

Womanhood and Spirituality: A Journey between Transcendence and Tradition

USHA S. NAYAR

This article focuses on how women in the past and women in contemporary India have chosen the path of spirituality, and how Indian culture has positioned women vis-a-vis spirituality. It explores female spirituality in a patriarchal paradigm through women like Sita, Meera, Savitri and Kannagi, who faced humiliation and hostility, but who tread the path of single-minded devotion to their principles and thus combined the feminine principle of grace with tenacity, steadfastness of purpose, vision and character. These prototypes inspire and guide the women in India even today and the article illustrates this through contemporary profiles in courage. The article stresses on the fact that in the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses, every god has a goddess, and as the form of *Ardhanaareeshwara*, the fusion of Shiva and Shakti in one body, denotes, male and female principles work together as equal partners in the universe. Other instances reiterate that in ancient India, women occupied a very important position. While analysing the spirituality of women as a cultural expression, the study underlines the fact that the Hindu version of the Mother image has manifested itself in the vision of Bharat Mata and underlines the fact that spirituality mediates relationships. It heals, provides succour to the emotionally needy, physically abused, and rebuilds fundamental trust in oneself. The modern approach to spirituality, according to this study, defines it as a means of reaching equilibrium or harmony through gender equality.

Prof. Usha S. Nayar is Deputy Director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

INTRODUCTION

The spiritual journey of women has several connotations. Spirituality in actual terms is an inward journey to look within oneself and discover the subtler meaning of life and beyond. In the past, only a handful of women were able to walk on the different path of the clarion call of their own heart. This was considered by society as a path of defiance, rebelliousness and boldness, and was seen and unheard of in

most of the women in those times. However, there is a visible change in the modern era. This article focuses on how women in the past and those in contemporary India have chosen the path of spirituality, and how Indian culture has positioned women vis-a-vis spirituality.

FEMALE SPIRITUALITY IN A PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM

Meera, Radha and Kannagi were some women from ancient India who had chosen a path of spirituality. They braved many a hurdle to pursue the path of spirituality. They were condemned, ridiculed and ostracised. Throughout women's spiritual history, saints like Bahinabai and Meera had to face humiliation and hostility. 'Women could respond to their spiritual calling only by risking their reputation and being termed deviant' (Ramaswamy, 1997: 1).

Women in Indian society have been under male subjugation. India has been following a patriarchal system of society barring a few exceptional communities in the Northeast and in the South in Kerala. Women led a life of care and protection, first under the father, then husband and then under the son. A woman had no identity of her own. Her major role in the family was to provide a congenial atmosphere of peace and well-being for her family members.

In the context of patriarchy, the empowerment of a spiritual woman implies a situation where they are otherwise disempowered. Thus, spirituality becomes a path of empowerment for women. The spiritual path helped women to transcend stereotypes. Asceticism can bestow immense power on the otherwise powerless, helpless and dependent women in a patriarchal society. India is perhaps the only country where prevails a belief that God incarnates in the form of a woman as well as that of a man. In the *Mahabharata*, we read the account of Sulabha, the great woman Yogi, who came to the court of King Janaka and showed wonderful powers and wisdom, which she had acquired through the practice of Yoga. This shows that women were practising Yoga.

India is a country of diverse religions. Each religion follows the ritualistic path of customs and traditions, which has been handed down generations. The people in India worship various forms of Gods and Goddesses, which help them to anchor their faith and belief. Whether it is Ram, Muhammad, Rahim, Guru Nanak, Jesus, Krishna, or Ganesh, the form helps them have direction and channelise their faith. This could have basis in the reasoning that if no form existed, perhaps

human minds would wander and sway from the spiritual path. While many of the Gods are regarded as *ishtadevta*, there are many Goddesses who are seen as symbols of power and courage. They are a source of strength and courage for many men and women. There is a popular belief that obeisance and surrender to Goddess Durga, Radha, Vaishnodevi, Amba Mata, Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi and several other deities will give people the courage to face difficulties in life.

In Hinduism, the deities for knowledge, learning and material wealth are female and not male. Social inconsistencies and injustices did not arise from Hindu scriptures, but arose from humans who failed to incorporate the teachings of the scriptures correctly, into their social philosophy. The concept of spiritual equality of souls naturally influenced the status of women on an individual and social level.

The idea of equality was most forcibly expressed in the *Rig Veda* (Book 5, Hymn 61. Verse 8). It states that the wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal parts in all work, religious and secular. There is a special injunction in the *Vedas* that no married man shall perform any religious rite, ceremony, or sacrifice without being joined in by his wife. The wife is considered a partner in the spiritual life of her husband; she is called, in Sanskrit, *sahadharmini* or spiritual helpmate. Perhaps, no other scripture in the world has ever given the woman such equality with the man as the *Vedas*. When Adi Shankaracharya, the great commentator of *Vedanta*, was discussing this philosophy with another philosopher, a Hindu lady, well versed in all the Scriptures, was requested to act as the referee.

The Hindu women of ancient times enjoyed equal rights and privileges with men, so in secular matters women had equal share and equal power with them. From the Vedic age, women in India have had the same right to possess property as men; they could go to the courts of justice, plead their own cases, and ask for the protection of the law. Those who have read the famous drama *Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa, know that Shakuntala pleaded her own case and claimed her rights in the court of King Dushyanata. Similar instances are mentioned in the tenth book of the *Rig Veda*. As early as in 2000 B.C., Hindus went to the battle fields to fight against enemies. Sarama, one of the most powerful women of her day, was sent by her husband in search of robbers. She discovered their hiding place and then destroyed them.

In brief, the prescriptions were that women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers and husbands if they desired good

fortune. Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; where, however, they are not honoured, then all sacred rites prove fruitless. Where the female relations lie in grief, that family soon perishes completely; where, however, they do not suffer from any grievance, that family always prospers. A woman's father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, her sons protect her in old age. The father who does not give away his daughter in marriage at the proper time is censurable; censurable is the husband who does not approach his wife in season; and after the husband is dead, the son, verily is censurable, who does not protect his mother. Women should be particularly guarded against the slightest provocations; for unguarded they would bring grief to both the families.

Hindu tradition recognises mother and motherhood as even superior to heaven. The *Mahabharata* says,

While a father is superior to ten Brahmin priests well-versed in the *Vedas*, a mother is superior to ten such fathers, or the entire world.

Hinduism offers some intriguing and unique examples of strong women in the form of Goddesses. Two thousand years ago, Saint Tiruvalluvar observed:

What does a man lack if his wife is worthy? And what does he possess if she is lacking worth?

Normatively, there is a respect in India for women and their role in society, as described in ancient Hindu scriptures. An interesting feature is that in ancient India women could have multiple husbands, widows could remarry, and divorce was permitted where there was incompatibility or estrangement.

To instil high ideals in humankind, Indian ancestors created a plethora of goddesses who enjoyed equal status with their husbands. The concept of *Ardhanaareeshwara*, where God is depicted as half-man and half-woman, is a concrete example to support this argument. In many philosophical texts, God is referred to as *Tat*, meaning 'It' which means that God is beyond gender. And, one can find a comparable Goddess for each God.

A woman in the role of wife occupies a position of pre-eminence in ancient Hindu tradition. Some illustrations from Hindu mythology provide insights on the spiritual journey that they made during their lifetime and how they are being perceived in contemporary India.

Sita

In the *Ramayana*, Sita chooses her own husband in a *svayamvara*. She chooses the most handsome, strongest and most skilled prince, Rama, as her husband.

After Kaikeyi instigates King Dasaratha and when Rama goes into exile, Sita insists on accompanying him to the forest. Sita's strength and self-possession are apparent. She is dutiful, indeed, she is not an obedient servant to a godlike husband; she has a will of her own and her relationship to Rama is governed by her love for him.

She shows determination and independence through the years in the forest; her insistence that Rama get the gold-spotted deer and her command that Laksmana come to his rescue, eventually leads to her abduction by Ravana. She shows self-control and she does not give in to Ravana's will. On being freed, she defends herself against Rama's accusations. She is far from passive. It is in the context of this 'dwelling in another man's house' that Vedic regulations for women are invoked and popular sentiment demands an ordeal by fire to prove her purity.

This strength of character has made her a prototype for Indian women, who have found much in her to applaud. Despite being commonly held up as a paragon of submissiveness, obedience, and loyalty that many men would like to see in their wives, women have often taken other lessons from her behaviour. To many Hindu women, she is a great heroine, not just a goddess. Sita is a unique ideal of fidelity and chastity. She had to undergo unbearable trial and tribulations throughout her life but with the power of unshakable fidelity and dedication to her husband she bore all the difficulties of life with fortitude and she, along with her husband, smilingly enjoyed the hardships of life in the jungle. The demon King Ravana failed to lower her morale or weaken her moral strength.

It was through the ordeal by fire that Sita proved and established her virtue and saintliness of her character. When Rama, the king, banished Sita, in order to satisfy some of his subjects, she remained in the hermitage of Rishi Valmiki.

The very fact that Rama and Sita are always mentioned in one breath endows Sita with equality: whatever status Rama occupies, will also be Sita's. If he is king, she is queen; if he is god, she is goddess.

Savitri

Savitri, the embodiment of chastity and faithfulness, took Satyavan as her husband knowing fully well that he would not live long. When only four days of his life were remaining, she undertook a vow to defeat his death.

On the fourth day, when Satyavan died and Yamaraja (the God of Death) was walking away with his vitality, Savitri pursued Yamaraja. As they walked one behind the other, there was a 'question-answer' session between them. Yamaraja was very impressed with Savitri's gentle behaviour, her wisdom, and single-minded devotion (dedication) to her husband. Pleased with Savitri, he allowed her to ask for boons. Savitri asked for such boons which helped her to not only obtain the well-being of both her father's and her husband's families, but also Satyavan's vitality. Thus Savitri, with the power of her chastity and fidelity, protected her husband.

Meera

Drenched in the colour of love for Lord Krishna, Meera is a well-known devotee in North India, particularly in the area where Hindi is spoken and read. This land resounds with the verses sung by Meera in her love for Krishna. Devotion to Krishna had touched Meera's heart in her early childhood. The daughter of Ratna Singh, Mira, was married to Bhojaraja, but her heart and mind were totally devoted to Krishna.

She was always engrossed in the devotion to God. She composed songs of great devotion in the midst of saints, in temples. After the untimely death of Bhojaraja, his brother Vikramajit wanted Meera to turn her back to the path of devotion and lead the life of an ordinary woman. Vikramajit felt that Meera's going to temples, her singing and dancing there, was against the tradition and discipline of his family. For not renouncing her of love for Krishna, Meera was subjected to great deal of pain and suffering. But Meera, on the contrary, laughingly submitted herself to these inflictions and bore them with fortitude. But there was no change in her divine love and devotion to Lord Krishna. Her life's song was: 'Mine is the preserver of cows, who upheld the mountain and no one else'. Her songs are unmatched in their devotion. Here is the portrayal of a woman who walked the path of spirituality and beyond the traditional, socially accepted norms for women.

Meera resisted the social norms and obligations that she found morally and personally repulsive, and upheld an alternative code of ethics. She spurned the power of her ruler and husband, paid allegiance only to Lord Krishna, and kept company with *bhaktas* (devotees), dancing and singing in their company. Even today, her *bhajans* (devotional songs) are preserved and widely sung, especially by women, peasants and the working classes.

WOMANHOOD AND SPIRITUALITY: A CULTURAL EXPRESSION

India, a land of vast religious, social and cultural diversity has shown the power of women in a myriad ways. The boundless potential of women *shakti* has been seen in Meera, Radha, Sita, Durga, Kali, Kannagi, Saraswati, Laxmi, Amba, Andal and several other Goddesses. They have expressed the deep and boundless potential of the human self. When women have identified with these mythological characters, they have examined, understood and deepened their own concerns, values and identities.

Goddess Sita, in the eyes of women, is a capable, independent woman, who met every challenge with strong, feminine grace and exemplary courage. Goddess Durga is referred to as all powerful and Kali as the destroyer of evil. Laxmi symbolises wealth and is highly revered by both men and women. The consorts of the three gods of the Hindu trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh — Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati respectively — were the strengths of their men. They were complementary to their male counterparts.

In ancient India, women occupied a very important position. It is a culture whose only words for strength and power are feminine — *Shakti*. All male power comes from the feminine. Literary evidence suggests that kings and towns were destroyed because a single woman was wronged by the state. For example, Valmiki's *Ramayana* teaches us that Ravana and his entire clan was wiped out because he abducted Sita. Veda Vyasa's *Mahabharata* teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public. Elango Adigal's *Sillapathigardm* teaches us that Madurai, the capital city of the Pandyas was burnt because the Pandyan King Nedunchezhiyan mistakenly killed Kannagi's husband Kovalan, on charges of theft.

Knowledge, intelligence, rhythm and harmony are all essential ingredients for any creative activity. These aspects are personified

in Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, music and fine arts. Without the grace of Saraswati, or *Saraswati Kataksham*, Brahma cannot do a worthwhile job as the Creator. Any maintenance activity needs plenty of resources, mainly fiscal resources. So Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, is an essential companion to Vishnu. Shiva, as Destroyer, needs plenty of power and energy. This is what Parvati, or Durga or Shakti as she is called, provides. It is only the Hindu tradition that provides, even at the conceptual level, this picture of the male and female principles working together, hand in hand, as equal partners in the universe. This concept is carried further to its logical climax in the form of *Ardhanaareeshwara*, formed by the fusion of Shiva and Shakti in one body, each occupying one half of the body, denoting that one is incomplete without the other.

Just three *shlokas* (hymns) which are commonly recited during daily prayers suffice to show the status of the three Goddesses. A *shloka* on Saraswati contains the following line: *Yaa Brahma Achyuta Sankara Prabhrudibihi Devaissadaa Poojithaa*, which means, 'Saraswati who is always worshipped by Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and other Gods'.

In Hinduism, all power, *shakti*, is female. So, the female represents the totality of the power, and the male is imaged as the agent of the female. Also, in Hinduism, the sun is female and the moon is male; he is born of her, dies into her, and is born of her again every month. Shiva, this great power, is the moon god. Parvati, his consort, is the sun power. And although the worship in the masculine-oriented action systems in India is directly to Shiva, it is the goddess Kali, who is finally worshipped.

In India, Kali is the great divinity. The Hindu goddess Kali is shown standing on the prostrate form of Shiva, her spouse. She brandishes the sword of death, that is, spiritual discipline. The blood-dripping human head tells the devotee that 'he that loseth his life for her sake shall find it'. The gestures of 'fear not' and 'bestowing boon' teach that she protects her children, that the pairs of opposites of the universal agony are not what they seem, and that for one centred in eternity the phantasmagoria of temporal 'good' and 'evil' is but a reflex of the mind, as the goddess herself, though apparently trampling down the God, is actually His blissful dream. Her worship requires the creation of appropriate forms in which to revere. The creation of images of the Divine Mother allows her healing grace, which is essential for world peace to descend. Without acknowledging the

forms of the Divine Mother, our life would be imbalanced and lead to various excesses in human behaviour.

The benign facet of the goddess is manifested in the mother image. *Sanatana Dharma*, as a universal tradition, recognises the importance of the Divine Mother. According to Hinduism, the deepest relationship that we can have with God is that of the Mother. No human relationship is closer than that of the mother and her child. It best mirrors our relationship with God. India itself is looked upon as the Mother — *Bharat Mata*. The Hindu religion itself is regarded as a Mother and its teachings are Her milk.

SPIRITUALITY AND WOMANHOOD IN THE MODERN WORLD

Anthropologists say it was a woman who discovered plants and adapted these for daily nutrition, medicine and agriculture, and made the first homes. Over the centuries, men began to establish control over homes, families and fields. In different parts of the world, ancient goddess-worshipping cultures gave way to belief systems in which God, or godhead, reigned supreme.

In the modern world, wherein we are recognising the principle of gender equality, we can no longer reject the feminine aspect of Divinity. The rejection of the feminine aspect of the Divine, which includes loving kindness, tolerance and caring nurturance, has led to much of the religious animosity and holy wars which have devastated humanity over the last 2000 years.

Spirituality offers a source of strength, guidance and wisdom to women. It integrates the spiritual with the nitty-gritty of daily lives and varied responsibilities. Are women articulating spiritual concerns in ways that help empower them? Spirituality, in the modern context, refers to a certain inner balance and harmony, of becoming focused whereby one could creatively influence others to move in a positive direction. *Mukti* (freedom) is not the cessation of the cycle of birth and rebirth. Rather, it is liberation from one state into the next. *Mukti* is what is appropriate for the given moment in time like, the snake shedding its skin which has fully lived out its purpose, like the being moving from darkness into light, and, once again, transiting into darkness.

SPIRITUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

For women, spirituality is not only otherworldly, it is as much about the body, about relationships and work, as it is about soul and spirit.

Spirituality does not advocate renunciation and negates life, but 'responsibility is the key word.'

Women seem to respond to the element of love, which interpenetrates the world of material life. Lovleen Kaur, a Sikh woman, has, from early childhood, valued 'service, love, faith, being honest, kind and helpful'. She says: 'I am a Sikh, but I believe that these are the basic teachings of all the religions of the world. All of them teach us to love and honor human beings and God.'

St. Therese, a Philippines scholar and writer, taught in a university for 26 years before she took the vows and became a cloistered nun. She calls Saint Therese, the 'foundress' of the religious order to which she belongs, a 'genuine feminist' whose 'very life of the "little way" provides us with such a clear, lived-out experience of the thirst for God.' Commenting on her own role, St. Therese says, 'My only contribution as a nun is through prayer, and the quiet pursuance of simple household tasks. I pray and share whatever God gives me.' Yet, she emerges from the cloister to take special lectures at the university on philosophy, aesthetics and women's studies.

Suffering can provide occasion for the active confirmation of faith, as we found during the aftermath of the 1984 riots (the brutal backlash on the Sikh community in India, as a result of the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards), in which a number of Sikh women were widowed in the most violent of circumstances. Women whose lives had been so ruthlessly violated expressed the need to work out their grief through rituals of mourning and scriptural reading. At times like this, being part of a community that practices a certain faith and has mutually shared beliefs lays the ground for empathy and a sense of connectedness.

A recent example is that of Shah Jahan Begum who after the loss of her daughter helped create a women's shelter home, Shaktishalini. 'My daughter was killed by her in-laws. I could not get justice, I was in despair. Yet I had faith in Allah's *rahmat* (mercy), and began working in society, so that such horrors will never be repeated'.

This means that spirituality is something beyond the ordinary, which not only lifts one's own soul but also that of others around.

NURTURANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONNECTIVITY IN SPIRITUALITY

Chanting of hymns, prayers, devotional *bhajans* and songs offer not only great delight, but peace and bliss of mind. Women in India have

been actively participating in this ritual from their childhood. Whether it is lighting the lamp at home, chanting *shlokas* or dressing up for *pujas*, the girl child has been a part of all these. In fact, she is nurtured on all these spiritual activities which she carries with her in to her womanhood and old age. The spirituality in respect of her strength is achieved through the medium of prayers and *puja*. Women in everyday life have shown tremendous resilience and courage in coping with personal tragedies. This power for many comes through chanting, be it at home or in a group in the community. One woman had this to say, 'With prayers and chanting I create a clean energy field around myself. This helps me handle things in my own way.' In the midst of conflicting and disturbing external situations, spirituality can provide an anchor. The inner core can be like a well from which one draws daily nourishment, to cope and survive with integrity.

SPIRITUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: THE MODERN APPROACH

Consumerism and a technologically advanced life has created tremendous imbalances. There is now a revival of interest in spirituality, and people are trying to seek a balance. Intellectually, there is *jnana* (knowledge) yoga, but practically speaking, people need to acquire equanimity and poise to bring down stress levels. People are now turning to spirituality in several ways — Reiki, Pranic healing, Vipassana Meditation, Yoga, and several other paths. When one practices these ways with diligence and complete involvement, there is a feeling of power, change and inner peace. Spirituality brings a bonding with something bigger than one's self, with a certain mystical force.

If an individual, man or woman, is supposed to find happiness and meaning in life by 'achieving harmony and resonance with fellow beings', then the social veil becomes an actual barrier for the Indian woman. If a woman were able to escape the veil which shrouds her mind, body, and soul, one can see the pain and torture that many like her have had to go through. Violence against women in all its forms — be it domestic violence, child sexual abuse, rape, eve-teasing, bride burning, and dowry deals — is prevalent in society. No religion teaches injustice and violence. The Prophet taught that women are equal to men. There are female divine teachers in Islam — the *paigambarzadis*. The journey to free and empower women has necessarily become a spiritual one, by turning the search inwards.

Have you ever seen the image of Shiva as *Ardhanaareeshwara*? He is depicted in two sexes but has one body. When the male and female elements are completely developed and complement each other in the same individual, the soul is fully realised.

HEALING AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SPIRITUALITY

It seems only natural that the modern Indian woman should rediscover the Goddesses of her culture as a means of empowering herself. These images belong to her as part of her cultural heritage. The modern woman has to use the Goddesses as tools of an all-powerful, all-enduring feminine energy.

Religion is an exploratory path in the journey of self-exploration. Healing it is a process of looking inwards and establishing a deep level of honesty with the self. The sexual core of an individual is the seat of great power and energy and the spiritual path is to unleash this power to transcend into higher realms of supreme bliss.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the term 'spirituality' may convey a variety of meanings to women in its cultural and historical contexts. These may range from possession, asceticism, mysticism, compassion, and transcendence. The examination of spirituality in this article was undertaken within the context of sexuality. Though the focus of this paper was spirituality of women, it is clear that gender differentiates the paths, expressions and attributions to spirituality, both at the individual and at the societal levels.

REFERENCES

Ramaswamy, V
1997

Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

The journey to share my experience with you is no different. The worlds I experienced were ancient and modern, art and science, mind and body. Across these worlds, I sought connection between the magical holism of the East with the scientific rigor of the West. A journey across East and West, Science and Tradition, Ancient and Modern. Our faces reflect our journeys across multiple worlds, starting at home to beyond and back to our self. The beauty of life perhaps lies in our common struggles to find patterns of connection across those worlds. While the particular scenes and characters of that journey may differ, the search for meaning to face our self with kindness, love and acceptance remains unchanged. The journey to share my experience with you is no different. Transcendence and otherness. Doctrinal positions may be modelled around any or all of the themes of the cosmogonic myth. If the emphasis falls upon creation by a high god through his thought, word, or other mode, the problem of the otherness and difference between creator and creature becomes a source of theological discussion and philosophical speculations. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the classical locus of this issue is found. All of these religions have theological traditions that raise this problem. To some extent, the a priori nature of this type of deity creates an apparent dualism between the creator and the world and creatures. This dualism is mediated in various forms in the traditions.