



# Harmonizing Devotion and Asceticism: The Enduring Legacy of Women Ascetics in Vaisnava Traditions

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## Abstract

The tale of women ascetics from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards have been alluded to a multitude of religious literatures, whereby it could be interpreted that the various bachanas, abhangas, poems, and songs composed by them were nothing but their voices against orthodox believers vindicating age-old dictums. Practices and performances conducive to asceticism, including praising and praying Krishna, facilitated the tempo of bhakti movement across borders of language, varna, class, and culture within India and beyond – more widely taking root in the Vaisnava tradition in subsequent centuries. Women conformed to their spirituality amidst the worldly realm, thereby generating a fresh lease of life to potential women devotees who wished to embark on a journey towards moksha and enlightenment. The impact of their full-fledged surrender to Lord Krishna is broadly documented in different scriptural and hagiographical contexts, as their illustrious lives are invoked by erudite Vaisnava scholars and naïve devotees for seeking bliss and peace of mind. The history of their unrelenting spiritual deeds and altruistic contributions under the wrap of canonised rule in wide geographical settings to dilute ich cultural barriers evoke quite a number of issues: how the definition of asceticism is translated into spiritual empowerment through the practice of austerity by taking Brahmavadini of Vedic period into confidence, how the relevance of scriptural narratives are strongly felt in their verses, and how their messages in different melodious languages strengthen the consistent flow of bhakti movement through venerating the incarnations of Lord Vishnu.

Keywords: ascetic, austerity, bhakti, Vaisnava

## Introduction

Time and again, women are known to have succumbed to worldly complexities, been victims of subjugation and social marginalization, and attempted to get over oppression and patriarchal hegemony (Charpentier 2010) – one way out was through leading an ascetic life, either in solitary or in sampradayaic mode. The messages of such women ascetics are remembered through various poems and songs – a trend that still seems to exist in present times (Clementin-Ojha 1988). Thus, women ascetics, right from the medieval to the recent times, are quintessential scholars whose illustrious lives are narrated and re-narrated in religious history, hagiographies and in bhajans.

In the Indian sub-continent, the compositions of these women ascetics were later translated into sacred lyrical melodies; with passing decades, they rapidly spread and ostensibly flourished across political and geographical borders. The multitude of holy gatherings (satsangha), circumambulations (parikrama), musical rallies (sankirtan) propitiating Krishna, and citing, singing and preaching of the written works of these ascetics (like, bachanas, abhangas, poems, songs) bear testimony to the same. These enlightened

ascetics finely blended their poetic flavour with mythological inputs to transform it into strong spiritual messages for the benefit of the common people. In contemporary Vaisnava society, people (including Vaisnava ascetics) contemplate upon their verses, arguably as daily rituals, while worshipping personal deities. Although this revelation has a positive connotation, it was fueled by a seemingly incorrect orthodox claim that a woman is to be perceived only as a potential servant to her husband. On the contrary, attainment of *moksha* is possible only through practicing austerities, whether as a sampradayaic ascetic, or a widow, or even a 'wife' in the 'domestic realm' (Bevilacqua 2017).

Today, such enlightened ascetics are remembered through chanting and singing in the name of propitiation of Lord Krishna and His different *avatars*. It must hereby be mentioned that their surrender to Lord Krishna is reflected right in their childhood, comingled with discipline, punctuality and sociability learnt from their parents, followed by a shift of residence after marriage and initiation by their prospective preceptors. For such ascetics, singing bhajans and kirtans accompanied by khol, cymbal, and gong is more commonplace than sitting on the asana<sup>1</sup> before the idols of Krishna and Radha. In spite of negotiating with the hegemonic status, some (Kururamma) claimed to consider child Krishna (Gopala) as her son (Rajendran 2020), some (Mirabai, Andal) were married to Krishna (Pandey and Zide 1965; Charyulu 2012:124), some (Janabai) considered Krishna (Vittala) as her friend<sup>2</sup> (Selligren 1996:219–226), some (Bahinabai, Gouribai) worshipped Krishna as Ishta Devata, or personal God (Sen 2013:176-184; Sen 2013:96-103). Nevertheless, the mystic appearances of such devout ascetics did not ever put any hindrance against the conventional system of venerating Lord Krishna. On the contrary, this served as a direct predisposition for succeeding ascetics. Interestingly, these ascetics never ever engaged in sampradayas, rather they have been venerated by women of all classes, sects, and communities, such as the 'Kannya Pith'<sup>3</sup> (Lipski 2007).

### Translation and social mortification of ascetics

The term 'asceticism' (Greek *askēō*: "to exercise," or "to train") attributes to the practice of austerity against the denial of worldly desires in order to achieve *moksha*, or eternal bliss (Wimbrush and Valantasis 2002). Ancient theology addresses asceticism as an inward journey from *jivas* (mortal body) to *jivatma* (self) through the medium of sheer simplicity, enriched with ample frugality, and embedded in bliss (Finn 2009). Amongst ancient Hindus in Vedic periods, and even prior to that, persons irrespective of gender, used to be simultaneously involved in daily household chores as well as self-mortification – a practice found in both theistic and non-theistic traditions (Vaisnavism, for instance) (Bhandarkar 1913). It enables the ascetic to negotiate a kind of equilibrium between inevitable presence in the 'domestic realm' as well as in the spiritual world. By and large, asceticism is supposed to be a composite discipline, to be strictly followed by the individual (woman as a case) who is able to restrict over the consistent persuasion of physical and emotional desires and sustain imperturbability (Finn 2009). The above view has invited an argument against the position of Vaisnava ascetics belonging to Vallabhacharya, Ramanujacharya, Nimbarka and Madhabacharya schools. One school of thought addresses ascetics as those who leave their domestic chores irrespective of being married or otherwise, having membership in a sampradaya and following strict austerity practices (Clementin-Ojha 1988; Denton 2004). Another school believes to confer the epithet of 'ascetic' on widows, who have no other alternative, but to take a politico-religious shelter in any Vaisnatirtha in the Indian sub-continent (Ghosh 2016). None of the schools, however, speak about women in general, whose religiosity is not deterred in the matrix of affinal relations as a 'servant' to her husband – thereby evolving a third school of thought that claims the engagement of ascetics into the dualist world of the 'domestic realm' and the non-dualist world of self-mortification, as stated earlier.

<sup>1</sup> seat for worshipping the personal deity

<sup>2</sup> Shri Namdev Gatha 1970: 940

<sup>3</sup> seat for virgins: established by Ānandamayī Mā in 1940 in Benaras. Source: Rüstam 2003: 152

In the Vedic periods, women ascetics enjoyed Brahmavadini<sup>4</sup> status along with their male counterparts in respect of performance and execution of rituals in attending puja, preachings, teachings, and practicing of austerities. Prior to The Bhagavad Gita, scriptural documents have mentioned about many Brahmavadini ascetics (Altekar 1944), such as Maitreyi, Vishvavara, Ghosha, Gargi, Apala, Vak, Romasa, Sulobha, Lopamudra, who earned a strong reputation as the most successful expounders of Vedas (Abadhut 2021). The scholarships of these ancient Vedic women ascetics are beautifully elucidated in different scriptural texts and religious literatures. Pandharipande's (2015) expression on the contributions of these Brahmavadinis through the following verses have made them relevant in the Indic religious theistic traditions:

*Yaa Devi Jyotirmayi, Jvalantii, Kaanti Matii Bhaasvatii I  
Taya Ana Ashithe Shahan, Dhaka Arahman Asishitah II  
Namasta Syai, Namasta Sya, Namasta Syai, Namoh Namah I*

The meaning of the above-mentioned verses are : O Devi, light is emanating from you, which is glistening exuberantly with dazzling flame, endowed with brightening hue that tones down the darkness of mind. I make a deep obeisance to you!

It is important to note that while expounding different verses of Vedas to followers, these women ascetics also successfully performed *stri-dharma* as a wife of their respective husbands. The trend is followed in the post-Vedic period too, in tune with Vaisnava theological doctrinal dictums and post-scriptural literary corpus that elucidate the pluralistic life and religiosity of ascetics since the Vedic times (Thoothi 1935).

### Deliberating asceticism in scriptural narrative

Women ascetics conventionally share equal responsibility with her male partner in executing all worldly duties, alongside regular performance of *kirtan* with the playing of khol, cymbal and gong (Bhandarkar 1913). In reality, no woman ascetic can escape from the inevitable circumstances of her affinal involvements, failing which she will be 'solely, wholly, and entirely' doomed to reprehension, which is not at all conducive to her married life

(Clementin-Ojha 1988). Her affinal members may even further humiliate her, taking 'magnanimous revenge' under the pretext of profligacy which appears to be nothing but uncouth and frightful. Under such circumstances, the spiritual connotative meaning of ascetics refers to being an ascetic by saving some time from her engagement of worldly duties to focus on renouncement and austerities through contemplating "Vasudevaya Dhimohe"<sup>5</sup> despite being an indispensable member of the family (Bevilacqua 2017:51).

Since the Vedic period, the relevance of ascetic nature of women are inextricably intertwined with every small ritual found among different Vaisnava sects. This include worshipping Tulasi (Carbone 2008) and Aswatha (Gupta 1954) as incarnations of Goddess Lakshmi (consort of Lord Vishnu) and Lord Vishnu respectively (Gupta 1954). It was also found that women ascetics of Benaras, Vrindavan, Nabadwip, Puri, and Pandharpur sailed themselves performed with *bhakti* every calendric ritual there was for worshipping of Lord Vishnu in different appellations, for instance, Gopala, Vasudeva, Narayana, Gobardhana, Damodar, Madhusudhana, and Govinda (including Prajapatnam at the time of wedding). Hence, the term asceticism is no longer restricted to the affinal piety strictly embedded in the orthodox belief of *stri-dharma* (Denton 2004). Rather, it undergoes a reasonable shift from a *servant to the husband* (stigmatization) to the *servant to the Lord* (emancipation). Arguably, any ascetic is supposed to be in tripled nature; the body, the intellect, and the spirit, whereby the first is supposed to perform the duties of *sampradaya* and look after its administrations (attributes to physical movement) (Kasturi 2018); the second is devoted to preaching, meetings with followers, and *kirtans* (attributes to utilizing the mental faculty) (Charpentier 2010), and the

<sup>4</sup> Brahmavadini (women ascetics). It means 'discussing on sacred texts, a defender or expounder of the Veda, one who asserts that all things are to be identified with Brahman'. Rig Veda (Mandala 8 Sukta 1)

<sup>5</sup> contemplating and meditating incarnations of Lord Vishnu: Krishna, Gopala.

third denotes involvement in communal chanting, meditation, and prayer (attributes to the reflection from contemplating Ishta Devata, or personal God (Denton 2004).

Scriptures, hagiographic texts, esoteric literature of The Bhagavad Gita and The Upanishads including Sruti, Manusmriti, and Puranas are prescriptive in building a ground for establishing the hypothesis of woman ascetic-guru transformation (Srinivasan 1981). It further enables Vaisnava women to problematize their ascetic position and the potential to attain an upper echelon amongst a Vaisnava sect in course of time (Thoothi 1935). Revelation from Puranas, archaeological and historical records, along with coins, inscriptions, and sculptures have buttressed arguments of Indic traditions that the very involvement of woman in every nook and corner of the society in different periods is the signature of socio-religious life, if not the fulcrum of the entirety of the religious system (Goyal 1996).

### **Conclusion: quiet flows the asceticism**

Women ascetics, ever since Vedic times, have appeared to be building a bridge between conventional rules of worshipping the personal deity and spontaneous surrender to the Lord through singing and chanting. In doing so, all potential ascetics are stepping across skepticism to fidelity. Although this is a challenging shift, they are socially and spiritually equipped to facilitate the bhakti movement. By and large, all abhangas (Bahina Bai, Jana Bai), songs (Mira Bai), bhajans (Anandamayi Ma), bachanas (Akka Mahadevi) or preachings (Andal, Gouribai) in the name of Lord Krishna end with *prema-rasa* (essence of divine love) and melancholy. Such metaphorical spiritual essence engrafted in various melodious narratives generate a fresh lease of life – the lyrical verses gradually unfolding into eternal bliss, transporting the content into the hallowed world of spirituality.

The revelation of such enlightened ascetics has made a spiritual summit to posit women ascetics at the apex of the quadrant of Bhakti-Bhakta-Bhagwan-Guru. This source of trance, sprung from the deified mode of life at a very early age, ab initio. Hence, performing given assignments in the dualist world along with engagement in spiritual affairs is tantamount to accept woman as an ascetic in any recognized religious tradition of the world.

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