

**Sacred Feminine in Contemporary Hindu Discourse:  
An Islamic Appraisal of Female led Hindu Movements and Social  
Reforms**



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- Hindu civilization
- Women Hindu
- Hindu social conditions
- Women

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work present in the following dissertation is my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged and that the thesis is my own composition. No part of the thesis has been previously presented for any other degree.

Date\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Zenab Hashmi

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## DEDICATION

**To my loving sons Hassan Shaheer Khurram and Mohsin Mustafa Khurram whose warm feelings always provided me new waves of passion. Their presence always gives me a new vision of the coming future.**

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis of Feminine as sacred in contemporary Hinduism through having an insight into three female religious/spiritual organizations that are being led by women spiritual leaders. Three reform movements are also studied in this regard as they are, although not having female leadership, but also becoming a symbol of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism because of working on women specific welfare issues. All these organizations and movements have highlighted the women related issues in Hindu society and tried to preserve the Hindu culture and traditions against the changing circumstances of the world in the light of religion itself. This effort of these organizations and movements has resulted in the revival of Sacred Feminine in Hindu Religion in contemporary period.

The research is Qualitative, analytical, and phenomenological in nature. Netnography is also used as a tool to collect data. A description of influential relation between the two types of organizations is also a part of the study. Above all how they have contributed to the development of religion and tried to make it compatible to globalization in contemporary times is also studied here. Lastly, Islamic appraisal towards the phenomena of Sacred Feminine is given as well along with the status of women as religious leaders in Islam. Exploring the issue with Islamic appraisal also enhances significance of the study.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Hinduism holds a special place among the popular religions of the world. Due to its certain unique concepts and beliefs, religious scholars differ between themselves regarding classifying it in different categories of religions. Among the contemporary scholars, Sri Swami Siv Ananda describes that those who claim to be Hindus are divided in three dominant groups: Vaishnavas<sup>1</sup>, Saivas<sup>2</sup> and Saktas<sup>3</sup>. These three are the popular variations among Hindus in contemporary times<sup>4</sup>. Other than this Hinduism has a deep relation with ancient civilization of the Sub-Continent as well. Many of the prevalent themes of Hinduism are traced back to the period of Indus valley civilization.

Hinduism presents a twofold picture of feminine. It presents the female essence of nature in the form of goddess, giving her a sacred status in this way. But the same feminine is seen humiliated in its mundane form when women are presented as a second-class creation and a source of evil according to the traditions and cultural practices of Hindu society. The way women are treated in traditional Hindu culture and society is also in total contrast to the concept of what is known as

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<sup>1</sup> One of the major forms of contemporary Hinduism, distinguished by devotion to God Vishnu and his incarnations (avatars). They are also known as Ramanujas, Sri Sampradayins or Sri Visnavas. Mostly recognized through their, two white vertical lines and a central red line on forehead. It is a popular group in Ganga valley upper and central India, Bombay, and Gujrat. Subdivisions are also found in Bengal and Orissa. Famous sub-sects are Vallabhacharins, Chitanyas, Nimbarkas and Madhvas. They are the largest group within Hinduism constituting about 67% of Hindus

<sup>2</sup> Popularly known as worshippers of Lord Siva. Their major population is in Tamil Nadu province of India Distinguished by three horizontal lines of Holy ashes on their foreheads. Their major groups are Saiva Brahmins of Malabar, Bengal and Karnataka. They worship Saiva or Rudra as the Ultimate Reality

<sup>3</sup> Saktas are Hindu devotees of goddess or Devi in one of her forms. Saktas are often characterized by their attempts to attain or develop the power of Shakti within themselves. Major groups among Saktas are Dakshinis, Vamis, Kancheliyas and Kararis. They are mostly found in Southern part of India. Some of them are also found in Kashmir <sup>4</sup> Sivananda, Sri Swami., All about Hinduism. (world wide web edition 1999) The Divine Life society Uttar Pradesh, India. ISBN: 81-7052-047-9

[https://www.academia.edu/40075188/ALL\\_ABOUT\\_HINDUISM?email\\_work\\_card=view-paper](https://www.academia.edu/40075188/ALL_ABOUT_HINDUISM?email_work_card=view-paper). P. 84 Retrieved on July 20, 2021

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‘Sacred’. What is more questionable is that most of these traditions are practiced in the name of religion. This research studies these two different aspects of feminine in Hinduism along with an insight into how the phenomenon of ‘Sacred Feminine’ is highlighted in contemporary Hinduism through the study of three female led religious/spiritual and socio-religious reform movements. The concept of Sacred Feminine is also reflected through these movements and their ideologies when they worked for introducing reforms in women related Hindu cultural and social traditions and customs in contemporary times. The interesting point is that they introduced these social reforms in the light of religion and presented a new picture of Hinduism in contemporary period. Researcher assumes that in contemporary times, the theme of Sacred Feminine has reoccurred and there emerged certain interesting views and reflections in the Western thought. In an excerpt from ‘voices of the Sacred Feminine’; Amy Peck writes regarding the writer Rev. Karen Tate:

“Sacred Feminine is a concept that recognizes that God ultimately is neither anthropomorphically male or female but a Divine Essence (Goddessence) beyond form and duality-an essence that is in balance and unification of masculine and feminine principles—a dynamic interdependent “Immanence” that pervades all life”.<sup>4</sup>

She herself explains ‘Sacred Feminine’ as an answer to the question: What is Sacred Feminine?

By saying:

“The Sacred Feminine is a paradigm of universal motherhood. It is a principle that embraces concepts of the Holy Mother, the goddesses of ancient mythologies, the Divine self within, mother

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<sup>4</sup> What Is the Sacred Feminine? An excerpt from voices of the Sacred Feminine: edited by Rev. Dr. Karen Tate. Writer: Amy Peck. [www.spiritualityhealth.com/articles/what-sacred-feminine](http://www.spiritualityhealth.com/articles/what-sacred-feminine); Retrieved on August 7, 2017

earth doctrines and lore of indigenous peoples. It is a spiritual model that weaves concepts of wisdom, compassion and unconditional love, plus other metaphysical, shamanic, and magical

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practices. The Sacred Feminine ideology does not seek to supplant patriarchal belief systems but to augment and reinstate equality, wholeness and equilibrium.”

The other side of the issue is that the study of the phenomena of ‘Sacred Feminine’ in contemporary Hinduism is not completed until those factors are not studied which caused this phenomenon to appear and made these reformers to highlight this aspect of Hinduism through their reformist ideologies in contemporary period.

But before studying the said phenomena in Hinduism it is also important to know what ‘Sacred Feminine’ stands for in general and that how it is defined in terms of religious studies. Thus, the research starts from a discussion about the history, definition, and background of the term itself at first, in general, and then in Hinduism. The first chapter is the introductory chapter which introduces the issue of ‘Sacred Feminine’ historically as well as in contemporary times. It also gives a brief introduction of leading goddesses of Hinduism as they are a clear symbol of Feminine as Sacred in Hinduism. Feminine as Sacred in the sight of Hindu Scripture is also discussed here. Along with Literature Review, Research Questions and Research methodology an account of effect of goddess worship on lives of common Hindu women is also a part of the introductory chapter. Second chapter gives detailed information about three female led religious and spiritual Hindu movements and ideologies of their leaders. The chapter discusses the historical background of these three movements, their perception towards traditional Hindu religious concepts and life history of their followers. The discussion is made according to the way these religious leaders are following Hindu beliefs. The researcher has chosen these movements because their leadership is

female. Women are leading these movements as religious and spiritual leaders and through this they are enhancing the feminine essence in Divinity and can be studied as symbols of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism.

Chapter three is about the three socio-religious reform movements that appeared in Hinduism in contemporary period. The researcher has chosen these reform movements to study here, because their founders are known for their efforts of introducing women related social reforms in Hindu society. The chapter gives a comprehensive life history of their founders at first and then describes their religious ideas. How they interpret religious scriptures according to their perception and how they presented Hindu Religion in the form of a women friendly faith in front of the world with pride is also discussed in this chapter. These reformers had a firm belief that the role of women is necessary for a progressive society and that if contemporary Hindu society wants to become a prosperous and developed society, it will have to give a respectable status to its women which is a stance of the movement of Sacred Feminine as well.

Chapter four analyzes the ideas, concepts and religious beliefs of female led religious movements and reformers and their ideologies, described in chapter: 2 and 3. Although their ideas have already been explained in detail in these chapters, but the researcher tries to raise interesting points while analyzing them in this chapter. The researcher explores into the viewpoint of these movements and organizations in context to the circumstances and socio-religious environment, their founders were facing in their times, respectively. The researcher has also given a short description of how Hindu women are performing their role in contemporary Hindu society.

Chapter five gives an Islamic Appraisal towards the phenomenon of Sacred Feminine and Islamic stance regarding the issue of religious/spiritual and social status of women in a society. It also studies Islamic viewpoint towards female religious/spiritual leadership.



### 1.1. Significance of the Study

No doubt that discussion about women related issues has always been important religiously. The research is interesting for female researchers at academic level as it discusses a women related hot issue of contemporary times. The research is important in respect that it studies the status of women in contemporary Hindu religion not only as a religious personality but as the founders of their own religious and spiritual circles as well. Study of such issues makes this research more important because it informs the readers about the latest developments in religion regarding status of women in Hinduism while also enriching the debate with an Islamic appraisal. Study of females in leading role makes this study unique and different in a sense that the modern reader automatically develops interest towards knowing about the religious and spiritual leadership of women in contemporary Hinduism. The research can play a vital role in providing solution for certain women related social problems of Indian society.

### 1.2. Historical background of Sacred Feminine

The research is focused on the study of ‘Sacred Feminine’ in contemporary Hinduism but before starting study this issue in Hinduism specifically, it is important to have a look at the history and background of the phenomena in general. ‘Sacred Feminine’ is not a new development in contemporary world. The earliest records of human history provide many proofs for its presence in all stages of the development of human societies. Most powerful proofs are the archeological findings about Mother goddesses in different parts of the world as discussed earlier in introduction of the research. Human beings even from Neolithic and Paleolithic period carved images of Mother Goddesses as the heads of all Gods. The religions by the great ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome and Egypt are also the great examples of this. Athena was the Goddess of wisdom and victory for Romans. The Aborigines of Hawaii worshipped Goddess Pele and the ancient

Egyptians revered Goddess Isis and Hathors<sup>5</sup>. The statue of Goddess Venus of Willendorf, in the museum of Vienna, is said to belong a period between 24000 to 22000 BCE, which means prehistoric era or the stone age. A very important among these is the remains of corpses buried in a special way in Europe and inside a few caves of Israel. A grave was discovered in France where corpses were found with some tools, animal bones and ashes with a limestone slab, buried with them. The noticing point among these is that all corpses are buried in the direction of setting Sun while the woman's corpse is in rising Sun's direction. A painting of female goddess on a rock in Spain shows the practice of fertility rituals in ancient times.<sup>6</sup> The human records from ancient Egypt reveal about a goddess above all, 'Hathor', who had a woman's head and a cow's body. There were some other small goddesses as well such as the Heaven goddess 'Nut', the goddess of Truth 'Matt', the goddess of Writing 'Safekht', the goddess of Hunting, 'Neit', the goddess of War, 'Sekhmet' and the goddess of Dew, 'Tefnut'. In Egyptian mythology there is a long story about creation where there is a mother goddess whose arms are touching the Skies and the Earth. Other ancient civilizations like Mesopotamian and Greek also reflect the existence of 'Sacred Feminine' through their religious beliefs. Archeological sites in Crete tells about a cult that worshipped a mother goddess who was above all other gods. Zeus always needed his permanent consort 'Hera' in accomplishing his tasks. Mother goddesses are also found in Homeric deities among Romans. In the popular Religion of Greeks, 'Sacred Feminine' is found in the belief of 'nymphs', which stands for the belief in a group of young and beautiful goddesses, present

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<sup>5</sup> Isis and Hathor <https://isiopolis.com/2012/04/28/isis-hathor/>. Retrieved on 14-2-2017

<sup>6</sup> Nigosian. S. A., World Religions A Historical Approach. 2001. Boston, Bedford/St. Martin. Third edition. P. 14

everywhere in nature. The chief goddess among Greeks was ‘Artemis’, who was also the head of all ‘nymphs.’ In the shrine of ‘Apollo’ at ‘Delphi’, there was a woman named ‘Pythia’, who was

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a medium between gods and humans. Her sayings were considered as words of gods for humans and were recorded by the priests. In the mystery religions of Greeks there were three highest gods. Two among them were females. Concept of a Supreme goddess is also present in ancient religious traditions of Africa. Similarly, in the religious traditions of ancient American Indians, the concept of ‘Sacred Feminine’ is found in the form of Mother Earth.

This shows that the idea of ‘Sacred Feminine’ is not something new that took birth in the modern times but was a part of human belief in every human civilization that emerged on the scene of human history. It seems that the concept passed through stages of development just like many other developments in human societies.

How scholars are trying to explain the phenomenon has already been discussed above. Views of some other scholars are also presented here to further elaborate the phenomenon in contemporary period. Mere Cromwell, while trying to define the term, declares it quite challenging to describe it in human terms. She explains it as Andrew Harvey has written in his book, ‘*The Return of the Mother*’, here he defines ‘Sacred Feminine’ by giving some attributes and qualities such as: Subtlety and flexibility, extraordinary ruthless, radical powers of dissolving all structures and dogmas, all prisons in which we have sought so passionately to imprison ourselves.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An Attempt to Define “The Sacred Feminine” by Mare Cromwell. <https://marecromwell.wordpress.com/2011/...an-attempt-to-define-sacred-feminine>; Retrieved on August 7, 2017

Through these sayings, it is quite apparent that the process of defining 'Sacred Feminine' is still going on. Some of those who are writing over the issue have given the concept, meanings, and objectives of the movement, while some are taking it as finding out the relationship between the female attributes and the nature around. What is obvious from all these writings is that 'Sacred Feminine' is not to declare women as superior to men or worshipping female goddesses instead of

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male gods but a claim to give equal respect to female essence present in every being around us.

But majority believes that declaring Feminine as sacred represents that the female essence in nature is superior to male and that is how Divine originally created nature. In today's world its supporters build the narrative that all creation around us carries the essence of feminine and the words we use for creation are also feminine in nature such as the word 'creation' itself. Then all other terms associated to creation are also presented as feminine such as world, nature, universe, wind, soil, and earth which shows that female essence was working since the process of creation started. Women are that part of creation which carries this feminine essence and represent this attribute of Divine working in nature. In this respect, women are superior to men because due to this feminine essence they represent God in the world. Women are closer to God because they complete the process of creation and play the role of nourishment, sustainer, and caretaker to a new creation just like the Mother Earth.

Another group describes 'Sacred Feminine' in the meaning of balancing between the masculine and feminine powers created by the Divine. Men and women are categorized on the basis of some qualities which is wrong. All attributes are created by the Divine for both genders. Women can be strong, powerful, courageous. In the same way men can be beautiful, polite, and weaker at times.

They talk about certain qualities that can be both, in men and women.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Divine Feminine movement aims to bring a balance between masculine and feminine and not declaring one superior to other.

The novel of Dan Brown '*Da Vinci Code*', published in 2003, gave a revival to this concept in the West through the character of Mary Magdalene. She was a prostitute and the mother of Jesus's

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illegal children. The novel remained best seller for two years but was banned due to immoral material about Jesus. The character of Mary is the basis for 'Sacred Feminine' in Christianity.

From the West, coming towards Hinduism in the East, it has a rich material regarding 'Sacred Feminine' which provides interesting facts to search into.

### 1.3. Sacred Feminine in Hindu scripture

Status of woman has always been debated in Hindu Religious tradition. According to a general perception, women are the oppressed and neglected class in a Hindu society. They cannot enjoy the religious status equal to that of men. But it is also a fact that with the passage of time this status is changing. The role of women has been accepted as important and necessary for the development of human society. Especially in big cities, trends are changing rapidly. But along with this change, the question of religious viewpoint towards the status of women in contemporary practical life is also being discussed. The society is still has different opinions with respect to urban and rural areas. That is why it is important to consult the popular texts in Hindu scripture to understand what traditional religion says about women and their participation in society.

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<sup>8</sup> Soulfulmed.com/blog-archive/2017/6/22/return-of-the-feminine-understanding-the-divine-feminine-the-truefeminist-movement. Retrieved on January 8, 2020

### 1.3.1. Women in Vedas

It is believed about Vedas that they are the words of gods heard by spiritually elevated personalities and then compiled by rishis. They are considered as the most important among the whole Hindu scripture. That is why it is necessary to consult Vedas in order to study the religious viewpoint over a certain issue. They consist about the stories, prayers and hymns related to gods and goddesses. They do not talk about women directly but manifest the importance and sacredness of feminine essence through the stories and prayers about goddesses. The study of Rig Veda is important in this regard that it contains material which is related to female deities in which they seem performing duties in the world. Sometimes, the name of a female goddess is clearly mentioned, but at several places female attribute or essence is observed through the wordings of the texts. Rig Veda starts with the hymns in praise to God. The fourth one is titled with the name of Indri. Cow veneration is also reflected through this hymn which is a clear manifestation of the sacredness of female essence in Hindu concept of God (RV 4.1). The importance of the role of women is also reflected in many other places such as another hymn says:

“Surely men crave and gain their wish. Close to her husband clings the wife. And, in embraces, intertwined, both give and take the bliss of love. Mark this my woe, ye Earth and Heaven.”

(RV 105.2)

This verse is giving a clear picture of the role of woman. Presence of women is as necessary with men as the existence of Heaven and Earth with each other. But the verse reflects another important point as well. It is that woman should remain closer to her husband to play her role perfectly and to get true blessings of God. The verse carries the concept that men and women are always in need of each other. Both completes each other and without this companionship they cannot have true

love between themselves. But one thing is clear that men can make a wish and they are free to choose the way to gain this wish. But real happiness for a woman is when she is with her husband. Individuality means nothing to her. Another verse says:

“May the most glorious Fathers aid us, and the two goddesses, Mothers of the gods, who  
strengthen Law. (RV 106.3)

This hymn is about asking help and support from the gods and then mother of these gods. When mother goddess will also be there with gods, it will provide strength to the religious law. In the second verse, woman is observed helping her husband in the form of a wife and in third one she appears providing support and help in the role of a mother. In this way she performs her role in strengthening the law of nature. But there are hymns in Rig Veda which also manifest the independent and leading status of female deities such as the second last hymn of third book of Rig Veda is a prayer to goddess Usas. In this prayer she is presented as an individual deity, who accomplishes her task without taking any support from a male God. Similarly, there are hymns for goddess Dawn, Sarswati, Vak and Aranyani which shows their individual status.<sup>9</sup>

Vedas do not talk directly about the religious status of women. This is manifested only when Vedas speak about goddesses. The important point here is that Vedas give an individual status to females only in the form of goddesses. In case of women, it is obvious that Vedas mention women just as a helper of men. They talk about female essence and not woman. That is why the feminine is picturized as a mother or a wife or a cow which is beneficial. It shows that a woman can play her role in the best way only when she is with her husband or a male as a supporter. Even the goddesses

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<sup>9</sup> [Response to Women in Hinduism/Vedas Part-1 https://vedkabhed.com/index.php/2014/05/14/response-to-women-in-hinduismvedas-part-i/](https://vedkabhed.com/index.php/2014/05/14/response-to-women-in-hinduismvedas-part-i/). Retrieved on July 9, 2019

in Vedas seem performing their role as the consorts of male gods except only a few mentioned above.

### 1.3.2. Women in Upanishads

Upanishads are another important group of Hindu religious texts which holds significance place in the scripture. Chandogya Upanishad and Barhadrayanka Upanishad are the two most important in this regard. They narrate the stories of women playing their roles and showing the status of women in the sight of Hindu religion. Among the stories that carry the female characters is the story narrated in the chapters ‘Meditation of The Sun’ to ‘Meditation of Vayu and Prana as Brahman’. In this story Janasruti wanted from Raikva to take him as his student but he denied. At this denial Janasruti offered his daughter to Raikva as his wife. Although the saint refused to accept

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the young girl as his wife, but after this he accepted Janasruti as his student. (CU: P. 189 200)

Similarly, there is a story of Upakosala in which the wife convinced the teacher, Satyakama, to teach her husband. She herself, was not a spiritual figure, but was fully involved with her husband in achieving his goal. It shows that she was fully aware of the importance of knowledge. But a distinguishing point in this story is that the mother of Upakosala is presented here as an independent lady, who lives on her own and does not depend upon any male. She has also raised up her son alone. (CU: P. 206-218).

While talking about creation, women are declared as fire. Fire holds a special place in Hindu religious traditions and when women are given the name of ‘Fire’, it shows the elevated status and significance of women in the process of creation and this status is given by religion itself. (CU: P.



246-247).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, when Yajnavalkya is telling about the creation of human beings in Barhadarayanka Upanishad through the story of Viraj, the first human being, he says that Viraj was not satisfied with his existence alone. Then, in order to have a partner in the world he split himself into two and a woman was created from his other half. This was his wife and from here the concept of Pati and Patni was introduced, and pairs of all living beings were also created in the same manner. The story carries the concept that all creations are from Viraj, thus, are of equal status. The wife who is a woman is the first creation from Viraj and is closest to him. (BU P. 100104). Then there is a story of forty-nine teachers.

The important here is that they are known with the name of their mothers. Although mothers have nothing to do individually but being the mothers of religious teachers, they have played a special role in the religious upbringing of their children. They also played the role of initial teachers for

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their sons. This shows that they themselves had a good knowledge of religious teachings and well aware of the importance of education. At another place, a female saint Gargi seems asking questions from Yajnavalkya in the court of king Janaka in the presence of many other religious scholars. This shows that she had the religious knowledge and reached at a level where she spoke in front of others and even asked questions from them and then confirmed the answers of Yajnavalkya.<sup>11</sup> Only that person can show such a reaction, who has a special level of knowledge. These stories show that the concept of women as religious and spiritual leader is there in the scriptures, although their number is less than the men. They not only can have religious knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> Swami Krishnananda: The Divine Life Society [https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/chhand/chhandogya\\_upanishad.pdf](https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/chhand/chhandogya_upanishad.pdf). Retrieved on July 9, 2019

<sup>11</sup> Brihadranyaka Upanishad <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Brihadranyaka-Upanishad.pdf>. Retrieved on July 10, 2019

but can also be the teachers. As compared to Vedas, Upanishads seem clear about the role of women because they talk directly about women instead of goddesses. But both are similar in depicting women in relation to a relative male. In most of the stories they are depicted as subordinates of men. The father is presenting her daughter as a gift which is very humiliating for females. Presenting slave girls as gifts and giving one's own daughters for political and other purposes has always been a common practice in the Sub-Continent and the Hindu society. Story of the wife also manifests the character of a sacrificing wife who is worried for her husband and begging the saint to take him as his student. Among a few independent female characters is Upakosala's mother but portrayal of women in such characters is very rare in Hindu scriptures. In the story of creation when Viraj split himself into two the wife was created. This again builds the narrative that women are created just to provide satisfaction and comfort to men. They are supposed to perform this duty as a preference in their lives. Gargi challenges Yajnavalkiya but not in order to prove the superiority of her knowledge over him but to prove Yajnavalkiya as having

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the highest knowledge. Even when she declares him right, she is not categorized as the highest ranked saint rather the whole story is described to conclude that Yajnavalkiya has the special knowledge which is above all.

### 1.3.3. Women in Epics

Epics comprises three longest stories Mahabhart, Ramayana and Bhagvad-Gita. Mahabhart is not only a story, but it talks about Hindu religious commandments and rules and regulations as well, related to daily life. Written in the form of a poem, it gives principles of politics, law, religion, sacrifices, wars along with family life and some other topics of Hindu social life. That is why they holds a special place in Hindu religious literature. Contrary to Vedas and Upanishads, Epics carry

a sad and gloomy picture of women in Indian society. There are eight prominent female characters in Mahabhartar. They are Urvashi, Draupadi, Kunti, Ganga, Satyavati, Gandhari, Ulupi and Amba. Urvashi is the immortal Being that came on Earth from Heavens but, in the world of men she just got the place of a dancer in Indra's palace. Draupadi is the wife of five brothers at a time. It is because of her desire for sexual pleasure in the previous birth. Kunti is the aunt of Krishna whose father gave her to his childless cousin after birth. She is presented as a well-mannered and wise female character of Mahabhartar. Ganga is the foster Mother of Ganesh and Skanda, the two sons of Shiva and Parvati. In Mahabhartar she appears in reincarnated form and becomes the wife of king Shantanu. She kills seven of his sons but the last one survives and is known as Bhishma in Mahabhartar. Satyavati was also the queen of king Shantanu. She is a greedy woman who wanted to have all powers in her hands. For this purpose, she orders her illegal son to produce children from the widows of his stepbrothers. Due to these immoral acts, she had no success and had a dreadful end. Gandhari is the wife of the blind king, Dhritrashtra, and the mother of hundred Kauravas. She is known for her sacrifices. One because of sacrificing all her sons in battles against Pandavas and other when she spent whole of her life blind-folded because her husband was blind. She is closer to Kunti in her conduct. Ulupi is also found in Bhagvata Purana and Vishnu Purana. In Mahabhartar, she appears as the second wife of Arjuna. Her role in Mahabhartar is just that she reunited Arjuna with his son. Amba is another negatively portrayed female character whose only purpose of life is the destruction of prince Bhishma and spends whole of her life in this enmity.<sup>12</sup> The prominent female character in Ramayana is Sita. The story of Sita and Ram is a famous myth in Hindu literature. It is a collection of moral and ethical values necessary for a good social and

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<sup>12</sup> Sundararaj, Aneeta., A Summary of The Mahabhartar.

<https://www.scasd.org/cms/lib5/PA01000006/Centricity/Domain/1487/Mahabhartar%20Summary.pdf>. Retrieved on July 10, 2019

family life. The prominent female character in Ramayana is Sita who is good, light, subordinate and a faithful wife of Rama. But there are some other female characters as well in the story, who are not at that level of morality as Sita. Such as Surpanaka who is shown as evil and impure. Kaikeyi is a proud woman, Sumitra is as dreadful as a lioness while Manthara and Sabari are also selfish in their characters. Thus, the only female, who is seen in positive role is Sita, all others are shown in negative characters. But the story of Sita's childhood raises another issue. It is told that Sita was the first child of Mandodari and Ravana. Astrologers had predicted that the birth of first child of this couple will be destructive for the whole family. Ravana ordered to bury her in the jungle, but King Janaka and His wife found her and adopted as their young princess.<sup>13</sup> So, the only positive female character is also a cursed woman by birth. She made herself respectable with her conduct otherwise she was sent away from her home and family because of her curse. When she had to prove her loyalty, she had to pass over the burning coals. Thus, her conduct was doubted

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again and again even though she is morally good in the story. Bhagvad Gita is the third among the literature of Epic. It is also a collection of moral and ethical values. But the whole Book talks about the morals of a man. Women are excluded to follow these instructions. Indeed, women are supposed not to have any relation with moral values. One of its texts says:

“When irreligion is prominent in the Family, O Krisna, the women of the family become polluted, and from the degradation of womanhood, O descendant of Vrsni, comes unwanted

progeny”. The same verse continues to say:

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<sup>13</sup> Dwivedi, Dr. Manisha and Sarika Soni., Depiction of Different Shades of Female Characters in The Ramayana. 2017. International Journal of Recent Trends in Engineering and Research. V. 3, Issn: 2455-1457. <https://www.ijrter.com/papers/volume-3/issue-7/depiction-of-different-shades-of-female-characters-in-theRamayana.pdf>. P. 428

“Women folks, Vaisyas, Sudras, and even those that are born of sinful wombs taking refuge in Me, attain the Supreme God”. (Gita 9: 32-33)<sup>14</sup>

These texts show that women are responsible for the immorality of the whole family. A family loses their moral values because of the curse of women because evil enters the family through women. It means that evil is there in the nature of women and females are more inclined towards evil. In the second verse women are mentioned in the category of sinful creatures. The wordings ‘sinful wombs’ show that women are considered as sinful by birth and more than that they are also responsible for further sinful births. It also gives the meaning that those who want to get rid of sins should come to God for refuge and should keep themselves away from women. Of course, with this viewpoint, no woman can be appointed as the religious leader because a religious leader cannot be sinful. Here it is also important that these are the apparent meanings of the texts. Some contemporary Hindu scholars do not take these texts in these meanings. They interpret them in their contextual meanings such as Hari Parshad Prabhu and Revati Vallabh Prabhu<sup>15</sup> interpret these

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texts in a totally different meaning from what is apparent. But it is also a fact that it is nothing but a mere effort to justify their scripture because the previous scholars like Ramanujachariya and Shankrachariya have written in their commentaries that being sinful is the adjective of women, vaisyas and sudras.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ramsukhdas, Swami., Gita on Character Building. [www.swamiramsukhdasji.net/eBooks/Gita-on-Character-Building.pdf](http://www.swamiramsukhdasji.net/eBooks/Gita-on-Character-Building.pdf). P. 9

<sup>15</sup> Two contemporary scholars from Har-e-Krishna movement

<sup>16</sup> What does The Bhagvad Gita says about Women. <https://www.quora.com/What-does-the-Bhagvad-Gita-say-about-women>. Retrieved on July 13, 2019

In this way the whole Epic presents a very discouraging picture of women. According to its sayings, women have to spend their lives at first following the decisions of their parents and family traditions, then with complete loyalty to their husbands, with full devotion to their children and at the old age her son plays the role of her guardian. Whole of her life is just sacrifice for others and this is what religion demands from her.

#### 1.3.4. Women in Code of Manu

The study of women's status is not completed until The Code of Manu is not consulted. It is known as the earliest code of Law of Hindu religion, and it is necessary to consult it in order to know the religious commandments about any specific issue. It talks about the responsibilities of each cast of Hindu society in accordance to their status of creation by the Divine. Many Hindu scholars accept it as a part of Vedas. According to Hindu belief Manu was the first human being, who compiled a complete list of duties for whole of the humanity till today. This is known as dharma in Hindu belief. As far as the status of women in Code of Manu is concerned, it talks about them in much more respectable way as compared to other books of Hindu scripture. There is a complete chapter in Manu with women related texts. It is clearly said:

“Women must always be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own welfare). Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased;

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but where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards.”<sup>17</sup>

It gives a comprehensive picture of a woman's life from her childhood till the old age. It takes women as a creation equal to men because both are created from the same body. The only

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<sup>17</sup> Women in Manu. Ravitvari.in/rtpaper2.pdf. p.2  
[www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/manu\\_for\\_modern\\_times.pdf](http://www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/manu_for_modern_times.pdf)

difference is that the female side is weaker and more likely to fall into evil thus, needs protection. While male side is powerful and that is why responsible to provide protection. Providing protection to women is a source of getting god's happiness and blessings. When a husband or a father or any other male head of the family protects his female family members from evils and inculcates in them good qualities of head and heart, this is the real honor he is providing to his women. A woman is blessed when she follows what is decided about her by her guardian. Manus gives instructions about women in different aspects of her life such as: daughter, wife, widow, mother, and others. But, along with all this favor, Manus also treats women in a very negative way in some aspects of practical life. She is deprived of her basic rights according to the teachings of Manus. A daughter deserves to be treated in the best way, but she cannot inherit alone from the property of her father, according to Manus. Even an adopted son is preferred over the daughter because the presence of a male offspring is necessary for performing the father's funeral rites. Similarly, a man is not completed without his wife and that is why she should be treated in a respectable way. But Manus does not give her freedom even inside her home. She is under the total subordination of her husband. There are strict principles for women in performing religious rites. A woman cannot perform any religious rite without taking permission from her husband. A Brahman is prohibited even to attend a sacrificial feast, if arranged by a woman alone. She cannot observe fast without seeking permission of the husband. Under these strict rules it is obvious that

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women cannot play any leading roles in worldly as well as religious affairs.<sup>18</sup> In case of widows, Manu strictly prohibits second marriage for women. A girl is associated to a man only once in her life. Spending life in the name of only one husband will lead into heavens.

The most respectful relation of all is the relation of Mother. She is considered to inherit the property and children of her deceased son. In case of the absence of a male head she can be the head of the family. But will spend her old age as a responsibility of her sons and cannot take independent decisions. But, above all this respect which Manu gives to women, there are texts which go totally in contrast with what is said above. They are the texts that show that slavery was a common practice in Manu's time and instead of putting a ban on it, new laws are introduced related to slave girls. It gives instructions how to treat the slave women. It advises the kings to fix and pay the wages of his slave girls in time. By going through these texts one can assume that Hindu code of law does not condemn slavery, rather promotes it by making new laws.<sup>20</sup>

An overall picture of Manu's laws clearly show that women are a totally dependent creation with no freedom and authority. If they are not free even in taking decisions inside their homes, how they can have authority in religious affairs as leaders? This becomes clear from these texts that Manu's laws strictly prohibit woman in leading roles.

#### 1.4. Concluding Remarks

Vedas, Upanishads, Epic and Code of Manu are the most important among Hindu religious texts.

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<sup>18</sup> Women in Manu. Ravitiwari.in/rtpaper2.pdf. P.2 <sup>20</sup>  
Ibid P. 9



None of them used any clear texts about women's religious and spiritual leadership, but they present women in such a way that they are limited to a small circle of household and family responsibilities only. Even inside this limited circle she is bound to follow the likings and

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dislikings of her family head or husband. The meanings of respect and honor are different in case of men and women. The conclusion of their teachings is clear about the status of women in every field of life. These teachings can tell us that those, who take religion as the basis of their ideology, accept religious texts in their apparent meanings or give new interpretation to improve the status of women.

A lot of examples are there in the history of Hinduism which are a source of inspiration for those females who are interested in spirituality and want to appear in the name of religion. Prominent among these are Meera Bai, Akka Mahadevi, Lalleshvari and Andal in the history of female Hindu saints. The writings of these female saints are considered as religious material and also chanted on religious festivals to receive blessings. There are many such female saints in Shaiva Sidhanta<sup>19</sup> tradition as well. Similarly, Sant tradition<sup>20</sup> talk about spiritual leaders such as Mukta Bai and Bahina Bai.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Shaiva Sidhanta is a Hindu religious philosophy that emerged in South India negating mainly the cast system. It is categorized among the group of Agamas which means going apart. Because of having concepts different from traditional concepts of Vedas

<sup>20</sup> In these traditions the succession of styles and teachings have been developed and transmitted. Sant is also equivalent to Sadhu in Indian traditions

<sup>21</sup> Rawat, Sugandha, Dr. Pradeep Kumar., Hindu Women in The Mirror of Time: At Once a Goddess and a Slave? 2015. Journal of Indian Research. V.3, No: 3 ISSN: 2321-4155.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/357828114/Hindu-Women-in-The-Mirror-of-Time> P. 3

### 1.5. Goddesses as symbol of Sacred Feminine in Hinduism

As said earlier, the study of Feminine as sacred is not new in Hinduism. Historical records show that the belief was always present in ancient Indian civilization even in religious traditions before Aryan period. Many examples of it are found in the archeological findings in present day India and Pakistan.

A God with the name of Potu Raju, is worshipped in a village of Andhra Pradesh. He is believed to be the younger brother of seven sisters. According to some scholars they are not sisters but

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seven avatars of one goddess. The eldest sister Poleramma or Polemma, is the most powerful deity of the village who protects the inhabitants from evil spirits and diseases. In another village of Rajasthan, the same goddess is worshipped with the name of Zawar Mata. At another place she is Avadi Mata. In the border villages of Rajasthan, the desert villages in Pakistan, she is known as Hinglaz Mata.<sup>22</sup> The interesting point here is that the priests who receive offerings of these goddesses are also females. It is important to note that all these beliefs belong to the times before Aryan period which means that the belief in this goddess belongs to Indus valley civilization which can be known as pre-Hindu era. Historical records show that the same belief shifted to Hinduism when the Religion developed and entered in Aryan age. Potu Raju became Pashu Pati in this period. The Chinchu tribes of Andhra Pradesh gave him the name of Siva or Siva Lingum. They transferred the concept of god's sister as well. Another interesting fact is that Poleramma became Adi Shakti in Aryan period. According to a myth Potu Raju was the husband of goddess Durga.

Durga, Kali, Parwati and other goddesses of Aryan period are the modified forms of Shakti or

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<sup>22</sup> Indus Religion., [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292144531\\_Indus\\_Religion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292144531_Indus_Religion). Retrieved on August 13, 2019

Poleramma in this age. With these developments in the religious concepts the Shakti Cult became Shiva Shakti Cult<sup>23</sup> in later Hinduism.<sup>24</sup> The Madiga<sup>25</sup> community believes that Poleramma was there even before the birth of Brahma. She wanted to live with Brahma as husband and wife but burnt him after he refused. Then Vishnu appeared and he also refused and was burnt. At last Siva accepted her offer with the condition of sharing her powers including her third eye. She accepted and Siva took half of her powers. From these powers he revived Vishnu and Brahma. Then he

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burnt Poleramma to ashes and divided these ashes into four parts. From the three parts Sarswati, Parwati and Lakshmi were created. From the fourth and last portion of these ashes Siva revived Poleramma but with reduced powers.<sup>26</sup> This myth shows that in the Darvidian period female goddess or Divine as Feminine was the Supreme Divine but lost its supremacy in Aryan period. It may be the time when religion was turning into patriarchal or male dominating religion. Researchers believe that the religion believed in a mother goddess in Harappan period as the goddess of creation and fertility. Because of the attribute of creation, she was above all other deities.<sup>27</sup> A well-known historian of India, Arthur Basham<sup>28</sup> writes that matriarchal culture was present in India even before Aryan's migration and before their establishment of a male dominated society.<sup>29</sup> Another scholar describes 'Sacred Feminine' with reference to Shakti worship by

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<sup>23</sup> A syncretic form of Shaivism and Shaktism

<sup>24</sup> Indus Religion., [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292144531\\_Indus\\_Religion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292144531_Indus_Religion). Retrieved on August 13, 2019

<sup>25</sup> A cast of Dallats in India mostly found in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orisa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala

<sup>26</sup> Indus Religion., [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292144531\\_Indus\\_Religion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292144531_Indus_Religion). Retrieved on August 13, 2019

<sup>27</sup> Religious developments in Ancient India., <https://www.ancient.eu/article/230/religious-developments-in-ancientindia/>. Retrieved on August 14, 2019

<sup>28</sup> A noted English historian and Indologist and a professor at the school of Oriental and African studies

<sup>29</sup> Basham, Arthur.L., wonder that was India Revised edition. 1967, London: Sidgwick and Jackson. p: 313. Asiasociety.org/education/Shakti-power-feminine. Retrieved on August 10, 2017

saying:

“It is quite common, furthermore, to identify Shakti with a female being, a goddess, and to identify the other pole with her male consort. The two poles are usually understood to be interdependent and to have relatively equal status in terms of the divine economy.”<sup>30</sup> Sri Sawami Chidananda has quoted the words of Swami Sivananda, about Mother worship in his book in these words:

“Since the dawn of civilization, when the primitive man lived in a matriarchal society, the worship of the Divine Mother came into practice. Later on, as civilization progressed, the

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matriarchal pattern gradually faded out, and the father became the head of family unit, where he was treated as the man in authority and to whom everyone looked for guidance and approval. Consequently, there was a change in the concept of God as such; the fatherhood of God was established. But mother worship persisted simultaneously, since this concept was psychologically more appealing to the devotee, the mother being nearest in filial affection to the child. Subsequently, a synthetic harmony between the Motherhood and Fatherhood of the God was developed by the Hindu Religion; the people worshipped Sita and Rama or Radha and Karishna together.”<sup>31</sup>

These historical records and religious myths are a proof that different religious beliefs from historical period became the basis for the development of Hinduism today in its recent form. All these religious traditions were female dominating but as the religion developed, the male essence

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<sup>30</sup> Kinsley, David. R., *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. 1986. Berkeley: University of California Press. p: 133. [Asiasociety.org/education/Shakti-power-feminine](http://Asiasociety.org/education/Shakti-power-feminine); Retrieved on August 10, 2017

<sup>31</sup> Chidananda, Sri Swami: *God as Mother*. 1991, Uttar Pradesh India. The Divine Life Trust Society. World-Wide Web edition: 1999. WWW site: <http://www.SivanandaDishq.org>, ISBN 81-7052-090-8

of Divinity dominated, and female presentation was only in the form of consorts of the male gods or their supporters in the modified form of religion. The remains of these ancient times are still there somewhere in the scriptures when at a few places religious texts talk about independent female deities as discussed previously in this chapter.

Hinduism when talks about Divine as Feminine, it associates mostly the attributes of creation, nourishment, beginner, sustainer, prosperity, and beauty to female gods. According to the archeologists, ancient Indians were the worshippers of an all-powerful female Goddess before developing a male dominating Vedic religion and this concept is still somewhere in the minds of public, when they use the term of Dharti Mata (Mother Earth), Gao Mata (Mother Cow) etc.

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Shaktism<sup>32</sup> is still prevailing in traditional Hindu concept of female worship in which the Goddess is the One Supreme principle. The religious literature also talks about goddess worship e.g hymns in Rigveda<sup>33</sup> and Puranas<sup>34</sup> which talk about goddess religion like Devi Purana<sup>35</sup>. Although a lot of changes have appeared in it with the passage of time, goddess worship is an important part of modern Vaisnavism and Saivism as well. Vishnu without Sri Devi, Rama without Sita and Krishna without Radha are unthinkable. A famous figure in Siva Shakti myth is ardhanari avatar<sup>36</sup>, half man and half woman. The story tells that when a worshipper refused to worship Parvati, Siva became one person with Parvati to teach him a lesson. Shakti is the female energy that gives life

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<sup>32</sup> A major tradition of Hinduism where the metaphysical reality is considered metaphorically feminine and Adi Prashakti is supreme

<sup>33</sup> An ancient Hindu collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns

<sup>34</sup> Hindu religious texts that are part of the Vedas

<sup>35</sup> A Hindu religious Sanskrit text that belongs to the Purana genre of Hindu literature

<sup>36</sup> An avatar with a body of half male and half female

to Siva. The greatest religious festival of Bengal is associated to goddess Durga and thus known as Durgapuja<sup>37</sup>. Goddesses are always there to perform their duties individually, as well as to help and support the male gods, in the form of their consorts. As the Religion developed, with the passage of time, the religious status of women was also discussed a lot. Religious texts were interpreted and reinterpreted and justified in different ways. Hinduism believes in avatars and saints who are known as the embodiments of God on earth. Although the standard list in Bhadrayana Upanishad<sup>38</sup> mentioned only ten avatars of Lord Vishnu but religious texts also tell that Vishnu's avatars are infinite in number. God has sent his avatars in every period to show the light of guidance to humanity. Devimahatmya<sup>39</sup> talks about the promise of a goddess who appears again and again whenever world is in danger. Thus, although the concept is changed in

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contemporary understanding of religious texts, but it is still there and manifested itself through the religious beliefs of female led religious movements that appeared in contemporary Hinduism.

Three of these movements are being studied in this research as the symbol of 'Sacred Feminine'.

The study of 'Sacred Feminine' in Hinduism is not completed without having a look at some popular and leading female goddesses as they are the symbols of feminine aspect of the Divine.

Most popular among Hindu goddesses is Shakti. The word Shakti is derived from the root word Shak, which means unseen power. According to the Hindu understanding this power exists in the universe but is not visible, thus Shakti is regarded as the kinetic energy of Brahma. This Shakti, according to them, is the energy which Brahma used to start the process of everything in universe.

That is why this energy is present everywhere and in everything that exists in this world and

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<sup>37</sup> The worship associated to religious festival of goddess Durga

<sup>38</sup> The author of Brahma Sutras is Bhadrayana. In this respect these texts are known as Bhadrayana Upanishad

<sup>39</sup> A Hindu religious text describing the goddess as the Supreme power and creator of the universe

universe. According to Hindu belief, everything in this universe is moving and the power which keeps them moving is Shakti. Another simple meaning of this name is ‘God as Mother’ or ‘The Power of God’. In this respect her name comes at first among the list of all goddesses. Thus, in this respect, she is superior to all. Being considered as a part of Brahma, she is above all creations. All other goddesses, Durga, Kali, Tara, Yaggadharti, Maheshamardini, Sarsvati, Parvati, Lakshmi and Chandi are considered the manifestations of different attributes of Shakti.<sup>40</sup> In Hindu mythology the best appearance of Shakti is in the form of ardhnari avatar which also shows the equal status of male and female in the sight of God. Lord Brahma is reported to say about her: “Do thy worship to her with all thy heart. She will grant thee thy boons. She is the Supreme

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Force. She shines like ten million suns. She is like ten million lightnings. She saves all beings from dangers. She is cool like ten million moons. She is the spouse of Kala, Kalakamini. She is the beginning. She helps in crossing the ocean of life, samsara<sup>41</sup>. She is Buddheshwari<sup>42</sup>

(Mistress of Intelligence). She is in the Atharvaveda”<sup>43</sup>

The word Shakti comes twelve times in Rig Veda. A part of it is known as Devi Sukta. Her presence is also seen in Epics and Ramayana. The texts of Bhagvata Purana<sup>44</sup> are totally in praise

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<sup>40</sup> Chatterji, Usha., Shakti and Shakti. 1968. Vol: 2, No: 4. P. 1,7

[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/uploads/ArticlePDFs/74.pdf](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/uploads/ArticlePDFs/74.pdf). Retrieved on August 18, 2019

<sup>41</sup> The cyclicity of all life

<sup>42</sup> From Athar Veda meaning knowledge

<sup>43</sup> Chatterji, Usha., Shakti and Shakti. 1968. Vol: 2, No: 4. P. 10

[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/uploads/ArticlePDFs/74.pdf](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/uploads/ArticlePDFs/74.pdf). Retrieved on August 18, 2019 <sup>33</sup> 125<sup>th</sup> hymn of Rig Veda

<sup>44</sup> One of the 18<sup>th</sup> puranas of Hindu religious literature

to her. Shakti principle is also seen in different schools of Indian philosophy. Mimamsakas<sup>45</sup> says that Shakti is the 'inherent power of all things.' Naiyayika<sup>46</sup> explains it as 'the function or property of any cause'. Vedanta philosophy<sup>47</sup> also mentions her as 'the activity of a cause revealing itself in the shape of an effect'. Samkhya<sup>48</sup> philosophy describes it in terms of the creating power and the life-giving force of parakriti.<sup>49</sup> The text of Devi Mahatmya considers the whole cosmos as the manifestation of Shakti and the best manifestation is woman. Thus, women have a special religious status and power. For example, recently there is a campaign for rape victim women and young girls in India. A comic book was distributed in the locality and the schools of the area naming '*The Abused goddesses campaign*'. An NGO propagated the story of a rape victim girl, titled, '*Priya's*

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*Shakti*'. It is obvious from these names that those who are trying to rehabilitate these women, are giving them a new spirit through making them feel that they are a special creation and symbols of god's power in the world.<sup>50</sup> Shaktism is an ancient cult in Hinduism and its devotees are known as Shaktas. It is so much popular in Hinduism that many researchers believe it to be a distinguishing philosophy among other philosophical systems, separate and different from other Hindu sects. A number of Shakti temples are there in India with special rituals, worships and mantras associated to goddess Shakti only. Then there are sub-divisions of Shaktas with their own ways to be

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<sup>45</sup> Mimamsa is a Sanskrit word which literally means 'revered thought'. It was originally used for interpretation of Vedic rituals which commanded the highest reverence. Mimamsa gives rules according to which commandments of Vedas are interpreted as well as a philosophical justification for Vedic rituals. Those who follow this way are known as mimasskas

<sup>46</sup> Nayayikas are also yogas. The followers of Nayaya Vaisheshika system

<sup>47</sup> Vedanta is said to be the explanation as well as the conclusion of the whole Vedas

<sup>48</sup> A system which gives the concept of duality 'Prakriti' and 'Purusha' and eternity of matter

<sup>49</sup> Morales., Frank, M.A. The Concept of Shakti: Hinduism as a liberating force for women  
CiteSeerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.542.6948

<sup>50</sup> Smears, Ali., Mobilizing Shakti: Hindu Goddesses and Campaigns against Gender-based Violence. 2019. Canada, School of Religious Studies, McGill university Montreal. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/6/381/pdf>. P. 3



associated to Shaktism<sup>51</sup>. The researcher is concerned here with Shakti as the feminine power of the Divine only, thus details of these sub-divisions are not discussed here. Goddess Shakti is shown in different iconographical images with different colors and backgrounds. She is picturized as a beautiful woman in red and green Sari, her long curly hair are widely spread on her back, sitting in kundalini yoga<sup>52</sup> position, holding a long pitchfork type tool in one of her eight hands, surrounded by lotus flowers, all primary colors are seen on her back which shows the quality of universality associated to her being. But this is not the only one picture of her. She is shown in many images and every painted image, manifests anyone of her attributes.<sup>53</sup> In some images a snake or snake like crown is also seen on her head. The name of Shakti is also used in association to Lord Shiva. Here it does not stand in the meaning of a 'consort' of Shiva as other goddesses are mentioned; rather Shakti is mentioned as the sustaining power of Shiva. The devotees of Shiva-Shakti cult believe in coexistence of two powers in the world at a time. One is

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masculine and other is feminine. Thus, Shakti is the feminine energy of the Divine, necessary for natural cycles of the world.

Another popular Hindu goddess is Sarsvati. She is known as the consort of the highest Hindu God Brahma, the creator God. Sarsvati is known for her attribute of the knowledge of creation. God cannot complete his task of creation until he does not know what, when and how to create a creation. Here comes the significance of Sarsvati. In this respect she is also worshipped as the highest among all goddesses. A person who has accomplished the whole procedure of cleaning his

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<sup>51</sup> Avalon, Arthur., Shakti and Shakta: Essays and Addresses on the Shakta Tantrashastra. 1918. London, Luzac & Co. [www.mysticknowledge.org/Shakti\\_and\\_Shakta-By\\_Arthur-Avalon.pdf](http://www.mysticknowledge.org/Shakti_and_Shakta-By_Arthur-Avalon.pdf). P. 63. Retrieved on August 20, 2019

<sup>52</sup> A school of thought influenced by Shaktism and Tantra schools of Hinduism

<sup>53</sup> Sivananda, Sri Swami., Kundalini Yoga. 1994. Uttar Pardesh, Himalayas India. The Divine Life Society. ISBN: 81-7052-052-5. P. 7

inner self, turns towards the worship of Sarsvati because now his heart has become pure to have the sacred knowledge. She is also known as the mother of Vedas or Vak Devi.<sup>54</sup> Reaching at the worship of her level means that a devotee is now capable to attain Moksha.<sup>55</sup>

Different stories are told about the origin of Sarsvati. According to the Most popular among these, when Brahma was not satisfied with his creation and wanted to bring colors, beauty, and charm in the world he decided to create the females to satisfy the males. For this purpose, he divided himself into two halves. He created Sarsvati from his second half. This second creation was so beautiful and satisfying that he fell in love with her and took her as his consort.<sup>56</sup> Swami Prajananda<sup>57</sup> writes that she belongs to the Vedic period and was the part of triad of goddesses once. Puranas usually mentions her as the consort of Brahma. She is also found as the head of deities in Jain myths and popular among some Buddhist groups as Aryasarsvati. In a Mahayana scripture that is popular in China and Tibet, a complete chapter is associated to Sarsvati<sup>58</sup>. She is also one of those female

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deities that have an independent status as well. At some places she has been given the name of Sarada which means ‘autumn moon’ or ‘lute’. As the head of the pantheon of goddesses she is known as Mahasarsvati. They are Prajna, Medha, Smrti and Mati. Here she is painted as the four headed Goddess. This also shows the historical and cultural status of goddess Sarsvati. In her popular iconographical image, she is shown as a beautiful young lady in white Sari, with four arms. She is holding the musical instrument Vina in two of her arms which manifests her Divine

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<sup>54</sup> Balaveharganeshatempletn.org>downloadoc>classfile. Retrieved on August 26, 2019

<sup>55</sup> [www.Sanaatindharmamandir.org/Documents/Articles/Mother-Sarswati/Mother-Sarswati.pdf](http://www.Sanaatindharmamandir.org/Documents/Articles/Mother-Sarswati/Mother-Sarswati.pdf). Retrieved on August 23, 2019

<sup>56</sup> Holm, Jean & John Bowker ed., Picturing God. 1994, New York, Pinter publishers. P. 99-101

<sup>57</sup> Swami Prajananda was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda. Along with a saint he was also famous as a musician

<sup>58</sup> Wayman, Alex., The Goddess Sarsvati --- From India to Tibet. New York.

[www.thlib.org<static<reprints<kailash<kailash\\_05\\_03\\_03](http://www.thlib.org<static<reprints<kailash<kailash_05_03_03). P. 1-4. Retrieved on August 26, 2019

music that is the music of scripture. In her third hand she is holding a prayer beads and a book in the fourth hand. The book is the symbol of Holy scripture and shows the knowledge of scripture in her hands. She is picturized sitting on a Lotus flower under which there is a peacock. But in some images, there is Swan instead of peacock. Both birds symbolize beauty and purity while Lotus flower shows the perfection and beauty of nature.<sup>59</sup> Goddess Sarsvati is also associated to a river in Vedas and sometimes known as the goddess of speech and creative art as well. When Vedas talk about a creative sound, she is considered as the sound of creation of Brahma from which the world cycle started. It is observed that singing, chanting, dancing, and playing musical instruments during worship is a part of Hindu religious practices. Special bhajans are associated to Goddess Sarsvati. She is compared to Greek goddess, Athena in her attributes and functions and the head of the triad of three main Hindu goddesses, Sarsvati, Lakshami and Parvati. Being associated to wisdom and knowledge, she is also known as the creator of Vedas. Students, teachers, scholars, and researchers offer special worships to her for the successful completion of their tasks. Sarsvati puja is a special worship in the last three days of Navarati festival. Lakshami is the consort of Lord Vishnu. Mythological stories tell that Shiva wanted to have her as his wife, but she had become the consort of Vishnu before Shiva took any practical step to adopt

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her. She is known as the symbol of wealth, prosperity, and good luck. She is also one of the three most important and popular goddesses of Hindu Religion. Her sacred name is Shri, which stands for grace, authority, abundance, and power. Some researchers believe that Shri and Lakshami, both were the wives of Aditya in Vedic period, but many others support the opinion that they are two different names of one same Goddess. She is the daughter of Prajapati and the mother of Kama.

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<sup>59</sup> Holm, Jean & John Bowker ed., *Picturing God*. 1994, New York, Pinter publishers. P. 99-101

She appeared as a major goddess in Epic. Married men and women are given the titles of Shriman and Shrimati in the meaning of getting Divine blessings of prayers and wealth in their family lives. Unmarried people and those who leave the worldly life are not given this title. She is also the Goddess of nourishment in life. Her realization means realizing the happiness and wonders of the life. In puranas she is known as mahalakshami, ‘the supreme embodiment of the mother goddess.’ She is the representative of righteousness and compassion and a link between a harsh father Vishnu and a disobedient son ‘The Devotee’. A popular Hindu sect Shri Vishnavatism consider Lakshami as a necessary counterpart of Vishnu. It is impossible to visualize Vishnu without Lakshami. Like Sarsvati, she is also deeply rooted in Indian culture and known as Shri in Jain and Buddhist traditions as well.<sup>60</sup>

Different stories are found in Hindu mythology regarding origin of Lakshami. Devi Bhagvata Purana tells that she was born from the left side of the Supreme Being. Then she divided herself into two and Radha was born. She incarnates with every incarnation of Vishnu. When he incarnated as dwarf avatar, she appeared with him as Kamala, in the incarnation of parasurama, she appeared with Vishnu as Dharani, in the story of Rama she is Sita and with Krishna avatar she

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appeared as Rukmini in the form of his wife and Radha, his favorite Gopi.<sup>61</sup> According to another myth, she was born from a Lotus flower in an ocean from prehistorical period and saved the

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<sup>60</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik., The Ancient Story of Goddess Lakshami - bestower of power, wealth and Sovereignty.

Qz.com/india/545655/The-ancient-story-of-Goddess-Lakshami-bestower-of-power-wealth-and-sovereignty. Retrieved on August 27, 2019

<sup>61</sup> Williams, George. M., Hand Book of Hindu Mythology, 1967. Santa Barbara California, ISBN: 1-85109-650-7. D14.org>uploads>pdf>Handbook-of-Hindu-Mythology. P. 196. Retrieved on August 28, 2019

treasures of gods. Since that time, she is holding a Lotus flower in her hand which has become the symbol of Lakshmi. In her famous iconographical image, she has four arms. In two of these she is holding Lotus flowers, the right hand is in upright position and left hand is in laying down position and giving gold coins. Flowers are the symbols of purity while coins are showing wealth coming out of the hands of this Goddess. She is seen standing or sitting on a Lotus flower with two white elephants on her right and left sides. They are the symbols of royalty. In some images fruits and fruit nectar is also seen placed in front of her. All images of Lakshmi are painted with bright colors which shows healthy and joyful life, prosperity, and wealth.<sup>62</sup>

Another important Hindu goddess is Parvati. She is the wife of Shiva and the mother of two other gods, Ganesha and Skanda. She is usually painted as dark skin colored goddess. In the form of energy and power the consort of Shiva is Shakti, while when Shiva appears in the world in his physical form, Parvati brings him in marriage bond and appears as the physical manifestation of Shakti so that Shiva's Divine energy is used for the benefit of the world.<sup>63</sup> That is why Parvati is hardly seen without Shiva in her iconographical images. Their marriage is a popular myth among god's mythological stories. According to this myth, Shiva's first wife was Sati. She committed suicide by burning herself in the fire. Shiva was so much desperate and sorrowful that he decided not to marry again. In this condition, a woman, Parvati, meditated in Himalayas for years with the purpose of winning over the heart of Shiva. She faced all problems, but nothing could make her to

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break her meditation. One day she heard the crying voice of a child and could not continue. At this, she stood up, broke her meditation, and started looking for the child. Although she could not

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<sup>62</sup> Holm, Jean & John Bowker ed., *Picturing God*. 1994, New York, Pinter publishers. P. 101

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

complete her required worship because of this interference but Shiva was so much impressed with her act of love for humanity that he married her. According to some other stories, Parvati was Sati in her previous birth. She appeared again in the life of Shiva when she saw him grieved and alone in the world. Because of spending too much time in Himalayas, she has been given the name of Parvati as the word Parvata is used for mountains in Sanskrit. Different names have been given to her in this meaning such as Shailaja, Adrija, Shailaputri and Haimavati. Indeed, she has 108 names in religious texts. Some researchers associate her name to the Sanskrit name Pavitar which means sinless, pure, or holy.<sup>64</sup> She is known as a combining power between mystic and worldly life when she brings Shiva in the world as a householder. In the role of Sati, she is the symbol of a devoted wife and a role model for all women. She is the one who set the example of burning herself alive in the fire for widows. Because of this myth of Sati, the practice was associated to Religion. She appears in Vedas with the name of Ambika and Rudrani. In kena Upanishad she seems playing the role of a mediator between human beings and gods. It is in Ramayana and Mahabhartata that she is presented as the wife of Shiva in clear words. Puranas describe long stories of Sati and Parvati and present them as significant goddesses. Scripture also represents her as the reincarnation of Mahadevi, who appears in the world for the same purpose for which Shiva incarnates. Due to her dark color, Shiva once called her Kali. At this she became angry and meditated long to get white complexion and after getting it, attained the title of Gauri. This dark colored quality when appeared with the anger of Parvati, it was in the form of Kali. Shiva is usually taken as the destroyer and Parvati as the building force. Thus, Parvati is the Shakti of Shiva in performing his tasks in the

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<sup>64</sup> Goddess Parvati. Scribd.com/document/118810328/Goddess-Parvati. Retrieved on August 29, 2019

world. This necessary relation is best picturized in Ardhnarisvara, half male and half female. The figure shows that both are the necessary part of each other and both powers are bound together.<sup>65</sup> In images where she is shown independently, she usually has eight to ten arms, holding in each arm things that are common among the images of gods and goddesses. She is riding on a tiger or a lion, with the picture of a beautiful forest behind. Such significant position of Parvati and her relation to one of the primary gods, shows her importance among Hindu deities.

The study of Hindu goddesses is not completed without mentioning Kali. She is worshipped by majority of feminine devotees and her temples are more in numbers as compared to other goddesses. Most of the sacrifices and offerings are offered to Kali to please her among all female deities and because of this her temples are more in number wherever feminine devotees are found. Some researchers associate her with Aryan invaders but some other consider her a Dravidian Deity. According to another myth about her origin, it was stated that a demon Darika was reported promoting evils in the world. On hearing this, Shiva became very angry and in this state of anger, created Bhadrakali, who defeated Darika and then Shiva and Kali danced together. It is due to this condition of anger of Shiva that Kali is so furious since her creation.<sup>66</sup> The name Kali is derived from the Sanskrit root word Kaal, which means time. Kali represents time and death with her appearance. In her simple form, it is easy to make her happy but in her extreme form when she is

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<sup>65</sup> Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in The Hindu Religious Tradition*. 1988, University of California Press, isbn: 9780585334882. P. 61-65

<sup>66</sup> Caldwell, Sarah., *Whose Goddess? Kali as Cultural Champion in Kerala Oral Narratives*.  
[https://www.academia.edu/Whose\\_Goddess\\_Kali\\_as\\_Cultural\\_Champion](https://www.academia.edu/Whose_Goddess_Kali_as_Cultural_Champion), P. 92-93

known as Mahakali, special mantras are recited to attain Siddhi<sup>67</sup>. She represents the powerful destructive and terrible aspect of feminine force in the universe. She is the goddess of death and

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new life at the same time. That is why she is worshipped by everyone at different events in life such as fertility festivals. Women worship her during pregnancy and at difficult times. To keep oneself away from bad effects of evil spirits and to avoid her anger, special offerings are offered to her. She has further three forms in three different colors; White for the virgin, red for the mother and black for the Crone. But in most of her images she is shown in black and blue colors. Black color manifests Kali as destroyer and death thus, the best place for her worship is the cremation ground. It is not the same place, which is fixed for cremation of deads in Hinduism, rather the place fixed for the worship of Kali, where devotees lit the fire to burn five elements that are present in human heart. When a devotee worships with full sincerity, Kali dwells in his heart and with the knowledge of Kali, all ignorance and evils are burnt in the cremation fire which is burning in the heart of a devotee.<sup>68</sup> She is picturized with black color, four arms, in which she is carrying a sharp bleeding dagger, a human head, a bowl of blood and one hand is empty. She is wearing a garland of ten bleeding human heads that are cut off from their bodies. Red color is seen in her hands, eyes, and in the tongue, which is coming out of her mouth. This is the symbol that she likes drinking blood and because of this, human and animal sacrifices are offered to her since ancient times. Being a universal goddess and the rebirth of Mahadevi with all powers, Kali is also painted in dark blue color. Not only Goddess Kali but some other gods and avatars like Krishna and Shiva are also

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<sup>67</sup> Siddhi means complete understanding or enlightenment. The name is of Sanskrit origin and is popular among Hindu and Jain females

<sup>68</sup> Rupak, Nath. Dr., Goddess Kali, the Black Magickian.

<https://yogalanguagesanskrit.files.wordpress.com/2013/05>. Retrieved on August 30, 2019. P. 2-6



painted in blue color. She is the partner of Shiva in darkness and destruction. In many popular images she is also seen dancing on Shiva which symbolizes supremacy of nature over mankind.

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Durga is another most popular goddess of Hinduism. Special religious festivals are arranged for her along with special offerings and worships in her name. Durga Puja is the famous festival, associated to her. It is also celebrated with the name of Navarati. She is also said to be an incarnation of Parvati and the mother of four other deities Karttikeya, Ganesha, Sarsvati and Lakshmi. But some others also presented her the female version of Vishnu because in Vishnu Purana, she is originated from Vishnu and helped him in protecting Krishna from a demon. In different popular myths, she is known as the Goddess of vegetation and fertility. Vedas present her as a warrior goddess. She is the one who defeated the buffalo demon, Mahisa and saved the cosmos.<sup>69</sup> Some other popular names of Durga are Mahagowari and Umma Devi. Durga and Kali are two different versions of the Divine Mother. Durga is lighter while Kali is darker in color, which shows qualities of the two goddesses. In her iconographical image, she is seen sitting on a tiger which shows her bravery. She has eight arms which show that she has all great powers that are a combination of the powers of gods. Because of a warrior goddess different weapons type instruments are seen in her hands taken from other gods such as Rudra's trident, Vishnu's discus, Indra's thunderbolt, Brahma's Kamandalu, Kuber's Ratnahar and a lotus flower. The flowers, candles and fruits are the symbols of life, light, and fertility.<sup>70</sup> This shows that Goddess Durga is

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<sup>69</sup> Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in The Hindu Religious Tradition*. 1988, University of California Press, isbn: 9780585334882. P. 95-96

<sup>70</sup> Goddess Durga., [balaviharganeshatempletn.org>downloaddoc>classfile](http://balaviharganeshatempletn.org/downloaddoc/classfile). P. 1-4

important not only as a deity but also has got importance in the domestic and family life in Hindu society.

#### 1.6. Symbols of Sacred Feminine and common Hindu women

A comprehensive introduction of popular female Hindu goddesses is given above. These are only six among the list of top female goddesses. Indeed, total number of Hindu gods and goddesses is

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not known. Some other female goddesses are Kamadhenu, Tulsi, Aditti, Green Tara, Ganga, and many others. But other than goddesses, some other feminine characters are also there that are considered as Sacred and revered like goddesses such as Sita and Radha. The researcher has mentioned them here because they are also symbol of Sacred Feminine in Hindu religious tradition. All female religious and spiritual leaders carry the concept of anyone of these female deities, especially Shakti. As Shakti is the feminine power of the Divine, every female religious leader claim to receive Divine light and energy from Shakti.

Goddess worship or turning towards feminine seems leaving very little effect on practical lives of Hindu women. Contemporary thinkers have observed that still there is a great contrast in goddess worship and attitudes towards women. In Tirupati, a city in Southern part of India, men dress up like women in Gangama festival and worship for almost one week wearing saris. Women focus on their domestic responsibilities and worship and pray to get more Shakti and feminine power of the Divine through righteous acts. But it is also a fact that despite of it, according to a survey report, two lac forty-four thousand two hundred and seventy cases of crimes were reported against women in this state which shows that women are getting no practical benefit from goddess worship in Hindu society. People worship these goddesses just for the sake of religion. Women and young girls have nothing to do with the rituals and festivals that are celebrated in the name of goddesses.

Some NGO workers clearly believe that religion is just a way to cover the cruel, immoral, inhuman, and unjust traditions of Indian society.<sup>71</sup>

A look at the stories of these goddesses shows that the most influential aspects in the myths of goddesses are women as wife and mother. The title of 'Mother' is a necessary part of the name of

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every goddess such as 'Kali mata', 'Durga Maan' and even cow is known as the title of 'Gao mata' means 'Mother cow'. How bravely Durga fought against the demon and saved the whole cosmos is a lesson for every woman that protecting one's family and children from evils is her responsibility no matter whatever difficulties she is facing in this way. Ultimately, she will be successful. The same level of faithfulness was shown from Sita to Rama and Radha to Krishna.<sup>72</sup>

The outstretched tongue of Kali is a symbol that she was feeling ashamed after stepping on the body of her husband Shiva. The people in Orissa interpret this symbol that wives should be shameful while treating their husbands in a bad manner.<sup>73</sup> These characters are famous role models for young girls and wives. They teach them that they should be very sincere and faithful to their families and husbands.

On the other hand, a group of researchers is also there who believe that goddess worship has nothing to do with the actual lives of women in Hindu society. Most of the devotees in the cult of Bhadrakali in Kerala are males and the purpose of their worship of Kali is what men fear from women. They believe that if they will not worship this goddess, something bad may happen to

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<sup>71</sup> Feminism for goddesses: does goddess worship empower girls? Theguardian.com/global-developmentprofessionals-network/2014/mar/05/india-hinduism-goddesses-feminism-global-development. Retrieved on September 3, 2019

<sup>72</sup> Hedman, Hanna., Hindu Goddesses as Role Models for Women? A qualitative study of some middle-class women's views on being a woman in Hindu society. 2007. [https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:145363> FULLTEXT01](https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:145363/FULLTEXT01). Retrieved on September 4, 2019

<sup>73</sup> Goddess worship: The Hindu Goddess. Encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-andmaps/goddess-worship-hindu-goddess. Retrieved on September 5, 2019

them or to their families and their women will be the source of this bad happening. Thus, they worship this goddess to avoid the bad omen of women.

Some believe that the issue of raising women in the essence of goddesses has now been colored with the slogan of Nationalism. In the late nineteenth century, there was a wave of Hindu Nationalism in India which politicized the religious concept of goddess and political parties organized their women groups to get more power from the public. The groups like Vishwa Hindu

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Parishad, Bhartiya Janata Party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were emerging in these years with the slogans of 'Hail to the motherland', 'Band-e-Matram'. The armed women wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh created their own deity with weapons in her eight arms. The members of such movements were taught that their mother needs her children to sacrifice for her. Similarly, many others also used the concept of goddess for their specific purposes like a health educator created Aids Amman in 1999, in Andhra Pradesh, with the purpose of educating the people about Aids. Some Hindu ecologists are using the name of Ganga goddess for making the people aware about water pollution. They are also using the attribute of purity of goddesses to promote cleanliness among the public. Thus, those who believe that goddesses have direct influence on social, domestic, and private lives of the women, argue that in this respect feminine aspect of the Divine is superior to masculine.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Goddess worship: The Hindu Goddess. Encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-andmaps/goddess-worship-hindu-goddess. Retrieved on September 5, 2019

### 1.7. Sacred Feminine and Feminism

One thing, which the researcher wants to make clear in the minds of her readers that this research has nothing to do with the movement of 'Feminism'. There are clear differences between Feminism and Sacred Feminine which are listed here:

1. Feminism demands for freedom of women from all social, marital, and even motherly bonds whereas 'Sacred Feminine' means reviving that respect of women which was given to her by Divine with all these attributes and because of which she has the element of sacredness in her being and is given the status of representative of female essence of Divinity in material world. It is about giving respect and importance to femininity through enhancing its element of sacredness.

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2. While Feminism maybe termed as areligious movement, the Sacred Feminine movement is essentially focusing on the importance of religious/spiritual element present in the female nature.
3. Sacred Feminine is focused on the qualities of creativity, nourishment, producing happiness, valuing others, and offering solutions to worldly problems in the light of religion. In this way it takes help from religion and the attitude is cooperative and supportive towards others, while feminism enhances the destructive side of feminine more than constructive. It is rebellious, angry, anti-religious and protesting. Although both appeared against the injustices, but Feminism went far ahead in protest rather making women unduly masculine at times.
4. Feminism is anti-male in its apparent attitude as obvious from the protests launched by its members at several times especially on 8<sup>th</sup> March, which is celebrated as women day all

over the world, the slogans raised are always against men. Sacred Feminine has never propagated such thinking rather they invite males to participate in their activities.

5. Sacred Feminine is against no one because it believes that men have their 'Sacred Feminine' element in their beings and women have their 'Sacred Masculine' in their beings while feminism arose against patriarchy and male dominance.<sup>75</sup>

The only area where Sacred Feminine and Feminism seem closer is 'Feminist Theology'. It is a branch of Feminism that emerged in the West in late 1960s with an ideology of reinterpretation of Christian theology and dogmas with a pure feminist perspective. Its supporters are demanding equal religious status for women in church and other religious affairs. The times when feminism

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came to India is same when Feminist Theology emerged in Europe and America. Thus, Feminist Theology is a later development within the movement of Feminism, while Sacred Feminine is something present in Hinduism since ancient times but revived in recent times.

### 1.8. Literature Review

Main theme of the research is to study the phenomena of 'Sacred Feminine' in the context of contemporary Hindu religious and spiritual female leaders and social reformers. The existing literature focuses on female Hindu goddesses and saints of contemporary period and contemporary developments in Hindu Religion.

Most important in this regard is the book "*Hindu goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the*

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<sup>75</sup> The Sacred Feminine or Goddess Feminism by Carol P. Christ <https://feminismandreligion.com/2016/01/25/the-sacred-feminine-or-goddess-feminism-by-carol-p-christ/>. Retrieved on July 5, 2021

*Hindu Religious Tradition*” by Kinsley David.<sup>76</sup> This book is the revised version of his compilation, published in 1997. The book gives detail description of at least thirteen Hindu Goddesses and their status in Hindu Religion. No doubt, the book is rich in providing material about Hindu Goddesses.<sup>79</sup>

The book *Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism* is basically a research project which provides information about previous studies made about female ascetics. It describes history of guruhood in Hinduism especially female gurus. It discusses the normal life of a Hindu female according to Religion. A separate chapter is dedicated for the worship of Goddess and the concept of female energy known as Shakti. It talks about how female gurus are related to this Divine energy as compared to male. The book provides details about seventy female gurus, from their childhood to guru ship and their philosophy. It also explains how different types of social and geographical

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conditions effected the ideologies of these guruhood. It tells that there is a difference male and female asceticism. Female gurus are more concerned with modernization, changing trend in Religion and globalization while males are inclined more towards Traditionalism.<sup>77</sup>

Among the latest publications is the book of Francis X. Clooney J.S.<sup>78</sup> *Divine Mother Blessed*

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<sup>76</sup> Kinsley David was born in 1939 in USA and died in the year 2000 in Canada. He served as the professor of Religious studies in Mc Master university Canada. He is known for his research in Hinduism specially his writings about Hindu goddesses gained much popularity among the researchers and students of religious studies <sup>79</sup> David, Kinsley., *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of The Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. California: University of California Press. 1988. ISBN: 9780585334882

<sup>77</sup> Therese, Merie Charpentier., *Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism*. Finland: Abo Akademi University Press. 2010

<sup>78</sup> Francis X. Clooney is a Roman Catholic Priest and a member of the society of Jesus. He has been an elected fellow of the British Academy and served at Australian Catholic University. He has also been a director of the center for the study of World Religions at Harvard University. He is the professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard Divinity school. He has produced considerable material regarding comparison between different theological issues between Christianity and Hinduism

*Mother: Hindu goddesses and the Virgin Mary*. Unlike most of Clooney's works this book does not give a comparison of the status of Virgin Mary in Christianity and goddesses in Hinduism. The book talks about religious texts about Mary and three hymns of goddesses in Hindu religious texts along with the importance of Comparative Theology in the study of religion. The book analysis three goddess hymns; 'Sri Guna Ratna Kosa, Sandaurya Lahari' and 'Apirami Antati' and concludes that Lakshmi and two other goddesses are females but independent goddesses as well. Another one is *The Divine Feminine in ancient Europe* by Sharon Piace MacLeod.<sup>79</sup> Although the book is written with a European background but because of its theme it seems relevant to the area of this research as well. The author has collected good information about the Sacred feminine in Europe through different ways such as archeology, anthropology, and mythology. The book also discusses that how women are closer to divinity in their characteristics according to the author. She concludes that this divine power in every woman is the reason that early humanity was dominated by female goddesses but with the development of human civilizations male dominance became prominent. But now is the time to realize that reality.

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Another notable book with this theme is *The Goddess in every Girl: Develop your feminine power* by M.J. Abadie<sup>80</sup>. The book is teen aged girl specific as the author directly talks to every teen age girl in the introduction of this book. Through different popular ways followed in every culture of many human societies in this world, the author proves that the Supreme deity who is above all and the creator of this world, is a female goddess. This female goddess is present everywhere in the

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<sup>79</sup> Sharon Piace MacLeod is the scholar of celtic studies and a musician at the same time. Her expertise includes ancient celtic culture and religion and early Irish poetry and wisdom texts, literature and mythology. She is the founder of celtic religious studies foundation and association. She plays many European musical instruments beautifully.

Sharon is also a Shamanic practitioner with over 18 years of experience

<sup>80</sup> M.J. Abadie was a professional astrologer and a psychotherapist with a specialty of dream interpretation. She also made research in the field of mythology and produced rich material in astrology and mythology, psychology and spirituality. Her writings have been popular among youngsters and teenagers specifically



universe and even in the nature of humanity. Women are the best symbols of this all-powerful female goddess. She is saying that the girls should be more independent, confident, and strong in themselves. Through this the Supreme Goddess can be revived.

The book *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* is written by Rosemary Radford Reuthers<sup>81</sup> is also important here to mention because it carries the notion that the initial human societies were matriarchal in their religious beliefs and makes discussion about four dominating Greek and Roman goddesses to proof this notion. The book is related to the theme of Sacred Feminine but is written with a feminist approach due to author's mindset

*Goddess Awakening: The Rise of the feminine Divine* is another notable compilation, written with the issue of Divine as feminine. The book is edited by two persons: Nikki Starcat Sheilds and Brent Blacklion Nelson are from the group of those scholars who are known as free thinkers and writers in contemporary times. They interviewed fourteen people who are writing and supporting the movement of Sacred Feminine.

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Among other books which are written over the same issue is *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States* written by Karen Pechilis.<sup>82</sup> The book is a collection of ten most famous Hindu gurus of modern period. It discusses similarities and dissimilarities among all these gurus, their objective behind spiritual thinking, how everyone of them experiences the

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<sup>81</sup> Rosemary Radford Reuthers is a famous feminist theologian of America in contemporary period. She has also contributed to the field of politics by writing about Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She was a strong advocate of women's ordination and supported that women can serve as priests

<sup>82</sup> Karen Pechilis is the professor of Comparative Religions and convener of Arts and letters in the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies. She chaired the department from 2010-2013. Now she is the professor of Comparative Religions at the university of Drew USA

Divine. The writer also tells the differences between all these gurus by explaining that some attain this status through intense meditation and personal efforts while some are known as Avatars by birth. It also describes different categories of female gurus. Those who belong to the West, mostly do not consider Religion as an issue eg: Mother Meera's Darshan is open to everyone, and Jesus is an Avatar too according to her. She never preached Hinduism neither demanded her disciples to change their faith.<sup>83</sup>

Another book with the same issue is *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* jointly edited by two contemporary scholars Lyn Teskey and Wendy Doniger. This book is an account of those women who renounce the world to live ascetic spiritual lives. The author is discussing two sides of a woman's life; spiritual and householder. The book is about the fieldwork conducted in Varanasi Banaras by the writer himself. It explores the social and personal backgrounds of such women, their institutions, and their ways of life. This book is quite informative regarding female Hindu saints and spiritual lives of Hindu women in contemporary period.<sup>84</sup>

Along with these books which are written with an overall view about Hindu goddesses or Female saints, a research; *Woman: Graphical rendering of a creation myth* by Yara Polana is also

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important. This thesis is about the creation myths popular in African religious traditions and customs. It also talks about a book about goddesses in ancient African myths related to stories of creation. It also touches to the phenomenon of Sacred Feminine.

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<sup>83</sup> Pechilis, Karen., *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States*. Oxford University Press: 2004

<sup>84</sup> Teskey, Lyn & Wendy Doniger., *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*. State University of New York Press: 2004

Another PhD dissertation: *Female Saints (700-1700): A study of the Sacred Feminine principle in Hinduism* by Priscila Gaye Sheehan, submitted in California institute of integral studies San Francisco CA, 2008 is also worth mentioning. This thesis is also about Female Hindu saints who are known as the symbols of Divinity in religious history of Hinduism. Six female gurus are discussed in the thesis of Sheehan. It also talks about spiritual aspect present in every woman. In this regard it is a women related study as well.

The writings of some devotees of a female guru can also be relevant in respect of providing material regarding 'Sacred Feminine'. The book of Adilakshami Olati<sup>85</sup>, named *The Mother* is good in this regard. The book gives a complete account of spiritual ideology presented by Mother Meera. It consists of a lot of opinions by the devotees of Mother and those who were blessed by Mother's *Darshans*, including the writer's personal experience at first. The book is a good collection about Mother Meera's life history and her ideology and that is why important for a study about Mother and her movement.<sup>86</sup>

*Answers I* is another book compiled by Mother Meera foundation. As apparent from its name the book is a collection of most frequently questions asked by the followers and devotees of Mother Mira Alfassa. She gave answers to the questions related to the life, afterlife, destiny, karma, and

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<sup>85</sup> Adilakshami Olati is a long-term devotee and an attendant of Mother Meera. Before she lived with mother but now has shifted to Pondicherry ashram in India

<sup>86</sup> Olati, Adilakshami., *The Mother*: Austria Dornburg. M. Meera Publishers. 1994

other religious issues. She has given the answers in a very simple way. The book is quite helpful as it a direct source to collect information about Mother's movement and religious ideas.<sup>87</sup>

The book *Holy Mother: Sri Sarada Devi* by Swami Gambhirananda<sup>88</sup> is a collection of the life history of Sri Sarada Devi especially of her religious and social life. It is an excellent record of her religious thought as well.<sup>89</sup> Because the book is about a popular Hindu saint that is why it is a part of this literature review.

The book *Holy Mother: Her Teachings and Conversations* by Swami Tapasyananda<sup>90</sup> is also a good collection of the life and ideology of *Sri Sarada Devi*. The book is an informative collection of important incidents, ideology, and sayings of Sri Sarada Devi.<sup>91</sup>

The book *Women, Men and Spiritual power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators* by John W. Coakley<sup>92</sup> has been written in context with the role of women in Church and as religious personalities in twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The writer studies this issue by taking two female characters as sample in this book and tells how they served as the supporters of other priests and played their roles as leading church figures at times. Although the Book is written with pure Christian background and presents Christian church environment of that era, still it is related to the theme of Sacred Feminine developed in the West.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *Answers I*, Mother Meera Foundation: 2011

<sup>88</sup> Swami Gambhirananda was a Hindu Sanyasi associated to Ramakrishna Mission. He joined the Mission in 1923 and also served it as its 11th president

<sup>89</sup> Gambhirananda, Swami., *Holy Mother: Sri Sarada Devi*. Maylapur: Sri Ramakrishna Amra Press Madras. 1977

<sup>90</sup> Swami Tapasyananda was a senior spiritual leader of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. He was a student of Swami Shivananda and also served as the vice president of Ramakrishna order from 1985 to 1991. He was also an expert of Indian and Western philosophies

<sup>91</sup> Tapasyananda, Swami., *Sri Sarada Devi The Holy Mother: Her Teachings and Conversations*. Maylapore Madras India: Vasanta Press the Theosophical society. 1958

<sup>92</sup> John W. Coakley is the professor of Church History at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. He is known as a editor, theologian and historian. He has written a lot in the field of religious studies and among those few religious scholars of contemporary era who talked about Sacred Feminine in their writings

<sup>93</sup> Coakley, John. W., *Women, Men and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators*. New York:

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The book *Woman and goddess in Hinduism* is specifically written about femininity in Hinduism. It is a collection of what different researchers have written about goddesses and religious status of women in Hinduism. The book provides good information about some famous Hindu goddesses like Kali and Feminine power of the Divine, Shakti. In this respect the book is related to the area of Sacred Feminine. The book also talks about the ideology of Gandhi about religious status of women.<sup>94</sup>

The Book: *The Status of Women in World Religions and Civilizations* is a collection of essays about status of women in different religions and civilizations of the world. It collects good information about the History of women in Hinduism and Islam. In this respect, it is quite informative and provides good data about religious status of women in Hinduism.<sup>95</sup>

Studies are also produced in the form of research articles related to the issue such as *Women and Social Reform movements in modern India* by Prashar Pooja<sup>96</sup> This Article gives a brief account of the social and religious background of Indian society when many reform movements appeared on Indian scene. The writer talks about some controversial religious customs which were effecting the lives of women negatively and were criticized by social and religious reformers in

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Columbia University Press. 2006. ISBN: 0-50861-1

<sup>94</sup> Pintchman, Tracy & Rita. D. Sharma. Edt., *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism*, New York: Palgrave Mc Millan. 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-11369-5

<sup>95</sup> Soorma. C.A., *The Status of Women in World Religions and Civilizations*. New Delhi: Nirman Press Pahadi Bhojla. 1997. ISBN: 81-900-537-2-8

<sup>96</sup> Prashar Pooja is the Assistant professor and Head of the Department of History at Dev Samaj College for women Ferozpur India. She is also known as a social scientist

contemporary period. It also discusses the circumstances through which women led movements emerged.

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The article *The Contemporary Hindu Women of India: An overview* by Dr. Tahira Basharat<sup>97</sup> is written specifically about how women in Contemporary India are struggling to have a better social status in society. The writer develops the idea that Hinduism does not give a respectable place to women and even literate women in big cities are not treated in a good manner. Moreover, all these violations are committed in the name of Religion. The Article also discusses current situation of women in modern India.<sup>98</sup>

The article: *Women's Issues: Contributions of The Reform and Reformers in Colonial India* is written with a background in writer's mind that women have always been an oppressed class in India. They suffered under all rulers. Efforts were made to improve their social status, but the best effort was made only in colonial times when colonial masters introduced new laws to improve status of women in British India. The article focuses that it was due to the efforts of reformers who appeared in colonial period and taking influence from the changing trends in the outer world, these Reformers realized the situation and worked to improve the status of women.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Dr. Tahira Basharat is the Head of the Department of Islamic Studies and chairperson of the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization at University of the Punjab, Lahore Pakistan. She is the first one among the ladies to get PhD degree in Islamic Studies in Pakistan. She is known for her valuable research work in Hindu philosophy and women related issues in the Sub-Continent

<sup>98</sup> Basharat, Tahira., "*The contemporary Hindu Women of India: An Overview*". A Research journal of South Asian Studies. Vol: 24, No: 2 (2009) University of the Punjab. Pu.edu.pk>images>journal>csas>PDF>5-Dr. Tahira. Pdf. Accessed on 7-9-2019

<sup>99</sup> Bhattacharjee, Debabrata Mr., "*Women's issues: Contributions of the Reform and Reformers in Colonial India*". Vol: 3, No: 2 (2015) International Journal of Economic and Business Review, e-ISSN: 2347-9671.

The writer in the article: *The Sacred Secret: The Real Mystery in the Da Vinci Code*, studies the issue of 'Sacred Feminine' by studying Da Vinci Code. He assumes that the novel got much popularity thus, revived the idea of Sacred Feminine. Although the Article is written in a Christian environment and the writer talks about Sacred Feminine in Christian perspective, but through this

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Novel he has revived the concept in the West. The Article has nothing to do with Hinduism, but it helps to understand the issue of Sacred Feminine in general.<sup>100</sup>

"*The Sacred Feminine in Hinduism*" is another article by Dr. Madan Lal<sup>101</sup>. He raises the question through this Article that why we present God as male only? Why God cannot be a female? He believes that belief in God becomes more affirmative when we assume God as Mother. Then he argues that since pre-historic period man believed in an all-powerful Mother goddess and gives proofs from Bhagvad Gita by presenting the prayer of Krishna for Mother. He also comments on the story of creation in Abrahamic faiths and said that they also have a concept in their scriptures that when God was not satisfied with His creation, he created the feminine aspect to complete it and to bring it in its perfect form.<sup>102</sup>

The article: *Hindu Women in the Mirror of Time: At Once a Goddess and a Slave* is written with a description of contemporary Hindu spiritual and religious movements and organizations and a

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[www.epratrust.com](http://www.epratrust.com). Accessed on 7-9-2019

<sup>100</sup> Giannini, John., "*The Sacred Secret: The Real Mystery in The Da Vinci Code*". Vol: 2, No: 2 (2017) Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche. Taylor and Francis Ltd. On behalf of C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco. URL. <http://www.jstore.org/stable/10.1525/jung/2008.2.2.63>. Accessed on 9-3-2019

<sup>101</sup> Dr. Madan Lal Goel is the Professor of Political Science at the University of West Florida USA. He has made valuable researches in religion as well

<sup>102</sup> Goel, Madan Lal. Dr., "*The Sacred Feminine in Hinduism*". University of West Florida. [www.uwf.edu/Igoel](http://www.uwf.edu/Igoel). Accessed on 9-9-2019

historical background of women's status in Hindu society. The writers have studied status of women and their role with a context of religious texts, customs, and social traditions. It discusses that role of women is different from goddess worship in Hindu society and majority public do not have any influence of their worships on their dealings to women. In short, the Article is about the twofold role of feminine in Hinduism, that is women as the second-class creation at one hand and representation of feminine aspect of the Divine, on the other.<sup>103</sup>

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A detailed review of the literature reveals that focus has been the biographies of the Hindu female religious leaders and saints mostly dealt as individual phenomena. It also reflects that the phenomenon is quite new and has not been studied through a comparative lens. Most of these books and articles are related to the origin, development and history of female Hindu religious leaders, saints, cults, and the movements led by them without taking into account these as a historical development or a phase. The researcher through this research studies the advent of these movements as a new phenomenon in contemporary Hinduism and that how they are presenting Hindu Religion in front of the world in contemporary period and to see that how these movements are influenced with reformists ideology of the contemporary period. More than that the research also studies the reform and female led organizations with an Islamic appraisal. In this respect this research is unique and different from the previous writings over the issue. The difference between what has been written and what researcher intends to do through this research has also been made clear through its research questions and aim of study.

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<sup>103</sup> Rawat, Sugandha & Pradeep Kumar., "*Hindu Women in the Mirror of Time: At Once a Goddess and a Slave*". Vol: 3, No: 3 (2015) Journal of Indian Research. ISSN: 2321-4155



### 1.9. Research Questions

1. Whether female led religious organizations/movements of contemporary Hinduism are influenced by reformation trends of contemporary period or not?
2. Whether female led Hindu religious organizations/leaders are inspired somewhere from contemporary movement of sacred feminine?
3. How the interpretation of religious concepts by female led religious groups contributed for introducing new developments in Hindu Religion?
4. How Hindu Reformists are influenced/inspired by Globalization?
5. How the phenomena of Sacred Feminine and religious/spiritual status of women can be approached from an Islamic perspective?

### 1.10. Research Methodology

The Research is mainly qualitative in nature and researcher has adopted various qualitative approaches and tools thus tilting towards a mixed method research. Thus, combining historical, phenomenological methodologies the researcher explores into the phenomenon of ‘Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism’ while doing so the experiences of the female leaders and those of their followers are studied through their autobiographies and the accounts and testimonies of others about them. Chapter four analyzes the sayings and writings of their leaders and members regarding Feminine as sacred and religious/spiritual status of women thus a thorough discourse analysis has been done as regards the Feminine and Sacred and the status of women in contemporary Hinduism.

Another key focus of this research has been the cyber or internet use by these movements. As they are using the “net space” for their preachers and followers. Thus, most of the data for research is

collected by applying the method of netnography<sup>104</sup>. They are hosting their devotees and members via websites, blogs, and webpages. That has created a digital space of religion too. The emergence of these movements coincide with the time when cyber churches were being introduced at first to offer online worship by different religious and social welfare organizations. Especially those movements and organizations that are working between East and West in the name of religion, internet is a way to link their followers to their spiritual leaders in different Parts of the world. It can carry the message in far-away areas in a few minutes. With the use of internet in the field of

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religion, a new development of Digital Religion is also observed.<sup>105</sup> This revolutionary development in the field of religion called for a net based method for research, ‘netnography’<sup>106</sup>. As the movements that are selected by the researcher for the present research are also widely spread and work through digital space a netnographic data and analysis is also being done simultaneously given to the fact that this has become a popular method among the scholars of religious studies.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> The time period in which these movements studied in this research emerged, was the time of rapid development in the field of technology. An important branch of which is cyber technology. West had started using internet at wider level in their societies in late 1970s. Internet as a revolutionary invention got much popularity soon and till 1980s and 1990s it had become a great source of connecting people in far-away areas as well as collecting information. It was in mid 1980s when religious scholars and spiritual organizations started using internet to share their religious ideas and to provide online spiritual services

<sup>105</sup> Campbell, Heidi. A., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. Texas: A&M University. 2013, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293958274>

<sup>106</sup> The use of *Netnography* as a research method has become popular in religious studies in recent times and researches are being conducted with the help of this method. Articles and booklets are being published about it. ‘Doner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural history’ from Finland has recently published a book with the title ‘*Digital Religion*’ in 2012. The book is a symbol that *Netnography* has emerged as a popular research method in religion in the West

<sup>107</sup> The book *Digital Religion* edited by Tore Ahalback is a symbol of such writings. It is a collection of thirteen research articles about use of net sources in religious studies, presented in a conference in 2012. An essay: *Third Spaces of Digital Religion*” presented in ‘The center for Media, Religion and Culture at University of Colorado Boulder in 2014 is also one example of such studies. Main theme of this Essay is the social impact of digitized Religion on society and on religion itself with a wider use of different forms of Media

### 1.11. Limitations and Delimitations:

The research is limited to making an analysis to what extent female led religious/spiritual organizations and socio-religious reform movements of contemporary period are reviving the phenomena of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism. It is also limited to study the influential relation between the two types of movements and Islamic perspective of Feminine as Sacred. Although the study is limited to six organizations of contemporary times only, but its results are generalizable to other movements/organizations of the same era, as they were also facing the same social, religious, political, and economic circumstances as faced by these.

To avoid apparent and superficial analogies, it does not intend to make a comparison between Islamic and Hindu feminists as feminism is not a part of its area of study. The research keeps a distance between feminism and sacred feminine.

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## CHAPTER: 2

### Female Led Religious Movements in Contemporary Hinduism

This chapter provides important information about female led religious movements that appeared in 20<sup>th</sup> century and are contemporaries of reform movements of colonial period in Indian SubContinent. The researcher has chosen three of them to study the phenomena. They are Sri Sarada Devi (Vedanta Society of New York and California), Brahma Kumari Organization and Movement of Mother Meera of Germany.

Details related to the origin, history, and background of these movements, how they function, the purpose and objectives of these movements and organizations along with a brief introduction of their founders is given in this chapter. At first, there is a description of social and religious

conditions of those areas where these movements appeared in their specific periods. Although so many movements and female avatars have appeared in contemporary period in the name of reformation and promoting spirituality but the reason for choosing these three is that they are among those female led movements which got popularity not only in India but also known as widely accepted Hindu organizations in Europe and other parts of the world as well. These movements are famous for presenting new ideas in Hinduism in general and specifically, regarding the status of women as religious leaders. Not only Hindu community of Europe and America but followers of other religions, living in these areas also visit their centers for spiritual guidance and blessing. Their leaders are considered as the symbol and sometimes avatars of God on Earth. The details about them are given as under:

## 2.1. Sri Sarada Devi (Vedanta Society of New-York and California)

As evident from the name of the movement, it is known with the name of a female Hindu saint Sri Sarada Devi whose brief introduction is given in the following pages, became a popular spiritual movement in America and other Western countries along with India. It has established its centers in America and is famous for focusing upon the status of women in Hinduism. From its beliefs and practices, it seems that it believes in the religious and spiritual leadership of women. That is why the researcher has chosen this movement to study as one among the three-female led spiritual movements in contemporary Hinduism.

### 2.1.1. Historical background and founder of the Movement

The study of origin and history of the Movement of Sri Sarada Devi and Vedanta Society goes hand in hand with the life history of Sri Sarada Devi and her husband who was also a Saint of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her real name was Saradamani Mukhopadhaya. She is known as the spiritual consort of

Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>108</sup> In fact, he was the person, who introduced Sarada Devi as a motherly saint in front of the world. Both lived in a time when child marriage was a common practice in Indian Society. According to the historical records, she was born in 1853 in a small Indian village of Western Bengal in a poor Brahman family. Goddess worship was a common practice in this village at that time. Her parents were simple traditional villagers but famous for their religiosity. They married their daughter to a religious person of the neighboring village, Sri Ramakrishna, when she was just six years old. After marriage he lived in Dakshineswar while Sri Sarada Devi kept living with her parents in her village because of younger age. At the age of fourteen she went back to the house of her in laws, but Ramakrishna kept living in Dakshineswar. At the age of eighteen she

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came to visit her husband and decided to live with him. He also gave her a warm welcome and both started a new life there. Sarada Devi lived as a student with Sri Ramakrishna instead of a wife. It is because Ramakrishna was spending a life of sannyasin<sup>109</sup>. Sarada Devi received religious knowledge from Ramakrishna, served him and his visitors, and started teaching as well after some time. After the death of Ramakrishna, she came back to the house of her parents where she had to face a lot of hardships from her family members. On seeing her troubles some of her disciples brought her to Calcutta with them where she started her life as a female saint. Along with religious education she always showed great interest in women related welfare activities especially establishing schools for young girls. She passed away in 1920 due to hard life and not getting proper medication of malaria. But in these sixty-seven years she had gained much popularity as a

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<sup>108</sup> Sarada Devi: Hindu religious leader <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sarada-Devi>. Retrieved on July 26, 2018

<sup>109</sup> A Hindu Monk who leaves the worldly life and becomes a religious devotee

saint in many areas of the country. A shrine is built now on her birthplace. The followers of Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna come to visit this village from all over the world. Even the day, when the construction of the Temple was started, is celebrated as a religious event.

### 2.1.2. Sainthood of Sri Sarada Devi

The followers of Sri Sarada Devi believe that she was divinely associated to Sri Ramakrishna just as Sita to Raam, Vishnu to Lakshmi, Brahma to Saraswati and Shiva to Shakti. She was sent with a Divine plan of providing the required assistance to Ramakrishna for the accomplishment of his mission in the material world. Some believe that she had a Divine essence in herself even before getting married to Ramakrishna. Records of her life history tell that she was observed meditating by the villagers many times. Her parents saw a beautiful, blessed girl in their dreams before her birth. Once she herself stated that whenever she was working in the fields, there was always

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another girl of her age working with her.<sup>110</sup> The movement that was launched by Ramakrishna was led by Sri Sarada Devi after his death which shows the equality of both saints in the sight of the Divine. It also emphasizes upon the importance of participation of women in the spiritual and religious development of human society. Ramakrishna himself believed in this notion and that is why taught a woman and groomed her as an upcoming religious leader inspite of the fact that he had so many male disciples who were already living with him. Sri Ramakrishna not only trained her but also worshipped her off and on in acceptance of the worship and Divinity of the Mother

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<sup>110</sup> Gambhirananda, Swami., *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore Madras India, 1977) 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. P. 32. [Estudantedavedanta.net/Holy%20Mother, %20Sarada%20Devi%20-%20S\\_Gambhiran](http://Estudantedavedanta.net/Holy%20Mother,%20Sarada%20Devi%20-%20S_Gambhiran). Retrieved on July 13, 2018

Goddess. Once he gave a mantra<sup>111</sup> to Sarada Devi and asked her to give it to one of the devotees, Swami Yogananda. Since that time, he is known as the first disciple of Sarada Devi. This was a clear indication that Sarada Devi is the Divine partner of Sri Ramakrishna in this world. His followers automatically turned towards Sarada Devi after his death and accepted her leadership as a spiritual teacher and the embodiment of a Universal Mother. Her followers still believe that she herself was Jagat Dhatri<sup>112</sup> and the Universal Mother, who came with blessings for everyone. She herself stated:

“My son, you know the Master had a maternal attitude towards everyone. He has left me behind to manifest that Divine motherhood in the world.”

Swami Vivekananda<sup>113</sup> believed that the advent of Sri Sarada Devi opened a new chapter in the process of social development and progress of women. Her life is an ideal life for the women of

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contemporary period. The development of society without women is just like ‘a bird flying with one wing’, in the words of Vivekananda.<sup>114</sup> Even in the lifetimes of her husband, Sri Ramakrishna, she was known as a Holy Mother among the believers. Those who came to visit Ramakrishna, also considered Sarada Devi as a sacred mother and the Holy consort of Ramakrishna. It was believed that she experienced the visions of goddess Kali since her childhood and because Ramakrishna was revered as a personification of Kali, thus, Sarada Devi was divinely associated to

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<sup>111</sup> A word or sound which is believed to have a special magical power. A popular term in Indian religions

<sup>112</sup> She is one of the aspects of Durga. Worshipped mostly in Bengal and a popular Deity of Ramakrishna Math. She is believed as holding or protecting the world. The Holy Mother-Sri Sarada Devi. <https://belurmath.org/sri-sarada-devi/>. Retrieved on July 13, 2018

<sup>113</sup> Swami Vivekananda was an Indian Hindu Monk and a chief disciple of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian mystic Ramakrishna. This was the person who introduced Vedanta society in West and America and founded the movement of Ramakrishna

<sup>114</sup> Gambhirananda, Swami., *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore Madras India, 1977) 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. P. 4. Estudantedavedanta.net/Holy%20Mother,%20Sarada%20Devi%20-%20S\_Gambhiran. Retrieved on July 13, 2018

Ramakrishna. That is why she led the followers of Ramakrishna for about twenty-four years after his death.<sup>115</sup> Those who were very close to her have narrated that she was found in the state of samadhi<sup>116</sup> very oftenly at nights, sometimes smiling and sometimes with tears rolling on her cheeks. The incident of Shodasi Puja is important in this regard when Ramakrishna, on the Kalipuja day, called on Sarada Devi and announced the existence of the Divine mother in her. Since that time, she is believed as the human form of Divine mother. After the death of Ramakrishna, the feminine energy of the Divine that manifested through him, shifted to Holy mother and then she took over the charge of carrying the message of Ramakrishna, who was not only her husband but a spiritual partner and a Master as well. It is said that after the death of Ramakrishna when she was removing her ornaments, she saw the vision of the Master who asked her not to remove them. After that she realized that her Master was an eternal Being who never dies. He has just shifted from one world to another.<sup>117</sup> She then, decided to perform pilgrimage and spent a whole year in

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visiting Banaras, Ayodhya and Varindaban along with a few devotees. She spent most of her time in deep meditations at these places. Her devotees believed that the Master, Ramakrishna, comes into her in this condition. Although she had attained the status of a saint yet had to face the same problems and difficulties like any other widow of the society of that time. Before his death, Ramakrishna had advised her to go back to stay with his family in the village of Kamarpukur, under the guardianship of Ramakrishna's nephew, Ramlal. But Ramlal, completely ignored her

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<sup>115</sup> Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi: A brief introduction by Elizabeth Usha Harding <https://www.kalimandir.org/Holy-mother-sri-sarads-devi>. Retrieved on July 26, 2018

<sup>116</sup> Samadhi is a Hindi term, also known as Sampatti in Sanskrit. The term is used in all yogic schools of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism in the meaning of the highest state of meditative consciousness

<sup>117</sup> *The Gospel of the Holy Mother* (Sri Ramakrishna Math publishers, Madras: 1984), [cincinnatiitemple.com/articles/The-Gospel-of-the-Holy-Mother-Sarada-Devi.PDF-pdf](http://cincinnatiitemple.com/articles/The-Gospel-of-the-Holy-Mother-Sarada-Devi.PDF-pdf). P: 19



and never played his role as her caretaker. She got her share from the food available at home, but she had no money to spend on herself. People in the village also criticized her on wearing red cloth and ornaments because according to the custom a widow had to wear white sari only. The followers of the Master, when heard about all this situation they started raising funds for financial support of Mother and invited her to come to Calcutta and live there. She accepted the offer with a little hesitation and came to Calcutta in 1888.<sup>118</sup> She stayed there, afterwards till her death in 1920. This was the time when her followers and the devotees of Ramakrishna gathered around her, and she got fame as the Holy Mother. After her arrival in Calcutta, she was living in residents on rent until Swami Saradananda<sup>119</sup> constructed a house for her in 1909 and she lived there in the rest of her life. She had seen a vision of the Master in which he was dissolving in the waters of river Ganges and then this water was sprinkled everywhere in the world. After this, Swami Vivekananda, started the broadcasting of Ramakrishna,s message and Mother's sayings via radio.<sup>123</sup> Since after this vision, she became a transmitter through which The Master was still sending his messages and this was the purpose of her life now. She was no longer interested in life

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and worldly affairs until the incident of the birth of her niece, changed this situation and she had to take care of her. It happened so that the youngest brother of Mother died leaving behind a pregnant wife who was also mentally unfit. On his death bed he requested Mother, Sarada Devi, to take the child in her custody. Mother loved her just like her own child but had to face the difficulties from her real mother and other girls of the family. After she got a house in Calcutta,

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<sup>118</sup> *The Gospel of the Holy Mother* (Sri Ramakrishna Math publishers, Madras: 1984),  
cincinnatitemple.com/articles/The-Gospel-of-the-Holy-Mother-Sarada-Devi.PDF-pdf. P: 23,24

<sup>119</sup> One of the close disciples of Ramakrishna and the first secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. He also wrote the very first biography of Ramakrishna in Bangali language <sup>123</sup>  
Ibid, P: 25

she had to keep two other daughters of her another brother as well, with her as they were also depending upon her. After the death of Swami Yogananda<sup>120</sup>, Swami Saradananda had taken the charge of Mother's expenditures. Now the number of her devotees had increased, and she needed a place where they could meet the Holy Mother and receive her blessings. Thus, along with the house in Calcutta, Swami Saradananda arranged to build a small cottage for her in her mother village also. In 1911 she visited Banaras once again along with a delegation of her devotees, meeting with large gatherings at different places. This visit was arranged by Swami Ramakrishna ananda<sup>121</sup>. In Rameswaram, she was given a privilege of worshipping the gods directly in the Temple due to her fame as a saint. Then she visited Bangalore, where she received a very warm welcome from Swami Nirmalananda<sup>122</sup> and the number of her devotees also increased here. In the next pilgrimage she travelled with a huge congregation, including her devotees, followers of Ramakrishna, the members of Ramakrishna Mission and some relatives.

She had received special mantras from Ramakrishna with advice of carrying his mission as a leader. A lot of people had gathered around her in last ten years of her life including men, women and even children of ten to twelve years of ages. She believed that no one should be rejected from

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getting closer to God. Everyone was welcomed in her circle. Following the way of her Master, Ramakrishna, she never forced anyone to leave his or her religion and to accept Hinduism but accepted everyone in her circle, whatever religion he or she is following. Here it becomes clear that like other spiritual movements of its kind, the movement launched by Sri Ramakrishna and

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<sup>120</sup> An Indian Monk, yogi and guru who spent thirty-two years in America and introduced teachings of meditation to many people through his organization

<sup>121</sup> Another direct disciple of Ramakrishna and an active member of Brahmo Samaj. Ramakrishna said about him that he had been the follower of Jesus in the previous birth

<sup>122</sup> He was also a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu monk and saint who took sanyasa from Vivekananda

Sri Sarada Devi is purely based upon the principle of promoting spirituality for all and not preaching the Religion of Hinduism. But the way how she preached spirituality and taught japa<sup>123</sup> and meditation to her students shows that she was a pure Hindu saint having firm belief in feminine power. The devotees of Ramakrishna believed that the powers of Kali had incarnated in him and after he entered in the stage of mahasamadhi<sup>124</sup>, this incarnation shifted to Sarada Devi, and she led the movement after him. Another important point in Sarada Devi's sainthood is that she believed in performing religious rituals and japas to attain liberation from the cycle of births and rebirths for her devotees. Here the Holy Mother seems offering atonement<sup>125</sup> on behalf of her followers. In this way she helped her devotees in getting rid of taking another birth.

This was the time when Sarada Devi got status of an independent guru in a sense that before, she was popular as the sacred and untouchable wife or consort of the Saint Ramakrishna. But it is not possible to study about Ramakrishna and his ideology without mentioning the role of Sarada Devi. It has already been mentioned above that Ramakrishna worshipped her himself and declared her a manifestation of Kali. Mostly, she kept silent in the lifetime of Ramakrishna but after he had passed away, she seems delivering speeches, giving lessons, and answering to the questions of the people regarding spirituality and other religious and social issues. Sometimes, she also listened to the

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problems of people and solved them. Historical records show that she was directly involved in running the affairs of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Swami Vivekananda always respected her opinions while taking decisions in important matters. Not only Vivekananda, but all other close

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<sup>123</sup> The meditative repetition of a mantra or a Divine name

<sup>124</sup> It is a highly spiritualized condition of a yogi in which his soul becomes free from the bondage of material body.

In most of the cases a yogi prepares himself for it intentionally

<sup>125</sup> The action of making amends for something wrong or injury

disciples of Ramakrishna also respected her as the 'Holy Mother'. Most popular among these are Swami Adbhutananda, Swami Trigunatita, Swami Yogananda and Swami Saradananda. Sarad was the person who remained closer to her till death. He also travelled to England and America to teach Vedanta on the instructions of Vivekananda in 1895. He also became the first secretary general of Ramakrishna Math and Mission and served at this post till his death.<sup>126</sup> He also presided over the meetings, processions and religious gatherings arranged by Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

The status of Sarada Devi is unique in a sense that along with having a fame as a religious personality, she is also a popular figure as the 'Mother' of India among the general female population. She preached spirituality along with performing her daily household duties and responsibilities towards husband, in-laws, and family. The way she looked after the children of her brothers with great patience and love is an example of sacrifice and selflessness in practical life. It is because of this aspect of her practical life that she is presented as an ideal religious woman for the women of contemporary world and is known as the 'exemplary mother' of the nation. It was Vivekananda, who used this title for her at first, while introducing Ramakrishna and his ideology in his speech in United States. After him other writers also used the same title for her.

As a Holy Mother, Sarada Devi believed in giving initiation to her students but never held any special initiation ceremony for anyone of her devotees. Sometimes people around him criticized

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her for it but she believed in giving blessings to everyone anytime, at any place. Her simple procedure was just to utter a few mantras, putting her hand on the head of the initiated person as a

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<sup>126</sup> Tapasyananda, Swami., *Sri Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother* (Sri Ramakrishna Mylapore Madras India, 1958) 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, P. 271

sign that she has accepted him or her as her student and this was the whole ceremony that could held anytime, anywhere. Before her death, she called on to Saradananda, advising him to take care of the ladies who were living with her in Calcutta. A large crowd gathered on hearing the news of her death. The body was cremated on the banks of River Ganges. A shrine was built there in her memory. A temple was also constructed in her village, Jayrambati.<sup>127</sup> These memoirs are still there and are visited by many devotees of Holy Mother and worshippers of Kali every year. The conclusion of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and the principles, depending upon which Sri Sarada Devi led the movement further are:

1. Everyone has the right to search for God in his own way.
2. All religions are different ways heading towards one God. Thus, all are valid.
3. Along with men, women also have an essence of Divine. That is why both saints accepted women as well in their circles.
4. Man has the potential to omit his sins and can get rid of the circle of births and rebirths through worships and meditation.<sup>128</sup>

### 2.1.3. Vivekananda and the movement of Ramakrishna Math and Mission

The study of Sarada Devi's movement is not completed until the movements of Ramakrishna Math and Mission are not studied because they are the movements which carried and spread her message from outside India especially in Europe and America.

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<sup>127</sup> *The Gospel of the Holy Mother* (Sri Ramakrishna Math publishers, Madras: 1984),  
cincinnati temple.com/articles/The-Gospel-of-the-Holy-Mother-Sarada-Devi.PDF-pdf. P: 34

<sup>128</sup> Gambhirananda, Swami., *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (Advaita Ashrama publishers, Calcutta: 1957), [estudentdavedanta.net/swami-Gambhirananda-History-of-the-Ramakrishna-an](http://estudentdavedanta.net/swami-Gambhirananda-History-of-the-Ramakrishna-an). P. 15

Swami Vivekananda was one of the closest companions of Sri Ramakrishna and The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. He turned towards spirituality after meeting with Ramakrishna and joined his circle. He spent almost six years with him in Calcutta. His real name was Narendranath Dutta. Before joining Ramakrishna, he also spent some time as an active member of Brahmo Samaj.<sup>129</sup> Along with a handsome knowledge of Western philosophies and literature, he had also studied Bhagwad Gita and Upanishads till the time of his graduation. He was always interested in finding realities about God. In this search, he visited Ramakrishna and found satisfaction in his companionship. In 1884 he adopted a completely ascetic way of life. It was Narendranath, who rented a house near the resident of his Master where he and some other disciples of Ramakrishna lived, in the last months of his life. After his demise, a group of his disciples left their worldly lives and started living as monks in Calcutta. This place was given the name of Ramakrishna Math, in the name of Sri Ramakrishna. This was the time when Narendranath turned into Swami Vivekananda and decided to propagate the message of Holy Mother and the Master. Ramakrishna Math and Mission are the first movements that were launched to propagate their message in a disciplined and organized form.<sup>130</sup> In 1893 he came to know about 'The World Parliament of religions' and decided to attend this conference. A fund-raising movement was launched by his companions to manage the expenditures of his travelling and for the first time the message of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi was heard at international level. He introduced Hinduism and the

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<sup>129</sup> A movement appeared in Calcutta in 1828, introducing new trends in Hinduism, denouncing the authorities of Vedas and caste system. It adopted a lot from Islam and Christianity as well and did not follow the traditional Religion in many ways

<sup>130</sup> Swami Vivekananda <https://www.culturalindia.net/reformers/vivekananda.html>. Retrieved on August 7, 2018

message of Vedanta in a very impressive way there. He stayed in America for two and a half years and laid the foundations of Vedanta Society in New York in 1894. He also travelled to England in

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these years and introduced his message to Western world. In 1897 he came back to India and started travelling throughout the country with a series of lectures on spirituality and purity.

#### 2.1.4. Ramakrishna Movement and women welfare

In the same year he founded the movement of Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta. From here the movement started working as a social, welfare association along with a spiritual and religious identity. The association focused upon opening the educational institutions in remote areas especially for young girls and women. Many hospitals and training institutions are also working with the support of this association.<sup>131</sup> Today Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission are known as twin organizations working in the name of social equality and welfare for all, promoting spirituality, and preaching religion. Selflessness, sacrifice, and love for all are the principles upon which these organizations are working. Here it is important to note that they use the name of Sangha for group of monks who live in these two associations and participate in welfare works. This term is mostly used by Buddhists and not Hindus. The services are provided to all without any difference between Hindu or non-Hindu, higher or lower cast, men, or women, poor or sick etc. All this is at the level of worship for them. Women have always been an important part of Sarada Devi's works and teachings. She herself led a difficult life and faced problems just like any other simple, illiterate and villager woman of her society. But she was much concerned about the

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<sup>131</sup> Swami Vivekananda <https://www.culturalindia.net/reformers/vivekananda.html>. Retrieved on August 7, 2018 <sup>136</sup> Her real name was Bhagini Navedita (1867-1911). She belonged to Ireland and was a teacher, author, social activist, school founder and a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She believed in service to mankind as service to God. Vivekananda gave her the name of 'Navideta', which means 'dedicated to God'. In November 1898 she established a school for girls in Calcutta and is known as a great supporter of female education in India

overall condition of women of her society. She was deeply associated to the school for young girls established by sister Nevidatta<sup>136</sup>. Vivekananda always got encouragement from her in all types of spiritual and social activity plans. She also supported the steps initiated by the colonial government

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of her time to improve the status of women in society especially in the field of education. The initiative was taken at first by opening the night schools for young women and girls so that their routine work and household chores may not disturb. Many schools and colleges were established in the name of Sarada Devi to provide education to women such as Sarada Ma girls college in Calcutta, Sarada college for women in Tirunelveli, Sharda Devi Degree college Jhansi, Sri Sarada college for women, Sri Sarada ashram in Tamil Nadu and Sri Sarada Devi college of Education. The ashram not only provides religious and spiritual guidance to women, but also serves as a community center for females of the local area. It provides services in the field of education, healthcare, family and social welfare, economic activities, and other issues like disaster management.<sup>132</sup> It also provides scholarships mostly to female needy students of remote areas along with arrangement of special classes to educate the illiterate elderly women of the area.

Hospitals and maternity centers are also working in the name of 'Mother' under National Health Portal India. Most famous among these is Maan Sarada Maternity and Nursing Home, located in West Bengal. Depending upon the thinking of 'Holy Mother', these twin organizations gave new ways to the women of India. It propagated that men cannot understand and solve the problems of women. Thus, women empowerment is the need of the time so that they could resolve their issues themselves. For this purpose, an institution, associated to Ramakrishna Math, was established

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<sup>132</sup> [www.srisaradaashram.org/](http://www.srisaradaashram.org/). Retrieved on August 15, 2018



especially, to work against poverty among women. ‘Mass Education Drive’ is another important program being run by ‘ashram’ with an aim that no girl between the ages of six to eight should remain illiterate.<sup>133</sup> In the year 2000, these efforts were recognized at national and international level and financial aid was provided to launch new projects by ‘International Fund for Rural

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Development’ and ‘World Bank’ with the help of Indian government. At the moment trainings of different skills like tailoring, weaving, pottery, cattle breeding, poultry and dairy farming and cultivation are also being provided to women that help them to increase the income of their families. No doubt, these efforts have brought changes in the social and economic lives of women in their villages. That is why more and more women are joining these groups and making their lives better.

In the celebration of 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Math and Mission took complete charge of a few small villages located near the city of Chennai. Since that time health, education, transport, loans for businesses and support during natural disasters is being provided freely to the public of these villages. A special program ‘Saradamma Grama Manglam’ has also been launched here to train women in different skills.<sup>134</sup>

#### 2.1.5. Vedanta Society of America and women welfare activities

The first branch of Vedanta Society was established in 1897 in New York, United States by the close disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda. This society is closely affiliated to the Indian based movements of Ramakrishna Math and Mission founded previously

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<sup>133</sup> Sri Ramakrishna Math [www.eng.vedanta.ru/prabuddha\\_bharata/July2005\\_steps\\_to\\_woman\\_empowerment.php](http://www.eng.vedanta.ru/prabuddha_bharata/July2005_steps_to_woman_empowerment.php). Retrieved on August 16, 2018

<sup>134</sup> Sri Ramakrishna Math <https://chennaiamath.org/women-welfare-medical-help-and-kids-education-at-meyyur>. Retrieved on August 16, 2018

in Calcutta. These movements and society are known to introduce Hinduism and Vedanta philosophy to the Western World as a global ideology. The core idea of Vedanta is Advaita, which means non-duality. When a person has reached to the level that he sees no difference between the image and the reality and his soul becomes one with the Supreme Reality, he has achieved the highest goal of Advaita Vedanta.<sup>135</sup> Vivekananda preached that Divinity of

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Soul can be attained through working selflessly for others, through meditation and worships. Although this philosophy became famous with the name of Swami Vivekananda, but the concept and idea are taken from the teachings of Sarada Devi and Ramakrishna.

In his first visit Vivekananda trained two of his disciples to run the newly established society but still there was a need to have an experienced teacher there, who could preach the message further and work for its expansion. Thus, after Vivekananda came back to India, he sent Swami Saradananda as the head of society's center in America. As a religious teacher he participated in 'Greenacres conference of Comparative religions', there. He was also invited to deliver a lecture in 'Brooklyn ethical Association' after that. Although Vivekananda had laid the foundations of Vedanta Society but without mentioning the efforts of Saradananda, study of how Vedanta Society flourished, is not completed. He was the person who introduced it in America in an organized form. But when Vivekananda founded Ramakrishna Mission, he needed a learned and trust-worthy person who could organize it and run its affairs as a leader. So, he called Saradananda back to India and appointed him as the secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Another close companion, Swami Abhedananda, was in London at that time on a mission of preaching Vedanta philosophy

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<sup>135</sup> Vivekananda, Swami., *The Vedanta philosophy*, (The Vedanta Society New York: 1901), 4<sup>th</sup> edition. P. 15-20  
[https://www.vivekananda.net/PDFBooks/The\\_Vedanta\\_Philosophy.pdf](https://www.vivekananda.net/PDFBooks/The_Vedanta_Philosophy.pdf)

in England and Europe. After getting approval from Vivekananda, he came to America and took over the charge as the head of the Society. Soon he became popular as the preacher of Hindu spirituality in America, Mexico, and the neighboring areas. The credit of getting the Society registered under the rules and regulations of United States also goes to Swami Abhedananda. He spent almost twenty-four years in America, working selflessly for the Society and preaching Hindu philosophy in America, Canada, and Mexico. He also met Max Muller<sup>136</sup> and Sir William James<sup>137</sup> during his stay there. He came back to India in 1921 but before returning, he had established many Vedanta centers in America and had trained a number of Western students as well. In the same years, he also travelled to various places of Asia including Japan, Shanghai, Singapore, Hongkong and Kuala-Lumpur delivering lectures on Vedanta philosophy and religions of India. A complete series of his lectures and speeches have been published by Ramakrishna Math at the time of his one hundred years birthday celebrations. After his return to India, he established two branches of Vedanta Society in India also. They are known as Ramakrishna Vedanta Math and Ramakrishna Vedanta ashrama.<sup>138</sup> Right now a lot of branches of Vedanta Society are working in United States, that were founded on the hands of Swami Abhedananda.

Swami Turiyananda, Budhananda and Trigunatiananda are the most famous personalities and spiritual leaders, after Abhedananda, who worked, preached, and remained associated with the Society in their times, respectively. In 1905 the Society constructed first Hindu Temple in the

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<sup>136</sup> Friedrich Max Muller was a German scholar of Comparative Religion, language, and mythology. He is also known as an orientalist due to his expertise in Sanskrit philology and Indian religions

<sup>137</sup> William James is a famous American philosopher and psychologist. He is also famous for his theory of functionalism in religion

<sup>138</sup> Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda. Vol:1 (Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, Calcutta: 1967)  
<http://estudentavedanta.net/Complete-Works-of-Swami-Abhedananda-01.pdf>. P. 4. Retrieved on August 20, 2018

United States on Webster Street.<sup>139</sup> The Society kept expanding as new branches were opened in different areas of America. Among them some famous branches are ‘Center of Olema in San Francisco’, established in the times of Swami Trigunatitananda, the new center that is also located in the same state, working as the headquarter of the Society in America right now was established in 1959 under the headship of Swami Ashokananda. After 1970, the center is being headed by

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Swami Prabuddhananda.<sup>140</sup> Another notable center is Vedanta Center of ‘Boston’, which was founded by Swami Paramananda and then headed by Srimati Gayatri Devi till 1995. The Vedanta Societies of ‘Portland and Providence’ are also important places in this regard.<sup>146</sup> Almost all these centers have been established in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another center was founded in 1909 in Washington D.C on the hands of Paramananda. The head of this center was Devamata, a Western female devotee, who also served as the director and teacher of Washington and Boston centers on rotation with Paramananda. She also delivered lectures with invitations from ‘Theosophical Society’ and ‘New Thought Alliance’. After Vivekananda and Abhedananda, she was the third person to deliver a lecture in People’s Church.<sup>141</sup> The appointment of these two women as heads along with many other women who joined the Society as disciples, serving it in different capacities, show that the Society believes in the equality of men and women in every walk of life including religious education, leadership, and others. The Society is associated to the ideology of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi according to which everyone among the mankind has an element of Divinity in his or

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<sup>139</sup> ‘American Vedantist’, A Directory of Ramakrishna-Sarada Vivekananda movement in the Americas. No. 2, Vol. 15, ed. 2009. P. 11. Retrieved on August 20, 2018

<sup>140</sup> ‘American Vedantist’, A Directory of Ramakrishna-Sarada Vivekananda movement in the Americas. No. 2, Vol. 15, ed. 2009. P. 11. Retrieved on August 20, 2018 <sup>146</sup> Ibid, P. 12.

<sup>141</sup> Expansion of the Vedanta Society of Southern California (1976-2018). Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California: from Swami Vivekananda to the present. P. 4. [www.vedantawritings.com/HVS8.pdf](http://www.vedantawritings.com/HVS8.pdf). Retrieved on August 21, 2018

her being. Thus, all get the status according to the worships and meditations he or she has offered to gods and goddesses.

The Society had earned so much fame till the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that famous Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, went to America and visited the American president there as an ambassador of the Society.<sup>142</sup> it shows that the works of Vedanta society were recognized, appreciated, and facilitated at government level as well. In 1931, a new center was inaugurated in Washington DC

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and Swami Vividishananda was appointed as its head. Under his leadership the society celebrated 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Ramakrishna. A series of lectures was delivered via radio by all swamis associated to different centers of the Society in America. Till 1936, the list of registered members in Columbia had reached up to forty. Another important event is the celebration of Swami Vivekananda's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in 1963, initiated by some devotees in collaboration with Indian embassy in America. The President of Columbia University appreciated the efforts of Vivekananda towards preaching religion and spirituality. Along with the establishment of two more centers, the Society celebrated Holy Mother's birthday in the year 2000 and collected funds for a girl's school in her native village, Jayrambati.<sup>143</sup>

Other famous centers are Vedanta Center of Atlanta, Vedanta Center of Greater Austin, Ramakrishna Vedanta society of North Texas and Ramakrishna Vedanta Center of Las Vegas. The last one is important to mention here in respect that this was once again an example of women spiritual leadership in contemporary Hindu thought in the West. Its first leader was Rose Maria

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid

<sup>143</sup> Expansion of the Vedanta Society of Southern California (1976-2018). Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California: from Swami Vivekananda to the present. P. 4. [www.vedantawritings.com/HVS8.pdf](http://www.vedantawritings.com/HVS8.pdf). Retrieved on August 27, 2018

Gordon, also known as Mahamaya. She herself was a psychologist by profession but also spent a long time with Swami Prabhawananda as a student. She became famous as a great teacher and preacher of Vedanta.

Among the newly established centers are ‘Ramakrishna Vedanta society of North Carolina’ and Vedanta society of Tucson established in 2008 and 2010, respectively. But now Vedanta Society is not limited to America only. It has its branches in many notable countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa as well such as Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Japan, Germany, Russia, Holland, Switzerland,

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and France.<sup>144</sup> According to the information provided in the pamphlet ‘What is Vedanta’, the number of Vedanta centers, that are working under Ramakrishna order, all over the world is almost 160. These are a part of those centers which have been established by some individuals or devotees who are running them in the names of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda but are not associated to the mother organizations Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Including all of them their number reaches to 1000 centers approximately.<sup>151</sup>

#### 2.1.5.1. Aims and Objectives of Vedanta in America and women

The aims of Vedanta Society are very similar to the objectives of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. It is important to mention these aims and objectives here as women welfare is a necessary part of their welfare activities. Vedanta Society is deeply involved in social welfare activities along with providing the spiritual and religious guidance to everyone including women. Multi-purpose welfare activities are provided by the Vedanta Society beyond any restrictions regardless of faith,

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<sup>144</sup> What is Vedanta Scanned-The Guibord Center. <https://theguibordcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/.../What-isVedanta-Pamphlet.pdf>. Retrieved on August 28, 2018 <sup>151</sup> Ibid

race, color, cast or any other discriminatory element. The society assists in any type of natural phenomenon or disastrous situations, in eradicating poverty, famine or any other situation that is causing threat to normal life in a community. In the beginning it was limited to establishing educational institutions, providing medical services in remote areas, establishing rehabilitation centers in floods or earthquake effected areas but in the recent years, society has grown up as an institution getting involved in larger projects as well such as mining, making the people aware of cleanliness, plantation for better environment, inserting water recycling plants and constructing roads and bridges in the villages. They are not only working inside India, but such services are provided in every country where message of Vedanta has reached. Men and women work equally

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in these organizations and participate in the development of local communities. People especially women from poor areas are preferred in providing jobs in different departments. Although women are encouraged to work but still their number is not more than 25% of the total employees.

The discussion about Vedanta society is not completed until Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi are not mentioned side by side. The whole discussion tells that Vivekananda presented his ideology taking the views of these two saints as the foundation. Sri Sarada Devi's life records show that she was a religious personality since her childhood, but it is a fact that after getting married to a saint she turned into a religious figure. Although it is believed by their devotees that she was Divinely associated to Ramakrishna but the incidents that took place in her life are same incidents that happen in the lives of every female child in Indian villages. According to the childhood records of Sarada Devi, she belonged to a poor family who married their daughters to anyone who could afford to give a heavy jewelry or money in return following popular custom of most Indian villages.

Ramakrishna had a fame of a mystic, but many believed that he is mentally upset. Because of this no one agreed to marry his daughter to him. It seems as if due to poverty, when Ramakrishna's mother offered heavy jewelry and large amount of money to Sarada's parents, they got ready to marry their daughter to a man who was fifteen years older than her. She was a child of six years while Ramakrishna was twenty-one years of age at that time. This was a traditional child marriage according to the customs of Sub-continent at that time. This was a common practice among the people of every cast and was accepted as something normal. Ramakrishna knew that his family has borrowed all the jewelry, given to her bride and when her mother demanded it back, he took it away from her when she was sleeping. Such acts were common among villagers in those times.

Another strange incident is, when she went to live with her husband, he along with some of his devotees worshipped her and announced that she has an essence of Kali in her being.<sup>145</sup> The innocent wife did not know any reality of all what was happening around her. She accepted everything without asking any question or raising any objection. She followed every commandment of her husband like a simple obedient wife who has given herself in a total submission of her husband. Although she had attained the status of a sacred being even in the life of Ramakrishna but never gave any advice to any devotee nor initiated anyone except that of Swami Yogananda to whom she also gave a mantra once, but it is a reality that it was Ramakrishna who asked her to do so. All her religious activities including pilgrimages, visits to different ashrams, speeches and leading of the processions are after the death of Ramakrishna. She also faced many social and financial problems from inside and outside of her family like any other widow who is in a need to get support from someone after losing her husband. She even died

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<sup>145</sup> The whole incident is explained on page 40



because of not getting proper medication of malaria at the age of sixty-seven. It was one of the students of Ramakrishna who arranged a shelter for her and accepted her as their leader and spiritual mother. Before she started living with Ramakrishna in Calcutta, she did not have any religious or spiritual status. People of her village and family treated her in the same way as every young widow was treated.

This is something common that when a person faces any type of shortcomings in his life, he tries to change the situation to save his next generations from these problems. It seems that the same thing happened in the life of Sarada Devi as well. She herself was illiterate but supported women education at every level. As mentioned earlier, many female schools and colleges are established in her name and most of them are in remote areas of the country. Although she belonged to a

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Brahman family but was aware of the problems of deprived and poor classes of the society. That is why she always initiated everyone who came to join her circle. All her devotees carried the same vision of peace, welfare of humanity, love for everyone, equality among the human communities, spirituality for everyone and creating an ideal society where all these things are present in their practical form. Thus, Sarada Devi is known not only as a female spiritual and religious leader of contemporary period, but also as a Divine mother of all and a blessing for everyone.

## 2.2. Brahma Kumari Organization

Brahma Kumari Organization is another famous female led Religious and spiritual movement which has introduced new dimensions in religion with taking proofs from the religious texts and specially concerned with justifying the religious and spiritual leadership of women. It is also a reason for researcher to study this movement in the relevant context as it can be a good example of Sacred Feminine in Hindu discourse in contemporary period.

### 2.2.1. Historical background of Brahma Kumaris

The name Brahma Kumari is a pure Hindi name. Brahma is the Supreme Deity according to Hindu Faith who is above all, while Kumari is used for young girls in Hindi language especially for the embodiments of goddesses<sup>146</sup>. So, the name can be taken in the meaning of ‘Daughters of Brahma’. According to another meaning: ‘They are those Brahmins, who are born of Brahma’s Lotus like mouth, through which they receive knowledge about God.’<sup>147</sup> The movement is known for introducing prominent and dominating role of women as spiritual leaders in contemporary Hinduism. Brahma Baba believed that the values required to create a caring society such as

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patience, tolerance, sacrifice, kindness, and love are the part of female nature. It seems from the historical sources that the name was used at first by the founder Dada Lekhraj himself. A comprehensive introduction of the founder is given below:

#### 2.2.1.1. Dada Lekhraj and advent of the movement

The real name of Dada Lekhraj was Lekhraj Kripalani or Lekhraj Khubchand Kripalani. He was born in 1884 in a Hindu family in the city of Hayderabad, located in the province of Sindh, present day Pakistan. His father was a school teacher in the local village. The family was a traditional Hindu Religious family. After completing his early education, he started his career as a wheat merchant initially but later turned into a diamond merchant. He was a famous jeweler of his time and known for his high moral values. Religiously, he was a devotee of Vishnu and recited Gita

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<sup>146</sup> Kumari in British English <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/kumari>. Retrieved on May 14, 2018

<sup>147</sup> Raja Yogi B.K. Jagadish Chander., ed. *One Week Course for attainment of complete peace, purity and Prosperity*. (Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwarya Vishwa-Vidyalaya Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu, Rajasthan). P.101. Retrieved on June 7, 2018

regularly.<sup>148</sup> He was always inclined towards spirituality and visited many gurus in his search for truth. According to some sources, he started experiencing the visions of God Shiva at the age of 60 and decided to devote rest of his life for serving religion and providing spiritual guidance to people. It was in 1936 when he left all his business-related activities and invested all his wealth for a trust, established under the supervision of a group of eight ladies known as the early managing committee of what appeared as Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University later on.<sup>149</sup> The trust was given the name of ‘Om-Mandali’<sup>157</sup> or ‘Om-Mandil’. Being the head of the group Lekhraj was also famous with the titles of ‘Om Baba’ or ‘Brahma Baba’ as it was believed that God speaks through him. The first female head of this committee was Om Radha, the eldest

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daughter of Dada and then Dadi Prakash Mani as the second.<sup>150</sup> It is because Dada Lekhraj believed that women are not only more spiritual than men by nature but more passionate and tolerant as well. Initially this trust became famous as a movement whose focus was spiritual uplifting of the women folk. Dada Lekhraj promoted celibacy. Women who joined the movement, were taught not to get marry and those who were already married had to leave their husbands because having sexual relation was not allowed for Brahma Kumaris. Practicing sex is a poison, a criminal act, and a door to hell according to the teachings of Dada Lekhraj.<sup>151</sup> As a result of these teachings, the followers had to face an intense reaction from the public especially from

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<sup>148</sup> The Brahma Kumaris Story [www.brahmakumaris.org/afr/mauritius/images/pdf/bbstory](http://www.brahmakumaris.org/afr/mauritius/images/pdf/bbstory). Retrieved on May 16, 2018

<sup>149</sup> The Brahma Kumaris Story [www.brahmakumaris.org/about-us/the-brahma-kumaris-story/brama-baba-the-founder](http://www.brahmakumaris.org/about-us/the-brahma-kumaris-story/brama-baba-the-founder). Retrieved on May 16, 2018 <sup>157</sup> Sacred circle of those who chant “Om”

<sup>150</sup> Singh, Bed., *The Teachings of the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Movement*, IJT 44/1&2 (2002), pp. 94-106. [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44\\_094.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44_094.pdf). Retrieved on May 18, 2018

<sup>151</sup> What-when-how.com/religious -movements/brama-kumaris-daughters-of-brama-religious-movement/. Retrieved on May 16, 2018

those whose wives or women had got influenced from the teachings of this organization. An antiOm Mandali group was established by the male members of the society to save their women. Due to strict resistance in Hayderabad, the community shifted to Karachi but still they had to face strict resistance. In 1939 the movement was banned but this ban was not implemented practically. The community changed its name from Om Mandali to Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University which is still in use.<sup>152</sup> At the time of partition of the Sub-Continent in 1947, the Brahma Kumaris had their head office in Karachi, Pakistan. In 1950 it was shifted to Mount Abu in Rajisthan, India. Brahma Baba passed away in 1969. After his death, the organization came under direct female religious leadership and Dadi prakashmaniji became the first female official head of the community. She passed away in 2007 and currently there are three names as the leading personalities of the organization, Dadi Jankiji, Dadi Hidayamohinji, who is also known as Dadi Gulzar and Dadi Ratanmohinji. Another prominent figure in its leadership is BK Shivani

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also known as sister Shivani.<sup>153</sup> But still the personality of Baba Lekhraj is a central point in Brahma Kumari circles. The day of 18<sup>th</sup> January is celebrated as the meditation day in all Brahma Kumari centers all over the world in the memory of Dada Lekhraj because he passed away on this date. The movement has approximately 9000 branches in 137 countries all over the world now.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Brahmakumarisresearch.org/foundation. Retrieved on May 18, 2018

<sup>153</sup> Her full name is Shivani Verma, associated to Brahma Kumaris since 2007 as a speaker and preacher of the movement. She is known as the modern face of the movement as she travels through India, Canada, UK and the US as a speaker who answers to the questions asked about the movement. She is also a teacher of Raja Yoga at BKWSU, Mount Abu India. Her television speeches have been published in the form of a book (Happiness unlimited). She is also a goodwill ambassador of World psychiatric organization <sup>162</sup>

Brief Introduction, <https://www.google.com.pk>. Retrieved on May 18, 2018

Having a broader view, the organization is also working with United Nations as a nongovernment institution, in the field of education and welfare of the women and children specifically.<sup>154</sup> It offers its welfare services under “The World Renewal Spiritual Trust” which is a public educational charitable Trust registered in Bombay, Maharashtra State, India under the Bombay public Trust Act of 1950.<sup>155</sup> Recent studies show that the organization is a public welfare organization now more than a religious one. Brahma Kumaris of New York talk about the four main tenets in the life of a follower, gyan (knowledge), Yoga (meditation), Dharna (To inculcate virtue in one’s inner self) and Seva (Service to mankind).<sup>165</sup> It offers its services and worships as a spiritual healing procedure for mental treatments. It is also working with Indian Psychiatrist Society Task Force (2008-2009). The Society has published a detailed book with the name of *“Spirituality and Mental Health”: Reflections of the Past, Applications in the present and projections for the Future*” in collaboration with the Medical wing of Raj Yoga education and

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Research Foundation Mount Abu. The book is published at Om Shanti Press Mount Abu as mentioned on its title page. It focuses upon facilitating the local community by arranging seminars and workshops in jails, hospitals, old-houses, drug rehabilitation centers, schools and for business communities for their spiritual uplift. It also provides support for women empowerment, enhancing leadership qualities, and creating better environment for them. It is the largest spiritual organization in the world led by females. Although men are also there as working

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid

<sup>155</sup> [Brahmakumaris.info/download/BK%20legal%20documents/BKWSO-Articles.pdf](http://Brahmakumaris.info/download/BK%20legal%20documents/BKWSO-Articles.pdf). Retrieved on May 28, 2018

<sup>165</sup> Ramsay. Tamasin, Menderson. Lenore, Smith. Wendy., *Changing a Mountain into a mustard seed: Spiritual Practices and Responses to Disaster among New York Brahma Kumaris*. Journal of Contemporary Religion. ISSN:1353-7903 (Print) 1469-9419 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjcr20>. Retrieved on May 28, 2018

members of organization but only women are appointed at administrative and decisionmaking positions.

### 2.2.2. Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University and their religious beliefs

The original Hindi name for the institution is Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya. This name is given by its founder. Now it is known as Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University all over the world with 4000 branches in about 70 countries. It offers a variety of spiritual courses, educational programs, seminars, and workshops, free of cost, to enhance the spiritual skills of its followers. The university is a completely non-governmental institution, and its different campuses are directly involved in providing welfare support to the local communities, especially women to establish themselves as important members of society.<sup>156</sup>

After shifting the center from Karachi to Mount Abu, Rajasthan, Brahma Kumaris started sending its messengers to other parts of India and new centers were also established all over the country. Since then, main leadership remains female. In 1971 the organization started sending its delegates in other parts of the world as well. Now it is a global movement with having centers in many countries including United Kingdom, Kenya, South Africa, Australia, Russia and North and South

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America. But the head office of all these centers is still in India with the name of Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University. The main area in university is the campus situated in madhuban (the forest of Honey). It is a place where many of yogis come every year to have their spiritual lessons. It consists of Baba's Hut, the place where Brahma Baba used to sit and meditate for long hours and the Tower of Peace where Baba's remains are preserved. Associated with these is Om Shanti

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<sup>156</sup> Forbes, Robert., *A Handy Book of Meditation*. (Eternity Ink: e-book NSW, 2012) ISBN 0 9587230 9 5.  
[www.brahmakumaris.org/.../Handy%20Book%20Of%20Meditations%20Ebook.pdf](http://www.brahmakumaris.org/.../Handy%20Book%20Of%20Meditations%20Ebook.pdf)

Bhawan, the universal peace Hall, where all types of conferences and other gatherings of the community are conducted. The place is not only an official headquarter of Brahma Kumari Organization but also a beautiful visiting place for more than 8,000 visitors every year.<sup>157</sup> It is also the home of 500 employees of the organization who work in 42 different departments of the university to facilitate the visitors.

Various courses are offered in university to teach about spirituality but majority of them revolves around promoting raja yoga, the official way of meditation of Brahma Kumaris, self-realization and consciousness, karma, and teachings about the next world. Along with it, seminars and workshops are arranged for personal development.<sup>158</sup> Along with raja yoga it offers various courses on overcoming anger, promoting positive thinking, self-esteem and stress-free living.<sup>159</sup> Although the movement has its origins in Hinduism, but it differs a lot from the traditional religion in some of its basic teachings and that is why it is considered as distinct from Hinduism by some religious researchers of contemporary period such as Reender Kranenborg writes that it is new spiritual religion. But according to many scholars like Lawrence. A. Babb, Richard. K. Barz and Prem Chowdhry, it is among the new religious trends and spiritual movements that have appeared

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in Hinduism in the twentieth century.<sup>160</sup> To know about these differences fundamental beliefs of Brahma Kumaris are given below:

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<sup>157</sup> Brahma Kumaris [www.brahmakumaris.com/campus/madhuban-forest-of-honey/](http://www.brahmakumaris.com/campus/madhuban-forest-of-honey/). Retrieved on May 19, 2018

<sup>158</sup> Courses we offer [www.brahmakumaris.org/wisdom/courses-we-offer](http://www.brahmakumaris.org/wisdom/courses-we-offer). Retrieved on May 19, 2018

<sup>159</sup> Brahma Kumaris Japan [www.brahmakumaris.org/japan/whoweare/faq](http://www.brahmakumaris.org/japan/whoweare/faq). Retrieved on June 2, 2018

<sup>160</sup> Lawrence A. Babb; '*Indigenous Feminism in a modern Hindu Sect*' (1984)

Richard K. Barz; '*A reinterpretation of Bhakti Theology: From the Pustimarg to the Brahma Kumaris*' (1992)

Prem Chowdhry; '*Marriage, Sexuality and the Female Ascetic: Understanding a Hindu sect*' (1996)

#### 2.2.2.1. Brahma Kumaris belief about God

To believe in the existence of a God who is the creator of all is not something important according to Brahma Kumaris because human beings are not able to produce any proof for His existence. But it does not mean that Brahma Kumaris did not believe in God at all. What they talk about is a Supreme Soul more than a God. This Soul is above all, different from the souls of human beings and perfect of all with all attributes in their perfect form such as the Supreme Father, the Supreme Mother the Supreme Teacher, the perfect peace, and the most complete form of knowledge etc.<sup>161</sup> Different names are given to this Supreme Soul as: God Father, Shiva, Brahma, Baba, Ocean of Bliss, Ocean of Love, Ocean of virtues, the Liberator, and the Guide.<sup>162</sup>

It shows that the concept of God is there but not in the same way as in traditional Hindu Religion. Similarly, they never build temples with iconographical images of gods and goddesses neither worship the traditional gods of Hinduism. Brahma Kumaris give a new interpretation to the concept of trimurti<sup>163</sup> in Hinduism. Traditional Religion teaches that it means Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva while according to Brahma Kumaris, Brahma is the leading figure in trimurti.

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<sup>161</sup> Encounters with God. [http://www.brahmakumaris.org/discovery/articles-blog/articles?view=article&option=com\\_alfresco&articleId=e0ef646e-d62b-4c4f-adee-ca9e03f96d74](http://www.brahmakumaris.org/discovery/articles-blog/articles?view=article&option=com_alfresco&articleId=e0ef646e-d62b-4c4f-adee-ca9e03f96d74). Retrieved on May 21, 2018

<sup>162</sup> Kranenborg, Reender., *Brahma Kumaris: A New Religion?* Free university of Amsterdam. A preliminary version of a paper presented at CESNUR 99. Bryn Athyn Pennsylvania (1999), [www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org). Retrieved on May 21, 2018

<sup>163</sup> The triad of three gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva



Then Shiva and third one is Shankar.<sup>164</sup> It is the name of a person about whom it was believed that through him the Supreme Soul transmitted its light after the death of Lekhraj. He has explained the details about beginning, middle and end of the world.<sup>165</sup>

In the traditional interpretation of trimurti, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the sustainer or preserver, and Shiva is the destroyer. But Brahma Kumaris interpret trimurti in a different way too. By creator they mean restoring peace and harmony in the world. By preserver they mean to practice the raja yoga<sup>166</sup> which helps to maintain a balanced personality while destroyer means that all evil will be destroyed in the end of the world.<sup>167</sup> Through raja yoga a person prepares himself to receive the message of God. It is explained with the help of an example of a radio transmitter that when it is tuned, only then it comes into a position to receive the message. In the same way a person grasps the message of God only when he is prepared to receive it.

#### 2.2.2.2. Brahma Kumaris belief about Karma and Reincarnation

Brahma Kumaris believe that all Human Beings are the eternal souls. They are one with the Supreme Soul but because of the law of karma, they had to leave that metaphysical world and enter the physical world in the form of human beings. To transform into a human body is necessary for the soul to express its attributes and qualities in the material world. The qualities of a soul are

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<sup>164</sup> Shankar is the name of a person who appeared after Dada Lekhraj. He preached the Brahma Kumaris beliefs and the practice of Raja Yoga in a different and simple way. Due to his teachings many of the Brahma Kumaris are joining the Adhyatmik Ishwariya Vishva Vidyalaya of Bholenath Shev Shankar, situated in Kampil, (UP). The group has become a challenging one for the original movement and that is why authorities in Mount Abu don't accept *Shankar* as the new mean to convey the message of *Shiva*

<sup>165</sup> [www.pbks.info/website%20written%20materia%20l%20books/Bks%20and%20shankar%20eng.pdf](http://www.pbks.info/website%20written%20materia%20l%20books/Bks%20and%20shankar%20eng.pdf). Retrieved on May 22, 2018

<sup>166</sup> A type of meditation practiced by Brahma Kumaris. Details about it will be given in coming pages

<sup>167</sup> Kranenborg, Reender., *Brahma Kumaris: A New Religion?* Free university of Amsterdam. A preliminary version of a paper presented at CESNUR 99. Bryn Athyn Pennsylvania (1999), [www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org) p. 4

manifested through its material form. Because of taking the shape of a human body, the soul loses the level of its attributes and matter overcomes it to some extent. There are three necessary

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elements of a soul are intellect, conscious and unconscious mind. Intellect is that part of a soul which controls the thoughts of a mind from getting influenced from the external factors. If the human mind is influenced from the outside world, then ideas that will appear in this mind will also be the reflection of that influence. As a result, this human being or soul will become spiritually darkened. The lesser the influence will be the closer the mind will be to the original attributes of the soul. In this way it will be a conscious mind. While unconscious mind is where there is a record of all life experiences, the soul is having in its relation to matter. That is why the thoughts and ideas generated in human mind are from the unconscious mind.<sup>168</sup> Two other concepts associated to this belief are karma and reincarnation of souls. Here again Brahma Kumaris differ from the traditional interpretation of karma and reincarnation. Hinduism believes that every soul is reincarnated according to the type of its karma matter. But according to the concept given by Brahma Kumaris, souls are reincarnated into human bodies only whatever type of karma it has generated in the previous birth. The reincarnated human being acts to the ideas generated by mind. As a result, more karma is accumulated. It can be good or bad at the same time. Thus, the soul gets involved in the cycle of birth and rebirth. The only way to get rid of this cycle is to make the mind pure and clean from the bad karma matter of the previous birth. For this purpose, Brahma kumaris offer a meditation of raja yoga. As the level of consciousness of a mind arises, the person becomes

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<sup>168</sup> Kranenborg, Reender., *Brahma Kumaris: A New Religion?* Free university of Amsterdam. A preliminary version of a paper presented at CESNUR 99. Bryn Athyn Pennsylvania (1999), [www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org), p. 5

a righteous one. In the same way when the level decreases, the person becomes sinful.<sup>169</sup> This notion also reflects concept of sin according to Brahma Kumaris. It believes that when a mind is

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not in a condition of consciousness it enters the stage of darkness which ultimately makes it a sinful person. As the mind comes into the condition of consciousness, it gets away from sins.

#### 2.2.2.3. Brahma Kumaris belief about World and creation

About creation Brahma Kumaris present a view closer to sankhya yoga.<sup>170</sup> It believes in dual presence of Prakriti and Purusha.<sup>171</sup> God is not the direct creator for every creation in this world rather just a Supreme Mover. Matter is eternal and inside this matter there are eternal elements. Things are created and finished with the evolution and dissolution of these elements. This process continues which does not have any end. World goes into a process of transformation after every five thousand years.<sup>172</sup> With every five thousand years one world cycle is completed. One cycle consists of six yogas:

1. Satyog (The Golden Age)
2. Tetrayog (The Silver Age)
3. The time where Satyog and Tetrayog join together
4. Dawapuryog (The Copper Age)

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<sup>169</sup> Singh, Bed., *The Teachings of the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Movements*. IJT 44/1&2 (2002), PP. 94-106.  
[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44\\_094.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44_094.pdf)

<sup>170</sup> Sankhya/Samkhya or Samakhiya Yoga is one of the six philosophical systems belonging to astika group in Indian philosophy

<sup>171</sup> Purusha is the eternal male element present in the matter while Prakriti is the female energy necessary for creation. Both are the necessary parts of the eternal matter

<sup>172</sup> Singh, Bed., *The Teachings of the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Movements*. IJT 44/1&2 (2002), PP. 94-106.  
[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44\\_094.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44_094.pdf)

5. Kaliyog (The Iron Age)
6. Sangamyog (Another joining time when the last period is joining to the first period starting a new cycle)<sup>173</sup>

Beginning of a cycle is the “The Golden Age”. It is the time when human beings are in their perfect form of consciousness and world is full of complete peace and harmony. “Silver Age” is also

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considered as a peaceful period of the world cycle, but human beings are less conscious in this period as compared to the Golden Age. In the third cycle the world continues losing the level of righteousness. In the fourth period the level of righteousness decreases some more degrees and human beings lose many perfect attributes of first and second period. It is a condition when human mind starts feeling uneasy with the worldly conditions and looking for a way to attain that perfect condition once again. In this effort the human mind develops different religions as different ways to find the Divine. The world has become more and more imperfect. There is a situation of chaos everywhere and people are in a situation of trouble and sufferings.

Human mind is indulged into wars, conflicts, clashes, and destructions in the world. At last, the world fills with ignorance dominated by sin. People become sinful by nature.<sup>174</sup>

Thus, they believe that this is the time when God Shiva appears in the world in human form in the body of a good devotee with attributes of God. He showers His blessings everywhere and on everyone. The knowledge of God spreads everywhere and through raja yoga human minds are made pure once again. This is the confluence age when the ending period is joined to a new period

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<sup>173</sup> Cycle of Time [www.brahmakumari.net/cycle/cycle-of-time](http://www.brahmakumari.net/cycle/cycle-of-time). Retrieved on June 2, 2018

<sup>174</sup> Cycle of Time [www.brahmakumaris.com/announcements-magazines/cycle-of-time/](http://www.brahmakumaris.com/announcements-magazines/cycle-of-time/). Retrieved on June 6, 2018 <sup>185</sup> Strano, Anthony., *Time and Transformation*. (The Huffington Post: 2013) [www.aboutbrahmakumaris.org/timeand-transformation/](http://www.aboutbrahmakumaris.org/timeand-transformation/). Retrieved on June 6, 2018

of Golden Age. This is the end of one world cycle and the beginning of another. At the end of this world cycle, in which we are living now, God reincarnated in Brahma Baba and gave him the name of Prajapita Brahma. These world cycles are eternal and each of them consists of five thousand years, according to the Brahma Kumaris.<sup>185</sup>

#### 2.2.2.4. Brahma Kumaris belief about Death and Salvation

As mentioned above, Brahma Kumaris believe in the eternity of souls. Thus, death occurs only to physical bodies, not to souls. When a soul takes out its energy from all body organs, death occurs.

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But soul carries the burden of its deeds and actions performed in this life with it in the next life. The status of new birth is decided on the basis of matter accumulated through these deeds and actions. According to their perception, when a woman is pregnant, the soul enters the mother's womb. As the mind of the child develops, it forgets the memories of its previous life. After he takes birth, the mind and soul adjust with the new circumstances. In this form every soul passes through a number of births until it gets salvation. By salvation, what Brahma Kumaris mean to say is the returning of the soul back to that state in which once it was, before coming to this world. Each soul has to come to this world to perform his role in every world cycle. Even the highest soul has to appear once in a world cycle for the purpose of revival of righteousness. When the soul is in the material world it desires to go back to Brahmaloaka, the world of souls, its original place and through spiritual practices and raja yoga it can go back to that world. But when it has spent a notable time in the world of souls it desires to come back in the material world and to start its cycle

of lives here. In this way the role of every soul continues.<sup>175</sup> Thus by salvation Brahma Kumari means resting of soul for a specific time in Brahmaloaka.

### 2.2.3. Raja Yoga

Raja yoga holds an important place among the beliefs of Brahma Kumaris. Special classes are arranged, and courses are offered at Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University, to teach about raja yoga. But it is also important to know that raja yoga should not be taken as a new type of yoga practice introduced by Brahma Kumaris in 20<sup>th</sup> century. As discussed earlier, the movement has emerged from a Hindu environment and has its bases in Hindu teachings, it seems that it has adopted the way of raja yoga from the ancient Hindu texts as well. Here again the movement seems

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depending upon the teachings of sankhya philosophy, explained as raja yoga and sankhya are deeply related to each other in ancient Sanskrit texts where it is also known as hatha yoga.<sup>176</sup> Some famous definitions are given below:

“Raja Yoga is popularly known as Ashtanga Yoga or “the eight-fold path” that leads to spiritual liberation”.<sup>177</sup> To be more specifically: “Raja” means king in Sanskrit and as such, raja yoga considered the king of all yoga types and “the royal path”. The earliest records show that it was introduced by the sage Patanjali<sup>178</sup> in 2<sup>nd</sup> century ce.<sup>179</sup>

In this way the Sanskrit texts explain raja yoga as the highest level of yoga path attained by a yogi, rather than a way of getting ultimate salvation. Yogapedia explains raja yoga as “the ultimate

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<sup>175</sup> Raja Yoga B.K. Jagadish Chander., ed. *One Week Course for attainment of complete peace, purity and Prosperity*. (Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwarya Vishwa-Vidyalaya Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu, Rajasthan). P.104 Retrieved on June 7, 2018

<sup>176</sup> What is Raja Yoga [www.hinduism.co.za/rajayoga.htm](http://www.hinduism.co.za/rajayoga.htm). Retrieved on June 11, 2018

<sup>177</sup> Defining Raja Yoga <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5338/raja.yoga>. Retrieved on June 11, 2018

<sup>178</sup> Patanjali is said to be a great Hindu saint and the writer of many Sanskrit texts especially yoga sutras

<sup>179</sup> Ibid

highest level of yoga practices and Hatha Yoga is said to be the way of achieving this level.”<sup>180</sup>

When a Yogi has attained this level, he has reached the highest level of consciousness and enlightenment. This state is known with the name of Samadhi.

Brahma Kumaris basically talk about raja yoga whenever they talk about meditation. Almost all courses offered at Brahma Kumari World Spiritual University, or any material published regarding meditation is mainly about raja yoga. It is compulsory for those taking the courses of meditation at BKWSU or full-time members of the movement, to meditate on daily basis. A complete method of practicing raja yoga is described by BKWSU, in a booklet published by Mount Abu publishing center *Raja Yoga meditation step-by-step Teachers-Guide 1994*. Online material is also available for the beginners. “*A Handy Book of Meditation*” is a famous online book published by Brahma Kumaris Australia. It gives a detailed introduction, procedure, and purpose of raja yoga meditation.

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Important steps focused upon by Brahma Kumaris are method, practice, attention, and experimentation. By method they mean to understand the complete way including its theory and practice. By Practice they mean to say that one has to be very punctual in his meditations. Consistency is the condition to get the full benefit of it. If someone is not consistent in his practices, he may lose the sequence and will have to start his daily practices once again. Attention means that one should always keep his mind towards his meditation. He should not forget his concentration during his daily activities. One should not get involved in worldly activities to that much extent that he forgets upon what he concentrated in the previous meditation. Experiment is something which is related to the practical aspect of one’s thought, he has accumulated throughout the process of Method, Practice and Attention. Here, by Experiment they mean that one should practically

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<sup>180</sup> Defining Raja Yoga <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5338/raja.yoga>. Retrieved on June 11, 2018

apply these thoughts on his mind. The way to apply these thoughts is to concentrate upon his own self with disconnecting himself from the people and situations around him. A person should concentrate in such a way that he visualizes himself as an individual soul. When a person is concentrating upon his mind, he is focusing on the soul whose central point is the forehead. This concentration takes a soul towards its originality and makes it to feel relieved. When the soul is relieved, ultimately the whole body feels light and relaxed. Raja yoga explains soul as a light with three necessary parts mind, intellect and sanskars.<sup>181</sup> All of the thoughts, ideas and life experiences are accumulated in the mind and then a person acts according to what has been recorded in his mind. There are two types of situations in which a mind works. First, when it is working according to its situations, habits, and surroundings without having any consciousness about what type of actions they are. Second is that working condition of mind in which it is acting consciously, linking

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itself to the Intellect, the second necessary part of soul. It gives a guideline to mind by telling it in which direction it should work. This is the part which guides the mind according to its original attributes such as peace, love, wisdom, and happiness etc. In this way it guides the mind to its original sanskaras, keeping it away from those sanskaras which are accumulated through worldly experiences. It means that raja yoga meditation makes the mind pure and takes it towards the right thinking and from the right thinking there appear the right actions.

Here it is also important to know that it is not Brahma Kumaris only who have spoken about raja yoga meditation, but it has always been an important way of yogic meditation and teachings as said earlier. That is why raja yoga has been mentioned in the teachings of other spiritual teachers

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<sup>181</sup> *Raja Yoga meditation* step-by-step Teachers Guide 1994. [Brahmakumaris.info/download/.../RY-MeditationTeachers-Guide-1994.pdf](http://Brahmakumaris.info/download/.../RY-MeditationTeachers-Guide-1994.pdf)



of 20<sup>th</sup> century as well such as Swami Sivananda<sup>182</sup> and Swami Vishnudevananda<sup>183</sup>. It comes at number three in the four types of yoga according to these contemporary scholars.<sup>184</sup>

Brahma Kumaris also mention principles necessary to perform raja yoga in its perfect way. Most important among these principles is Brahmacharya. According to this principle, a person should make his mind clean and pure so that only pure thoughts, words, and deeds could appear in his mind. Especially the desire for having sex is strictly prohibited. It has been already mentioned above that Brahma Kumaris preach celibacy.

Another important principle is related to one's diet. Along with the purity of mind the purity of diet is also necessary. Brahma Kumaris believe that whatever a person eats has a great effect on his mind that is why pure food is required to develop a pure mind. The prescribed food for a raja

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yogi is known as Satoguni food<sup>185</sup> in the teachings of Brahma Kumaris. At first a person should not eat anything which has been taken by unfair means or earned through illegal sources. Even it should be prepared by a person who practices yoga daily and has become a Brahmacharya. That is why it is a practicing rule among the Brahma Kumaris that they do not eat food unless it is prepared by a Brahma Kumari only.<sup>186</sup> Along with these two principles, to have a lesson of God's

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<sup>182</sup> Swami Sivananda (1887-1963) is known as a famous Hindu spiritual leader and a teacher of Yoga and Vedanta in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>183</sup> Swami Visnudevananda (1927) is a student of Swami Sivananda and the founder of International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta centers

<sup>184</sup> The four types of yoga are Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Janana Yoga

<sup>185</sup> Fruits and vegetables cooked in the remembrance of god with the awareness that the food is provided by God is considered as Satuguni food

<sup>186</sup> A hand-book of Godly Raja Yoga (*Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa-Vidyalaya Pandav Bhavan, Mount Abu, Rajasthan India*) [www.bkdrluhar.com/000.../Books/05.%20Handbook %20 of %20 Godly %20 Rajyoga.pdf](http://www.bkdrluhar.com/000.../Books/05.%20Handbook%20of%20Godly%20Rajyoga.pdf)... p. 27-28

knowledge is also necessary on daily basis which will incorporate the Divine attributes of contentment, humility, righteousness, purity, and peace in one's personality. It is claimed that when a person practices raja yoga regularly, he reaches to a level where he can enjoy the following benefits:

1. A raja yogi can never have mental tensions and can never be a psychic patient.
2. He can feel the Divine attributes in himself and becomes a guiding personality for others.
3. The soul of a yogi is purified, and he feels lighter internally.
4. The daily practice of yoga keeps a man alert and active. A yogi can never be lazy rather yoga practice keeps him physically and mentally active. He performs his duties in a way much better than others.
5. One who practices yoga regularly is always friendly with a smile on his face for everyone.
6. A raja yogi develops good relationship with other people around him without caring about class, color, race, caste, or religion because he knows that all are different souls from one God. He is always more tolerant and broadminded towards other human beings.

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7. Brahma Kumaris claim that promoting raja yoga is useful for whole of the world as it controls the crimes of bribery, sex, and many immoral deeds. When it bans marriage and sexual relationships, it becomes a source to control the human population as well.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> A Hand Book of Godly Raja Yoga (*Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa-Vidyalaya Pandav Bhavan, Mount Abu, Rajasthan India*) [www.bkdrluhar.com/000.../Books/05.%20Handbook %20 of %20 Godly %20 Rajyoga.pdf](http://www.bkdrluhar.com/000.../Books/05.%20Handbook%20of%20Godly%20Rajyoga.pdf)...P.32

8. A yogi develops a good control on his physical and mental capabilities. Raja yoga practice helps a person to overcome his scattered thoughts and to spend his mental energy in positive thinking.
9. Raja yoga develops the power of judgment and distinguishing the right from wrong. A regular practitioner can never take a wrong decision and will not be biased. He develops better abilities to decide what is right and what is wrong.
10. It develops the qualities of courage and bravery among the practitioners. A raja yogi is not frightened of facing the worst situations and never feels panic in hardships and adverse circumstances.

These points show the importance of raja yoga in the teachings of Brahma Kumaris. Every member of the movement has to follow all instructions to become a Brahmacharya and has to practice raja yoga meditation on daily basis. If it is not possible for someone to come and attend classes in BKWSU, classes are offered online as well. Along with raja yoga, the regular recitation of Murli is also something very important in the daily schedule of Brahma Kumaris.

#### 2.2.4. Murli: The Holy text of Brahma Kumaris

The sacred text according to Brahma Kumaris, is known as Murli. The word is used in Hindi language for a popular traditional musical instrument, flute as well. But Brahma Kumaris use this

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name for those Holy texts which they believe that it is necessary to recite on daily basis for the members of the movement. They claim that Murli is as ancient as Vedas in. Hindu scripture is of two types Shruti which was heard and Smriti which was remembered. Although both are sacred, but difference lies in their origins. Shruti are the revelations and Smriti are the texts developed by sages with the passage of time. Taking this notion as the basis of their belief, one of the scholars

of Brahma Kumaris Pari,<sup>188</sup> claims that Murli belongs to the first group of Sacred Texts Shruti as its texts were also heard initially by Baba Lekhraj.<sup>200</sup> She also describes the reason for the name Murli. As mentioned above that the word Murli means flute and its sweet sound. In the same way the sweet message of Divine started coming to human beings through Brahma Baba at first and then through his successors after he left this world. In this sense Brahma Kumaris explain two types of Murli, Sakar Murli and Avyakt Murli. They are also known as ‘Vanis’.

‘Sakar’ is a famous term in Hindi language which is used in different meanings. One of its meanings is ‘Personification’ as well.<sup>189</sup> The word is also used for monocarpous<sup>190</sup> type of plants in Hindi<sup>203</sup>. These meanings might be the reason behind applying the name ‘Sakar’ to first type of Murli because they are those parts of sacred texts which were delivered by the Divine through Lekhraj Kripalani. Whatever religious instructions or sayings are given by Baba Lekhraj or Brahma Baba himself is known as Saakar Murli.

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The other type is Avyakt Murli. Avyakt means ‘angelic’. They are that portion of the sacred texts about which Brahma Kumaris believe that they were delivered after when Baba Lekhraj moved to the world of souls. He joined the highest Soul or transformed into a most perfect Being just like an angel, he kept sending the messages to humanity through one of the leaders of Brahma Kumaris

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<sup>188</sup> Pari is a Malaysian writer, with a degree in Law but greatly influenced with the meditation techniques of Brahma Kumaris and meditates regularly at one of the Brahma Kumari centers in Malaysia. She claims to have certain unusual spiritual experiences since 1996 and started writing articles explaining the things depending upon her experiences, with the name of “Brahma Kumari Pari”. In 2015 she started writing books instead of articles in different cosmological issues, explaining what she had already written in her articles <sup>200</sup> *Veda and the meaning of verses in the Veda.*, Brahma Kumari Pari: 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2014. [www.brahmakumari.net/vedaand-the-meaning-of-verses-in-the-veda](http://www.brahmakumari.net/vedaand-the-meaning-of-verses-in-the-veda). Retrieved on June 26, 2018

<sup>189</sup> <https://www.quora.com/what-is-the-English-of-Hindi-word-ssakar>. Retrieved on July 3, 2018

<sup>190</sup> They are the plants which produce its fruit only once and then dies after leaving the seeds for another one to grow

<sup>203</sup> [dict.hinkhoj.com/sakar-meaning-in-hindi.words](http://dict.hinkhoj.com/sakar-meaning-in-hindi.words). Retrieved on July 3, 2018

residing in World Spiritual University at Mount Abu. It is believed that this is Dadi Gulzar among the leaders who is receiving the messages since 1969,<sup>191</sup> the year of the death of Baba Lekhraj.

#### 2.2.4.1. Procedure of receiving the Divine Message

Receiving the Divine messages is a complete procedure described on one of the movement's official site according to which Brahma Kumaris themselves fix a date when the concerned spirits will be called on. Dadi Gulzar is bathed and appears in front of the members dressed up in new white clothing. Being the medium of receiving revelation, she sits on a throne, gaddi and sometimes lay down in a senseless condition. The spirit, which was called on, enters her body with a jerk and if she is not unconscious, the features of her face and voice are changed. Whatever she speaks during this condition is accepted as the Divine message and recorded as the texts of Avyakt Murli. Sometimes the spirit is also served with food items. It leaves the body again with a jerk and Dadi Gulzar comes back into consciousness condition. All these messages are broadcasted live to other Brahma Kumari centers and recordings with translations are also sent later on.<sup>205</sup>

The researcher has described Brahma Kumari's religious beliefs along with the introduction of the organization, in order to show that how they interpret some basic Hindu concepts, which is something that distinguishes them from other Hindu religious and spiritual movements. This description is also important here because Brahma Kumaris have established their religious stance

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depending upon these beliefs including their views of religious/spiritual leadership of women and their role as independent citizens in every department of the society. Description of these beliefs is also necessary here because introduction of any religious or spiritual organization is not

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<sup>191</sup> What is Murli? <https://www.themurli.wordpress.com/2007/12/28/introduction-2/>. Retrieved on July 3, 2018 <sup>205</sup>  
Ibid

completed until its religious beliefs are not discussed. The organizations and movements discussed here, have been made a part of this theses because they are related to the theme of the research that is ‘To study the phenomena of Sacred Feminine by analyzing female led religious and socioreligious reform movements in contemporary Hinduism’. It is obvious that religious beliefs of every movement and organization are necessary to describe here.

#### 2.2.5. Brahma Kumaris and women

But along with these practices and concepts Brahma Kumari organization is still following its stance about women. As the movement grew, men also joined it and are providing their services in its different departments, but leading positions are given to women only. Providing women, a better social and religious status is the fundamental belief of the movement. It was the basic point when the movement was established that women should also serve as spiritual and religious leaders in Hindu community. To work for the elevated status of women in Hindu society was the main task of this movement. Due to this aim and other welfare works in which Brahma Kumaris have participated, the movement has progressed a lot and is known as a worldwide female led religious and spiritual organization that emerged inside Hinduism with a belief in women religious leadership and its practical implementation in the society. Brahma Baba focused upon the spiritual element in womanhood with a belief that women have the potential of becoming a spiritual leader. Through promoting the notion of equality and respect for everyone, he taught that all are equal in the sight of the Divine.

Three members of the organization sister BK Binny, sister BK Urmil and BK Sudesh attended an inauguration ceremony of the project on women empowerment along with a summit in February 2019 with the theme ‘She is the solution’. Sister BK Urmil talked about gender equality and changing the trends from grass root level. Brahma Kumari’s booklet about gender equality was

also distributed at the end.<sup>192</sup> Workshops and conferences regarding women welfare are arranged at all centers of the movement in different parts of the world. A special model is designed to show the way of women progress. It is described and published online in a book with the name '*The Four Faces of Woman*'. It shows four faces of women at its title, which carry different aspects of woman's life. Their realization is necessary for every woman if she wants to succeed in life. The first one is the 'Eternal Face' which means the inner innocence present in every woman. Second is the 'Traditional Face' which protects a woman's boundaries and limits. The influences which she receives from her surroundings also comes under this category. At third level there is 'Modern Face' when a woman resists against the traditional settings, breaks the boundaries, gets freedom, and sets her life according to her wishes. This is the reaction which comes out of her being as the result of what she faces around her. The last and fourth face is 'Shakti Face' which is the face of a powerful woman. She knows the limitations of traditions but seeks internal contentment and ultimate beauty. She becomes a responsible person of the society through awakening her eternal powers.<sup>193</sup>

Movement is working on different women empowerment programs in many areas of the world. In Chile and USA their theme is 'My courage, Your courage'. Here they are working with the aim of

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making women brave. In Costa Rica, their slogan is 'Holistic balance and Self Care'. Through this project they are working against domestic violence. They are also working on grooming women as professionals in healthcare, judiciary, and as primary school teachers. In Russia, their slogan is

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<sup>192</sup> Brahma Kumaris participate in the Women Empowerment Project at Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. Media wing Brahma Kumaris. [mediawing.org/braahma-kumaris-participate-in-the-women-empowerment-project-at-kumbhmela/](http://mediawing.org/braahma-kumaris-participate-in-the-women-empowerment-project-at-kumbhmela/). Retrieved on November 21, 2019

<sup>193</sup> Empowering Women and Men. [Brahmakumaris.org/hope/women-men/empowering-women](http://Brahmakumaris.org/hope/women-men/empowering-women). Retrieved on November 22, 2019

‘A Treasure deep in the Soul’. It is to enhance the inner deeper qualities of love, peace, wisdom, purity, and happiness. They promote the idea that empowering a woman means to empower the whole family. Dialogues are arranged for women in metropolitan societies to bring them closer and to understand the problems of each other. It also teaches respecting other’s faith. Brahma Kumaris also arrange weekly workshops for women related to issues like moral values, family health and teaching meditation. The director of the Brahma Kumari center in Trinidad received National Gold Award in 2014 for her community services for women and women development. A dialogue was arranged in Ukraine about three secrets of beauty. They are good relationships, expressing inner qualities and taking a well-balanced vegetarian diet.<sup>194</sup> In 2007 a delegation of young girls and women from Brahma kumaris of India, Mexico, South Africa and other parts of Asia and Africa participated in ‘Annual Commission on status of women’ at United Nation’s Head quarter. These women were inspired to arrange workshops in their regions for other women with three themes: Exploring our inner resources, promoting gender equality, and empowering women and young girls.<sup>195</sup>

It is written in the vision of the movement that it will take initiatives for women equality, restoring dignity, self-respect and creating for them an environment where they could feel safe and protected.<sup>196</sup> October 2019 was declared as breast cancer awareness month by the organization in

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<sup>194</sup> Empowering Women and Men. [Brahmakumaris.org/hope/women-men/empowering-women](http://Brahmakumaris.org/hope/women-men/empowering-women). Retrieved on November 22, 2019

<sup>195</sup> Ibid

<sup>196</sup> Women Empowerment. Brahma Kumaris meditation center, San Francisco. [Bksanfrancisco.org/initiatives.php](http://Bksanfrancisco.org/initiatives.php). Retrieved on November 22, 2019



India. BK Dr. Shubhadha Neel arranged a free medical camp for women on 6<sup>th</sup> October at Chirner Uran which was visited by 250 women in one day.<sup>197</sup>

Along with these projects of their own, the organization also works in collaboration with the government and other women welfare associations and that is why known as one of the leading females dominating movement in India and other parts of the world.

#### 2.2.6. Critique on Brahma Kumaris

Brahma Kumaris is also criticized a lot because of its some practices and concepts. Especially the process of receiving revelation is highly questionable and unacceptable from a movement established and working in the name of God. A person who is a link between human beings and God had a contact with God but then he lost this contact on the commandments of some other person. If all these mediums were true, then why differences occurred in the messages given to them? It is not acceptable from God that He is sending different messages to different people at the same time. It leaves a question mark on the authenticity of these mediums. Similarly, one can ask that if a person is going to Heavens why he is not getting the message directly from God or the Supreme Soul? This person's status seems higher even than Baba Lekhraj and Dadi Gulzar as he visited the world of souls himself while these two always remained on earth and never visited God's world.

Among the reasons for criticism are Murlis as well. They are not distributed, published neither available online. They are kept and preserved as secret documents of the movement. Even the

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<sup>197</sup> Medical Wing: Raj yoga Education and Research Foundation.

Bkmedicalwing.org/October-breast-cancer-awareness-month-celebration-with-wow. Retrieved on November 22, 2019

members are not given the direct access to the websites where Murlis are available. Only a few leading members of the movement can open these sites and read them online. According to Brahma

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Kumaris, everyone does not have that much level of purity which is required to understand the Holy Texts. But still, whatever the answer is, this practice is also not acceptable because God's message is for everyone. God always demanded from His messengers to propagate His revelation as much as possible. He never asked the receivers to hide it from one community and share with some others. Such practices also create doubts in the minds of people regarding the status of Murli as a sacred text. It is a common practice among religious groups or cults that whenever they preach their beliefs, they present their Holy scriptures to the listeners at first to prove their authenticity and to explain their beliefs clearly, but Brahma Kumaris start from introducing raja yoga at first instead of religious teachings beliefs or scripture.

Another practice because of which the movement is criticized is that currently the followers are not that much punctual in remembering Brahma Baba as it was done in the early years of the movement. Although the date of his death anniversary is celebrated as the annual meditation day, but all his pictures are replaced by the pictures of current leadership at all worship places and in the homes of followers as well.

B Ks are also criticized because they used the name of United Nations for their publicity. Similarly, the movement is notorious in a sense that many of its ex-followers have committed suicides. Members are taught to leave their families which causes restlessness and hatred for the movement in the society. It is asked by the members to invest their money and property in the welfare works and the best welfare is to donate all your belongings to Brahma Kumaris. Because of such issues the organization is criticized by analysts and many of its followers have also left it. Notable among

these, are those who are practically active to inform the public from this organization. They also have created an online platform for its effecties.<sup>198</sup> ‘Sant Ram Pal Ji Maharaj’ is also an important

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name among those contemporary Hindu religious scholars who have criticized Brahma Kumari beliefs and proved that they are against the real concepts of Hinduism.<sup>199</sup> Many ex-Brahma Kumari followers have filed cases against them in Rajisthan, Maharashtra and in other states and cities where centers of this organization are located.

### 2.3. Mother Meera of Germany

This movement is being led by a female Hindu lady, who belongs to India but as evident from the name, it is centered in Europe, Germany. The movement is one of the contemporary movements that appeared in recent years in the name of enlightening the world with the light of God. The lady claims to be given a task of bringing down the Paramatman<sup>200</sup> light to the Earth. She is famous as a spiritual leader and a mystic whose spiritual guidance is for everyone. Her followers believe that she is an avatar of Shakti that has appeared with some special task. It is said that almost 30,000 people come to visit her every year in Talheim Germany.<sup>201</sup> Although Mother Meera never spoke about Hinduism neither she claimed to preach Hindu religion but due to following Hindu traditions, and preaching spirituality by using pure Hindu terms, she is taken as a symbol of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism and that is why the researcher has chosen this movement to study in this research.

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<sup>198</sup> Complaint Board. <https://www.complaintboard.in/complaints-reviews/brama-kumaris-1321068.html>

<sup>199</sup> Brahma Kumari exposed. <https://news.jagatgururampalji.org/brama-kumaris-meditation-movement-murli-exposed-by-sant-rampal/>

<sup>200</sup> Highest Self or The Self of the whole universe. The absolute or Supreme soul or spirit who is identical to Brahman according to Hindu concept

<sup>201</sup> Clark, Peter. B. ed., *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, 2006. Ebook.umaha.ac.id. p: 409

### 2.3.1. Life History of Mother Meera

Real name of Mother Meera is kamala Reddy. She was born on December 26, 1960, in a poor family in a small village of Southern State of India, Chandepelle, Andhra Pardesh.<sup>202</sup> Her early

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life records tell that she was an extraordinary personality since childhood. By the age of three she would report to 'going to various lights'.<sup>203</sup> Her parents, although not very much religious but are said to be her first guides. She used to spend a lot of time in the state of Samadhi.<sup>204</sup> In 1972 her uncle Belgur Venkat Reddy<sup>205</sup> took her with him to Sri Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry where she spent some time and people started attracting towards her there. Here he introduced her as Mother Meera<sup>206</sup> and propagated that Kamala is an incarnation of Supreme Divine energy, Adiparashakti.<sup>207</sup> At the age of 14-18 she was reported to merge and getting power from the spirits of ancestors and previous incarnations of Divinity. She made her first international visit to Canada, Germany, and Switzerland with her uncle Mr. Reddy and one of her female devotee Adilakshami after getting special responsibility from Paramatman. Although she had started receiving visitors and pilgrims at the age of 18 but majority of the people were still reluctant to accept her as the religious head of the ashram. According to some narrators, due to this reason Mr. Reddy took her to Germany where she was able to establish herself as a religious and spiritual guide. Here she married to a German in 1982 and settled in a village of Germany, Talheim, near the city of

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<sup>202</sup> Ross, Christopher., *Experiencing Mother Meera*. P: 1, Cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/8918. Retrieved on November 14, 2017

<sup>203</sup> Mother Meera; Spiritual Star of the Golden Age [www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html](http://www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html). Retrieved on August 15 2017

<sup>204</sup> A state of deep meditative contemplation which leads to higher consciousness

<sup>205</sup> He had a close relation with *Sri Aurobindo Ashram* and had a special respect for female gurus

<sup>206</sup> Ross, Christopher., *Experiencing Mother Meera*. P: 1, Cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/8918 Retrieved on November 14, 2017

<sup>207</sup> Adi Parashakti is the Supreme Being Goddess in the Shaktism sect of Hinduism. In simple words she is also known as Shakti

Frankfurt. She used to give darshan four days a week at that time in her house. In 2006, she started travelling to other parts of the world as well including Europe, America, Australia, and India. Today she lives in Schaumburg, Balduinstein a small village in German countryside. She has developed an ashram as well in Mandipelle, India which is also an orphan house school for children till 16 years of age. Mother Meera states that this world is in a period of crisis, and she

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has come with the task of enlightening the world with Divine Light. This Light is basically gives supreme energy to this world, which is necessary for good health, joy, and happiness for everyone whose heart is open, to accept this Light.<sup>208</sup>

### 2.3.2. Ideological background of Mother Meera

In order to understand this ideology of bringing down the ‘Paramatman Light of the Divine’ by Mother Meera, it is important to look back into her religious background as well. It has been mentioned above that before coming to Europe, she also spent some time in Sri Aurobindo ashram. Here the movement seems carrying ideology of Sri Aurobindo who was the real founder of this ashram and society. He got his early education in England and came back to Indian Sub- Continent as an educationist and a politician afterwards. He was known as a great supporter of Nationalism during freedom struggle against Colonial Masters. He left politics in 1908 and started his life as a religious leader in Pondicherry. During his stay of forty years there, he introduced a new form of spiritual practice with the name of Integral Yoga<sup>209</sup>. He presented the idea of spiritual realization

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<sup>208</sup> Jones, Constance. A, Rayan, James. D, *Encyclopedia of Hinduism.*, p. 285. ISBN-13:978-0-8160-5458-9

<sup>209</sup> Integral yoga is a type of yoga which claims to synthesize six branches of classical yoga in philosophy and practice. It is developed by Sri Aurobindo with the aim of transformation of the entire being. All other yoga systems focus upon any one aspect of the human personality, but according to him integral yoga focuses on all aspects of a human being

which is necessary for eternal success.<sup>210</sup> In 1926 he founded this ashram in collaboration with Mother Mirra Alfassa.

Mother Mirra Alfassa had learnt and lived in Paris for many years before coming to India. Although she was famous as an artist but greatly interested in spirituality. Maybe because of this interest she visited Sri Aurobindo in 1914. She was greatly influenced by the ideology of Sri Aurobindo but due to some reasons went back to France. She also spent some time in Japan and

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in 1920 came back to Pondicherry. After the establishment of Sri Aurobindo ashram in 1926, she was appointed as the spiritual and material head of the ashram.<sup>211</sup> So, although the ideology and ashram were founded by a male spiritual leader but since its establishment it is being headed by female spiritual and religious leaders. For about fifty years she headed this ashram and during this period, she also established 'Sri Aurobindo International center of Education' and an international Township. That is why the ideology presented by these two personalities is taken as the basis for the movement of Mother Meera and the study of this movement is not completed until one knows about Sri Aurobindo, Aurobindo ashram and Mira Alfassa. When Kamala Reddy got associated with Aurobindo ashram, she adopted the title of Mother Mira following the name of Mira Alfassa. But according to another opinion, the reason for adopting this title is Saint Mira Bai of Medieval period.<sup>212</sup> Here it appears from this title that Mother Meera is carrying the legacy of two female spiritual leaders, with the name of Mother Meera before her.

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<sup>210</sup> Sri Aurobindo ashram [www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/life\\_sketch.php](http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/life_sketch.php). Retrieved on November 9, 2017

<sup>211</sup> Sri Aurobindo ashram [www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/life\\_sketch.php](http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/life_sketch.php). Retrieved on November 9, 2017

<sup>212</sup> Meera Bai was a great Bhakti saint, a Hindu mystic poet and a devotee of Lord Krishna. Her bhajans are still sung by the devotees of Krishna all over the world

### 2.3.2.1. Mother Meera as Avatar

Hinduism believes that embodiments of the Divine appear on Earth, in every period of human history with purposes such as helping, enlightening and spiritual guidance of humanity.<sup>213</sup> These avatars are free of gender limitations and that is why one can find both male and female spiritual leaders or Gurus, claiming to be the avatars of the Divine, throughout the history of Hinduism. Mother Meera is also one of such religious leaders from the contemporary period, about whom her followers believe that she is an avatar of the Divine Mother Shakti or Devi. In the book *Answers*, compiled by some of the devotees of Mother Meera, it is said that the avatars of Divine mother

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have appeared in this world in different times with different appearances. Sometimes they appear in front of the world and sometimes fulfill their task in a hidden way. Then it is told specifically about Mother Meera:

“In turbulent times such as these, several incarnations of the Divine Mother move among us, each with her particular task of healing or protection or transformation. One of the most widely revered and loved of these Avatars of the Divine Mother is Mother Meera”<sup>214</sup> Answering to a question asked from Mother by a devotee about Divine presence on Earth she reveals that many avatars of Mother; Shakti or The Holy Spirit, have incarnated on the planet today.<sup>215</sup>

Once, while talking about avatars, she said:

“The avatars come from God and have the light and power of God. The avatar has a human body

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<sup>213</sup> “*I come into Being from age to age*” (Bhagvatgita, chapter: 4, verse: 8)

<sup>214</sup> Mother Meera; Spiritual stars of the Golden Age [www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html](http://www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html). Retrieved on August, 17, 2017

<sup>215</sup> Ibid. Retrieved on August 17, 2017

while God has no form and yet all forms”.<sup>216</sup> While claiming to be an avatar, she herself said:

“Some will be known others wish to remain secret. The work of each is different. Each expresses a different aspect of the Divine Mother. My scope is very broad and more integral. I help people at all stages of life.”<sup>217</sup>

In another saying she declares:

“I have no special path, but come to give grace and power to those on all paths.....people from all faiths can receive help from me”.<sup>218</sup>

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It appears from these sayings that not only Mother Meera’s devotees believe about her to be an avatar of Shakti but she herself claims this as well. This claim of her, needs to be discussed in the light of religious teachings about avatars and female religious leaders because study of female avatars is not completed until reality of Shakti is not known.

Adi Shakti or Shakti is the supreme cosmic energy which is present everywhere even inside the human beings. This energy is inevitable for creation, preservation, existence and sustainability of the world and the universe. This female cosmic energy unites with Brahma to start the process of creation in Nirguna state and in its condition of Saguna<sup>219</sup> it appears in this world again and again in different times with certain purposes. These appearances of this female energy in physical form

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<sup>216</sup> Quotes by Mother [www.mothermeera.com/quotes/](http://www.mothermeera.com/quotes/). Retrieved on 21 August, 2017

<sup>217</sup> Mother Meera; Spiritual Stars of the Golden Age. <http://www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html>. Retrieved on August 22, 2017

<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> Saguna means God with attributes, name and form. Its opposite is *nirguna* which means God without attributes, name and form



are known as avatars of Shakti. It appears in its materialistic manifestations in the form of three Hindu goddesses: Sarsvati, Lakshami and Parvati.<sup>220</sup>

They are not just the consorts of their male counterparts but an important element for the completion of their tasks. In fact, they are the energy of these gods. In other words, Sarsvati is the Shakti of Lord Brahma, Lakshami is the Shakti of Vishnu while Parvati is the Shakti of Shaiva. Durga and Kali are the further incarnations of Sarsvati.<sup>221</sup> Among Hindu festivals, Navarati is the festival of Durga in which nine days and nights are spent for the veneration of nine incarnations of Durga. But indirectly this is also a festival of Shakti. Shakti is worshipped in rural India even today in its different manifestations. Because Shakti is an essential part of Divine feminine that is why most female religious and spiritual leaders claim to be the avatars of Shakti and Mother Meera is also one of them. She never denied this claim of her devotees, but the question associated with

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this claim is that the place for Shakti worship is known as Shakti peethas, which are very common in Indian villages where goddess worship is popular. But Mother Meera has never talked about establishing such peethas anywhere rather she associates herself with an ashram. Maybe it is because she got all her religious training in an ashram and never visited any temple or peethas which are common worship places of Hinduism. Another question that comes into mind here is that avatars do not need guides or helpers for religious training while Mother Meera lived and got her early religious education by another devotee of feminine Divinity, Mr. Reddy as said:

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<sup>220</sup> Chidananda, Sri Swami; *God as Mother* (Uttar Pradesh India: 1991) The Divine Life Trust Society. World Wide Web edition: 1999. WWW site: <http://www.SivanandaDishq.org>, ISBN 81-7052-090-8

<sup>221</sup> Kolluru, Sai., *Shakti: The Divine element of the feminine*. [www.stateofinformation.org/2011/09/shakti-the-divineelement-of-the-feminine](http://www.stateofinformation.org/2011/09/shakti-the-divineelement-of-the-feminine). Retrieved on November 18, 2017

“An avatar always learns from God and never has any other guru. Only God can be his guru.”<sup>222</sup>

Famous religious scholar mentions three manifestations of Shakti. Swami Chidananda has recorded his saying about avatars of Shakti:

“Shakti cannot be worshipped in its essential nature it is worshipped as conceived of in its manifestations Sarsvati, Lakshami and Kaali.”<sup>223</sup>

These are three manifestations of Shakti in which she has appeared in the world and helped the male gods. All other female avatars are the further incarnations of these divine manifestations.

Here it is needed to make it clear from Mother Meera’s side that what type of avatar she is? Is she a direct incarnation of Shakti or a further incarnation of anyone of the above mentioned, manifestations?

Another confusion associated with this claim is that she talked about being an avatar but never talked about Hinduism or any other religion. Because of using certain Hindu terms and following Hindu norms, she is listed among the female Hindu religious/spiritual leaders.

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### 2.3.3. Religion and Mother Meera

As mentioned above Mother Meera does not talk about any religion. According to her teachings, it is not necessary to follow a specific religion or a certain type of faith to get nearness to God. All religions are different ways leading to one supreme Being. According to her:

“The Divine is the sea. All religions are rivers leading to the sea. Some rivers wind a great deal.

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<sup>222</sup> What is an Avatar? [www.adishakti.org/prophecies/what-is-an-Avatar.htm](http://www.adishakti.org/prophecies/what-is-an-Avatar.htm). Retrieved on September 6, 2017

<sup>223</sup> Chidananda, Sri Swami; *God as Mother* (Uttar Pradesh India: 1991) The Divine Life Trust Society. World Wide Web edition: 1999. WWW site: <http://www.SivanandaDishq.org>, ISBN 81-7052-090-8

Why not go to the sea directly?”<sup>224</sup>

But here it is also important to note that she does not tell anything about what she means to say, “go to the sea directly”. If religion is the way leading towards the One Supreme Being, then it is important to adopt at least one of the existing religions, but she never spoke about following any religion as a path to get the Supreme Being. If religion is not necessary, then what is the direct way to get to that sea?

According to another saying:

“If you need me or my help, I will help you, whatever path you may follow. For me there is no difference. All paths lead to the same goal, that is, to realize the Divine.”<sup>225</sup>

An answer given by Mother Meera regarding the issue of finding an appropriate way to Divine is recorded in the book *ANSWERS I*, published by Mother Meera Foundation in which a devotee asked her: “Can I reach the Divine through art or work?” Mother answered him that having a way to reach the Divine is not necessary, but one can have Divine directly. If someone surrenders himself totally to Divine then, Divine comes into him and he becomes a source through which Divine reflects His Light to this world.<sup>226</sup> In the same way while talking about japa she said it does not matter whether someone is calling the name of Krishna or Jesus, the sincerity and love of

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Divine in his heart will take him closer to the Divine Power.<sup>227</sup> These sayings also reflect that Mother Meera does not support any religion rather religion is never something necessary to reach the Divine, according to her. Only the realization of Divine is required for success but how one

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<sup>224</sup> Quotes by Mother [www.azquotes.com/author/28062-Mother\\_Meera](http://www.azquotes.com/author/28062-Mother_Meera). Retrieved on November 27, 2017

<sup>225</sup> Ibid

<sup>226</sup> Facebook, January 23, 2018

<sup>227</sup> Mother on Meditation and Japa [www.awaken.com/2013/02/mother-meera-on-meditation-and-japa/](http://www.awaken.com/2013/02/mother-meera-on-meditation-and-japa/). Retrieved on January 29, 2018

can realize the Divine? To get answer to this question it is necessary to know the spiritual ideology of Mother Meera. Realization of the Divine is the only way to get success and this realization is required by purity of inner self. To attain that level of inner purity Mother Meera offers two ways. One is the way of darshan<sup>228</sup> and other is practicing japa. In Hinduism, beholding or watching of a revered person or sacred object is also a part of worship. Most of the people believe that this is an important way to get closer to the deities and to receive their blessings. According to another definition darshan also refers to the six Hindu philosophical systems: Samkhya, Yoga, Nayaya, Vaishashika, Mimansa and Vedanta system.<sup>229</sup> A devotee is raised up to the level of the deity when he is watching with pure heart and full concentration. This relationship is a source of inner purification and spiritual elevation for the devotee.

#### 2.3.3.1. Darshan by Mother Meera

Mother Meera has adopted the way of darshan for her visitors and followers. As mentioned earlier, darshan or darshana is a popular Hindu religious ritual and important to develop a good relationship between the deity or guru and the devotee. Thus, it is not something new introduced by Mother Meera in her way of promoting spirituality.

Mother declares that darshan is a blessing, a sign of love, light, and grace for everyone from Divine. It is free of any cost and because Mother does not bother religion or any faith that is why

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everyone can come and receive this blessing without any discrimination. This is the gift of Mother to humanity. The whole process takes place in a very organized way. As told earlier, Mother Meera

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<sup>228</sup> The term Darshan is originally Darshana from Sanskrit origin in the meaning of “viewing”

<sup>229</sup> Yogapedia Dictionary <https://www.yogapedia.com/defination/4965/darshan>. Retrieved on August 24, 2017

lives in Germany, so a large room associated to her house in Schaumburg is fixed for darshan, but she visits other parts of country as well. She also travels throughout Europe, U.S.A, Australia and India for darshan. Mother Meera foundation offers a complete calendar of Mother's schedule and online reservations are also made to get an individual or family booking for darshan. Mother also visits other areas sometimes on the invitation of her followers who arrange darshans themselves. The whole procedure of darshan and etiquettes associated with it are clearly told on official website of Mother Meera foundation. They are also available on separate web pages in English and other European languages because most of her visitors belong to different parts of Europe. Above all a step wise chart is also available online to prepare them for the procedure of darshan before it starts.<sup>230</sup> As mentioned above, online registration is given by Mother Meera foundation after the date of a darshan is confirmed. Those who are getting registered for the first time are preferred. When a person gets registered, he receives an online ticket via email which he should get printed and required to enter the place for darshan. A visitor should reach at least one hour prior to darshan and report to the organizers there. People are seated in rows and a passage for walking is left in between. People are called according to their seat numbers, not by their names. Each row gets up and starts moving towards Mother when their number is announced. Every person receives darshan individually as he comes kneeling down in front of Mother, lowering down his head so that she could take his head in her hands easily. If someone is not able to sit on the floor or has any problem in kneeling down, he is provided with a chair to sit. For a few minutes Mother takes visitor's head

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<sup>230</sup> The Darshan Procedure [www.mothermeera.com/the-darshan-procedure](http://www.mothermeera.com/the-darshan-procedure). Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2018

in her hands<sup>231</sup> and then releases. After that he looks into Mother's eyes until she lowers her head. When she stops looking, it is required from the visitor to go back to his seat as his darshan is over. When everyone in the hall has finished receiving individual darshan, Mother brings down the light to enlighten her visitors. When she leaves the room silently it means that the procedure of darshan is over.

A few etiquettes are also strictly observed during darshan. They are:

1. Switching off the cell phone.
2. No talking or whispering in the hall.
3. Taking photos or video recording is not allowed.
4. Standing in the hall is not allowed if you are not participating in darshan.
5. Every person can receive one darshan in one reservation.
6. People in front rows are not allowed to sit in cross legged position.
7. Do not leave the hall immediately after having personal darshan but wait till the whole session is over which does not take time more than one and a half or two hours.
8. A visitor is required to clean his hair and to bring a clean pair of socks to wear in darshan hall.
9. Those who need special assistance require to contact the concerned persons before, so that they could not cause disturbance during darshan.
10. Remove shoes before starting the procedure of darshan and put them under your chair.<sup>232</sup>

It is not possible to arrange an individual darshan for disabled persons or those sitting on

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<sup>231</sup> This is known as paranam (bowing down) in Hindu tradition

<sup>232</sup> The Darshan Procedure; Darshan Etiquettes [www.mothermeera.com/darshan-en/about-darshans/darshan-etiquettes/](http://www.mothermeera.com/darshan-en/about-darshans/darshan-etiquettes/). Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2018

wheelchairs because they cannot move up the stage where Mother is sitting. They can receive it in

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a collective way when Mother is giving light to everyone. In darshans Mother bestows light upon the soul and answers to the individual prayers.<sup>233</sup> Even when darshan takes place in a group, it is a complete individual and personal process because everyone's personal experience is different from others. Everyone's soul is enlightened differently, that is, according to its requirement.

These arrangements show importance of darshan in Mother Meera's way of providing blessings. In fact, this is the procedure through which she shifts the Supreme light to humanity and transferring this light is the major purpose for the advent of Mother Meera. By transferring this light Mother purifies one's consciousness and prepares it to rise at the level of Divine. This is the work of the Divine Mother for which she has incarnated into the form of Mother Meera.<sup>234</sup> It is asked here, that how she shifts Divine light into the human soul? And what she does while taking one's head in her hands? Answering to the question Mother explains a whole system of energy present in human body which moves from head to toes. As the soul gets influenced by worldly things or ideas, knots and blockades appear in the way of this energy and the soul feels heavier. When Mother looks into the eyes of a person, she is working on unfolding these knots and freeing up the blockades so that the soul feels lighter and easier to rise at higher level. There are different aspects of a person's personality including mental, physical, spiritual, emotional etc. By watching into the eyes of a person Mother checks those areas where Divine Light is needed the most and

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<sup>233</sup> The Darshan Procedure; Darshan Etiquettes [www.mothermeera.com/darshan-en/about-darshans/darshan-etiquettes/](http://www.mothermeera.com/darshan-en/about-darshans/darshan-etiquettes/). Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2018

<sup>234</sup> Ibid

when she focusses upon that specific area the process of inner purification takes place and the individual feels relaxed.<sup>235</sup> While explaining this process Mother Meera herself says:

“I am looking at everything within you to see, where I can help, where I can give healing and

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power. At the same time, I am giving light to every part of your being, I am opening every part of yourself to light”.<sup>236</sup>

Similarly, days are fixed for children only. Children from all ages can attend it if they are able to spend at least one hour without parents. Babies or children less than this category should be accompanied with their parents but individual darshan will be for kids only on that day. Parents can have darshan at collective level.<sup>237</sup>

Activities are arranged for children on Saturdays and Sundays at school in Shaumburg Germany in the presence of Mother. An online calendar is available according to which reservations can be taken online. These activities include meditation, singing, yoga, writing stories, storytelling, art projects and much more.<sup>238</sup>

#### 2.3.3.2. Meditation and Japa with Mother

Darshan is not the only way adopted by Mother Meera, but she focuses upon meditation as well. Before January 2016 meditation was not practiced separately. But from 2016 onwards another program other than darshan has been launched with the name of “Meditation with Mother”. In the first sight, it seems as if it is the same procedure that is practiced in the end of darshan, but Mother

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<sup>235</sup> About Darshan [www.mothermeera.com/uncategorized/darshan-intro](http://www.mothermeera.com/uncategorized/darshan-intro). Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2018

<sup>236</sup> The Darshan Procedure; Darshan Etiquettes [www.mothermeera.com/darshan-en/about-darshans/darshan-etiquettes/](http://www.mothermeera.com/darshan-en/about-darshans/darshan-etiquettes/). Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2018

<sup>237</sup> Children’s Meditation [www.mothermeera.com/activities/children/childrens-meditation/](http://www.mothermeera.com/activities/children/childrens-meditation/). Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2018.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid



Meera claims that it is not the same. It is arranged on Fridays when Mother is in Germany. It lasts only for thirty to forty-five minutes and is compulsory for every participant to stay till end. Darshan is for everyone, but meditation is only for adults. No special arrangements are made for children. Livestream of meditation is also available so that more and more people could receive the benefit. Pre-meditation reservations are compulsory just like darshan.<sup>239</sup> As described before, according to

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Mother Meera, it is not the same meditation which is practiced after darshan but something new and different. But what is the difference, is never told by Mother Meera anywhere. In the book *“108 Mother Meera is on Tour”* a conversation between Mother and a visitor has been recorded in which he asks about the details of this new practice of meditation. Mother Meera did not say anything about this procedure rather she said that explanations about this meditation will be given at some other appropriate time. In fact, no words are available in any human language that could explain this process.<sup>240</sup>

Associated with meditation is the procedure of japa<sup>255</sup>. Mother appreciates meditation with japa, which encourages the viewpoint that she is a female Hindu religious leader. In a questions and answers session with a visitor Mother Meera explained that japa is necessary as calling the name of a deity provides peace to heart and soul. It is not compulsory to find out special time to perform it, but one can practice it along with his daily activities as well. When a person repeats name of his chosen deity with his heart full of sincerity and devotion, the Divine power automatically comes towards him, and this helps the soul to rise higher. It is not compulsory to call one name every

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<sup>239</sup> Meditation with Mother [www.mothermeera.com/meditation-with-mother/](http://www.mothermeera.com/meditation-with-mother/). Retrieved on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

<sup>240</sup> Meditation with Mother [www.mothermeera.com/meditation-with-mother/](http://www.mothermeera.com/meditation-with-mother/). Retrieved on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2018 <sup>255</sup>

A process in which a devotee proclaims the name of a certain deity repeatedly in his heart silently in such a way that no other thoughts are there in the mind. It can be in the presence of the guru as well as in his absence

time. If some other name comes to one's mind at some other time, he should call that what is appealing to mind at that time. Even if mantra<sup>241</sup> is coming in mind instead of a name, it is better to call mantra at that time. Because what matters, is the love and sincerity in the heart of the devotee not any particular name or wordings, as mentioned earlier that it does not bother whatever name a devotee is calling, according to Mother Meera. In the same question and answer session she also declares further that although it is not necessary to utter a name or mantra for a perfect

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meditation, but it is better to practice japa with both that is recalling the name and silent feelings in the heart.<sup>242</sup>

Mother Meera encourages the people to ask her for help in time of need. Similarly, when they are facing any spiritual or worldly problem, they can pray to her, ask her for help by writing to her, calling her name in meditation or japa or asking directly if possible. Mother answers them according to the type of the problem and sends that specific light which is required to solve a certain problem. With light comes the grace of the Divine and a seeker is blessed. If the demand is not fulfilled it means that it is not necessary to get it. Life can go on even without it. What is given, that is, what is necessary.<sup>243</sup> Physical presence in front of Mother is not necessary for japa but a person can practice it anywhere, anytime. Only sincerity and feel of Mother's love is required.

In *Answers I* Mother Meera says:

“My help and blessings are possible even at a distance”<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/mantra. Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018

<sup>242</sup> Mother Meera on Meditation and Japa [www.awaken.com/2013/02/mother-meera-on-meditation-and-japa/](http://www.awaken.com/2013/02/mother-meera-on-meditation-and-japa/). Retrieved on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2018

<sup>243</sup> Ibid

<sup>244</sup> Mother Meera Foundation USA. Mothermeerafoundationusa.org/mothershelp.html. Retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

Another saying of Mother carrying the same meaning is recorded in *Answers 2*, when Mother says:

“The Mother’s love is above all human relations. The Mother is with you wherever you may be.

You must be free from doubt. Have confidence in Mother and Mother’s help and blessings

will always be there.”<sup>245</sup>

Japa is the only way to keep in contact with Mother every time. With the sincere feeling and calling the name of Mother verbally or silently, one can have a direct relation with Mother even without having her physical presence. This practice has become popular among the devotees all over the world. For example, a group of some British devotees gather once or twice a month to practice

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meditation and japa and sometimes only to sit silently in the state of concentration that lasts from thirty to forty-five minutes. Sometimes they are connected online with Mother Meera when she is offering darshan or meditation and sometimes read some sayings of Mother before starting their practice. Number of members in this group has reached up to hundred followers now.<sup>246</sup> Latest information about Mother’s upcoming darshans are also provided by such groups. On the wishes of devotees some of them also invite Mother Meera and arrange for her visits in their areas. Here it is also clear that along with darshan, japa and meditation, silent gathering also holds a special place in Mother’s way of getting closer to Divine. This silence is not only a requirement for meditation and japa but is something important itself according to Mother Meera’s way.<sup>262</sup>

#### 2.3.4. Mother Meera in public

Mother does not mix up with public but appears mostly at the time of darshan only. Before she used to take phone calls but now, she does not. Only emails and faxes are accepted and answered

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<sup>245</sup> Facebook. February 16, 2018

<sup>246</sup> Mother Meera Meditation <https://www.meetup.com/mothermeera/>. Retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2018 <sup>262</sup>  
Mother Meera [www.mothermeera.com/mother-meera/](http://www.mothermeera.com/mother-meera/). Retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2018

by the concerned authorities after taking instructions from Mother Meera. She hardly gives interviews because of her busy schedule and continuous travelling. But because she believes that she has come in the world for humanity, she spoke almost about every aspect of human life about which people ask her for help. For example, she also spoke about everyday life, health, family life and children etc.<sup>247</sup>

About health, Mother says that one should eat everything which is good for his body. It is not compulsory to eat vegetables or meat only, what is good for health should be eaten. One should take care of his health as she says:

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“The greatest pain is ignorance. When the pain is clear, you can find its source and can change.”<sup>248</sup>

Through these answers to her followers Mother keeps in contact with the public. Another way of Mother’s public interaction are schools associated with Mother Meera ashrams. First and largest of these schools is associated with the earliest Mother Meera ashram of Mandepelle, India. It is the same ashram of Mira Al-Fassa in which Mother Meera spent her initial time as a spiritual guru and which was founded by Sri Aurobindo in 1926. The work of establishing educational institutions associated to ashram had started in the times of Mira AlFassa when she established a university in 1951 in Pondicherry.<sup>249</sup> In 1956 a branch of this ashram was established in Delhi along with a school named Mother’s school India.<sup>266</sup> In 2007 Mother Meera founded an orphan house for the

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid

<sup>248</sup> Mother Meera [www.mothermeera.com/mother-meera/](http://www.mothermeera.com/mother-meera/). Retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2018

<sup>249</sup> Sri Aurobindo and Mira Alfassa biography [www.mirapuri-enterprises.com/SriAurobindo-Mira-Biography/index.shtml](http://www.mirapuri-enterprises.com/SriAurobindo-Mira-Biography/index.shtml). Retrieved on February 14, 2018 <sup>266</sup> Ibid.

homeless children in her house in India.<sup>250</sup> Children had to walk a long way to go to school. Thus, Mother decided to establish an ashram school which was inaugurated as an English medium school in 2010 in Mandepelle in the presence of leading personalities of the city. Number of students at school has reached to more than 1000 children now known as 'ashram kids' by Mother. Now this school has grown as Mother Meera English Medium High School along with many play homes in the city.<sup>251</sup> Home for kids and volunteers is there inside the main building. Those who are interested in welfare works are always needed and welcomed at school. Working for education is not less than fulfilling a Divine Task as a quote of Mother is recorded in the book *Answers I*:

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"It is a time to work with the power and love of the Divine in the world. When people are really dedicated to the Divine, there is no difference between action and prayers."<sup>252</sup> About those who work voluntarily Mother says in *Answers I*:

"I want people to be strong, Self-Reliant, unselfish and to contribute to the world with whatever skills and gifts, they have. I want them to work."<sup>253</sup>

People from inside and outside India especially from Europe come and live to work for ashram, voluntarily. Most of them are either the devotees of Mother Meera or those visitors who want to work to promote education in third world countries. Application forms are available online for every type of volunteer whether he is an educationist or wants to work in some other way such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, painting, and as dancing teacher or plumbing etc. Residence is provided inside the premises of the ashram on first come first serve basis but those who offer their

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<sup>250</sup> Mother Meera Ashram Vidyalya [www.mothermeera.school](http://www.mothermeera.school). Retrieved on February 20, 2018

<sup>251</sup> Ibid

<sup>252</sup> Mother Meera Ashram Vidyalya [www.mothermeera.school](http://www.mothermeera.school). Retrieved on February 20, 2018

<sup>253</sup> Ibid

services for a few days or a very short time, stay in nearby hotels on their own.<sup>254</sup> Along with this ashram in Mandepelle, there are kindergarten schools and play homes for young children in Vivekananda Nagar and in SBI colony, Bangalore. Mother Meera visits these ashram schools, frequently and is willing to open more schools of this type in India and in Europe as well. They are a great source to convey Mother's message to young generation and to the public. All above discussion about Mother Meera shows that she is known as a spiritual leader in Europe and America and in India by majority of those who are looking for a way to get spiritual satisfaction without following a specific set of beliefs and adopting limitations of a certain religion. Although she never talked about forming a religious sect or a cult, but a reasonable majority has accepted her as their spiritual leader. Some of them are her devotees and visit her very oftenly to receive

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blessings of darshan. Among them are the people, writing about her, working with her, and sharing their experiences with the others. Such writings are a great source to get first-hand information about Mother Meera and her works. The study about Mother is not completed until views of such visitors are not included. Thus, the researcher has incorporated the views of four of such devotees including Adi Lakshami, Mark Matousak, Martin Goodman, and Andrew Harvey.

Adi Lakshami Olati also belongs to Mandepelle, South India near Bangalore. She visited Sri Aurobindo ashram first time in 1969 and started spending most of her time in the state of Samadhi after that. She then, joined the ashram along with her sister and served as a teacher in Sri Aurobindo International centre of Education. In 1974 when she had lost Mother Mira Alfassa and looking for another spiritual personality, she met Mother Meera, Kamala Reddy, and since that time she is

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<sup>254</sup> Mother Meera Foundation USA. [Mothermeerafoundationusa.org/India.html](http://Mothermeerafoundationusa.org/India.html). Retrieved on March 5, 2018

associated to her. She is known as the 2<sup>nd</sup> full time devotee of Mother Meera after Mr. Reddy.<sup>255</sup> She spent most of her time with Mother Meera after she shifted to Germany in 1979 but now, she lives mostly in Mandepelle India in Mother's ashram school. She is also known as having the best record of Mother's quotations as one can see that the books *Answers 1* and *2* are full of Mother's sayings provided by Adi Lakshami. She firmly believes that Mother Meera is an avatar of Shakti. Mark Matousek is another person, who became famous as a devotee of Mother Meera. Before he was known as a journalist and an author. He never believed in religion but always interested in spirituality. For this reason, he came closer to the circle of Mother Meera. He has recently published two books about Mother in 2017 with the names of '*Writing to Awaken: A journey of Truth, Transformation and Self Discovery*' and '*Mother of the unseen world*'. Mark is also associated to teaching from 2006 and now a faculty member at the New York Open Centre and

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the Omega Institute. He is also running a company in New York with the name of "Media Living and Learning Centre".<sup>256</sup> He is the only journalist who recently interviewed Mother Meera on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2018. This interview continued for almost two hours and is available online as well. It was included later in the book of Mark published now with the title "*The Mystery of Mother Meera*".<sup>257</sup> From this book, Mark describes how a person can travel from unknown to known and from pain to relief through the spiritual guidance of Mother Meera. With this belief Mark has

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<sup>255</sup> Darshan in Canada

[https://www.mothermeeradarshancanada.com/mm/default/mother\\_meera](https://www.mothermeeradarshancanada.com/mm/default/mother_meera). Retrieved on March 24, 2018

<sup>256</sup> Mark Matousek: Truth, Story, Transformation

<https://www.Markmatousek.com/about/bio>. Retrieved on March 28, 2018

<sup>257</sup> Mark Matousek: Events <https://www.banyen.com/events/matousek-2018>. Retrieved on March 28, 2018

become a longtime follower of Mother and has compiled this book with her complete cooperation and approval.

Another person who got fame because of writing about Mother Meera is Andrew Harvey. He is the author of the most famous book written about Mother Meera, *The Hidden Journey*, published in 1991. Here he declares her an 'Earthly Goddess' and his personal experience of visiting her. Since the time when he received his first darshan in 1978, he became a devotee and a strict follower of Mother Meera. He was a professor at Oxford but left his academic life and turned towards spirituality after meeting with Mother Meera. His earlier and later writings tell that he was a homosexual and was living with his partner Mark Matousek, the same Mark mentioned in the text above. When Andrew Harvey visited Mother Meera at first, Mark was his partner at that time. After their breakup Andrew left Mother Meera but Mark still follows her as a devotee. The answer for the question why Mother accepted Mark and condemned Harvey, while both are gays, is given in the last chapter of this thesis when researcher makes an analysis of the ideas of Mother Meera. When Mother Meera condemned this relationship, he turned against her.<sup>258</sup> It happened in 1993

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that he not only left the circle of Mother Meera but also started writing negatively about her by declaring her as the 'Goddess of evil'<sup>259</sup>. He has presented a new idea of duality in his latest compilation '*The Sun at Midnight*', claiming that there is duality in the nature of godhead and because God has created everything in His nature, duality is there in every creation such as dual aspects in the nature of sun. It gives light sometimes and sometimes not. Same is the case with

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<sup>258</sup> Save women [www.janani.org/masters/m\\_meera\\_set.html](http://www.janani.org/masters/m_meera_set.html). Retrieved on March 30, 2018

<sup>259</sup> Michael Zarte, Mother Meera-Andrew Harvey, *The Sun at Midnight*. Andrew Harvey, On behalf of a Panvoluntaristic New World Order: Mother Meera  
[www.network54.com/Forum/554264/thread/.../Mother+Meera++Andrew+Harvey](http://www.network54.com/Forum/554264/thread/.../Mother+Meera++Andrew+Harvey)



Moon and other creatures. Man is also created with having dual aspects in his personality; good and evil, white and black, both are the created realities.<sup>260</sup> In fact, through this idea he is trying to convey that Mother Meera also has a dual personality. Before she was good but now, she has turned into an evil goddess. The person who has explained these views of Andrew takes them as making ground for justifying his affiliation and then splitting away from Mother. In 1995 he published another book *“The Return of the Mother”*, in which he declared her as homophobic<sup>261</sup> and accused her of creating a religious cult whose members threatened him to kill.

Another important person, who is necessary to be mentioned in relation to Mother Meera is Martin Goodman. He is the person whose writings introduced Mother at first among the masses. Andrew Harvey also visited Mother Meera after getting inspired from what Martin Goodman had written in his book *“In Search of the Divine Mother”*.<sup>262</sup> He does not deny Mother completely in his writings but talks about her in a doubtful way whether she is really a divinely person or not? Sources tell that Martin Goodman was asked to compile a biography of Mother Meera to introduce her to the public. Being a journalist Martin wanted to collect first-hand information about Mother

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and for this purpose visited her native town in India. He interviewed people there, who had spent time with Mother in her childhood and early youth. Martin found that majority of the people there, are not ready to accept Mother Meera as an avatar. Depending upon the information provided there, Martin was not able to prove that Mother Meera is a Divinely Being. Her staff asked Martin to

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid

<sup>261</sup> Homophobia is a psychological disease in which a person feels fear, hatred, discomfort or mistrust towards the opposite gender. That is why mostly those people who are lesbians, gays or bisexual are found to suffer from this

<sup>262</sup> Bostock, Cliff. “Revisiting Mother Meera: A New Book Raises some Questions”.  
[www.soulworks.net/writings/essays/site\\_039.html](http://www.soulworks.net/writings/essays/site_039.html). (Retrieved on March 30, 2018)

destroy this work. He did so but left the circle of Mother as a devotee after that and kept publishing his writings independently.

Cliff Bostock is another person who wrote about Mother Meera but in a state of total confusion about whether she is an avatar or not. After receiving four darshans from Mother Meera, he compiled the book “*Revisiting Mother Meera*”, in which he has raised questions about her Divinity. In the end he concludes that she can be a mystic but not a Divine. According to him after every visit he felt more chaos and pain in himself instead of feeling internal peace, harmony, and satisfaction. At one place he also mentions the insulting attitude of Mother Meera’s husband and the organizers of darshan. He also mentions that when he asked Adilakshami about Mother’s views regarding homosexuality, she confirmed that she changed her views later and said:

“Choice is for the individual”.<sup>263</sup>

All above discussion and the views of devotees mentioned here show that Mother Meera’s guru ship is not agreed upon. This can be concluded from the views of her frequent visitors who also started raising objections against her Divinity after some time. The incident of Andrew Harvey is also important here to be noted that when the follower turned against her and homosexuality was officially allowed in the West, Mother also changed her views and accepted gays in her circle. Mark Matousek is a great example of it. He was the partner of Andrew Harvey when Mother

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condemned Harvey. After she changed her views, Harvey left her, but Mark is still there as her devotee.

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<sup>263</sup> Bostock, Cliff. *Revisiting Mother Meera*: [www.soulworks.net/writings/essays/site\\_039.html](http://www.soulworks.net/writings/essays/site_039.html). (Retrieved on August 31, 2017)

Another issue which arises here is that she seems a follower of Hinduism through her ways but does not mention it. She follows many Hindu rituals and norms in a traditional way which clearly reflects that she is a Hindu lady eg: typical Hindu dress of Sari, adopting Hindu ways of Parnam<sup>264</sup> and darshan, applying bindi on her forehead as applied by every married Hindu woman, using the name of ashram for her place of darshan and following the concept of avatar show clearly that she is following the Hindu beliefs and practices. Without knowing about her ideas, one can simply assume from this appearance that she is a Hindu religious personality just like many others before her, in the history of Hinduism. That is why many writers of contemporary period categorize her as a Hindu spiritual leader such as in '*Encyclopedia of Hinduism*', the writers Constance A. Jones and James D. Rayan have mentioned her as a Hindu mystical and spiritual leader.<sup>265</sup> Similarly, she has also been mentioned in '*Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*'. The writer Peter B. Clarke also declares her as an Indian spiritual leader with a Hindu background.<sup>266</sup> Another author Karen Pechillis has given the names of eleven female Hindu spiritual leaders in the beginning of her article named '*Women Gurus in Hinduism*'. She has also mentioned Mother Meera of Germany among them.<sup>267</sup>

Along with these writings Mother Meera's practices also support the view that she is originally a Hindu and following pure Hindu concepts such as claiming to be an avatar. It is believed by her devotees that she is an avatar of Shakti with the task of enlightening the people<sup>268</sup>. Although she

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<sup>264</sup> A popular Indian way of paying tribute to an elderly being

<sup>265</sup> Jones. A Constance, Rayan D. James. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. (ISBN 978-0-8160-5458-9) P. 285

<sup>266</sup> Clark, Peter. B., *Encyclopedia of New Religious movements* (ISBN0-2013-59897-0) pg: 409

<sup>267</sup> Pechilis, Karen., *Women Gurus in Hinduism*. <https://www.bc.edu/.../Boisi%20Centre%20Symposium%20Hinduism%20Reader.pdf>. Page No: 1, 19

<sup>268</sup> Mother Meera, [www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html](http://www.saieditor.com/stars/meera.html). Retrieved on April 16, 2018

herself never used the name of Shakti or any other God or goddess, whose incarnation she is, but it is clearly written in the book *Answers* compiled by Mother Meera Foundation that:

“The Divine Mother has always been worshipped as the sustaining soul and force of the universe. Although some of the faces she wears are well-known Kali, the virgin mary, Isis for example. Many of her embodied forms have chosen to work quietly in the world. In turbulent times such as these, several incarnations of the Divine Mother move among us, each with her particular task of healing and protection, or transformation. One of the most widely revered and loved of these avatars of the Divine Mother is Mother Meera.”

Here it is important to note that Hinduism believes in avatars and that they appear in human form with Divine powers in different times. Similarly, it is understood that Shakti is the name of a popular Hindu goddess. All other goddesses are the incarnations of that Divine female power named as Shakti. Another notable thing is that Mother Meera has adopted the way of darshan which is a well-known Hindu practice among Hindu gurus. Before Mother Meera, this method was adopted by Mira Alfassa as well in Sri Aurobindo ashram. She is also using the name ashram for her place of darshan which proves that she is carrying the legacy of Sri Aurobindo. The definition of ashram clearly tells that this name is used for Hindu monasteries, especially those where Hindu Gurus live.<sup>269</sup> Those who are not able to do something for their well-being, need a place to live as shelter, provided with all necessities of life including food, health, education etc., Their living

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<sup>269</sup> Ashram. [www.yogapedia.com/definition/4960/ashram](http://www.yogapedia.com/definition/4960/ashram). Retrieved on April 16, 2018

place is also known as ashram in its wider meanings. Mother Meera is also using the name of ashram schools for her boarding schools in India and the children residing in these schools

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are known as ashram kids. It shows that Mother Meera is carrying a pure Hindu legacy and can be categorized as a female Hindu spiritual leader as mentioned above.

## CHAPTER: 3

### Socio-religious Reform movements in Contemporary Hinduism

Along with those religious and spiritual movements, that appeared in contemporary Hinduism with female leadership, there were some other as well which worked openly with the slogan of bringing change in the lives of Indian women. These movements worked under the leadership of some personalities, who were famous as noble persons and reformers along with being religious and spiritual guides. In this respect these movements are different from the organizations/movements mentioned in the previous chapter. Sri Sarada Devi, Brahma Kumari Organization and Mother Meera movement started from a religious standpoint then turned towards welfare activities but socio-religious reform movements, studied in this chapter, got fame for their welfare works for women before their religious ideas. All such reform movements and reformers are known to work differently from the practices and customs of traditional Hindu Society. In this respect it is important to study them in relation to female led religious movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu India as both type of organizations seem becoming a source for the revival of 'Sacred Feminine' in contemporary Hinduism. The religious and social reformers, researcher has chosen to study in this chapter are Dhondho Kishave Karve, Pandurang Shastri Athavale and Shri Ram Sharma Achariya. These three persons are famous for their efforts to uplift the status of women in Hindu society. They believed that for the development of Hindu society, it is necessary to enhance the abilities of women and encourage them to come forward and participate in every department of social life. The researcher has chosen these three personalities because they are well known for their services regarding women education, giving them awareness of their rights, promoting equality among

different casts of society, eradicating the traditions that are practiced in the name of religion and making religion easier for everyone.

### 3.1. Dhondho Keshav Karve and his life history

Dhondho Keshav Karve is also known as Maharishi 'The Great Sage', among the Indian public. He is famous for his efforts in the field of women development and education. Especially, the role he played to uplift the status of widows in Hindu society, cannot be denied. In his autobiography, which was published in 1936, he writes that he spent his early childhood period in the village of Murud, near Bombay. Since that time, this village was famous for Vedic education and people used to visit it from far away areas. Due to it the village had developed an educational value of its own. Most of its population was literate. He proudly mentions names of those famous people, in his autobiography, who belonged to his native village and served the nation at national and government level.<sup>270</sup>

About his family he himself tells that his grandfather settled in Murud, along with his brother and since that time, all family members started living there. The family was known for their wealth and knowledge in the village and the neighboring areas but lost their good days due to changing political situation in British era. Dhondho tells that his parents always had a responsible attitude towards society, religion, and upbringing of their kids. It is maybe because they got married in a very young age and when his father and uncles decided to live separately, the young couple, who were just at the ages of nineteen and eleven respectively, had to bear the responsibilities of life at a very tender age. His father, Keshav Karv, had got job of a tax collector in a nearby village. With a very small income, his parents struggled a lot against poverty and managed to meet their expenses

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<sup>270</sup> Kishav Karve, Dhondho., *Looking back* (Hindu widows Home Association, Hingne Budruk, Poona 4. 1936) P.45. Dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf. Retrieved on September 6, 2018

to some extent. He built a new house in Murud, for his family where Dhondho spent his childhood with his mother, elder brother, a younger sister, and a blind grandmother. His father

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lived where he worked and used to come home only for a few days in a year. He passed away at the age of sixty when Dhondho was twenty-one years old and had not started his settled life yet. He writes that it was his mother, brother and sister who encouraged him and supported him to do something useful for himself and for the society.

In his autobiography, Dhondho tells that he was born in 1858 in his maternal uncle's home, in a village near to that place where his father worked.<sup>271</sup> But because the educational situation was much better in Murud as compared to other villages, his father wanted them to stay in Murud where Dhondho started his early education. It was a simple village school where he received his early education in local languages such as marathi. He also learnt Sanskrit in his student life. He wanted to join the government services but did not know the English language, which was a requirement for public service exam at that time. After getting disappointed from having a government service, he also worked as a salesman in a garment's shop in his village. But because of not having any experience of handling business, he and his partner had to bear great loss and ultimately the business was ended, and the shop was closed. His partner accused him of all the losses, and he had to bear this loss too. Now he decided to appear in public service exam but in his first attempt he was not allowed even to sit in the exam because he looked too young. At the age of eighteen he started learning English language in his village. During these years he made another attempt to

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<sup>271</sup> Keshav Karve, Dhondho., *Looking back* (Hindu widows Home Association, Hingne Budruk, Poona 4. 1936) P.11. [Dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf](https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf). Retrieved on September 6, 2018



pass the public service exam and succeeded this time but preferred to continue his education instead of joining the training session. He also worked as a school teacher in his village

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for five months and then came to Bombay for higher education. There he joined a missionary high school and started his life at Bombay.<sup>272</sup>

In these years when he was focusing upon his studies and carrier, sudden death of his father was a great shock for him. He had to manage the expenses of his studies as well. According to the traditions of Bombay, rich families welcomed the needy students from remote areas and used to provide them resident and food in their homes. Dhondho also found a supporter but wanted to rely on his own through taking tuitions. After spending hard times at school, at last he passed his matriculation exam and started his college education with scholarship. Throughout college years, he earned for himself and bear his expenses on his own. After a few years he brought his wife and son to Bombay and started his family life in the big city. He completed his college education at the age of twenty-seven. He writes that at this time he considered himself the luckiest person ever. The autobiographical record of Dhondho Keshav Karve's life shows that even in those times when he himself was facing financial problems, he was greatly interested in welfare works especially related to the field of education. He used to have long discussions with his friends about social issues, problems being faced by the people in rural areas and that what should be done to bring a change in the lives of these people. He always felt satisfaction in giving charities and helping

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<sup>272</sup> Keshav Karve, Dhondho., *Looking back* (Hindu widows Home Association, Hingne Budruk, Poona 4. 1936) P.15-22. Dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf. Retrieved on September 11, 2018

others. He participated willingly in welfare activities in his village and then in city life as well. This was the time when he seriously started thinking about doing something practical and special for others, other than what he had done up till now. Doing something for himself and his family only, was not enough in life according to him.

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He had chosen to be a teacher in his professional life and joined a private school, even though that he was selected for government service as well. Along with this job he continued taking tuitions which helped him in improving his financial conditions as well as raising his intellectual level. He was famous as a good mathematics teacher. He was also interested in doing M.A which was considered as a great achievement at that time.

Since the time when he himself was a student, he was much concerned about promoting the importance of education among the youth. For this purpose, he also supported other youngsters of his village to come to Bombay and study there. During these times education was not something common among the Indian public especially in rural areas it was not a priority for the poor villagers. The situation was worst in the case of women. There was no concept of women education in villages. Dhondho was much concerned about female education even in those days. He himself taught his wife and sister at home and instead of spending money on the thread ceremony of his son, he preferred to give this money in women education fund at Murud. He had to face resistance from his family, but he strictly adhered to his point.<sup>273</sup> Another important event of his life was the

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<sup>273</sup> Keshav Karve, Dhondho., *Looking back* (Hindu widows Home Association, Hingne Budruk, Poona 4. 1936) P.33. [Dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf](https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf). Retrieved on September 11, 2018

death of his wife, Radhabai, when he was in Poona and could not even attend her funeral. He established a fund in her name which was spent on girl's education at Murud.

Dhondho Kishav Karve was now participating in many welfare-works in his village. The temple's building that was built by his ancestors was now in a need of renovation, but no one was willing to contribute. Similarly, the only school at village required some maintenance work. The poor population was not able to fulfil these expenses. Thus, Dhondho came forward and with his contribution and personal interest these tasks were fulfilled. A room was fixed only for girl's

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education at school, but the idea did not work because most of the people were not ready to send their daughters in his school after he got married to a widow, Godubai, of his village.

This was something extremely unusual and against the traditions of Hindu society. It took him too hard to promote this practice among the people. There was no concept of respectable life for a widow in Hindu society and remarrying was considered as something unfaithful to the deceased husband. But Dhondho continued his efforts and at last the time came when people started following him. The school was now full of female students and on the suggestion of Dhondho Keshav Karve, a separate school was constructed for girls in 1917 with the efforts of villagers themselves.<sup>274</sup>

In the meanwhile, he had joined the Fergusson College as professor of mathematics in 1891. He remained associated with this job till 1914. After that he devoted whole of his life in working for women education, status of widows in society and establishing welfare organizations for orphans. Now he had become a famous personality and his services were acknowledged at national level as

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<sup>274</sup> Keshav Karve, Dhondho., *Looking back* (Hindu widows Home Association, Hingne Budruk, Poona 4. 1936)  
Dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/16257/GIPE-019745-karve.pdf. P. 37. Retrieved on September 11, 2018

well. Since his college life as a student, he was inspired by Pandita Ramabai<sup>275</sup>, Vishnushastri Chiplunkar<sup>276</sup> and Herbert Spencer<sup>277</sup>. He had to face hardships and strict criticism because of his ideas and acts but ultimately people started recognizing his efforts and he got appreciation at government level as well. He also received many awards from different universities. In 1942, he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Banaras University, in 1951 from Pune University, in 1954 from SNDT University and got LLD by University of Mumbai in 1957. In 1955, he was awarded with Padma Vibhushan award and in 1958, Bharat Ratna by the Indian

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government.<sup>278</sup> His commemorative stamps were also issued in the same year. It was first time in the history of India that the picture of a living person was printed on postal tickets. His statues can also be seen at some important places in the country and roads are also named in his commemoration in Mumbai India. In March 1929, he visited England and attended 'Primary Teacher's Conference' and talked about the issue of women education in India. In 1930, he went on a tour of African countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Mombasa, and Zanzibar.<sup>279</sup> He wrote two autobiographies, one in Marathi and other in English. These books provide a good information of his life and works. His works are acknowledged at social level as well. In 1972, a Marathi drama Himalayachi Saavli (The shadow of the Himalayas) was played on the life of Dhondho Keshave Karv. Amol Palekar made a film Dhayas Parva on the life of Dhondho's first son Ragunath as he was the person who carried the mission after Dhondho. The movie also gives a picture of Karve

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<sup>275</sup> The first Indian woman who was a feminist, social reformer and educationist

<sup>276</sup> A poet who gave ideas about social reforms in Marathi language

<sup>277</sup> A famous British sociologist, philosopher, and educationist

<sup>278</sup> <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Dhondho-Keshav-Karve>. Retrieved on September 13, 2018

<sup>279</sup> <https://beinspirer.com/dhondho-keshave-karv-the-great-indian-social-reformer-who-pioneered-women-education-in-india-and-set-up-indias-first-school-for-widows-and-first-university-for-women/>. Retrieved on September 12, 2018

family and the problems they faced throughout their efforts. In 2017, Taluka Deopali, a researchbased initiative, made a documentary about the life of Dhondho Keshave Karv.<sup>280</sup> He died in Pune, India, in 1961.

#### 3.1.1. Welfare works by Dhondho Keshav Karve

As mentioned above, Dhondho Keshav Karve was greatly interested in welfare activities since his student life. Even in the times when he himself was facing financial problems, he used to save some money to spend in welfare of the people around him. He was interested in working for the promotion of education specifically, that is why most of his welfare works are related to establishing educational institutions. His autobiographical records tell that he liked to study about

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Western philosophies and social reformers of his time. He lived and studied in a time-period when Indian sub-continent was under colonial rule and British had their influence in every department of life.

Dhondho Keshav Karve was one among a few literate persons of his time. Along with educational activities he was also concerned about the political situation of his country and social problems around him. He used to discuss these issues with his class fellows and colleagues and tried to find out their solutions. He used to read out Marathi newspaper for his fellow villagers in the local temple. He was always there to contribute with his time and money whenever required. He believed that it is the responsibility of the people that they should try to change their conditions themselves. It was this sense of responsibility that he devoted whole of his life for the welfare of his people and society.

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<sup>280</sup> <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Dhondho-Keshav-Karve>. Retrieved on September 13, 2018

### 3.1.2. Dhondho Keshav Karve and women welfare

Although he encouraged all types of welfare works, but his main concern was education and lifting-up the status of women in the society. He started this struggle from his home and used to teach English language to his wife and sister. After he started a settled life in Bombay, he brought four other boys from his village and provided them food and shelter in his house so that they could get a chance to study in a big city. People started realizing the importance of women education because of his efforts in his village. First girl's school was established there because of his great efforts. In 1916, he laid the foundations of first women university of India. In 1917-18 he established a Training college for Primary school teachers and a school for girls with the name Kanya Shala.<sup>281</sup> He also used to collect donations for welfare associations and schools that were run with the public money.

His welfare works cannot be enlisted until his efforts for the status of widows are not mentioned. This was the time when child marriage was a common practice in many Indian villages. Dhondho himself, in his first marriage, got married at the age of fourteen to a young girl, who was just eight years old. Some of these girls lived in the houses of their parents till the age of puberty but most of them were sent to live with the families of their in-laws where they faced bitter humiliation and no rights were given to them. Girls of this age were physically not able to play their roles as mothers, thus many of them died during childbirth. If they survived, life would become more miserable for them especially in case of widowhood. According to the religious custom of Satti<sup>282</sup>, a widow had to burn herself to die in the funeral pyre of her husband but if she was allowed to stay

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<sup>281</sup> One India One People <https://oneindiaonepeople.com/maharishi-dhondho-keshav-karve/>. Retrieved on September 12, 2018

<sup>282</sup> Satti is a religious ritual in traditional Hinduism. According to which a wife has to burn herself alive in the fire in which body of her dead husband is cremated as a sign of eternal relationship of two souls. Although this ritual was banned during British rule by declaring it as unhuman in 1859

alive, her parents were not ready to accept her and her status in husband's family was no more than a slave girl. They were recognized with shaven heads and white robes forever. No one was ready to take the responsibility of such women and their children. They even faced sexual harassment from the male members of their families and society.

Dhondho Keshav Karve always felt pity of these women and wanted to change their plight. For this purpose, he, at first, worked to make the people aware of the importance of female education and then focused upon the lives of widows. As a social reformer he introduced a new idea of widow remarriage. He emphasized that it is not fair for a woman to spend whole of his life as a widow. Setting an example of his own, he himself married to a twenty-three years, old young

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widow of his village, two years after the death of his first wife. He also had three sons from this marriage. This was not acceptable in Hindu society in those times but with a strong will of bringing a change, he not only opposed the traditional ways but proved that this is not something that cannot be practiced. In 1893, Karve founded Vidhawa-Vivahottejak Mandali school for widows, it also provided shelter to widows and their children. It also served as a center for remarriages of the widows and providing school education to their children.<sup>283</sup> In 1896, he started a women school in Hingne near the city of Pune. In 1907 it was given the status of a girl's high school. It is still a popular women school, with the name, Mahilashram High School, in state of Pune with a good number of 3500 female students.<sup>284</sup> The establishment of S.N.D.T University in 1916, which is now known as All-India University for Women, was a key step towards the further advancements

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<sup>283</sup> One India One People <https://oneindiaonepeople.com/maharishi-dhondoo-Keshav-Karve/>. Retrieved on September 13, 2018

<sup>284</sup> Mahilashram High School <https://maharshikarve.ac.in/mahilashram-high-school/>. Retrieved on September 14, 2018

in providing higher education to women. Six students of Mahilashram High School were the first to get admission in this university. A girl's college, Mahila pitha-shala, was also founded in affiliation with this university. Dhondho Keshav Karve himself was the first principle of this college. But soon he left this post and appointed another person in his place because of his consecutive visits to different areas for collecting donations. People criticized this project and sometimes it was declared even a failed project, but it was the result of Professor Karve's tireless efforts that it is still there in the service of knowledge in India. After sometimes another school, Shrimati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Kanyashala, was founded in Bombay and soon an already established school was also affiliated with S.N.D.T University. In 1920, another school was founded in Satara as well. The Gujrat Mahila Pathashala was founded and affiliated with Baroda

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University in 1920. Mahila Vidyalaya of Surat and Maharani Girl's High School were affiliated with this university in 1922. Another school was founded in Bhavnagar in 1925 and was affiliated to this university in 1927. In these schools, widows and girls from remote and poor areas were preferred.

They were not only offered courses on regular basis but those women who wanted to study privately were also allowed to appear in exam and to continue their studies at higher level. All these schools were established just within five years. In 1936, Karve established 'Maharashtra village Primary Education Society' which aimed to establish primary schools in those villages where there are no government schools. In 1944, he founded another association named Samata Sangh. This was his effort to promote equality in the society.<sup>285</sup> Due to these efforts, professor

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<sup>285</sup> Reformers of India [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/.../wiki/social\\_reformers\\_of\\_India.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/.../wiki/social_reformers_of_India.html). Retrieved on September 21, 2018



Karve had become now a famous public figure so much so that in the year 1918, different groups celebrated his 61<sup>st</sup> birthday with paying gratitude to him.<sup>286</sup>

Even after the death of Dhondho Keshav Karve, his sons carried his mission of public welfare. His elder son Ragunath became a great supporter of family planning, population control and women rights in his times. He was also a professor of mathematics like his father. He even had to leave his job due to his revolutionary ideas but like his father he stood firmly with what he aimed. The ‘Appropriate Rural Technology Institute’, is established under the leadership of A.D. Karve in 1996, with the help of his fellow scientists, technologists, and a group of social reformers. A.D. Karve is the grandson of Dhondho Keshav Karve. With the establishment of this institution, he aimed to provide technical education and techniques of establishing new businesses to the people of rural areas. After getting support from national and international level, the institution has

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successfully completed almost fifty projects in different rural areas of India. A.D. Karve’s mother was a sociologist and an anthropologist of her times. He founded this institution with a great support from his family and children. His daughter Dr. Priyadarshini Karve, was there with him at the time of its inauguration. Initially it was not specific for women but later on special courses were also started to train rural women in different areas of professional life such as health, family and agricultural production.<sup>287</sup> ‘Karve Institute of Social Service’, celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013. It was established in 1963 and is still providing services to the people especially women of rural areas. Karve Nagar community center is another institution that was initially founded as a

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<sup>286</sup> Chandavarkar., G.L. *Dhondho Keshav Karve*. (Publicatio Division, Ministry of Publication and Broadcasting, New Delhi, India: 1970) [https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Dhondho\\_Keshav\\_Karve.html](https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Dhondho_Keshav_Karve.html)? Retrieved on September 14, 2018

<sup>287</sup> Osnes, Beth., *Theatre for women’s participation in sustainable Development*. (Routledge, London: 2013)1<sup>st</sup> ed. P. 104-108. <https://www.books.google.com.pk/books?isbn=1136728465>. Retrieved on September 13, 2018

pre-school but on the demand of the people was changed into a center. Now along with providing education to children, it is also a community center which facilitates the public of rural areas in different walks of life such as Family counseling center, Center for development of appropriate trade skills and guideline. They provide financial and legal help to women and children, preferably those who belong to villages, in getting solution of their problems.

Along with men the women of Karve family have also been prominent ladies on the scene of India. The name of Irawati Karve is important in this regard. She was the Daughter-in-Law of Dhondho Keshav Karve and wife of his son Dinkar, who was an educationist and the principle of Fergusson College in his times. Carrying the legacy of his family, their son Anand, also involved in welfare activities and ran an NGO named Arti. Their daughters were well known writers of their times.

One of Dhondho's grand-daughter Nandini Nimbkar, is a distinguished alumni of The University of Florida USA. Dr. Priyadarshini Karve, is a scientist and working on developing bio-technology

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programs in rural areas since 1991.<sup>288</sup> These people from Dhondho Keshav Karve's family set a living example of how women are encouraged and supported in Karve family. They proved that how educated women are important for the better development of their society. Although women are still facing a lot of problems in India and cruel traditions are still a hinderance in their way of progress and development, but it is a fact that Dhondho Keshav karve and other people like him played their role as a ray of light in the darkness. He not only himself struggled hard but paved the

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<sup>288</sup> Mondal, Puja., *Biography of Irawati Karve and her Contributions towards Sociology*.  
[www.yourarticlelibrary.com/sociology/biography-of-irawati-karve-and-his-contribution-towards-Sociology/35023](http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/sociology/biography-of-irawati-karve-and-his-contribution-towards-Sociology/35023). Retrieved on September 18, 2018

way for others as well to move forward. He gave a voice to oppressed women and made them to know and stand for their rights in the world. His efforts should be appreciated because he fought against those issues about which no one could even thought to talk about.

### 3.2. Pandurang Shastri Athavale

Pandurang Shastri Athavale is another notable figure among the social reformers of contemporary period of Hindu society. He is famous as a religious personality, a philosopher, a spiritual leader, and a social reformer. Along with many other welfare activities, he was also much concerned about the participation of women in religious and social affairs on equal basis for the development of society. Due to his special religious status, he is also known with the title of Dada Ji. Like many other reformers he was also against the cast system in Hindu society and believed that everyone has equal rights to enjoy his or her life and that Religion is for everyone.

#### 3.2.1. Life History of Pandurang Shastri Athavale

Pandurang Shastri Athavale was born on October 19, 1920, in the village of Roha, in Maharashtra state, near the city of Bombay. He belonged to a religious minded Brahman family in the area. He had five brothers and sisters. His grandfather, Lukshman Rao, was a famous teacher of Gita in his

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village and neighboring areas. He was known to impart the teachings of Gita to the lower casts of the society. His father Vijainath Athavale was also a teacher of Sanskrit. Pandurang was observing the practice of his grandfather since his childhood that he used to go to the areas where lower casts Hindus, Dallat<sup>289</sup>, lived with a belief that God's words are for everyone. But being the member of a higher cast, he used to take bath after coming back home. This raised questions in the mind of

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<sup>289</sup> The lowest cast among Hindus, declared as 'untouchables' by the higher casts

young Pandurang. He had heard in his home that God has sent His message for everyone, and that God lives in the heart of every person. That is why it is necessary to convey it to every human being. So, if God does not discriminate among all human Beings, why we humans become impure after touching some of them? Why it is so that some are considered as inferior to others? His grandfather had established a school for the study of Gita, Upanishads, and Sanskrit language in his village. Pandurang also joined this school and completed his early education there according to the practice of that time. This also developed a feeling of religious affection in the heart of Pandurang. He had also started delivering lectures on Bhagvad Gita at the age of 22 in the school of his grandfather. After that he also learned in Royal Asiatic Library for 14 years and became an expert of non-fiction literature. In 1954 he attended second World Philosophers Conference in Japan where he presented Vedic philosophy and the ideas of Gita. This presentation was highly appreciated as he explained the philosophy of Lord Krishna in relation to economics, psychology and politics and presented Hinduism there as a practical philosophy. After that he was invited to stay in America for five years as a state guest and got an offer to work there in the field of philosophy, but Pandurang refused and preferred to stay and work in his homeland, India.<sup>290</sup> He travelled many times to America but spent most of the time in India. He spent whole of his life as

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a reformist in his country and worked for public welfare through Sawadhiya movement<sup>291</sup>. He passed away on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2003 at the age of 83 after a cardiac arrest in Mumbai. The news of his death was the leading story of Indian newspapers of 26<sup>th</sup> October 2003. The then prime minister

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<sup>290</sup> Pandurang Shastri Athavale Profile <https://www.veethi.com/india-people/pandurang-shastri-athavale-profile-3734-20.htm>. Retrieved on October 5, 2018

<sup>291</sup> Details of this movement will be given in coming pages <sup>309</sup>

“Shastri Athavale Dead”, The Hindu, *Natinal*. October 26, 2003

<sup>310</sup> The elder sister in Hindi language

of India Mr. Atal Bihari Wajpai expressed his grievances on hearing the news of his death.<sup>309</sup> He had also received highest awards at national level at different times in acceptance of his services for the uplifting of Indian society such as Roman Magsaysay award for community leadership in 1996, \$ 1.2 million Templeton Award in 1997 and in 1998 with Padma Vibhushan award for his efforts of bringing sociocultural change in the society.

His wife Nirmala Tai also known as Maan by the followers of his movement, also supported him and participated actively in welfare activities launched by her husband through this movement. After the death of Pandurang Shastri Athavale, she started living in one of the centers of the movement and taught female followers. She passed away in her residence at the age of 90 in January 2017. As far as his children are concerned, records tell about only one daughter of Pandurang Shastri Athavale and Nirmala Tai named Jayshree Talwalker. She is known with the title of Didi among the members of the movement. She is believed to be a social reformer and a spiritual leader and a personality who is carrying the mission of Pandurang Shastri Athavale after him. She leads the organization, delivers lectures, and has represented the movement at different forums all over the world. Her real name is Dhanashree Shreenawas Talwalker, who is famous with the title of Didi<sup>310</sup>, among her followers. She got direct training from her father and the founder of Swadhiya Pariwar and became the head of movement after his death. She studied art, music and military disciplines as early school education and completed her Masters, degree in Philosophy

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from Elphinston College of Mumbai University.<sup>292</sup> She started her practical life as a lecturer of philosophy but soon joined her father and since that time committed herself totally to the organization. Soon she became a popular figure of the organization due to her loving and

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<sup>292</sup> [www.worldsreligionsafter911.com/pdf/Didi's%20biography.pdf](http://www.worldsreligionsafter911.com/pdf/Didi's%20biography.pdf). Retrieved on November 2, 2018

harmonious nature especially among the youth of rural areas. She has presented Sawadhiya movement and its philosophy at different forums such as:

- She spoke at an International Colloquim on Environment at Montreal Canada.
- Attended the Parliament of World's Religions at Chicago USA.
- Presented her movement in Brussels in a seminar regarding the issues of hunger and poverty.
- Delivered a presentation in Hague about role of religion in promoting peace.
- She was invited by the Pope John Paul 2 in Vetican City, Rome, to participate in inter-Religious dialogue held in Pontifical council<sup>293</sup>.
- She also presented a speech at UNICEF in a special gathering arranged by UNO in New York.
- She participated in an Inter-Faith meeting held in London by Focolare movement<sup>313</sup>.
- She is also a member of Governing Council of Arigatou Foundation Tokyo, initiated to promote ethical education to the children of the world. This was arranged in association to UNICEF.

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<sup>293</sup> The Pontifical Councils are a group of several mid-sized sub-groups, each lead by a cardinal or archbishop as president which are part of larger organization called the Roman Curia. The Roman Curia is charged with helping the Pope in his governance and oversight of the Roman Catholic Church <sup>313</sup> It is an international movement that promotes the ideas of unity and universal brotherhood

### 3.2.2. The movement of Swadhiya Pariwar

Pandurang Shastri Athavale launched the movement of Swadhiya Pariwar with a purpose of promoting peace, harmony, love, and equality among the people. It was launched in the beginning of 1950s when Pandurang was thinking of developing an ideal society. In order to understand the philosophy behind establishing Swadhiya Pariwar movement, it is important to know about the ideas of Pandurang Shastri Athavale regarding religion, spirituality and human society. He was a person who always thought about the people and life around him. When he went to Japan to attend the World Philosophers Conference, he was thinking about the loss of human lives in World War II and the throwing of atomic bomb on two cities there. More than that he used to ask questions from himself about the life and purpose of existence. Especially after receiving the invitation from America, he started thinking who am I? Why I came to this world? What should I do while living here? After thinking a lot, he reached to the conclusion that the answer to these questions lies in true understanding of religion and religion teaches to serve humanity. He observed that people in his own country needed him the most. He decided to stay in his homeland and preferred to teach the message of Gita to his people. He believed that humanity has gone away from the teachings of Bhagwat Gita and Vedic traditions and being the member of a family who is bestowed with the knowledge of Gita it is his responsibility to guide the public towards the right path.<sup>294</sup> He also felt sad because of the poor social conditions, poverty and that basic facilities of life are not available

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<sup>294</sup> Kher, Rajandra., *The Silent Reformer: A biographical Novel*.

<https://archive.com/details/SilentReformerRajendraKher>. P. 12-14, Retrieved on November 5, 2018

to everyone in Indian society. More than that, he observed that instead of turning towards religion, people have started criticizing it. His grandfather had a traditional mind set and because of this,

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refused to send him to any other school established by the British Government. He himself had studied according to the traditional way of teaching and trained his children in the same way.

He also wanted his grandchildren to grow up in the same manner. Pandurang's parents were living in Mumbai where his father was running a Pathshala.<sup>295</sup> Pandurang got his early education according to Tapovan system<sup>296</sup> of education while living with his grandfather and grandmother, who were known as religious minded people in their village. They also had a small worship place at home where they worshipped goddess Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and intellect. His grandfather was also known for his patriotic speeches and following the way of Gandhi.<sup>297</sup> He used to narrate the story of the great grandfather to Pandurang, who had attained Samadhi after spending all his money for the welfare of his fellow villagers. Pandurang always fascinated and felt proud of his family and ancestors on hearing this story. He was a brilliant student at school as well. In this way he not only received his early religious education from his grandparents but also inherited patriotism, respect for Religion and love for humanity from them.

After the death of his grandparents, he came to Mumbai along with his parents and got admission in a school near to their home. Everyone in the family and friends had the opinion that Pandurang

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<sup>295</sup> A traditional Hindu school where children are taught in Sanskrit by Brahmins

<sup>296</sup> The traditional way of teaching in Hindu society where kids are taught Sanskrit language along with Vayakaran and Nayaya (two of six shastras)

<sup>297</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was an Indian lawyer, social activist, religious and political leader, and a writer who became the leader of the nationalist movement against the British rule of India. He was the head of Indian National Congress till his death



should go for ICS; Indian Civil Service exam, but he was interested in doing something different. That was working for the revival of Vedic culture and the people of India. Till the age of 14 he had started thinking about the plight of public in his village and in the big city of Mumbai. He was also much concerned regarding the plight of young girls, who were married in tender ages and then had to bear all types of consequences of their marriages. His elder sister had also died while

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facing such problems, and this had compelled Pandurang to think over such social issues. He decided to go back to his native village Rohe, and to continue his education in a traditional way according to the will of his grandfather instead of preparing for ICS exam. He studied Sanskrit language and grammar along with Vedanta, Vayakaran and Nayaya in the newly established pathshala by his father in his village.<sup>298</sup> The distinguishing quality of this Pathshala was that along with Sanskrit language, English was also taught here. It was because of this reason that soon it became a popular Pathshala among the public. In this way a new education system was introduced in the area and Pandurang was the first student to register here. In the meanwhile, he had also developed interest in Western literature and philosophy. After completing his education at Pathshala, he shifted permanently to live in Mumbai with his parents and started visiting libraries in the big city to study Will Durant and Shakespeare. He was also very much interested in games and was popular as a good player among his classmates. Traditional games like Kabaddi were his favorites. He was also a good swimmer in his youth times. Once he attended a marriage ceremony and got much disturbed to see that rich people are wasting the food while the poor and lower casts are standing outside the temple, waiting for the leftover food items as they were not allowed to

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<sup>298</sup> Kher, Rajendra., *The Silent Reformer: A biographical Novel*.

<https://archive.com/details/SilentReformerRajendraKher>, P. 104, Retrieved on November 10, 2018

enter inside. This made him to think seriously about the deprived classes of his society.<sup>299</sup> The breaking out of second world war was another incident that influenced his thoughts deeply. As a result of this influence, he started taking interest in politics of his times. He was continuously thinking about the sufferings of humanity in his country because of international politics and wars. Then, one day, standing on the place where his great grandfather had attained Samadhi, he made a promise to himself. That is to bring a change in his society, to fight against inhuman customs, to

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convey the message of Vedas to whole humanity and to fulfill the dreams of his grandfather through this. His father also demanded from him to deliver discourses on Vedas and Upanishads, carrying the legacy of his family. So, Pandurang delivered his first lecture on Bhagwat Gita when he was just twenty-two years old. He was also greatly interested in the politics of India after worldwar 2, and also attended the Convention arranged by all India Congress Committee in 1942 headed by Mulana Abu-l-Kalam Azad<sup>300</sup> demanding the British government to leave India. In 1944 he got married to Nirmalatai. It is also interesting to note in his biography that he was a great admirer of Dhondho Keshav Karve. His younger sister was also married in Karve family. At the age of thirty he had developed heart problem as well. His father was suffering with severe form of diabetes and younger brother was still jobless. In these circumstances all family responsibilities also fell on him. During these times he was also facing financial crisis but never accepted any offer of getting help from anyone. Till the age of thirty-three he had become famous for his religious discourses and was known with the title of Shastriji.

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid

<sup>300</sup> Maulana Sayyid Abul Kalam Ghulam Muhuyyuddin Ahmad bin Khair-ud-Din Al-Hussaini Azad was an Indian scholar and senior leader of the Indian National Congress during the Indian Independence movement

All this education and environment in which he was brought up, compelled him to take a firm decision to stay in his own country and to serve his nation. He planned to solve social issues of his society in the light of teachings of Gita. He was much concerned about the cast system prevailing in Hindu society, the condition of lower casts and women. In other words, he believed that religion could help humanity to solve all kinds of social problems. By applying the rules of religion, human beings can make their societies a better place to live in. So, establishment of a society where all are spending their lives with full contentment was the main purpose behind the movement of Swadhiya Pariwar. He picked out this name from Upanishads, which is a Divine concept.

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According to him, Swadhiyay means “Study of the Self”. Not only Upanishads but Bhagvat-Gita also carries the same concept. Swadhiyay is the practical form of Gita. Pandurang explained Swadhiyay by saying that human ego and material desires, when blended, make the self-impure. When a person controls his ego and keeps himself away from worldly desires, he becomes closer to the Divine. In other words, he enters the state of Swadhiyay.<sup>301</sup> After attending the International Conference in Japan Pandurang had planned an ideal society with the name of Swadhiyay Pariwar, as discussed earlier. He had also discussed it with his wife, Nirmalatai, who had already agreed to support him in all his projects. He started it in Maharashtra India, in 1954, with delivering discourses on Bhagwad-Gita, Upanishads and Vedas. He asked the people to focus upon selfdevelopment and promoting discipline within themselves through the philosophy of religion. After a hard struggle of forty-two years, when he was awarded with Tempton award in 1997, Swadhiyay Pariwar had become a famous movement all over the world carrying the idea of

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<sup>301</sup> Kher, Rajandra., *The Silent Reformer: A biographical Novel*.  
<https://archive.com/details/SilentReformerRajendraKher>. P. 209, Retrieved on November 5, 2018

universal brotherhood. It shows that the ideology promoted by Pandurang Shastri was not for Hindus only, but the doors of his movement were open for everyone. He believed that by changing human beings, the whole world can be changed. Religion eliminates differences among humanity. Thus, Pandurang Athavale promoted equality and respect for humanity. Three main issues are the major areas of Swadhiyay.

1. Caste system
2. Religious discrimination and 3. Gender inequality.

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Pandurang taught the equal distribution of wealth in human society which means everything for everyone. For this he preached the notion of presence of Divine in every person. In other words, God is everywhere in this world and even inside us. He instigated everyone to do good for human society. The religiosity of a person should be reflected through his actions. In this way Swadhiyay presents a beautiful picture with a blend of spiritualism and materialism.

In 2015, a symposium on Development Management Pathways towards good society was organized by Development Management Institute at Bihar, where Jayshree Talwalker Didi, daughter of Pandurang Shastri Athavale and the current head of Swadhiyay Pariwar, participated as the chief guest. Being the head of the movement and the chief representative, she described some important beliefs of the movement one by one in a very comprehensive way. They are:

1. **Bhaktipheri:** Through this concept, Pandurang Shastri preached that the members of Swadhiyay Pariwar movement should make the people aware of the fact that when they commit sins, the essence of God in their heart feels offended. They visit from village to village and talk about good and bad with the public. If this visit is not too long and the

group consists of two or three members only then it a Bhaktipheri and if the number of group members is at least ten and they stay in a village for more than two weeks, than this service is not considered less than a pilgrimage. This visit is known as teerthayatra, in terms of Swadhiyay Pariwar.

2. **Bhava-bhakti:** This is another important belief of Swadhiyay Pariwar introduced by Pandurang Shastri Athavale. The concept is created with combining two different terms bhava which means “Being” or “Worldly Existence” and bhakti stands for “Total devotion”, “attachment” and “association”. While Pandurang’s focus was humanity and human society, he presented them in a sense that when a person focuses upon himself, he focuses upon the Divine essence present inside him. It brings change in whole of his attitude and ultimately changes the whole society. In the words of Pandurang, it leads from ‘ego centric to god-centered behavior’.<sup>302</sup> He also used the term Adhyatma in the same meaning.
3. **Krti or Krtisil-bhakti:** This is another concept preached in accordance to Bhava-bhakti. It carries the message that whatever skill, time, money, or talent a person has, he should devote it totally to God and should use it to spread the message of God according to His will.
4. **Yogeshwar-Krti:** Agriculture is the popular profession of Sub-Continent since centuries. Till today majority of Indian rural population is associated with agriculture and farming. Those, who have the skill of farming, provide their services voluntarily, to work on the land purchased by Swadhiyay movement. They all work for two days a week for their collective

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<sup>302</sup> Rukmani, T.S., *Turmoil, Hope and The Swadhiyay*.

[https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s\\_es/s\\_es\\_rukma\\_hope\\_frameset.htm](https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_rukma_hope_frameset.htm). Retrieved on November 20, 2018

interest. Growing crops and plantation of fruit trees is special focus of this agricultural activity. These farmers are known as pujaris in these days as they also teach in local temples. They also perform the duty to teach some prayers to everyone especially women and the members of lower cast. Here it is also important that everyone is allowed rather invited in the temples, that are run by the movement of Swadhiyay Pariwar, to study Gita and offer their worships.

5. **Amrtalayams:** Swadhiyay presented a function of temples other than worships, that is to use them as community centers as well for the local areas. All members of Swadhiyay gather in temple, offer worships and at the end give some amount of money for collective

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use in their organization. This amount is given to the poor and needy members of the society, which helps them to fulfil their needs or to establish businesses to generate their earnings. This money is also known as *parsad* according to the interpretation given by Pandurang.<sup>303</sup> The term ‘*apauruseya Laksmi*’ is also used for this amount that is collected for this purpose. To protect the self-respect of a person, it is not told, to whom this money is given. Due to this support Swadhiyay has become the most popular organization among the poor communities of the society.

### 3.2.3. Swadhiyay and women welfare

Here it is important to note that women also participate in all types of activities of Swadhiyay, as they consider that all are the part of one larger human family without any gender discrimination or differences due to cast, religion, or race. Women members of Swadhiyay Pariwar also offer their

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<sup>303</sup> Rukmani, T.S., *Turmoil, Hope and The Swadhiyay*.

[https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s\\_es/s\\_es\\_rukma\\_home\\_frameset.htm](https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_rukma_home_frameset.htm), Retrieved on November 20, 2018

services inside the temples as pujaris. It shows that women can lead worships and can become religious teachers according to the ideology of Swadhiyay Pariwar. This has brought a great change in the lives of women in remote areas. They are also sent to other villages on preaching tours and serve as workers outside their homes. Many women have become independent, running their own businesses, and even supporting their families. A researcher observed the effects of Swadhiyay activities on the lives of lower cast village women and told the story of a woman, Pushpa Behn. Being the member of a lower cast, she was not allowed to touch and read from Gita but due to Swadhiyayees, now she has learnt many prayers by heart and has the knowledge of many religious teachings as well. Another woman of Vaghri community of Indian Gujrat tells about her experience of attending Swadhiya meetings continuously for ten years. She said that

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they know about life, their social behavior while living together in one society and family. She can now handle her family matters in a much better way. People, who attend these lectures regularly do not get involved in criminal activities rather most of them have adopted a respectable and virtuous way of life.<sup>304</sup> Special platform is provided to women through developing centers for them in the name of Behna Kandra<sup>305</sup>. Here women meet each other and discuss their problems. These centers are run by the women of Swadiyay movement. They provide practical and moral support to women who come to these centers and ask for help. They not only provide skillful training to

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<sup>304</sup> Wiowode, Christoph., *Transcendence and Spirituality: Human needs and the Practices of Indian Swadhiyay Movement*. (2013), Journal of Developing societies (3). Vol: 29. DOI: 10.1177/0169796X13494275. P. 237. [www.igcs-chennai.rwth-aachen.de/.../Christoph-Woiwode\\_publications-April-2017.p...](http://www.igcs-chennai.rwth-aachen.de/.../Christoph-Woiwode_publications-April-2017.p...) Retrieved on November 24, 2018

<sup>305</sup> 'Behna' stands for sister and 'Kendra' means center <sup>326</sup>  
Irma, K.V.Raju., *Swadhiyay efforts for Development*.

Casestudies10.weebly.com/uploads/9/0/0/2/9002260/swadhaya.pdf. Retrieved on November 24, 2018

the village women but also give financial support to them when required. It is reported that in all those villages where Swadhiyay is an active force, beating wives has become a condemnable act.<sup>326</sup> No doubt that Swadhiyay has become an active force in many poor villages of India, but it is also noticeable that it is a purely private association which has established itself with the help of its members only. They offer donations and skills to the organization which is a larger family for them. The focus of Swadhiyay Pariwar is to make the social life better. For this purpose, they initiate many projects on their own and mobilize the local community through religious teachings. Pujaris teach the people to focus upon themselves and bring out their positive qualities to uplift their social status. The change at individual level results in a greater change in the society at collective level.

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In 1995, a report was published regarding the welfare activities of Swadhiyay movement, where it was stated that those engineers and technicians who are also the members of this movement, engaged the local public and used rainwater for harvesting. They also cleaned up the local wells and told the people about the importance of cleanliness. Special classes are arranged for women and children as well for personality grooming. In short, Swadhiyay is a movement that focuses upon both spiritual and material development of a person.

Education is another important area where Swadhiyay has focused a lot. Pandurang Shastri, himself was the product of a traditional educational system along with the study of English language and writings of modern thinkers. He presented the concept that the modern educational system just tells the ways of earning money, it is not concerned with producing healthy, responsible, and sensitive brains. Worldly education should be given in the light of religion. Only



then, this education will become a source to enlighten the individuals spiritually and they will implement their knowledge in their practical lives. Thus, the educational institutions developed by Swadhiyay movement introduce a different system, known as Tapovan Vaidic System. Main idea of this system is ‘Self Concept’, which gives the ideology of having confidence in one’s ownself. A person should believe in his own qualities, and he should know that he is presenting himself in front of the world along with these qualities. He should focus upon himself and should develop his personality through enhancing these attributes. Every person gradually learns how he can become the acceptable one in his society. Everyone avoids being condemned, to be disliked and to get a lower place in the society. As a result, he focuses to enhance his good qualities and ultimately a good society is established. The education system, that is Tapovan Vaidic System, propagates this education system as they believe that a person should also think about his spiritual growth along with his physical growth. A research conducted on this education system concluded that members of Swadhiyay movement are more confident, more disciplined, more concerned about their families, more responsible towards their conduct in the society, more contented and emotionally more mature as compared to those who have never been the members of Swadhiyay Pariwar.<sup>306</sup> Swadhiyay is not limited to India only. Indian immigrants took this movement to different parts of the world wherever they went. The movement is popular among Hindu community in America, Canada, Australia, England, and Europe as well.

But along with its supporters, Swadhiyay also has many critics. Especially when Pandurang Shastri appointed her daughter, Jayshri Talwalker as the head of the movement after him. Her opponents

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<sup>306</sup> Shinde., V.R, Warkhede., P.S, *Self-Concept Among the Students of Informal and Formal Educational System*. Int. j. Indian psychol. ISSN: 2349-34299. P (2017), vol: 4 (3) ISSN: 2348-5396 (e). P.10. Retrieved on November 24, 2018

believe that she is interested in getting hold of movement's wealth and donations rather than promoting its message and purpose. A group of members left the movement after the death of Pandurang. One of these members accused their leadership of corruption and illegal use of the donations, collected for rehabilitation of the people in Indian Gujrat, from United States and United Kingdom. It is told that this person was killed by some Swadhiyayees after some time of these allegations. It is also said that changes have been made in the biography of Pandurang Shastri Athavale, to present him as a heavenly creature. Many incidents that are recorded today as the real happenings of his life history, are mere stories, according to this group. In short, the movement has lost its status as a reliable welfare organization due to these allegations.

### 3.3. Shri Ram Sharma Achariya

Pandit Shri Ram Sharma Achariya is another famous personality among the socio-religious reformists of 20<sup>th</sup> century who worked for women welfare in the light of religious teachings. He

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was born on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1911 in Anvalkheda, district Agra India. Being a religious scholar and teacher, he became famous with the title of Pandit. He belonged to a religious, Brahmin family.

His father, Pandit Roopramkishore Sharma, was also a Pandit and a religious scholar of his time. It was due to this religious environment that Sharma Achariya was inclined towards religion since his childhood. He was the youngest among his four brothers. He wrote his autobiography in 1989, which was translated into English and reprinted in 2011, through which he tells about himself that he was always interested in knowing the ways of attaining enlightenment 'Siddhi' through meditation, religious practices, and worships 'Sadhana'. His father used to deliver lectures on Bhagvat Gita and most oftenly, Sharma Achariya also joined him. It was because of this religious environment that he had learnt Gita since his early age. Madan Mohan Malviya, a religious

personality, a friend of Achariya's father and the founder of Banaras Hindu university was his first guru or religious teacher. He received his early education in a local primary school along with learning Sanskrit language as it was considered necessary for the children of Brahmins to get good knowledge of religion.<sup>307</sup> He got his M.A, degree also in Sanskrit. He had also visited some famous ashrams of his time including Sri Aurobindo ashram at Pondicherry. He got married to Bhagvati Devi Sharma from whom he had four children. Two sons and two daughters. He was always a kind-hearted person and loved humanity. In his childhood, he took care of a lady of lower cast who worked as sweepress in the homes of Brahmins. When she fell ill, and no one was willing to look after her as she was a Dallat, Achariya used to go to her house to see her. Similarly, according to an incident of his childhood, once he left his house and said that his real home is far away in the Himalayas. He was very punctual in his daily worships and religious practices.

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#### 3.3.1. Meeting with Spiritual Guru

Although Shri Ram Sharma Achariya was receiving religious education from his guru Malviyaji, but he talks about another incident of his life in which he received Divine guidance through a spiritual being when he was sitting in his house. According to him, it was fifteenth year of his life when an unknown being who claimed to be with him in his previous births, appeared in front of him. He had not seen him before and did not know who he was but after this first meeting Sharma Achariya realized that this was his Divine Guru, who appeared to show him the path of enlightenment. He appeared from among the lights and disappeared in the form of these rays of lights. His real name was Sarveshvarananandji Maharaj, who had left this material world after

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<sup>307</sup> Achariya, Shri Ram Sharma., *My Life and its Legacy and Message* (2011). Yog Nirman Yojana Vistar Trust Gayatri Tapobhumi Mathura-281003

[https://archive.org/details/MyLifeAndItsLegacyAndMessage\\_201806/page/n19](https://archive.org/details/MyLifeAndItsLegacyAndMessage_201806/page/n19). P.21

getting enlightenment and started living in Himalayas in the form of an enlightened spirit. It is told that he is living in a mountain region of Himalayas from the previous six hundred and fifty-one years and still resides there.<sup>308</sup> Shriram Sharma Achariya uses the name of Gurudev and Devatma for this spiritual being whenever he talks about him in his autobiography. He also saw some incidents from his previous three births with the help of this guru and knew how this guru helped him at certain times in these births. When Shri Sharma Achariya was in a state of confusion about this spiritual being that who is he and why he has appeared to him, described him the reason and said that due to the religious knowledge, he had, Sharma Achariya is the right person to become a medium between the Divine and humanity. When a true devotee has reached to a special level of spirituality by making his heart and soul pure through worships and religious knowledge, then a time comes when this devotee does not look for a guru, but gurus find him themselves because they always appear in front of such true devotees. Gurus show them the right path which they should follow in their spiritual journey. They also save them from the hinderances and obstacles

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in this way.<sup>309</sup> Similarly, guru dev told him that world is in the times of troubles as the evil forces of darkness are working for the destruction of humanity. The Divine wants to save the humanity and for this purpose intends to take a physical being, living in this world, as his messenger, to convey His message to humanity. According to guru dev, it is not possible for him to appear in front of everyone in spiritual form and that is why he wants one from among the human beings to

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<sup>308</sup> Veda Incarnate and Great Yogi Shri Ram Sharma Achariya by Ashok. N. Rawal [www.shriramsharma.com/chapters\\_1\\_2\\_3.htm](http://www.shriramsharma.com/chapters_1_2_3.htm). Retrieved on December 21, 2018

<sup>309</sup> Guidelines by Gurudev about my future life of action.

literature.awgp.org/akhandjyoti/2003/Sept\_Oct/Guidelines\_byGurudev/. Retrieved on December 18, 2018

<sup>331</sup> Achariya, Shri Ram Sharma., *My Life and its Legacy and Message* (2011). Yog Nirman Yojana Vistar Trust Gayatri Tapobhumi Mathura-281003.

[https://archive.org/details/MyLifeAndItsLegacyAndMessage\\_201806/page/n19](https://archive.org/details/MyLifeAndItsLegacyAndMessage_201806/page/n19). P.23

take this responsibility and stand with the cause of saving the humanity with the help of Divine guidance that he will receive through guru dev.<sup>331</sup> He also appreciated Achariya for being married because according to him a married person can fulfil the Divine tasks in a better way. He gave the examples of different variations of Divine and said that they always had their consorts with them as the female essence is necessary for the successful accomplishment of different tasks in this world. After this first meeting with his spiritual guru, Sharma Achariya writes that all his doubts and confusions were erased from his mind and his inner self became as much contented as it could be. He never thought about doing any other thing in this world except that of what was told to him by guru dev. He was also given some instructions to fulfil his own spiritual needs and to make himself strong enough to overcome the hinderances in his way to serve the humanity. He had to think for whole of the humanity since that day, along with getting inner spiritual strength for himself. These instructions which were specific for him and were declared as compulsory for him by guru dev to follow are:

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1. Performing twenty-four mahapurascaranas of Gayatri<sup>310</sup> in twenty-four years.
  2. Installing a Ghrit lamp that should be kept lighted without any interruption
  3. Coming to Himalayas to receive guidelines from guru dev.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Related to chanting of Gayatri Mantra associated to Goddess Gayatri (Gayatri Devi). A devotee chants Gayatri Mantra 3000 times, on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Navarati, in a meditation of four hours, taking a very light diet of barley bread and buttermilk to attain the highest level of spirituality and illumination. The process is completed in twenty-four years. It is a popular mantra of Rig Veda and japa of this mantra is something popular in Bhagvad Gita and Manusmriti as well. It is chanted usually at the time of thread binding ceremony of young Hindu boys. But now a-days it is popular among women as well <sup>333</sup> Emergence and Leadership of Yug Nirman Movement.

Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/10603/18074/6/07\_chapter%203.pdf. Retrieved on December 20, 2018

Along with these there were some other instructions as well such as writing as much books as possible to spread the Divine message among humanity on a large scale, participating practically in the freedom movement of India, having his appearance of a rishi, and keeping a minimum level of worldly contact with the people around him, even with his own family members.<sup>311</sup>

Shri Ram Sharma Achariya followed all these instructions strictly as they were necessary to be followed for his personal grooming as a religious saint. According to him, he established a worldwide movement of Gayatri Pariwar in the light of these instructions. He visited Himalayas four times after completing the twenty-four mahapurascaranas of Gayatri mantra in the presence of a lighted Ghrit Lamp from 1926 to 1953. During his absence, his wife Bhagwati Devi worked as the head of the movement but before discussing this movement it is important to know about the political aspect of Sharma Achariya's life because it is also an important part of his biographical study. In 1990, he decided to leave his physical body and at last on 2<sup>nd</sup> June of the same year his soul was released to the metaphysical world.

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### 3.3.2. Shri Ram Sharma Achariya as a politician and writer

Shri Ram Sharma Achariya has produced a lot of written material related to religion, spirituality, and meditation. It is said that total number of his books is more than 3000. Most of these were written in Hindi but are translated in ten local languages of India as well as in English. Most of these publications are available at the headquarter of the movement, Shantikunj Hardwar as well

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<sup>311</sup> The story of Shri Ram Sharma Achariya, how he participated in the politics of his times as a freedom fighter against the British government, is told on page no: 24 of this chapter

as published online. ‘*The Super science of Gayatri*’ is the famous book among the writings of Sharma Achariya, through which he explains the special status of recitation of gayatri mantra in Hindu worships. Monthly journals such as *Akhand Jyoti*, *Yug Nirman Yojna* and *Yug Shakti Gayatri* are also published with a purpose of propagating the ideas of Sharma Achariya and his movement.<sup>312</sup> Among these, *Akhand Jyoti* is the most popular magazine of All World Gayatri Pariwar. Shri Ram Sharma Achariya himself launched it in 1938. It is published in more than seven local languages every month and has got the status of a popular magazine of India. Even those who are not associated to this movement like to read it because of its informative features on science and spirituality.

The records of Sharma Achariya’s life tell that he was always interested in happenings around him. 20<sup>th</sup> century was the time when Indians had started their freedom struggle against the colonial rule of British. Different movements were launched at that time against the British government. Sharma Achariya belonged to a religious family whose members were least interested in political activities. But knowing the fact that everyone in the family was against his decision, he joined the noncooperation movement<sup>336</sup> launched by Indian National Congress<sup>313</sup> under the leadership of

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Gandhiji. He participated in the freedom movement of India for ten years. Being the worker of Indian National Congress, he was also sent to jail, two times by the British government, but he took it as an opportunity to provide religious education to the prisoners. He taught Sanskrit to the people there and started learning English language. After the partition of India, Shri Ram Sharma

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<sup>312</sup> Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/10603/139218/10/10\_chapter4.pdf. Retrieved on January 29, 2019 <sup>336</sup> It was launched in 1920 and lasted till 1922 against the British Government, as a symbol of non-violent independence movement from the people of India

<sup>313</sup> Indian National Congress is a famous political party of India, founded by a British officer Lord Hume in 1885. It remained the only representative political organization of Indians during their freedom struggle till the establishment of Muslim League in 1906

Acharya limited himself only towards the social, religious, and moral education of the people. He did not participate practically in the political activities of Congress after that. Its reason was that he was the follower of Gandhi and remained associated to congress till Gandhi was its leader but when the freedom movement was over, and Gandhi was assassinated, he left the party and kept himself limited to his religious, spiritual, and social welfare activities only. He followed Gandhi so much so that he even wore the same dress of Gandhi woven on khadi only. This was the only practice of congress that he continued till his death.

Shri Ram Sharma Acharya declared his offering of twenty-four purascaranas, participation in freedom movement, joining the All-Indian National Congress and writing and translating the religious materials in as many languages as possible, not something which he did by his own choice but a Divine demand indeed. The study of his life history tells that he spent whole of his life in fulfilling these tasks only. But along with these three, another fourth task was also there. It was, to organize the masses in the name of God and for this purpose he established Gayatri Pariwar. The ideology of Shri Ram Sharma Acharya is reflected through this organization in its practical form. That is why the study of the ideas of Sharma Acharya is not completed until the movement of Gayatri Pariwar is not studied.

### 3.3.3. Gayatri Pariwar

After completing his recitation of Gayatri Mantra for twenty-four years, Shri Ram Sharma Acharya established an organization in 1953 in India with the purpose of showing a new way to all human beings at individual and collective level. It also aimed to improve morality and ethical values of Indian society at social level. Like other reformers Sharma Acharya also presented a system that is above the cast, religion, race, and color among the human beings. The organization also gave new ideas to previous customs and practices prevailing in Indian society such as it



worked against the dowry system in India and taught the people that marriages can be conducted even without dowry. The organization put its best effort for elevated status of women in society as well. It supported to give them the equal status in all religious and spiritual activities. In its initial stage it was known as yug Nirman movement, which emerged in Gayatri Pariwar afterwards. As it appears from its name, the name was chosen according to the aim of the movement. 'Yug' means 'era' or 'a specific time period' in Hindi language while 'Nirman' is used in the meaning of something that is 'under construction'. In this sense the movement was given this name because it aimed to work for building a better society, a prosperous nation and the revival of ancient Hindu traditions that are in danger of elimination due to changing trends.

Pandit Shri Raam Sharma Achariya talked about change, but he presented the idea of 'good change'. According to him change is something necessary and natural in human societies and an individual should change with the changing circumstances around him. When an individual is changed, his family is changed, and through this way change appears in whole of the society. Thus, Shri Ram Sharma presented the idea of bringing change at collective level. But it is not a mere change. It should be turning something into good, that is why he has used the term 'formation' instead of 'change'. He explains that this formation takes place in three steps:

1. Individual formation
2. Family formation
3. Community formation/Society formation<sup>314</sup>

According to the explanation given by Shri Ram Sharma Achariya, individual is the key to social reformation. This formation should come with the religious and spiritual essence in it. For this

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<sup>314</sup> Kumar, Alok. J.K. Pundir., *Ideology of a Social Reform Movement: A study of 'Yug Nirman Movement' in India*. International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences. ISSN: 2278-6236, Vol.4, No. 12, December 2015. P. 6. [www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Dec2015/24.pdf](http://www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Dec2015/24.pdf)

purpose, Shri Ram Sharma introduced the way of Gayatri Yagya.<sup>315</sup> This Yagya is a strong tool for the spiritual upbringing of the members of the movement. Through this meditation the qualities of self-determination, righteousness and progressive attitude are incorporated in one's mind. It also conveys the ideas of what is intellectually and spiritually good for building up a good character. Because of focusing mainly upon the reformation of human mind, Shri Ram Sharma Achariya also used the name of 'Vichar Kranti Abhiyan'<sup>316</sup>, for his movement. As a result, the change appears in three ways:

1. Intellectual Revolution
2. Moral Revolution
3. Social Revolution<sup>317</sup>

The reason for the problems of mankind in modern world is that he has lost these three ways according to Shri Ram Sharma Achariya. Adopting these ways, incorporating the attributes of Devetva and the 'descendants of God on Earth'. By Devetva he means having the qualities of dev or guru dev in one's own self and by 'descendant of God', he means living the life like a special Being whose conduct shows that he is the representative of God on Earth. In short, to prepare a

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person to spend his life like a saint. Along with these Pandit Shri Ram Sharma also gave a whole procedure for this personal reformation. They are:

1. Upasana

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<sup>315</sup> Meditation with japa of Gayatri Mantra

<sup>316</sup> The Revolutionary movement of Thought

<sup>317</sup> Kumar, Alok. J.K. Pundir., *Ideology of a Social Reform Movement: A study of 'Yug Nirman Movement' in India*. International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences. ISSN: 2278-6236, Vol.4, No. 12, December 2015. P. 7. [www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Dec2015/24.pdf](http://www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Dec2015/24.pdf)

## 2. Sadhana

## 3. Aradhana

Upasana means that a person must take some time for remembering God out of his daily routine and the best way of remembering God is worship. The ways of Upasana according to Pandit Shri Ram Sharma are yagya and the offering of japa of Gayatri Mantra as these are the two most powerful ways of developing one's natural inner powers. The second step for this procedure is Sadhana, which means that a person should be disciplined in his overall conduct including his thoughts, actions, dealings and even spending the wealth he has got. To keep his mind away from evil thoughts is the discipline of mind and having firm belief in the omnipresence of God is the discipline of faith. Third step is Aradhana, which means that a person must spend some of his time and money for the welfare of his society. Man is associated to society and cannot live without it. Thus, not thinking about others and not doing something good for society is an act of selfishness which shows the lack of discipline in one's inner self. What is good for all is above all. The social benefit should be preferred over personal benefit.<sup>318</sup> Further details of all these rules are given in the writings of Shri Ram Sharma Achariya when he presents the idea of good for all, the reality of soul, self-realization, mind, intellect, and ultimate attitude of human being.<sup>319</sup>

Another important idea presented by Shri Ram Sharma Achariya is that he refused the traditional cast system in Indian society. He rejected the notion that a Brahman is one who is born in a

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Brahman family but every person who generates good karma, can become a Brahman according to his teachings. Brahmanism is not something inherited but a higher level of spirituality that can

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<sup>318</sup> Kumar, Alok. J.K. Pundir., *Ideology of a Social Reform Movement: A study of 'Yug Nirman Movement' in India*. International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences. ISSN: 2278-6236, Vol.4, No. 12, December 2015. P. 7-8. [www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Dec2015/24.pdf](http://www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Dec2015/24.pdf)

<sup>319</sup> Shri Ram Sharma Achariya, Pandit., *Who I am?* Publisher: Shantikunj, Hardwar, UP India 249411. P. 9

be attained the accumulation of good karma.<sup>320</sup> Due to this ideology Yug Nirman movement is always ready to accept everyone beyond the limits of religion and cast. Its doors are always open for everyone. Those who accept to be the members of this movement form Gayatri Pariwar.

#### 3.3.4. Shri Ram Sharma Achariya and women welfare

Along with religious and spiritual training of the people, Gayatri Pariwar also aims towards many social welfare activities for the public. Their efforts for elevated status of women and eradicating poverty and illiteracy from the society are notable in this regard. The very first step taken by the Pariwar is that Gayatri Mantra was made available to all males and females. The respect for female essence is the part of Gayatri Pariwar's members as they are the followers of Gayatri Devi or Gayatri Mata. The Mother Gayatri Temple, located inside the head office at Shantikunj is open for all pilgrims to visit and worship.<sup>321</sup> Since its establishment, the movement run a strong campaign against many customs and social traditions that are unjust to women such as child marriage, female infanticide, and dowry etc. Although these customs are not fully eradicated, but these campaigns got a country wide appreciation.

Shri Ram Sharma declared the 21<sup>st</sup> century the century of women and said that women are the leaders of this century. Due to his efforts, women are allowed to read religious literature and to worship Mother Gayatri. Through this movement, women are encouraged to become Prohit as well. Many women are leading the religious gatherings in their homes and giving religious education to their families specially to their daughters. Not only in the field of religion but Gayatri

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Pariwar is running a whole movement of women empowerment under which women are

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<sup>320</sup> Shri Ram Sharma Achariya, Pandit., *Who I am?* Publisher: Shantikunj, Hardwar, UP India 249411. P. 9

<sup>321</sup> Gayatri Tirth Shantikunj: philosophy and vision (English). Cdr – World Gayatri Pariwar  
[https://www.awgp.org/var/node/1071/Gayatri\\_Teerth\\_Shantikunj\\_English.pdf](https://www.awgp.org/var/node/1071/Gayatri_Teerth_Shantikunj_English.pdf). Retrieved on January 22, 2019

encouraged to be the religious leaders, to lead their families, to get education and to be socially and financially strong.<sup>322</sup>

The movement also worked in the field of education without any gender discrimination. It is providing equal opportunities to everyone in its educational institutions. Dev Vishwavidyalaya university is the famous institution providing higher education to all male and female students from all over the country. It also conducts a countrywide exam to test the knowledge of Indian Culture through its organization: Bhartiya Sanskriti Gayan Pariksha. Another organization Sanskar Shala arranges camps for children to promote religiosity among them. The girl guide and boy scout organizations are also arranged under Yog Nirman movement who train the young girls and boys to be active in welfare activities in society. Along with this there is a group of special people at center, known as Lok Sevi, who are trained to provide social welfare services in different departments of life. There are special training centers in Shantikunj as well which provide skillful education to public to encourage cottage and household industries among the villagers. Shantikunj is also involved in many environmental protection related activities such as plantation, cleaning the populated areas and participating in project of cleaning the sacred river Ganges. It also provides an active support to government in national disasters like phenomenon such as floods, earthquakes, and famines etc. Akhand Jyoti eye hospital is a famous hospital of India which provides free treatment facilities of eye diseases to poors.<sup>323</sup>

Due to these efforts Shri Ram Sharma Achariya is known as a popular figure among the religious and social reformers of contemporary period. He not only had good relations with the members of

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<sup>322</sup> Gayatri Tirth Shantikunj: philosophy and vision (English). Cdr – World Gayatri Pariwar.  
[https://www.awgp.org/var/node/1071/Gayatri\\_Teerth\\_Shantikunj\\_English.pdf](https://www.awgp.org/var/node/1071/Gayatri_Teerth_Shantikunj_English.pdf). Retrieved on January 22, 2019

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, Retrieved on January 28, 2019

all Indian National Congress but other politicians and government officials as well. One of such officials is, Shri Jagdish Chandra Pant, who wrote his autobiography as a devotee of Sharma Achariya, after getting retirement from the government service. He also mentioned his different meetings with Sharma Achariya and admits him as his religious and spiritual mentor and guru dev. He explains that how teachings of guru dev are helpful for the government officials to fulfil their duties properly. He states that serving the people is the foremost duty of a government employee and guru dev's teachings revolve around the service of mankind. In this way, they can serve with more passion and sincerity. Shri Pant is a reputed bureaucrat who served as Deputy Commissioner in some states of India as well.<sup>324</sup> Some other officials of his time have also appreciated his efforts of recording and publishing the meetings with guru dev. It shows that Shri Ram Sharma Achariya was popular not only among the public, but a class of bureaucrats was also highly influenced with his religious and spiritual ideas and that how much concerned he was about bringing change in the attitude of public servants. They believed that the ideas of Sharma Achariya can be implemented in their practical form in their profession. After his retirement J.C.Pant established a welfare organization in Delhi with the name of Reacha. It was established depending upon the concept of service of mankind, presented by Shri Ram Sharma Achariya. Many retired government officials also joined it which made it an active organization among the public. It works voluntarily in rural areas in solving problems related to education, health, drinking water, food, and other everyday facilities. It works under the slogan of 'friendship', which means to provide a peaceful and friendly

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<sup>324</sup> Pant.J.C., *Pandit Sriram Sharma Achariya as I knew him*, published by Reacha on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2013. ISBN: 978-81-910318-1-2. <http://www.reacha.org/pandit-sriram-sharma-achariya-as-I-knew-him>. P. 1, Retrieved on January 31, 2019

environment to everyone and bringing communities together.

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The present leadership of the organization is also running its affairs devotedly and is well known through the literary class of Indian society. The present head, Parnav Pandya, is a direct disciple of Shri Ram Sharma Acharya and a certified cardiologist as well. He studied medicine from USA but because his guru asked him to come back and serve his own nation, he decided to live in India and offered his services to the organization. Dr. Parnav Pandya is also the vice chancellor of Dev Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya university and the director of Brahmavarchas Research Institute at Hardwar. He is also the chief editor of *Akhand Jyoti*, the monthly magazine of *All World Gayatri Pariwar*. Under his leadership the organization has developed its centers in almost eighty countries and is followed by ninety million people all over the world. He also got a chance to speak to the joint session of House of Commons and House of Lords in UK in February 1992. He is known as a contemporary Hindu scholar who has worked in creating a rational relation between science and religion. As a scientist he initiated a program about using rainwater for harvesting, in 1992. In acceptance of his services 'Federation of Indian Association', announced 'Hindu of the Year' award for him in 1999. On his suggestion Indian Government has established a research university in 2002 just to promote Indian/Hindu culture among the youth.<sup>325</sup>

Another prominent leader of the movement is Shreddheya Shailbala Pandya. She is the wife of Dr. Parnav Pandya and the daughter of Shri Ram Sharma Acharya. She is a symbol that the movement believes and accepts women as religious and spiritual leaders. She is famous with the title of jiji among the members of Gayatri Pariwar. She offers blessings to her visitors through darshan and

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<sup>325</sup> Present Mentor. [www.awgp.org/about\\_us/present\\_mentor](http://www.awgp.org/about_us/present_mentor). Retrieved on February 6, 2019

prayers. After completing her M.A degree in psychology, she devoted herself whole heartedly to the movement. She also served as an active partner of Nari-jagran movement<sup>326</sup> from 1980 to 1994

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and after the death of its founder she looked after the affairs of this movement as well. Now it is also working directly under All World Gayatri Pariwar. The movement focuses mainly upon the education of girls belonging to lower casts of the society and providing them all possible support to become useful citizens.<sup>327</sup> Since its establishment, the movement has become a popular organization among the religious welfare movements that appeared in India in contemporary period and worked for oppressed classes and women in the society. An analysis of the movement and its ideology is given in chapter: 4 of this thesis.

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<sup>326</sup> A women welfare movement founded by a social activist Param Vandniya Mataji to fight for the rights of women

<sup>327</sup> Present Mentor. [www.awgp.org/about\\_us/present\\_mentor](http://www.awgp.org/about_us/present_mentor). Retrieved on February 6, 2019



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## CHAPTER: 4

### Female led and Socio-religious Reform movements as symbol of Sacred Feminine in Contemporary Hinduism

In chapter 2 the researcher discussed three female led spiritual and religious movements and their ideologies while chapter 3 is about three socio-religious reform movements that appeared in contemporary Hinduism in 19<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter makes an analysis of to what extent these three-female led religious movements and reformist organizations have revived the phenomena of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism. The influential relation between these two types of groups is also studied in this chapter. A short description of deep effects of Islamic traditions on the lives of Hindu women is also given at the end.

#### 4.1. Female led religious movements

All three movements that researcher has chosen to study in this thesis, belong to contemporary period. An interesting and common fact about these movements is that since their establishment, their leadership is female and are still popular as religious/spiritual organizations. They are also known for their welfare works specifically for women. The analysis of their ideologies is not completed until the religious and social environment of Hindu society, in which they flourished is not studied.

20<sup>th</sup> century was the beginning of a new chapter in Indian history. The society experienced rapid religious, social and cultural changes. When Indians lost the war of independence against their colonial masters, they had to face its consequences afterwards. This defeat left a deep effect on every department of Indian society. Voices were being raised to bring an overall change in the Indian social structure and religious traditions. The bitter political relations between Hindus, Muslims and the ruling British were effecting the society in every aspect. Here it is important to note that religion has always been an important part of Hindu culture and society. Religion and culture go hand in hand in the sub-continent. It is unthinkable to bring any change by putting religion aside. The very first reaction of Indians was to save their faith, traditions, values, and social norms from the British culture. That is why most of the movements, whether they were reform or religious, aimed towards giving a new perception of life and religion to their people instead of having direct clashes with the British and other communities of society. Although the war was over, but the struggle was still there. People had started realizing that they need to preserve their norms along with a changing attitude towards the outer world. The distinguishing quality of these movements is that they not only taught about life in this world along with the religious beliefs and traditions but presented a picture of better life after death. A group of renowned scholars believed that religion should be understood in relation to human life and needs to be reinterpreted to establish a progressive society. This group believed that traditionalism is an obstacle in the way to progress. Once a Hindu scholar Vidyasagar<sup>328</sup> was asked about God. He answered that he did not have enough time to think about God because being humans we have to do a lot of things on

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<sup>328</sup> Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a famous Bengali philosopher and thinker

earth.<sup>329</sup> But such views could never have a solid ground in a conservative society like Sub-continent.

A look at three movements; Sri Sarada Devi, Brahma Kumari Organization, and the movement of Mother Meera indicates that all of them talked about the welfare of humanity by taking guidance from religion, focusing mainly upon lower classes of the society. Other than this, Christian priests and orientalist were continuously criticizing the Hindu religion due to its certain beliefs especially cast system, sati and status of women in society were greatly condemned. As a result, there was

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a wave of defending religion and Hindu social structure along with adopting new trends to present it in an acceptable form in front of the world. They never differentiated between their members, whatever class they belonged to. They are also presenting a new picture of Hindu woman when she seems leading the movements as religious or spiritual leader. They also gave a new interpretation to the concept of avatar in Hinduism by giving the status of representative of God on Earth to women through these organizations. In this respect they focus upon both types of changes, religious and social.

#### 4.1.1. Study of the movement of Sri Sarada Devi (Vedanta Society of New York & California)

While analyzing the movement, it is important to keep in mind that this female saint appeared in front of the world as a consort of Sri Ramakrishna in the beginning. Thus, the ideas of this female saint and Vedanta society are very much based upon the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. The historical record tells that Sri Sarada Devi was brought up in an environment where goddess

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<sup>329</sup> Chandra, Bipan., *India's struggle for Independence 1857-1947*.

[www.mentorstudypoint.in/downloads/\(Bipan\\_Chandra.pdf](http://www.mentorstudypoint.in/downloads/(Bipan_Chandra.pdf). Penguin Books, P.80. Retrieved on March 18, 2019

worship was something popular. Her husband Sri Ramakrishna was also a religious saint and a devotee of goddess Kali. Thus, he and his disciples are the worshippers of the sacred female essence/sacred feminine in contemporary Hinduism. He is the person who introduced Sri Sarada Devi as a religious saint and he himself worshipped her declaring her as the symbol of female essence of Divinity. In such an environment, the advent of Sarada Devi as a religious and spiritual leader is not something unusual rather it seems that because Ramakrishna wanted to have someone as the leader of his movement after him and because he already had inclination towards female worship, it was not something difficult for him to present a woman in the form of a religious leader. Although their devotees believe them to be divinely associated, but question is; if Ramakrishna was already spending the life of a yogi, why he accepted to get marry? Because yogis spend a life of celibacy according to the teachings of Hinduism. Followers of the movement refute this objection by saying that although he married but he accepted Sarada Devi as his spiritual consort and a symbol of goddess Kali, and not as a wife. Even after marriage, they spent the life of celibacy. Secondly the incident of taking all the jewelry from the young girl when she is sleeping is something that does not match with the conduct of a religious person. It seems as if he wanted to have a woman with him because of his inclination towards feminine aspect of Divinity and then prepared her as a religious figure and a female leader of the movement after him. Another important point here is that the way how Sarada Devi spent a long period of her life with Ramakrishna is the same traditional way in which many young wives still live in the villages of Indian society. This is something religiously good for a woman to be contented and satisfied with what her husband has given to her and Sarada Devi did the same thing throughout her life. She did not take him as her husband only but believed him to be her master which is a common attitude of every woman in an environment in which she was brought up.

As far as the issue that she was observed practicing meditation since childhood is concerned, historical records show that she herself belonged to a Brahmin family who were known for their religiosity. So, it can be stated that she was already a religious minded person due to her family practices and had inclination towards religiosity and spirituality. She might be following her family religious traditions by meditating of and on. Being the eldest daughter, she used to help her parents in daily household tasks as well as in the fields. Thus, she was a responsible person since her early childhood.

Ramakrishna, himself never lived with his family in his village but advised Sarada Devi to go back to the village after his death and stay with her in laws. But later incidents show that she faced the same situation which is faced by every village woman in the traditional Hindu society after the death of her husband. No one in the family of her parents neither from her in-laws was ready to bear her expenses and to look after her. Instead, they used to taunt her due to wearing red robes and jewelry with her sari as it was against the traditional dressing of a widow. Circumstances had become so harsh that she had to leave the village and some of her devotees when saw her miserable condition took her to the city with them.

This was the time when Ramakrishna movement was spreading outside India and Swami Vivekananda had carried the message of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi to America and Europe. Sarada Devi had now got the fame as the 'Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi'. She was now fully devoted to the movement along with taking care of the daughter of her diseased brother and mentally upset sister-in-law. So once again she was serving as the caretaker of the kids of her poor brothers and sisters who were not ready to look after her in time of need, rather she took the responsibility of their children when they needed.

Like other two movements, Ramakrishna Math and Mission also never preached any religion, rather talked about coming closer to God through promoting spirituality. Sri Sarada Devi welcomed everyone in her circle. Last ten years of her life are important in a sense that during these years she was known as an independent spiritual leader with her own circle of devotees as it is seen that when she went on a religious journey in 1911, a large crowd was around her everywhere, trying to get her blessings. Temple was opened for her, and she worshipped there alone in a time when women were not allowed even to enter the temples. It shows her special status as a saint among religious circles as well. She was also taking decisions of the Ramakrishna movement as a head during these years. Swami Vivekananda and leadership of the movement after him, all respected her not just as the wife of Sri Ramakrishna but as the 'Holy mother'. While preaching the message of Vedanta in Europe and America, they always presented Sarada Devi as the 'Exemplary Mother' of the whole nation. She is known as an example of practical spirituality for the women of contemporary period because she continued practicing her worldly responsibilities along with religious. This gives a message for contemporary women of India that religion does not apply any restrictions on their daily duties and that they can be religious along with different aspects of their practical life. Her life also teaches that spirituality in its contemporary understanding does not mean denouncing the world but performing religious and worldly duties alongside. She herself was the devotee of Mother goddess and a symbol of Sacred Feminine in contemporary religion on Earth who appeared to show the right path to the women of this world and that is why she was much concerned about the welfare of girls and women. The last advice which she gave to Swami Saradananda was about taking care of those poor women who were living with her in her house and were depending upon her. She presented the idea that women

can also join the religious circles and can be taken as devotees. Her shrine is still a sacred place for the devotees of Mother goddess.

Following her footsteps, working for the betterment of everyone beyond the limits of cast, race, and religion, is considered as a worship for the members of Vedanta society. The focus of the movement was not only religious and spiritual education of women but Sarada Devi herself was greatly interested in educating the young girls and women according to the requirements of today's world. As described earlier, the movement supported all those efforts taken by the British government for women education in the Sub-Continent. Similarly, the efforts she made towards establishing a school in her own village where young girls studied during daytime and women were provided education at nighttime, also show her interest in promoting education among women. The movement also worked towards providing skills to women to make them independent and financially strong.

Through these efforts, Vedanta society in collaboration with Ramakrishna Math and Mission presented Hinduism and Hindu culture with new concepts and a new ideology that is the practical side of religion. This new form is a mixture of traditionalism and the new trends. Meditation, Japa and worship is necessary but working selflessly for the welfare of others is the real way towards salvation. It is because of this belief that Vedanta society and Ramakrishna movements are involved in welfare activities on a large scale. Throughout this journey women participation is the prominent feature of the movement as seen that not only in India, but women performed their role as leaders in the centers of Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in America as well. Due to these efforts, the movement is one of those Indian movements which gained much popularity in the Western world as well. Its concepts are also reflected in the writings of some popular Western writers<sup>330</sup>.

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<sup>330</sup> 354 Described earlier in C: 2, P: 53

Through its teachings and practices the movement denies the cast system in traditional religion. Similarly, it refuses racism in the name of religion. Vedanta society also holds sessions on interfaith dialogues to promote harmony between religions.

An important question that arises here that why there was a need to convey the message of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi to America and the West? It was due to efforts of Vivekananda, that the ideology of the two saints reached there. Before joining the circle of Ramakrishna, he had spent time with the reformist movement of Brahmo Samaj. He had also been a student in Scottish College of England to complete his education. It shows his inclination towards reformation and change. He must be having a mindset of a representative of the Hindu Culture with a blend of Western ideas. This gave a way to Vedanta movement to receive a good reception in the West. Secondly, being prosperous, West could generate reasonable fundings for the welfare activities of the movement. Western linkages can also be helpful in presenting the Hindu society of contemporary period with a new face in front of the developed world. Detailed discussions have already been made in chapter 2 of this research about the sainthood of Sarada Devi in the light of some important incidents of her life.

#### 4.1.2. Study of Brahma Kumari Organization

In the same years when voices were raised for the rights of women, another organization was emerging in Hayderabad, located in the province of Sindh of today's Pakistan. It also emerged in the name of providing women a just status in contemporary Hindu society. That is, introducing the Hindu women as religious and spiritual leaders as well as active and participating members of the society.

As explained in the autobiography of the founder of this movement in chapter 2, Dada Lekhraj, established its first center in 1936. It has already been discussed that political activities were on



their peak during these years and Sub-Continent was passing through the struggle for independence in its history. These were the last years of the colonial rule in India. As mentioned earlier, the colonial period left a long-lasting effect on every class of the society. Different types of opinions were there in the society regarding adopting or rejecting the Western influence with traditional ideas. But there was also a group of scholars believing in development and change along with carrying the Hindu legacy as well. Dada Lekhraj can be listed among this group of scholars who wanted to bring a change and to develop their society on new lines with a focus upon the most deprived and oppressed classes of the society. Among these, were the lower caste Hindus and women. It is known that the traditional Hindu society was facing criticism because of bitter attitude towards these two and Hindu scholars were providing justifications for these practices. Women were now playing an active role in political and social activities of the society. 1947 was the time when Sub-Continent was divided. After the establishment of a new Hindu state, there was a wave of making new laws for the state. There was a wave of introducing new trends along with preserving Hindu religious culture. It seems that the movement appeared as the result of these circumstances.

The very first thing is the initial organization of the movement. Forming of a group of women as the initial formation of the organization is something unique and is also important in this respect that it was the first movement governed by women only. This also shows that the movement believes in women leadership, women empowerment as well as their role in the field of religion. Name of the movement also reflects that it believes in a special relationship between God and women and the presence of the essence of Divinity in females. Although the founder, Dada Lekhraj, was a devotee of Lord Vishnu but he believed that women are more spiritual than men. He was also the follower of the female essence of the Divine. After partition, in 1947, Hyderabad

became a part of Pakistan which was ideologically and constitutionally a Muslim state. In 1950 the head office of the movement was shifted to India and became popular as a religious welfare organization there. Women religious and social development was also a significant feature of the organization. After shifting to India, the movement continued its activities till the death of Dada Lekhraj in 1969. Next two decades was the time when the organization came directly under female rule and Dadi prakashmaniji became the first female official head of the movement. Since that time, only women are appointed at the key posts of the organization. This was the time when movement appeared as a purely women led spiritual organization with a focus upon women welfare activities alongside also. It was also active as a women right activist association and participated in protests in certain issues like women rights violations and oppression against them in the name of religion. As discussed earlier, this was the time when there was a wave of awareness among women. Brahma Kumari organization was also a part of this environment.

A notable incident of women awareness is what happened at the time of one hundred-year celebrations of Saradeswari ashram on January 19, 1994, when the organizers invited a woman, Arundhati Roy Chaudhary, to recite some verses from the Vedas at the inaugural session. The chief guest of the ceremony, who was a swamiji, asked one of the organizers to stop this lady from reciting the Vedic verses. The lady left the stage after announcing that she is not allowed to recite from the Vedas just because she is a woman. Later, this Swamiji had to appear in front of the press to give a proper justification of his act. According to him women are respectable, but he could not allow any woman to recite from the sacred books in his presence as this is something not allowed according to religious teachings. The women volunteers protested because of this viewpoint and situation became worst between traditionalists and reformists. Brahma Kumaris were also part of

this protest.<sup>331</sup> A political religious party Bhartiya Janata Party strictly condemned this thinking and demanded religious authorities to adopt a progressive attitude towards women.

In this way, the movement developed as a spiritual as well as welfare organization with the passage of time. The important point, while analyzing Brahma Kumari organization is that it seems as if it is a separate cult that appeared within Hinduism because its teachings seem different while interpreting some basic beliefs of Hindu faith. Specially its concept of 'celibacy' is something very different, rather contrary to the religious teachings. Due to this, it faced severe criticism as well. The concept of celibacy is there in the religion but only for those men who have adopted to live their lives as brahmachariyas. Women are not supposed to adopt this way of life except certain situations.

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As discussed earlier, in the initial period of its formation, the organization was also banned on the demand of public because it asked its female followers to keep away from their husbands as having sexual relationship is prohibited in the teachings of Dada Lekhraj. He was criticized for preaching celibacy among others because he himself was married and spent a family life. Similarly, an important figure among the present leadership of the organization B.K. Shivani is also married, lives with her husband, spending a family life and has a daughter as well. Same is the case with Brahma Kumari's other teachings such as the issue of sacred literature. They never teach from the sacred literature of Hinduism neither recite it during their worships and meditations. Instead, have

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<sup>331</sup> Ralhan., O. P. (edt-in-chief), *Indian Women through Ages*, 1995. Anmol publications private Limited, New Delhi, India. V.4, P.149

developed their own Sacred literature, known as Murli. Thus, it can be concluded that it is a new religious cult within Hinduism and not a sect.

Traditional Hinduism believes in the existence of a Supreme God. Then there are other gods and goddesses and their incarnations. It never uses the term ‘Supreme Soul’ instead of God. But Brahma Kumaris do not use the word God while explaining their belief in a Supreme Being. They even do not consider this important to have a belief in God in the same way as believed in the traditional religion and the reason for it is that human beings are not able to produce any proof for the existence of God and that He is the creator of everything in this world. The Supreme gods according to Hinduism are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but Brahma Kumaris consider Shiva at second in trimurti and third one is Shankar, who is not found in any of the Hindu scriptures. Then the description of their duties and responsibilities is also very different.<sup>332</sup>

Similarly, their understanding of human soul is quite different from the traditional understanding. The souls of all human beings are eternal and have appeared in this world to show their attributes and qualities. This soul effects a human being internally and externally. When human mind is

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influenced from the qualities of this soul, the acts of the human are also influenced towards betterment. The more a mind is influenced by the soul it gets absorbed in it. This absorption shows that this soul will not be incarnated and is ready to shift to the metaphysical world from physical. Here a soul gets rid of the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The organization seems closer to traditional Hinduism when it talks about the concept of meditation and practicing raja yoga, as they have their basis in Hindu scriptures. But again, the

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<sup>332</sup> Discussed earlier in C: 2, P: 25

interpretation is different. Raja yoga is not just a worship to get inner satisfaction but also a way to attain purification from sins which is quite a new perception.

Regarding the issue of world and creation, again although Brahma Kumaris present a concept closer to Samkhya understanding in Hinduism, but their explanation and description of the issue is different from what is described in Samkhya philosophy. Brahma Kumaris also believe in eternity of matter, but it talks about six different stages of time alongside, known as Yog, which appear one after the other. The cycle is repeated in a time of five thousand years <sup>333</sup>. This explanation is not given by any scholar of Samkhya school of thought.

Worship according to Brahma Kumaris is meditation and practicing raja yoga only. Although they are following Hindu scriptures in this practice, but Hinduism believes in other worships as well such as offering sacrifices to gods and goddesses and temple worships. Brahma Kumaris do not build any temple neither worship all those gods and goddesses worshipped in traditional Hindu faith. The status of Murli and that how the present leadership receives messages from the metaphysical world has already been discussed in chapter: 2 of this Thesis. Due to these major differences Brahma Kumari organization holds a unique place among contemporary Hindu religious traditions.

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Here it is important to note that this idea of world cycle is not something new but ideas similar this were already present in the ancient Roman and Greek philosophies. Even the names of “Golden Age” and “Iron Age” are there in the written documents of these philosophies. Among the Greeks, Hesoid<sup>334</sup> presented a model of human development, in which he talked about golden, silver,

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<sup>333</sup> Discussed earlier in C: 2, P: 27-29

<sup>334</sup> Hesoid is one of the earliest Greek poets and a contemporary of Homer. He is famous for his poetry about gods and religious ideas

bronze, heroic and iron races of human developmental cycle. Similarly, among the Roman writers such as Aratus<sup>335</sup>, Ovid<sup>360</sup> and Claudian<sup>336</sup>, there are descriptions like changing of iron age back into the golden age. The poet Claudian seems praising a German warrior on bringing the golden age back to Rome.<sup>337</sup> From here it can be assumed that those who developed and explained the beliefs of Brahma Kumaris in details, collected material from other religions or ancient philosophies as well, along with Hindu sources.

#### 4.1.3. Study of the Movement of Mother Meera

Mother Meera of Germany is a Hindu lady who belonged to latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but seems carrying the legacy of Mira Alfassa, a leading figure of Sri Aurobindo ashram, who lived in the mid of the century. As mentioned earlier, the founder of this ashram was a devotee of mother goddess. He believed in the superiority of feminine aspect of the Divine. He was greatly interested in spirituality and had introduced integral yoga as a new form of yoga for his devotees. Mira Alfassa was his partner in establishing and running the affairs of this ashram and promoting spirituality. The devotees of the ashram revered her as an embodiment of feminine element of Divinity on Earth. In this respect, although she never proclaimed Hinduism or any other religion,

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but became a symbol of Sacred Feminine in Hindu society through her welfare works and teaching spirituality. She associated herself to a Hindu ashram and adopted Hindu practice of darshan as a way to bless her devotees. She lived in India for a long period till her death and set an example of women spiritual leader by living in a small town of India. The ashram was famous as a goddess

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<sup>335</sup> Aratus was a poet, a politician, and a statesman of his times. He is known for his writings in religion and theology

<sup>360</sup> His real name was Publius Ovidius Naso but became famous as Ovid in English speaking world. He lived during the reign of Augustus and known as famous poet of Latin literature

<sup>336</sup> Claudian was a Latin poet associated to the court of emperor Honorius

<sup>337</sup> Momigliano, Arnaldo., *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Wesleyan University press Middletown Connecticut USA: 1987), pg. 33-34. <https://books.google.com.pk/books?isbn=0819562181>

temple when Sri Aurobindo and Mira Alfassa passed away. The then patron of the temple Belgur Venkat Reddy, a close relative of Kamala Reddy, adopted her, brought her to the temple and then introduced her as a new symbol of female Divinity of the temple, among the Hindu public of the village. As far as the name 'Meera' is concerned, the community was already familiar with it because of Mira Alfassa and another female Hindu saint of 17<sup>th</sup> century, Meera Bai, a devotee of Lord Krishna.

But the significant feature which gives Mother Meera of Germany a distinguishing status from the previous female saints is that she appeared in a time when Indian society had started a new chapter of its history. It was almost the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Sub-Continent had got freedom from its colonial masters in 1947<sup>338</sup>. There was a wave to build a progressive society compatible to the requirements of developing societies. Hindus had experienced a long time of Muslim and British rule. Hindu social and religious traditions were criticized by both rulers. Other than that, both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions. A great number of Hindus converted to Islam with the entry of Muslim invaders and preachers. In the same way British entered here with large number of missionaries who propagated Christianity especially among the lower casts. This resulted conversion to Christianity on a large scale. This situation was a great challenge to the traditional Hindu religion. British had introduced even new laws against some women related religious and social traditions such as child marriage and sati. The issue of human rights had

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become the hottest issue of the world in these years. Role of women had also become very popular in the new face of the world and status of women was discussed everywhere. The prominent

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<sup>338</sup> This was the year when Sub-Continent was divided into two independent states of India and Pakistan

character of Indian women appeared in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century India when the first women organization was organized in 1886 by Swarnakumari Devi<sup>339</sup>, the wife of a congress leader, Janakinath Ghosal. She was also active in congress as a nationalist leader along with her husband. Many new laws were introduced after independence of India. Among these were the laws for women and lower castes. It was claimed that everyone will get equal rights and opportunities to rise in the new Indian society. The very first law made for women was Hindu Marriage validating act introduced in 1949 through which inter-cast marriages were encouraged. This law was greatly supported by Gandhi's advice that upper caste Hindus should marry the Shudras and Harijan women. A reward of gold watch was also announced for a person who will married a lower caste woman and spent ten years with her. This was because of the strong resistance from the traditional society as no one was willing to follow this law.<sup>340</sup> In 1955, another law was made through which women were given the right of divorce. Marriage before the age of fifteen was declared as illegal. Women were given the right to sue her husband or could demand for divorce if he gets marry without informing his first wife. Men were bound to bear the expanses of their first wives in case of second marriage. This was made compulsory to encourage the practice of monogamy<sup>366</sup>. In 1956, females were given the right to get their share from the property of their fathers. The rights and status of an adopted female child were also made clear through this act. These years also mark the highest number of female members elected for loksabha, lower house of Indian parliament.

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<sup>339</sup> Swarnakumari Devi was the sister of Rabendranath Tegore and was among a few educated women of her time.

She is also one among the early Bengali writers. She was also the mother of Sarala Devi, an active participant of Swadeshi movement, later on

<sup>340</sup> Wolpert, Stanley., *A new History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press. 1977 P. 368 <sup>366</sup>

Having only one wife at a time



There was a wave among women to use their own names for their identity instead of being recognized with the names of their brothers, husbands or fathers which was a great change among the traditional Hindu community.<sup>341</sup>

The area of Pondicherry, where Mother Meera spent her childhood in the ashram, remained under colonial rulers for a very long period of its history. Historical records tell that it was a trading route since the ancient times. Due to this, it has always been an important place for all rulers who established their kingdoms in India. After the fall of Mughal empire, it fell in the hands of French. British also accepted this status of the land but after independence in 1947 it was handed over to India in 1950. In 1955 it became a part of West Bengal.<sup>342</sup>

The French colonial masters not only ruled the area but also influenced the life of the town in its different aspects. Important of these are the religious and social aspects of the life in Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo ashram holds a significant place when the religious life at Pondicherry is discussed. It is also important to mention here that Mira Alfassa, one of the founders of ashram, also belonged to France which shows that foreigners used to visit this area and public was also familiar with the outer world. The population of Pondicherry was a population of labor class comprising of fishermen, blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, potters, barbers, cobblers, and those associated to agriculture. The population was divided mainly into two groups, whites, and blacks. White population was the ruling class, who were either foreigners or appointed by the French on the key

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<sup>341</sup> Wolpert, Stanley., *A new History of India*, New York: Oxford University Press. 1977 P. 368

<sup>342</sup> Pondicherry becomes French. Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/135539/7/07\_chapter%202.pdf. p. 15.  
Retrieved on April 18, 2019

posts for administrative purposes.<sup>343</sup> The rulers did not spend their lives here separately, but always participated in the festivals and religious ceremonies with the local public. They had good relations

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with merchants, family heads and other nobles of the town. These activities were a great source to uplift the standard of social and economic life of the local community. People became familiar with new businesses and new ways of life etc. As far as religious environment of the town is concerned, it has always been a Hindu majority area. French officials brought Christian missionaries with them who took great interest in daily lives of the people at Pondicherry. They also helped the local people in resolving their issues along with introducing Christianity there. Along with Church Fathers and Priests, Nuns also used to visit the town very frequently. They visited local women, participated with them in their religious practices and provided them guidance in religious issues. The name of a Christian Nun, Ursulines, is important in this regard. Some of these missionaries were involved with locals to such an extent that they even learnt Tamil language with a purpose to have a direct interaction with the local population.<sup>344</sup>

As mentioned earlier that Mira Alfassa was also a French who was greatly interested in religiosity and spirituality and because of this had developed a religious relationship with Sri Aurobindo, at Pondicherry. She came here with a purpose of promoting spirituality. A look at what Mother Meera of Germany talks about, shows that she is carrying the same pattern of religious life as that of Mira Alfassa. Both focused upon internal peace, love, and blessings of God for everyone through promoting religiosity without any discrimination due to cast and religion. Mira Alfassa never tried

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid, P. 17

<sup>344</sup> Pondicherry becomes French. Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/135539/7/07\_chapter%202.pdf. p. 18. Retrieved on April 18, 2019

to change the religion of the people but focused upon spirituality through love for everyone. Even though she was a French Christian, she adopted the Hindu way of darshan and introduced herself with the name of Mira, a popular name among Hindus, which was a good way to have a better interaction with the people and to win their trust. In the same way Mother Meera of Germany

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never preached to follow a specific religion but focused upon religiosity. In this sense she seems following the way of Mira Alfassa as she also adopted the way of darshan, although the way is a bit different. The name of the two mothers is also same, Mira, which is a popular name in the history of Hindu female saints.

Through this description, the researcher wants to present a picture of that social and religious environment in which Mother Meera of Germany appeared as a religious leader. Along with Hindu religious scholars, foreign religious personalities also visited Pondicherry. Some of them had even settled down here on permanent basis like Mira Alfassa and the Christian Nun, Ursuline. Similarly, the construction of an ashram there, specifically associated for the worship of the feminine essence of Divinity, Shakti, shows that the concept of goddess worship was already common among the public, there. Mother Mira Alfassa was a leading figure of the ashram and had got the fame in Pondicherry and the neighboring areas as a religious personality. Thus, advent of a woman as a saint and a religious leader is not something unusual in the area having such type of religious and social environment. It reflects that Mother Meera is not presenting something different or new.

The very first thing in her teachings is the Paramatman Light, the light of the Divine. The concept of the Divine light is present in almost every popular faith of the world. It is common among the stories of the revealed religions as well that when God creates a direct relation to his Prophet or

Messenger or reveals his message, the Prophet experiences the Divine Light. In the story of Prophet Musa (A.S), it is told that he saw a fire on the mountain, in the story of the birth of Jesus a light appeared to Maryam and in the incident when first revelation came to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) a light appeared in the cave of Hira. Similarly, in the mythology of non-revealed religions too, there is always a light with gurus and enlightened personalities. Hinduism also believes in appearance of Divine light at different times with gurus. It shows that the concept of light has always been there in different religious traditions and not something new in the ideology of Mother Meera. Same is the case with her other practices such as darshan, focusing upon meditation and japa, using the name of ashram for her centers and carrying the belief of appearance of avatars. In short, nothing proves her to be a special appearance in these circumstances. Anyone, who understands the ground realities and is capable to get the benefit from the situation, can stand with this claim. Even some of the devotees of Mother Meera also said the same about her. It seems that she travelled from India to Europe just because she could not get that much popularity in the town as she and her uncle were expecting. The person among her earliest devotees writes that the people of her village were not ready to accept her as an avatar. All this has already been discussed in detail in chapter: 2 of this thesis.

Another important point which the reader should keep in mind that Mother Meera appeared in a time when women were coming forward in every field in Indian society. The religious class was also under a pressure to present Hindu belief in such a form that its brighter aspects should be enhanced. Even women themselves were coming forward to define their role in religion. Such an environment was ideal for the advent of women religious and spiritual leaders. These movements and religious leaders focused upon spirituality and making women aware of their religious rights

rather than traditionalism. Thus, it can be concluded that mother Meera is a product of this new scenario that was created due to this religious and social environment.

#### 4.2. Female led movements and Sacred Feminine in Contemporary Hinduism

Female led organizations, studied in this research and many others like them are also a symbol of Sacred Feminine present in the teachings of Hindu religion since ancient times. They have not only given a new trend by reviving this concept in contemporary Hinduism but a look at their teachings shows that all three are agreed upon one single element that is ‘female essence of Divinity’. Their founders had inclinations towards this female essence. It is recorded about Sri Sarada Devi that her husband and religious mentor Ramakrishna, was a devotee of goddess Kali and believed that women have the attributes of Kali and thus, are closer to Divine as compared to men. In this sense they have the sacred essence in them. That is why he not only himself worshipped his wife but also presented her as a symbol of goddess on earth. This practice also reflects the revival of the concept of Sacred Feminine along with the sainthood of Sri Sarada Devi. Brahma Kumari Organization also appeared with the idea of female religious and spiritual leadership. The founder, Dada Lekhraj, was also inclined towards female worship and had a belief in the presence of Divine essence among females more than males. In this sense he too became a source of reviving the concept of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism.

Mother Meera’s followers believe in her to be an avatar of Shakti. This is an age-old belief and has a long history in traditional Hinduism. Those, who believe in her, believe in the female essence of God indeed. This belief revives the idea of females as religious gurus, which is a mark of revival of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism. A saying of her is recorded by her long-term devotee Mark Matousek in his book ‘*Mother of the unseen World*’ in which she is talking about Sacred Feminine in clear words:

“The Sacred Feminine has been excluded from our image of God in Western culture. ... No image of the Divine Mother as equal counterpart to God the Father, no union of Masculine and feminine principles into a wise and balanced whole. Among many of today’s spiritual leaders, there is strong belief that an integration of the Divine feminine into our worldview is urgently needed if we are to heal our planet’s woes.”<sup>345</sup>

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But this saying of Mother Meera raises question that the issue of Sacred Feminine has appeared in the West, at first, in contemporary period and not by Hindus or Indians which shows that West realized the need of the revival of Sacred Feminine before Hinduism. Secondly, West reflects Sacred Feminine in the images of Mary, sacred mother of Jesus. Thus, this saying of Mother Meera ‘Sacred Feminine has been excluded from image of God in Western culture’ needs clarification according to the researcher. She also needs to elaborate that what role of the Divine Feminine is urgently required to heal the problems of our planet according to this saying?

#### 4.3. Female led religious organizations and new developments in Hinduism

No doubt, that female led religious organizations in contemporary Hinduism came with new religious ideas through their concepts and practices. Hinduism is a religion that passed through different stages of development throughout history. Mother Meera and the devotees of Sri Sarada Devi, when carried the message of religion to other areas of the world, they introduced new aspects of universalism in Hinduism. Brahma Kumaris hold a significant place in this regard that they not only set an example of women leadership in contemporary Hinduism but also gave a totally new

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<sup>345</sup> Mother Meera’s Facebook page, accessed October 27, 2019, [www.facebook.com/mothermeera](https://www.facebook.com/mothermeera). Oct 27, 2019

interpretation of some basic religious beliefs of Hindu religion. How they presented the religious texts is also something new and different.

When their practices and concepts are studied with an Islamic appraisal, here again they seem introducing some new things in religious practices especially when they are directly involved in activities like social welfare, women development, promoting women education, fighting against inhuman attitudes and poverty. They are presenting Hindu religion in relation to the requirements of practical life. This presentation of religion in practical form and that how it is related to social lives of the people can also be taken as a new development in contemporary period.

#### 4.4. Socio-religious Reform movements and contemporary Hinduism

Along with female led movements, the analytical study of three reform movements is also given in this chapter. A thorough study of these reform movements shows that their founders themselves had a religious background and a strong inclination towards religion along with having a deep insight into the social problems of their society. They wanted to bring revolutionary changes in their societies but wanted to carry their religious traditions as well. They raised voices against the cruel practices of their society but at the same time seem struggling to protect Hindu culture as well. The times when these reformers appeared is almost same in which the phenomena of female led organizations is observed to appear. It shows that both were facing the same circumstances and socio-religious environment and at some places both seem raising voice against the same problems. The issue of women related problems was the hottest issue of eighteenth and nineteenth century India. That is why both types of movements worked specifically for women as their topmost agenda. The details about these reformers and their ideology have already been given in chapter three of this research.

#### 4.4.1. Dhondhoo Keshav Karve and his movement

The very first among these reformers is the personality of Dhondho Keshav Karve. A study of his life history tells that he was always worried about the plight of young girls in his locality. He not only thought about women education but wanted to bring a revolutionary change in the over-all situation of women in Indian society. He made his best efforts to ban the practice of child marriage, providing education to women at equal level and encouraging the public to re-marry the widows. He practically did what he said and set an example by marrying a widow after the death of his first wife. He had to face strict criticism because of this act but he was firm in his decision. People refused to send their daughters to his school because he was accused of disrespectful towards religious traditions. But soon his efforts were acknowledged and within a few years the girl's school of his village became a popular school of the area. After that he also founded the very first training and residential school specifically for widows to make them educated and independent. He is also known as the first who established the first women university in India. He himself faced problem in having a government job for not knowing the English language. This made him to think about providing education in English along with their local languages. Again, he started this practice from his house by teaching his wife and sister at home. This was the first step towards the success of Karve family's women and time proved that this encouragement produced wonderful female professionals in the family. But his services are not limited to the field of education only. The establishment of Karv Nagar community shows that the circle of his welfare activities was much wider. It aimed to provide skillful training, financial aid, educational scholarships and even shelter to homeless women which made Dhondho Keshav Karve and this community, much popular among the women and young girls of poor rural areas. Dhondho Keshav Karve is different from other two reformers, studied in this research, in respect that he never claimed to be a religious



or spiritual leader nor presented any new religious ideology blended with new ideas. He was just an educationist, a social activist, and a reformer. But it does not mean that he left religion at all. Indeed, if he did not preach it never denied its importance. He has mentioned a few Indian and Western personalities from whom he was influenced from his student life, but never mentioned that he adopted their ideologies to follow practically in his welfare activities.

#### 4.4.2. Pandurang Shastri Athavale and his movement

The second personality is Pandurang Shastri Athavale. He is known as a social reformer as well as a religious and spiritual leader of contemporary Hinduism. He is also famous for his efforts for the women of his society. Because of belonging to a practicing Brahman family, he was inclined towards religion, since his childhood. He had seen his father and grandfather teaching Gita and delivering religious sermons to lower caste Hindu communities. Thus, had developed the thinking about doing something for others from early age. He always felt proud of his religious background and Hindu culture of his society. It was due to this way of upbringing that in a time when everyone wanted to have a chance to study in Europe and America, he preferred to stay in India and decided to work for his people. He got his early education in the traditional type of school, established by his grandfather, and always felt proud of it. He promoted this type of education in his own schools as well with a variation, that is introducing the teaching of English language along with the traditional religious education. This makes him prominent among others that he not only focused upon promoting education and opening schools but gave a complete education system as well. He was not in a favor of following the government educational system as it was followed in government schools but adopted it with the condition of making changes according to the traditional requirements of a pure Hindu culture and society. According to his ideology the purpose of education for a Hindu is to protect and revive the Hindu culture and the best way to preserve it

is to practice it with proper knowledge and sincerity. Thus, he supported the new ways of education but believed to adopt it in the light of the teachings of Gita and Vedas. He is known to give a new interpretation to religious concepts and presented it with a claim that Vedic ideology is a practical philosophy. The problem is that its true essence is lost, and people do not know how to implement it according to the needs of contemporary societies. He had studied the Western philosophers of his time but never mentioned anyone as his ideological guide rather claimed that what they have introduced to the world now is already there in Vedas and Gita. Thus, it becomes clear that he was not impressed with the Western ideas, rather presented quite different concepts in the name of Hindu religion.

The important point here is that he also supported women education greatly and emphasized upon their role in the field of religion as well. The great example of it is that his wife played the role as the leader of the movement after his death and now the current leader is his daughter, who is highly educated and has presented the movement at several forums. The movement of Swadhiyay Pariwar is the symbol of the concept of public welfare and establishment of an ideal society presented by Pandurang Shastri. He believed that only religion could provide the solution to the problems of human societies. Other philosophies are acceptable but should be followed in the light of religious concepts only.

#### 4.4.3. Pandit Shri Ram Sharma Achariya and his movement

Third important personality in this regard is Pandit Shri Ram Sharma Achariya. It is obvious from his name that he was a religious and spiritual leader who appeared with the idea of serving humanity in the light of religion. He belonged to a practicing religious family as his father was also a Pandit and a teacher of Gita in his times. Because of this he brought up in a pure religious environment. But he always had the idea of religion for everyone and was not in a favor of

confining it in the hands of one community or class. That is why he served a lower cast lady during her sickness. His status is different from others in a sense that he not only presented a whole new system of bringing change but narrated his own story of having link with a metaphysical guru who guided him from the age of fifteen till the end of his life. Although he was getting religious education since his childhood because of his religious background but he appeared as a spiritual leader with the establishment of this link between him and his spiritual guru. His status is also unique in a sense that he himself went to meditate in an unseen spiritual world under the guidance of his metaphysical spiritual guru. His life ended by attaining samadhi just like the traditional Hindu Pndits. His followers believe in him to have a Divine link because of this story. He performed twenty-four mahapurascaranas of Gayatri mantra during his four visits to Himalayas which shows that he was a devotee of Gayatri Devi. Other distinguishing qualities of Shri Ram Sharma Achariya is that unlike others, he himself wrote many books about his religious ideas and published a lot of spiritual material. The monthly journal of this organization is one of the most popular journals of the country. Secondly, he participated practically in the politics of India under the leadership of Gandhi by joining Indian National Congress and remained an active member of it till the death of Gandhiji. The efforts he made for the welfare of his society are known through the establishment of Gayatri Pariwar. This movement is different from all in respect that it not only focused upon the elevated status of women through providing them worldly and religious education but accepted them to be the religious and spiritual leaders as well. It openly stood against the customs of dowery, satti, child-marriages and inhuman treatment of widows in Hindu culture and declared that all these are against the teachings of religion. Its members also participate in government welfare projects voluntarily like cleaning the rivers Ganges and Jamna and building a free eye hospital for poors. Due to these efforts, Shri Ram Sharma Achariya became a popular

figure not only among the public but greatly respected among the government officials and politicians as well. As mentioned in chapter three some bureaucrats established a welfare organization depending upon the ideology of Shri Ram Sharma Acharya.

#### 4.5. Influential relation between Female led organizations and Reform movements

While analyzing these three socio-religious reform movements and female led organizations a few things seem similar among both type of movements. They are:

##### 4.5.1. Reform and Religion

All these movements focused upon bringing a change in their society declaring religion as the basis for this change. First three started from religion and spirituality then turned towards social or women welfare activities while reformers became popular because of socio-welfare ideas at first and then justified them in the light of religion. They stood against traditionalism, customs, concepts, and in-human practices that were followed in the name of religion. They presented the idea of finding the solution of their social problems from religion and in this way, they were presenting a new version of Hinduism.

##### 4.5.2. Defending Hinduism

Another important point that appears from the study of these movements and organizations is that all seem defending Hinduism from the criticism of colonial period. This was the time when India had developed direct relationship with the outer world. European culture and civilization were dominating other nations. The colonial period had given birth to a new class of scholars. They were propagating to promote Western style of education among Indians. Hindu scholars considered it a threat to Indian religions and culture. At first Islam and then colonial masters were raising questions against many Hindu religious traditions like cast system, status of women and other women related issues such as sati, the miserable life of a widow, child and forced marriages and

women education. A look at the efforts of these reform movements and female led organizations shows that their focus is also the same areas. Especially the concepts of Pandurang Shastri Athavale and Shri Ram Sharma Acharya and Brahma Kumari organization are totally a new interpretation of religion. The way how Pandurang and Vivekananda presented Hinduism in front of the West is purely a way of defending his religion. This has been clearly mentioned in their biographies as well.

#### 4.5.3. Human crisis of two world wars

India was under the British rule during the two world wars and British were directly involved in them. As a result, it had to face the bitter consequences as well. The worst of all was the humanitarian crisis in the society of the sub-continent. Many Indians were forced to serve in British Army and to fight in far-away areas according to the commandments of their British Commanders. Indians started thinking that their people are forced to fight a war which is not their concern. Many of them never came back and no one told to their families where their graves were. British government did not pay any attention to the old parents, widows, and orphans of these Indian soldiers. More than that the revenues collected from Indian lands were spent in war instead of Indian public. All these circumstances directly affected the lives of the people in India and created serious social and economic crisis in the society. This made the sensible minds to think about their people and society. These reformers and female spiritual movements emerged in these difficult times, and it seems that they were looking for a way that would guide them to find a way out. Female led organizations appeared as a source of boosting up the confidence of Indian women in her religious and cultural life.

#### 4.5.4. Education, the major Task

Another common factor between these movements and organizations is that they focused upon education a lot. Although they got fame due to their efforts for women education, but they did not keep it limited to Hindu women only. Everyone is welcomed in the institutions established by these movements. Important point of their efforts in the field of education is that they rejected the educational system introduced by the colonial government rather established their own schools, colleges, universities, and training institutions according to the requirements and environment of their societies along with the modern education. That is why these institutions got more popularity among the public as compared to the government schools. The way to change is education and religion.

#### 4.5.5. Denial of cast system

All these movements and social reformers, although themselves belonged to the higher priestly class of Hindu community and were enjoying a noble status in their circles but firmly stood against the tradition of cast system and invited everyone to join their movements and circles. Cast system is a part of traditional Hindu belief but these movements and organizations appeared with quite a different interpretation of this belief. All of them totally rejected the concept of untouchability and propagated that the word of God is for everyone, and God does not make any difference between his creations.

#### 4.5.6. Digitizing Religion

Female led spiritual organizations and reformers all are known to introduce a new trend in Hinduism. This was the time when revolutionary developments were taking place in digital world as well. West was the place where internet and progress in the field of technology had widely spread. These organizations emerged and reached Europe and America in the same era, thus got

influenced with how religious groups were working there in those times. Digital culture had entered in Christian religion as well. Since early 1980s cyber-church had been introduced and many organizations had developed their websites like ‘godblogging’ and ‘godcasting’. Then there was a phenomenon of ‘Digital Religion’ in the last three decades. There was a rapid increase in the use of internet by religious organizations during this period.<sup>346</sup> Female led organizations and reformers, studied in this research are also offering programs because of which they have become a source of introducing a new trend in religion that is digitizing the religion.

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#### 4.6. Socio-religious Reform movements and Sacred Feminine

Just like the female led movements discussed above, the reform movements also have played a vital role in reviving the concept of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism. No doubt, that their purpose was giving a better status to women in Hindu society, but an analysis of their efforts also reflects that with these efforts, they were playing a role for the revival of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism alongside. Dhondhoo Keshav Karve was a true social reformer. His main task was to provide confident, independent, and progressive women to his society who could support their men and participate equally in the development of their country. The way he adopted to achieve this task was educating them. He did not talk about the religious and spiritual status of women but providing them equal status automatically leads towards religion because an educated and well-groomed woman is always aware of his rights and responsibilities in different aspects of her life including religion.

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<sup>346</sup> Campbell, Heidi. A & Alessandra Vitullo., *Church, Communication and Culture: Assessing changes in the Study of religious communities in digital religion studies*, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group (2016). 1:1, 73-89, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rchu20>, P. 1-4

Pandurang Shastri Athavale also seems playing a clear role in this regard. His grandfather was a teacher of Gita and Vedas and was a devotee of goddess Sarswati with a special place for goddess worship at home. It can be assumed here that sacredness and worshipping the female element of Divinity was always there in his mind. He spent his early childhood with his grandparents and used to go to the colonies of lower casts and untouchables with his grandfather to teach them the Holy Scripture. Thus, along with goddess worship he had the idea of 'religion for everyone' since the beginning. Then after that when he launched the movement of Swadhiyay Pariwar, his wife and daughter were always there with him playing leading roles. Women are not only taken as members of the movement but also participate in all its activities just like men. His daughter is still leading the movement of Swadhiyay Pariwar. As mentioned earlier, the movement used to send its trained members to different villages to teach religion there, it introduced a different character of women that is to nominate them as pujaris. This is a clear indication that Pandurang Shastri Athavale and his movement are supporting the contemporary Hindu women in their role as religious and spiritual leaders.

Similarly, Shri Ram Sharma Acharya also seems promoting Sacred Feminine in the contemporary period when he gave a different status to women in his philosophy. He was the follower of a spiritual guru, who admired him for getting married. This is something very different from the traditional teachings of Hinduism because it is compulsory for the saints to stay unmarried throughout their life to get a higher spiritual status. It shows that spending life with a woman does not harm the religiosity and spirituality of a person according to the ideology of Shri Ram Sharma Acharya. His wife was always there with him in leading roles throughout his struggle. Whenever he went to meditate in Himalayas, it was his wife who led the movement in his absence. More than that he was a devotee of Gayatri Devi, and his guru also taught him to perform twenty-four



mahapurascaranas of Gayatri mantra which is purely a goddess worship. He also used the name of Gayatri Pariwar for the community which he established. It is a clear symbol that he had a belief of the sacredness of feminine element of the Divine and implemented it practically in his worships and teachings as well. Mother Gayatri Temple is located inside the head office of the movement which is open for everyone. Meditation and performance with Gayatri mantra, was the highest level of worship according to Shri Ram Sharma Acharya which shows that he believed in sacredness of feminine essence. He was so much concerned about women's role in building up a good society that he declared twenty-first century the era of women. Women are also encouraged to perform as *prohit* according to his teachings. This is a clear indication that he was a believer and revivalist of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism. In this respect these reformers and their movements can be taken as the factors which revived the phenomena of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism.

#### 4.7. Socio-religious Reform movements and Globalization

The social environment in which reformist's organizations emerged, has already been discussed in the previous pages. A notable phenomenon that appeared in 20<sup>th</sup> century was 'globalization'. This ideology emerged after a special situation which was created due to two world wars. Many nations had to bear the great financial and human crisis. Nations were now coming closer to solve their problems and to save the world from further disastrous like situations. World leaders were presenting ideas to collaborate for finding solutions for their problems. Economical rehabilitation was the greatest challenge for most of the countries. The best and most effective solution was establishing trade and economic relations between different nations. Globalization stands for working jointly for mutual benefit.

The reform organizations seem adopting and following the idea of ‘globalization’ when they established their organizations outside India and opened their doors for everyone. All needy students got benefit from the educational institutions of these organizations. Pandurang Shastri Athavale and Shri Ram Sharma Acharya when established Swadhiyay Pariwar and Gayatri Pariwar, they did not keep it limited to Hindus or Indians, but anyone could join it whether he was a Hindu or not. How they established the center of their movements in different parts of the world and the way they worked in the name of betterment of their society, is a clear example of implementing the patterns of ‘Globalization’ in their ways of working. The aim of globalization was financial benefit and these reformers also focused upon providing skills to public through which they could increase their income. Thus, globalization was an important factor behind how these reformers worked.

#### 4.8. Women in Contemporary Hindu society

The research about women’s status and leadership is not completed until the contemporary situation is not studied. As described earlier, things are changing in contemporary societies. Second half of the twentieth century and twenty first century Hindu society seems much friendly to women as compared to previous centuries. Especially in big cities schools, colleges and universities have a good number of female students which is a sign of increasing literacy rate among females. Women are also working in Hospitals, Banks, serving as executives in companies, participating in games and working as professors at universities along with managing their household responsibilities. The essence of this change is also reaching to rural areas now. These changing attitudes are reflected through many new practices that have been emerged in recent times with the purpose of women empowerment. An example of this is the interesting custom of planting trees on the birth of a female child in Piplantri village in Rajasthan. Like rest of the country, people considered the birth of a girl as a burden for the family and due to this thinking, female infanticide

was common in the village. Then the time changed, and the head of the community gave the idea of planting trees on the birth of a female child after the death of his own daughter. The family plants one hundred and eleven trees for each girl. Most oftenly fruit trees are planted. The young girl herself and the senior family members of her family mostly females, look after these trees till the girl reaches to the age of eighteen or the time when she gets marry. These trees not only become a source to increase the family income, but the family also get enough money to spend on education and dowry of the girl. A specific amount of money is also deposited in the name of this girl under Janani Suraksha Scheme. The Panchayat of the village protects this money. Seeing the efforts of the villagers, many famous social welfare organizations also came forward to help them. Famous social worker, Anna Hazare, launched Kiran Nidhi Scheme, with a purpose of a comprehensive development of the girl child at school as well as at home in this village. The organization provides all necessary requirements to the parents after taking an oath from them under this scheme. The conditions upon which oath is taken are:

- 1) No one in their family will commit female infanticide
- 2) The trees and the girl child will be treated in the best possible way
- 3) They will educate their daughter properly.
- 4) They will not marry their daughter until she reaches to the age of eighteen
- 5) The money earned through these trees, will be saved for this girl's wedding and education
- 6) These trees will be considered as village's property<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> This Village in Rajasthan Plants 111 Trees for Every Girl Child Born. Thanks to One Man's Vision.  
<https://www.thebetterindia.com/73393/piplantri-rajasthan-girl-child-planting-trees/>. Retrieved on August 1, 2019

This practice became so popular that some other nearby villages also adopted it. Inhabitants of another village of Eastern Bihar plant at least ten fruit trees to celebrate the birth of their female child. The money earned through the wood and fruits of these trees are saved for this girl only and she becomes owner of these trees at the age of marriage.<sup>348</sup>

It is a common practice in India that bride's family gives dowry according to the education, social and economic status, caste, and job of the groom. Plantation of fruit trees has become a profitable business of the whole region. People now plant fruit trees instead of wheat and other crops. It is also beneficial to make the climate clean and green. All these villages look like thick jungles because of these trees. People are seen everywhere sitting under the shadows of their mango and

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lychee trees during summer season.<sup>349</sup> In this way these trees not only become a source for saving the lives of many girls but also increase the income of the family.

Although cast system and many other traditions are still prevailing in Hindu society, but due to these new trends attitudes are changing now, and many educated persons do not consider cast system as something important. The concept of education for all is becoming popular. The advent of religious-reform movements shows that religious class is now realizing the necessity of change which is a great encouragement for contemporary Hindu women. This has been accepted as a fact that without participation of women a prosperous society cannot be achieved. Women are coming forward to participate actively for the progress of their society. The increasing economic

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<sup>348</sup> The Bihar village of green daughters. <https://www.gulfnews.com/world/asia/india-the-bihar-village-of-greendaughters-1.653031>. Retrieved on August 1, 2019

<sup>349</sup> Tewari Amarnath., How fruit trees in Indian village save girls lives. <https://www.bbc.com/news/10204759>. Retrieved on August 2, 2019

requirements of the people are also motivating women to come forward and work to increase the income of their families. Women are seen sitting at higher positions in leading roles at national level in India today. Indra Gandhi served the country as prime minister. Sonia Gandhi and now Paryanka Gandhi are the leading politicians of Indian National Congress. Some other examples of leading Hindu female politicians are Mumta Benarji who served as the chief minister of Bengal, Shela Dixit who served as the chief minister of Delhi and Sushma Suraj who was an active politician of Bhartiya Janata Party and served the country twice as the minister. Oma Bharti is another famous lady of the same political party. Their names are important here because they represent a political party which is also religiously motivated. Once, while sharing her views about the issue of attaining equality for Hindu women, she said:

“Women are inherently superior as a created species. Men are not such noble beings that women should fight for equality. Instead they should fight to be treated with respect.....If Indian women

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combine the madhury (sweetness), their femininity, with self-pride and political awareness, they  
can teach the whole world the path of liberation”.<sup>350</sup>

It is interesting to know that BJP is an extremist Hindu religious party who adheres strictly with religious views. This saying is showing the thinking of a female Hindu political leader, who is also representing a religious party. The equality does not mean the equal status of men and women to her, rather to be treated with respect is enough for her along with a feeling of pride on herself with whatever qualities she has been bestowed by the nature as a female. This can lead to the path of liberation to a woman and enough according to her to get success. This saying raises another point

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<sup>350</sup> Basharat, Tahira., The Contemporary Hindu Women of India: An overview. 2009, A Research Journal of South Asian Studies. V. 24, No. 2, pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/5-Dr.%Tahira.pdf. Retrieved on July 18, 2019

as well, it is that the issues like status of women in a male dominating society, her religious position, whether she is superior or inferior to men, what type of relationship she should have with males around her, how she should be treated in the society, what personal qualities a woman inherits from nature, what she can give to society and what is the way of liberation for a woman are still being discussed in contemporary Hindu discourse. This is a great development that the government of a religious party is taking interest now in grooming their women for practical life. But along with all these efforts made in today's Hindu society to give women a respectable place, women in are still struggling at different levels to be treated as respectable. Indian society today, is a patriarchal society where men dominate every area of human life. Situation is still horrible in many rural areas. Many women are associated to agriculture and industry but do not get the full payment of their services even in big cities. Religious condition is also not satisfactory. At one side there are women, who are becoming a source to revive sainthood of Vedic period and presenting the examples of Sacred Feminine in their society. On the other hand, still there are

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temples where women are not allowed even to enter and worship as mentioned earlier. Thus, the struggle is going on.

#### 4.9. Influential aspect of Sacred Feminine in the practical lives of contemporary

##### Hindu women

It has already been discussed that when these movements and organizations were appearing on the scene of contemporary Hinduism, this appearance was also marking the phenomena of the revival of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism. As mentioned earlier, this was a time when SubContinent was passing through a phase of struggle for independence. Women also participated actively in this struggle. The very first active and practical role of Indian women was observed in

Swadeshi movement<sup>351</sup>. The movement demanded to boycott the British goods and promoting the use of local items. In this way women, being the guardians of their homes played a vital role in making the movement successful. They not only checked that no imported item is purchased for household tasks but also started small industries at home to boost the local economy as the word 'Swadeshi' stands for self-reliance. A series of writings also appeared in contemporary period enhancing the role of females in respect to the development of Indian society. Such as the novel '*Home and the World*' by Rabindranath Tagore which was written in an environment when Swadeshi movement was on its peak. Another notable writing of this period is '*Difficult Daughters*' by Manju Kapur. This novel was written under the influence of Satyagraha movement of Gandhiji. The writer enhanced the role of women through different female characters like Swarnalata, Virmati, Kasturi and Shakuntala.<sup>352</sup> Some important women related issues in society

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such as marriage, polygamy, education, being independent in life, her religious and social status and woman's political role are enhanced through these female characters. The writer of another novel '*Ladies Coupe*' presents the idea of a girl who is providing financial support to her family and faces hardships in a manly way during this struggle. It is obvious that its subject was equality, self-grooming, financial independence, and a lesson for young girls that they should make themselves powerful enough to face the hardships with confidence and courage to get success in life.

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<sup>351</sup> Swadeshi movement appeared as a reaction to the partition of Bengal by British in 1905 and continued till the decision was taken back

<sup>352</sup> Shrivastava, Nidhi., *The Progress of Indian women from 1900s to Present*. 2009: Honors scholar theses. Paper 76. [http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/srhonors\\_theses/76](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/76). P. 14-23  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/27404713\\_The\\_progreess\\_of\\_Indian\\_women\\_from\\_1900s\\_to\\_present](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/27404713_The_progreess_of_Indian_women_from_1900s_to_present). Retrieved on March 27, 2019

An analysis of these novels is given by a researcher in 2009 in which she concludes that these writings are telling us about the changing role of women in Hindu society in contemporary period in different aspects of life including religion, which marked a turning point in woman's role other than a householder only. Another important point, which is also the main concern of this research, is that some of the female characters in these novels are having the names of Hindu goddesses such as Janaki and Ganga. This not only shows mingling up the ideas of women development and religion together in this era but also reflects the reviving element of Sacred Feminine in the literature of this period. This feminine element reaches to the level of sacredness when these female characters are presented with the names of Hindu Devis and seen performing their roles in practical lives as supporters of their families, sacrificing for the benefit of others and making others feeling blessed due to their presence. Here they are carrying the aspect of goddess or God as

Mother which raises the status of women to the level of sacredness, thus reflecting the concept of Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hindu thought. These were the writers, who believed in women development, but this should be along with the religion and not leaving it behind. These scholars believed in the importance of the role of women for social development with a religious identity.

Another movement that marked the phenomena of feminine as sacred in contemporary Hinduism, was the 'Devi movement'. Its followers were known as Adivasis. This movement appeared in Southern Gujrat. Although many Hindu scholars declared them as non-Hindus because of allowing eating meat in religion but it is still known as a notable group of late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, which gave a different status to women from traditional practices. Most of the scholars have taken them as a group of lower caste Hindus who deviated the original religious teachings and rebelled against cast system. As appears from its name, the movement believed in Devi or goddess worship. This goddess and related religious rituals appeared as a reaction of



certain circumstances, this community was facing along with the slogan of bringing reforms in social behavior towards women and the oppressed class of the society overall. Till the late nineteenth century, Adivasis, were associated to the business of toddy and daru<sup>353</sup> and prepared it in their homes for trading purposes. Most of the dealers who purchased it from Adivasis were Parsis. It is said that these traders when used to come to the areas of local manufacturers, also entered their homes and raped their women after drinking. Women and young girls were also forced to act as prostitutes for the Parsi officials. These circumstances made Adivasis to develop rituals of purification for their women. Special ceremonies were held for those women of the community who had passed through this situation. The cases of taking bribes, capturing their lands and other exploitations were also reported. The goddess that appeared in these circumstances was Sitala, a sign of bringing change and a protest to this oppression. This goddess could appear in its physical form in any woman of the community. She preached the prohibition of liquor business and drinking it. The male members of every family were encouraged to drink tea instead of liquor

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and to earn through some other sources. Open clashes were reported between Parsis and Adivasis after this. Many of them also rebelled against the Hindu belief of cow veneration. They used to beat it with a stick like other animals, drove it away from their houses and fields and many were also involved in selling cows, its skin and meat. With the passage of time, the movement merged into the reform movement of Gandhiji. Many community members also joined independence movement and the nationalist movement. After a few leaders were punished by the government no one claimed to be possessed with a goddess. But it is a fact that the rural women of Andhra

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<sup>353</sup> Toddy or tadi was made from fermentation of palm tree juice and daru is a type of local vine prepared from the flowers of mahua tree and alcohol. Both are considered as the types of vine but not very strong

Pradesh continued their struggle against liquor even without any goddess.<sup>354</sup>

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## CHAPTER: 5

### An Islamic Appraisal towards Female led and Socio-religious Reform movements in Contemporary Hinduism

According to the theme of the research, it is concerned with the study of revival of the phenomenon of Sacred Feminine with a viewpoint of Islam. This chapter studies female led organizations and reform movements along with providing an Islamic stance towards the phenomena of Sacred

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<sup>354</sup> Doniger, Wendy., *The Hindus: An alternative History*, New Delhi: speaking Tiger publishing private limited, 2015. P. 628-632

Feminine. It also gives Islamic viewpoint regarding religious and spiritual status of women which presents a clear picture of Islamic teachings towards feminine as sacred.

### 5.1. Female led contemporary Hindu movements and Islamic Appraisal

It is the nature of Islam that it focuses upon individuals and society and does not keep itself limited with worship and beliefs only. It has a clear position on every theoretical and practical aspect of social and religious life of every community in human society. Women's role and status is also one of those issues that have always been important in the teachings of Islam and that is why it is necessary to have Islamic viewpoint towards those areas that are focused a lot by these female led organizations.

#### 5.1.1. Social status of women

It is the characteristic of Islam that it always focused upon providing a respectable status to women in society. Their rights and responsibilities regarding social and family life are clearly mentioned in Qur'an and the traditions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Islam gives rights to every woman to take decision about her life according to her liking and disliking. She has the right to lay conditions for her marriage and husband is bound to fulfil these conditions. It has also been made compulsory for a man to pay the Dower (Haq Mehar) to his wife right at the time of Nikah. Force marriages are not allowed according to Islamic Shariah. Similarly, Shariah gives the right of cancellation of marriage to a girl if she does not agree. These commandments are mentioned in Qur'an clearly such as:

‘And when you divorce women and they reach their prescribed time, then either retain them in good fellowship or set them free with liberality, and do not retain them for injury, so that you exceed the limits, and whoever does this, he indeed is unjust to his own soul (Al-Qur'an: V'.

The following verse also talks about female right at the time of marriage

‘And give the women (upon marriage) their (bridal) gifts graciously. But if they give up willingly to you anything of it then take it in satisfaction and ease.’ (Al-Qur’an: V. 61, C. 4)

It has been stated explicitly in one verse that they are equal to men when Qur’an mentions feminine and masculine nouns parallel to each other. They are at equal level in the sight of Allah as said:

‘Indeed the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so-for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.’ (Al-Qur’an: V. 35, C. 33)

Qur’an mentions equal status of women at other places as well as said:

‘The believers, men and women are protectors, one of another, they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them Allah will pour His mercy. For Allah is exalted in power; Wise” (Al-Qur’an: V. 71, C. 9)

The verse is clear about the reward of good deeds which is for everyone without any discrimination on the basis of gender.

The role of women at individual and collective level in human society is encouraged in every period of Islam. Before coming to India, Islam had already set an example of bringing reforms in women’s plight in Arab society shortly after its advent. Even at a time when Islam was not a ruling

power in Arab, it talked about the inhuman Arab practices against women and condemned them strictly. It was a common practice that women were purchased and sold like goods in the markets. Having slave girls and giving them to others as gifts was also common. Even wives of a diseased person were distributed among his sons along with other properties. Qur'anic verses before migration talked about the social practice of killing of female infants and declared that Allah will not even talk to those on the day of judgement, who have committed this sin. (Al-Qur'an: V. 8-9, C. 81)

And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked. For what sin she was killed.

(Al-Qur'an: V. 8-9, C. 81)

Several traditions of Holy Prophet (PBUH) are also there in which He condemned those who killed their daughters and praised those who gave love and affection to them just like their sons. Thus, Islam categorically differentiates between the responsibilities of men and women depending upon their attributes and qualities bestowed to them by nature, and not because of gender.

#### 5.1.2. Women Education

Education has always been something very important in the sight of Islam. Islam promotes education for everyone. It was always a common practice among the Muslim societies that they made special arrangements to provide proper education to their kids. Islam promised highest place in the Heavens for those who do not differentiate between their sons and daughters. Islam promoted a culture of education for everyone which is a distinguishing feature of Islam and something quite different from the traditional Hindu society where getting education was the right of priestly class only. All this is based upon the clear verses of Qur'an and traditions of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H). Famous verse of Qur'an is:

‘Is one who is devoutly obedient during periods of the night, prostrating and standing [in prayer], fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the mercy of his Lord, [like one who does not]? Say, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding.’ (Al-Qur’an: C. 39, V. 9)

The last portion of the verse is clear about the status of knowledgeable ones. The encouraging words of Prophet about knowledge are:

‘Seeking knowledge is an obligation for every person’<sup>355</sup>

More than this the first revelation of Qur’an was about the importance of knowledge.

‘Read in the name of your Lord who created. Created man from a clot of blood. Read and your Lord is the most respected. He is the One Who taught human from pen. Taught him what he did not know.’ (V: 1-5, C: 96)

It is clear through these verses as well as the tradition that knowledge is something important and for everyone in the sight of Islam.

Mother Meera’s movement started from an ashram, which was not only a place for worship but served as a community school as well. Today a large boarding school is a part of Mother Meera’s ashram where education is free for all, especially girls. The school also provides technical education for females to make them independent financially. Mother Meera herself and before her

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Mira Alfassa, both reflect a new, transformed, and progressive image of women in contemporary Hindu society. Same is the case with other two organizations, Brahma Kumari and Sri Sarada

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<sup>355</sup> Sunan ibn-e-Maja (1/81) (224)

Devi. A look at their welfare activities shows that women education is among their major areas. As mentioned above, many schools and colleges are opened for women with special personal interest from Sri Sarada Devi under the movement of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. A group of highly educated and independent ladies is leading the Brahma Kumari organization today. In this respect they seem closer to Islam.

### 5.1.3. Denial of Gender Discrimination

Islam stands for equality and justice in human societies. It has always denied the classification of humanity on the basis of race, religion, and gender. All are equal in the sight of Allah as it is said in Qur'an:

‘O mankind! We have created you from one man and woman and made you in the form of nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily the most respectable amongst you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most pious amongst you’ (Al-Qur'an: V.13, C. 49)

The above-mentioned verse of chapter Al-Tawbah of the Holy Qur'an also carries the message of equality and denial of discrimination on the basis of gender. According to a tradition of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) the best among the believers is he who is good with his family and of course wife is the key figure in one's family.

The organizations studied in this research have gone against the traditional concepts of Hindu society by denying this discrimination. All three of them opened their spiritual sessions, worship places and circle of devotees for everyone. They talk about equality, justice, and religion for all. These organizations also opened their worship places for both men and women. This is also different from the traditional Brahmanism where women are still not allowed at some places to enter the temples and to read from certain sacred books.

This is also a prominent feature of Islam that it talks about everyone's status in religion and not a single class of the society is banned from participating in religious and spiritual activities neither one single group has the authoritative position in religion. Women used to come to offer their prayers in the mosques since the early period of Islam. Along with worship places, women participated in every type of activity in Islamic society whether it was literary, religious, political, economic, or social. Islamic history is full of examples of those women who were the leading religious scholars of their times. They also served their states as political leaders and successful rulers. It was all because of that environment, education, guidance, training, and encouragement which they received from their elders at equal level with their male family members. Thus, the trend was always there in Islamic culture, but these Hindu religious and reform organizations are introducing it now in contemporary times.

#### 5.1.4. Islamic worships and Female led Hindu movements

Islamic worships are the symbols of complete submission and total devotion to Allah Almighty. A Muslim gives the sign of submission to Allah physically and mentally with fulfilling the required conditions. This physical submission becomes a source of spiritual elevation for the worshipper. worships bring a person closer to God. But according to the Islamic viewpoint worships in Islam are also related to the practical side of the believer's lives. For instance, Salaat (prayer) when offered at collective level becomes a source of developing relation with other Muslims of one locality. It is the symbol of equality among Muslims. Fasting symbolizes that Allah is the foremost priority of the Muslims and His commandments are above all for him. Through Saum (observing fast), Muslims know about the hunger pains of their poor fellows. It teaches sacrificing for Allah and for other fellow Muslims. The worship of Hajj (Pilgrimage) reflects unity and equality among



Muslims belonging to different parts of the world. Hajj and Zakat (Alms taxes) teach sacrificing and spending in the way of Allah.<sup>356</sup>

All these three movements promote meditation in the name of Divine. It is well known that worship in Hinduism is performed in temples with images of gods and goddesses in front of them. It is the significant feature of Islam that it condemns the iconographical images of God. The worship of Salaat can be offered anywhere if the conditions are fulfilled.<sup>357</sup> These organizations also encourage their followers to practice meditation anywhere if they are not able to come to the specific place.

Mother Meera allowed her followers to practice japa of her name even during their daily chores. It is also something similar to the teachings of Islam as according to the Islamic concept of worship, every action is rewarded just like a worship, if it is started with Allah's name and performed with full sincerity and devotion to Allah.<sup>358</sup> Brahma Kumaris are also observed following Islamic practice of offering prayer when they sing their sacred songs five times a day almost at the same timings in which Muslims offer their prayers five times in twenty-four hours.<sup>359</sup>

#### 5.1.5. Service to Mankind

Islam gives great respect to humanity. Everything and all creations in this world are created according to the physical and mental requirements of human beings. How humans are using many

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<sup>356</sup> Al-Jawziyyah., Ibn Al-Qayyam. *A Hand Book of Islamic prayers*: Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic publications Pvt limited., 1991: P. 2

<sup>357</sup> Al-Tirmidhi., Abu Eisa Muhammad ibn-e-Eisa Al-Tirmidhi *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi (Jama' Tirmidhi)* Hadith no: 317, narrated by *Abu Sa'eed Al-Khudri*, recorded in the chapter: 2 Al-Salah. 2007. Islamic Research Section Dar-us Salam

<sup>358</sup> The Concept of Worship. *Dar-ul-Ifta' Al-Missriyyah*. [www.dar-alifta.org/foreign/viewArticle.aspx?ID=268&CategoryID=3](http://www.dar-alifta.org/foreign/viewArticle.aspx?ID=268&CategoryID=3)

<sup>359</sup> Astonishing similarities between Brahma Kumaris and Islam  
[www.a1spiritual.info/website%20written%20materials/.../BKs%20and%20Islameng.p...](http://www.a1spiritual.info/website%20written%20materials/.../BKs%20and%20Islameng.p...) P. 2

living and non-living things present on the planet Earth for his benefit clearly shows that man has been given an upper hand in this creation. This concept is presented in Qur'an in clear words when Allah says:

‘And when your lord said to the angels; No doubt I’m going to create a caliph on Earth.....’.

(Al-Qur'an: V. 30, C. 2)

The five objectives of Shariah: Hifz-ud-Din (protection of religion), Hifz-un-Nafs (protection of life), Hifz-hn-Nasl (protection of lineage), Hifz-ul-A'ql (protection of intellect) and Hifz-ul-Maal (protection of property) gives a clear picture that how much respect Shariah has given to human life.

A look at the activities of these three organizations tells that they are also focusing a lot upon serving humanity more than preaching religion. Being a missionary Religion Islam not only focuses upon preaching religion it also emphasizes a lot upon service to mankind. Hinduism believes in classification in society where one class is considered as the sacred and the last two are committed to serve the higher groups only. People belonging to the higher classes are the religious leaders and it is the religious duty of others to serve them. But the leaders of these female led movements are known to give respect to everyone even though they belong to the lower casts of society. They believe in serving humanity and not Brahmins only. A study of the welfare projects launched by them presents this notion more clearly that their focus is poor and lower classes of the society. They worked for women and those who belonged to lower casts. Most of the schools are established in villages and poor areas where majority is not able even to fulfil their basic needs. The ashram schools of Mother Meera are for orphans and for those kids whose families cannot afford their education. Sarada Devi also focused upon providing better education in extremely poor areas. The institutions established by Vedanta society are run totally by donations sometimes from

the government and sometimes by other supporters. No charges are taken from the students and their families. Another practice in which Brahma Kumaris seems closer to Islamic teachings is that they demand from their members to give their wealth and properties for public welfare. Although they are not following this concept purely as in Islam, but this is something understood that this is not a Hindu practice.

It is only the teachings of Islam that presented the concept of spending money for the welfare of society. It is made compulsory for wealthy Muslims to give a specific amount of money to the poor of the society in the form of alms taxes Zakat. Commandments of its obligation are there in Qur'an and the traditions of Holy Prophet (PBUH) at several places.<sup>360</sup> Its purpose is to make the people familiar with the problems of others and that wealth should not be limited in a few hands. It should circulate in the society. Same is the purpose of these female led movements when they ask for donations from their followers.

#### 5.1.6. Women and Religion

It has already been discussed that Islam talks about women, their rights and responsibilities and providing them a respectable status in a clear way. Islamic Shariah law clearly mentions the rights and responsibilities of every community of the society. Commandments about treating women in a better way and giving them a special respect are a part of the Qur'anic teachings. These teachings have been implemented practically throughout Islamic history so much so that this practice became a part of Islamic culture and civilization. Muslims carried this culture with them wherever they

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<sup>360</sup> The term 'zakat' in the meaning of charity and religious tax is used at nine places in Qur'an. They are 7:156, 19:31, 19:55, 21:73, 23:4, 27:3, 30:39, 31:4, 41:7. The chapter of Zakat (Bab Wujub-ul-zakat) Al-Bukhari, Muhammad bin Ismail Bukhari., Sahih Al-Bukhari. 1998. Dar-ul-Ishat Karachi Pakistan. P. 259-269

went and promoted these practices in the new societies as well. Due to this aspect of Islamic Shariah, religion is not limited in the hands of one single class of the society rather men and women

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equally participate in the religious activities in a Muslim society. Verse no: 13 of chapter Al-Hujrat has already been mentioned in this respect. At another place Allah said:

‘Men shall have the benefit of what they earn, and women shall have the benefit of what they earn. (Al-Qur’an: V. 32, C: 4)

By leading the religious movements and coming forward as spiritual leaders, these women have set an example in contemporary Hinduism that women can also be the religious leaders and that religion is something for women as well. It has always been a trend in Hindu society that men had the authoritative status in religious issues and women were not allowed to join the religious circles or even to participate in religious activities. Still there are some places in India where women are not allowed even to enter the temples. A recent incident that took place in India, is an example of it. Two women entered the temple of Lord Ayyappa in Kerala and worshipped there. This deity lives in celibacy that is why women in the age of reproduction are not allowed to enter in his temple. But Indian Supreme Court ordered to lift this ban and following the court’s decision, two women entered the temple and worshipped there. At this, there was a situation of unrest in whole of the state.<sup>361</sup> These movements have emerged as a new trend that is the refusal of a traditional thinking and introducing a form of Hinduism which is for women as well. Now there is a trend in recent years to study the role of women in society in the light of religious teachings. They emphasized that women are useful members of the human society, and their role is important for

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<sup>361</sup> Sabarimala: Indian Women make History by entering Temple <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-46733750>. Retrieved on July 18, 2019

its correct development and progress. In this respect these three women led movements or organizations are observed closer to the teachings of Islam.

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#### 5.1.7. Promoting Morality

Islam emphasizes a lot upon promoting moral and ethical values in human societies. Indeed, the central point for whole of the teachings of Islam is morality. Quran and Hadith provide a rich material regarding the importance of moral and ethical values. There are clear commandments about respecting humanity, rights of women, slaves, parents, neighbors, relatives, prisoners of war and even non-Muslims. The subject of chapter Al-Hujrat is morality only. The criteria for getting higher status in the sight of Allah is to be morally and ethically good. According to a famous saying of Prophet (P.B.U.H) the best amongst the Muslims is he who is good with his family and wife is the key person in one's family. Certain other traditions are also there emphasizing upon the importance of moral and ethical values. Prophet's companions and Muslims in the later period as well are also known for preaching high moral values, practicing them between themselves and implementing them everywhere they went. So much so that moral and ethical values became a necessary part of Islamic society. Islamic history is full of such incidents when Muslim rulers respected the non-Muslim community and their worship places after conquering their lands.

Notable among these is the conduct of Caliph Hadrat Umar (R.A) at the time of the conquest of Bait-ul-Maqdas, how Salah-ud-Din Ayyubi treated Christians during crusades, how Muslim rulers of Spain treated their non-Muslim public and many more are a part of the history of Muslim morality. Due to this level of morality even non-Muslim public trusted Muslim rulers more than their own. Muslim invasion of Sindh is important in this respect. The Hindus of Sindh welcomed

and loved Muhammad bin Qasim due to that respect which he gave to every person in the areas which he conquered. No temple was destroyed, no women and children were taken as prisoners, no houses were looted or burnt. In short, religion and morality go hand in hand in an Islamic state. The female led movements, studied in this research also focused upon character building through proper education and inculcating moral and ethical values among their followers. These teachings have always been a part of Islamic traditions.

#### 5.1.8. Collective benefit

Islam focusses a lot on the development of a better human society. For this purpose, it not only gives importance to individual life, but social life is also very important alongside. When people are conscious about their surroundings and establishing good environment, the society automatically works for the benefit of all. Even the fundamental beliefs of Islam are related to collective benefit in their practical aspect. The pillars of Islam that are also known as worships of Islam are a source to benefit the whole society at collective level. The fiscal, political, and social systems presented by Islamic Shariah are not for the benefit of Muslims only but for the benefit of everyone inside the premises of Islamic society.

Female led movements, studied in this research are also working with their focus on making women a useful, active, and beneficial individuals of their societies. The study shows that they are using their centers, headquarters and worship places as community centers and educational institutions which indicates their emphasis on collective benefit. Special classes and different types of trainings are arranged here for all women of the community specifically which are beneficial for their families and then the whole community in the long run.

#### 5.1.9. Respecting Humanity

Islam gives human beings a special status among all creatures. He has been given the status of the Caliph of Allah and an upper hand over all other creations. He is allowed even to use them for his personal benefit. There is a clear verse of Qur'an:

‘Indeed, we gave respect to the sons of Adam.....’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 70, C. 17) At another place Allah clearly says:

‘Indeed, we created man in his best form’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 4, C. 95)

Islam does not encourage disgracing humanity at any level and in any situation. Man is a respectable creation of Allah and a representative of Divine in this world. Thus, holds a special status among all other creations as said earlier. Disgracing someone in the name of religion or promoting religiosity or spirituality through physical and mental humiliation is an un-Islamic way. On the other hand, traditional Hinduism takes life itself as a problem and the ultimate success is to get rid of worldly life and desires. Most religious persons attain Samadhi by putting their lives to an end which means going out of this world is the greatest relief. Those who reach to the level of Sadhu, are supposed to leave worldly life completely. They tease themselves physically as much as possible. The female led movements and organizations, searched in this thesis seems away from these traditional concepts. Their leaders never talked about leaving the world to become truly religious rather taught how to make one's life better while living in the society, which is a pure Islamic concept.

#### 5.1.10. Role of Worship places in welfare activities

Islam is a practical religion and practical social life is very important according to Islamic Shariah. Since its beginning Islam had started guiding its followers to think about their proper religious, social, educational as well as collective grooming so that they could find a proper platform to share

their problems and finding their solutions in the light of their religion. Worship places have always been significant in this respect in Islamic societies that they played a role as community centers and social platforms where Muslims not only worshiped five times a day but knew about the problems of others along with finding their solutions. History of Islam tells that initially, when Muslims were not in a strong position in Makkah, they used to sit in the house of Arqam for religious education and worship. Then, shortly after migration, very first step taken by the Prophet (P.B.U.H) was building a mosque, Masjid-e-Nabwi, which not only served as a worship place but also as an early school and a community center for Muslims, popularly known as Suffa. A group of companions lived there and kept busy with learning and teaching on the commandments of Holy Prophet (PBUH).

It is also observed during the study of these movements and organizations that their worship places also serve as community centers and sometimes educational institutes like the ashram of Mother Meera in Pondicherry and the meditation center of Sri Sarada Devi in Calcutta. Brahma Kumaris went far ahead of these. Their worship place is an open center for everyone where devotees offer prayers five times a day and read from Murlis. Problems of members are discussed, and issues of the organization are settled here which is quite a different practice from traditional religion.

## 5.2. Socio-religious Reform movements and Islamic Appraisal

Along with female led organizations it is also important to have Islamic appraisal about socioreligious reform movements and their practices. They also seem closer to Islamic teachings, practices, and cultural traditions in their reformation, working style and practices, when studied with an Islamic appraisal. These reformers emerged in the times of colonialism, but it is a historical fact that colonialism could not affect their society as Islamic culture did. Through the reforms and practices, they introduced, they seem closer to Islamic values as discussed below:



### 5.2.1. The concept of Brotherhood

Islam presents the idea of brotherhood among all Muslims of the world beyond cast, race, color, or nationality. It has been mentioned clearly in Qur'an that division of people in the form of cast and tribes is just a natural pattern aiming towards giving them a recognition in this world. The most respectable in the sight of Allah is he who is the most pious.

‘The best amongst you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most pious of All’.

(Al-Qur'an: V.13, C.49)

In another verse it is said:

‘The believers are brothers.’ (Al-Qur'an: V. 10, C. 49)

Prophet (PBUH) also made it clear in his last sermon by telling that there is no concept of superiority of white over black or Arab over non-Arab. All are equal in the sight of Allah. The only criteria for superiority, is piety.<sup>362</sup> When Prophet (P.B.U.H) migrated from Makkah to Madina He presented a practical model of this concept of brotherhood in front of the world. This incident is known as Muawakhat-e-Madina in Islamic history.

Social reform movements and reformers, studied in this research also worked beyond the concept of cast system, gender and racism which is a totally different concept from the traditional practice in Hindu society. They denied classification of humanity and propagated to treat all on equal basis. They seem introducing the concept of brotherhood in Hinduism. Especially when Pandurang Shastri Athavale launched the movement of Swadhiyay Pariwar and Shri Ram Sharma Achariya introduced Gayatri Pariwar, they are openly introducing the concept of brotherhood to bring

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<sup>362</sup> Mubarakpuri., Safiur-Rehman. The Sealed Nectar: Al-Raheeql Makhtum. 2008, Darussalam. Riyadh. P. 398

change in their society. It seems that they promoted the culture of helping the poor, deprived and needy communities of their society through this.

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### 5.2.2. Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is a significant feature of Islam and one of basic human rights. Islam clearly mentions that it is the right of every person to choose religion of his own and spend his life according to the belief he likes. There are clear verses in Qur'an over the issue. Some of these are:

‘The Truth is from your Lord. Then who so ever wills, let him believe and who so ever denies, let him disbelieve’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 29, C. 18)

Other verses in Qur'an are:

‘There is no compulsion in religion’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 256, C. 2)

‘For you, your way and for me, my religion’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 6, C. 109)

These verses are clear about the freedom of adopting and following a religion of one's own choice and spending the life with the way he likes. Islam believes in conveying the message of Allah in the best way, but it was never commanded in any verse that accepting this message has been made obligatory for all. Not even a single tradition is recorded in the sayings and life history of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) that He ordered all to accept His message. Islamic history records that nonMuslims lived a peaceful and free religious life in the Islamic state.

These reformers and reform movements also, when allowed everyone to join their circle and to be a part of their community, they never demanded them to change their religion and be a Hindu at first. People from every faith and nationality are welcomed to be a part of their organizations. They themselves were proud Hindus and believe that Hinduism is the right faith, their worships and practices are also very similar to Hindu practices, but they never discriminated on the basis of religion. The followers of all faiths are treated equally according to their teachings.

### 5.2.3. Promoting Education

Importance of education in Islamic Shariah is quite clear. It has also been explained earlier in the study of female led movements with Islamic appraisal. Allah Himself taught His Prophet to say:

‘And say O’ my Lord! Increase me in knowledge’. (Al-Qur’an: V. 114, C. 20)

This importance is not only there in the teachings of Qur’an and Sunnah rather Islamic history records many examples which tell about the importance of knowledge in the sight of Islam. The very first example was set by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) Himself, when He put a condition of teaching the Muslim kids the art of reading and writing as a ransom, for the prisoners of The Battle of Badr, and to get freedom in return.<sup>363</sup>

An important thing about all these reform movements and reformers is that they were very much concerned about promoting a culture of education in their society. The historical record of these movements shows that the focus of their welfare activities was education. They worked a lot towards opening schools, colleges and universities for both boys and girls. They took education as the basis for that ideal society which they wanted to establish. In the Hindu culture of India, education was something limited to higher casts only. Members of lower casts could not even think

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<sup>363</sup> Mubarakpuri., Safiur-Rehman. The Sealed Nectar: Al-Raheeql Makhtum. 2008, Darussalam. Riyadh. P. 208

about getting education. Especially religious education was the domain of Brahmins only. But these organizations declared every type of education for everyone. Dhondhoo Keshav Karve started from his home and the lowest class of his village. Pandurang Shastri Athavale used to visit the lower cast colonies with his grandfather since his childhood with a purpose of teaching the lower casts. Shri Ram Sharma Achariya himself was a writer and a religious teacher. His writings and discourses are for everyone. Of course, this is not the practice of Hinduism. It was only Islam

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which emphasized upon education and importance of knowledge for everyone. These three reformers and their movements seem closer to the teachings of Islam when they take education as the foundation for a progressive society and the success of their movements.

#### 5.2.4. Fighting for the rights of deprived communities

Standing in support of the weaker communities of the society is much praised according to the teachings of Islam. Islam not only encourages it, but a promise of great reward is there for those who stand to fight for the rights of their weak brothers. Qur'an also encourages this concept by saying:

‘And what happened to you that you don’t fight for the rights of those (men, women and children) who ask (Allah) to take them out of a specific place whose inhabitants are cruel and pray to have a special supporter and helper friend for them’. (Al-Qur’an: V. 75, C. 4)

Although in its apparent meanings the verse carries the meaning of launching a war against cruelty to provide protection to the weaker, but in its wider meanings it is about providing all types of support and protection to those who do not have enough power to fight for their rights. Muslim women of India were running their own associations to provide protection to women at times and

to fight for their rights. Most popular among these was Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam. The purpose of this organization was to work for social welfare and women education in the light of teachings of Islam. They also worked to make Muslim women aware of their religious and social rights. Although they had to face criticism from some conservative Muslim scholars but continued their efforts in collaboration with the government and Muslim leaders at that time.<sup>364</sup> Hindu

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reformers seem closer to such Muslim activists as well and launched this type of movements in Hinduism too.

#### 5.2.5. Islamic system of Alms Taxes

Every social and welfare activity needs financial support. Nothing can be done only through passion and love for humanity. Money is a necessary requirement to fulfil any welfare project. Especially if it does not have any support from the government, to complete it becomes a challenge for the initiators. Islam gives a beautiful system of alms taxes for its followers. It is a specific amount of money collected from the rich and spent upon the needy and poor communities of the society. There is a great reward in Islam for those who pay their alms taxes happily. Along with this, giving charities and donations in the way of Allah is also very much appreciated and encouraged in Islamic Shariah:

‘And in their wealth, there is a share for beggars (those who beg) and deprived (those who are in a need of help but do not demand).’ (Al-Qur’an: V. 19, C. 51)

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<sup>364</sup> Shabbir, Sajida., Struggle for Muslim Women’s Rights in British India (1857-1947). Pakistan Vision pu.edu.pk/images/journals/studies/PDF-FILES/Articles-1\_V\_12\_No\_2\_Dec11.pdf. P. 14. Retrieved on July 3, 2019

At another place it has been stated:

‘And give to your close ones their right and to Masakeen and the wayfarer and do not spend your wealth in useless expenditures.’ (Al-Qur’an: V. 26, C. 17)

Hindu reform movements introduced the same practice in the communities which they established and made it compulsory for their rich members to give some amount from their money in the welfare activities of the movement. The movements of Swadhiyay Pariwar and Gayatri Pariwar have implemented it as a rule for their followers. Dhondho Keshave Karv set the tradition of giving charity for the education of poor women. He promoted the culture of collecting donations from wealthy of his nation which is a different culture from traditional Hindu society and closer to Islamic practice. Those who have any kind of skill, should serve the organization through this. This concept is not found in Hindu teachings anywhere, but a common practice in Islamic societies.

#### 5.2.6. Revivalist movements among Muslims

The last decades of nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century was the time when Muslims had started struggling for their religious and social revival. Muslim religious scholars and political leaders were presenting new ideologies for the revival of Islamic culture. There was a wave among Muslims to revive the nation’s overall moral, social, economic, and political character and to save their Islamic culture and identity in a rapidly changing world. This was also the time when Muslims were facing the worst consequences for losing The War of Independence in 1857 in India. The Muslim revivalists were now focusing upon rebuilding the morale of the nation through education. The Aligarh movement was a great example of these revivalists. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan presented an idea of a new system of education where he encouraged Muslims to

learn English language and Western sciences along with Islamic education with a sense of preserving their own culture and identity. The name of Tehreek-e-Deo Band, which worked to preserve the religious identity of Muslims through promoting religious education, is also important in this regard. Nadvat-ul-Ulama was established by a group of religious minded Muslims who were government servants as well. When Muslims were not allowed to take admission in Hindu and Christian Missionary schools, Muslims of Punjab established their own institutions under the movement of Anjuman-e-Himayat-e-Islam. Such revivalist Muslim leaders set a role model for other local communities and gave an idea that how practical steps can be taken by the people themselves to change their circumstances. It is a historical fact that these Hindu reformers and many others as well appeared in the same times when Muslim revivalist movements were working successfully among Muslim public. Thus, these Hindu reform movements of contemporary period might have been influenced from their Muslim counterparts.

#### 5.2.7. Standing for the rights of women

Islamic teachings for women rights are clear. It is proved through historical facts that Islam presented the ideology of giving respect to women in a time when they were not considered even human beings. Islam explained the status of women with complete description of his rights in different aspects of life. There are clear commandments in Qur'an and traditions of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) regarding respecting women as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives. Many Qur'anic verses are there which shows respectable status of women in the sight of Islam.

‘And we have made the Muslim men to be kind to his parents. His mother bears him with hardship and then brings him forth with pain and the bearing of him and weaning of him is thirty months.....’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 15, C. 46)

Similarly, it is recorded in a tradition of Holy prophet:

‘The world and all things in it are precious, and the most precious thing in the world is the pious woman.’<sup>365</sup>

These reform movements and reformers stood against the inhuman attitude of Hindu society towards women specially widows and women remarriage related issues and introduced women related reforms with a purpose of providing them a respectable status which is something new in Hindu society but common among Muslims.

### 5.3. Islam and Hindu Women

Islam is a religion which talks about the rights of every community in human society. Women rights have always been an important part of Islamic teachings. These teachings have always been

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a part of Islamic cultural and moral values. Muslims carried them and implemented them wherever they went. Women were always an oppressed class in Hindu society. Her status has always been a controversial issue among the observers. Muslim states made new laws to practice a better system of government and to provide basic human rights to every person in the society. Among these were also women related laws.

The most important step taken by Muslim rulers towards elevating the status of women was introducing the laws related to custom of sati. Naseer-ud-Din Humayyun, one of the great Mughal emperors, banned’ to burn the wife alive in the funeral pyre of the husband if she is too young to be a mother. Although this law could not provide protection to every widow, but it shows that Muslim rulers wanted to bring a change in traditional customs and became a source to save the lives of many young girls. Child marriage was also a common practice throughout India. They knew that they are against the basic human rights but of course, they could not put a complete ban

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<sup>365</sup> Sahih Muslim, (9/15), (1467)



on such customs even though they were inhuman in nature because they were practiced in the name of religion and putting a ban on them meant to ban the religious practices of Hindus. In the times of emperor Akbar, taking permission from the government was made compulsory before performing the practice of satti.<sup>366</sup>

Muslim influence can also be reflected through purdah system among prominent and noble Hindu families. Although the practice was not very much popular, but historical records tell that even before Islam Hindu women from higher casts had to follow some rules to be distinguished as respectable ladies. It is written in Arthashastra<sup>367</sup> that males should not have an eye contact with females out of their families. This commandment is similar to the commandment in Qur'an to men

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to practice Ghadde-Basr. (Al-Qur'an: V. 30, C. 24) Similarly it is written in Smriti that women should not go out without covering their faces.<sup>368</sup> This is very similar to purdah related commandments in Islamic Shariah for Muslim women. But it is also a fact that this was followed only by a small community of higher and noble classes of the society and was not a common practice. It was due to wide spread of Islamic culture in Indian society that majority of the population adopted it and soon this practice became common in Medieval period when a number of middle-class families also adopted this practice with a purpose of providing protection to their women. Many followed it just because it was a common practice among the ruling class. The Marathas are known in this regard as they followed purdah as strictly as the Muslim rulers did. Till the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries purdah had become common among the rich and middleclass

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<sup>366</sup> Desai, Tripta., *Women in India*. 1992. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers private limited, New Delhi India. P. 16

<sup>367</sup> Arthashastra is an ancient Indian treatise on politics, economic policy and military strategy written in Sanskrit. It is said that it is the work of many leading Sanskrit scholars over the centuries

<sup>368</sup> Desai, Tripta., *Women in India*. 1992. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers private limited, New Delhi India. P. 23

<sup>395</sup> Ibid P. 24

families of Punjab, Uttar-Pardesh, Bihar, Bengal, and Rajasthan. Women from lower casts could not practice it due to their responsibilities outside their homes such as working in fields etc. But they also always covered their heads at least and avoided facing towards strangers while they are out of their houses.<sup>395</sup> It shows that women followed it as a tradition and not as a religious practice.

The Devi movement, mentioned above, is also important in this regard that they gave a different status to women from traditional practices. Women were not treated as a property or a commodity in the families of Adivasis rather they had the right of divorce and remarry in case of widow. Thus, they seem closer to the teachings of Islam while giving such rights to their women. The movement also refused cast system in Indian society. They also resisted strongly against Christian

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missionaries and taught their community members to be firm on their teachings.<sup>396</sup> The way how this community treated the cows was also different from the traditional Hindu practice. They seem closer to some Muslim practices in this respect.

#### 5.4. Islamic Appraisal regarding Divine as Feminine

Islam whenever talks about Allah Subhana-hu-wa-Ta'ala or Divine Being, according to the Western term, it is clear from the verses of Holy Qur'an that there is no concept of gender of the Divine in Islam. There are several verses in Qur'an which tell about the concept of God, His Being, and attributes and qualities associated to His Being. There is no concept of gender of

God in any Qur'anic verse which talks about the attributes of Allah Subhanahu-wa-Ta'ala or The God of Islam. In fact, according to Islamic belief Allah Subhanahu-wa-Ta'ala is beyond all these attributes and qualities which are the characteristics of human beings. This is something associated

to creatures that Allah created them as males and females and created the element of gender among them. In the case of Supreme Being, according to Qur'an:

‘Say that Allah is the one. Allah is the eternal and the best. He begets not, not He was begotten.

And there is none comparable to Him. (Al-Qur'an: V. 4, C. 112)

Among other clear verses is Ayat-ul-kursi:

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<sup>396</sup> Doniger, Wendy., *The Hindus: An alternative History*, New Delhi: speaking Tiger publishing private limited, 2015. P. 631

‘Allah! There is none worthy of worship other than He the ever living and the sustainer by Whom all subsist. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. To Him alone belongs whatsoever is there in the Heavens and whatsoever is there in the Earth. Who is there that can intercede with, Him except by His will? He knows all that what was before them and all that shall be after them, and they can grasp nothing of His knowledge except that which He may will. His throne (knowledge and power) encompass the heavens and the earth and the preservation of them both (the earth and heavens) does not weary Him, and He alone is the Highest and the Supreme. (Al-Qur'an: V. 255, C. 2)

Among other clear wordings about the Supreme Being in Islam is the saying of Qur'an:

‘There is nothing like Him’. (Al-Qur'an: V. 11, C. 42).

The wordings of ‘nothing like Him’ gives a clear picture of Islamic stance. These are among the key verses that are always studied whenever there is a discussion about the Being of God or Allah Subhanahu-waTa’ala, in Islam. There is no need to go into the long details of the concept of oneness (Tawheed) and attributes and qualities described in these verses here as all scholars whether they are among the interpreters (Mufasssireen), jurists (Fuqha), philosophers or Muslim theologians (Mutakallimeen), all are agreed that there is no gender for God in Islam. There is no issue of masculine and feminine for God in Islam. Thus, if the issue of Sacred Feminine is to be studied in the light of Islam, then there is no room to use this term for Allah Subhanahu-wa-Ta’ala in Islam. It is a useless discussion with reference to Islam. However, the attributes and qualities and the names of Allah Subhanahu-wa-Ta’ala mentioned in Qur’an and Sunnah in proximity to the human language, are to be understood under the Qur’anic principles: **ليس كمثله شيء** (There is nothing like Him) and (Do not give similarities for Allah SWT, (wa la tadribu lillah-il-amthaal).

## **CONCLUSION**

The whole discussion in this research revolves around the idea of revival of ‘Sacred Feminine in contemporary Hinduism’ as obvious from the title and introduction given in its beginning. The researcher searched into this issue by studying three female led religious/spiritual organizations and movements and three socio-religious reform movements and concluded that they are becoming the source of reviving the phenomenon of ‘Sacred Feminine’ in Hinduism in contemporary period through their beliefs and practices. The uniqueness of this research is enhanced when it adds Islamic appraisal towards the phenomenon.

After having an analytical study of three female led organizations, the researcher concludes that these movements or organizations emerged in a special social and political environment which was a specification of contemporary era. Then there was a time, when newly established Hindu state

of India emerged as a new developing nation in the world with a large female population. These three female led organizations are also a product of this specific environment. As discussed earlier, the religious communities and traditionalists were facing a lot of pressure from the dominating Western civilization and the supporters of progress/change because of humiliating attitude of society towards women. These circumstances not only became a strong reason for the advent of these organizations but also influenced the thinking of religious personalities of those times. The analytical study of these movements shows that they were also taking influence from the changes taking place in the world at that time.

No doubt that it was the time when Hindu society had interacted with two great civilizations of the world Muslim and Western, along with its own rich culture of Indus valley civilization. Muslims and West, both had a far better position of women in their societies and had emphasized upon a changing role of women in Hindu community as well. Especially after independence, Hindus of India as a nation had to present themselves as a progressive nation in front of the world. Women were playing active roles in dominating societies of the West while Islam also had a history of women participation in social and religious life. The researcher concludes that Indian society was itself in a struggle of how to find a balanced way in this situation. Thus, the female led movements and organizations, studied here, not only revived the significance of feminine aspect of the Divine but can also be taken as a new face of Hindu society and a new religious development regarding socio-religious status and role of Hindu women.

Hindu Religion has a rich material regarding myths about goddesses, females as consorts of gods and female saints in its history. These organizations also seem reviving that specific religious and spiritual status of Hindu women which was lost when the society turned into a male dominating society. In other words, Hinduism always had the concept of 'Sacred Feminine' in its religious

history and these female spiritual leaders revived this concept of their religion through their ideas and practices.

The research also concludes that female led, and reform movements are also closer to Islam in their beliefs and practices, to some extent, when studied with an Islamic viewpoint. Although, apparently, they are quite different from Islamic teachings when they present a woman as an independent religious and spiritual leader and to worship her as a sacred figure. Islam does not encourage such type of women religious leadership as presented by these organizations. Objection can be raised here that these women were not the real founders of these movements rather all three of them were founded by male spiritual leaders as the details about the history of their origin, given in chapter: 2 and 3 show. Mother Meera's uncle, Sri Aurobindo brought her to the ashram and introduced as a 'Spiritual Mother'. Dada Lekhraj was the founder of Brahma Kumari organization and Sri Ramakrishna was the person who introduced Sri Sarada Devi as the representative of Kali at first. Indeed, these three male religious and spiritual personalities themselves were inclined towards female essence of Divinity. Sri Ramakrishna was a devotee of Kali, Dada Lekhraj believed in a Supreme Divine Mother while Sri Aurobindo had established a temple of Divine Mother in Pondicherry which was popular because of Mother Mira Alfassa. Thus, the researcher concludes that these women are a new face of Hinduism in contemporary times where women are performing their roles as religious and spiritual leaders and reviving the concept of Sacred Feminine in contemporary period.

Along with the study of female led movements the researcher also studied the ideology of three socio-religious reformers and their movements and concluded that they had a deep inclination towards religion and spirituality and were also much worried about the plight of women in their society. They had a desire to bring a change in their society along with keeping their religious

traditions alive. They were influenced from many factors around them and launched such movements that were presenting a progressive picture of Hindu Religion and society. The researcher gives an analysis of the ideas of these reformers and their movements in chapter: 4 and in chapter no: 5 there is a simple Islamic appraisal towards Feminine as Sacred and status of women as religious leaders in Islam.

Another important and interesting point that appeared during the analysis, is that the three female led organizations also seem taking influence from the reformer's thought of their times especially in their concepts about women, their status and role in Hindu society and in religion. The researcher also studied those three reform movements in this research which are known for their welfare activities for women specifically but in the light of religion. After going through their women related welfare activities, the researcher concludes that they are justifying their progressive ideas and welfare works in the light of Hindu religious texts. Thus, provide a new interpretation of women related teachings of Hinduism. In this way, they are also generating a way for females to appear as religious and spiritual leaders as observed that two of these reformers were also the religious leaders of their times.

Through their teachings, they totally denied the traditional humiliating attitude of Hindu society towards women in the name of religion and presented quite a different picture of what Hinduism says about women. In the light of these facts, it can be concluded that female led spiritual movements and reformists emerged in the similar time and environment. It can also be concluded from this discussion that the female led organizations and reform movements had an influential relationship between them as described in Chapter: 4. The researcher has also studied these reformists or reform movements with an Islamic appraisal. Although female religious leaders and reformers never mentioned their similarities with Islam but through the points given in chapter: 5,

the researcher observes that Hindu reformers of contemporary period seem closer to Islamic traditions in the process of development of their society which shows how deeply Islam has penetrated into the social structure of Hindu society.

Another issue that has been studied through this research is that whether reformists and female religious leaders are influenced by the movement of 'Sacred Feminine' that appeared in the West in contemporary period or not? The researcher concludes that these reformers and spiritual leaders seem reviving the concept of Sacred Feminine in Hinduism, but they never claimed or associated their efforts to the Western movement of Sacred Feminine. It appears from this study that they followed it unconsciously as none of them ever mentioned it. They worked just for respect and equal status for women in their society. Their focus was bringing social change by motivating the women to participate in the practical life of society. They never demanded from their followers to worship goddesses only or associate oneself with one female spiritual leader as guru. Similarly, they never talked about superiority of women over men or dominance of female essence of Divinity over male. Their aim is to enhance the importance of femininity for the sustenance, completion and beauty of this world which is present everywhere and whose best representation are the women. With this standpoint they seem following the same footsteps of the movement of Sacred Feminine in the West.

By giving new meanings to Hindu concepts and beliefs, both, female religious/spiritual organizations, and reformists have contributed to the development of religion as well in contemporary period. Whether their stance is acceptable in Hinduism or not, it has initiated a new discussion in the religion which, no doubt can contribute to further development of Hindu discourse. Organizations like Brahma Kumaris have gone far ahead of all. They have presented a whole system of beliefs and practices which is quite different from the traditional Hindu faith.



With these new ideas, these organizations and movements have contributed to the development of their religion in contemporary era.

This also leads to the conclusion that this influence of religion from contemporary trends and waves of change, automatically make the researcher's mind to think that religion in its new form is also taking influence from globalization. The principle of globalization stands for the notion of combining nations, people from different nationalities, followers of different faiths, those who are speaking different languages to come closer for economic, trade, industry, and social development of human societies. This term 'Globalization' emerged in the mid twentieth century when some Western social scientists and economists were working to find ways to bring different European nations closer for economic development of the Western world. It was the same time when reformers and women led organizations were emerging in Hinduism in India. A look at the ways adopted by these reformists or reform movements and how they revived the spirit of unity, collective benefit, and sense of responsibility among their people, shows that they were also influenced from the idea of globalization. By following the same concepts, they brought different classes of Hindu community closer with the purpose of social and economic development. Similarly, female led organizations do not limit themselves to Hinduism or any other faith. All are welcomed in their circles. Their purpose is to promote religiosity and spirituality only. Atheists, followers of Christianity, those who try to find satisfaction through spiritual exercises only and Hindus all are among the devotees of Mother Meera. Brahma Kumari organization also invites everyone to join them. Vedanta society is popular among Hindus and have a group of 'American Vedantists'. Similarly, the doors of Swadhiyay Pariwar and Gayatri Pariwar are open for everyone. In this way these movements are becoming a source for bringing people from different faiths and societies together.

Today, women are participating in economic, political, social as well as religious activities of a Hindu society. Although, still there are differences, but women are participating now in daily worships not only at domestic level but in temples as well. Especially in domestic worships, women are seen in leading roles because their worship brings blessings to whole of the family and home. There are some worships which are not performed without participation of women such as rituals of wedding, childbirth or asking for the blessings from a certain female deity. Kartik Puja is also this type of worship offered mostly in Northern India.<sup>369</sup> The condition of humiliation and restriction on their freedom continued till the medieval period. Muslim rulers left quite a different example in the society which caused more pressure on existing Hindu religious tradition and reformation was demanded. Queen Jahan is a famous Queen among Salateen-e-Dakkan who got

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fame before Mughals.<sup>370</sup> Following the practice of how Muslim women were playing their roles, prominent Hindu families also started educating their daughters. The Gond Queen Durgavati, Shaivaji's mother Jijabai and Ahilya Bai Holker were the great Hindu warriors and administrators of their times. In some villages, women were leading as heads of the whole community. Then, after Muslims there was a wave of providing equal rights to women, during British rule. Girls were also joining the schools now, but still their number was not more than 2%. Women who wanted to work outside or wanted to have education had to face resistance from inside the family as well as from the society. Women education still meant just an appropriate upbringing of the young girls to become good wives, good mothers, and responsible daughters in law. Women wing was

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<sup>369</sup> Munoz, Monica., *The Role of Women in Hinduism: Becoming leaders of Patriarchal traditions*. Illinois, Wesleyan University. <https://blogs.iwu.edu/span408-mmuno/files/.../the-role-of-women-in-hinduism.pdf> P. 5

<sup>370</sup> Farishta, Muhammad Qasim., *Tareekhe Farishta*. 2018, Islami Kutab Khana Lahore. V: 2, P. 41-42

established for the first time in the history of Indian Army with the name of Rani Jhansi Regiment.<sup>371</sup> After that how Hindu women participated in the freedom movement of India and how Muslim women struggled for the establishment of Pakistan, has already been discussed earlier.

The researcher also recommends further studies in related areas which are not studied in this thesis, but new studies can be produced on them. They can be religious status of women in Islam and Hinduism, a comparative study between Sacred Feminine and the movement of Feminism, Muslim woman in Hindu society of contemporary India, Hindu woman under Muslim rule, Islamic influence on contemporary Hinduism and technology and religious studies. (The study can be religious specific as well).

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## Glossary of Terms

### A

Adi Shakti, The name of Poliremma in Aryan period	17
Adiprashakti, The great Divine Mother in Hinduism	74
Adhyatma, A person who serves humanity for nothing	109
Advaita, non-duality, becoming one with the Supreme	45
Ambika, The name of Parvati in Vedas	26
Ardhnari avatar, An avatar with the body of half male and half female	19
Arthshastra, an ancient Indian treatise on politics, economic policy and military strategy written in Sanskrit	146

Aryan, those who said to speak an Indo-European language and thought to have settled in prehistoric times in Northern Indian Sub-Continent 17

Aryasarsvati, The name of goddess Sarsvati among Buddhist tradition 23

Atharvaveda, From Athar Veda meaning knowledge

Avatar, An embodiment of the Divine on Earth, 17

Avyakt, shifted via angels in terms of Brahma Kumaris 68

Awadi mata, Another name of Pleramma, 17

## B

Behna Kendra, A women council run by Brahma Kumaris 111

Bhadrayana Upanishad, One of the Upanishads associated to its author Bhadranya

Bhagvata Purana, One of the 18<sup>th</sup> puranas of Hindi religious literature 21

Bhajan, A devotional song with religious theme or spiritual ideas 24

Bhakti, Total devotion 108

Bhava, Worldly existence, a being 108

Bindi, A small dot like circle pasted in the middle of the forehead by married Hindu ladies 90

Brahmachariya, The conduct consistent with Brahman 65,66,67,131

Brahmaloka, The world of souls in terms of Brahma Kumaris 63

Brahmo Samaj, A socio-reform movement that appeared in Calcutta in 1828 42 C

Chinchu, A tribe of Adivasis in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Orissa 17

## D

Dallat, A lower cast among Hindus 101,113

Darshan, Looking towards a spiritual guru is a worship and a way of getting blessings 79, 80,81,82

Darvidian, Related to Darvedian era

Devi Purana, A Hindu religious Sanskrit text that belongs to the purana genre of Hindu literature 19

Devi Mahatmya, A Hindu religious text describing the goddess as the Supreme power and creator of the universe 20

Devi Shukta, 125<sup>th</sup> hymn of Rig Veda 21

Devetva, A being with qualities of Guru Dev 119

Dharma, To inculcate virtue in one's own self 56

Didi, A title for elder sister as a symbol of respect 103

## G

Gayatri Yagya, Meditation with japa of Gayatri mantra 119

Gayana, Knowledge 56

Ghrit Lamp, this lamp is the symbol of Gayatri Pariwar 116

Gopi, The milkmaid friend of Krishna 25

Gurudev, A personal spiritual teacher or guide 116

## H

Hatha yoga, The Sanskrit name of raja yoga 63

Hinglaj Mata, The desert name of Pleramma 17

## J

Jaat, A native tribe of Sindh 143

Jagat Dharti, An incarnation of Durga 37

Japa, The meditative repetition of a mantra or a Divine name 40,79,83,84,128 K

Kaal, A Hindu term for time 27

Kala or Kalakamini, Kala Bo, A Hindu consort goddess 21

Karma, The universal principle of cause and effect in Hindu belief 59,60

Kumari, A Hindu term for young virgins	54
Kundalini yoga, A school of thought influenced by Shaktism and Tantra schools	22 L
Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of wealth, good fortune, prosperity and beauty	18
M	
Mahasamadhi, A highly spiritualized condition	40
Mantra, A sacred word that is considered to possess mystical or spiritual efficacy	37
Math, A Hindu term used in the meaning of an institute or college	43
Mahayana, The moderate sect of Buddhism	23
Madiga, A Dalt cast among Hindus mostly found in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orisa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala	17
Mahapurascaranas, Twenty-four different positions for reciting of Gayatri Mantra	116
Maharishi, The great Saint	92
Meed, An ancient tribe of Sindh	143
Mimansa, One of the principles of the interpretation of Vedas	21
Moksha, Liberation from the cycle of birth and death	23
Murli, The Holy texts of Brahma Kumaris	67
N	
Neo-Vedantism, The reconstruction of Advaita Vedanta	49
Nari Jagran movement, A women welfare movement that merged into Gayatri Pariwar later on	123
Navarati, A Hindu festival of autumn season with special worship of goddess Durga	29
Nayaya, One of six Shastras	
Nayayikas, The followers of Nayaya Vaisheshika system	21
Nirguna, beyond any physical attributes	77

Nymphs, A mythological spirit of nature imagined as a maiden inhabiting rivers, woods or other locations 15

## O

Om-Mandali, Sacred circle of those who chant 'Om' 54

## P

Paramatman, The Supreme soul or spirit which becomes identical to Brahman 73,74, 138

Parwati, The Hindu goddess of fertility, love, beauty, marriage, children and devotion 18

Pashu Pati, The Aryan-age name of Potu Raju 17

Pathshala, A school of traditional education in Hinduism 105

Pandit, A Hindu religious teacher 113

Pathshala, 106

Poleramma, One of famous female deities 17

Potu Raju, The regional God of Andhra Pradesh 17

Pranam, A way to pay tribute to elders in traditional Indian culture 81

Pujaris, Those who are social workers along with being religious teachers 109

Purusha, The male essence in eternal matter according to Samkhiya philosophy 21,60

Puranas, Hindu religious texts that are a part of Vedas 19

Prakriti, The female essence in eternal matter according to Samkhiya philosophy 21 R

Raja Yoga, A type of yoga practiced and promoted by Brahma Kumaris 57,58,59,132

Rudrani, The name of Parwati in Vedas 26

## S

Saguna, A Being with attributes and qualities 77

Saivism, Organized worship of Hindu God Shiva 19

Samadhi, The highest state of meditative consciousness	38,63,64,105,153
Sanskar, The rites of passage in a human being's life	65
Sant tradition, A tradition of becoming Sadhu	178
Sarsvati, The Hindu goddess of art, wisdom and learning	18,105
Satoguni, Fruits and vegetables cooked in the remembrance of God	66
Seva, Service to mankind	56
Shakti Peethas, The place for Shakti worship	77
Shaktism, A major tradition of Hinduism where the metaphysical reality is considered metaphorically feminine and Adi Prashakti is Supreme	19,90,91
Shamanic, related to the beliefs and practices associated to a Shaman	15
Shaiva Shakti cult, A syncretic form of Shaivism and Shaktism	17
Shaiva Sidhantha, A trend in Hinduism having different concepts from the traditional	178
Shodasi Puja, The event when Ramakrishna worshipped Sarada Devi	38
Shruti, The Holy texts of Hinduism which were shifted through hearing	68
Siddhi, The state of complete enlightenment	27,113
Siva lingum, The abstract representation of God Shiva in Shaivism	17
Samkhya, The philosophy believing in duality of matter	21,60,63,133
Samsara, Cyclicity of life	21
Sant Tradition,	178
Sanyasin, The Hindu monk who leaves the wordly life and becomes the religious devotee	36
Satti, A traditional Hindu custom where a wife has to burn herself alive in the funeral pyre of her husband to show the eternity of their relationship	98,135
Smriti, The Holy texts of Hinduism which were shifted through memorization	68
Sakar, A type of Brahma Kumaris sacred literature	68

Satti, 135

Sawadeshi Movement, A movement launched in 1905 to promote local goods and boycott British goods in India 139

Shaiva Sidhantha, 178

T

Tapovan System, The traditional way of teaching in Hinduism 106,111 Trimurti,

The triad of three gods in Hinduism 59,132

V

Vaisnavism, The direct descendant of the Vedic religion also known as Brahmanism 20

Vyakaran, One of six Shastras 105

Vedanta, The explanatory texts of Vedas 21, 49

Vedantism, The practical side of Vedanta 49

Vichar Kranti Abhiyan, A revolutionary movement of Thought 119

