

EVERYONE in India is aware of the existence of female *gurus* or spiritual teachers. It is highly unlikely, for example, that a name like that of Anandamayi Ma would be unknown to someone in this country. I would like to introduce here four female *gurus* whom I had the opportunity to meet in Varanasi while I was conducting an enquiry into the characteristics of Hindu female ascetics.

I shall present here the portraits of these ladies. As far as possible, I shall avoid technical discussions, emphasising rather the human aspect of the question. To begin with, however, some explanatory remarks have to be made. First, I will explain in what sense I use the word female *guru*.

We need to be aware that this expression does not correspond to any Indian term. The simple reason for this is that the *guru's* role having been traditionally a masculine one, the word *guru* does not accept a feminine form. The closest Sanskrit term to our "female *guru*" is *gurumata* but, as anyone acquainted with the classical religious literature of India knows, this means the wife of the *guru*. In the days of yore depicted in the *Upanishads* when the young pupils used to receive their education in the home and family of a *guru* (*gurukul*), the *gurumata* was no doubt a highly respected person but never one entitled to impart any kind of philosophical instruction. I found that the disciples of the female *guru* whom I met in Varanasi usually designated them *mataji* that is, "mother." This seems to be the general usage.

Essentially, the role of the female *guru* is not different from that of a *guru*. What does a *guru* do then? For our purpose here, it is enough to define a *guru* as someone who has received knowledge and who is in a position to transmit it. This knowledge is usually of a religious or philosophical nature, but not always, since one finds *gurus* in spheres such as classical dance and music but it is true that these are not completely profane arts either. Further, this knowledge is held to liberate the disciple and bring about his or her spiritual salvation—a state which is understood differently by different schools.

To receive knowledge means that once upon a time a *guru* was a disciple studying

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The Tradition of Female Gurus



Anandamayi Ma with her disciples

-Eternal India

under a *guru* who earlier had also been studying under a *guru*. This has been going on in India from time immemorial so that any *guru* of today is theoretically the inheritor of an ancient tradition. To transmit knowledge means to help pass on this tradition to another person. The essential ritual involved in the process is that of *diksha* or initiation. Another way to define the *guru* is to say that one who gives *diksha* is a *guru*. All this implies that a *guru* is a link in an uninterrupted chain of succession or *parampara* and that there cannot be such a thing as an independent or self made *guru*.

There are many *guru paramparas* to be found today in Hinduism. Some are for householders—married *gurus* -in which case the *guru* is also the father. Some are for ascetics. Most of these *paramparas* are parts of bigger organisations known as *sampraday*. This term, which means “transmission” of a particular doctrine, is awkwardly translated into English as sect. Three of the four ladies presented here belong to *ascetic paramparas*. They are members of three major sects : the *Dasnami Sampraday*, the *Ramanandi Sampraday*, and the *Nimbark Sampraday*. The fourth one belongs to the *Vallabha Sampraday* which has only householder lines of succession.

If, as I have said earlier, female *gurus* do not have a role different from that of their male counterparts, why give them special attention? Because they have adopted their career despite considerable odds. Thus, the four sects enumerated above, which are among the most important in Hinduism, have traditionally refused women the right to function as *gurus*. It is true that this attitude has not characterised all Hindu sects. It has not affected those influenced by the *Tantras* which state explicitly that women can become *gurus*. In Bengal, for example, there have been many female *gurus* within the *Shakta* school. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the great nineteenth century Bengali mystic, was himself initiated by a female *guru*. On the scale of Hinduism as a whole, however, such phenomena remain rare.

Then, how have these women

The Woman Who Initiated Sri Ramakrishna

This is an extract from a biographical sketch of Sri Ramakrishna, the famous nineteenth century philosopher and mystic, written by his most famous disciple, Vivekanand. Here, Vivekanand describes how Ramakrishna was initiated by a female guru. Unfortunately, we know very little else about this exceptional woman, who is briefly mentioned in the various biographies of Ramakrishna.

“At the time he had no teacher, nobody to tell him anything except that everyone thought that he was out of his mind. This is the ordinary condition of things. If a man is not mad with desire for gold, the men of this world say that he is out of his mind. If one seeks not after lust and wealth and vanity, he is called mad. But such men are the salt of the earth. Out of such madness came the powers that have moved this world of ours in the past, and out of such madness alone will come the powers of the future, that are yet to move it. So days, months and even years passed in a continuous struggle of the soul to arrive at Truth. The boy began to see visions, to see wonderful things, the secrets of his own nature were beginning to open to him. Veil after veil was, as it were, being taken off. God himself, Mother herself, became the teacher, and initiated the boy into the truths he sought. At this time there came to the place a woman, of beautiful appearance and learned beyond compare. Later on, the saint used to say about her that she was not learned, but the embodiment of all learning ; she was learning itself, in human form. There, too, you find the peculiarity of the Indian nation. In the midst of the ignorance in which the average Hindu woman lives, in the midst of what is called in Western countries, her lack of freedom, there could arise this woman, of supreme spirituality. She was a *sanyasini*, for women also give up the world, throw away their property, remain unmarried, and devote themselves to the worship of the Lord. She came, and when she heard of this boy in the forest, weeping and wailing, whom people called mad, she offered to go to see him. Hers was the first help he received. She understood at once what was the matter, and said : “Blessed is that man, my son, upon whom such madness comes. Everyone in the world is mad ; some for wealth, some for pleasure, some for fame, some for a hundred other things. Blessed is the man who is mad after God ! They are very few.”

This woman took up her abode in the place, and remained there for years, taught him the various forms of the Indian religions, initiated him into the different practices of Yoga, and guided and brought into control, as it were, this tremendous river of spirituality.

(From Swami Vivekanand, *My Master*, second edition, 1911, Calcutta, pages 32-35)

managed to infiltrate the exclusively male *guru paramparas* ? There will be some answers to that question in the portraits given below. As we shall see, their circumstances and their tremendous personalities were the main ingredients on the side of the women themselves. But let us not forget the role of their own *guru* who first gave them the possibility by initiating them. It was a male *guru* in all four cases. Does that mean that it requires a male authority figure to legitimise aberrant female behaviour? It certainly indicates that the organisation of these sects may not be as resistant to change as they appear to be.

However, the fact that these four women are functioning as *gurus* today does not suffice to prove that they will fully qualify to belong to the *guru parampara* of their *guru*. They have indeed received a tradition and they are transmitting it but to become an integral part of a *guru parampara*, they still have to hand down to one of their disciples the right to succeed them after their death. Out of the four women presented here, there is some evidence that this could be the case with two of them. Yes, it seems possible for Shobha Ma of the *Nimbark Sampraday* and for Sharadvallabha Betiji of the *Vallabha Sampraday* that their

names will be remembered, as those of their *gurus* before them, and will be a link in one of the uninterrupted chains of succession of their sect. This would be a great challenge to the hierarchy of these traditional and age old sects but, given their loose structure and the fact that none of their members has the authority to oppose such a development, there will be little choice but to accept the new female.

Finally, it remains to be said that the ladies we are about to meet symbolise an ideal of life which is extremely prestigious in Hindu society. For this reason, they are the keepers of a tradition which is not specific to the sects with which they are associated. A good part of their teaching has, therefore, no sectarian leanings but is common to all ascetics and all the *gurus* who preach in India.

As is well known, the ideal human life is divided, according to tradition, into four stages (*chaturashram*). Theoretically, it is crowned by the practice of renunciation and the complete giving up of worldly existence. It is on these principles that the life of ascetics is based and their function seems to be to remind those who are caught up in the world, of the ideal they should strive to obtain. Fundamentally, such is also the role of these female *gurus*. They teach essentially through their own example. Their life style, what they do, what they say, their everyday ordinary existence and the atmosphere they create around themselves, these are their main teaching.

Mataji Om Bharati

It was quite by chance that my husband and I one day met Mataji Om Bharati in the streets of Varanasi. She lives in the Bengali area and rents one of the old and formerly magnificent mansions overlooking the Ganga. As her name indicates, she is a *sanyasini* or female ascetic, and belongs to the *Bharati* section of the *Dasnami Sampraday*, the ten monastic orders organised in the ninth century by the great *Vedanti* theologian Shankaracharya.

Mataji hails from Bengal and she has retained from her province a typical pronunciation which gives a peculiar accent to her Hindi. Sixtyish, small and rather hefty, she comes through as an alert

and authoritative person. She wears an orange dress and keeps her thick and long black hair loose on her shoulders. At first, she was somewhat flattered by our visit but in subsequent meetings she grew impatient with our questions and took to answering them in a diffident way as if she was taking an exam. Her swift way of walking, her volatile face behind her thick black framed glasses and her tone full of authority, all point to her determination to assert herself and do what she wants.

She likes to declare that, right from her teenage years, she always did as she pleased. That is why her parents could not prevent her from walking out of their home to wander around and lead the life of a renunciant. When you have a strong inclination to do something, she explains, none can stop you, it is your *karma*.

She does not wish to speak more about her past. "My old personality is dead", she says. She will not say anything about her caste, her family, whether she was married or not. She denies strongly that her becoming an ascetic had anything to do with widowhood. She insists that she voluntarily broke all her links with the world. According to her, this is the purpose of *sanyas*: it means *nash karna*, to destroy—all former associations.

She met her *guru* soon after she left her home. From him she took the regular monastic vows to become a *sanyasini*. Then she stayed in his service for many years. They lived on a barge that navigated the Ganga and she recalls this period of her life with great pleasure. She describes in a lively way how she used to spend her time on this floating Ashram where all the normal activities of a religious community used to take place: *puja*, *satsang* and *kirtan* (community worship). Despite her dedicated service which gave her much work, she felt a thrilling sense of freedom on this barge.

Several years ago, Mataji settled down in Varanasi. She lives alone with one or two Bengali widows who serve her for a few coins a day. She has no ascetic disciples. All her disciples are lay people who come to see her off and on. They bring donations which allow her to live. Besides her own disciples, others also

come regularly to visit her. They share their problems with her and she advises them. Everyone is welcome. This is how Mataji understands her role in society—to receive people and give them advice. She wants to be seen as a serious and enlightened person who has a certain wisdom and can help others in times of crisis. She fulfils this role with a dignified bearing, adopting in her dealings with others a half protective, half authoritarian attitude which her entourage seems to appreciate. By all her sayings, Mataji strikes one as a person who wishes to appear extraordinary. Thus, she claims to have an unusual *shakti* (strength): she says that for this reason people fear her very much. She also wants to be treated respectfully and, before accepting an invitation, she makes sure that she will be received with all due marks of honour.

As she sees it, her sex is in no way a handicap for the life she has chosen to lead. When I told her that Shankaracharya, who founded her monastic order and made it clear that no woman was to be allowed therein, might not have approved, she burst out: "I know this very well. But why should we care about all this, we women? When our third eye is open we are stronger than anybody else. All these Shankaracharyas, these Nimbarkacharyas, they have created gangs to keep us subdued. In this society, we are kept under a lid: don't do this! don't do that! It is unacceptable!"

Mataji worships that form of Kali whose lolling out tongue, dishevelled hair, naked body and standing on the prone Shiva is a clear symbolical expression of the domination of the female principle over the male principle. These forms and symbols are pregnant with meaning for all Hindus and, as she claims, this *sanyasini* seems indeed to scare her neighbours. Any renunciant once angered is a potentially dangerous character, more so a woman who worships Kali the Mother, for one never knows what kind of supernatural power she may have derived from it.

At the same time, her solid common sense has earned her the affection of her acquaintances. She is also very orthodox and defends with all her might the value of

the *chaturashram dharm*. And, if all her disciples are lay people, it is because she does not encourage the practice of renunciation. AS for the other female ascetics, she says that they do not interest her. She is rather suspicious of them for she finds that there are only very few among them who know how to keep their station.

Mataji Ram Dulari Dasi

We now cross the Ganga river to go to Ram Nagar, the small town facing Varanasi. There we meet Mataji Ram Dulari Dasi, also in her sixties, who is a *vairagini* of the *Ramanandi Sampraday*. She is a very genial character. She has a big round shining face, small features, a smooth skin. On her large forehead she wears the mark of her sect—the *Ramanandis*. Yellow paste applied on its whole surface delimits a two branched fork in the middle of which arises a red flame. Her grey hair is pulled back and reunited at the top of her head in an enormous and conical *jata*. Once, she opened her ascetic bun and her long matted hair swept the floor as she stood. She wears a white *dhoti* wrapped around her body. She also has the *Ramanandi Kanthi* (necklace) and the wooden earrings worn by ascetics of her sect.

Mataji is originally from UP. She was born in a brahman family and married at the age of nine. According to her, it was a most auspicious age for “the Himalaya himself gave his daughter in marriage to Lord Shiva when she was nine.”

But her husband died one year later and the young child widow started a life of wandering. At first, she moved around with other elderly widows of her family. Then she met female ascetics and became a member of their group. She has some difficulty in recalling all the events of those days for she has seen so much and as she says :”It is difficult to explain how these things happen. It is good *samskar* which gives you this possibility and god’s grace puts you on the right path. Everything depends upon the will of god.”

Later, she met her *guru*. She went on roaming in his company, learning the practices of his sect and serving him as is



-Virginia Johnston

Mataji Om Bharti

the custom. Then he died and she started having disciples of her own. When she grew weary of wandering around, they helped her buy a small house in Ram Nagar. This is where I met her, for she spends most of her time there, taking care of the images of Sita and Ram and serving visiting ascetics. She has given up going on pilgrimage but she still takes part in the *Kumbha Mela* where she can meet many other ascetics and attend their conferences.

However, it is in Ram Nagar itself that the most important event of her life takes place. There, for a whole month every year, she leaves her sanctuary and its preoccupations to follow the different episodes of the great *Ram Lila*, a fantastic event which brings into the reality of this world the kingdom of Ram. This spiritual experience illuminates the rest of the year for her.

Since she has settled down in Ram Nagar, Mataji is independent. There are many female ascetics like her within the sect which Ramanand founded in the fourteenth century, for he was a reformist who did not believe in discriminating between disciples on grounds of their caste or sex. However, most of these women live in monastic communities. The situation of Ram Dulari Dasi is quite different. As; she makes clear, she is her own master : “Everybody must respect a person who has founded an Ashram. Even if she is a very young woman, the other *sadhhus*, must bow to her (*dandavat*). But this implies that she is responsible for the good order of the place, she must feed all those who come to visit her. As you see, it is a very great responsibility to be a *mahant*” (head of an Ashram).

Mataji is often alone. All her disciples are male ascetics. They have adopted her

former life style and roam about the country. They come only to pay her brief visits. She remarks with some irony, but cheerfully, that the disciples of nowadays don't like to serve their guru, they prefer to lead an easy life. Disciples know only one thing today, she adds with a hearty laugh, and that is to rush back to the Ashram once their *guru* has "left the body", and start fighting for the property.

She does not think that her feminine condition disqualifies her for the spiritual life. Quite the contrary. She repeats an often heard argument to prove her point : "We are all on the *bhakti marg* (path of worship), and this is a feminine path. Actually, there are no males among us. We are all women. The only male is our Lord Ram."

Her devotion to Lord Ram is at the centre of Mataji's *sadhana*. Everything she does, every thought she thinks, she dedicates to him. Like many other members of her sect, she has chosen to praise him by practising austerities. She has been a *tapasvini* for many years. In the beginning, she had taken a vow to keep travelling all the time, never staying for more than one day at the same place. Then she started a cycle of 12 years of ascetic practices known as *jal tapas*. During all the winters of this period, she stood in cold water at the coldest hours. Then she did 12 years of *dhuni tapas*, sitting under the sun and surrounded by a circle of fires at the hottest months of the year. She has also adopted a strict diet of fruits and milk.

It is very unusual for women to practise ascetic austerities of this sort and many people have actually scolded Mataji for it. She took the issue to one of the gatherings of ascetics at a Kumbha Mela and there she reminded some of the big *mahants* of her sect that Parvati herself had undergone a rigorous penance to obtain Shiva as her spouse. The *mahants* gave her their full support. Unlike her illustrious model, Ram Dulan Dasi does not have a precise aim in mind. She offers her *tapas* to Ram as a sign of her devotion to him, of her complete surrender. She does not want any reward : "We want neither *arth* (wealth) nor *dharm*, (religion) nor *kam* (pleasure) nor *moks/i* (liberation). We have

renounced everyihing, except *bhakti*."

What struck me most about this lady, who has been practising such severe austerities for so many years, was her simplicity and above all, her joviality. The fact that she belongs to a sect which has shown some generosity towards women has certainly helped her to attain this self respect. She seems to be constantly in a good mood, always happy to meet and receive people, has many visitors. Some come from long distances to hear her for she is also a good story teller. Her source of inspiration is the *Ramcharitmanas* which she knows by heart and recites or retells with considerable skill.

Sharadvallabha Betiji

Yet another female *guru* of Varanasi is Sharadvallabha Betiji. Even though she is not, strictly speaking, an ascetic, she has been leading for several years a life dedicated to religious pursuits. Unlike Om Bharati and Ram Dulari Dasi, she is well known in the city, where she is even a kind of celebrity.

Sharadvallabha Betiji was born about 45 years ago in one of the wealthiest and most notorious families of Varanasi. Her father, who died recently, was the *mahant* of Gopal Mandir which is in Varanasi, the seat of the sect founded by the brahman Vallabha in the fifteenth century. All the *mahants* of this sect are the male descendants of Vallabha and their sons become *gurus* after them. But the *mahant* of Gopal Mandir had only two daughters. He got them married early, hoping that a grandson would be born to succeed him. His daughters were not to satisfy his desire, however.

Sharadvallabha's elder sister was a saintly character. She had a contemplative nature which led her to withdraw from the world and dedicate herself to the worship of god right from her childhood. She was married when she was 11 but she never lived with her husband. Sharadvallabha too had a strong personality. She was duly married in her turn, but after a brief visit to her in-laws, she decided not to pay further attention to the man whom her father had chosen as her husband. Needless to say, this situation created some tension between the *mahant* and his two

daughters.

Meanwhile, however, the two girls found the full support of their mother. Helped by her, they engaged *pandits* who taught them the philosophy of their sect. They became very erudite and wise, and the older girl even conducted a spiritual campaign in northern India in order to cleanse the image of the sect, which had been tarnished by different scandals. In those days, many members of the sect were distressed by the lifestyle of those who were in charge of Gopal Mandir. Some devotees, who were particularly displeased, decided to build a new temple and entrusted it to the pure hands of their *mahant's* older daughter. An institution was also founded whose aim was to provide some instruction to the ladies of the sect. But, not long after these events, the older daughter died and her sister inherited her spiritual work.

Sharadvallabha Betiji was not a saint but already a strong minded woman. Thanks to her outstanding personality and her quasi aggressive moral integrity, she has wielded ever since a considerable influence on her sect.

She answers my questions in a loud and clear voice. She is smiling, polite but to the point. Her face has regular features. She wears no external marks of her sect. Her hair is held in a bun behind her head. She wears a white sari and several gold bangles. She looks like a very neat person who means business. But who is she ?

"I am neither a *grihasth*, (house holder) nor a *brahmacharini*, (one vowed to celibacy) nor a *sanyasini*. I am a *dasi*, I am his slave. Nothing is in my hand. My whole life is dedicated to him." As she sees it, her role is to serve Janardan, Lord Krishna, and *janta* or the people. The first she worships. She is the priestess of the new and wealthy looking temple a which her sister's disciples, and later her own, have built just opposite Gopal Mandir in the old section of the city. She serves the people by engaging in all kinds of social work. She runs a school, a library, and a dispensary. She sees this sense of altruism which was not a characteristic of the original Gopal Mandir as a direct

consequence of the philosophy of her sect: the shuddhadvaita vedanta.

According to this doctrine, the world is real. It is called *shuddhadvaita* for unlike the *advaita vedanta* it does not conceive of the world as illusory. One should never give up the world. On the contrary, one should try to contribute to its prosperity for it has been created by the divine *lila* (joy of creation) of Krishna. The supreme aim is to be reunited with him after one's death and to contemplate him devotedly while taking part in his *rastila*.

Sharadvallabha Betiji teaches this philosophy to her disciples who all hail from the wealthiest strata of society and most of whom belong to the vaisya varna (trader caste). She was initiated by her father and is entitled to transmit the diksha of the sect. As soon as her disciples have received the eight syllabled mantra, they have to observe certain food restrictions, recite their mantra (incantation) and wear their sect's mark and necklace, all rules which their guru herself observes very strictly. All Betiji's actions are in fact exemplary and it creates in the community a kind of emulation. She declares with justified pride that there has not been so much discipline in the whole sect for the last 500 years.

Her erudition is also a subject of deep satisfaction. Rightly so, for all too rarely still are women in a position to study philosophy and theology. Even when they get initiated into some sect, they are too often confined to the domestic work of the community. And Sharadvallabha Betiji has decided to share her knowledge. She regularly invites the great religious authorities who represent different philosophical tendencies and she chairs enlightening seminars that draw big crowds. Hers is the only religious institution in Varanasi which sponsors such intellectual debates. She also teaches, particularly other women, her disciples, whom she has organised in a *Mahila Mandal* of about 800 members. Together, they read the *Bhagvata Purana*, the *Bhagvad Gita* and the works of Vallabha.

Thus, with an uncommon energy, this female descendant of Vallabha takes care

of her religious centre. She is not only the pujarini and the philosophy professor but also the administrator of the place. As any responsible guru must, she also travels to raise funds and to meet the leaders of the other communities of the sect. She takes her role as a purifier very seriously. Her celibacy, interpreted as a total gift of herself, gives her the respect and the devotion of a milieu that values the spirit of renunciation very highly since it practises it, itself, so little. After her father's death and, as his only surviving child, she appears to be the most qualified person to succeed him officially. Having relinquished everything, Sharadvallabha Betiji is, thus, nevertheless, the most powerful personality of the Vallabha community of Varanasi.

Shobha Ma

Unlike Sharadvallabha Betiji, Shobha Ma



is not a native of Varanasi. She was born in 1921 in the Tripura district of Bengal in a family of petty *zamindars* belonging to the kayasth caste. In 1947, after the partition, she and her relatives, like thousands of other Hindus from the eastern provinces, found refuge in Calcutta. But, after she took her monastic vows in the sect of Nimbark in 1950, she settled in Varanasi. Within a few years, she became one of its famous female *gurus*.

Today, she is the spiritual leader of 1,000 disciples and certainly the most important

female guru of the town since the recent disappearance of Ma Anandamayi. Most of her followers are lay people but she has a dozen or so disciples who have adopted the lifestyle of the renunciant and who are now living permanently with her at Sant Ashram,, the monastery which she founded in Laxa about 35 years ago. All these ascetics are women. Sant Ashram shelters today the best organised feminine monastic community of Varanasi. This monastic community is actually the nucleus of the whole movement founded by Shobha Ma. The main religious activities of the lay disciples are linked to its life, while the life style adopted in the Ashram is the ideal that they are striving to imitate while living in the world.

Shobha Ma owes a great deal of her notoriety to having been an exceptionally gifted teenager. Like many other kayasth families of East Bengal, her family was *shakta*. Her father especially was a devotee of Kali. But, in the first quarter of the century, one of her older relatives became the disciple of the famous scholar and ascetic of the *Nimbark Sampraday*, Swami Santdas, also known as Kathiyya Baba. The influence of his towering personality was soon to be felt upon the whole family.

In 1935, Shobha, then 14, received a *mantra* from the master. However, she was too young then to be initiated into the *Nimbark Sampraday*, a situation which gave birth to some confusion later. At the end of the same year, her *guru* died without ever meeting her again. But, not long after, the young Shobha started having all kinds of mystical experiences. She saw many visions of deities, particularly of Krishna and Kali, and she also claimed that she was receiving Swami Santdas's, visits. Her late *guru* was not only in contact with her, he was teaching her and she was undergoing *sadhana* under his spiritual guidance. For many long months, Shobha remained in this state. Her family who, at first, was filled with doubts, came to accept these unusual events as proof that she was the recipient of a very special grace. Soon, great sensation prevailed in her native village. People would flock to have the *darshan* of the enlightened young girl

who was said to be divinely inspired. In May 1933, no less a personality than Gopinath Kaviraj, who was already a *pandit* of great renown, came to examine Shobha and from the vantage point of his authority, he declared that she had indeed reached some spiritual attainment and was in a superior state of consciousness known as *brahmana*.

By this time, the young and uneducated village girl had started functioning as a *guru* in her own right. She considered herself not only a disciple of Swami Santdas but also a member of the *Nimbark Sampraday*, the sect founded by the theologian Nimbark in the twelfth century. This claim was not easily endorsed by the hierarchy of this sect. The other disciples of Swami Santdas, in particular, could not accept her as a *Nimvat* since, as I have already said, she had not received the *diksha* of the sect. This led Shobha to approach one of the disciples of her late master and to receive from him the initiation that finally made her a regular member of the ascetic section of the *Nimbark Sampraday*. This was indeed most unusual in a sect which had traditionally barred women from leading the ascetic life. But there had been a recent precedent when Swami Santdas himself had accepted his own niece Ganga among his renunciant disciples. Had he lived long enough, it is likely that he would have granted the same right to Shobha too, in regard for her most remarkable spiritual achievements. Right from the start of her religious career, Shobha managed to impose herself as a female *guru* by drawing strength from two different sources. In her case, one sees two specific types of religious powers at work. One is her personal charisma, the other is the institutional charisma derived from her status as a *guru*.

As a *guru*, there is no doubt that Shobha Ma owes a great part of her prestige to her association with Swami Santdas, one of the most famous ascetics of the first three decades of this century. Yet another essential factor has been her own remarkable achievement within the

Nimbark Sampraday. She, all alone, earned for herself the means to function as one of its *gurus*. She has founded an Ashram, organised a feminine monastic community a striking innovation in her sect and she has gathered around her a good number of lay disciples. Over the last 35 years, she has proved that she knows how to exercise her authority and she has made her Ashram one of the most respectable in Varanasi. Above all, she has been teaching with considerable skill the theology and spiritual techniques of the sect of Nimbark. Because of all this, she stands on firmer ground as a *guru* than if she had been free of all sectarian associations. She can enjoy the respect granted to an age old religious school and a large part of her spiritual prestige derives from this position.

However, another part of her authority is linked to her person. It comes from her own character and nature. Following the supernatural events that marked her teenagehood, she came to be identified with a human manifestation of the goddess Kali, the traditional deity of her family as well as of the families of many of her devotees. Actually, the religious history of India is not wanting in saintly women who were identified with the great goddess, the most famous contemporary example being without doubt that of Anandamayi Ma. This has to be seen as the feminine version of the traditional belief held by the Hindus that their *guru* is divine. The identification of Shobha with the goddess Kali is thus motivated by her gender. As one of her disciples put it : "We Hindus, we consider our *guru* as god, Shobha is *Devi*." And as a very famous verse states it : "*gurur brahma gurur vishnur gurur devo maheshvarah*" that is to say, just as the *guru* is identified with the divine male type *par excellence*, so the female *guru*, because she is also the holder of the supreme authority, must have as a model a sovereign feminine deity Shobha is identified with Kali because, in this milieu of former *shaktas*, Kali is the supreme principle.

To recognise one's *guru's* divinity

does not necessarily imply that one will treat him or her like a divine being. In the case of Shobha Ma, however, she is not only identified with the goddess but also worshipped as such. Twice a year, her disciples gather in her Ashram to offer her a solemn cult similar to the one done for the deity. In fact, the cult of the female *guru* can be perceived as one aspect of the cult of the goddess in India.

As far as I know, Shobha Ma is the only living female *guru* to receive such a cult in Varanasi today. She likes to see this aspect of her life as a way to please her disciples. It seems as if she is not involved in it. It was my good fortune to be allowed regularly to visit her Ashram and I would see, time and time again, that she was an extremely devoted woman who took all marks of respect with a natural modesty. We should not ignore, however, that the divinisation of a female *guru* like her has also some sociological aspects. In other words it serves to explain, even to justify her very heterodox behaviour. It is only because she is not considered an ordinary mortal woman that she can act as she does.

We cannot insist too much on the fact that Hinduism provides the woman who wishes to make a career in the religious sphere with a prestigious image of herself by allowing her to be compared or identified with the goddess. Thanks to this conception, Shobha Ma has been able to adopt a life style in agreement with her deep aspirations. Not only that, she could do it without antagonising her cultural milieu. Having renounced the normal feminine pattern of life, that is to say the marital condition, she still had this other alternative which, could be tolerated by others.

Note

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