

THE RISING INFLUENCE OF INDIAN WOMEN IN SPIRITUALITY – A CASE STUDY OF BRAHMA KUMARIS

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Abstract

Women and spirituality have been intertwined in Indian history. They have been the keepers of spirituality, have served as priests, shamans and this is highly evident from the Indian Vedic period. The extraordinary women spiritual warriors, through their unwavering devotion, profound wisdom and selfless acts of compassion, had left an indelible mark on the spiritual landscape of the nation. The stories of Mirabai, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Akka Mahadevi and Gangasati serve as a testament to the resilience and devotion of women, defying societal norms and breaking barriers. There have also been attempts to exclude their presence from the society. Despite this, women continue to assert their influence in India's spiritual realm. Their motherly role in the spiritual realm have been influential and is considered necessary in the world plagued with hatred and violence. To put an end to this plague, the Indian society needs more women spiritual warriors wanting to create a compassionate and inclusive environment.

The researcher through this paper seeks to conduct an in dept case study of a women led spiritual organization named Brahma Kumaris. What different techniques especially rajyog meditation is used and encouraged to develop positive attitudes and qualities in people. The researcher also aims to study the journey of the organization from a small led group to a global widespread movement making their mark as spiritual leaders. The researcher will also emphasize the importance of feminine spiritual energy in the world to make it a better place to live in.

Key words: Spirituality, Brahma Kumaris, rajyog Meditation

SPIRITUALITY IN INDIA

Spiritualism can be defined as “having something to do with the spirit or soul” (for example “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us”), “caring much for things of the spirit or soul”, or “having to do with supernatural.” Whatever its definition, we find spiritualism saturated in Indian culture. India and its very soil have always allowed and encouraged spiritualism to thrive, flourish and prosper in its society. Spiritualism in India is about showing reverence to all living beings and leading a healthy and positive life. It believes that our birth in this world has a purpose and that purpose is to be compassionate, loving and caring towards one another. Our great Indian spiritual personalities have played an important role in spreading the message of love, care and the need for positive living all over the world. This quest for spirituality is growing especially with increasing capitalism and alienation. Women have been making efforts to claim a rightful place in the spiritual world. For a long time, women were marginalized and their voices were silenced in the spiritual sphere. But this is changing, women are choosing the spiritual path and are utilizing their spiritual energies to bring positive change and their influence is being felt more than ever before.

Every woman deep inside has a longing to “be” someone in her own right—fully aware of herself, confident and in control. Instead, aspects of the “feminine” have taken mainly symbolic forms from the Virgin Mary to the vestal virgins, from Earth Goddesses to the Shakti Devis. Feminine qualities such as love, tolerance, compassion, understanding and humility are qualities of leadership. They are also needed for spiritual progress, for without them it would be impossible to come close to God and attain self-realization. Women become spiritual leaders when they themselves acknowledge they have the capacity and necessary attributes to play such a role. This research paper focuses on the influence of women spirituality in India from past to present with a special case study of women led organization named Brahma Kumaris.

CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN THE GROWTH OF SPIRITUALITY IN INDIAN ANCIENT SOCIETY

India's spiritual journey has several phases. It begins with ancient Vedas, Upanishads and the Bhagwat Gita to contemporary spiritual establishments like ISKON, Art of living, Isha Foundation and Brahma Kumaris. It is pertinent to mention the role and contribution of women saints through these phases.

The Vedas are a collection of hymns, prayers, and rituals that were composed by Indian ancient sages. They are the oldest scriptures of Hinduism dating back to around 1500 BCE. This time period is considered as the 'Golden age' for women because of the high position they hold in society. There are wherein women of this age were always encouraged to pursue spiritual knowledge. These women called as women rishis have obtained Vedic knowledge. The Rig Veda mentions about thirty women rishis who have encapsulated Vedic wisdom. Two best examples of women philosophers of the Vedic period are Maitreyi and Gargi,

Maitreyi is known for her profound knowledge on self and essence of life. Her prominence as a philosopher stem from her intellectual conversations with her husband, the sage Yajnavalkya. The philosophical dialogues between husband and wife are documented in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In this dialogue, Maitreyi approaches her husband with a question:

"Yajnavalkya, if all the wealth in the world were mine, would I be immortal by that?" In response to this question, Yajnavalkya explains that wealth alone cannot lead to immortality, but it can provide comfort and luxury in the material world. He then proceeds to impart profound spiritual teachings about the nature of the self (Atman) and the ultimate reality. Maitreyi's question in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is a reflection of her deep philosophical inquiry into the purpose and meaning of life. She seeks knowledge that transcends the material world and is interested in the pursuit of spiritual truth. Her question challenges the notion of wealth and material possessions as a means to attain immortality. On the other hand we had Saint Gargi's whose pursuits are not limited to philosophical debates. She has significantly contributed in Yajur Veda. He has emphasized on a deeper inner journey and self-exploration.

Further the Bhakti movement has witnessed widespread participation of women saints. Women in this movement not just contributed in the philosophical discourse but also questioned and challenged the Brahmanical monopoly. They embraced Bhakti to define their own truths to reform society, polity, relationships and religions. Women saints expressed their love for God through poems and songs, considering God as their lover, husband or consort. Many women chose to discard their marital ties and chose the path of Bhakti. We have example of Mirabai and Sant Soyarabai of this time period. Mirabai's life underwent a tremendous change when she wed Rana Kumbha of Mewar. She had married into a distinguished Rajput family and was a member of a royal family, but her heart belonged to Lord Krishna. She perceived her marriage to Rana Kumbha as merely a worldly formality because she believed herself to be the spouse of Lord Krishna. Meera's fervor for Lord Krishna frequently caused arguments in her marital home. Her husband, and her in-laws didn't always agree with her extreme devotion to and renunciation of materialistic pleasures. Despite opposition and criticism from her family, Meera's unflinching devotion to Lord Krishna only grew. She has expressed her devotion and love towards Lord Krishna through her songs and poems.

On the other hand, we had Sant Soyarabai who neither rejected marriage and nor overtly defied societal norms. She wrote about her family, daily existence and her devotion to god Vithoba, pilgrimage to Pandharpur, married life and finding freedom amidst it. Her abhangas to the misery of daily life and restrictions to which they were subjected as belonging to Mahar caste, indicate her heightened caste and gender consciousness.

The Bhakti women laid the roots of feminism in India by moving out from the restricted domestic spaces and oppose patriarchy and Brahminical hegemony.

CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN THE NEW AGE SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS

There has been growth of New age Religious and spiritual Movements in the post-Independence and rapidly modernizing India. These faith-based groups or communities have emerged and established their own unique set of religious beliefs and practices. They often arise in response to societal changes, offering new interpretations of existing religious traditions or introducing entirely new doctrines. These movements often draw from a variety of religious traditions, philosophies, and psychological theories. They emphasize personal spiritual growth and self-realization. One such organization which has taken the new age spiritual movement forward is Prajapati Brahma Kumaris. A women led organization founded by Prajapati Brahma Baba who chose put women in front and embrace spiritualism.

BRAHMA KUMARIS: ORIGIN AND EXPANSION

Brahma Kumaris, officially known as 'Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya' is a worldwide spiritual movement dedicated to personal transformation and world renewal. It was founded in 1936 in Hyderabad, Sindh by Dada Lekhraj, a diamond merchant known as Brahma Baba by his followers. Dada Lekhraj was born in Sindh in 1876 into a Kriplani family who were the devotees of Valabhacharya sect. This spiritual group relocated in the beautiful Aravalli Ranges of Mount Abu in Rajasthan in 1950 and have been successful in sowing the seed of spiritual knowledge in different parts of the country and abroad. Over the years the Brahma Kumaris has spread to over 137 countries in 5 continents of the world and has been creating an extensive impact on all sections of the society. The organization is committed to help individuals transform themselves, based on the understanding of their true, spiritual identity, which transcends their mere material existence. It is associated with the United Nations Department of Public Relations and has been working as an international Non-government organisation. Its aims to cultivate deep collective consciousness of peace and bring dignity to each soul. Even though the founding father of the organization was fondly known as Prajapita Brahma, the first Administrative Head was Mateshwari Jagdamba, fondly known as Mamma. They welcome people from all religions and cultures to join, breaking down barriers of caste, colour, culture and most importantly gender.

The principles of the Brahma Kumaris are aligned in particular with the tenet contained in the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations – "... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person..." & "to promote awareness and highlight the purpose and principles of the UN." The Brahma Kumaris also participated in various conferences organised by the UN – in the 1980s, they initiated the outreach project 'The Million Minutes of Peace' – Peace Appeal and Global Cooperation for a Better World', In 90's – participated in many UN world conferences and summits on Sustainable Development, Women, Social Development, Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Health and Youth, etc. From 2000 – the Brahma Kumaris focused on the Millennium Development Goals. Its member feels that women are still a long way from enjoying positions of spiritual leadership, and society still doesn't fully concur with the notion that women make good spiritual leaders. Yet, society won't necessarily change until someone, whether an individual or a group of individuals, breaks the tradition and sets a new role model. This, in part, was the thinking behind the work of Brahma Baba, founder of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University.

In the year 2016, the organization had actively organized awareness campaigns in rural and urban areas to sensitize the masses to eradicate female feticide. Over 32,000 women participated in workshops, seminars, and rallies during in the campaign to save girl children" *Beti Bachao, Sashakt Banao*" in different parts of the country. More than 1,45,000 women benefited from the 45 regional campaigns in 13 states organized under the National campaign 'Nari Suraksha, Hamari Suraksha' in 2014.

In the year 2022, the Brahma Kumaris had taken seven initiatives under Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav. They organised programs in medical colleges and hospitals with focus on spirituality, well-being and nutrition – My India Healthy India. Initiated Aatmanirbhar Bharat for self reliant farmers by arranging empowerment Campaigns, Sustainable Yogic Farming Training Programs for the welfare of farmers. Power of Peace Bus Campaign which organised exhibitions on the positive transformation of today's youth. They also hold Andekha Bharat Cycle Rally and Green initiatives under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. The organization launched a National Campaign 'RISE- Rising India Through Spiritual Empowerment' on January 3, 2023, wherein the President of India, Smt Droupadi Murmu was invited in the inauguration ceremony. In her address President Murmu said, that she had learned the method of Raja Yoga, which emphasizes inner spiritual power rather than external physical conveniences and events. This helped her to find light and enthusiasm during a time when she felt surrounded by darkness and lacked hope. The aim to launch this campaign was to spiritually empowering Indians in order to fulfill the dream of a "Golden India." Brahma Kumaris believes that self-transformation leads to world transformation, and that the journey of a million transformations will create a domino effect, ultimately leading to the rebuilding of the nation. To achieve these goals, a range of lectures, workshops, short courses, youth camps, and fests were and will be conducted nationwide to create awareness and transformation among youth. Additionally, Brahma Kumaris will collaborate on various projects that provide opportunities for young people to participate in activities of social and humanitarian concern.

CREATING SPIRITUAL AWARENESS THROUGH RAJYOG MEDITATION AND MURLI

The Brahma Kumaris believe in Raja Yoga meditation. It is a meditation without rituals or mantras and can be practised anywhere at any time. 'Raja' means ruler and 'Yoga' refers to 'communion'. So, Rajyoga is a divine communion which makes us self-sovereign. It is practiced with 'open eyes', which makes this method of meditation versatile, simple and easy to practice. Meditation is a state of being in that place just beyond every day consciousness, which is where spiritual empowerment begins. Spiritual awareness gives us the power to choose good and positive thoughts over those which are negative and wasteful. It helps to create better and

happier, healthier relationships and change lives in a most positive way. A primary research study published in the Journal of Religion and Health has shown how rajyog meditation has helped improved the well-being of the elderly rural women in Haryana. It revealed how Brahma Kumaris as the most popular spiritual groups are devoted to help people transform from material to spiritual life.

Murli contains the words of the Highest Soul itself. These messages have been written down and are largely to be found in the Murlis. The work is thus to be used for teaching and study. This material is therefore extremely important, for it provides the truth and knowledge.

The heart of the movement is in its local centres – the small centres are called the Gita Pathshala, the larger centres are usually called Raja Yoga Centres. These are located at major urban areas as well as in some small towns and villages which are easily identifiable as BKs centres. Every centre has a flag or a huge sign board of the movement where it is easily seen by passersby. Mediations are held in the morning and evening which are called Murli class by the BKs. These centres are also the residence of few fully surrendered movement members, typically women, who conduct the classes and maintain the building. While the householders and lay devotees commute from their respective homes daily to the nearest centre to participate in the activities at the local centre. At these centres, women are taught that all are 'souls' irrespective of their gender, caste, etc. Through rajyog meditation and murlis, daily they are socialized and reminded that they are soul and not body.

CONCLUSION

It is significant to mention that spirituality, which was primarily the prerogative of a male intellectual, social and religious elite was challenged by women at all phases of Indian society. Numerous women have been pursuing the spiritual quest, sometimes under most difficult conditions. In present times organizations like Brahma Kumaris, their search for liberation and fulfilment has brought new consciousness to the new age spiritual movement. They have certainly placed women in all positions of power and at the forefront, breaking the mold of religions and spiritual movements across the world. This feminine spiritual group till today is by and large female oriented. They are a significant example that the influence of women in spirituality has definitely rising and not diminished.

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