

Sanatani Woman Saint Tradition: Sociological Study of Tradition, Change and Social Acceptance in Indian Society

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the changing role, social acceptance, and ascension to institutional authority of women in religious institutions within Indian society, which is fundamentally a religious society, from a sociological perspective. Women have traditionally been confined to ritual-bound, gender-stratified roles in religious structures, but the increasing presence of women saints in contemporary India has contested entrenched normative hierarchies. This article provides a historical overview of the religious status of women from the Vedic era to the post-Vedic, medieval, and modern periods. Additionally, the experiences of several women saints currently active in the major Akharas and monasteries of North India are presented as case studies. The paper highlights the presence of Dalit and transgender women saints and the emerging trajectories of doctrinal inclusivity they represent. Theoretically, P. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Anthony Giddens' structuration theory are employed. The study aims to comprehend the entire process of women's leadership through M.N. Srinivas's concept of institutional change and Durkheim and Max Weber's explanations of religion. The conclusion of this study reveals that religious authority is no longer a static patriarchal structure; instead, transformative dynamics of social reconstitution have emerged based on gender, caste, and identity. This paper recommends that inclusive policies should be formulated in religious institutions so that female saints can be legitimised not only as nuns but also as decisive leaders.

Keywords: Women Saint, Religious Institutions, Akhada Tradition, Social Acceptance, Inclusiveness, Cultural Capital, Religious Leadership, Mandaleshwar, Mahamandaleshwar.

Introduction

'Yatra naryastu pujyante ramante tatra devata:' (Manusmriti 3.56) This shloka from Manusmriti presents the socio-spiritual position of women in Indian religious consciousness, where women have been accepted not only as social entities but also as spiritual energy. In the Indian Sanatani tradition, women have been venerated in many forms as goddesses like Saraswati, Lakshmi, Durga, Sita, and Radha, but this religious ideal has always conflicted with social reality. While goddesses have been worshipped on one hand, traditions of patriarchal regulation and violence against living women have persisted in parallel on the other.

During the Vedic period, women had the right to perform yajnas, access to education, and the opportunity to study the Vedas, as evidenced by women scholars like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Apala (Jamison & Witzel, 1992). However, in the post-Vedic period and Smriti period, social structures became increasingly patriarchal, and the public-religious roles of women became limited. In medieval India, religious institutions such as monasteries and akhadas assumed a male-dominated form. Within this context of male dominance, saint poets like Meera Bai, Akka Mahadevi, and Janabai established their presence in the religious public domain during the Bhakti movement. These women not only adopted the path of devotion but also resisted patriarchal control within religious structures (Hawley & Juergensmeyer, 1988).

This represented the first organised intervention against anti-women religious structures, which can be understood as 'religious resistance'. This resistance was not only subjective but also a social declaration that the path of religion and salvation was not limited to men alone. In modern India, new dimensions have been added to the tradition of women saints. While the presence of women in the Akharas and Mathas was initially limited, in recent years, women saints have reached senior positions like Mahant, Acharya, and Mahamandaleshwar.

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Currently, there are more than 60 women Mahamandaleshwars in 13 main Akharas, including Ishwari Nand Giri (Kinnar Akhara), Mahamandaleshwar Sadhvi Niranjan Jyoti (Niranjani Akhara), Santoshi Mata (Niranjani Panchayat Akhara), those from Mahanirvani, Maitreyi Giri (Shri Panchdashnam Juna Akhara), Karuna Giri (Shri Panchdashnam Juna Akhara), Jai Ambe Maa Giri (Shri Panchdashnam Juna Akhara), and Mahamandaleshwar Nirbhayanand (Panchayati Akhara Shri Niranjani). Among these, the contributions of Sadhvi Bhagwati Saraswati are particularly noteworthy, as she has taken religious leadership to global platforms (Tripathi, 2004; Singh & Singh, 2008).

Simultaneously, the presence of Dalit and transgender women saints represents a revolutionary change in religious inclusion. This change is not merely symbolic but constitutes a process of redefining the role of women in socio-religious structures. The activism of women saints is important from a sociological point of view because it presents an alternative morality in the conflict between religion and patriarchy. These saints chose the path of change from within the tradition, leading to new definitions of women's participation in religious leadership. This phenomenon also demonstrates that when women assume leadership within religious structures, those structures not only achieve stability but also become agents of change.

In the contemporary post-modern era, when spirituality has become part of global discourse, the international presence of women saints is becoming a new chapter in India's cultural diplomacy. This paper examines this historic contemporary transition where the tradition of women saints is becoming a marker of social change within the complex relations of religion, gender, caste, and patriarchy. This study not only highlights the expanding institutional integration of women in religious structures but also explains how this participation gives rise to transformed discursive paradigms in contemporary debates, such as women's empowerment, gender justice, and social inclusion. Therefore, this introduction presents the tradition of women saints not as a mythological narrative but as a living social consciousness, which demonstrates 'change within tradition' in Indian society.

Theoretical Perspective

To understand the role of women saints, especially Dalit women saints, in contemporary India, an inclusive and multi-layered theoretical framework is needed that is not limited to the spiritual aspect of religion but can also analyse its social structure, power relations, gender, capital, caste, and other factors. In this context, Pierre

Bourdieu's theory of '*Cultural Capital*' is particularly appropriate. Bourdieu argued that capital in society is not only economic but that cultural capital, such as language, religious knowledge, educational attainment, sanskar, and cultural behaviour, also facilitates achieving social prestige and power (Bourdieu, 1986).

When a woman saint, especially one emerging from subaltern caste positions, acquires proficiency in Sanskrit, Vedic recitation, and rituals, she acquires cultural capital for establishing alternative religious leadership. For example, the acceptance of saints like Sadhvi Bhagwati Saraswati or Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi in religious institutions results from acquiring this cultural capital, with which they challenge traditional brahminical and patriarchal power structures.

Complementing this, Anthony Giddens's '*Structuration Theory*' provides additional depth to this discussion. According to Giddens, social structure and agency are not separate and opposing elements, but they co-constitute each other (Giddens, 1984). When women saints enter traditional religious institutions such as Akharas, Mathas, and Peethas, they not only become active within them but also reconfigure institutional logics. Examples like Kinnar Akhara represent the concrete manifestation of this structure-agency relationship, where women and transgender saints are creating new institutional structures by transcending traditional boundaries. This represents a dynamic process in which they are challenging traditional beliefs and introducing new religious practices.

Within the Indian sociological context, M.N. Srinivas' concept of '*Sanskritization*' is also relevant. Srinivas explained how lower castes adopt the customs of higher castes in their process of social mobility (Srinivas, 1966). Efforts by Dalit women saints, such as learning Sanskrit and receiving Vedic initiation, reflect contemporary trends of this Sanskritization. This is not merely cultural imitation but also a kind of '*institutional reconstruction*' in which they are asserting their community's representational agency and making interventions in the discursive canon of religiosity. Their initiatives range from temple entry to establishing educational institutions, all representing important indicators of social change.

In analysing religion from a deeper sociological perspective, the views of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber are particularly noteworthy. Durkheim considered religion part of '*collective consciousness*', which establishes moral discipline in society (Durkheim, 1912). When women saints lead religious rituals and construct normative-religious frameworks, they introduce the legitimacy of female leadership into Durkheim's theory, which leads to gender restructuring in collective consciousness. Conversely, according to Max Weber,

charismatic authority in religion can become a factor in legitimising social transformation (Weber, 1922).

The leadership of women saints, especially figures like Ma Poornanand Giri or Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi, establishes authority through performative charisma, struggle, and moral influence. This charisma emerges not only from their oratory or stage presence but from their social contribution and public role. This leads to a redistribution of legitimacy within the institutionalised authority structure of religious institutions, which Weber conceptualises as 'religious reconstruction'.

This comprehensive theoretical framework demonstrates that contemporary women saints, especially those from Dalit and marginalised communities, are not merely nuns or religious figures but serve as agents of broader socio-religious change through cultural capital (Bourdieu), restructuring of structure-agency relationships (Giddens), institutional reconstruction (Srinivas), moral leadership (Durkheim), and charismatic legitimacy (Weber). From this perspective, they emerge as exemplars of change within tradition in India's religious consciousness.

Literature Review

The major books and research papers selected to understand the multidimensional complexities of the presence, social acceptance, power structure, and inclusion of women saints in religious institutions represent various streams of Indian sociological and gender studies. This review highlights the relevance of each text, its underlying theory, and its contribution to this paper.

Hawley and Juergensmeyer's (1988) book '*Songs of the Saints of India*' comprehensively highlights women's participation in the saint tradition. Through analysing the verses of women saints like Mirabai, the authors explain how women's voices challenged religious-social stereotypes in the Bhakti tradition. This book articulates the subjective voice and social resistance of women saints, which strengthens the foundational theoretical basis of this article.

Hausner's (2007) book '*Wandering with Sadhus*' presents the dynamics and social interactions of Himalayan sadhu life. Despite documenting the limited presence of women sadhvis, their engagement in socio-symbolic discourse, ritualised performative functions, and contribution to the process of renunciation are sensitively depicted.

Narayan's (1997) '*Dislocating Cultures*' examines feminism and the identity crisis of the Global South. This book places the role of women in religious traditions within the framework of 'orthodox cultural epistemes vs. emergent modern subjectivities' and redefines feminist

criticism in local contexts. This work provides theoretical tools for analysing patriarchal symbols.

Zelliot's (2001) book '*From Untouchable to Dalit*' presents Dalit discourse, the Ambedkarite movement, and the process of self-construction historically. This book examines the religious and cultural aspects of Dalit women saints in their pursuit of ontological reclamation and social justice.

Fuller's (2003) '*The Renewal of the Priesthood*' highlights the conflict between tradition and modernity in the priestly tradition of South Indian temples. Although it focuses mainly on male Brahmin priests, its analysis of power structures and religious authority provides insights for understanding the struggles of women saints.

Tripathi's (1988) book '*Hindu Math*' analyses the historical development of the monastery tradition alongside its organisational structure. It illuminates the social structure of monastery leadership, Akharas, and religious power, which is useful for understanding the context of contestations over ritual legitimacy and symbolic control involving women saints.

Dutt's (2001) book '*Origin and Development of Religious Institutions in India*' provides a comprehensive analysis of the development and socio-structural transitions within India's sacred institutions. This book presents historical explanations of caste and gender-based power structures within religious institutions.

Tripathi's (2004) book provides an in-depth analysis of Indian sadhus in his book '*Sadhus of India*'. This work highlights the lifestyle, beliefs, religious rituals, and rites of Indian sadhus, including their participation in Kumbh festivals. Ghurye's (1964) book '*Indian Sadhus*' serves as a foundational document on the study of Indian sadhus. The author studies prominent saints of India, demonstrating that the saint community also serves as an important agency for accelerating social change. Most saints transcend worldly desires and dedicate themselves to human welfare.

Collectively, the above-mentioned books and articles illuminate the multifaceted aspects of historical limitations, contemporary emergence, socio-cultural struggles, and symbolic acceptance of women in Indian religious institutions. This comprehensive literature review not only provides theoretical depth to the research but also offers direction for future research, especially regarding religious institutions where women hold leadership roles but still have minimal representation in power structures.

Existing literature on women saints has addressed questions about women's participation in Indian religious life, their role in the Bhakti tradition, and gender-based inequality. Various social scientists have also connected the experiences of transgender and Dalit women saints

to contemporary discourse in their studies. However, despite these rich studies, a significant research gap emerges: there is a lack of in-depth study of the leadership process, social acceptance, and institutional challenges faced by women Mahants and Mahamandaleshwars in structurally male-dominated religious institutions like the Akhada tradition of North India.

Furthermore, the experiential journey of Dalit and transgender women saints and their process of achieving religious leadership has not yet been examined holistically within an interdisciplinary framework combining sociology, political equity, and religious studies. This article attempts to address this critical contemporary need.

The main objective of this research paper is to present a sociological analysis of the role of women saints in the Indian Sanatani religious tradition. This study attempts to understand the processes of participation, leadership, and social acceptance of women in religious institutions from historical perspectives to contemporary contexts. This study particularly focuses on the experiences of women saints who have occupied senior religious positions such as Mahant and Mahamandaleshwar in traditionally male-dominated religious institutions such as Akharas, Mathas, and Peethas. This paper aims to identify social and structural impediments rooted in caste-gender stratification that create obstacles to the leadership of women saints and to analyse how Dalit and transgender women saints are playing a transformative role in advancing religious inclusion and social justice. This study employs P. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, Giddens' structuration theory, Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization, Durkheim's collective consciousness, and Weber's charismatic leadership theory to examine how contemporary women saints are challenging traditional structures of religious power and creating new religious discourse.

Research Questions

1. What is the status of social-institutional acceptance of women saints in contemporary Indian religious institutions?
2. What are the social-institutional barriers that operate in the process of women becoming Mahamandaleshwar and Mahant?
3. How does the religious leadership of Dalit and transgender women saints represent religious inclusion and social justice?
4. How are women saints establishing leadership by acquiring cultural capital within religious institutions?

5. Does the presence of women saints indicate a substantial reconfiguration of hegemonic structures in the power dynamics of religious institutions?

Research Methodology

This research employs qualitative research methods, including:

1. An overview of the religious role of women from the Vedic period to the contemporary period conducted through historical analysis.
2. An analysis of the experiences of contemporary women saints such as Bhagwati Saraswati, Lakshmi Tripathi, and others presented through the case study method.
3. Theoretically, this research is based on P. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, Giddens' structuration theory, Durkheim's collective consciousness, Max Weber's charismatic leadership concept, and M.N. Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization.

Significance

This research paper not only highlights the religious role of women saints but also makes a fundamental contribution to broader debates on the power structure of Indian society, inclusiveness, and democratic transformation of religion. This study establishes the legitimacy of women's leadership in religious institutions and suggests that it is time to adopt gender-balanced and inclusive policies in institutions like Akhada Parishad, temple administration, and Veda Vidyapeeths.

The participation of Dalit and transgender women saints particularly challenges exclusionary traditions that have historically considered only upper caste men eligible for religious leadership. This study's significance extends women's empowerment beyond political or economic spheres to include religious-spiritual leadership. Additionally, this study encourages policy-makers, social organisations, and religious institutions to take concrete steps towards creating inclusive religious consciousness by eliminating prejudices based on gender, caste, and sexuality.

This article underlines the flexible and self-improving tradition of Indian religiosity, under which possibilities of change exist within the tradition itself. Contemporary women saints embody those possibilities. Their life, leadership, and thoughts not only enrich religious discourse but also contribute to building a just, egalitarian, and responsible religious society.

Religion, Women and Leadership: Tradition, Patriarchy and Contemporary Religious Reconstruction

The gendered positioning of women in the Indian religious tradition has always represented a structural contradiction where, while they were revered as goddesses, they simultaneously experienced structural exclusion. This contradiction reflects the structural complexities of Indian society, where definitions of purity and impurity have been constructed based on gender, caste, and sexuality. The status of women, especially in the Vedic period, has been central to religious and philosophical debate.

Female sages like Maitreyi, Gargi, Lopamudra, Apala, Shachi, and Vishwavara not only studied the Vedas but also engaged in deep philosophical dialogues on complex subjects like the soul and Brahman (Jamison & Witzel, 1992). The concept of 'Sa Vidya Ya Vimuktaye' was equally applicable to both men and women at that time, as evidenced by the Maitreyi-Yagnavalkya dialogue. However, in the post-Vedic period, when the influence of the Smritis and Dharmashastras increased, the re-establishment of patriarchal discipline became visible in religious structures.

Texts like Manusmriti (9.2, 9.3, 9.18) prohibited the independence of women and mandated their subordination to father, husband, and son according to life circumstances. Consequently, the presence of women in religious institutions gradually became limited to domestic ideals, pativrata dharma, and purity concepts. In the medieval period, foreign invasions, religious orthodoxies, and social instability exacerbated this situation. Male dominance was established over monasteries, peeths, and akhadas, and women's social-religious life was controlled by linking the female body with concepts of purity-impurity (Narayan, 1997).

Menstruating women were particularly barred from temples and religious rituals, thereby limiting their spiritual participation. However, even within this patriarchal structure, women created alternative spiritual paths for themselves. The Bhakti movement represents the most powerful example of this process, which transcended the boundaries of caste, gender, and ritual and prioritised the direct relationship between the soul and God.

Mirabai emerges as the most luminous female figure of this movement, who redefined religious leadership through her experience, poetry, and self-motivation. Her hymn '*Paayo ji maine Ram Ratan dhan paayo*' represents not just devotion but a declaration of self-reliance and self-empowerment (Hawley & Juergensmeyer, 1988). Mira chose the path of spiritual autonomy by renouncing

marriage, family traditions, and social prestige.

From a sociological perspective, Mirabai exemplifies Max Weber's (1963) charismatic authority, where her leadership derives not from institutional position but from spiritual charisma, moral influence, and public respect. Currently, when we examine the rise of women saints in contemporary India, this Mirabai ideal becomes a cultural antecedent for them. Modern women saints such as Bhagwati Saraswati, Annapurna Bharati, Poornanand Giri, and Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi are assuming leadership roles by challenging religious institutional structures from within.

Indian religious institutions, especially Akharas, Mathas, and Peethas, which have traditionally been male-dominated (Briggs, 1938; Ghurye, 1964), are now undergoing restructuring with the presence of these women saints. The power structure of these institutions has been based not only on religious discipline but also on cultural capital and the brahmanical order (Bourdieu, 1986). However, when a woman saint like Bhagwati Saraswati is declared Mahamandaleshwar and addresses topics like Vedanta, service, cleanliness, and women's empowerment in events like Kumbh, this demonstrates that religion is transitioning toward doctrinal inclusivity.

In this context, the initiation and leadership of Sadhvi Annapurna Bharti and the establishment and recognition of Kinnar Akhara by Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi represent revolutionary change in contemporary religious power. The example of Lakshmi Tripathi particularly demonstrates that religious leadership is no longer limited by gender or sexuality, but has become grounded in inclusive morality. Through Vedic recitation, yoga, religious discourse, and public participation, these women saints are utilising religiosity for civic transformation, cultural intervention, and human dialogue.

However, this change faces residual institutional resistance. In religious institutions, women are still often relegated to limited, symbolic, or merely celebratory roles. Social tendencies persist in considering their leadership as 'figurative'; however, when Bhagwati Saraswati explicates Vedanta, it becomes clear that this process involves not only inclusion but also religious reconstruction. The activism of women saints demonstrates that religion is no longer merely a tool of salvation and patriarchy but has become a medium of social justice, service, equality, and dignity.

The decisive role of women, Dalit, and transgender saints in contemporary religious society confirms that religion is moving in a democratic, responsible direction. This change establishes religion not just as a sacred discipline but as a living social process that challenges gender, caste, and sexuality-based prejudices and fosters inclusive religious consciousness. Given all

these developments and interventions, it appears that the historical conflict between religion and patriarchy is being resolved.

Discourse on Reconstruction of Religion in the direction of Women's Leadership and Social Inclusion

In the Indian orthodox religious order, positions such as Mahamandaleshwar have traditionally been reserved for male saints who have served as symbols of spiritual leadership, guru tradition, institutional control, initiatory tradition, and religious decision-making (Briggs, 1938; Fuller, 2003). However, in the twenty-first century, this structure appears to be transforming. Women saints are now occupying these key religious positions, thereby initiating the process of restructuring gender-based religious power structures.

The appointment of Sadhvi Anand Leela Giri as Mahamandaleshwar by Juna Akhara in 2013 was a defining moment in this change. She brought socio-religious recognition to the organisation of women Akharas, which previously had only a peripheral role. Subsequently, Sadhvi Bhagwati Saraswati, who migrated to India from the US and works with Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, has contributed to areas such as Vedic education, environment, women's empowerment, and global dialogue, proving that women saints are no longer limited to worship but have become central to institutional construction and policy-making (Hausner, 2007; Parmarth.org, 2021).

The case of Mahamandaleshwar Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, who belongs to the transgender community, was even more revolutionary. The formation of the Kinnar Akhara (under Shri Panchdashnam Juna Akhara) in 2018 and its recognition at the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh symbolised the religious re-establishment of a community that was excluded from socio-religious discourse for centuries. Their leadership indicates that spirituality is no longer a birth-based right but has become leadership based on spiritual practice and social consciousness (Hinchy, 2019).

Similarly, the rise of Dalit women saints represents another important transformative phenomenon. Historically, Dalits were excluded not only from social life but also from religious life. Texts like Manu Smriti (5.148) and the Dharmashastra disciplines deprived them of yajna, Vedic recitation, and the Guru-Shishya tradition. However, in modern India, saints like Sadhvi Rekha Bharti have challenged this dominance. Her initiation as Mahamandaleshwar in the Ujjain Simhastha Kumbh granted the Dalit community a share in religious power. Her statement, "Dharma is not only for the upper castes, but also for the Shudras and women," represents

a reaffirmation of Ambedkarite ideology (Omvedt, 2004; Teltumbde, 2008).

The participation of Kinnar Saint Laxmi Narayan Tripathi in Vedic recitation, rituals, and religious processes not only challenges Brahmanical concepts of purity-impurity but also demonstrates that a new religious interpretation, 'spiritual reclamation', is now active, in which excluded communities are being repositioned centrally (Hinchy, 2019). The presence of Dalit and transgender women saints is not just symbolic; it represents the reconstruction of religious institutions, leadership, and religious social responsibility.

Sadhvi Rekha Bharti's work in girls' education, slum service, and establishing women's ashrams, and Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi's work in health, education, and legal aid for the LGBTQIA+ community demonstrate that religious leadership has now become integrated with sociological discourse. Through these works, religious power is moving beyond ancient patriarchal hegemony and becoming democratic, accountable, and inclusive.

The philosophical basis of this change also lies within Vedic texts. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad (4.3) states, "Tvam Stri Tvam Pumanasi Tvam Kumar Ut Va Kumari", which establishes that the soul has no gender and that the realisation of God is possible in any body. Viewing the female Mahamandaleshwaras and Dalit-Kinnar saints of contemporary India through this Vedic lens, it is clear that they are not only leading in religion but also creating an alternative interpretation of religion which places social justice, equality, and dignity at the centre.

This change should not be viewed only from a religious perspective but as a process of comprehensive social reconstruction. This represents the point where religion, which was once constrained by walls of power, gender, and caste, is now redefining itself with discourses of inclusion, service, and sensitivity. In this context, women Mahamandaleshwaras, Dalit saints, and Kinnar saints emerge as harbingers of a new chapter within the Indian religious tradition, demonstrating that religion now serves not only as a journey to salvation but also as a medium of social revolution.

Sadhvi Life versus Public Leadership: Philosophical Resistance of Contemporary Women Saints

In the contemporary Indian religious scenario, the life of women saints is no longer limited to the traditional sphere of renunciation and meditation, but has also become a domain of extensive social, cultural, and institutional intervention. In traditional Sanatani ideology, the life of a Sadhvi was associated with values such as restraint, celibacy, and renunciation of household life. However, today's women saints are linking this life with civic-

religious accountability, institutional leadership, and public engagement. This tension between 'Sadhvi life versus public life' is now being redefined through the activism of contemporary women saints.

Historically, male saints were accepted in institution-building, debates, and administrative leadership, while women saints were limited to the role of Sadhvi or 'goddess' (Khandelwal, 2004). However, saints like Bhagwati Saraswati, Lakshmi Tripathi, and Kamala Bharti transcend this division. They are not only Sadhvi's but also founders, thinkers, and public leaders. From a philosophical perspective, these saints are grounded in 'inclusive spirituality' and 'humanistic religion'.

Bhagwati Saraswati's philosophy that 'spirituality progresses from self-realisation to social welfare' connects religious life with the global environmental movement, women's empowerment, and cleanliness campaigns (Hausner, 2007). Lakshmi Tripathi's philosophical interpretation that 'religion has no gender' makes religious discourse gender-neutral through sophisticated engagement with the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Gita (Hinchy, 2019). Saints like Kamala Bharti make Dalit consciousness and social self-reliance integral to sadhvi life, transforming their life into a '*sadhana of protest*'.

The personal struggle of these women saints has been characterised by institutional rejection, cultural prejudice, and gender biases. Ma Purnanand Giri faced initial rejection from the Akhara Parishad; Bhagwati Saraswati was challenged as a legitimate custodian of 'Indian religion' because she was a foreign woman; and Laxmi Tripathi was repeatedly excluded from public religious forums due to her transgender identity. However, these saints successfully integrated their lives with public life through self-confidence, philosophical dialogue, and social construction. Their relationship with institutions has extended beyond participation to leadership. These saints present religious institutions as laboratories of social change. Bhagwati Saraswati transformed Parmarth Niketan into an international spiritual-social centre, while Laxmi Tripathi established Kinnar Akhara and provided religious recognition to marginalised communities. Their activism proves that contemporary sadhvvis are no longer merely symbolic presences but bearers of decisive power and ideological direction. They are working toward establishing a religious society that is grounded in the principles of justice, equality, and inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper examines the multifaceted nature of the increasing participation of women saints in the contemporary Indian religious scenario, their social acceptance, and their empowerment within traditional

religious structures. From the Vedic period's principle of 'yatra naryastu puhyante' to the present-day journey of women saints like Bhagwati Saraswati, Lakshmi Tripathi, Maa Poornanand Giri, and Kamala Bharti to the post of Mahamandaleshwar, and the emergence of thousands of Dalit women as saints in various Akharas, this represents not only the resurgence of the feminine in religious contexts but also change in religious power structures. This transformation demonstrates that religion is no longer a static, male-dominated, and upper caste structure, but is becoming a dynamic, inclusive process that engages with factors like caste, gender, sexuality, and identity. These saints have connected Sadhvi's life with public responsibility. They are active as institutional architects, doctrinal strategists, and agents of normative change, while also serving as spiritual guides. Although this process of social acceptance is not yet complete, it is no longer merely symbolic.

The decisive presence of women saints in Akharas, Mathas, Peethas, and pilgrimage events indicates structural changes within religious institutions. The religious leadership of Dalit-transgender women saints particularly highlights processes of inclusion and social justice that align with the values of compassion, equality, and liberation inherent in Indian religious traditions. Bhagwati Saraswati's development of environmental religion**, Lakshmi Tripathi's religious legitimisation of transgender rights, and Kamala Bharti's establishment of training centres for Dalit women *sadhvis* demonstrate that religion has now become a tool for social intervention and moral reconstruction.

A central conclusion of this paper is that Indian religiosity represents a flexible and self-revising system that has been reinterpreting beliefs under changing times. Women saints are not only participants in this process but have also become its ideological leaders. Therefore, their representation in religious institutions must receive constitutional and institutional support. Additionally, concrete measures should be taken to increase the number of women acharyas, ensure participation in policy-making, and establish gender justice in religious leadership.

However, this study also reveals persistent challenges that require analytical attention. Despite significant progress, women saints continue to face institutional resistance, particularly in decision-making processes within traditional Akharas. The acceptance of their leadership often remains contingent on their ability to navigate complex negotiations between traditional expectations and contemporary realities. Furthermore, while Dalit and transgender women saints have achieved remarkable visibility, their representation remains numerically limited and geographically concentrated,

suggesting the need for more systematic inclusion efforts.

The intersectionality of caste, gender, and sexuality creates multiple layers of marginalisation that require nuanced policy interventions. Women saints from privileged backgrounds, like Bhagwati Saraswati, may face different challenges compared to Dalit women saints or transgender leaders like Lakshmi Tripathi. This diversity of experiences necessitates differentiated support mechanisms and recognition of varying pathways to religious authority.

From a theoretical perspective, this transformation aligns with Bourdieu's concept of field restructuring, where new entrants challenge existing hierarchies by leveraging alternative forms of capital. The success of women saints in acquiring and deploying cultural capital, through Sanskrit learning, scriptural expertise, and performative charisma, demonstrates the dynamic nature of religious fields. However, Giddens' structuration theory reminds us that while these agents are transforming structures, they simultaneously work within existing institutional frameworks that both enable and constrain their agency. The global dimension of this phenomenon also deserves attention. As Indian spirituality gains international prominence, women saints like Bhagwati Saraswati serve as cultural ambassadors, potentially influencing both domestic and international perceptions of Indian religious traditions. This global engagement may accelerate internal transformations by creating external pressures for greater inclusivity. Looking forward, this research suggests several areas for future investigation. Longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of women saints could provide insights into institutional change processes. Comparative analysis across different regions and religious traditions could illuminate varying patterns of inclusion and resistance. Additionally, examining the perspectives of traditional male religious leaders on these changes could offer a more comprehensive understanding of institutional dynamics.

The policy implications of this study extend beyond religious institutions to broader questions of gender equality in Indian society. The success of women saints in achieving leadership positions within traditionally patriarchal institutions offers lessons for other domains, including politics, education, and corporate governance. Their strategies of working within existing frameworks while gradually transforming them may provide models for institutional change in other contexts. In conclusion, the emancipatory praxis of contemporary women saints represents not only change within tradition but also serves as a catalyst for the emergence of alternative religio-political subjectivities characterised by religious democracy, spiritual justice, and social dignity. This transformation signals a fundamental shift in Indian

religious consciousness, where authority derives not from inherited privilege but from spiritual accomplishment, social contribution, and moral leadership. The ongoing evolution of women's roles in religious institutions thus reflects broader democratizing trends in Indian society, suggesting that religious traditions, when approached with an inclusive vision, can serve as vehicles for social progress rather than obstacles to change.

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