

WOMEN'S LIVES,  
WOMEN'S RITUALS IN THE  
HINDU TRADITION



*Edited by*

TRACY  
PINTCHMAN

# Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition

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*For my son,*

*Noah Lawrence French,*

*born August 4, 2002*

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We have chosen to eliminate all diacritical marks from the book and to minimize the use of terms from Indian languages in order to make the chapters more accessible to a nonspecialist audience.



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Tracy Pintchman is a professor of religious studies and Hindu studies at Loyola University Chicago, where she teaches courses on Hindu traditions and women and religion. Her previous publications include a number of articles and book chapters; two monographs, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (1994) and *Guests at God's Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares* (2005); and an edited volume, *Seeking Mahadevi: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess* (2001). She is currently researching narratives of meaning surrounding motherhood.



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# Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition

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# Introduction

*Tracy Pintchman*

We give birth to a child, we put oil on the child's body, and we massage the child. Men can't do all this. So ritual worship [*puja*] is like this. Men cannot do as much as we do.

The woman who spoke these words, Bhagavanti, was reclining on the floor of her home in the city of Benares, North India, and watching her daughter-in-law sort rice as my research associate, Sunita Singh, and I sat before her, trying to interview her. It was November 1997, and I had come to Bhagavanti's home to ask about her participation in Kartik *puja*, a tradition of women's devotional practices specific to the month of Kartik (October–November). Bhagavanti sat before us, her elbow resting on a pillow as she responded patiently to the questions we put before her. She was quite elderly at the time of our interview and had lost a good deal of her hearing, so Sunita and I had to shout to make ourselves heard, drawing the attention of many neighborhood women and children, who came to peer through the windows to see what was going on. Bhagavanti's daughter-in-law kept getting up and milling about, but she also chimed in whenever she had a point she wanted to make. At this particular moment, I was asking Bhagavanti why men don't participate in the particular ritual tradition, called Kartik *puja*, about which I was asking her. Like many other women I interviewed, Bhagavanti attributed men's absence to differences between men's and women's natures and social roles in ways that seemed to favor women as the more virtuous and disciplined gender (cf. Pintchman 2005).

Bhagavanti's words quoted above bring to mind the common perception among many Indian Hindus that women have a special aptitude for ritual performance. During the years from 1995 to 1998, when I was conducting field research in Benares, on numerous occasions both women and men suggested to me that, in India, women are more religious than men and do the lion's share of the day-to-day religious work. Like other women I interviewed, Bhagavanti also drew a clear parallel between the work women do in the household and the work they do in this particular *pūja* tradition, comparing ritual tasks specifically with maternal tasks and the responsibilities involved in birthing and caring for children. For Bhagavanti, the domain of ritual practice is not separated from day-to-day existence but instead involves the kinds of skills and commitments that appear regularly and without special notice in the mundane arena of ordinary life.

The chapters in this book explore the relationship between women's ritual practices and the lives and activities of Hindu women beyond the ritual sphere. Bhagavanti's words provide a helpful point of departure for our collective inquiry into the nature of this relationship. Like Bhagavanti, we presume that Hindu women are deeply engaged and invested in the performance of religious practice. Rituals that take place in Sanskritic, Brahminical Hindu environments continue to be instituted and directed largely by Brahmin males, but women largely control many types of ritual practice that occur outside of such contexts, including many household, calendrical, and local devotional practices. Even in environments where Sanskritic traditions maintain a strong presence, women often sustain active ritual agendas and function as engaged actors in many types of ritual work. Indeed, in some parts of India, women are taking leadership roles in Sanskritic ritual performance as well.

Like Bhagavanti, too, we maintain that Hindu women's religious practices are not isolated from social, cultural, domestic, or larger religious roles or frames of meaning but tend to engage realms that transcend individual ritual contexts. Contemporary scholarship pertaining to both ritual and women's religiosity provides support for such a premise. Recent work on ritual practice emphasizes its nature as a type of performance that is inherently constructive and strategic, producing specific types of meaning and values through particular strategies. Because it is constructive and strategic, ritual practice facilitates the ability of ritual agents to appropriate or reshape values and ideals that help to mold social identity (Bell 1997, 82, 73). Elizabeth Collins observes that thinking of ritual as performance also requires greater sophistication in thinking through issues of agency. Collins notes:

The model of performance implies several different agents and different kinds of agency. There is the agency of the author of the text, but also the agency of the performers who choose to perform a particular ritual or a particular variant of a ritual text and who

may even revise the text or tradition in their performance. There is [also] the agency of those who participate as audience. (Collins 1997, 183–184)

In different contexts, women may function as ritual authors, performers, audience, or any combination of these, and the chapters in this book collectively address women's ritual agency in all of these ways.

People who participate in ritual practices are also embedded in larger communities that maintain particular social norms and values. When individuals engage in ritual performances as agents, their engagement may function to help produce, reproduce, transform, resist, or even defy these larger norms. The constructive nature of ritual in this regard extends to ideologies and practices that concern gender. Judith Butler has argued that gender is primarily performative and that gender identity is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler 1990, 171–180). Religious practice, which certainly entails a stylized repetition of acts executed in a ritual arena, is, in this regard, clearly an engendering process. Lesley Northup notes that rituals are, at least in part, “constitutive of persons,” helping to construct, enhance, and enable personhood (Northup 1997, 87). Ritual engenders through the performance of actions that help to produce identity, including gender identity, in relation to predominant social norms in ways that may be compliant, resistant, or both, complexly and simultaneously. In her work on Hindu women's domestic rituals in South India, for example, Mary Hancock explores ways that domestic ritual practice acts simultaneously as a site for both “reproduction of and resistance to hegemonic images of female subjectivity” in Sanskrit Hinduism (Hancock 1999, 32, 137).

Recent work on women's religiosity further corroborates an emphasis for women in particular, including Hindu women, on the continuity between religious and social domains, affirming that women appropriate religion in ways that tend to engage women's gender-specific social roles, experiences, and values. Meena Khandelwal, for example, notes that female renunciants in the Hindu tradition tend to identify themselves as mothers, emphasizing the moral and spiritual strengths particular to women in the mothering role and adapting the term *Ma* (“mother”) as a form of address (Khandelwal 2004, 184–185). Susan Sered (1992, 1994) observes that women often personalize religion, emphasizing practices and symbols that give spiritual meaning to women's everyday lives. In speaking of the relationship between religion and other dimensions of women's lives, Marjorie Proctor-Smith distinguishes between what she calls the emancipatory function of religion (including ritual practices), where religion may help women to transcend existing social restraints and behave in ways contrary to social expectation, and a sacralizing function, where religion may serve to establish women's traditional roles and experiences as sacred (1993, 25–28). While the sacralizing function can serve to justify traditions that limit

women's power and freedom in both public and private spheres, at its best it may serve to reveal "the dignity and holiness of women's work" (28) and to enhance women's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.

In engaging Bhagavanti's words as our point of departure, it is important to acknowledge one important way in which the chapters in this book may depart from the assumptions that Bhagavanti seems to bring to the table: the chapters do not necessarily affirm a straightforward correlation between women's daily work in the domestic arena and women's religious practices. Instead, we interrogate the relationship of women's ritual activities to normative domesticity, exposing and exploring the nuances, complexities, and limits of this relationship. Here we understand domesticity in terms that are primarily spatial and relational. We take "the domestic" to refer to a place, a domicile or home, including the activities that occur therein and the kinship relations among particular individuals. In many cultural and historical contexts, including contemporary India, women's everyday lives tend to revolve heavily around domestic and interpersonal concerns, especially care for children, the home, husbands, and other relatives; hence, women's religiosity also tends to emphasize the domestic realm and the relationships most central to women. Within the study of Hinduism, work by Susan Wadley, Mary McGee, and Anne Pearson has elucidated the concern for familial relationships and domestic well-being that permeates some women's rituals, especially votive rituals (Wadley 1989; McGee 1987, 1991; Pearson 1996). But these scholars also remind us that such rituals involve other goals and concerns—spiritual liberation, for example. Furthermore, even the domestic religious activities that Hindu women perform may not merely replicate or affirm traditionally formulated domestic ideals; rather, these activities may function strategically to reconfigure, reinterpret, criticize, or even reject such ideals.

The contributions in this book form a collective commentary on the relationship of Hindu women's ritual practices to the domestic arena in particular. Women may challenge normative domesticity by reinterpreting, expanding, or rejecting prescribed spatial restrictions, domestic practices, ideologies of kinship, or familial expectations. Traditional domesticity intersects with women's lives ambiguously, providing freedoms as well as constraints, danger as well as protection, devalued as well as heightened status; women's challenges to normative domesticity may be similarly ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> We emphasize female innovation and agency in constituting and transforming both ritual and the domestic realm, and we call attention to the limitations of normative domesticity as a category relevant to at least some forms of Hindu women's religious practice.

Many chapters in this volume also consider the relationship between Hindu women's ritual practices and political, religious, or sociocultural concerns and values beyond the domestic. Some, for example, explore larger questions of power and women's empowerment, asking whether women's rituals empower