

Review of Marie-Thérèse Charpentier, *Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism: A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press 2010, 395 pp., ISBN 978-951-765-544-6/ISBN 978-951-765-545-3 (digital)

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Marie-Thérèse Charpentier explores the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood in contemporary Hinduism by investigating the spiritual careers of an impressive sample consisting of seventy gurus, with a particular focus on four of them. As a point of departure, she makes use of the key question: 'How does one become a (female) guru?' That question gives rise to further questions concerning the socio-religious context of emerging female guruhood (including upbringing, calling and public recognition) and specific traits of female asceticism. Furthermore, Charpentier works on the assumption that goddess worship has helped pave the way for the contemporary female gurus' existence. The present study is her doctoral thesis and was accepted by the Åbo Akademi University, Finland. It took her ten years to identify and localize seventy female spiritual masters in contemporary India. Apart from this vast number of persons involved, the long period of research is partly explained by the experience that the process of identifying and locating looked like 'a job for a detective' (p. 43). Charpentier's research work initially was inspired by the contact with two Indian female gurus sharply contrasting the prevailing stereotypes about female subordination in Hindu traditions. The main thesis of the present study is that the phenomenon of contemporary female guruhood contradicts the usual social expectations of female subordination in Hindu traditions and promotes a renewed awareness of age-old perceptions of God as the divine feminine. Female Hindu gurus, rather than working directly for social or political change,

progressively infuse transformation at a personal level, which is believed to act as a powerful motor to social transformation in the long run.

This study consists of nine chapters. Chapter I introduces in the research project including a valuable survey on previous research in Hindu female asceticism. Chapters II–III deal with the historical background of guruhood in Hindu tradition, present portraits of four particular female gurus and deal with the social and socio-cultural background of guruhood. Chapters IV–V investigate the spiritual career of female gurus starting from their spiritual experiences in childhood to the public recognition of spiritual leadership. Chapter VI presents typical modes of female asceticism in relation to *śrīdharmā*, the normative prescriptions for female life. Chapter VII deals with Hindu goddess worship, especially with the concept of *śakti*, the divine female energy and its relevance for female guruhood. Chapter VIII focuses on the question if female spiritual leadership in contemporary India has an impact on social life. Chapter IX summarizes the study. Charpentier tries to answer her research questions by various sources of information. Especially important among these are written sources such as hagiographic and biographic accounts or quotes from the gurus themselves and in-depth interviews with gurus and devotees.

The seventy female gurus of this study present a wide diversity and variety in terms of age, social and geographical background, religious affiliation, level of education, age and social position. Nevertheless the first interesting – yet not really surprising – outcome of the study is that general trends can be discerned: most gurus studied belong to superior *varnas* (classes of the Hindu society), specifically *brāhmanas*, come from an urban area, are well-educated, and have a middle-class background. Charpentier examines the normative and the individual socio-religious and socio-cultural contexts and their impact on the female gurus studied. Moreover, she regards contemporary female gurus as part of modern Hinduism and globalization. The gurus themselves exclusively derive their spiritual careers from a strong inner calling and vocation based on personal spiritual experiences. The present study testifies that female guruhood is to be seen on the margins of tradition. Most women formally have not been initiated into *sannyāsa* (renunciation) and do not follow the traditional male patterns of asceticism. Charpentier asserts that it is striking about the female ascetic way of life is its highly individual and non-institutional character (p. 151). The spiritual status of female gurus predominantly is transmitted by personal charisma but not by institutional authority. The fact that female gurus are associated with *śakti*, the divine female energy, contributes a lot to their power and high esteem.

At the end of her study Charpentier deals with more general issues concerning female spiritual leadership. By asking whether female gurus challenge cultural and religious norms of gender ideology and contribute to modifying the codes of social conformity prevalent in Indian society, she addresses an issue focused by recent academic discourse on religion and gender. Does religion – in this case the presence of female gurus – offer an emancipating option for women? Charpentier finds that the answer depends on the perspective (p. 301f). From a socio-religious perspective she determines the gurus' views as ambivalent: On the one hand they are part of the normative male-defined tradition and on the other hand female gurus transgress male-defined boundaries. The main focus, however, is not laid on social transformation but on the process of inner self-transformation.

There are some points of critique to be mentioned. Often it is not clear enough how representative the statements of individual gurus are for the whole sample and which criteria are decisive for the selected material. Several times Charpentier refers to 'Sharada Devi' (the correct name is Sarada Devi), the wife of Ramakrishna, playing a central role in the Ramakrishna movement which had an important impact on modern Hinduism. Charpentier reproduces the uncritical perspective of the movement by describing Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi as an ideal spiritual couple (p. 113). Sarada Devi's spiritual importance and position as guru and Divine Mother evolved only gradually after the death of her husband. During Ramakrishna's lifetime Sarada Devi functioned as a perfect Hindu wife being fully orientated to the needs of her husband. It was Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's foremost disciple, who laid the foundations for Sarada Devi's spiritual status. In the perspective of the later movement Sarada Devi was formed into a spiritual model being Ramakrishna's divine consort and first disciple. At the end of her study Charpentier summarizes that most female gurus of her research sample are not working directly for social transformation but are focusing on a process of inner transformation, which is believed to have a positive impact on society (p. 293). This answer is not balanced enough regarding the different individual gurus building up the research sample. It is self-evident that spiritual authorities concentrate on spiritual transformation instead of socio-political change but this must not mean that the normative patriarchal tradition has to be reinforced. Spiritual development may provoke transformative insights concerning the social dimension – at least there are examples testifying this expectation. However, there are differences between the gurus and the range reaches from revolutionary rejection of social conventions and patriarchal structures to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Spiritual self-transformation cannot lead to social transformation as long as traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity as well as patriarchal attitudes are encouraged. The related question if Hindu goddess worship translates into women's social status requires multi-layered answers. Charpentier's answers could be much more nuanced. There is not only a difference in attitudes – evaluating women's status in terms of autonomy and self-determination from a Western perspective or stressing duty and community from an Indian perspective. Hindu Goddesses and especially the concept of *śakti* can provide liberating symbols for women but it depends on the broader social context of interpretation to enhance the symbol from the restricted impact on the individual emancipation of a female guru to a source of empowerment in 'ordinary' women's lives. The symbol of the Goddess may reinforce the ideal of female subordination as well. There is at least one example that the concept of 'equal rights' is not only essential for Western women (confer p. 255). Mate Mahadevi, the spiritual leader of a modern movement belonging to a Hindu tradition originating in the 12th century. She does not figure among the four representative gurus but she belongs to the larger sample of Charpentier's study. Mate Mahadevi advocates the concept of 'equal rights' for men and women. Thereby she builds on the traditional ideal of equality of all human beings without restrictions of caste, class and gender. Nevertheless the emphasis of gender equality is to be discerned as part of a modern reinterpretation of the old ideal of equality. Interesting enough, the symbol of the Goddess and the concept of *śakti* respectively do not play a dominant role for the empowerment of women within the scope of this movement.

In her study Charpentier contributes to the broad field of the study of religion and gender by addressing many general issues revolving around gender, authority, power and empowerment. Female spiritual leadership, its typical traits and ways of sanctification as well as its impact on social or political change, make up a crucial topic in the study of religion and gender. Charpentier's study represents an example how this role of authority is played by women belonging to the stream of Hindu traditions. Charpentier has gained interesting and useful insights to be further discussed.