Article
Gender Discourse in the Gurucaritra: A Close-Reading of Three Women’s Narratives

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Abstract: In this article, the author provides a fresh reading of three women-centered narratives from the Gurucaritra, a sixteenth-century Marathi devotional text. Based on the analysis of three distinct narratives from the Gurucaritra, the author examines the narratives through two key lenses: women’s subjectivity and the “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity”. I argue that although women’s voices are absent or marginalized in religious narratives, we can retrieve and amplify their contributions by reinterpreting traditional narratives to emphasize the roles of female characters. In the process, we can situate these narratives within their social contexts, thereby shedding light on women’s nuanced and multifaceted positions within the social and spiritual fabric of their societies.

Keywords: women and gender in Hindu literature; medieval Hindu literature; regional Hindu literature; the Gurucaritra; Hindu narratives; textual analysis; androcentric; feminist criticism and religion; constructive theology; women’s subjectivity; “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity”

1. Introduction

In medieval Hindu scriptures, the voices of women are often marginalized or obscured by patriarchal norms and male-centered perspectives. From the time of classical Hinduism (500 BCE–500 CE), the notion of the feminine has been shaped by an emphasis on right conduct, as defined in the Dharmaśāstra texts such as the Manusmṛti (“Laws of Manu”) (Kāne 1968, vol. 2 part 1, pp. 281–94). Collectively speaking, these texts define women’s spiritual progress by the extent of their service to their husbands and families (Olivelle 2004). Thus, a woman’s self-righteousness or svadharma is defined in terms of serving the well-being of her husband and family. The Dharmaśāstra textual traditions, and especially books such as the “Laws of Manu”, have been influential in inscribing norms of patriarchy, and, therefore, ascribing a secondary status to women. Hinduism, in terms of ritual and textual practices, is predominantly [still] taken up by men (Dhruvarajan 1996). This is because, with a few exceptions such as the women priests’ movement in Maharashtra (Patton 2005), men are still in charge of disseminating religious knowledge and of performing religious duties. The characterization of women based on the highly androcentric ideology of pātivratya (a woman’s quality of being virtuous by serving her husband) is obvious in many Sanskritic texts and the reason for such characterization is that most of the religious texts were authored by men (Aklujkar 2000). These texts have had a foundational impact on developing the notion of the feminine in Hindu literature throughout history.

The relationship between feminism and Hinduism is indeed a complex and multifaceted topic, with scholars adopting various approaches to understand and critique this intersection. Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan (2012) highlights one such approach, which involves the Gandhian secular tradition. This tradition attempts to reinterpret the symbols of “Sanatan Dharma” (eternal duty or order, a term often used to refer to Hinduism) in ways that are progressive, universal, and non-communal. By doing so, it aims to make these symbols more inclusive and relevant to contemporary sociopolitical contexts, particularly in terms of advancing feminist concerns. On the other hand, Sharada Sugirtharajah (2002)
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points out that some scholars, identifying as feminists, have chosen to distance themselves from religion altogether. This stance likely stems from the perception that traditional religious frameworks, including those within Hinduism, may inherently uphold patriarchal values and structures that are at odds with feminist principles. Consequently, these scholars might see secularism or other non-religious frameworks as more conducive to promoting gender equality and feminist goals.

Sharma and Bilimoria (2000) advocate for a more nuanced understanding that situates Indian women’s experiences within their cultural and social contexts, recognizing their active roles in resisting and redefining spirituality amid patriarchal constraints. Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (2018), through her portrayal of women in the Rāmāyana demonstrates how women’s actions and fates in the Rāmāyana are used to address and negotiate complex cultural and religious concerns in ancient Indian society. This would mean reinterpreting traditional narratives to emphasize the roles and contributions of female characters, as well as situating these narratives within their social contexts. As Nileema Shukla-Bhatt asserts, “for women in whose lives religion is an important component, participating in its interpretation from a feminist perspective can be an empowering experience” (Shukla-Bhatt 2009, p. 68). In light of this, can faith-based feminism that seeks to reconcile religious beliefs and feminist principles offer a transformative lens through which to reevaluate gender discourse in medieval Hindu society, thereby reshaping our understanding of power dynamics in the lives of women? By aligning religious practices with contemporary ideals of gender equality, faith-based feminism may provide new insights into the historical roles and agency of women within these communities. Two eminent scholars of feminism and religion, Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma, urge that scholars need to go beyond the analysis of masculine and feminine powers and develop a “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity” that is based on the all-encompassing notion of dharma in understanding how Hindu perceptions of the divine feminine are formed and expressed (Pintchman and Sherma 2011, p. 10). The nuanced framework of “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity” opens spaces for multiple perspectives about gender dynamics. A fresh look at the narratives about women from a relational/dharmic viewpoint that focuses on the context of spiritual progress based on the idea of karma can lead to the project of highlighting and retrieving the marginalized voices of women. Building on proposals of Dhruvarajan (1996), Rita M. Gross (1998), Pintchman and Sherma (2011, p. 10), and other recent scholars on Hinduism and feminism, this paper offers feminist criticism of the Gurucaritra. In what follows, I propose to examine the existing medieval Hindu texts through a feminist lens to help us understand gender dynamics, religious practices, and cultural heritage in pre-modern India.

The Gurucaritra, the central text of the Dattatreya sampradāy, is a sixteenth-century Marathi text about the role of a particular guru in the life of ordinary human beings. The book consists of more than seven thousand verses covering numerous topics, including the birth narrative of a Hindu god called Dattatreya, narratives about the life and works of two human incarnations of that god, and narratives elucidating the centrality of the guru in the lives of disciples concerning the guru’s grace and the disciples’ devotion to the guru. The book is a revered religious text in the Marathi bhakti/devotional tradition. With the dialogical format, everyday life stories about healing, and the effects of the guru’s grace in ordinary people’s lives, the text has become emblematic of the Marathi bhakti milieu.

Feminist criticism, in this case, refers to taking up female characters who seem to have been undermined in religious literature. We come across several narratives in medieval Hindu literature where women characters make an important contribution in the course of the story. However, despite their centrality to the narrative, women are portrayed as marginalized characters in many medieval Hindu texts. For instance, as discussed later in the essay, Anasuyā, as depicted in the Gurucaritra, is typically read as the ‘other’ in the story of the making of the god Dattatreya, even though she is the reason for his creation.

I examine stories from the Gurucaritra through two key lenses: women’s subjectivity and the “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity”. This approach allows for a deeper analysis of women’s experiences, perspectives, and contributions within religious discourse, shedding
light on their nuanced and multifaceted positions within the social and spiritual fabric of South Asian societies. Based on my analysis of the three particular narratives from the Gurucaritra, I offer two methodological insights regarding the study of intersections of gender and religion in medieval Hindu literature: 1. While the text presumes/presents the women as secondary characters, we have to refocus our attention on the actual work/actions women are doing in the narratives; 2. We have to analyze the gender constructions in the context of a Hindu worldview that presumes the importance of preserving and upholding the ultimate, underlying philosophical force in the formation of ontological reality, i.e., *dharma*.

This constructive theological approach that seeks to creatively engage with the androcentric Hindu narratives within an inclusive and equitable framework can challenge and change traditional patriarchal norms. I hope to further the consciousness and practices of contemporary Hindu women as they re-read and re-engage with popular religious stories.

The project of studying women’s authority and agency must start with assuming that there are many forms of feminism. Informed by postcolonial scholarship (McLeod 2010; Gandhi 1998) and recent feminist scholarship which pushes us to think beyond the binaries of the powerful and vulnerable, we need to create our own onto-epistemological framework in understanding women’s power and leadership in myriad, local contexts. In what follows, I refer to stories from the Gurucaritra, a popular literary resource well suited to rethinking gender constructions in medieval India. We read stories of women that rework the traditional norms of patriarchy in this text. The women utilize their domestic power and become harbingers of change in their families. The women in these stories become the source of fulfillment of the *dharma* of the householder of their husbands and themselves. In this new way of reading, the Gurucaritra presents the dynamics of power and gender roles in a much more complex way than merely reinforcing the patriarchal hierarchical framework.

In the present analysis, the first section briefly introduces the women in the Gurucaritra. The second section focuses particularly on three narratives from the text in which women play an authoritative role. Following the narratives, the concluding section offers reflections on the issues of power, authority, agency, and gender in light of the role of women as portrayed in these three narratives.

2. Women in the Gurucaritra: A Medieval Marathi Treatise on Leading a Successful Hindu Life

Contemporary readers of the Gurucaritra relate to it as an ethical treatise, as it consists of comments on topics such as the code of conduct for bṛहmaṇs, married women, and so forth. It is also perceived to be a ritual manual, as it gives elaborate instructions on such topics as the procedures for daily *pūjā*, pilgrimages, and votive observances. Followers of Dattātreyā not only value the text for its lucid language and everyday life topics; they also hold it to be equivalent to the Vedas. Out of the 52 chapters in the Gurucaritra, 29 feature prominent women characters. As we analyze the roles of these women, we realize that despite often being treated as secondary figures, they are the harbingers of change, peace, well-being, and happiness for their families. There is no doubt that through these stories, the Gurucaritra reinforces the gender normativity of the *Dharmaśāstra* by reintroducing concepts of *pativrata* (a dedicated wife), *strīdharma* (norms of womanhood), and *vidhaevacātācār* (ideals for widowhood). There is no doubt that the text presents stories within a highly androcentric and patriarchal framework. However, I am more interested in ‘possibilities for validating women as participants in religion’ offered in the narratives from the Gurucaritra (Pechilis 2008, p. 8). I analyze three specific stories from the Gurucaritra and suggest how we can read them from a women’s perspective.

The first narrative features a semi-divine character who transforms gods into infants as a consequence of their immoral act. The second narrative centers on an ordinary woman who receives a divine son as a reward for her dedication to dharma. The third narrative involves two women whose rightful conduct alters the course of events in a king’s life. By
highlighting how semi-divine figures, ordinary women, and those influencing royal affairs can all enact significant moral and transformative changes, these narratives underscore the universal potential for female agency and virtue to drive positive outcomes, regardless of social status.

2.1. The Tapas of Anasūyā: The Creator of the Gods

Anasūyā has been celebrated in various Hindu traditions as an exemplar pativrata. Anasūyā’s narrative comes up in various genres of Hindu texts, including the epic of the Rāmāyaṇa, Garuḍa and Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇas, and regional-language texts such as the Gurucaritra. The author of the Gurucaritra refers to Anasūyā in the context of the birth of the three-headed Hindu god Dattātreya. The story portrays a woman’s ability to transform lustful desires into nurturing and nourishing needs. The episode of birth is narrated as follows:¹

The story of the sage Atrī can be traced back to the story of the creation of the universe. When there was nothing like this universe, there was only water everywhere. Then the god created a golden-colored egg that became famous as the brahmāṇḍa.² After one divine year, the golden egg broke apart and there came into existence one earth and one sky. Then Brahma appeared and he created the fourteen cosmological universes and ten directions. Then he wanted to create the universe so he created seven boys from his mind. Their names were Maricī, Atrī, Angiras, Pulasta, Pulah, Ritu, and Vasiṣṭha.

Atrī was married and his wife’s name was Anasūyā. She was the gem among the pativrataas. Anasūyā was the mother of the universe. She was so beautiful that no one could describe her beauty fully. She took very good care of her husband. She was so steadfast and virtuous that even gods were alarmed by the spiritual prowess she had accrued by her dedication to the practice of her dharma. They feared that she was capable of taking over the heavenly beauties from the gods at once. With this apprehension in mind, Indra approached Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. He described the dharmic prowess of Anasūyā and said, “Anasūyā is a true pativrata. She thinks and cares about her husband in mind, speech, and action. She offers her best to the atithi (guests). Even the Sun is so afraid of her spiritual powers, that he makes his heat less harsh. The fire takes on the qualities of being cool for her. The wind blows slowly. The earth offers herself to Anasūyā in the form of soft sandals. We are afraid that she could challenge and take over our divine status. She could grant a boon to someone and they could misuse such a boon even to kill us. This is why it is necessary to challenge her chastity by disturbing her during her votive observances”.

With this thought in mind, the three gods took the guise of mendicants and arrived at Anasūyā’s house as guests. They requested Anasūyā, “We are here because we cannot bear our hunger anymore. We have heard that you fulfill the wishes of your guests by serving them whatever they wish for”. Anasūyā welcomed them by washing their feet and by offering them flowers, ceremonial rice, and kunikum (blessed vermillion powder). They requested, “We have already taken baths. We are very hungry and would like to have a meal at once”. Respecting the request of the mendicants, Anasūyā decided to serve them food without waiting for her husband’s return. As she started serving food to them, they said, “Hello lady, we came here from far away. After witnessing your beauty, our desires for your beauty have been elevated. Please serve us while being naked or else we will go back without eating our meals”. This strange request put Anasūyā in a moral dilemma. If she let the mendicants go hungry, it would bring her spiritual harm due to failing to fulfill her duties towards guests of atithidharma. She was confident that she would not be the victim of the lustful desires of the mendicants as her mind was pure. She also thought that she would survive in
that challenging situation as a result of the ascetic powers of her husband. She promised to serve them naked. She went to her kitchen, took off her clothes, and uttered, “The guests are my babies”. At that very moment, the mendicants were transformed into infants. She came back with clothes on and started breastfeeding them. Anasuyā saw the babies were crawling on the floor. They were crying with hunger. She quenched the thirst of each of the babies with her breastmilk. See, the divine miracle, the gods were transformed into babies with the ascetic powers of the pativrata. [Thus,] the one in whose belly is heated with fire that evaporates all the water in the seven seas, was calmed with the breast milk of a pativrata. Once their thirst was quenched, Anasuyā put each of the infants to sleep by singing lullabies. Upon his return, Atri was pleasantly surprised to see the three infants. When he learnt about the happenings, the sage offered his respect to the gods. The gods also offered their respect to sage Atri. The gods were very pleased with Anasuyā. They offered to fulfill her wish as a boon. She suggested Atri to request the gods to gift the infants to Atri and Anasuyā as their offspring. The gods, ultimately, stayed with the virtuous couple in the form of their children forever. (Kāmat 2009, The Gurucharitra, Kāmat 26th edition. Translator: Mugdha Yeolekar)

The children in the above story are depicted in the form of a god called Dattatreya. Thus, readers of the Gurucharitra call it the story of the birth of Dattatreya. The readers of the Gurucharitra refer to the above narrative as the story of the birth of Dattatreya. On the surface, this narrative may appear to be essentially patriarchal. Anasuya is forced to be naked in front of men. She then relies on her husband’s tapas as a means to save herself from this calamity. When she transforms the men, she changes them into three male children. Finally, when receiving the boon from the gods, she asks her husband to request three boys as offspring. All in all, the entire story reemphasizes male dominance. However, the story is also remarkable for the prominence it gives to female subjectivity. The woman, who became vulnerable to male desires, subverts the dynamic of vulnerability by transforming them into infants. As Pechilis (2008) suggests “moving beyond a simplistic understanding of ‘oppression and empowerment’ when studying South Asian religions” is crucial in understanding the ideas of female subjectivity in the Hindu world. The social norms in South Asia, according to Pechilis (2008), are not solely governed by notions of power, agency, and authority.

Furthermore, the idea of Anasuyā relying on her husband’s tapas and reaching him to ask for the boon of offspring does not weaken her, as her social imagination and subjectivity are informed by the idea of pativrata. This type of complementarity of male and female principles undergirds the Hindu world. Although the goddess is portrayed as having an independent power to regain control of the situation, she is never considered as “superior to, or in any way independent of, the male gods” (Menon 2001, p. 51).

The idea of “disjunction between a male-dominated social order and potential power of a woman” is expressed in several Hindu narratives (Menon 2001, p. 47). The story of Kali’s violent war with the demon Mahiṣasūra is one example. In this story, the god Brahma gives a boon to the buffalo demon so that he is invulnerable to death unless killed by a naked woman. Consequently, Kali had to strip naked in front of the demon before she could slay him (Menon 2001, p. 46). In that story, Kali’s rage after being humiliated leads to the destruction of the world, and is then controlled by her husband, Śiva, who reminds her of her wifely duties. Similarly, in this narrative, Anasuyā is forced to be stripped naked in front of the male gods. The difference is that this action is demanded by the gods who appear in the form of mendicants, instead of by evil demons. More importantly, in Kali’s narrative, Śiva interferes to tame her rage. In Anasuyā’s case, she takes the matter into her own hands by transforming the lustful men into vulnerable babies. Just like Sita is revered as an ideal wife for her “emotional steadfastness and not slavery,” Anasuyā is honored for her spiritual prowess, not her vulnerability (Kishwar 2001, p. 240).

This narrative becomes significant in the context of gender norms in several ways. First, Anasuyā is the central agent of this story. She fulfills her duty towards the guests as
well as towards her husband. It is her tapas (austerity) that gives her ultimate control of the situation. In this context, she overpowers the divine power—the power of the gods. As Veena Howard explains:

In yogic systems of practice, tapas can be understood as a concentrated effort leading to physical purification and spiritual realization. Tapas denotes voluntary austerity, physical restraint, and mental discipline with the aim of “burning away” physical and psychological impurities. This effort is thought to prepare a yogi for spiritual enlightenment, enable mastery over one’s life and environment, and bestow supernormal powers (siddhi). Some of these restraints, which have their origins in yogic asceticism, are also used by women—especially in practices such as vrata (vows) that involve fasting—for accessing spiritual power, though not authority, which was otherwise not available to them. (Howard 2011, pp. 202–3)

In addition to the powers she derives from her tapas, Anasūyā carries out her duties of atithidharma (serving the guests) well. Thus, the spiritual powers she acquires are a result of her devotion, hard work, and dedication. These powers then enable her to transform the guests into babies. Second, the narrative also offers a subtle reflection on the issue of masculine vs. feminine power. Anasūyā is challenged by the sexual norms of the society. Instead of becoming a victim of masculine power, she demonstrates her power to turn the gods into infants. In this way, she claims ultimate ownership over her body.

Anasūyā’s actions and decisions are deeply rooted in the cultural and religious frameworks emphasizing dharma (duty) and tapas (austerity), transforming her response to the gods’ exploitative demands into a profound display of agency within societal structures. By transforming the gods into infants, Anasūyā not only demonstrates her power but also challenges the simplistic dichotomy of oppression and empowerment, showing that her subjectivity is constructed through her relationships and adherence to dharma, devotion to her husband, and fulfillment of atithidharma. Through the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, this narrative highlights the complex interplay between individual subjectivities and shared cultural meanings, illustrating how Anasūyā’s spiritual prowess and devotion reshape the relational dynamics between the divine and the human.

2.2. Sumati Who Feeds a Brahmana and Is Bestowed a Son

Sumati’s story is that of an ordinary woman who gives birth to a son with divine qualities like Dattātreya. The son in this story is considered to be an avatar or human incarnation of Dattātreya. This is why contemporary Marathi readers of the Gurucaritra refer to this story as the narrative of the birth of Dattātreya in a human form. Here is the narrative from the Gurucaritra:

A brahman who hailed from the clan of the sage Āpastambh lived in a town known as Pithāpūr. His name was Āpalarāj. The name of his wife was Sumati. She was an ideal pativrata. She used to make offerings to both types of guests: atithi—guests who show up without notice, and abhyāgata—guests who arrive with prior notice. One day Dattātreya visited her home as an atithi. It was a no-moon day and they were performing annual funeral rites for ancestors at Sumati’s home. Considering that the food would be served at such a house only after the performance of rites concluded, Dattātreya was about to leave without getting any meal. The woman [going against the precedent in such situations] offered food to Dattātreya. Dattātreya was very pleased with her and promised her that he would grant her wishes. Sumati, with folded hands, said the following to Dattātreya, “You who are the cause of the universe, the one who is kind towards all sentient beings, the one whom the Vedas and purānas praise, the one who is gracious to his devotees, the one whose speech is never untrue, the one who is the ultimate support for the devotees, the one who is the reason for this world, I request you to grant only one wish of mine”. Dattātreya said, “Hey mother, please ask me what you wish for”. She requested, “I wish to be addressed [as a
mother] in the way you just addressed. I conceived many babies. But many of them were stillborn. The others [who were born alive] are disabled. I don’t have an able-bodied son. May we [my husband and I] be bestowed with a son like you who is knowledgeable? Dattatreya said, “You will get a son who would acquire a great spiritual merit by his tapas. He will be very knowledgeable”. This is why [like you did] one should offer food to anyone who is at the door at noon time as that is the time when Dattatreya visits his devotees,” and thus, granted her wish (Gurucaritra: 5).

Contemporary readers refer to this story as the story of birth of the human incarnation of Dattatreya known as Śripād Śrivallabh. They might not initially recognize the presence of women’s voices. One may also argue that in the ultimate analysis, this narrative is essentially androcentric, as the woman seeks a child to fulfill her wish, and specifically desires for a male child. There is no denial about that. However, they overlook the work of Sumati in the course of this narrative. Following Sabita Singh’s (2019) outlook, I would propose that the work of a woman activist, through a lens of faith-based feminism, is to create a space for conversation about women’s subjectivity and agency in stories such as the above. Let us analyze Sumati’s actions here. How does she define her svadharma? Following the pativratā model, her prime duty should have been to serve food to everyone in her house after the rites and then offer it to outsiders. However, she chooses to do otherwise. Her choice of moral actions is informed by her construction of dharmic behavior, which is not based on serving her husband, in this case. As Balslev suggests, “in the context of feminist thinking, Dharma—which is itself a hyper-complex concept takes on even more intricate and subtle nuances” (Balslev 2024, p. 476). Despite the potential negative consequences of not adhering to the traditional norm of serving the guest after funeral rites, Sumati chooses to offer food to an outsider before concluding the funeral rites for her ancestors, illustrating a nuanced and relational understanding of her duties. Through the lens of the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, her decision highlights how personal wisdom and ethical considerations led to her reworking of the traditional norms. Sumati’s actions lead to the gift of a child for her family and thereby transformed the social and familial dynamics within the narrative. In this way, the story can be read as both a narrative of Sumati receiving grace from Dattatreya and the birth of Śripād Śrivallabh. Similar to Anasuyā’s story, Sumatī becomes the agent of change for her family, and therefore, this narrative can create a space for conversation beyond themes of oppression, conformity, and resistance. Sumati is particularly fascinating due to her dynamic engagement with gender expectations and traditional customs. She navigates these complexities by selectively modifying certain customs while adhering to others. For instance, she defies tradition by feeding Dattatreya, a significant act that demonstrates her willingness to prioritize situational considerations over strict adherence to established norms. In doing so, she embodies the virtues of a good host and pativrata (a devoted wife), skillfully balancing her actions within the confines of gendered and ritual expectations. Sumati’s subjectivity is inherently attached to the concepts of Hindu wifehood and maternal instinct, and therefore, she aims to create a space for herself in her religious world.

2.3. Subverting Power: The Queen and the Brāhmaṇī

Unlike the stories of Anasuyā and Sumati, the source of power for women in the following story is undefined. There are two women here: a queen and a wife of a brāhmaṇ man. Both women prove to be harbingers of change in the lives of their husbands. The main story is about a king who rids himself of his sins as a result of going on a pilgrimage to a place called Gokarna. As with the other narratives in the Gurucaritra, the narrative unfolds in the context of several other stories which are in some ways connected with the main character. There is a layering of narratives. Here is how the story appears in the Gurucaritra:

Once there was a king who was well-versed in religious knowledge. He was a protector of dharma, a reasoned thinker, valorous, and yet very kind. For
entertainment, he engaged himself in hunting. While on this hunting spree, in a dark forest, he encountered a dangerous r̄aksasa (demon). The king killed the demon with a bunch of arrows at once. The demon, who was on the verge of dying, instructed his brother to take revenge for his death. The brother followed the instruction of the dying sibling seriously. He took up a position as a servant with the king with the intention of taking the revenge of his brother’s killing. Upon his return from the successful hunting trip, the king organized a feast for everyone, including the rishis (sages). The servant who was the brother of the killed demon was assigned to oversee the food catering for that feast. The servant offered the sages a dish made from human flesh. The sage Vasiṣṭha got very upset with the food as it was non-vegetarian and he spelled a curse on the king for serving inappropriate food. The curse was that the king would turn into a demon. The king, in turn, got very upset with the sages as he was not responsible for serving that food in the first place. The king took some water in hand with the intention of spelling a curse back to the sage Vasiṣṭha as retaliation in a rage. However, his wife intervened and warned the king against taking any such action against a spiritual leader. She reminded him that cursing a guru would have repercussions of severe bad karma for the king. The king listened to his wife and canceled the idea of uttering any curse to the sage. The king became a demon for the rest of his life. The queen went to the sage and convinced him to change his mind about punishing her husband. The sage, as a result of persuasion from the queen, announced that the king would return to his kingdom in his original form after twelve years.

While in the form of a demon, the king encountered a brāhmaṇ couple once. He abducted the husband and intended to eat him. The wife of that brāhmaṇ requested the demon to refrain from any such action. She begged for her husband’s life. She said, “What would my life be without my beloved husband? Please save my saubhāgya” (McGee 1996, p. 155). When the demon did not listen to her, she reminded him of the spiritual consequences of killing a learned brāhmaṇ. Even then, the demon did not listen to her. He killed the brāhmaṇ. The pained brāhmaṇī (wife of the brāhmaṇ) cursed the brahmārāksasa in revenge. She said, “Hey demon, you were king before and you got this current status of a demon as a result of a curse given to you by a sage. And now I curse you that when you return to your original state of a king after twelve years, you will not be able to enjoy your gṛhasthaśrama. If you try to become intimate with your wife ever again, you will die”. Upon his return to the king form, the king returned to his kingdom and shared this curse with his wife. They could never have any offspring ever as a result of the curse (Gurucaritra: 28, 29).

The above narrative describes the course of events in the life of a king. However, is it really just a story of a king? What does it teach us about notions of power and authority? Upon a closer look, one realizes that it is two women from different walks of life who are the real agents of this narrative. The women appear at crucial moments in the life of the king and they are responsible for changing the course of actions of a king’s life. At first, the king could have lost his status of a king forever had he cursed his guru in rage. It is only due to his wife, who intervenes at the opportune moment, that the period of his status of a demon is reduced to twelve years. In the narrative that follows, when the brāhmaṇī loses her husband, she becomes so angry that she curses the king who is in the form of a brahmārāksasa. It is because of her that the king ultimately fails to be an ideal husband. He fails to give progeny to his wife. Thus, the king who has obvious power by being the sovereign authority of his kingdom actually becomes vulnerable as a result of the actions of that ordinary brāhmaṇī. She subverts the hierarchy on at least three distinct levels: first, she challenges the norms of patriarchy by challenging a male; second, she undermines the dynamic of the prevailing power structure as she challenges sovereign political authority, and third, the brāhmaṇī upsets the procreative aims of patriarchy insofar as the king and his wife are no longer able to reproduce. The point I make here is that both these narratives allude to the multi-layered nature of power and portray women as influential actors in
shaping the spiritual journey of their entire families. Although readers treat women in these stories as secondary characters, their role is crucial in changing the lives of everyone involved, especially for an extraordinary man.

The queen and the brāhmaṇī, central female figures in the narrative, navigate their roles within a complex web of social, moral, and spiritual interrelations. Their actions are deeply interwoven with their understanding of dharma and their relationships, showcasing how their subjectivity is constructed and exercised within a communal and relational context. Firstly, the queen’s intervention to prevent the king from cursing the sage Vasiṣṭha exemplifies her moral authority and wisdom. Her counsel, grounded in a profound understanding of spiritual laws and the consequences of actions, highlights her influence over the king’s decisions. This interaction underscores the importance of relational dynamics in shaping moral judgments and actions. The queen’s power is not just individual but is deeply embedded in her relationship with the king and her role as his moral guide. As Tracy Pintchman observes, “issues of gender hegemony, furthermore, including questions of compliance and resistance to male authority and hegemonic structures and codes, are rarely straightforward (Pintchman 2005, p. 184)”. Similar to the queen, the brāhmaṇī’s plea to the demon and her subsequent curse reflect her deep emotional connection to her husband and her understanding of the spiritual ramifications of his murder. Her actions are a powerful assertion of justice, demonstrating her resilience and moral strength within her relational and spiritual framework. These women not only shape the spiritual journeys of their families, but also of entire kingdoms.

After all, the wives in these stories and others in the Gurucaritra are critical in the lives of their husbands as they assist in upholding the norms of dharma to sway their husbands towards achieving the status of ‘moksha’. However, the power for women, especially in the first two narratives, is also dependent upon their attitude and behavior with their husband. This is why the “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity”, which are based on that idea that masculine and feminine powers do not work in a mutually exclusive way, are essential for furthering our understanding about gender discourse in Hinduism.

3. Conclusions

I have shown that even though the constructions of gender and sexuality in medieval Hindu literature have been heavily influenced by patriarchy, we can create spaces for women’s voices by focusing on the role of women in predominantly male-centered narratives. While medieval Hindu texts such as the Gurucaritra often reflect patriarchal ideologies and gender hierarchies, they also provide glimpses of women’s agency, resilience, and diverse contributions to society. Based on the analysis of three specific narratives from the Gurucaritra, I have argued that in these stories, the power and subjectivity of women are closely linked to their moral and spiritual insights, as well as their relational connections. In the balance that these women strike, they seem to understand the complexities of spiritual and cultural traditions better than the men in their lives. Their ability to influence, guide, and exact justice is portrayed not as an isolated individual trait but as something emerging from their roles and relationships within their community. The hermeneutics of intersubjectivity help in appreciating how these women’s subjectivity is constructed and exercised about others, highlighting the communal and interconnected nature of their power and influence. By examining these texts critically and amplifying marginalized voices, scholars can gain a more nuanced understanding of women’s power and influence in medieval Hinduism.

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2 All translations are my own and they are based on the Kāmat edition of the Gurucaritra. My approach towards translation is not a word-to-word approach. My goal is to present the narrative with clarity to a wider audience who might not be familiar with Marathi language and Hindu traditions.

References


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