

# Women and Spirituality

*Sudesh Didi describes the unique role which women play within the Brahma Kumaris*

In a world where women have been seen traditionally as someone's wife, mother, daughter, or sister, why would a woman choose to follow a spiritual path?

Perhaps because, deep inside every woman has a longing to “be” someone in her own right—fully aware of herself, confident and in control. When we talk of spiritual power, we are in fact referring to the original power of the self to be whole and independent—free from the web of domination and suppression, free from the need to exist for someone else's sake.

For the last two thousand years or more, women have not fully utilised their spiritual power. Instead, aspects of the “feminine” have taken mainly symbolic forms from the Virgin Mary to the vestal virgins, from Earth Goddesses to the Shakti Devis. On the one hand, women have been put on pedestals and worshipped on account of their purity or femininity. At the same time, they have been excluded from religious practices and barred, even until now, from entering some places of worship.

Elevated or chastised, exonerated or condemned, the main problem facing women is that they have never been treated as equal to men—either as spiritual leaders or spiritual seekers. This lack of equality finds its roots not only in sociological and cultural systems, but more particularly within levels of consciousness upon which spirituality and attitudes are ultimately based.

## Women as Spiritual Leaders

Women become spiritual leaders when they themselves acknowledge they have the capacity and necessary attributes to play such a role. The change of consciousness needed is to move away from unworthy feelings and attitudes and to see the greatness contained within the self. Feminine qualities such as love, tolerance, compassion, understanding and humility are qualities of leadership. They are also needed for spiritual progress, for without them it would be impossible to come close to God and attain self-realisation. Every human being possesses those qualities but women are more easily and naturally able to tap them, for feelings of love and devotion are often more natural to women, combined with a profound sense of discipline and order. A true leader leads through example.

Women know how to serve and how to give. Often the notion of service or of putting others in front has been seen as a sign of weakness or lack of power. Quite the opposite is true. The ability to bow before others, with true humility, is the sign of the greatness of a soul who has conquered ego.

However this quality of giving to others must also be balanced with qualities of courage, determination, clear thinking and self-respect. Too often, women have a tendency to give to others and neglect their own spiritual needs. It is one of the major reasons women find themselves depleted and lacking in spiritual power. The foundation for assuming spiritual leadership is thus a change of consciousness. Overcoming the huge physical, religious and sociological barriers which have

prevented women becoming spiritual leaders can only be done through the development of self-respect. The quality of self-respect comes from the knowledge and experience of the eternal self which is beyond social, cultural or physical identity. The eternal self or soul is pure, peaceful and complete with divine and spiritual qualities. When women touch this inner, eternal core, they gain the courage to play the part they are capable of.

Spiritual power is an expression of the inherent qualities of the spirit and has nothing to do with gender or physical limitations. Feelings of domination or suppression occur when there is the awareness of superiority or inferiority. Feelings of equality, however, manifest when there is the consciousness of spirit or soul. These feelings and attitudes can be expressed in actions with positive results.

Women are still a long way from enjoying positions of spiritual leadership, and society still doesn't fully concur with the notion that women make good spiritual leaders. Yet, society won't necessarily change until someone, whether an individual or a group of individuals, breaks the tradition and sets a new role model. This, in part, was the thinking behind the work of Brahma Baba, founder of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University.

#### Historical Context of Brahma Kumaris

In 1936, at the age of 60, Dada Lekhraj, a wealthy diamond merchant from the province of Sind (now Pakistan) experienced a series of powerful visions. He had always been religious-minded and had also held a highly reputable position in the community. Yet the visions changed his life completely, revealing striking images of the world passing through a period of immense unrest, as well as images of the change required to usher in a new world for the future. Within a year or so, Dada Lekhraj, later known as Brahma Baba, had sold his business and established a spiritual university. He nominated a group of 12 young women to assume all administrative responsibilities for the group of almost 400 people which met regularly to study spiritual knowledge and meditate.

At that time in India, women were treated as second class citizens, perceived as little more than chattels belonging to their husbands. Such attitudes have their roots in the traditional Hindu scriptures. For example, in the Ramayan there is a reference to four things being equal: a drum (that you beat), an animal (that you push), a senseless fool and a woman.

For Brahma Baba to place women in charge of a spiritual university at a time when they were still hidden by the veil—literally and figuratively—caused a huge uproar. But he was determined to carry out this gentle social and spiritual 'revolution'. He believed that the balance of spiritual and social power wouldn't change unless the inequalities were redressed, and women, both young girls and mothers, were given the right to serve the community as spiritual teachers.

By the time Brahma Baba passed away in 1969, the knowledge he was given and the changes he championed had found receptive and fertile soil. Within the space of 54 years, the University has grown considerably and now operates over 8,500 centres in 100 countries. All administrative and spiritual duties are carried out by Dadi

Prakashmani and Dadi Janki, the two most senior women teachers who have been students since the University's establishment.

#### Student not Disciple

Today, from an organisational perspective, both men and women assume responsibility for teaching and running centres. By and large, however, men follow the founder's example and willingly put women "in front".

For the Brahma Kumaris the concept of discipleship does not exist. Brahma Baba never positioned himself as a guru. He taught through example, by putting into practice the spiritual knowledge and principles he had received in his communion (yoga) with the Supreme Soul. He encouraged others to do the same by creating their own communication directly with the source.

Brahma Baba encouraged women to understand and explore their potential, and inspired them with a vision of the valuable contribution women can make as spiritual leaders. He found that women have the serenity and gentleness to understand and accept spiritual ideas easily without the barrier of arrogance which is so often present in men. So, by putting women forward, he sought to create a situation of equality and mutual respect and regard between men and women, and indeed within all relationships regardless of gender.

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