The Lives of Sarada Devi:

Gender, Renunciation, and Hindu Politics in Colonial India

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Sarada Devi (1852-1920) was the Hindu child bride of the famous nineteenth-century renouncer Ramakrishna (1836 -1886). While Ramakrishna was alive, he worshiped Sarada as a goddess, a woman to be revered but never touched, and ultimately making of her a figure of popular adoration. This thesis addresses the ways in which Sarada has been constructed in devotional and academic texts, in order to not only determine the ways in which different types of followers viewed her and her religious practices, but also to analyze scholarly assumptions about Sarada. It argues that despite Sarada's renunciatory practices, both scholars and devotees of Ramakrishna, continued to write about Sarada primarily as a helpmate to Ramakrishna rather than as a guru in her own right. Such constructions fail to adequately take account of the advanced Hindu practices adhered to by Sarada herself. This failure is the result of an over-reliance on traditional (i.e. patriarchal) understandings of what it meant to renounce in colonial India and speaks to the neglect of the study of female renouncers in general. In the case of Sarada, a rereading of key texts through postcolonial and feminist lenses enables us to see more clearly the manner in which her idealization as the Mother of India by the Bengali *bhadralok*, masks the complexities and contradictions of her life as a renouncer and guru.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Sarada Devi (1853-1920), while an historical figure, is somewhat of a mystery. Sarada Devi was the Hindu child bride of Ramakrishna (1836-1886), a famous nineteenth-century renouncer, and grew up to be Ramakrishna's devotee in a marriage that was never consummated. There are many anecdotal tales about what she said and did, yet given the plethora of these stories, it is odd to me that her actions and reactions remain unpredictable. In instances of great conflict or despair, she is found utterly silent; in times where lilfe seems peaceful and mundane, she is sassy and vocal. I considered the idea that perhaps Sarada was a shy woman, not willing to disclose her true feelings related to an event, but this does not seem plausible given her apparent willingness to share her thoughts with those writers who eventually wrote them down. Instead, the duality of Sarada—the silently devoted wife versus the independent and indignant renouncer—appears to be dependent on who is writing about her and for what purpose it is written. Therefore, in instances where Ramakrishna is telling Sarada what to do or how to behave, Sarada is silent; one has a vision of acquiessence befitting a devoted wife subordinating to her guru husband. But in instances where Ramakrishna is not around—or perhaps at times when her own followers are telling a story—Sarada responds, often impatient with those who try to tell her what to do. While I prefer to think of Sarada in light of the latter representation, even these are

problematized by the fact that there are no writings left by Sarada. Instead, we are reliant on how others perceived her and wanted her to be. What we find, then, are many different Saradas.

Interestingly enough, scholars of religion also construct Sarada in specific ways, either as a model of divine femininity as someone who is able to inspire Ramakrishna to experience the Goddess, or as a model of the ultimate householding woman, by articulating her devotion to Ramakrishna as his wife. Sometimes, she is both. In these representations, Sarada is foremost understood in terms of her relationship with Ramakrishna and his followers (her "children"), rather than as a being who functions separately from them.

What I found overall, then, was a mix of accounts of what and who Sarada is. This certainly speaks to the varied sources available about her, as well as how she was perceived by the authors and compilers of such texts. That said, I am working within limited primary material specifically on Sarada Devi, including works by Swamis Nikhilananda, Gambhirananda, and Tapasyananda, as well as edited compilations of collected stories by her followers and followers of Ramakrishna. But while these sources are minimal, I am making use of secondary, academic data in order to reinterpret the primary source. And so, this work attempts to draw out the many faces and representations of Sarada, not only to shed light on the ways she has been constructed as a personality, but also to provide my own understanding of her. I believe that in doing so, I can locate the political and cultural implications of Sarada as a personality, as well as identify what I believe are faulty assumptions by scholars in terms of their understandings of women and religion in Hinduism.

My primary argument is that Sarada is unacknowledged as a "true" renouncer or ascetic because of how she is represented in various sources, including both devotional and scholarly narratives. In my view, scholars need to re-examine writings about Sarada with an eye to providing a new understanding of her life and religious practices within colonial Bengal. My aim is not to identify an 'historical Sarada' or 'true Sarada', which would be difficult given the lack of primary sources by Sarada, as well as tentative timelines. Instead, I want to draw attention to the way Sarada has been constructed by devotees and scholars, each group having very particular goals. For example, the limited understandings that result from these constructions largely neglect the nature and importance of Sarada's renunciatory practice, as well as her role as a guru. Ramakrishna worshiped Sarada as a goddess, and viewed her as a woman to be revered but never touched; this view, arguably, forced Sarada to lead the life of celibacy. After Ramakrishna's death, Ramakrishna's disciples continued to revere Sarada as a model and object of spirituality; however the emphasis on Sarada as divinely-inspired shifted over time (Sil marks origins in 1891—in full swing by 1896)[1] from a general representation of a divine goddess to a more specific image as Mother of India.

As the Mother of India, Sarada was a model of Hindu nationalism which household women could follow; yet Sarada also continued her renunciatory practices such as fasting, intense devotional practices and celibacy, which appear to contradict not only expectations for women in colonial India in terms of day-to-day living but the representations of her as a symbolic 'mother'. Scholars such as Narasingha Sil and

[1] Narasingha Sil, *Divine Dowager, The Life and Teachings of Saradamani the Holy Mother* (London: Associated University Press, 2003), 65-66.

Jeffrey Kripal understand Sarada as a woman who reluctantly participated in renunciatory practices which contrasted to her private desire to be a mother. This is a distinct, even nationalist understanding, of Sarada as a symbolic representation of [Hindu] motherhood. Sil and Kripal's analyses of Sarada's life are an alternative to devotional narratives, yet they do not adequately address the conflict between householder ideals and renunciatory practices. In Sil's case it is due to a lack of historical context, while in Kripal's it is due to the brevity of his work on Sarada. This thesis redresses this inadequacy.

Despite Sarada's unique living situation as a married renouncer, very little academic work has been done on her. As suggested earlier, extant writings can be put into one of two categories: 1) devotional works by practitioners, and 2) academic works by contemporary scholars. Both of these bodies of work primarily focus on Ramakrishna, tracking Sarada's life and practices only in relation to him. This work is also weakened by contradictions and arguments that arise when biography blurs the difference between hagiography and scholarship. In hagiographical accounts, Sarada practiced asceticism and extreme devotional prayers as a young girl, prior to meeting Ramakrishna.[2] However other scholars, including Kripal and Sil, question the validity of such claims by implication, arguing that she foremost wanted to have a family. Other arguments occur over the type of renunciation Sarada is said to have practiced. Roman Rolland, for instance, argues that Sarada practiced traditional renunciation, without taking critical account of the fundamental differences between male and female practices. Academic studies such as those written by Meena Khandelwal and

[2] Solange LeMaitre, *Ramakrishna and the Vitality of Hinduism*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 77.

Lynn Teskey Denton address renunciatory practices for women in general, but do not specifically address Sarada's practice of renunciation. Underlying questions go unanswered: did Ramakrishna's declaration of Sarada's divinity influence later assumptions about Sarada's renunciatory practice? Did Sarada's gender-specific, renunciatory practice affect the development of nationalist ideals in the male-dominated Ramakrishna movement? And, in particular, how do we resolve the contradiction of Sarada as a model householder and Sarada as an ascetic?

In order to answer the questions posited above, instead of assuming that re-translating primary sources about Ramakrishna and Sarada from Bengali to English is the most precise method to assert an accurate account of events in Sarada's life, I will follow the method Amiya Prosad Sen uses in his book, *Three Essays on Ramakrishna and His Times*, and try to situate my subject in a larger historical and cultural milieux. Sen provides a critical analysis of the way current scholars inadequately use primary sources and argues that they fail to provide the proper historical and nationalist contexts in which these sources were written and published. Sen targets *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (*Kathamrita*) written by Mahendranath Gupta, one of Ramakrishna's closest householder disciples, as an example of the problem of accepting texts at face value. The *Kathamrita* has been a primary source of information about Ramakrishna for academics, and is considered a fairly accurate account of Ramakrishna and his disciples. For example Kripal, whom I mentioned previously, uses his own translations of that text to argue that Ramakrishna was a homosexual, assuming that the writings must be accepted as truth. Sen, however, argues that the *Kathamrita* cannot be considered an exact account of particular events, especially when we

consider that the text was rewritten, edited and published in parts over an extended period of time.[3] Mahendranath himself admitted to later embellishments and additions to make the text a more cohesive unit once it was put together into a single volume.[4]

Keeping in mind Sen's approach, I have organized my project into three parts. Chapters one and two, entitled, "Introduction," and "The Textual Sarada," respectively, outline and evaluate the ways in which Sarada has been constructed to meet the needs of the particular people/groups who write about her. This section includes critical examinations of extant writings on Sarada, including both hagiographical and scholarly material. In general, I view these interpretations which range on a spectrum from devotional to strictly academic texts as falling into two camps—works that describe Sarada only in terms of the divine, and works that focus on the humanity of Sarada. Overall, I am not concerned with the truth claims of these two camps so much as with what these contrasting perspectives tell me about the context in which Sarada was written.

The primary issue at hand is how to provide such an analysis when Sarada and Ramakrishna left no writings of their own. Because they were both considered illiterate, in many instances they knowingly left writing about them to their devotees. These secondary sources, while useful, are problematic nonetheless, as noted below. That said, I argue that there are ways in which to come to some sort of understanding of Sarada even though she left no writings behind. What I am offering is not new. There have been scholars who have attempted to write about Sarada using these devotional texts. At the same time, my approach to these texts is significantly

[3] Amiya Prosad Sen, *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001), 32.
[4] Ibid., 30.

different, drawn from a multitude of methodological approaches by scholars outside of the area of studying Sarada as a subject.

While I argue for the importance of Sarada and how she may shed light on the political climate of her age, nonetheless difficulties arise when addressing and using sources about her. Most of the work compiled about Sarada is found through works on Ramakrishna, and his 'favourite devotee' Swami Vivekananda. In outlining these sources, in addition to more recent works that deal with Sarada specifically, it becomes evident that academic work on Sarada as a subject proves a difficult task. That is, certain questions arise about the sources themselves, the agenda in the creation of such sources, as well as the way early sources that discuss Sarada have been used. To set the stage and tone of this thesis, these sources must be outlined and discussed in such a manner as to delineate the ways in which sources can be used to understand Sarada, colonialism, and specifically the role of women in colonial Bengal. So while I offer a specific study of Sarada, this study also provides a broader understanding of the political climate in which Sarada functioned and was written about. The political climate, I believe, is important in terms of offering critique of previous works related to my topic, as well as a means to offer an alternative to the way we use texts today. Not only is this a concern of previous academic uses of sources, but also it proposes an alternate means in which to understand these sources.

Even though the focus of this study is Sarada, it is pertinent to evaluate a larger body of sources, which are not limited to her as the sole subject. This is because much of the work on Sarada is a secondary side-effect of primary work written about Ramakrishna, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, and/or Vivekananda. While

speaking to general, over-arching concerns I have in acknowledging a broader body of work, ultimately these concerns are just as relevant to the study of Sarada, even if not consistently discussed.

Chapter three entitled, "Mothering Renouncer: Sarada and Renunciatory Practices," analyzes Sarada's renunciatory practices by first outlining traditional notions of renunciation, second, summarizing current scholarship on female renunciation, and third, by using this information to further understand Sarada's renunciation within the particular historical and cultural context in which she lived, that of colonial Bengal. This inevitably means a re-evaluation of 'renunciation' as an analytical concept by tracing academic and religious assumptions about 'true renunciation' and reconceptualizing it so it takes into account the actual practices of female renouncers such as Sarada.

Such a project is relatively ambitious because it is debatable as to whether female renunciation was accepted within the brahminical tradition to which Sarada belongs. There is a textual basis for female renunciation found within the *Upanishads*, but scholars such as Patrick Olivelle argue that female renunciation was the exception rather than the rule.[5] Overall, it has been difficult to trace the developments of female renunciation because entire Hindu communities deny the existence of female renouncers (even when we know it occurs), and female renunciation does not appear to fit the mold of 'traditional' (i.e. brahminical) renunciation.[6] Nonetheless, feminist scholars have already begun the task of reconceptualizing and critiquing traditional

[5] Patrick Olivelle, "Renouncer and Renunciation in the Dharmasastras," in *Studies in Dharmasastra*, edited by R. W. Lariviere, 81-152 (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1984), 114-15.
[6] See Meena Khandelwal's *Women in Ochre Robes, Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (New York: SUNY, 2004), and Lynn Teskey Denton's, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (New York: SUNY, 2004).

understandings of renunciation in order to adequately evaluate the role of women in relation to renunciatory practices and within renunciatory communities. I intend to use the more recent work of Meena Khandelwal, who argues that female renunciation is significantly different than male renunciation, to make my case that Sarada, indeed, fits within the context of female renunciation.

This brings me to the third part of my thesis, chapter four entitled, "Sarada and Her Colonialist Contexts," which outlines the way Sarada, as the Mother of India, functioned or didn't function, as a means to help bring Bengali women into the fold of nationalism. It is evident that her role as the Divine Mother supersedes devotees' understandings of Sarada as a renouncer and I want to outline the ways in which Sarada functions as a model for nationalism through Vivekananda's treatises in particular. In addition, this section will also address the conflict between Sarada's attitude toward the British (i.e. she would purchase British goods to give to close friends or relatives as gifts, much to the chagrin of Vivekananda), and the expectation of Sarada as a role model for middle class Bengali women.

Parama Roy, in *Indian Traffic, Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, argues that the popularity of Ramakrishna, which was created and perpetuated by Vivekananda, primarily consisted of followers from middle-class, Hindu Bengali backgrounds. Predominantly men, these followers found appeal in Ramakrishna's stance against women and gold (*kaminikanchan*), for which they viewed as symbolic of their subordination under British rule. Roy argues that Vivekananda, in an effort to counter this economic and political subordination, emphasized the strength, virility, and masculinity of India, while at the same time citing spirituality (something the

West lacked) as rooted in women and femininity. Roy notes that Vivekananda reworked the notion of femininity by discussing Hindu women in "bourgeois nationalist terms,"[7] in which women could do their part by becoming spiritualized women and devoted wives. Roy argues that the importance of a celibate woman, as in the case of Sarada, lies in widowhood and devotion to her dead husband.[8] In this sense, Sarada becomes an ideal and living model for Vivekananda's idea for a new, Hindu India.

The Importance of this Research

This research is essential for several reasons. First, there is no comprehensive analysis of Sarada's renunciatory practices and her role as a nationalist model for the Math and Mission. The absence of such an analysis does not suggest that the subject is unimportant, but underlines the fact that academic work on the role of women in colonial India in large part remains to be done. While an increasing number of texts deal with women who renounce in India, there has not yet been adequate research on Sarada specifically. This is why a feminist, postcolonial critique is so essential to understanding Sarada. Those primary texts that do include details about Sarada often mention the ambivalence she felt regarding her nationalist role within the Mission and Math. An analysis of these writings is needed to determine the legitimacy and rationale of conflicting claims about Sarada and her practices as both a religious and nationalist figure. It is also important to note that female renunciation is a neglected area of study. Until recently, virtually no texts have comprehensively addressed

[7] Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic, Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 116.
[8] Ibid.

renunciatory practices of women. Certainly as suggested earlier, no one has addressed renunciation in the context of Sarada's practice, even though she is an apt model with which to explore female renunciation. Overall, it is evident through my preliminary research that current scholarship has not only inadequately resolved the rich set of contradictions that representations of Sarada provide, it has thus been unable to illuminate them.

My own approach relying on feminist and postcolonial methodologies as it does, is one that I hope will contribute towards an understanding of how Sarada's many aspects—Mother of India, ascetic, woman—are related to the historical and cultural context in which she has been written.

A Note on Language

Following scholars such as Gwilym Beckerlegge, Meena Khandelwal, and Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, I will italicize only non-English words the first time they are used. Further, and also in keeping with Beckerlegge, Khandelwal, as well as Amiya Prosad Sen, I will not use diacritics except when they are used in sources that I am quoting directly. This style is used in all English-translated devotional texts dedicated to Sarada.

I have also chosen to transliterate the name, 'Sarada,' as Sarada rather than Sharada, as the majority of scholars (with the exception of Kripal), as well as devotional works, spell her name this way.

Sarada: A Biography in Brief

As noted previously, the information we have about Sarada is a mix of historical fact and hagiographical accounts. We know as fact that Sarada was born in 1853 to a poor Brahmin family[9] in Jairambati, located in West Bengal.[10] We also know that in May, 1859, she married twenty-three year old Ramakrishna when she was five.[11] The marriage supposedly took place in an effort to silence Ramakrishna's family's concerns over what they perceived to be his mental illness.[12] This illness manifested itself in Ramakrishna's extreme asceticism in devotion to Kali.[13] Ramakrishna's mother thought that marriage would rectify Ramakrishna's state of mind and bring his attention back to the life of a householder.[14] These circumstances made it very difficult for Ramakrishna's family to find a suitable match, for there were few families willing to marry their daughters to a madman. However, Sarada's family eventually consented to the marriage due to the high bride price that was paid for her.[15]

Sarada's poverty in both childhood and adult life is consistently noted in texts dedicated to both Ramakrishna and Sarada accordingly. This poverty is described in

[9] Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1955), 20; Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother, Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), 18; Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), 14.
[10] Gambhirananda, 8.
[11] Ibid., 25; Nikhilananda, 25; Tapasyanananda, 25.
[12] Ibid., 25; ibid., 24-25; ibid., 24.
[13] Nikhilananda, 24-25; Tapasyananda, 24-25.
[14] Gambhirananda, 26; Nikhilananda, 25; Tapasyananda, 24-25.
[15] Sil, in *Divine Dowager*, claims that the bride price was 700 rupees. However, most other accounts, such as in Jeffrey Kripal's *Kāli's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, second edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), note that the bride price was 300 rupees. Tapasyananda also cites 300 rupees, claiming that it made it difficult for Ramakrishna's family to find a suitable bride for him (25). While this issue is completely omitted from Gambhirananda's text, Nikhilananda notes that the family did have difficulty find a bride for Ramakrishna, but does mention that this was due to lack of funds (25).

general as the result of her coming from a poor family,[16] while Sarada's contrasting love for gold is highlighted by her wedding day.[17] Ramakrishna's family had to borrow the jewelry needed to adorn Sarada in appropriate wedding attire. When the ceremony was over, Ramakrishna lovingly tried to remove the bangles to give them back to their owner, much to the chagrin of the child.[18] This event not only marked Sarada's poverty, as she loved pretty things but did not have any, but also her proclivity to keeping her bangles after Ramakrishna's death, despite being a widow who was expected to remove her baubles in humility.[19]

We also know that after the marriage ceremony, Sarada spent most of her childhood in Jairambati, visiting Ramakrishna's village, Kamarpukar, infrequently.[20] During those times, either Ramakrishna, when he was visiting home, or his mother, would teach Sarada the ways befitting a householder.[21] The rest of Sarada's education was minimal. She did attend village school and attempted to get tutoring from one of Ramakrishna's nieces.[22] However, some of Ramakrishna's other family members, such as Ramakrishna's nephew Hridayram Mukhopadhyay, attempted to prohibit Sarada's book learning, arguing that it was inappropriate for women to learn.[23] This consistent resistance to her book learning no doubt contributed to Sarada's overall illiteracy and lack of writing.

It was not until Sarada was in her late teens that she actually began living with Ramakrishna in Dakshineshwar, a village where Ramakrishna then held residence as a

[16] Tapasyananda, 14.
[17] Gambhirananda, 27; Nikhilananda, 26; Tapasyananda, 26.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Tapasyananda, 106 and 117.
[20] Gambhirananda, 28; Nikhilananda, 27-28; Tapasyananda, 30.
[21] Ibid, 31-32; ibid., 28-30; ibid., 30-31.
[22] Ibid., 30; ibid., 28.
[23] Sil, 36-37.

temple priest. Prior to this, she had visited him periodically, either in Kamarpukur or in Dakshineshwar. She arrived at age 18, unannounced, worried about her husband as a result of rumours she heard in Jairambati about his self-inflicted illness brought on by extreme asceticism and devotional practices.[24] This worry about Ramakrishna's health was coupled with Sarada's concern over Ramakrishna's Tantric practices under the tutelage of Yogeshwari, a *bhairavi*, or female practitioner of Tantrism.[25] Sil notes that Yogeshwari was jealous of Sarada and Ramakrishna's commitment to one another;[26] the evidence of this respect and devotion to one another only being truly evident from this point forward. From then on, Sarada basically took up residence with Ramakrishna at first in his room and later separately in the Nahabat (orchestra block or concert house,[27] until his death, with the exception of trips back to Jairambati due to her bouts of illness.

In a more hagiographical version of events, writers like Romain Rolland (1866-1944), describe Sarada at 14 years old as such:

> The development of the little wife with the pure heart was greater than her age, and she understood at once her husband's mission and the part of pious affection and tender disinterestedness she was to play in it.[28]

Despite her young age, Sarada is described as inherently knowing what she must do to support her husband, and being older than her years, as able to handle her unorthodox marriage.

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[24] Gambhirananda, 39 and 41; Nikhilananda, 34-35; Tapasyananda, 32.
[25] Sil., 42. Both Gambhirananda (36) and Nikhilananda (31) argue that Sarada had no worries about the bhairavi, and looked upon her as a mother-in-law.
[26] Ibid., 55; Gambhirananda, 37.
[27] Precisely how long Sarada resided in the same room as Ramakrishna until moving to the Nahabat is uncertain. Tapasyananda cites that they stayed together for six months (39), while Gambhirananda and Nikhilananda cite eight months (41 and 44 respectively).
[28] Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), 82.

Some describe Sarada much in the way of Parvati and/or Sati, both of whom were devoted wives of Shiva in Hindu mythology: she was a child that performed tapas, or extreme asceticism, in hopes of being granted the wish of a devoted and spiritual husband. From this perspective, Sarada's birth was divinely mandated by way of a dream her mother had, foreseeing her special birth.[29] Sarada is also described as speaking to a playmate that no one else could see—the implication here is that she was keeping company with a goddess.[30]

In many instances, there is a blend of the historical and hagiographical, each touching upon similar events and instances in Sarada's life.[31] But the disparity among these accounts of Sarada's life concerns her marriage to Ramakrishna. Though Ramakrishna and Sarada eventually lived together, they did not have a typical marriage in that it was assumed to be never consummated.[32] Devotional accounts of this arrangement describe a patient and thoughtful Ramakrishna explaining to his wife that he would prefer to live a life of celibacy because it was a facet of his spiritual devotion; but if she insisted on her rights as a wife, he would have sex with her.[33] In contrast, non-devotional accounts such as Narasingha P. Sil's *Divine Dowager*, describe Ramakrishna as manipulating a naïve Sarada, telling her that consummation would most certainly lead to the future death of either or both her and her as yet non-

[29] Gambhirananda, 16-17; Nikhilananda, 20.
[30] Gambhirananda, 22.
[31] Many of the various books on Sarada by different authors contain word-for-word excerpts that are shared. The idiosyncracies of the texts may vary, but the key stories remain the same.
[32] We have no way of knowing whether or not this was really the case, but given Sarada's isolation throughout their marriage, or in contrast company (when sleeping in Ramakrishna's room, she had a companion), it would seem unlikely that Sarada was intimately with Ramakrishna or anyone else.
[33] For his conversation with Sarada, asking her if she intended to drag him into worldly matters, see Nikhilananda, 40; and Tapasyananda, 42. For Ramakrishna's understanding that their celibacy in marriage was a means to test his understanding of Brahman, see Gambhirananda, 46; Nikhilananda, 40; and Tapasyananda, 38-40.

existent child.[34] Or, in the case of Kripal's work, Ramakrishna avoids all sexual contact with Sarada due to his latent homosexuality, by way of worshipping Sarada as a mother rather than a goddess.[35] In the latter instance, Sarada, "still a naïve sixteen-year-old virgin, innocent "in this subject," did not realize what was happening."[36] In both cases, Ramakrishna's behaviour is described at best as manipulative of a young Sarada, who even in her teenage years was uncomprehending of what was going on. This is certainly a marked contrast to Rolland's and devotional accounts of a confident and knowing Sarada. Instead, Sarada is ignorant and bewildered.

Yet in both historical and hagiographical accounts, it is Ramakrishna who asserts celibacy while Sarada remains silent on the issue: we do not have a response from her except by way of implied consent, even if such consent was misleading. Overall, these one-sided accounts are somewhat dubious, in that it does not seem likely that Sarada would not have responded, be it positively or negatively. Regardless, we do know via various writings that Sarada later spoke as though she agreed to the condition of the marriage, and thereafter looked after Ramakrishna[37] and his disciples.[38] As Sil notes when discussing Ramakrishna's treatment of Sarada, "The saint seems to have squandered all his humanity and love on others, especially on his devotees and admirers, and not much was left for his own wife,"[39] yet the same time, "she [Sarada] unhesitatingly declared that she suffered no discomfort if she did

[34] Sil, 43.
[35] For devotional accounts of Ramakrishna's worship of Sarada, see Gambhirananda, 46 and 49; Nikhilananda, 43; and Tapasyananda, 46.
[36] Kripal, 135.
[37] Gambhirananda, 52.
[38] Nikhilananda, 58; Sarada cooking for devotees, see Tapasyananda, 42.
[39] Sil, 62.

anything for his [Ramakrishna's] service."[40] So two interpetations arise from her response to her unorthodox life as a householder: either she subordinated herself as wife in order to fulfill her *stridharma*, or she understood Ramakrishna's divine status. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Whether her acceptance of the situation was done so uncomplainingly, as suggested in most historical and hagiographical texts, is dubious. That said, Sarada consistently served her husband while simultaneously (even if silently) partaking in her own devotional rituals.[41]

Sarada's life changed dramatically when Ramakrishna died in 1886. At this time, Sarada and Ramakrishna's disciples parted ways, including Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's favourite and most famous disciple.[42] Both the young disciples and Sarada, including her female companions Golap-ma and Yogin-ma, were made to leave Cassiopore, a residence that had previously been paid for by elderly householder devotees.[43] For one year, Sarada went on pilgrimage under the support of Balaram, another householder disciple.[44] This support also ended with the pilgrimage and from 1887 to 1888, Sarada lived in hard times in Kamarpukur.[45]

Ramakrishna's disciples, at least those outside of his inner circle, seemed unaware or unconcerned with Sarada and what lay ahead of her in terms of her life as a widow. Some disciples would intermittently support her, but it was not really enough to

[40] Ibid.
[41] All devotional texts that focus on Sarada consistently cite her devotion to her husband as well as her own, private devotional practices including early morning ritual cleansings on the Ganges (Nikhilananda, 56). For discussions on Sarada's emphasis on japa, meditation and austerities, see Gambhirananda, 109-111; and Tapasyananda, 48-49 and 54-55.
[42] Nikhilananda, 95.
[43] Ibid., 102.
[44] Gambhirananda, 139; Nikhilananda 95.
[45] Ibid, 148; ibid., 102; Tapasyananda, 116.

sustain her or give her any quality of living.[46] Her allowance of 7 rupees per month, for example, could hardly feed, clothe and give her shelter, and was eventually stopped, leaving Sarada penniless.[47] Sarada had to rely on wild plants and rice; basically anything she could scrounge for herself without begging.[48] This period of hardship was exacerbated further by Sarada's refusal to adhere to the codes of dress befitting a widow.[49] While this will be addressed in more detail in chapter three, a few words seem apt here. Sarada wore the white of a widow, but modified her dress to include a red border.[50] This red border was made out of the remnants of one of her old saris. Also, at least for a time, she continued to wear the bangles of a householder, until the comments made by villagers became so intolerable that she decided to remove them.[51]

The interpretation of this time in Sarada's life varies from hagiographical to historical accounts. While the secular reports denote this as further evidence of Sarada's experience of abuse, devotional reports generally consider this period as a lesson of our ignorance in understanding Sarada as the Holy Mother. For example, Sarada's extreme and committed devotionalism and spirituality is highlighted in hagiographical accounts, rather than her utter poverty.[52] As mandated by Ramakrishna prior to his death, Sarada was supposed to focus on Ram and live off the

[46] Gambhirananda, 148; Tapasyananda, 117.
[47] Nikhilananda, 102
[48] Gambhirananda, 148; Nikhilananda, 102; Tapasyananda, 118.
[49] Ibid, 137; Tapasyananda, 117.
[50] Ibid., 151; Nikhilananda, 103-104; Tapasyananda, 106.
[51] Nikhilananda, 94; Sil, 64.
[52] Gambhirananda notes that at this time, Sarada was spiritually guided by Ramakrishna (149), and Nikhilananda notes that Ramakrishna appeared to her, to coax her to continue her way of life (104). Tapasyananda refers to this time as part of divine will and God's will (118-119).

land in Kamarpukur.[53] The lesson embedded in this interpretation of Sarada's life is that no matter what state of hardship an individual is experiencing, surely one can focus on some spiritual matters just as Sarada did; and as long as one listened to Ramakrishna, one would succeed. This perspective also showed the uniqueness of Sarada's devotion—it was so steadfast that even poverty could not inhibit her from her spiritual pursuits.

This low point in Sarada's life was not long-lasting (approximately one year). Things began to change when her mother intervened.[54] Sarada's mother sent her son, Sarada's brother, to Dakshineshwar to talk to a priest who knew Ramakrishna, and to two of Sarada's female devotees—Golap-ma and Yogen-ma. The two women approached the wives of Ramakrishna's householder disciples to rally support for finding a means to care for Sarada.[55] In the end, Vivekananda and a few of Ramakrishna's other monastic devotees agreed to take Sarada to Calcutta to live with them. The monks did not have any money either, so it continued to be difficult for Sarada to support herself.[56] However, it is thought that against her mother's wishes to come to Jairambati, Sarada foremost wanted to be with her children, or Ramakrishna's young disciples.[57]

When Sarada moved to Calcutta in 1888, she was not viewed as spiritually significant let alone as the Mother of India, or the Mother Goddess. Sil argues that this is because all attention had previously been on Ramakrishna and his disciples,

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[53] Nikhilananda, 102-103.
[54] While Sarada is largely silent in accounts relating to her life, her mother is the voice of agency. She is attributed as complaining about Ramakrishna and Sarada's unorthodox marriage, Sarada's lack of children, and in this instance, vocalizing about Sarada's lack of support.
[55] Nikhilananda, 104; Tapasyananda, 121-123.
[56] Sil, 64-65.
[57] Ibid., 65.

with no notice of Sarada; Sarada's transformation into a goddess was a gradual process that came thereafter. Sil notes that while we cannot chart views about Sarada with any sort of precision, by 1891 close acquaintances recognized her as the Divine Mother which was marked by followers coming to see Sarada in Jairambati.[58] Interestingly, Sarada's popularity among Indian devotees of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda dramatically increased with Vivekananda's trip to the United States (1893 to 1897).[59] While there, Vivekananda discussed at length Sarada as the Divine Mother of India, which also resulted in Vivekananda's Western female disciples coming to India to meet Sarada.[60]

Subsequently, Sarada began participating and supporting projects like those of Nivedita, a European female devotee of Vivekananda's, who opened a girls' school in India 1898.[61] And as the Ramakrishna Order, Maths and Missions became established, Sarada also lent support for their associated projects.[62] She participated in Durgapuja (worship to the goddess Durga) in various locations,[63] initiated male disciples into the Order,[64] and continued various pilgrimages between 1898 and 1911.[65] But her active participation in these organizations was curtailed by her health by various bouts of illness which eventually led to her death in 1920.

[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.; Nikhilananda notes that Sarada gave Vivekananda her blessing for going to the United States (112).
[60] Nikhilananda, 114; Tapasyananda, 257.
[61] Tapasyananda, 272.
[62] Sarada blessed the Ramakrishna Mission when it opened (Nikhilananda, 114).
[63] See Tapasyananda for an example of this (263).
[64] Nikhilananda, 154-155.
[65] Tapasyananda, 245-256.

Women, Text, and Representation: Sarada and Feminist Contexts

By outlining a brief biography, it is already apparent that divergent views of Sarada exist. In order to understand Sarada in the various contexts in which she is presented, that feminist analysis is pertinent. Sarada, as noted by scholars and as evident in the writings about her, could not be considered feminist, yet at the same time, Sarada certainly articulated a place for herself in a patriarchal society, which could be constituted, at least in some ways, to be feminist. For as Kumari Jayawardena argues, there are many types of feminism. That said, Jayawardena's working definition of feminism is as follows:

> Feminism can be defined as consciousness of injustices based on gender hierarchy, and commitment to change. Such injustices arise from the exploitation and oppression of women in male dominated societies, and the changes envisaged range from the achievement of "equal rights" to "liberation."[66]

Sarada certainly was no activist—however in her later years and via her own childhood experience, she recognized the need for girls to receive an education (as noted in her support of the work of Sister Nivedita), suggesting her recognition of injustice as it pertained to gender. I also think we can see traces of an underlying feminism in the ways that Sarada rejected the rules of a widow, which I have already touched upon previously. However, even if we do not consider Sarada a feminist, this does not mean dismissing the use of feminist theories to understand her life—it is only with feminist textual analyses, as well as feminist concerns about the renunciatory practices of women, for example, that providing alternative readings of Sarada are fruitful. I assert this despite the fact that I also foresee resistance to this approach.

[66] Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden, Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), 9.

This is because, in my view, the life of Sarada (which arguably was not a feminist one) and the ways in which I analyze her life (which is imbued with feminist theories) tend to be conflated with one another. However, feminist scholars, such as myself, often make use of feminist approaches to religion in order to articulate and highlight female religious thought and practices. This has been no doubt useful to my own work as a religious studies scholar.

While feminist approaches to the study of religion are historically evident, Religious Studies departments were slower to adopt feminist perspectives in the study of religion as opposed to other academic departments.[67] The difficulties in incorporating feminist projects into religious studies in particular are rooted in assumptions about phenomenological truths, theology, and the emphasis that has historically been placed upon text. These issues are further complicated when turning to Eastern religions and the ways in which interpretations of related texts are potentially orientalist or rooted in Judeo-Christian values (the awareness of which also tends to be part of the overall feminist project). Traditionally, texts have provided the starting point to understanding religions in general, and are closely linked to phenomenology and theology as a result. That is, theology and phenomenological understandings of religion tended to be rooted in texts. Thus, religious traditions have tended in religious studies, to be legitimated primarily through texts.[68]

The importance placed upon text and a textual tradition has not gone without criticism, as can be noted by feminist scholars especially. These feminists have attempted to problematize the ways in which knowledge has been constructed around

[67] Darlene Juschka, *Feminism in the Study of Religion, A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), 1.
[68] Ibid., 427.

texts, by way of questioning particular textual origins and the construction of knowledge in general.[69] Who writes the texts? Who has access to the texts? And for who and what purpose do they serve? Given the general patriarchal nature of the textual tradition, as well as the classism and racism embedded within texts, these scholars recognize that particular voices and perspectives have, if not literally erased from a text, been neglected within the writings of history. Thus, not only are women directly impacted by the ways texts are created, constructed and studied, but so too are the under-classes or minorities of any given culture of which the texts were/are about. These religious texts, which have provided a basis of understanding world religions, are thus marked by a dominant, hegemonic discourse indicative of patriarchal and elitist concerns.[70]

This dominant discourse takes on a multitude of different forms, depending on where the text originated, for what political purpose they were written for in the first place, and who later systematized them. For example, the textual tradition in Hinduism is comprised of a variety of different texts from different time periods, each text signifying various groups pertinent to the political and regional climate in which they were written. The *Vedas*, as the earliest known texts related to Hinduism, are thought to be rooted in Brahminical or Aryan concerns in contrast to Dravidian beliefs. While the *Vedas* and other texts remain important to Hindus, British

[69] Feminist scholars have done this in a number of ways. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Toward a History of a Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), for example, notes how 19th century Britons treated India as an object of knowledge (201), constructing representations of India that eventually became a reality for India (203). Uma Chakravarti, in her article entitled, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past" in *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1989), 27-87, also notes the ways in which orientalists set the parameters in which the history of Hinduism was discussed, but also identifies the ways Hindu nationalists understood the Vedas and its "original" meanings and practices.

[70] Juschka, 427.

colonialists by way of early orientalists, further solidified the importance of these texts by systematizing the language of Sanskrit,[71] as well as the texts themselves. The implication of understanding texts in this manner points to the ways in which meanings have been derived from the various climates in which these texts were/are understood. This means that while the *Vedas* are consistently touted as the most important texts to Hinduism, essentially establishing Hindu origins by way of text, the understanding and significance of the *Vedas* changes from its origins to its colonial understandings. In both instances, however, the importance of the *Vedas* as a signifier of original and "authentic" Hindu practice fails to address other sources of information that also teach and inform us about Hindu practices. While Hindus may well (and often do) recognize the importance of the *Vedas* to their understanding of Hinduism, the overall importance given by academia to the *Vedas* in contrast to other Hindu texts is not necessarily reflective of how Hindus themselves may perceive them. Or, alternatively, while Hindus may cite the importance of the *Vedas* to Hinduism, they might instead turn to and focus on other Hindu scripture that is given less importance by scholars.

Relying on specific religious texts to determine the authentic origins of Hinduism suggests that all practices that are not included in early Hindu literature are aberrations. Scholars in various fields—including history, anthropology, psychology, sociology and religion—have attempted to not only address the issues raised when one relies on particular texts to understand cultures, but have also explored alternative understandings of women and under-classes within these same texts. These groups

[71] David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance, The Dynamics of Indian Modernization, 1773-1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 242.

have traditionally been written out of these texts, and yet they are intrinsically part of any culture of study. Thus the question becomes, what are the texts not saying? And what does this mean for those who are not addressed in these texts? How can we understand these writings as informative of culture, but as useful outside the context of the patriarchal elite?

It is with this mindset that I attempt to understand the many representations and understandings of Sarada Devi, which are no doubt problematized by text—both by what is said about her and what is not said. In theory, there is a plethora of writing available about Sarada; Sarada's followers wrote about her spiritual developments, and Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's religious thoughts were carefully recorded by their respective followers and by Vivekananda himself. This suggests that there is a large body of texts available that are fundamental to any understanding of any of these figures. However, Sarada's followers did not write to the same degree or for the same purposes as Ramakrishna's followers in that Sarada was first understood primarily as Ramakrishna's helpmate, and then secondly (after Ramakrishna's death) as a guru. In turn, Vivekananda and his followers also understood Sarada in a different light, not only in terms of how Sarada's religious practices were significant, but also in terms of how they understood her within the greater colonial, and thus nationalist, context in which she lived. Therefore, how particular events and actions are understood as they relate to Sarada within these texts vary greatly, depending on who wrote them and to what purpose the writings served.

It is with these differences in mind that I note that the earliest understandings and writings about Sarada were by Ramakrishna's followers. Generally, these followers

were concerned with putting forth Ramakrishna's ideas about spirituality and tracking his spiritual journey, in addition to, at least in the case of the *Kathamrita*, also highlighting some of their class anxieties and concerns that existed during British rule.[72] Particularly, these writings, which were supposed to be originally put forth in booklet form,[73] were meant to gain more followers, and to inform people about Ramakrishna as a guru. In providing a life story of Ramakrishna as well as his treatises on morality and spirituality, these writings were also supposed to function as a guide to his followers. As a married yet celibate guru, these writings about Ramakrishna included peripheral glimpses of Sarada's life and their marriage.

In these writings, hagiographies are shaped of both Sarada and Ramakrishna, who are described often in terms of Shiva and Parvati. Ramakrishna is Shiva because he straddles both the world of a powerful renouncer yet is married, and Sarada, as noted earlier, is Parvati because it is said that from the time she was a very small child she performed austerities to be granted a boon in order to marry Ramakrishna.[74] And while the marriage was never consummated, it is, according to Ramakrishna's followers, supposed to provide the ideal partnership—one of a "traditional" Hindu marriage, yet at the same time is spiritually focused.[75] According to Ramakrishna, the ideal marriage was not based on concerns for materiality, but instead one that was spiritually grounded. From this perspective, the traditional roles of husband and wife were practiced in that the wife adeptly looked after her husband's needs while a husband cared for and respected the wishes of his wife. For Ramakrishna—at least

[72] Sen, 26.
[73] This is at least true of M.'s *Kathamrita.* See ibid, 27.
[74] LeMaitre, 77.
[75] Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 83.

according to his disciples—the celibate marriage ultimately represented mutual respect between a husband and wife.[76]

In this context, Sarada is depicted as the ultimate householder, who obeys and looks after her husband, ideally anticipating his needs and wants. She is described as learning how to look after her husband under his careful and patient guidance (traits also required of a good husband), and under his tutelage, adhering to the utmost of piety and modesty. In their years together, for example, Ramakrishna's disciples note that she never complained, showed herself to the public unless asked, or neglected her prayers and meditations.[77] She is described as understanding Ramakrishna's uniqueness as a spiritual guide, and therefore supported him as only his chosen wife could.[78] In many ways, therefore, Ramakrishna and Sarada are represented as a traditional brahminical couple as found in the ways in which Ramakrishna oversaw Sarada's on goings, and by the ways in which Sarada uncomplainingly served her husband.

Problematic to this understanding of Sarada is that we are reliant on middle- and upper-middle class perspectives on Sarada and Ramakrishna's lives and spiritual concerns. Be it householder or renunciant, this perspective is very specific to the group that it represents, as will be discussed in chapter four. This perspective is in contrast to potential viewpoints of Sarada's lower class followers—thieves, prostitutes, the poor—who did not leave any writings about Sarada; or if they did, the

[76] Nikhilananda, 73
[77] See Gambhirananda, 40, for Sarada's uncomplaining attitutude; Swami Tapasyananda, 84, footnote 1, for a discussion of Sarada's confinement as seva (service); and Nikhilananda, 79, for a discussion of Sarada's "quiet prayer and meditation."
[78] Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969), 17.

writings are certainly not used in the same way and to the same degree by subsequent followers. Further, aside from class concerns embedded in texts about Sarada and Ramakrishna, there is also the issue of gender. Ramakrishna's followers were primarily comprised of men, suggesting that a woman's voice, let alone her perspective, is largely omitted from any of the writings pertaining to Ramakrishna. This means that Sarada—her voice and her experiences—are not only shaped in a specific way as to support patriarchal assumptions, but are potentially omitted entirely because she was viewed as unimportant at that time. These factors certainly shaped the way that Sarada and Ramakrishna were understood by their followers, and subsequently, the ways in which they are understood by scholars who rely on these writings.

When Sarada is evident in texts, she is presented in various ways, largely depending on the group that is writing about her, the ways in which the group understands her spiritually, and the political climate in which she was written about. Each group, it seems, while simultaneously having different ideas about her role in relation to Ramakrishna, also denotes the ways in which their notions of her spirituality reflects political ideas about colonial India. In all three cases, these writings were written by and for the middle- and upper middle-classes, yet within this class, there were different ideas about the significance of spirituality and how it related to colonial India. In all cases, however, representations of Sarada are informed by ideas about gender.

As noted previously in my discussion on general writings about Ramakrishna, Sarada is foremost his wife and help-mate for his spiritual journey. Without her,

Ramakrishna would not have been able to fulfill his spiritual greatness. But in writings dedicated solely to Sarada, Sarada is a spiritual guru in her own right, and while married to Ramakrishna, she had her own spiritual lessons to offer. For example, Sarada was viewed as accepting those people whom Ramakrishna would not,[79] and thus was representative of universal motherhood.[80] But not only was Sarada the ideal mother, she was also the ideal woman, denoting utmost purity.[81] Overall, she was not just a spiritually advanced human, but she was divine in her purity.

Arguably, this type of representation of Sarada was for the specific consumption of her followers, as well as Ramakrishna's. In fact, many of the stories taken by Sarada's followers are derived from works originally written with Ramakrishna in mind. However, two themes emerge here, both of which will be dealt indepth in subsequent chapters—Sarada as a divine (or divinely inspired) wife and mother, and Sarada as a renouncer. In both cases, she is viewed as equal to Ramakrishna in spiritual rigor and understanding; attitudes about Sarada which emerged slowly over the time after Ramakrishna's death. In these understandings about Sarada, there is no sense that she is viewed as subordinate to her husband, as noted in scholarly works, but instead is depicted as working with Ramakrishna to help all followers find their place in a changing world. Importantly, Sarada *chose* to refrain from the limelight that made Ramakrishna so famous.[82]

Vivekananda, in contrast, was aptly able to provide a representation of Sarada for mass consumption—for both the East and the West—while simultaneously asserting a

[79] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna,* ed. Nanda Mookerjee (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1978), 116-17.
[80] Ibid., 95.
[81] Ibid., 76-77.
[82] Ibid., 82.

particular brand of Hinduism and nationalism in which Sarada became the iconic Mother of India.[83] During a time of competing nationalisms, and competing interests from other Hindu groups and organizations, Vivekananda was able to articulate concerns over the occupation of India by the British in such a way that was viewed as "non-threatening". That is, by way of Vivekananda's speeches overseas, Westerners who supported the cause of independence, for example, did not experience the conflict of being the colonialist (and born Christian) while under the tutelage or spiritual guidance of one who was colonized and born Hindu.[84] I think Vivekananda was primarily able to do this with his use of Sarada, highlighting her compassionate nature and acceptance of all, be it Christian or Hindu, white or brown. But Vivekananda was also able to accomplish this with his Indian followers as well. In this way, Vivekananda idealizes Sarada not only as a helpmate to Ramakrishna, but also as a model of spiritual practice, basically straddling interpretations between Ramakrishna and Sarada's followers, and thus outreaching to both groups.

To understand Vivekanada as constructing an image of Sarada in order to "use" her as a means to gain Western followers does not suggest that she was not complicit in this construction. Sarada affirmed her role given to her by Vivekananda by way of providing him a blessing when he went to the United States,[85] and by way of working with his followers like Nivedita, when they came to India to meet the Sarada they had

[83] Sarada became Vivekananda's version of Mother India, although she was not the only one in India in general. For historical developments and various examples of how Mother India has been articulated in colonial India, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India, The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
[84] Gwylim Beckerlegge, "The Early Spread of Vedanta Societies: An Example of "Imported Localism"," *Numen*, 51 (2004): 304.
[85] Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 112.

heard so much about.[86] Thus, while treatises about Sarada's life and spirituality do not necessarily include nationalist concerns, it appears evident that she was aware of and worked with the ways in which others constructed her.

But interestingly, in some of the writings that include Sarada, there are instances of criticism for her disregard for the fight from political freedom from British rule. Many of Ramakrishna's followers, including Vivekananda for example, had decidedly boycotted British goods. Sarada, on the other hand, did not ascribe to this boycott and continued to purchase small items that came from Britain. These items were primarily small gifts (what these gifts were, the writings do not say) that she could give to visitors who came to see her.[87] In response to admonitions of purchasing these goods, Sarada argued that the British were just as much her children as the Indians were. On the surface, then, it appears that Sarada had little time or concern for the politics of India, or the politics of Hinduism.

At the same time, with her blessing, Vivekananda set off for North America and Europe in order to spead the word about Hinduism. These lectures for Westerners included general understandings of ideal Hindu womanhood, which I argue were modeled from his ideas about Sarada, particularly, as the ultimate model for women.[88] Vivekananda's approach came at a time when Indians were becoming increasingly aware of the significance of Western female support for their cause of independence. For example, Sinha notes that in the early 1900's, nationalists in general were seeking

[86] Ibid., 114; Tapasyananda, 257.
[87] She is also recorded as buying British fabrics for her nieces (see Swami Nikhilananda, "Holy Mother, Embodiment of the Divine," in *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother, Her Teachings and Conversations*, translated with notes by Swami Nikhilananda, ed. Swami Adiswarananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 2004), 22.
[88] See *The Complete Worlds of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. VIII (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1847), 198.

female support in the West and as means to bolster their claims to freedom from the British. The British, at the same time, also noticed this shift, and simultaneously sought prominent, articulate white women who could sufficiently argue for the continuance of British rule.[89] So while Sarada superficially rejected any involvement in nationalist projects, at the same time, she became key to Vivekananda's notion of a Hindu nationalism.

In dubbing Sarada the Mother of India, and asserting her as the spiritual ideal for other women, Vivekananda was not really doing anything new. Feminist and postcolonial scholars, for example, have noted how women end up becoming representatives of society, and the measurement of piety in religious communities.[90] Thus, the Mother of India has taken on a variety of forms, has been embodied by various figures, and in turn has been interpreted in a variety of different ways depending on the interests of any particular group. This means, for example, that the Mother of India has not always been a Brahminical one, nor has it necessarily been rooted strictly in Hinduism.

This idea of women demarcating the status of a community is not restricted to India, and is certainly not restricted to the context of Hinduism. Part of the connection between the ideas about women and communities are rooted in what it actually means to be a woman, and how this in turn is reflective of a society. Of my concern specifically are the ways that gender gets constructed in particular historical contexts

[89] Mrinalini Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India," *Feminist Studies*, 26: 3 (Autumn 2000), Points of Departure, India and the South Asian Diaspora.
[90] See Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*; Partha Chatterjee, *A Nation and Its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold, Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) for examples.

as it relates to religion. That is, women, as reflective of particular communities, are demarcated in this way according to the religious practices that they uphold. Discourses such as this have already been observed by many feminist scholars of religion, who note the differential treatment of men and women in terms of religious practices, and how they relate to the greater society in which these practices are relevant. This trend is not restricted to the study of colonial India and Hinduism, therefore, but can also be observed in a variety of contexts.

For example, Hala Shukrallah, in her analysis of debates and partial acceptance of women wearing the hijab in 1970's Egypt, argues that the debate over wearing the veil, while seemingly indicative of the status of women, or women's rights, was rooted in the complexities of politics and formations of Islamic nationalism.[91] Muslim women, as the "bearers of culture", were viewed as ideal models of Islamic adherence, should women choose to wear the veil.[92] The wearing of the veil not only marked one's adherence and following of a particular type of Islamic identity, but it was also a means to show support for a Muslim cause in opposition to colonialism.[93] Thus the wearing of the hijab implied allegiance to not only an Islamic nation, but also a rejection of westernization and forms of modernization associated with it.[94]

Importantly, it is notions of the purity of these women that represent the markers of a state's success or failure to affirm a particular community and/or religious identity.[95] In times of tension, or at times when a community is at odds with a

[91] Hala Shukrallah, "The Impact of the Islamic Movement in Egypt," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion, A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 181.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., 182.
[94] Ibid,. 190.
[95] Ibid.

dominant power, it is the women who are expected to practice and behave in ways that denote this moral purity. In terms of the Muslim context, this concern is not restricted to 1960's Egypt, but can continue to be seen in present day Palestine, in which graffiti depictions on the West Bank barrier show and encourage women to veil to show their allegiance to more conservative political groups such as Hamas.[96]

Coupled with the outward dress of Muslim women, cultural protection tends to be rooted in religious and political laws, which contribute to the continued moral purity of women. Closely tied to modes of dress in these particular situations have been sharia laws which dictate ideal marriages, sexual behaviour, and public life for women—all of which tend to be punished disproportionately to male counterparts who partake in similar "immoral" behaviour.[97] Thus the issue of the hijab is not merely about the freedom to wear what one wants, but is symbolic of the struggle for independence from a dominant culture or discourse, as well as the "uprightedness" of a community which is ultimately only monitored or gauged by way of women's behaviours and practices. In the struggle for a particular kind of Islamic nation, which views itself as countering colonialist and Judeo-Christian hegemony, women are responsible for the success or failure of this aim.

The idea that the purity of women (or lack of it) denotes the success or failure of an independent nation is equally applicable to the struggles of Indians in 19th century India. During this time, a number of religious practices which signified the purity of a woman and hence her family, became the focal point of British rule. Sati, child marriage, and practices relating to widowhood, all came to represent the upper caste

[96] Julie Peteet, "The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada," *Cultural Anthropology* 11:2 (1996): 154.
[97] Shukrallah, 192.

status of a Hindu family, while at the same time were used to legitimate British rule over an "uncivilized" nation.[98] While Indians themselves also saw the need to remove these cultural practices, they sought to do so on their own terms, in ways that would still be in keeping with their ideas about the "ideal woman."[99]

But the role of women as the bearers of culture is not restricted to a Muslim or Middle-Eastern context; nor is it relevant simply to the issue of gender. Black feminists, for example, note the problems of attempting to address both the issues of gender as well as the issues of race. The issue of race, for instance, was problematized during second wave feminism, in which the dominant feminist discourse in the 70's was white.[100] E. Frances White, for example, analyzes the role of women during emergence of assertions of a pan-African identity in the United States during the 1950's to 70's. In general, this notion of a return to an African identity emphasized what leaders supposed as a return to African tribal culture, which contrasted white American Christian culture in terms of marriage, and male and female roles. In an effort to counter to the hegemonic discourse, which historically supported slavery and inequality with its embedded racism, a return to African roots was viewed as a means to free people from this continued slavery of inequality.[101]

This notion of a pan-African identity contributed to the development of certain ideals subsequently found within the Black Panther and Rastafarian movements. In their early formations (again, these are specific in their geographic formulations, with

[98] See Partha Chatterjee, 17, for an example of this mentality in an effort to reform Hindus.
[99] Ibid., 127.
[100] Juschka, 429.
[101] See E. Francis White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse, and African American Nationalism," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion, A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 475-76..

ideals about women differing depending on where one lived in the United States), women were viewed simultaneously as having the ability to create a strong black male who could counter white hegemony, yet were also responsible for the African American male's previous inability to obtain freedom and overcome equality.[102] As overseers of home life, these women too, could be viewed as bearers of culture, not necessarily by way of dress (though in some instances this was a factor as well) but in how they raised their children, and in particular, the males in their family. In addition, and closely tied to the Black Power Movement in general, there was emphasis placed on the propagation of the species, which meant that women had a responsibility to bear children (and thus formulating culture inadvertently) with males of the same race.[103] To couple with another outside of one's 'race' indicated one's loyalties as outside the movement, much in the same way that the rejection of wearing the hijab indicated an affiliation with colonial power.

Therefore, not only are women the bearers of culture in that they are perceived as having the responsibility of upholding certain cultural norms and/or ideals, they are also "cultural transmitters,"[104] in that as an ideal, these women teach others how they should behave. And again, we can see the relevance that these ideas have to the role of women in 19th century India. Ideal notions of motherhood appear to be closely linked to the education of boys and girls. Traditionally, a girl's education was restricted to the duties of homelife, and learning the ropes of servitude to one's future

[102] Robert Carr, *Black Nationalism in the New World, Reading the African-American and West Indian Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 188-89.
[103] Ibid.,195.
[104] I borrowed the term, "cultural transmitters," from Dawn Martin-Hill, in *Women and Religious Traditions*, eds. Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 137-159.

husband.[105] In contrast, and depending on one's caste, boys were taught scripture and the ways of the world to ensure an appropriate vocation to support a future family.[106] While the importance of girls' education was brought to the fore at this time, the schools that were established, at least early on, were to not only teach girls to read and write, but to continue to inform young girls how to keep house and how to look after one's family.[107] Even in this sense of reform, women continued to be the transmitters of culture, for it was thought that women's roles as wives had to change in order to help men succeed in gaining political independence.

This idea of women as cultural transmitters can also be related to Sarada's life. For example, Mrs. S. Muthalakshmi Reddi, a devotee of Sarada's, argues that Sarada's devotion to her husband should be used as a model for the education of children in India. While modern-educated men and women are described as falling to the temptations of wealth and ornaments easily, current education should instead include "the high ideals of religious and spiritual life"[108] as modeled in Sarada. For Reddi, Sarada's greatness was laden in the fact that Sarada was brought up in a religious atmosphere;[109] in following her ways of life in India, the Indian people would be able to solve their own problems of India.[110]

In these particular cases, one can see how closely related child bearing, child rearing, and culture are. In identifying women as the bearers of culture, it is evident how closely tied women are to home life, and what is now considered the domestic

[105] Mary Hancock, "Home Science and The Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 35:4 (October 2001): 879.
[106] Ibid., 872.
[107] Ibid., 880.
[108] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 118.
[109] Ibid., 115.
[110] Ibid., 116.

realm. At the same time, however, they are also symbols of public life, not only by way of the laws created and enforced related to the domestic sphere, but in terms of how the public (i.e. male public) understands them.

It is important to note in relation to my own work that while my thesis deals with how gender in general is constructed in colonial India, and how Sarada is constructed in particular, these constructions are not all considered negative by the women who participate in them. For example, Shukrallah notes that many women who chose to wear the veil in Egypt, prior to any sort of legal systematization of the hijab in other Islamic states, openly supported the hijab as symbolic of the stance against colonialism.[111] Also, some feminist thinkers view(ed) the wearing of hijab as a way to navigate in the public realm, enabling women to work in the public sphere free from sexualization. Thus for some women, veiling was not only a political symbol, but a practical mode of dress used to escape unwanted advancements.[112]

Janet L. Jacobs also argues that there are some women who prefer to adhere to more conservative notions of women's roles. She notes that in contrast to New Religious Movements in North America, which theoretically offer a new space for men and women to interact (yet inevitably fail and revert back to patriarchal assumptions),[113] some women prefer more orthodox or traditional religious practices as a means to formulate their role and identity in an increasingly ambiguous world. Thus, Jacob found that there was actually an increase in movements toward Orthodox

[111] Shakrallah, 193.
[112] Ibid., 194-95.
[113] Janet L. Jacobs, "Gender and Power in New Religious Movements: A Feminist Discourse on the Scientific Study of Religion" in *Feminism in the Study of Religion, A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 169.

Judaism as a result.[114] What can be derived from this is the fact that there are women as bearers of culture, who actively participate in this formulation. It should not be assumed, therefore, that women consistently resist this role or function in society.

Yet while the examples I posit above are quite recent, and do not initially appear to be connected to my particular project of colonial India, feminist and postcolonial scholars (the two are not mutually exclusive) also note the ways in which women were also considered and treated as the bearers of culture during the 19th and early 20th centuries in India. I think that the role of women in this context stems from even earlier than this, particularly during the attempts by the British government to systematize Hindu and Islamic laws in India. Sinha notes in her work on responses to Katherine Mayo's work, *Mother India*, that women had at this time (1927) become measurements of the community. In this instance, concern was over what the notion of Mother India meant, and how this in turn was intrinsically connected to the role and practices of women, be it in their daily lives, or how the legal system contributed to this understanding. In particular, women represented the ongoings of specific religious communities—in this particular case, Hinduism.[115] She in turn draws this assessment from other postcolonial writers such as Partha Chatterjee, in his work *A Nation and Its Fragments*. What is important to note in the case of India, and especially how it relates to my project, is how these women get represented in society, and how Hindu communities not only shape the ways in which religious practices of women have been traditionally understood, but also in terms to how women relate to particular nationalist projects. Such representations contribute to these community

[114]Ibid., 170.
[115] Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India," 43.

identities as evidenced not only by the ways in which the West came to know Sarada via Vivekananda, but through particular imagery and interactions with Sarada. Thus, Sarada, like other women, is used as a tool not only for the model citizen denoting a particular brand of Hindu nationalism, but also in terms of how her religious practices are understood.

While previously I note how women, as the bearers of culture are understood in terms of how they raise future generations (mostly as a counter-point to experienced oppression), Sarada, at least superficially, does not appear to fit the mold. However, though she never had her own children, her role as a model for an ideal Hindu community is constructed in such a way as to transcend this issue. By becoming the Mother of India—a mother who welcomes all her Hindu children—Sarada transcends the practical applications of motherhood. At the same time, however, she is also able to fulfill the traditional role of motherhood. This is especially so since it was mandated by Ramakrishna that she would have many children—a fact that is continually emphasized by his own followers, including Ramakrishna.[116]

In understanding Sarada as the supreme model of India, and thus as the ultimate bearer of culture, it does not really matter what Sarada "really thought", or in what way she actively participated in this construction. While she is consistently touted by both her own followers, as well as Ramakrishna's followers as the model of an ideal Hindu marriage, it is evident that her role as a bearer of culture had different formulations depending on one's vicinity (i.e. devoutness) to her. That is, there is a tendency for Vivekananda's and Ramakrishna's followers to view her solely as a model householder, signifying her role only in relation to how it pertained to

[116] Gambhirananda, 127.

Ramakrishna and later, the nationalist cause. In contrast, Sarada's own followers recognize both Sarada's support of Ramakrishna's spiritual endeavors as well as Sarada's particular religious practices as important and separate from Ramakrishna's. This may not suggest a departure from the idea that women are the bearers of culture, but instead points to varying configurations of how Sarada is understood and represented in this context.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TEXTUAL SARADA

In contrast to Ramakrishna and his devotee Vivekananda, very little has been written about Sarada in either academic or devotional texts. Much of this has to do with the fact that Sarada was illiterate, leaving no writings of her own, and that it was not until her later years that she became viewed as a spiritual guru. Hence, her situation differs from Vivekananda's in that he left a plethora of works behind in both English and Bengali, and from Ramakrishna's in that he was viewed early in his life as an enlightened being, causing his followers to compile transcripts of his life and teachings early on. In the latter context, Sarada is emphasized as a helpmate to Ramakrishna rather than spiritually enlightened in her own right. As a result, much of the writings that we do have about Sarada are from works about Ramakrishna, in which Sarada is situated on the periphery of events, lessons, interactions and discussions related to Ramakrishna. This also means that devotional works actually dedicated to Sarada have a tendency to include reams of recycled material from other works, and that academics have chosen not to write about her due to these limited sources.

I argue that it is not sufficient to claim a lack of primary sources as a reason for the sparse academic works on Sarada. For practitioners devoted to both Ramakrishna

and Sarada there is enough information to compile and analyze the ways in which Sarada has been situated in devotional texts. However, in order to determine the fruits of the texts available that are about Sarada, understandings of the ways these texts have previously been used are in order. Thus, the objectives in determining the "textual Sarada" are threefold: 1) to show the ways in which texts are problematic to the study of religion in general, particularly how these problems benefit from a feminist understanding of textual traditions as they pertain to Sarada; 2) to show the ways in which texts written specifically about Sarada are controlled; and 3) to show the ways in which I think writings about Sarada can be used for the benefit of my study—specifically in understanding Sarada within a greater cultural context. Essentially, this chapter calls to question some of the assumptions made in religious studies concerning texts as unquestioned authorities of information. The fundamental argument to my objectives is that texts can only be useful insomuch as they are understood within the greater cultural context in which texts about Sarada were written—in colonial Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—and how they are interpreted in present day.

Feminism, Religion, and Texts

Feminist scholars in particular have attempted to draw out the problems with texts as well as formulated new ways to discuss women using texts. While traditionally, texts have provided the starting point to understanding religious traditions in general, they have also been key to how one understands religions as legitimate or illegitimate, authentic or inauthentic. That is, the general importance placed upon texts in the study

of religion also points to specific rules and/or doctrine in texts which end up contributing to the assumption that religion is unchanging and that a particular tradition cannot (should not?) be diverse in practice. Those that do not subscribe to what texts have to say are therefore "illegitimate" or are considered "inauthentic."[1] The importance placed upon text and a textual tradition has not gone without criticism, as can be noted especially by feminist scholars. Feminist approaches have attempted to problematize the ways in which knowledge has been constructed around texts, by way of questioning particular textual origins. General conclusions point to the fact that many of these texts have been dictated by particular power relations. Those who are educated for example can write particular discourses that represent the writers themselves as representing the dominant (i.e. "authentic") culture.[2] In contrast, those who do not have access to the texts, or to the writing of them, are excluded from this culture. For feminist scholars, those who are excluded from the discourse are not only women, but include any of those who are not part of the elite class, such as the uneducated, the lower classes and/or minority groups. Bear in mind that while the elites create and control this discourse, they do not necessarily represent the majority—this is especially problematic when the religious texts they create are used

[1] See Meena Khandelwal's section entitled "Female Renunciation: Legitmacy and Historicity" (36-39) in *Women in Ochre Robes, Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (New York: SUNY, 2004).
[2] See Clarice J. Martin, "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion, A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), 548-49. In this article, Martin explores ideas about class and race while addressing the notion of the term, *doulos* in biblical scriptures.

as a marker for measuring who constitutes a "legitimate" practitioner and who does not.[3]

Given the general patriarchal nature of the textual tradition, as well as the classism and racism embedded within related texts, feminist scholars recognize that particular voices and perspectives have, if not been literally erased from a text, been neglected within the writings of history. Thus, not only are women directly impacted by the ways texts are created, constructed, and studied, but so too are the marginalized or minorities of any given culture of which the texts are about. These religious texts, which have provided a basis for understanding world religions, are thus marked by a dominant hegemonic discourse which assumes to represent all citizens for which the text is supposed to apply, yet omits the experiences of all the people it supposedly represents.

The concern for who has been written out of history is not only a focus for feminist scholars, but includes all scholars who wish to provide alternate understandings of history that are not already part of the dominant discourse. Gayatri Spivak, for example, asks the poignant question in her famous article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". While the jury is still out on that one (first she says yes, then she

[3] This is not only a feminist project; for example, we can locate concerns over the precedence given to the textual tradition in subaltern studies as well. Vinay Bahl, in "Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies," notes that:

> British workers left diaries behind for British historians to find their voices in, but Indian workers and peasants did nto leave behind any 'original authentic' voices. Therefore, to find Indian subaltern voices, subaltern studies had to use different methods of reading the available documents, that is, read then 'against the grain.' [*Reading Subaltern Studies, Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia*, ed. David Ludden (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 361]

One can also find a discussion of the idea of privileged discourse in Gyanendra Pandey's article, "Voices From the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories," in *Mapping the Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayek Chaturvedi (London & New York: Verso, 2000), 281-299. While these examples do not deal with religion explicitly, subaltern studies in general have contributed to the way that religion scholars conceive of historical developments and read texts.

says no), her work does speak to the general need and attempts to retrieve voices that have been historically omitted from texts. These attempts are also noted in more specific scholarship on women, including *Recasting Women, Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Sexuality, Obscenity, and Community* by Charu Gupta, Uma Chakravarti's *Rewriting History, The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, and Khandelwal's seminal work on female ascetics, already mentioned previously. For these scholars the concern is not only in how colonialism contributed to the redefinition of female Hindu ideals, but also the ways in which the Hindu upper classes also sought to define Hindu women's roles (in spite of women's silence).[4] These studies, it should be added, are not necessarily addressing what women were thinking—for in many instances it would be impossible to say—but instead attempt to address the ways in which the roles of women have been articulated by specific groups or classes and the subsequent impact this has had on the general population of women. For example, *bhadralok* (the Indian middle class) concerns about the role of women in Indian society, particularly in terms of how women functioned as a marker of civilized society, led to many discussions among the bhadralok about how women should behave, how they should be educated, and how they should dress.[5] With women as the measure of a civilized Indian society, the bhadralok sought, mainly in their writings, to assert a culture as civilized and equal to the British (even if different). Many scholars note how the bradralok's assertions of a

[4] See Lata Mani's, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India," in *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 88-126.

[5] Partha Chatterjee, *A Nation and Its Fragment, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 130; for the ongoing debate on fashion for Indian women, see Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community; Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 140-151.

civilized India by way of the role of women greatly impacted women of different castes—particularly lower caste women who had relative freedoms prior to the successful articulations of bhadralok assertions that a civilized Hindu woman was actually a Brahmincal Hindu woman.[6] Lower castes, in an effort to move upward in the caste hierarchy, began to force their women to adhere to certain rules outlined by the pundits, and later legally mandated (that is, systematized), by the British.

The other major issue for feminist approaches in religious studies is how to deal with hagiographical material. There has been a general tendency to either reject hagiography as unreliable sources of information, or to (at the other end of the spectrum) accept unquestioningly and uncritically information about particular subjects in this same hagiographical material. The use of such material is further problematized when controls are placed on who has access to the material, and what can be said about it. For example, when Jeffrey Kripal published *Kālī's Child*, claiming that a re-translation of hagiographic material led to his conclusion that Ramakrishna was homosexual, the Ramakrishna community responded with extreme upset,[7] seemingly followed by limiting who would have access to their resources in the future. This example alone shows how the use or access of such material is tenuous.

Yet the problem is not only rooted in how devotees may want to control the way hagiographic material is interpreted. In many instances, hagiography is so ancient

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[6] See this debate within the context of tensions between nationalists and Pandita Ramabai in Uma Chakravarti's work, *Rewriting History, The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 313.

[7] See *The Statesman*, letters to the editor (7, 11, 13, 18 February 1997); the editor's response, "Now Let It Rest," (18 February 1997); and "Ramakrishna's Impulses Spark Row," *The Times of India* (10 April 1997). These citations are also found in Jeffrey Kripal's *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, second edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xi-xii, footnotes 1 and 3.

there may no longer be living devotees left to care. The other significant issue is deciding how hagiography can be used as a source of information for academics. In terms of the study of women in such texts for example, while women may be the foci, they may in fact actually represent the political, agenda-setting motives of the authors who write about them. Thus, the idea of representation, or more precisely, understanding how women are represented in hagiography, is key to the uses of hagiography in academia. In this way, hagiography, which is seemingly personal and subjective to meet specific devotional needs, can be used in an objective, strictly observational manner.

Caroline Walker Bynum for example, addresses the academic use of hagiographical material to study female medieval saints. For Bynum, hagiography can be a useful source in scholarship, permitted that it is used in particular ways. Rather than viewing hagiography as contradictory to academic sources, Bynum argues that such sources should be treated similarly to academic (i.e. "objective") ones. For example, one should be aware that just like academic sources, hagiographic material is socially constructed, and one should question how the material is formulated and used.[8] In terms of Western scholarship specifically, one can look upon the decades in which hagiography was analyzed and pinpoint particular concerns of the age in which the analysis occurred.[9] Any analysis therefore, is also subject to social construction, indicating a particular world view in which an evaluation was written. Bynum's aims,

[8] Carolyn Walker Bynum, "foreword," in *Gendered Voices, Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), ix.
[9] Ibid., ix-x.

much like mine in this chapter, are to use these hagiographical texts to illuminate particular pasts, while simultaneously shedding light on interpretation and method.[10]

In the case of works on Sarada, one can turn to the *Kathamrita* and see Sarada as primarily the help mate of Ramakrishna. She is described in human terms, although she is simultaneously acknowledged as a special woman because she was able to allow Ramakrishna to focus and continue his spiritual pursuits. This same type of Sarada is also understood in *The Gospel of Sarada Devi*, and Nikhilanada's (a devotee of Ramakrishna) other writings about her. Given that Nikhilananda published his work in 1962, which was well after both Sarada's and Ramakrishna's deaths, this construction of Sarada seems to be in keeping with mainstream thoughts and ideas related to the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. In addition, while Nikhilananda was writing during the dawn of second wave feminism, a time when women were increasing seeking identities outside of home life, Nikhilananda provides the caveat that Western women missed the strengths found in traditional Hindu women—Western women's aggressive behaviour has left them none better in terms of gaining respect and freedoms. As Nikhilananda states:

> To an outsider a Hindu woman may appear passive. She may seem not to enjoy much freedom. She regards herself as free if, without any interference from outside, she can manage her household affairs, bring up her children according to her own good standards, and practise her spiritual disciplines…In free India, at the present time, Hindu women hold positions in the political field which their more aggressive Western sisters have yet to achieve. Yet Hindu women never started a suffragette movement to demand their rights.[11]

[10] Ibid., x.
[11] Swami Nikhilananda, "The Holy Mother, An Ideal of Perfect Womanhood," in *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder, A Compilation of Revelations, Reminiscences and Studies*, by Apostles, Monks, Savants, Scholars, Devotees (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), 191.

While Nikhilananda does not reject the idea of women in power, he is also skeptical of the forms this type of power takes. In this same excerpt, Nikhilananda compares and contrasts Sarada with one of her female devotees, Gauri-ma. Gauri-ma was a tough individual who "bubbled" with masculine energy. Sarada, on the other hand, was viewed as quite ordinary—doting on those who came to see her—holding back her energy with humble restraint.[12] The overall message is clear—one should look to Sarada, the ideal housewife, as a modern day role model.

Thus far, Sarada's function in writings, particularly by devotees of Ramakrishna, is as an especially spiritually-inclined woman who understood the needs and greatness of Ramakrishna. But Sarada is described as more than simply an ideal housewife, as the marriage itself also had to be constituted as special. This was in order to articulate the spiritual enlightenment of Ramakrishna, and to counter the question floating around in many people's minds: why, if Ramakrishna was so enlightened, would he marry an average woman?

Yet this was not only a concern for devotees, but for academics as well (or perhaps, more aptly, devotional scholars). For example, Solange LeMaitre, while writing a biography of Ramakrishna, is explicit in her mythical understandings of Sarada. Sarada was, as noted by LeMaitre, Parvati, who like Parvati sought out her "Shiva" as found in Ramakrishna by way of her tapas.[13] Max Müller also writes about Sarada, albeit briefly, in his work on Ramakrishna, emphasizing Sarada's advanced spiritual nature, and her contentedness with her and Ramakrishna's ascetic (i.e.

[12] Ibid., 186-87.
[13] Solange LeMaitre, *Ramakrishna and the Vitality of Hinduism*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 77.

celibate) living arrangement.[14] I argue that in both cases, the emphasis placed upon Sarada's spiritual nature is rooted in discomfort over Sarada's child marriage to Ramakrishna, and particularly in reference to Müller's work, is an effort to quell Western readership's concern over an arranged marriage, and rumors of subsequent abuse of Sarada by Ramakrishna.[15] Müller explicitly refutes such accusations against Ramakrishna, and because he was writing for a Western-European audience, I believe he wanted to ensure that they understood why such a seemingly unorthodox and unethical marriage had to take place—because only Sarada could understand Ramakrishna's process to enlightenment.

In more modern depictions of Sarada, we have Kripal's work, and Narasingha Sil's biography of Sarada, both of which have already been mentioned previously. In contrast to Sil's work, which focuses completely on Sarada, Kripal's Sarada sits silently on the periphery of events with little or no voice. For Kripal, Sarada played little part in Ramakrishna's life except by way of feeding his sensitive stomach. In contrast, Sil finds Sarada a remarkable figure, though entirely human rather than divine. As can be noted in this brief summary of key works related to Sarada, each writing provides its own context and approach to Sarada's life, with vastly different outcomes. However in most cases, Sarada is at least minimally divine, due to her ability to understand the greatness of Ramakrishna.

Catherine Mooney, like Bynum, also uses hagiography to study female Christian saints, and posits specific questions to determine the ways in which the saints she

[14] Max Müller, *Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1923), 64-65.
[15] Ibid., 64.

studies have been culturally constructed. Using her framework as a model to explicate on a textual Sarada, I will bear the following questions in mind in this chapter:

1) Can I distinguish Sarada's voice from its interpreter?

2) Is the voice that I hear gendered?

3) In what ways is Sarada represented? [16]

For the purpose of my study however, particular attention is paid to the ways in which Sarada is represented. This has largely to do with the limits of the texts about Sarada in contrast to Mooney's sources on female saints.

That said, there are definite instances when one can hear and mark a gendered voice when reading about Sarada. For example, while male swamis describe Ramakrishna and Sarada's marriage as the epitomy of utmost devotion,[17] or divinely inspired,[18] Sister Nivedita, Vivekananda's Western disciple, notes that Sarada was "forgotten by her husband till she was eighteen."[19] Other women, while deeming Ramakrishna and Sarada as divine, denote the marriage as a practical application of Hindu custom. When speaking of Sarada as a child bride, for example, Elizabeth Davidson notes:

> The custom of child-marriage suggests certain advantages, for it helps the bride to adjust herself to the ideals of her husband and his family while at the same time her mind ceased to be distracted by idle dreams. Being still immature she feels secure in the affection of her elders.[20]

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[16] Catherine M. Mooney, "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Society," in *Gendered Voices, Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1-2.
[17] See Swami Hiranmayananda's account in *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder*, 19.
[18] Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), 25.
[19] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, ed. Nanda Mookerjee (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1978), 6.
[20] *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder*, 306.

This is a far cry from the idea that Sarada knew the importance of her marriage to Ramakrishna from a young age, as suggested by Rolland in chapter one of this thesis. Also, not only does this speak to the differences in perspectives from men to women, but also, in my view, highlights the ways in which Western women have dealt with the marriage.

One reason that I am primarily addressing representations of Sarada rather than attempting to determine her voice is that it is difficult to distinguish Sarada's voice from another. Interestingly, I find that it is easier to ascertain the voices of other women in contact with Sarada, than to locate Sarada's own voice. This is true when determining the voice of her mother for example. There are two examples in which Sarada's mother's voice appears to ring loud and clear—once when she accuses Ramakrishna of not fulfilling his household duty by not providing children for Sarada,[21] and another when she asks Sarada to stay with her in Jairambati after Ramakrishna's death, and her subsequent approach (by way of Sarada's brother) to Ramakrishna's followers to look after Sarada after Sarada's refusal of her mother's offer.[22] In both instances, Sarada's silence makes it difficult to ascertain Sarada's own attitudes toward these events in her life. Or perhaps, her compliance with these life events are viewed by readers like myself as impossible, therefore rendering Sarada silent even though she theoretically responds—just not in the way that scholars like me had hoped.

Yet there are instances in which Sarada has quite explicitly responds to questions and situations posed to her, which suggests that perhaps Sarada was not merely a

[21] Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother, Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), 54.
[22] Ibid., 103.

compliant householder. Questions of her practices while a widow suggests that Sarada was outspoken and strong-willed—certainly a marked departure from the silent Sarada on the issues of having children and being homeless. This gives me cause to think that Sarada's voice, in some instances anyway, is actively omitted from the relaying of events. One can only speculate what these reasons are, given that we do not often know her actual responses to these events. One possible reason is that perhaps Sarada's words were not befitting the wife of a famous guru; or perhaps the mundane aspects of her and Ramakrishna's relationship would have been made all too clear in her words. But these are theories reserved for another time.

Another reason for the difficulty in locating the voice of Sarada is due to her illiteracy; we simply do not have any of her own writings to compare to others who write about her. This also means that most of the writings about Sarada are rooted in devotees' observations and understandings about her, rather than words confirmed by and collaborated with Sarada. This is in contrast to some of Mooney's research, in which the saints of her studies sometimes partake in collaboration with their authors.[23] Such a collaborative effort means that not only must one discern the voice between the author and the saint, but one must also take into account who the author was. While Sarada may have been aware that there were disciples writing about her, most of her disciples write about her in terms of their recollections of meetings with her, and the spiritual teachings and experiences they encountered as a result. This is a departure

[23] Mooney, 3-4.

from the ways in which some of Ramakrishna's disciples wrote about him—recording daily events and talks of Ramakrishna's as they unfolded.[24]

Thus, the collaborative efforts in terms of information about Sarada are due primarily to her illiteracy, as well as rooted in those who were literate. What this means is that only those who could read and write were able to take part in the compilations of stories, events, and views on Sarada. Even in what may be considered intimate or personal letters, Sarada was reliant on others to write the letters, even if guided by her own diction. Accounts of this process are noted casually by followers and/or devotees of Ramakrishna. In these accounts the writings describe individual visits to Sarada, and observations of her on-goings. Thus, Sarada's dictation of notes/letters are not the focus in these writings, but are noted only as part of Sarada's day and the ways in which she conducted her life. The people Sarada chose to dictate letters to was anything but consistent. For the most part, it seems that the primary writer for her letters was her niece, but there are instances when accounts describe followers and other people in contact with Sarada as also writing letters for her.

In this context, and unlike Mooney's concerns, the authors of Sarada's texts are not only men. However, as Mooney also notes when identifying textual considerations in hagiographic accounts about medieval women, that even when texts are written by women rather than men, these texts are affected by patriarchy and patriarchal concerns.[25] For example, the women who did write about Sarada were

[24] We see this style of record in the *Kathamrita*, although as already mentioned in my introduction, even this text is not without its problems. While M. no doubt recorded the events and ongoings of Ramakrishna, he includes his own interpretation of events, as well as concerns reflective of his times [Amiya Prosad Sen *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001), 30].
[25] Mooney, 7.

either female ascetics who worked closely with Sarada on a daily basis, were wives/relatives of existing male devotees, or Western women who had come to know Sarada via Vivekananda. In these instances, the women who wrote about Sarada were socially accepted by the Ramakrishna Order—these writings often integrated into larger bodies of work.[26]

Yet in cases where it is evident that a female has authored a text, and despite Mooney's assertion that female authors can be dictated by patriarchal concerns, she argues that there is still a notable distinction between male and female hagiographers:

> Nevertheless, male hagiographers were more likely to conceal or diminish a saint's this-worldly activities if the saint in question was a woman. Fear of offending the Church or public opposed to feminine assertiveness likely influenced their choices, but other agendas, ranging from their unconsidered assumptions and women and female sanctity to their own self-interest, played a part.[27]

The importance for male hagiographers then, are the religious practices of these women, rather than their personality, and possible independence they may have displayed. In turn, these religious practices were understood as other-worldly, rather than marked by one's interactions with others. According to Mooney, women's holy experiences are foremost marked by bodily expressions, including fasting, bleeding, and swooning. While the perception or emphasis of these body expressions vary in text, they are nonetheless significant in how the lives and holiness of female saints are articulated.[28] Arguably the body and how it is used as a preceptor to God—is

[26] See *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder* and *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna* for examples of these types of compilations.
[27] Mooney, 11.
[28] Ibid., 12-13.

emphasized in a way for women that it is not for men. In short, the ways the body is important is significant and is often dictated by gender.

Mooney's observations about the ways Christian women's religious practices are written about are significant to my study for two reasons. First and foremost, she draws attention to the different ways religious practices are emphasized and interpreted according to gender. And second, the significance of the emphasis on religious practices is a way to "erase" a gendered voice (that is, nothing controversial about the saints are included in the writings), and in particular, women's voices. Arguably, the assumption that there is very little about the "real" Sarada is rooted in this type of erasure.

Yet in contrast to Mooney's findings, which argue that female saints are depicted as completely removed from worldly concerns, Sarada is noted particularly for her worldly presence. In hagiography, Sarada is characterized by in-world activities due to her integral role as wife and helpmate to Ramakrishna. It is Sarada's role as "functioning in the world" that enables Ramakrishna to function apart and transcendent from this same world. In texts, Sarada is a counterpoint to Ramakrishna's religious life, and this enables Ramakrishna to become an enlightened being that can share his wisdom with others. Ultimately, Sarada provides the link to the outside world, making Ramakrishna's philosophies and religious teachings accessible to married couples and to the everyday devotee.

While the aforementioned is the basic function of Sarada in hagiography, all is not so clear cut. While Sarada functioned as a model wife, providing a model for other married couples (not just wives) on how to behave, her function was largely a

symbolic one, rather than a concrete example that devotees could model themselves from. This is because Sarada lived largely in *purdah*, or isolation from mainstream society (while she was married and living in Dakshineshwar), had no children, and for the most part, lived apart from Ramakrishna.[29] Thus only those closest to Ramakrishna had access to Sarada, and even then this contact was sparse and limited.

However, Sarada also transcends these mundane householding activities in her role as an enlightened being, particularly after Ramakrishna's death, when she essentially began to function in his place. It is not an either/or situation in the case of Sarada, in which she lived wholly in the world or ignored it, as such was the case with Ramakrishna. Instead, Sarada straddled the two worlds of in-world and other-worldly activities, and in my view, those writing about her cannot agree upon the ways in which she exists in these worlds. While in one sense, the hagiographical claims about Sarada appear to be consistent, in another, the translation or interpretation of this material by various followers is not. Therefore, while Mooney's study differs in terms of how male authors construct the lives of the female saints, her analysis is an apt model in which to understand how male authors have strategically constructed Sarada's life by way of her religious practices. That is, Sarada is only understood as a householder until it is in their interest to understand her as enlightened (in order to spread the word of Ramakrishna, to initiate the uninitiated, and so on).

[29] Not only did Ramakrishna and Sarada live separately in the early years of their marriage, but Sarada's bouts of illness took her to Jairambati frequently, while Ramakrishna's illness took him to Kolkata for medical treatment (see chapter one, "Introduction" for details of the marriage arrangements; see Nikhilannada, *Holy Mother*, 86, for Ramakrishna's move to Kokata.

Hagiography, Objectivity and Sarada

Because the information garnered about Sarada is rooted mostly in hagiograpical and devotional accounts of her life, it is difficult to discern anything with concreteness. As already mentioned previously, representations of Sarada denote particular agendas and needs of Ramakrishna's devotees. However, certain trends on how Sarada is discussed are evident, even in what can be called 'scholarly' works. Important in this chapter is the fact that many works that are used and termed as "academic" are in fact re-creations of hagiographical accounts, pointing to some of the issues that arise not only when attempting to understand a historical Sarada, but also points to issues in scholarship in general about Hinduism and gender.

For Mooney and others who work on medieval female saints, the question of hagiography is not one of simple critique or rejection, but instead one of usefulness, especially in delineating female histories. In terms of my own work, while simultaneously questioning the voices of those writing about Sarada, there continues to be usefulness in using devotional accounts of Sarada's life. According to Mooney, hagiography has helped to invigorate women's histories, and enables scholars to use these materials to find out more about the societies in which they were written.[30] While this may be problematic for some scholars, as the material in question possibly fails to provide adequate information on the female saints themselves, Mooney argues that through careful interpretation, hagiography can be a useful source for understanding particular subjects.[31]

[30] Mooney, 2.
[31] Ibid., 3.

The idea that these hagiographical texts are gendered is a complicated one. Not only do these texts tend to be primarily male-authored and thus male-centered, it also implies divergent emphases on what this means. That is, there is a tendency, as Mooney also notes, to view the male-centeredness of these texts in terms of only difference in comparison to the female religious practices being described. But as Mooney argues, the differences between male (authors) and female (saints) should not be viewed as antithetical to one another as both the practitioner and the hagiographer share the same geographical space, time period, beliefs and understandings of the roles of men and women.[32] I think that Mooney's points are particularly important for understanding how material about Sarada can be used, analyzed and understood.

For example, Mooney notes that while male and female cannot be understood as antithetical to each other, certain differences in gender, as they are found in hagiographic texts, enable scholars to discover the voice of the female saint, including "…women's relatively more assertive self-understandings of their religious roles," and "men's tendency to understand these women as mystical and mysterious."[33] In discovering Sarada's voice among the texts that write about and mention her, I believe that her assertiveness is apparent, but is generally offered more by way of glimpses of her voice, rather than explicitly outlined. That said, it also seems that whether Sarada's voice is evident is also dependent on who was writing about her. Those who came to know and were initiated by Sarada after Ramakrishna's death tend to write

[32] Ibid., 9.
[33] Ibid., 10.

more freely about her and her sayings than those who knew her when she was known foremost as Ramakrishna's wife.[34]

Interestingly, the disparity between how Sarada is perceived and written about prior to Ramakrishna's death and after is evident in devotional texts dedicated specifically to Sarada. Relating accounts of villagers who knew Sarada as a young girl, there are assertions that there was no indication that she was divine. The humility and plainness that suggests that Sarada was an unremarkable young girl is later understood after Ramakrishna's death as humility and restraint. An example of this can be found in a disciple's excerpt on Sarada, entitled, "Sri Sarada Devi and the Mission of India," in which a fellow Jairambati village woman is described as indignant over the reverence of Sarada. T. M. P. Mahadevan states in this lengthy but apt quote:

> Because the Holy Mother did not appear to be an extraordinary woman, because the Holy Mother used to do the very common domestic duties, because the Holy Mother swept the floor and cooked the food and served it to all and sundry, we may think that she was merely an ordinary woman. In the village in which she lived, there was another lady whose name had been mentioned as a possible match for Sri Ramakrishna; and when she grew old and saw the Holy Mother being venerated by all, she is reported to have remarked, 'What excellence is there in the Holy Mother? If I had been married to Sri Ramakrishna, the world would have come and fallen at my feet!' She did not know the glory and grandeur of the Holy Mother, because the Holy Mother chose to hide her divinity under a cover of commonness. We ordinary mortals want extraneous symbols for recognizing saintliness. We are not prepared to accept a person as great if he has not 'grown horns on his head'. But the Holy Mother did not believe in growing horns; and, therefore, it is difficult to understand her.[35]

[34]A great example of this is found in an excerpt by Swami Vireswarananda when discussing Sarada's initiation of followers, which occurred after Ramakrishna's death. Vireswarananda recollects these words of Sarada's: "Sri Ramakrishna had selected the best people and has left all the trash to me. And I have to suffer for this." (*Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder*, 55).
[35] Ibid., 234.

I think this shift in how followers understood Sarada is in large part because after Ramakrishna's death, those who had previously looked to Ramakrishna as their guru now sought spiritual advice, initiation, and visits from Sarada; she functioned as their guru in his place. At the very least, she functioned as an intermediary between Ramakrishna and his disciples. Writers in these instances still viewed themselves as Ramakrishna's followers, but could only access Ramakrishna through Sarada. According to these followers, who experienced Ramakrishna in this way, Sarada herself denoted her importance to Ramakrishna's disciples by citing visions and dreams in which Ramakrishna would instruct her on how to handle devotees.[36] While the writings were instigated by their importance in relation to Ramakrishna, Sarada was seen and heard in ways that were different prior to Ramakrishna's death. And in these instances, it seems that Sarada is unwilling to claim herself as a guru or an enlightened being, instead referring to Ramakrishna's knowledge and wants in all matters related to the disciples.[37]

As Sarada continued with Ramakrishna's "work" there were those disciples who began to view Sarada as a separate entity from Ramakrishna: as a woman who was not simply the transmitter for Ramakrishna's guidance. These disciples began to make a "switch" to Sarada, whom they eventually viewed as a guru in her own right, as separate from Ramakrishna. It seems that these writings emerge much later, once Sarada is firmly established under the patronage of household followers of Ramakrishna, and certainly after her brief destitution as a new widow. These writings, while devotional in nature, as with the other texts, focus on Sarada as an individual

[36] Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1955), 174; Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 149.
[37] Ibid., 175.

(although her marriage to Ramakrishna is mentioned, especially in terms of her role as a partner), highlighting her enlightenment in terms of her understanding of the world. These writings are relatively few, especially in terms of devotees who solely adhere themselves to Sarada. As noted previously, the bulk of the devotional writings dedicated to Sarada tend to stem from disciples of Ramakrishna, who have turned to Sarada, as noted previously, after Ramakrishna's death.

These texts are at best limited, in that there are very few comprehensive works on Sarada which function and were written in the same capacity as devotional texts to Ramakrishna. In my view, part of this has to do with the fact that Sarada was assumed to be and was constructed as an ordinary woman/wife with an extraordinary understanding of Ramakrishna's enlightenment. The other part has to do with the fact that Sarada was kept in isolation during the early formations of the Math in Dakshineswar. Sarada's teachings were not heard of until she was a widow and out of purdah. Nonetheless, as a result of these limited texts on Sarada, very little has been written about her academically[38]—and very little has been noted about the cultural context in which she grew up and became who she did.

Underlying these disparate configurations of Sarada in text are tensions between what are considered legitimate and "illegitimate" texts; hagiographical and objective treatments; and devotional and scholarly accounts of Sarada's life. Those texts that are viewed as illegitimate tend to be those that are not in keeping with the carefully constructed ideals surrounding Sarada, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda. When interpretations of those texts can no longer be controlled by the Ramakrishna Mission,

[38] See Narasingha Sil, *The Divine Dowager, The Life and Teachings of Saradamani the Holy Mother* (London: Associated University Press, 2003) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Moving Devi" *Cultural Critique*, No. 47 (Winter, 2001), 120-163, as examples of scholarly work on Sarada.

these interpretations are viewed as illegitimate or contrary to the original meanings, as can be noted with Kripal's work on Ramakrishna.

Yet even if a body of work about Sarada is considered "legitimate," differences in perspectives are still evident. Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's developments of religious thought are carefully traced by their followers by way of texts and other writings. Sarada's followers also wrote about her, which suggests that there is a large body of texts that are fundamental to any understanding of any of these figures. And yet, Sarada's followers did not write to the same degree or for the same purposes as Ramakrishna's followers, Vivekananda's, or Vivekananda himself. How particular events and actions are understood vary greatly. Thus, one sees a marked difference between Sarada's followers' understanding of Sarada's religiosity, and Vivekanananda's understandings of Sarada's religiosity. The earliest understandings and writings about Sarada were by Ramakrishna's followers. These followers, in general, were concerned with putting forth Ramakrishna's ideas about spirituality and his spiritual journey. In providing a life story of Ramakrishna as well as his treatises on morality and spirituality, these writings were also supposed to function as a guide to his followers. As a married yet celibate guru, these writings included Sarada's life and their marriage.

Sarada's own followers, in contrast, do not simply view Sarada as a help-mate to Ramakrishna, but as a spiritual guru in her own right. While always noting her support for her husband, and the significance of their celibate marriage, she is not only a mere supporter of Ramakrishna, but is a model for which *he* should follow. Dr. Nanda Lal Chatterjee, for example, refers to Ramakrishna and Sarada as "two

ascetics"[39] and that Sarada in particular does not get enough recognition for the ways in which she helped Ramakrishna.[40] From his perspective, Sarada is more than a housewife and mother, but a renouncer equal to Ramakrishna in spiritual advancement.[41] Her spirituality (and thus renunciation), in contrast to Ramakrishna's intense and solitary meditations, were rooted essentially in what I view as outreach to the marginalized, or those traditionally rejected as impure. Her reputation was one of acceptance, regardless of one's behaviour, past or present, or race, either Indian or British. This often brought much dismay to Ramakrishna, who at one time had refused her to allow prostitutes onto the premises of the Math (but whom she had invited warmly).[42] This also dismayed Ramakrishna's followers, particularly in terms of Sarada's refusal to boycott British goods, or to denounce British visitors.[43] According to Sarada's followers, Sarada saw all, regardless of their affiliations, as her children. While this development was certainly evident while Ramakrishna was alive, this perspective was even more explicit after his death. In this sense, it could be argued that Sarada's followers view Sarada as transcending political concerns.

Certainly in comparing the two ways in which devotees understand Sarada speaks to the notion of objectivity. Both texts from Ramakrishna and Sarada's devotees represent "legitimate" texts—and yet these writings are also indicative of the varying interpretations of the importance of Sarada's role in Ramakrishna's life. In both cases, however, Sarada's "place" is in her relationship to Ramakrishna. This is not in question, but the way the relationship was configured is. For example, there is

[39] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort to Sri Ramakrishna*, 83.
[40] Ibid., 81.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Gambhirananda, 83.
[43] Nikhilananda, *Sri Sarada Devi*, 22.

concern that the West, and in particular Western women, have steered Indian women away from the importance of tradition and Hindu spirituality. As Swami Gambhirananda notes in this lengthy but apt quote:

> There is need for energizing our womanhood by drawing a little on foreign sources in order to make national life more vigorous and fruitful, at the same time that the West also learns something of our veneration for motherhood, so that Western civilization may have a stronger spiritual basis and a longer lease for life. But though each civilization has much to learn from another, it will spell disaster if the basic distinctions are ignored. For though women are honoured everywhere, that honour very often appears in the form of chivalry and appreciation of feminine charms. But India eulogizes chastity and motherhood, since the ideal aimed at is spiritual freedom which has for its foundation absolute self-control.[44]

While Gambhirananda does not entirely reject ideologies of the West, he also affirms the differences in ideals between Western and Indian women. Particularly in that rather than viewing householding and motherhood as oppressive, it is in fact a freeing element relevant to Hindu spirituality.

Most importantly, within this context, is to understand the veneration of women within the ancient Hindu tradition. As Dr. Kalidas Nag states:

> There is no doubt that since the glorious days of Sanskrit learning some women authors and their works have been duly remembered. But the principal medium of their self-expression was silent service to their family and through the family to the nation as a whole. Sri Sarada Devi's life proves beyond doubt that even when our women were not functioning as rules or earning members of society, they lay in veritable foundations of our social and spiritual life which lie deep down in our ancestral memory.[45]

Echoing the ideas posited by Vivekananda concerning Indian women's silent sacrifice and thus suffering, Sarada here represents the ideal woman as she contrasts Western and feminist understandings of womanhood. Devotees, therefore, do not see the

[44] Gambhirananda, 4.
[45] *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder*, 288.

legitimacy of applying these feminist configurations to Sarada's life. In keeping with notions of legitimate and illegitimate texts, understanding Sarada in this context would be misguided (and thus illegitimate).

Yet while devotional texts are viewed as legitimate in contrast to other works on Ramakrishna and Sarada, this does not mean that the devotional texts themselves are more accurate or authentic. That is because, and not generally recognized by "the official" organization, is that the devotional texts have been carefully constructed over time while simultaneously functioning as unquestioning truths in their description of conversations and events related to Sarada and Ramakrishna. Amiya Prosad Sen aptly notes this in his discussion of the *Kathamrita* by Mahendrenath. Sen argues that M.'s work is treated as containing accurate observations of what was happening as it happened, therefore depicting the life and times of Ramakrishna as wholly accurate, at least according to his present-day devotees. Yet Sen also notes that the compilation of these writings took place over decades, and was edited well after Ramakrishna's death, suggesting that the original writings had in fact been "tampered with" or re-edited for the consumption of his followers.[46] In fact, Sen argues that the earliest writings took the form of tracts, which were subsequently lost[47]. With this in mind, Sen argues that it becomes impossible to assert with certainty any accuracy about the times and teachings of Ramakrishna. At the same time, however, one can glean a general understanding of his life, and suppose on the texts themselves what such edits and reworkings tell us about his followers.

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[46] Sen, 28, 30.
[47] Ibid., 27, 30.

Arguably, this issue also applies to writings about Sarada, especially given the fact that most writings dedicated solely to her are derived from texts that have to do with Ramakrishna. Thus, while there may be multitudes of texts published under different authors and different titles, what one finds is a repetition of stories and events taken from the same sources. The compilations are different yet the content remains restricted or the same.[48]

Part of this repetition has to do with who these texts are for and who has access to them. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, as well as the Sarada Math have largely retained control over the information written about Ramakrishna and Sarada. In turn, the purpose of these writings, as well as any new ones, is for their devotees and potential devotees, rather than for academics or those that simply have a special interest in either Ramakrishna or Sarada. This tension—between wanting to share knowledge about Ramakrishna and Sarada and wanting to control the outcome of interpretations of this knowledge—has led to tight restrictions regarding accessing unpublished documents such as letters, notes, and original manuscripts. Not only does this issue point to the constraints placed upon a scholar who wants to study Sarada, but it also speaks to the ways in which specific archives are created for specific people (in this case, middle class devotees who can afford to pay for access).[49]

At the same time I do not mean to suggest that understanding Sarada in the texts that are available is impossible. I do not consider this to be the case. However, I do

[48] One example is the repetitive use of Sarada's experience of famine in childhood. We find Sarada's family respond to the crisis in *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder* (130-31), Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother* (27), Tapasyananda (13), and Gambhirananda (22-23). These examples are meant to denote Sarada's compassion, even as a 10/11 year old child. This compassion gets translated into her role as the Universal Mother in her adult life.

[49] Sil, for example, was denied full access to texts on Sarada because of his reference to Sarada as a "divine dowager." (10-11).

understand that my analysis of Sarada's renunciation as situated in a specific cultural context in which she lived will be limited to the availability of these texts. Ultimately, I do not feel that these constraints hamper my study, yet speak to the issues that arise when relying upon texts, a few issues of which will be further elaborated below.

The Divine Sarada as an Academic Source

The issue of how to use hagiographical material in scholarly research has posed many problems to scholars. On one hand, hagiographical texts are not considered adequate sources of information when dealing with historical figures, largely because the element of objective truths are perceived as being removed from such texts. At the same time, these texts can be useful in terms of understanding how and why a historical figure is constructed in a particular way, with the understanding that while it may tell us little about the actual figure found in the writings, it may tell us about the cultural climate, and the authors writing about her.

In the case of Sarada, we find a blend of historical truth and hagiographical data, combined as such to establish Sarada as an important religious figure who was obviously revered and considered wise and enlightened. Roman Rolland for example, in describing the life of Ramakrishna in *The Life of Ramakrishna*, begins the first footnote of his first chapter with a note of caution to European readers regarding the content of Ramakrishna's biography. In this footnote, Rolland states:

> I must warn my European readers that in describing his childhood, I have abstained from using my critical faculties (though they keep watch on the threshold). I have become simply the voice of the legend, the flute under the fingers of Ramakrishna. For the present we need not concern ourselves with

> the objective reality of facts, but only with the subjective reality of living impressions.[50]

Rolland justifies his process of removing his objective and critical faculties by arguing that scholars before him, like Max Müller, have been unable to find a balance between the mythology or hagiographic detail of religious figures, and the critical methods of the West.[51] Rolland's stance denotes two things: First, his text is exemplary of Said's outline of an orientalist approach, which includes stereotypical divisions between the mystical and magical East in contrast to the rational West;[52] second, and tied to the first, is that the emphasis on hagiographic information as well as biographical content with little or no critical analysis leaves us, as readers, with little sense of Sarada except in the context of idealized representations (by way of, in Rolland's case, hagiography). The treatment of Sarada in this context points to greater ideological problems in defining women, as will be noted when looking at my subsequent chapters. For now, I leave this thought—women such as Sarada, are constituted by their gender role in relation to men.

This problem of hagiographically defining religious figures is evident in Rolland's defense of Ramakrishna's child marriage to Sarada in 1859—Sarada was five and Ramakrishna was twenty-three. To those who would object to child marriages, Rolland writes:

> But peace to scandalized minds! It was a union of souls and remained unconsummated—a Christian marriage so-called in the days of the Early Church—and later it became a beautiful thing. A tree must be judged by its fruits, and in this case the fruits were of God, pure and not carnal love.

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[50] Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), 21.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Edward W. Said, "Imaginitive Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental" in *Orientalism*, (NY: Vintage Books, 1979), 49-73.

> Little Saradamani was to become the chaste sister of a big friend who venerated her, the immaculate companion of his trials and of his faith, the firm and serene soul, who the disciples associated with his sanctity as the *Holy Mother*.[53]

Rolland romanticizes the situation—the marriage is described as beautiful and pure and not carnal. This romanticization adds to the assertion by Rolland (and later by Kripal), that Sarada was venerated.[54] Essential to her veneration is the fact that she was an *object* of worship. Further, her marriage was considered special and holy not *despite* being unconsummated, but *because* it was unconsummated. Both facets of her life led her to be called the Holy Mother.

Inextricably linked to Rolland's conceptualization of Ramakrishna's and Sarada's marriage are the renunciatory practices of Sarada. Because information about Sarada is written largely in the context of Ramakrishna's 'spiritual greatness,' very little, if anything, is directly said about Sarada's renunciatory practice. However, her renunciatory practice is alluded to, if not solely explicated in terms of celibacy. I argue that because of this, her asceticism is "gendered," or described solely in terms of her being a woman, specifically in terms of her being Ramakrishna's wife. For example, Sarada's purity is not derived from ascetic practices per se (in contrast to traditional male renunciatory rites) but from her unconsummated marriage. As Ramakrishna's "immaculate companion," or more precise, as his child bride, she was also a virgin. This again points to a gendered renunciatory practice. We have no knowledge that Sarada partook in sexual acts outside the marriage, signifying perhaps

[53] Rolland, 40. Italics are part of original script.
[54] Kripal notes in *Kālī's Child*, that Sarada was worshipped by Ramakrishna even if she was abused (133).

her duty to her husband, yet it also points to her life-long renunciatory practice of celibacy.

Sarada's renunciatory practice is never emphasized but categorized in terms of traditional female roles (which in many cases, she actually disregarded). This is because she is still classified in terms of being a woman and a householder as indicated by her title, the Holy Mother. Through her celibacy, she does not become viewed as a renouncer, but instead is viewed as the mother of all of India.

Obviously, Rolland's understanding of Sarada in terms of historically situating her using hagiographical material is problematic. As noted above, this has largely to do with the orientalist assumptions embedded in the ways that he uses hagiography to begin with. While Rolland's work is currently understood as outdated, much of the hagiographical information he does use in his work on Ramakrishna is already found in devotee's texts about Ramakrishna and Sarada, such as the notion that Sarada's parents foresaw Sarada's importance in a dream prior to her birth, or that Sarada was viewed, even as a child as in incarnation of Parvati. While Rolland's analysis is misguided, the basic hagiographical information that he touches upon was new to him.

In contrast, Kripal discounts information about Sarada on a purely textual basis, which is ultimately inconclusive. The assumption in his arguments about Sarada is that the Bengali texts which he has translated and studied inside and out are correct. When they do not include Sarada's voice or response in a matter, even when she is accounted for being present in a room, she literally did not speak. He does not critically evaluate her presence or the fact that in these situations, her voice was possibility omitted from the conversations once they were written down. This is not

because he is not critical about the texts that he writes about—this is evident from his deconstruction of texts pertaining to Ramakrishna in his book, *Kālī's Child*. In *Kālī's Child* he takes into account not only what Ramakrishna said, but also what was not being said. So why does he seemingly neglect Sarada? Why does he exclude the possiblity that more is being said in her silence than simply her silence?

CHAPTER THREE

MOTHERING RENOUNCER:
SARADA AND RENUNCIATORY PRACTICES

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a new reading of Sarada's life. In the previous chapters, I discuss the ways hagiographic and secular texts are used as sources for understanding Sarada. In the subsequent chapter, I outline political and socio-economic factors as they are related to Sarada's role in the Ramakrishna Mission. It is evident by addressing these different factors and approaches in my scholarship that Sarada is constructed in specific ways for specific purposes. This chapter now turns to Sarada's specific religious practices with particular focus on how they relate to Sarada as a woman and as a renouncer. As in the previous chapters, my focus on Sarada's religious practices also notes the variety of ways Sarada's spiritual life is interpreted. Particularly, this chapter draws attention to new ways to understand renunciatory practices, especially in terms of how women conduct themselves.

Sarada Devi, often referred to as the Holy Mother, or more simply Mā (a reverent term for the word, 'mother'),[1] was the wife of Ramakrishna during 19th century India. Ramakrishna was, and continues to be, a popular religious figure known for his tantric and renunciatory practices, and is often described by his followers as being a divinely

[1] Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Perfecting the Mother's Silence: Dreams, Devotion, and Family in the Deification of Sharada Devi," *Seeking Mahādevī, Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 171.

enlightened teacher.[2] After Ramakrishna's death, Sarada too became viewed by some as a divine religious figure, despite arguments that she lacked religious experience such as visions or *samadhi*.[3] The conflict and debate between perceptions of Sarada's "worldliness" on one hand, which included criticisms that she wore jewelry after Ramakrishna's death, wanted children, and adopted her niece in lieu of this, and divinity on the other, which included descriptions of her as an object of worship and as a guru, with an emphasis on her connection to Ramakrishna after his death, are often described by scholars in 'gendered' terms. The result is that Sarada's renunciatory practices also are described in terms of her gender, unlike descriptions of Ramakrishna's asceticism. Sarada's renunciation is always linked to womanhood, denoting a particular brand of female renunciation that simultaneously points to assumptions about womanhood. This idea of 'gendered' renunciation, or even a gendered religious experience has been brought forth by scholars like Amy Hollywood in her work entitled, *Sensible Ecstasy, Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*.[4]

The information pertaining to Sarada's religious practices is not new, but the way in which I present and interpret the data is. I have taken my lead from recent feminist understandings of Hindu renunciatory practices. As well I have drawn from unique perspectives regarding Sarada as viewed by her own devotees. It is apparent that there is a marked contrast in the way Sarada's role as a religious leader is perceived by her

[2] Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother, Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), 151. Here, Nikhilananda notes that only a teacher who posseses spirituality can pass it down to a student who is willing to accept that same spirituality. Here he is referring to Ramakrishna's ability to pass his teachings to Sarada in order for her to continue his mission after his death.
[3] Kripal, 188-189.
[4] See Amy Hollywood's work, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

own followers, especially how they describe and place importance on Sarada's religious practices, as opposed to those whose focus and allegiance is to Ramakrishna. I believe that this difference marks yet another way in which Sarada is constructed for the general consumption of Ramakrishna's followers and for Hindus in general. The fact that these differences are evident but not specifically addressed in writings about Ramakrishna and Sarada denotes the ways that, in turn, Hinduism has been systematized and constructed. Thus, by outlining and considering Sarada as a renouncer my aims are twofold: first, it enables a recontextualization and rereading of her life in a way that is not already offered; and two, it problematizes the way in which scholarship is constructed, specifically around the concept of renunciation.

In order to achieve these aims, I must continue to work with hagiographical material mentioning Sarada. To reiterate what I discuss in chapters one and two, the majority of information on Sarada's religious practices was written and compiled by those devoted to Ramakrishna. While Sarada is respected and sometimes even revered in these texts, her actions are hardly the focus of these writings; when Sarada is mentioned, it is only done so within the context of Ramakrishna's teachings, actions, and life events. Naturally, given the fact that Ramakrishna was the guru, Sarada's religious practices emerge only on the periphery of these texts, and Sarada as a subject emerges only secondarily to Ramakrishna. This means that Sarada, at least until Ramakrishna's death, was primarily only written about in terms of how she related to Ramakrishna. What follows is that her life, her religious practices, and her choices have all focused on how they contributed to Ramakrishna's spiritual pursuits and successes. In this context, Sarada is consistently presented as the ideal householder

and helpmate of Ramakrishna through marriage. As a devoted wife, she supported Ramakrishna's request for a celibate marriage, enabling Ramakrishna to continue his life as a renouncer. As a devoted 'mother', Sarada was able to identify not only with renouncers, but with householders as well, enabling Ramakrishna to teach a wide spectrum of followers. As the ideal householder Sarada was and continues to be a role model for women to follow.

This emphasis placed on Sarada as the ultimate householder has meant that subsequent writings about her are viewed primarily through this particular lens. While not entirely inaccurate, this perspective on Sarada's life does hamper the possibility of addressing Sarada and her religious practices in a new light. For many, particularly Ramakrishna's followers, Sarada was emblematic of the bridge between Ramakrishna's renunciatory practices and his householding followers. Because Sarada was considered completely devoted to Ramakrishna both as his wife and as his devotee, she paved the way for other householders to view Ramakrishna as an apt model of spirituality. Yet for her own devotees, most of whom emerged after Ramakrishna's death, Sarada was not simply representative of the ideal householder. For them, she was a model ascetic whose spiritual practices were just as rigorous and renunciatory as Ramakrishna's.[5]

[5] Most of the writings about Sarada (and certainly those that are considered official biographies) stem from Ramakrishna's followers, including Swami Nikhilananda and Swami Gambhirananda. However, there are works that comprise of notes from those who view themselves primarily (or only) as Sarada's followers, including *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna,* ed. Nanda Mookerjee (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1978); *Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder, A Compilation of Revelations, Reminiscences and Studies*, by Apostles, Monks, Savants, Scholars, Devotees (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1984); and *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother, Her Teachings and Conversations*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, ed. Swami Adiswarananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, 2004). In all of these writings, however, it is acknowledged that Sarada's status as a guru did not become widely acknowledged until approximately 11 years after Ramakrishna's death (see *Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother*, 7).

The failure by the majority of writers to discuss Sarada in terms of her renunciation is an interesting one—especially when one considers that Sarada's husband is touted as the ideal renouncer. The emphasis placed upon her role as the ideal wife has meant that her practices as a renouncer go largely ignored. This could be because Sarada often performed her religious practices in conjunction with Ramakrishna's, signifying her reliance on Ramakrishna for spiritual matters; or perhaps it was because she was expected to serve her husband and disciples, as a typical wife would for her family. And yet I do not think these practices should preclude scholars from understanding Sarada as a renouncer, especially when we come to understand that: a) Sarada conducted rituals separate from Ramakrishna, even while he was alive; and b) Sarada's role and religious practices changed dramatically after Ramakrishna's death.

The insistence on emphasizing Sarada's life as a householder over and above other aspects of her identity may have to do not only with the difficulty in ascertaining original writings about Sarada specifically, but also with traditional notions of women's roles in Hinduism. Keshab Chandra Sen, for example, argued that Sarada as the ideal householder is a model for which all women may follow.[6] At the same time, it is only because of Ramakrishna's understanding of the importance of women as the Universal Mother that Sarada was able to live up to this model.[7] In this way, it is only because of Ramakrishna that Sarada was able to uphold herself as the ideal, signifying the precedence of men's power and behaviour over those of women's.

[6] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, i-v.
[7] Ibid., v-viii.

While perhaps self-evident, I think it is important to iterate some of the issues that concern gender within the context of religion in general, as it points to some of the problems that arise when attempting to discuss Hindu female renunciation. Ursula King, for example, recognizes that, "Religions are highly gendered fields charged with sacred power, which, until modern times, have been the ultimate source of legitimation for all political and social power and authority."[8] Even though King is dealing with Western religions when she discusses gender within this context, her view of the role of feminist scholars as attempting to re-conceptualize the use of language in order to reevaluate male and female power is nonetheless useful in my own evaluation. Primarily, one should question what kind of access women have/had in terms of religious participation of rites, their roles within a religious group, and the symbolism that represents them.[9]

Such questions, though for King targeted toward Judeo-Christian concerns, are equally as important when attempting to address Hindu renunciation. This is because much of the data that we know about Hindu renunciation is based on the male experience. In turn, and perhaps self-evidently, the male experience is assumed to be universal, normative, and is ultimately andocentric.[10] If one adheres to this assumed model of religious practice, one can no longer discuss female renunciation unless it fits within the male representation of renunciatory practices. However, based on evidence compiled by scholars such as Lynn Teskey Denton and Khandelwal, we know that female renunciation exists differently from male renunciation. Therefore,

[8] Ursula King, "Religion and Gender: Embedded Patterns, Interwoven Frameworks", *A Companion to Gender History*, eds. Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 80.
[9] Ibid., 79.
[10] Ibid., 73.

we must recognize certain assumptions that have taken place concerning Hindu renunciation.

Obviously, I am attempting a feminist reading of the information about Sarada and renunciatory practices. This by no means suggests that I am claiming that Ramakrishna, Sarada, or their devotees were feminists. However, a feminist reading, which takes into consideration alternate means of understanding material about women and views of women, is helpful to dissecting the various interpretations of events and writings about Sarada.

Kripal notes the issues that arise when one attempts to dissect the Ramakrishna Mission's stance on the status of women. One is often confronted with mixed interpretations. Kripal argues that there are essentially two views of Ramakrishna and his view of women: one that is misogynist, and the other, primarily supported by his devotees, in which Ramakrishna is actually the creator of a Proto-feminism.[11] For Kripal, however, there is "*no* basis for a feminist Ramakrishna."[12] This is despite the idea that Ramakrishna worshipped women as goddesses and holy mothers.

Sarada's practices appear to me to be a site of tension, where on one hand she is carefully constructed for the benefit of society, yet on the other she is obviously more than this construction. I believe that this tension to resist containment points to the importance of attempting to view Sarada's religious practices in an alternate light, resulting in a critical reading that recognizes that Sarada was not *only* a householder. Simultaneously, recognizing Sarada's practices as a site of resistance also calls to question the nature of renunciation and how Sarada may fit within this category.

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[11] Jeffrey Kripal, *Kāīi's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, second edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 278.
[12] Ibid., 279. Italics are his.

Narasingha Sil argues, for example, that Sarada cannot be defined as an ascetic, at least not in the conventional Hindu sense.[13] This is because Sarada enjoyed her comforts too much,[14] as noted in her refusal to get rid of her bangles after Ramakrishna's death.[15] However, I believe that this line of argument fails to consider that both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were also accused of having a propensity toward comfortable living, and that they were still both considered renouncers, even if unorthodox ones.[16]

That said, to argue that Sarada is someone or something other than a householder is problematized by how disciples viewed Sarada's own opinion of her status. By now however, I hope it has become evident to the reader that Sarada's primary identification with the householding role had some very practical benefits for her, which means, perhaps, we should not accept her declarations of being a householder at face value. For example, being Ramakrishna's wife enabled Sarada to assert her place as a religious leader for Ramakrishna's disciples, functioning as a conduit between Ramakrishna and his followers, even after Ramakrishna's death. It also afforded her greater authority and in theory, independence,[17] as any unorthodox practices that were traditionally viewed as unbecoming of a householder could be assuaged when it was explained that her actions were the result of Ramakrishna's requests, as he had

[13] Narasingha Sil, *Divine Dowager, The Life and Teachings of Saradamani the Holy Mother* (London: Associated University Press, 2003), 104.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), 106, 117.
[16] Such examples include Ramakrishna's fussy food habits, and Vivekananda's housing and food requests while visiting Europe and North America.
[17] Once Sarada had gained popularity as being a guru in her own right, approximately a year after Ramakrishna's death, many of Ramakrishna's disciples became very protective of her and insisted upon particular housing requirements that left her with little privacy. She has been cited as complaining about this.

continued to contact her in her dreams after his death. By citing Ramakrishna's authority as her guru, Sarada continually affirmed her householding status, and her role as Divine Mother. Yet at the same time, Sarada's affirmation of her own householder status does not comprehensively embody Sarada's religious practices in their totality. To only look at Sarada's householding religious practices has limitations, not only in terms of understanding Sarada, but also in terms of how scholars understand Hinduism in practice. For example, understanding Sarada's life within the context of renunciation makes room for rethinking her role in Ramakrishna's life, as well as sheds light on scholarly assumptions regarding female Hindu religious practices.

One way to deal with Sarada's religious practices is to pay close attention to her life as a woman. For example, emerging studies on renunciation recognize the ways that religious practices are gendered. In contrast to more traditional scholarship, recent works tend to provide more constructive and relevant models for which to understand specific religious practices as they relate to renunciation and women. Of primary interest to me are the ways in which scholars have studied renunciation as rooted in classical or traditional Hinduism, which assumes male practitioners as the "normal" model of renunciatory practice. In contrast, both Khandelwal and Denton recognize in their own works on Hindu female asceticism, that there has been a tendency to look to the ancient past to assert and formulate 'legitimate' sources and practices of asceticism. In their separate anthropological studies, the traditional roots of asceticism are not only patriarchal in nature, but do little to inform us of modern practices. While these studies include time periods more recent than my concern,

ranging between the 1970's and 1980's, I think that these works provide a foundation for understanding female ascetic practices beyond their specific contexts. In other words, I find it useful to take their observations and findings and apply them to Sarada's religious practices. In some instances, Sarada's practices are unique to those discussed in Khandelwal's and Denton's works, but in other instances, Sarada's life and actions do fit into the frameworks and theories they have each provided.

However, simply categorizing Sarada as a renouncer is difficult, as there appears to be little consensus concerning the very label of 'renouncer'. This chapter treats the term 'renouncer' in the broadest of contexts, to allow for a variety of practices and ideas associated with asceticism—from the most mild to the most extreme—as well as rituals related to various means of becoming liberated. By approaching the concept of renunciation in this way, I am following the theories already posed by David M. Miller and Dorothy C. Wertz, Kirin Narayan, and Khandelwal. The reason for such a general understanding of renunciation not only accounts for the diversity of ascetic practices, but also allows us to understand better the conditions and meaning associated with Sarada's religious practices.

Key to discrepancies in determining the history and context of Hindu asceticism is the fact that scholars utilize different definitions of what constitutes asceticism. This issue of definition is not restricted to only feminist studies, but appears to plague all sorts of studies on renunciation from classical and/or traditional understandings to more modern studies.[18] However, rather than posing a problem to my analysis, I

[18] For traditional understandings of renunciation, as well as a comprehensive outline of sectarian divisions between renunciatory groups (and thus their practices), see G.S.Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus* (Bombay: The Popular Book Depot, 1953). For criticisms on traditional understandings of

believe that this issue highlights the fluidity and dynamism of the development and practices of asceticism and renunciatory practice. Importantly, this supports new and innovative ways to identify renunciatory practices that cannot only contribute to the reevaluation of renunciation in general, but also within the context of female renunciatory practices.

A case in point is Ramakrishna, of whom we have access to a vast array of literature, especially in comparison to what we have access to on Sarada. While Ramakrishna is often described as a *sannyasi*, it is a label that is certainly debated by Ramakrishna scholars. In turn, many of Ramakrishna's devotees who were viewed or described as sannyasis in fact did not fit within the mold of the orthodox renouncer. For example, even though Ramakrishna was traditionally initiated by Tota Puri, rather than wearing the traditionally sanctioned ochre robes, Ramakrishna chose to wear white. In addition, the initiations that Ramakrishna conducted for his sannyasis could be considered unorthodox, for he neither bestowed upon them a mantra nor a monastic name.[19] Vivekananda's initiation, for example, differed from the traditional model of initiation for sannyasis, in that Ramakrishna requested Vivekanada to delay initiation until Ramakrishna's death, in August 1886.[20] Despite the incongruence between Ramakrishna's practices and traditional ideas about renunciation, Ramakrishna is still categorized by some as a renouncer.

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renunciation, particularly in terms of how they contradict actual practices in modernity, see David M. Miller and Dorothy C. Wertz, *Hindu Monastic Life: The Monks and Monasteries of Bhubaneswar* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996) and Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels, Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

[19] George M. Williams, *The Quest For Meaning of Svami Vivekananda, A Study of Religious Change* (California: New Horizons Press, 1974), 22.

[20] Ibid.

What is interesting about this is that even though it was Ramakrishna who is known for his renunciatory practices and initiations of devotees, it was Sarada who did so in a much more traditional fashion. As will be discussed in this chapter, Sarada did in fact bestow mantras, names, and objects onto those who requested it from her. In fact, she is described as being quite successful at it, apparently knowing what would best suit individual initiates. I think this is important to note here because it points to some of the issues that arise when attempting to discuss the renouncer and renunciatory practices. Specifically, I believe that it points to the often arbitrary nature to which the label "renouncer" is applied, as well as speaking to the diversity of practices that in the end, are dependent upon the interpretation of the actions by observers.

In keeping with both Denton and Khandelwal's works, this chapter will first outline classical or traditional notions of renunciation. Then I will outline more recent studies as they pertain to my work, and finally, I will discuss Sarada specifically, noting how her religious practices can be considered forms of renunciation. It is my contention, as stated throughout this chapter, that traditional understandings of Hindu renunciation as well as assumptions about Sarada's life can be questioned. Specifically, Sarada's religious practices will be reinterpreted in order to provide a greater contextual analysis of her life.

Classical Renunciation

The weight given to a classical or traditional renunciation is such that subsequent renunciatory practices tend to get compared to and "authenticated" only in relation to

these earlier configurations. Comparisons between early or what has been considered "legitimate" renunciation and modern practices, the latter of which are thus treated as "illegitimate", continue to persist, even with the understanding that this type of genealogical heritage of renunciatory practices is problematic. One of the issues stems from where scholars have traditionally pinpointed Hindu renunciatory origins in the first place. Khandelwal, for example, argues that while there is archeological evidence to support assertions that Hindu renunciation's origins can be found as early as 3000 B.C.E., she also notes that academics have instead turned to texts as a basis for these origins, rather than archeology.[21] This means that renunciation is treated as a much later development than perhaps it was in actuality. Nevertheless, despite the problems of neglecting archeological evidence as a means to pinpoint early Hindu origins of renunciation, Khandelwal continues to outline these early conceptions of renunciation within a textual context.

Khandelwal's approach, while puzzling given her stated concerns, should not be read as a practice of conforming to the standardized methods of writing and studying renunciation. Instead, Khandelwal's approach should be viewed as drawing attention to the issues that occur when text is taken as the only authority of Hindu religious practices. Namely, this approach problematizes the role of the female Hindu renouncer. For me, it also raises the issue of how knowledge about Hinduism and gender is generally constructed not only within the context of renunciation.

The reliance upon texts to decipher the source of renunciatory origins and its subsequent developments has limited applications. Most apparent is the precedence

[21] Meena Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes, Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 29.

given to texts over other sources of information. While I do not seek to diminish the overall benefits of being able to turn to early Hindu texts for information about how Hindu culture originated and developed over many centuries, critical considerations must also be taken into account in order to constructively use texts as sources of information in scholarship. In other words, scholars should be diligently mindful of the ways texts have been constructed, systematized, and presented for our present-day consumption. Not doing so fails to recognize that texts, including those related to Hinduism, are politicized, gendered, and dynamic. Texts should not be taken as quintessential proofs of particular religious realities.

In addition, where texts are accepted as proof of particular practices and attitudes toward religion, one must bear in mind that the interpretation of texts also varies. So while a canon of texts may be accepted as authentic, the meaning of such texts is by no means fixed as they are interpreted differently depending on the scholar and the cultural context in which the interpretation takes place.[22]

Scholars, such as Edward Said, have pointed out these issues by drawing attention to the ways in which knowledge about the East is constructed by the West. Though Said's concern was primarily with the ways Europeans wrote and obtained information about Middle-Eastern cultures, Said's work contains valuable and pertinent criticisms that may be equally applied to India and Hinduism.[23] For example, the colonization of India by England unquestionably impacted the access and distribution of texts. By identifying the ways Hindu religious texts were compiled and

[22] For example, Kripal's translation and interpretation of the *Kathamrita* in *Kālī's Child* differs significantly from Amiya Prosad Sen's understanding of the same text, as noted in Sen's work, *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Rashtrapati Nivas: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001).
[23] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (NY: Vintage Books, 1979).

systematized during the British occupation, scholars may more readily recognize that texts, while fundamentally useful, also represent orientalist constructions of knowledge. A case in point is the British and intelligentsia's obsession with locating a Golden Age, which meant that certain texts were upheld or rejected based on whether they supported this notion of an ideal society.[24] It also meant that certain texts received more attention than others. For example, the result of the precedence given to texts like the *Vedas* and *The Laws of Manu* over other sources of information about Hindu life contributed to the systematization of the entire Hindu tradition and not just the texts themselves.[25] The subsequent uncritical use of these texts by Western scholars perpetuated this orientalist approach that has not only contributed to the stereotyping of specific religious practices but also confirmed the political power of the Brahminical elite.[26]

The reliance on texts to understand renunciation also points to less apparent issues such as the diverse uses of terminology and conceptual frameworks. In particular, even though renunciation has been systematized by scholars, various terms are still used to describe one who partakes in renunciatory practices. The terms, '*muni*,' '*sadhu*,' and 'sannyasi,' to name a few, all denote individuals who practice some form of renunciation. The different terms used are meant to depict the unique status and practices associated with each term. The sannyasi, for example, indicates one who has officially renounced all worldly ties by adopting and being initiated by a guru. In

[24] David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance, The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 22, notes how Hastings, a prominent orientalist in India, took a classicist rather than "progressive" approach to knowledge of the East.
[25] Not only did British orientalists contribute to the formation of text, but as Kopf notes, orientalists like Jones emphasized "suggestive generalizations" about them. Ibid., 34.
[26] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 31-32.

general, the sannyasi seems to indicate a more institutional form of renunciation, in which individuals can claim that they are members of a larger sannyasi community or organization.[27] In contrast, the muni indicates one who is more isolated and is not reliant on a community of renouncers. The muni is also noted for renouncing worldly ties, similar to that of the sannyasi, yet he is also noted for his spirituality and success as a seer, or one who has visions.[28] Thus, the terms used by scholars vary according to the texts in question, as well as the descriptions offered by those same texts.[29]

In addition to the vast terminology that is used, conceptual frameworks created and used by scholars may also vary. These frameworks have been based largely on what texts dictate are or are not acceptable practices for renouncers. Lynn Teskey Denton, for example, categorizes female renunciation as including only those women who have been formally initiated, have never been a householder, and who focus solely on *moksha*.[30] While Denton arrives at particular conclusions about female renunciation by way of her own fieldwork, the basis for her initial framework of female renunciation appears to be rooted in traditional texts.[31] Khandelwal, who in contrast opts not to begin with stringent frameworks, argues that there is no one standard of renunciatory practice. That said, for Khandelwal initiation and general

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[27] Khandelwal, 24-25; for a differentiation between sadhus and sannyasis, see Lynn Teskey Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (New York: State University of New York, 2004), 72; David Miller, in "Karma, Rebirth and the Contemporary Guru," in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, edited by Ronald W. Neufeldt. (New York: State University of New York, 1986) treats the terms, "sadhu" and "sannyasi" interchangeably (67).

[28] A. L. Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 16.

[29] For example, Denton carefully distinguishes between varying classifications and terminologies, particularly in terms of how they are used by householders and ascetics. For her list of various terminologies and usages, see 75. Khandelwal, in contrast, restricts her exploration to the term 'sannyasi,' as it pertains to restricted and general meanings, weighting it against the ideal and the reality (25-29).

[30] Denton, 9-10.

[31] Part of the issue with using Denton's work is that it was unfinished by her by the time of publication. Denton died before the work was completed, and as a result it was finished by other scholars.

detachment appear to be key factors in determining whether or not one is a female renouncer.[32]

Khandelwal's conscious effort not to impose a definitive framework upon her subjects is in keeping with earlier, innovative works on renunciation. In particular, I speak of Miller and Wertz, who are highly critical of the ways renunciation has been defined and categorized. For example, they argue that the Western academic construction of knowledge about asceticism has historically entailed two opposing, stereotypical extremes. The one extreme includes the philosophical intellectual man, while the other includes the ash-covered beggar. While these two representations of asceticism do exist, Miller and Wertz argue that individual renouncers operate en masse in between, including those who have been or are married, and those who perform outreach for their local communities.[33] Their findings suggest that there are multitudes of ways in which renouncers can be understood, as well as point to the differences between what texts say renouncers do, and what renouncers are actually doing. Not only do Miller and Wertz provide a foundation upon which scholars may question the notion of the quintessential renouncer, but they also provide a basis for understanding renunciation in alternate contexts, outside of traditional Hindu religious texts. The latter is particularly important to me, as it legitimates my concern about the ways renunciation is gendered—male-centered texts hardly provide a comprehensive picture of female renunciation.

Even though Hindu texts may in many ways be disassociated from modern renunciatory practices, it is nonetheless important to provide an overview of ancient

[32] Khandelwal, 5.
[33] Miller and Wertz, 195.

accounts of renunciation in order to convey the importance and issues surrounding academic evaluations of female renunciatory practices. This process may also confirm the reason for hesitancy in acknowledging Sarada's renunciation in that her practices cannot really be viewed as rooted in tradition, even though she sometimes partook in what can be considered highly traditional renunciatory practices. When looking at modern practices it seems evident that Sarada was a pioneer for the female renouncer.

The following sections will address the *Vedas*, the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, and *The Laws of Manu*. While perhaps the *Bhagavad Gita* may appear to be an obvious text to address here, I have chosen to omit them due to the fact that it does not address renunciation as it has traditionally been understood. Mainly, the *Gita* emphasizes a detachment (or renunciation) from within, in which everyone—male and female, renouncer and householder—has access to liberation.[34] While Sarada's religious practices and the idea that she straddles two worlds (in-world and other-world) certainly fits within the context of the *Gita*, but I argue that she does more than renounce from within, and instead participates in traditional renunciatory practices, which I believe exceed the scope of the *Gita.*

i. The Vedas

The *Vedas* may seem like an unlikely place to begin discussing Sarada as a renouncer, for these writings have not historically been considered as providing the basis for renunciatory ideals. Instead, they primarily offer insights into the formulation of the caste system and early ritual practices. Yet for many scholars of asceticism and writers of more general studies on renunciation, the *Vedas* provide a

[34] *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. with intro. Juan Mascaro (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 25-29.

foundation from which to understand and evaluate all other renunciatory practices, even up to present-day. The concerns and practices of the Vedic renouncers are often, though not always, markedly different than what we see in modern renouncers. At the same time, early scriptures such as those found in the *Rig Veda* do imply a sense of continuity between then and now. On one hand, it is useful to see connections to such an ancient past, especially when attempting to trace the reasons for changes in Hindu religious practice and attitudes. On the other hand, continuing to use the *Vedas* as a model for renunciatory origins perpetuates the issues touched upon in the introduction of this chapter. Specifically, it is apparent when delving into Vedic texts that there is little room for diverse and/or gendered renunciatory practices. While the latter is problematic to understanding Sarada as a renouncer, its' very limitations simultaneously point to the need to re-evaluate the ways in which the *Vedas* are important in understanding renunciation. Therefore, in the end, certain general findings in the *Rig Veda* in particular continue to contribute to the shaping of a female renouncer.[35]

The *Vedas*' establishment of sacrifice as integral to Hindu thought precipitated the shift from outward ritual to the internalization of sacrifice,[36] a movement that has traditionally marked the origins of renunciation. Prior to the internalization of sacrifice, which was later emphasized in the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, the *Vedas* describe the importance of conducting the ritual and the gains one could achieve as a result. Now seemingly, this has little connection to renunciatory practices, as the *Vedas*

[35] Basham, 7. The *Rig Veda* was composed between 1500-900 B.C.E
[36] Patrick Olivelle, *Samnyāsa Upanisads, Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 68.

specially call for action in the world by way of religious practices. However, personal prosperity that came out of sacrificial rites was not limited to tangible gains. That is, in the *Vedas* one finds the successful attainment of special powers or knowledge as coming out of conducting these rites. Acquiring special powers represented the acquisition of knowledge, and this knowledge in turn represented not only the spiritual power of the early renouncer, but also his success on the path toward liberation.

In contrast to contemporary understandings about renunciation, which typically calls for a rejection of all formal ritual (at least, in the most extreme instances), the *Rig Veda* outlines the ways in which sacrificial rites may benefit the would-be renouncer:

> For those who give rich meeds are all these splendours, for those who give rich meeds suns shine in heaven.
> The givers of rich meeds are made immortal; the givers of rich fees prolong their lifetime.
> Let not the liberal sink to sin and sorrow, never decay the pious chiefs who worship![37]

In exchange for offerings, individuals are granted immortality and humanity is granted immunity from suffering. This excerpt does not clearly indicate that it is only the renouncer who may be granted these benefits, and in all likelihood anyone could find the relief from suffering in providing these offerings. But the notion of immortality coupled with other stanzas in the *Rig Veda*, does suggest a connection between renunciation and magical powers, with the immortal man indicating the renouncer and the mortal man representing all others.

Mariasusai Dhavamony argues that the *Rig Veda* 10. 136 is the first metaphorical reference to ascetic/renunciatory practices: "The Muni, made associate in the holy

[37] Ralph T. H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rg Veda, Translated with Popular Commentary*, ed. J.L. Shastri (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973); hymn 125, 6-7.

work of every God, looking upon all varied forms flies through the region of the air."[38] Unique behaviours, including the consumption of hallucinogens enabled the renouncer to access powers and secret knowledge that other practitioners could not. These resulting powers, such as flying, separated the munis as distinct and other-worldly compared to those who consciously lived in the world. This tension between the renouncer and lay-practitioner, which is initially implied in the *Rig Veda*, continues to be a debated concern among scholars when discussing the history and function of renunciation.

Dhavamony argues that the Vedic depictions of the munis clearly provide a basis for later understandings of traditional renunciation.[39] Subsequent developments can be traced to this early representation. For example, Albert Schweitzer argues that "world and life negation originated among the Brahmins under the influence of the idea of being exalted above this world which was developed from magic-religious ideas and the experience of ecstasy."[40] Thus, the development of the practice of renunciation was the individual desire for magical powers that eventually led to the negative world view that continues to be associated with traditional renouncers.[41] Already, at this early stage of world-negating ideas, renunciatory ideals found in the *Rig Veda* were apparently viewed as an elite practice in the sense that only the truly dedicated were able to attain any magical powers or were seen as associates in pursuit of Truth.

[38] Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1982), 375.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1936), 25.
[41] Ibid, 28.

In contrast, other scholars argue that renunciatory ideals arose from the influx of independent thought that altered the then-existing religious thought, perhaps in opposition to Brahminical ideals. For example, A. L. Basham points out that Karl Jaspers:

> …posited in *The Origin and Goal of History* that, between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C.E., great changes took place in the religious life of people in all the civilized parts of the world. Some of the wisest individuals of the times began thinking independently and individually.[42]

The emphasis on individual thought at this time meant that practitioners began to question assumptions about Brahminical power as well as specific religious rituals overseen by them. Brahminical authority became questioned and weakened as a result. By this interpretation of the emergence of renunciation, it was the individual who viewed renunciation as a means of religious practice separate from the Brahminical tradition that was ultimately responsible for the acceptance and incorporation of renunciatory practices into the Brahminical tradition. Further, Fritz Staal suggests that, "ascetics and yogins of various persuasions began to propagate their ideas, already hinted at in the *Rgveda*, in a more systematic fashion."[43] As independent thought arose, written works were created to support the renunciatory ideals that were already coming into practice. These renunciatory texts were written in imitation of the *Vedas*, though their message departed from Vedic thought.[44]

Socio-economic factors also precipitated change, affecting the rise of individualism and influencing Hindu ideology. These factors included food surplus, increase in population, new trade, and the development of monarchical states and

[42] Basham, 36.
[43] Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1975), 20.
[44] Olivelle, 12.

cities.[45] Of all these factors, the introduction of monarchical states seems the most pertinent; "…the outbreak of asceticism through the Ganges Valley has been ascribed to disorientation stemming from the breakdown of tribal society, and rapid social change."[46] The increasing power of monarchical states, as denoted by the Kshatriya caste, meant that the imbalance of power, arguably outlined in the *Rig Veda*, became firmly entrenched as a construct of society. Coupled with the intense suffering as a result of the increase in population and disease, the people who were not privy to the benefits of being part of the ruling class began to re-evaluate certain assumptions about how the world worked. That is, in addition to viewing sacrificial rites as increasingly ineffectual, these individuals rejected the hierarchical notions tied to religious beliefs in general.

The transformation from external to internalized sacrifice, which occurred after the formulation of the *Vedas*, was a response to the growing complexities of sacrifice, which emerged as a result of priests attempting to control and monopolize the practice. Until this time, lay people had been increasingly taking it upon themselves to perform sacrifices, regardless of their caste affiliation. However, in an effort to cease independent practices, Balbir Singh notes: "In the course of time the priests made it their sole monopoly to determine how and when different people could have their dharmas performed under their guidance."[47] In response, followers began to reject the need for sacrifice, seeking alternatives such as renunciatory practices.[48]

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[45] *The Laws of Manu*, introduction and notes/trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 30.
[46] Narayan, 67.
[47] Balbir Singh, *Dharma, Man, Religion and Society* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), 11.
[48] Ibid., 12.

With the efficacy of sacrifice in question, a new theological problem emerged—how could one cease rebirth? As already mentioned, the development of cities took place with the introduction of kingship ideals. The emergence of cities brought forth disease as a result of newly-closed living quarters.[49] Plagues and disasters required new insights to explain the suffering of the people. The rebirth theology that subsequently developed was a means to explain this suffering that occurred even though individuals were conducting proper religious rituals to the gods. O'Flaherty argues that rebirth does not appear in the *Vedas*, but the theory of "re-death" does. She supposes that such theories of death predated and influenced later theories of rebirth.[50] Ancient India sought to propose two ways of liberation: liberation that took place after many births, and liberation that could take place here and now.[51] O'Flaherty attributes this to the fact that new systems of transmigration of the soul were superimposed onto older ancient Hindu beliefs, amalgamating in seemingly opposing fashion.[52]

While the *Vedas* point to the early roots of renunciatory practice, the texts do little to account for monastic interpretations of renunciation, like that which we find in the Ramakrishna Mission, nor does it provide a workable depiction of a female renouncer. It is apparent that there are similarities between early depictions of Vedic renunciatory practices and contemporary sadhus, for example. However, by addressing the Vedic conception of renunciation, the limitations of relying upon the *Vedas* for an

[49] *The Laws of Manu*, p. 33-35.
[50] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and Purānas," *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Tradition*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (California: University of California Press, 1980), 3.
[51] D. Kuppuswamy, *Dharma and Society, A Study in Social Values*, (Columbia: South Asian Books, 1977), 45.
[52] O'Flaherty, 13.

"authentic" renouncer is evident. For example, the female, who may certainly renounce possessions or householding lifestyle in general, would not, under the premise of societal norms, go naked as suggested above.

ii. The Sannyasa Upanishads

Sannyasa literally means "discarding" or "abandonment," which in this context refers to the abandonment of ritual activity.[53] This rejection of ritual, already touched upon in the previous section, departs from early Vedic ideals of renunciation, in which a muni was only required to discard his clothing and home in the *Rig Veda*. Ritual, at least in terms of sacrifice, was still needed as a means to secure the knowledge of the gods. In contrast, the *Sannyasa Upanishads* required the complete abandonment of ritual, including sacrifice: "Consequently, the central elements of the rite of renunciation…consist in the abandonment of key elements of ritual life: sacred fires, fire drills, sacrificial string, top knot, and mantras. The lack of sacred fire in particular is the hallmark of the renouncer."[54] The renouncer is thus further isolated from the mainstream community, but is upheld not necessarily for having magical powers (which is no longer a concern here) but for his difference from others who partake in the world of ritual.

Where previously I have attempted to show how the *Rig Veda* could be possibly viewed as a model for early renunciatory ideals, such assertions remain tenuous. That is, debates continue as to whether renunciation can be viewed as a development stemming from the *Vedas* or whether it was a response to the cultural context in which

[53] Olivelle, 59.
[54] Ibid., 62.

the *Vedas* were understood. Olivelle, for example, acknowledges that there are two opposing views about renunciation: there are scholars who view renunciatory ideals and practices as a natural extension of the *Vedas*; and there are scholars who argue that renunciatory ideals came into being as a challenge to Vedic principles, and ultimately transformed Vedic religion.[55] Olivelle, siding with the latter perspective, dates the emergence of renunciation around 6th century B.C.E., and argues that the practice of renunciation occurred as a result of the introduction of the concepts of *samsara* (cycle of existence) and moksha (liberation). Olivelle states:

> The religions sharing this world view challenged the society-centered ritual religion of the early Vedic period. The result of this confluence of two opposing worlds was a deep and lasting conflict between the value of responsible social engagement within the context of marriage and family and the ascetic withdrawal from society that was seen as the necessary precondition for achieving liberation.[56]

Olivelle situates the shift toward renunciatory ideals as stemming from the emergence of a changing world view, in which freedom from rebirth became the primary concern. While this shift in religious ideals is closely related to sociological and economic changes mentioned in the previous section on the *Vedas*, Olivelle's identification with this shift is largely textual and philosophical. As a result, there is little room for Khandelwal's supposition that renunciatory ideals emerged prior to these changes in world views.

[55] Ibid., 20.
[56] Patrick Olivelle, "Ascetic Withdrawal or Social Engagement," *Religions of Indian in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 533.

For Olivelle, the *Sannyasa Upanishads*[57] became a major source for ancient Brahminical renunciation, in which the hallmark of renunciation was the rejection of ritual activities, particularly Vedic sacrifice.[58] In particular, Olivelle's concern for text justifies his stance that the *Upanishads* represents the pinnacle of renunciation. This in turn means that the complete rejection of ritual is justified as being the ultimate model of renunciation. As Olivelle states: "For the Advaitin the abandonment of ritual activity is the very definition of renunciation. Renunciation is aimed at liberation, and liberation is attained only through knowledge and not through ritual or other types of activity."[59] Knowledge, as also denoted in the *Rig Veda*, remains one of the key reasons for renunciation in the *Upanishads*, although the power derived from this knowledge is significantly different. Because of the emphasis placed upon philosophical concerns, this knowledge has more to do with moksha rather than magical powers.

The emphasis on meditative practices in the *Sannyasa Upanishads* shows us that its' focus was not solely on renunciation, but on using renunciatory practice to attain liberation. In general, this meant that, "Detachment from worldly things and the abandonment of rites" were the "necessary conditions for achieving this final goal."[60] With renunciation viewed as key to any form of liberation, it should come as no surprise that this model of the renouncer continues to be categorized as one who

[57] Olivelle argues in his work, *Samnyāsa Upanisads*, that the *Sannyasa Upanishads* cannot be dated with any degree of accuracy. For example, the texts that comprise of these Upanishads were not declared a collected work until 1905, in a German translation (4). While they are considered to be part of the minor *Upanishads* because of some of the late compositions and the sectarian nature of the texts, Olivelle also notes that parts of the text date a few centuries before the common era (8). In general, the Samnyasa Upanishads date between a few centuries before the common era and the 15th century.
[58] Patrick Olivelle, "Renunciation and Hinduism, A Medieval Debate" vol. 1, *The Debate and Advaita Argument* (Vienna: Institute for Indology, University of Vienna, 1986), 32.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 78.

focuses solely on moksha. As will be noted later in this chapter, this assumption—that only renunciation and liberation go hand in hand—becomes questioned via the idea of the *jivanmukti* (the living liberated).

The model of renunciation is also clearly delineated in the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, in the form of the sannyasi. In particular, the sannyasi is contrasted to the mendicant monk, with the sannyasi being one "who has outwardly cast away the trappings of the world, to the supremely realized individual who has become inwardly free of differentiation."[61] Adh. 2.114-117 denotes the general expectation of renouncers in the form of sannyasis, who clearly reject any sort of living in the world:

> An ascetic keen on feeding others, who accepts clothes, etc. and woolen garments or others as well as good clothes undoubtedly falls (from virtue). Resorting to the ship of non-duality he will gain liberation while living. For restraint in speech, he shall observe in silence; for control over the body, he shall fast; for control over the mind, breath control is prescribed. A being is bound by [worldly] action; he gets liberated by spiritual knowledge. Hence, far-seeing ascetics do not perform (worldly) action.[62]

It is apparent that it is not only ritual that separates the renouncer from other practitioners. In an effort to remain detached, a renouncer should not, under any circumstances, concern himself with others. To do so only diverts the individual from what was truly important—becoming liberated. The *Upanishads*, as articulated in the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, created a new ideal in which the householder was replaced by the renouncer as representing optimum religious living. Eventually, householders

[61] *The Samnyāsa Upanisad (on renunciation)*, trans. A.A. Ramanathan, foreword Radha Burnier (India: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1978), viii.
[62] Ibid.

were viewed as not even having the ability to attain liberation.[63] This line of thought continues in present-day practices and ideas about renunciation.

Because the *Sannyasa Upanishads* continue to be instrumental in the way Hinduism is viewed and practiced, it seems pertinent to briefly outline the ways renunciation is understood in these texts. The practice of renunciation, as found in these *Upanishads*, is particularly important to note, as it is the sannyasi that continues to represent the ideal model of renunciation. This ideal renouncer, who is only concerned with liberation, contrasts with alternate, more general versions of the renouncer, particularly one who straddles both worlds—that is, a life in isolation and a life living in the world. Interestingly, while scholars have attempted to discuss renunciation in this more comprehensive, perhaps inclusive way, there has also been a tendency in scholarship to demarcate the renouncer according to the Upanishadic goal of liberation.

iii. The Laws of Manu

The *Laws of Manu* consists of 2,685 verses about varying subjects that appear disjointed, but in actuality are intimately related, with a concentration on the social duty of different castes and individuals at various stages of life, including renunciation.[64] It was written approximately at the beginning of the Common Era, and is considered a "pivotal text of the dominant form of Hinduism as it emerged

[63] Olivelle, "Ascetic Withdrawal or Social Engagement," 538.
[64] *The Laws of Manu*, xvi.

historically…."[65] It includes both Vedic and non-Vedic principles, attempting to combine two modes of thought related to traditional renunciatory ideals.

The author(s) of *The Laws of Manu* sought to propound thoughts already characteristic of Vedic philosophy, while simultaneously including renunciatory ideals. In this way *The Laws of Manu* is considered a transitional piece:

> World renunciation in and of itself was a radical departure from the life-affirming values of the Veda. The natural world, and the social world which supposedly reflected it, were reconstituted as realms of perpetual suffering, as the recurrent nightmare of *samsāra* or the endless cycle of rebirth.[66]

However, the aims of this text also created tension between older teachings and newer ones. For example, Brahmin priests who originally adhered to Vedic doctrine appropriated the new teachings, establishing an orthodox order of priests.[67] This new order, unlike the individual renouncers outlined in the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, established their collective in an effort to maintain their authority over other forms of religious practices. In some ways, these priests adopted those concerns precipitated by the renouncers, particularly their focus on liberation. However, at least within the context of *Manu*, these priests were still required to conduct rituals related to in-world activities. Ultimately, while some forms of renunciatory practices were adhered to by these priests, rituals such as sacrifice continued to be viewed by them as an integral aspect of attaining moksha.

In general, *The Laws of Manu* provided a framework in which different groups could work closely together, while being able to specialize in their own areas. However, Singh also notes that the intended inter-mingling between groups eventually

[65] Ibid, xvii.
[66] Ibid., xxxiv.
[67] Ibid., xxxv.

became obsolete. As people followed the rules more rigidly, the caste system as we currently know it came into being.[68] In terms of Singh's assessment, there is a hint of egalitarianism which went awry and instead asserted the supposedly rigid and unchanging social system to the detriment of lower classes. At the same time, there are scholars who view *The Laws of Manu* strictly as an attempt to systematize the caste system, in which upper castes could exert power over lower castes. In addition to formalizing the caste system, it also enabled the writers of *The Laws of Manu* to place women in a very specific field of practice. For which women this outline of practice is for—Brahmins or Kshatriyas—is debatable.

Peter Brent argues that when the caste system originally formed, the warrior class was considered the most important, with the Brahmin class participating in menial roles. However, "in time, probably because it was their astrological sums which decided seed time and harvest, and their rituals which plucked success from the gods, the Brahmins became more powerful. The Brahmin teacher became viewed as embodying the *Vedas* and so was given the same respect as the *Vedas*…."[69] This gave the Brahmin legitimacy when supervising complex sacrifices, boosting his position within the caste system.[70] By posing as an intermediary between humanity and the gods, a Brahmin kept the world going through ritual sacrifice. As mentioned previously, this led to the rejection of ritual which is viewed by many scholars as the foundation for the creation of renunciatory ideals. Thus, as priests created more complex sacrifice, practitioners found it harder to appease the gods. In rejection of

[68] Singh, 18.
[69] Peter Brent, *Godmen of India* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972), 26.
[70] Basham, 17.

this complexity, they eventually internalized sacrifice which led to renunciatory practices.

The caste system and the importance that Brahmins placed upon themselves within this framework greatly impacted ideas about renunciation. If we take Singh's assertions that the caste system, at least prior to *The Laws of Manu*, was egalitarian, then it could be logically supposed that renunciation was also egalitarian. However, as the power of the upper castes became fixed, so too did the notion of renunciation. That is, whether or not individuals could adequately or effectively renounce became dependent on whether they belonged to the right caste in the first place.

Not only did *The Laws of Manu* formulate ideas about the caste system, but also the *ashramas*, which also perpetuated the establishment of specific formulations of renunciatory ideals. The ashrama system is linked to the caste system in that both are attempts to provide order. Like renunciatory principles in general, Robert Lingat argues that ashramas were established by non-Brahmins who sought radical changes in Hinduism, in an effort to integrate asceticism within Vedic culture. According to Lingat:

> Beside recluses in the forest who were still attached to Brahminism, there were all kinds of ascetics practising ecstatic methods, mortifying themselves and living on alms. They enjoyed great prestige amongst a credulous population, gaining reputations as sorcerers, healers, soothsayers, and so on. In fact these people came from every corner of the Hindu world, from all castes. Their way of life placed them outside Brahminical precepts. Hence the Brahmins thought of canalising and damming up this current form of mysticism by making it into a fourth *āśrama*.[71]

[71] Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, trans. J. Duncan M. Derrett (California: University of California Press, 1973), 51.

Prior to the Brahmin's successful assertion of power, the integration of asceticism and Vedic culture was considered a structural innovation. Renunciation was not an expectation, but a voluntary practice that showed itself within the *Dharmashastras* around the fifth century B.C.E. [72] The idea was that one was supposed to be able to choose his or her *dharma* according to one's preferred lifestyle, be it householder, renouncer or both.[73] The fluidity of this process includes not only being able to choose whether to become a renouncer, but also how to practice renunciation. This means that current assumptions as to what renouncing is and who renouncers should be is called to question when considering how scholars have constructed the history of traditional Hindu religious practices.

Lingat also suggests this when he states: "thanks to the creation of the fourth *āśrama* the door is now open for a broad assimilation which might permit some check to be offered to a competition which was dangerous for the orthodox ascetics. At the same time our authors lay down rules to safeguard Brahminical tradition"[74] by requiring stages that one had to go through before one could become a renouncer. It was only later, once elitist views of renunciation came into play, that the ashramas became rigid. Prior to this, one could renounce at any age or stage in life, although it seems unclear what this means within the context of gender. However, the implication is that the original ashrama theory allowed one to choose what stage he would like to be in at any given time.[75] Thus, because the stages were not always considered mandatory steps of living, there was no expectation to renounce. Over time however,

[72] Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads*, 52.
[73] Ibid., 53.
[74] Lingat, 51.
[75] Patrick Olivelle, "Renouncer and Renunciation in the Dharmaśāstras," *Studies in Dharmaśāstras*, ed. Richard W. Lariviere (Calcutta: Firm Klm Private Limited, 1984), 111.

one did not come to choose an ashrama, but went through them during specific periods of one's life.[76] This theory is called *samuccaya,* a theory that is utilized in *The Laws of Manu,* though not necessarily reformulated there.[77]

According to Manu's classical view, one *must* enter every stage of life.[78] Olivelle recognizes the constructed paradoxes between householder and renouncer and he argues that this is a result of having many texts which are all considered equally authoritative.[79] *The Laws of Manu* consolidated all of these theories into one text in an attempt to establish a cohesive world view based on fulfilling dharma. It also meant, and not unnoticed by scholars such as T. M. Madan, that a dichotomy was created, which placed householders and renouncers in opposition to one another.[80] Without going into great detail of the householder ideal, it is implied within research on the ascetic ideal that the householder is positioned in opposition to the renouncer. For example, while the renouncer rejects material wealth, the duty of the householder is to gain wealth in order to look after his family.

According to *The Laws of Manu* and other texts concerned with the ashramas, in addition to renouncing worldly goods, the renouncer also leaves his wife and family after fulfilling dharmic duties, completely severing all ties.[81] As Lingat states, "The *samnyāsin* has renounced the world, he has freed himself from the relationships which

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[76] Ibid., 99.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Patrick Olivelle, *Vāsudevāśrama Yatidharmaprakāśa, A Treatise on World Renunciation, part two* (Vienna: Indological Institute, University of Vienna, 1977), 32.
[79] Ibid., 35.

[80] See T. M. Madan, *Non-Renunciation, Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9-16, for his comparison of householding ideals of purity and detachment and traditional renunciation. Madan argues that the two groups—householders and renouncers—should not simply be understood in opposition to each other, but also complementary to each other (17).
[81] Dhavamony, 355.

are the web of mundane life; society's morality offers him no object or goal."[82] In leaving his wife, the renouncer is now expected to take a vow of celibacy. Doing so allows him to concentrate on attaining the knowledge needed to achieve liberation.[83] However, paradoxically, it is also thought that as one begins to practice prescribed measures, he is in some sense already liberated. "The signs of a free (Liberated) man are as follows: -he shall have a begging bowl made of earth, tree as his shelter, tattered short cloth for dress, shall stay in solitude without any attachment to anything and shall have equanimity for all."[84] In order to become liberated, one adheres to the prescribed measures of renouncing. However, those who partake in those prescribed measures are considered already "liberated." At the very least, the latter come to symbolize or embody liberation, denoting a preliminary freedom that the subsequent liberation from the cycle of existence at death represents. Olivelle reiterates this notion in the following passage:

> The renouncer is depicted in Brāhmanical literature as having reached a condition that transcends normal human existence. He is freed from all the duties and obligations, rules and regulations, customs and taboos that dog ordinary mortals. His freedom foreshadows on earth the transcendent freedom (*moksa*) from the birth-death cycle (*samsāra*), which is the ultimate aspirations of all Indian religions.[85]

Arguably, the *Laws of Manu* reiterates the essence of the renouncer that was established in the *Rig Veda*, and has contributed to the continued stereotyping of a traditional renouncer that we encounter in modern scholarship. Specifically, a renouncer should be unconcerned with worldly concerns as shown through his disregard for trimming his nails and the rejection of substantial clothing. Purity

[82] Lingat, 5.
[83] Rajendra Nath Sharma, *Ancient India According to Manu* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1980), 59.
[84] Nitya Narayan Banerjee, *Manu and Modern Times* (New Delhi: Hindutva Publications, 1975), 58.
[85] Olivelle, "Renouncer and Renunciation in the *Dharmasastras*," 81-82.

through sacrifice is also prominent, although different compared to early Vedic principles. The renouncer internalizes the sacrifice and is never expected to perform outward sacrificial oblations again. Eventually, the renouncer is even expected to give up his internal sacrificial fires, denoting complete renunciation of everything.

However, those who follow the ashramas, even as renouncers, are still ultimately entwined within dharma and *karma.* Olivelle argues that one should not get into the debate over ritual, as it is inevitable that renouncers cannot help but partake in ritual practices. This is evident in one's desire for purity, and the need to obtain food by begging.[86] This is despite the fact that non-ritual behaviour often becomes idealized. As Olivelle states, "the non-ritual state of renunciation, first of all, is often depicted as the ultimate perfection of ritual."[87] This does point to some of my concerns in studying renunciation in that while there may be texts that outline particular renunciatory behaviours as well as including ideal notions of ritual and non-ritual practices, renouncers have taken on a wide variety of interpretations concerning these practices. While the ashramas are taken and followed seriously, at the same time there are many renouncers who cannot be accurately categorized as either the hermit or the sannyasi. Perhaps the systematization of renunciation was somewhat successful, however this success can really only be measured in scholarly assessments of texts such as *The Laws of Manu*, and certainly cannot be measured against what people are doing now as renouncers. This distinction will be more evident when I address female renunciation specifically.

[86] Olivelle, *The Samnyāsa Upanisads*, 62.
[87] Ibid., 68.

Despite these limitations, certain things can be said about renunciation within the context of *The Laws of Manu* in that a state of perfection seems to be the primary goal of the traditional renouncer. This theme of perfected knowledge was already touched upon when discussing the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, and subsequent texts are no different. In general, perfection has often been interpreted by renouncers as accomplished through extreme austerities of self-inflicted pain.[88] However, it is not the pain that is necessary, rather it is self-restraint and control.[89] Self-restraint and control is often associated with concepts of purity, in which a renouncer goes to great lengths to be ritually clean both physically and spiritually.[90] As Olivelle states, "He [the renouncer] has given up every connection with ritual; he may be expected to be beyond both ritual purity and ritual impurity. On the other hand, the literature on *dharma* often views the renouncer in terms of the pure and the impure."[91] I argue that this obsession with purity, rather than the preoccupation with moksha, is what truly marks the renouncer, for although householders often have this concern as well, the process of purifying and remaining pure takes on significantly different forms.

To contextualize this paradox in terms of purity concerns, the renouncer becomes celibate to purify himself but also to present himself as pure. In this instance, it is only the male renouncer that is of concern here, and his wife represents the impurity marked by their relationship prior to his renunciation. In addition, and as further means to denote his renunciatory status, he is supposed to partake in fasting, sexual

[88] Dolf Hartsuiker, *Sādhus, India's Mystic Holy Men* (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1993), 15.
[89] Dhavamony, 368.
[90] Olivelle, *Vāsudevāśrama Yatidharmaprakāśa* , 45.
[91] Ibid., 46.

continence, poverty, seclusion/isolation and self-inflicted pain.[92] Perfecting these leads to something greater:

> Detachment seems to imply the adept forgoes worldly pleasure, selfishness and ambition. But the significance of this detachment does not lie in the realm of ethics. It is an aspect of most of the techniques for training the mind. Before the fluctuations of the mind can be brought to a standstill, they have to be examined…. Since struggling against them would only introduce new waves of motion, the natural method to bring about this cessation is detachment.[93]

The Laws of Manu emphasizes the need for insight through detachment. "He who possesses true insight (into the world), is not fettered by his deeds; but he who is destitute of that insight, is drawn into the circle of births and deaths."[94] One may reach this insight "By not injuring any creatures, by detaching the senses (from objects of enjoyment), by the rites prescribed in the Veda, and by rigorously practising austerities, (men) gain that state (even) in this (world)."[95] In this sense it seems that anyone, not simply the sannyasi, can partake in certain renunciatory practices. Fasting, for example, is an austerity that is practiced by householders, men and women alike, albeit it in different forms to different degrees.

Ultimately, detachment can be fostered by following one's dharma. "According to Manu, *dharma* is, 'that which is followed by those learned in the *Vedas* and what is approved by the conscience of the virtuous who are exempt from hatred and inordinate affection.' (II.1)"[96] Manu also reiterates this in 2.6, where he states that "the entire

[92] Walter O. Kaebler, "Asceticism," *Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 1*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1987), 442.
[93] Staal, 137.
[94] *The Laws of Manu* 6.74.
[95] Ibid., 6.75.
[96] Kuppuswamy, 17.

Veda is the source of dharma."[97] Dharma connects cosmic order to divine law, in which all must follow a set of rules in order to maintain cosmic order (*rta*). "The implication here is that in classical Vedic literatures *dharma* carries ontological weight: being arises out of proper activity while improper action leads to non-being."[98] However, stating that the *Vedas* provide the ultimate source for the rules of dharma is misleading. It is not necessarily the Vedic texts that prescribe such rules for living, but "the totality of Knowledge, the sum of all understanding, of all religious and moral truths, whether revealed or not."[99]

Following dharma and moksha as outlined in *The Laws of Manu* is difficult. Seemingly, *The Laws of Manu* is pieced together by different bits without paragraphs of transition from one thought to the next.[100] However, certain things can be said about the text and moksha. For example, everyone is responsible for his or her own destination after death. *The Laws of Manu* outlines how to accomplish liberation, but it is up to the practitioner whether he or she will follow the prescribed practices.[101] Also, one is not supposed to seek death in anticipation for what awaits after death.[102] That too, would influence the outcome of one's afterlife.

The overall implication outside of the context of *The Laws of Manu* is that the rejection of ritual was a method for liberation only attainable by the renouncer. However, *The Laws of Manu* does not support this. "The point Manu wants to make is clear: it is not necessary to become a renouncer to attain liberation. Even a

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[97] Dhavamony, 349.
[98] William K. Mahoney, "Dharma: Hindu Dharma," *Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 4*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1987), 329.
[99] Lingat, 8.
[100] Ludo Rocher, "Karma and Rebirth in the Dharmaśāstras," *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (California: University of California Press, 1980), 62.
[101] Sharma, 298.
[102] Schweitzer, 168.

householder who follows the tenfold *dharma* can be liberated."[103] It is necessary to eventually give up all ritual, but it does not matter if he stays within his family unit, or if he wanders and begs for food.

iv. Classical renunciation and gender

Arguably, the *Vedas* provide the root of origins for Hindu renunciation and other texts have subsequently informed or elaborated on key concepts found in these texts. Particularly, the development of the concept of dharma has greatly influenced the ways in which one is supposed to renounce. To locate the female renouncer in these early depictions is particularly difficult, as the model typically used to describe rules and practices for renouncers are men. As the renouncer became categorized as part of the ashrama system, it is even more evident just how patriarchal the system is. Dhavamony, for example, refers to the fourth ashrama, or that of becoming a sannyasi as being a time when the male leaves his wife and children.[104] The suggestion is, and this certainly is not restricted to Dhavamony's work, that a woman does not participate in the fourth stage. Instead, and as noted in the *Laws of Manu*, a woman's ashrama ends with the death of her husband, in which she enters widowhood.

In terms of later classical developments, it is apparent that Hindu religious practices in general and renunciation in particular, are in large part informed by notions of dharma. Because of this, the ashramas are dictated by dharma, or obligations as introduced to us in the *Vedas*. However, not only are the ashramas and dharma gendered, but they are concepts that are politically charged, further begging

[103] Olivelle, "Renouncer and Renunciation in the Dharmaśāstras," 134.
[104] Dhavamony, 355.

the question of the role of renunciatory women. For example, just who are ashramas meant for? Robert Lingat notes that there has been some debate as to whether the ashramas themselves were really only meant for Brahmins.[105] We could suppose again that this had largely to do with differences in dharma. Just as men and women have different obligations to follow, so too different castes have different dharma to follow, and this in turn happens to be informed by one's ashrama. Perhaps while non-Brahmins were not without their own dharma, Derrett argues that it was from the Brahmins that men learned their own dharma, as Brahmins acted like judges in situations where dharma had to be clarified.[106] However, while some may view a form of dharma as key to understanding the fourth ashrama, Lingat also notes that in terms of the *Dharmasutras*, pinnacle in understanding dharma, the authors were generally hostile toward the idea of renunciation, instead emphasizing family and householder duties. At least in *The Laws of Manu*, as well as other 'law-based' texts, renunciation was only recommended if one could not bear children, or at least until the children were fully grown.[107]

Part of this had a lot to do with political control and who was situated outside or inside the Brahminical circle. The flourishing of mysticism and extreme ascetic practices that were thought to stem from the *Sannyasa Upanishads* as a rejection of more traditional householder ideals, meant that many Brahmins who practiced more extreme forms of asceticism were actually viewed as countering traditional notions of Brahminism. Lingat argues that the result of this was that 'insider' Brahmins, or those

[105] Lingat, 48.
[106] J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The Concept of Duty in Ancient Indian Jurisprudence: The Problem of Ascertainment," *The Concept of Duty in South Asia*, eds. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and J. Duncan M. Derrett (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd., 1978), 29.
[107] Lingat, 49.

who did not isolate themselves as part of their renunciation, sought to systematize and incorporate more renegade religious practices by incorporating renunciation and the associated mysticism into the ashrama system, by making it the fourth stage of life.[108] In theory, this was to alleviate the tensions between more orthodox or traditional renouncers and unorthodox ones, by incorporating the unorthodox practitioners into the traditional Hindu system. It also meant, in theory, that rules could be imposed on who or what it took to become a renouncer, in order to slow down the more unorthodox movement.[109] While such efforts have contributed to the shaping of traditional texts, it must also be noted that the efforts of orthodox Brahmins did not succeed, and Lingat notes that "Eventually it was acknowledged that no rule of *dharma* survived for the *samnyāsin*."[110]

This example of the Brahminical attempt to reformulate texts to include renunciation calls to question how current scholars use traditional texts as a basis for the unchanging nature of the tradition, as well as calls to question how we categorize renunciation in general. That is, could we speculate that women were able to be controlled in a way that the renouncer could not be? That perhaps it was not about the fact that women did not practice renunciation on the whole, but that they were written out of the rules? To suppose that the formulation of the ashramas was politically charged according to caste status but not in terms of gender seems problematic, especially if we return to the notion of the woman's ashrama.

As already briefly noted, the four ashramas do not apply to women in the same way as for men, especially in terms of the fourth ashrama, which encapsulates

[108] Ibid., 50.
[109] Ibid., 51.
[110] Ibid.

renunciation. Rather than partaking in this final ashrama, women are instead either abandoned by their husbands, or if their husbands should die, are expected to follow the rules of widowhood. In either case, the husband is either symbolically or actually dead; both of which generally result in a difficult life for the wife who remains alive. In many ways the wife, in widowhood, partakes in similar practices as that of the renouncer—she is reliant on others to supply her with sustenance; her dress sets her apart from those who are considered to live in the world; and she is symbolically viewed as separate from the rest of the world. However, the reason widowhood has not been viewed as part of religious renunciatory practices has largely come as a result of women being forced into widowhood, of their lowly status and subsequent systemic abuse, and the general hardships experienced by them. In general, this has foremost to do with the fact that these women are seen as predominantly impure. No matter the extent of their religious practices, which may indeed focus primarily on liberation, they cannot be considered renouncers due to the ways in which dharma, karma, and the ability to attain moksha, have been constituted in classical Hindu texts.

Primarily, the issue of choice omits widows from being classified as ascetics or renouncers. Because they are forced into widowhood, often explained in terms of a woman's bad karma, they are not perceived as being spiritually advanced. However for Spivak, in her article entitled, "Moving Devi", it is not a question of the societal treatment of widows, nor is it an issue that they are not ill-treated.[111] What is important is what they do despite their status. How do they function? What are their religious practices? To identify widows in this way—that is, by what they do rather than how others view them, points to some of the issues that concern me here. For

[111] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi," *Cultural Critique*, 47 (Winter 2001): 154.

example, it calls to question the assumption that a traditional Hindu male with a wife and family can become a renouncer, yet it is more difficult to view women who have been married as being renouncers.

New Approaches: The Jivanmukti

There has been increasing interest in scholarship to explore 'integrative liberation,' or a balanced liberation, in which the practitioner embraces both in-world and other-worldly elements of Hinduism. Closely related to this development pertaining to integration is the idea of ethics and how it relates to mysticism, and of my concern, renunciation. Interpretations of the jivanmukti as the 'living liberated' tends to incorporate renunciatory principles such as detachment, but also explains how renouncers continue to live in the world. I argue that scholarship on the jivanmukti is one way in which to understand broader conceptions of renunciation. In other words, this framework posited by scholars offers and contributes to the ways that female renunciation can be understood, especially as it departs from traditional understandings of the renouncer. Thus, ideas about the jivanmukti serves here as a starting point for which to highlight the differences between classical and contemporary renouncers. While the jivanmukti serves as a useful template to explicate the unique and/or specific behaviours of the female renouncer, studies pertaining to the jivanmukti are also plagued with methodological problems not dissimilar to studies on classical renunciation in that it does not adequately address gender. Therefore, while it seems important to touch upon this new approach to Hindu renunciation, it too has its limitations.

The most apparent problem in studies on the jivanmukti are the ways this concept is situated by scholars amidst tension between Eastern spirituality and Western morality. Western scholars[112] often note that jivanmukti is influenced predominantly and in some cases solely by Western values of service. This new model of the Hindu practitioner, therefore, is viewed as a development that arose out of Judeo-Christian ideals, rather than being viewed as yet another response to a changing Hindu society. Two issues arise out of this that is a concern to me here. First, it denotes the continuing systematization of an Eastern religious tradition by the West, in which particular notions about what is valid and authentic is determined according to assumptions made by scholars. Second, and certainly tied to my first objection, is that by defining the jivanmukti according to Western morality, based on methods of scholarship founded upon Christian notions of tradition, it has led to the eventual establishment of paradoxical ideals where mysticism functions in opposition to morality.[113] Through a legacy of Western scholars, we can view the continual problems posed in the dichotomy between mysticism and morality, which I argue is not dissimilar to the dichotomy between renouncers and householders already discussed briefly in the section on *The Laws of Manu*.

In terms of a Western scholarly perspective, there is a preoccupation with how a renouncer ethically lives in the world yet is considered a liberated being at the same time. Coupled with this preoccupation is the determination to outline how a renouncer

[112] See *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, eds. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (New York: State University of New York, 1996). This work is a compilation of articles by western scholars dealing specifically with the notion of jivanmukti.
[113] See *Crossing Boundaries, Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, eds. G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), which attempts, in part, to deal with such issues.

living in the world denotes a modern phenomenon that is not rooted in tradition. As with studies on the traditional practice of renunciation, debates as to whether the jivanmukti is a derivative of the Hindu tradition obscures the fact that there are renouncers who participate in the world. For example, many modern interpretations of the jivanmukti are discussed largely within the context of Neo-Vedanta,[114] with much of its focus on the work and speeches of Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's favorite disciple. In separate studies, Vivekananda himself has been described as departing from more traditional Hindu ideals, and at the very least as departing from the teachings of Ramakrishna.[115] For some, Vivekananda's message even represents an integration of Western and Eastern values.

That said, the argument about ethical renunciatory practices as an extension of the Hindu tradition is not unlike debates concerning the initial emergence of renunciatory practices found in the *Sannyasa Upanishads*. Paul Hacker for example, in his discussion on Neo-Vedanta and ethical mysticism, assumes that there is such thing as 'tradition' and that the notion of tradition may be properly juxtaposed against Neo-Hinduism, and thus modernity. For Hacker, the legitimacy of historical developments and change within a religion are based on how they are tied to tradition. Any appearance of a departure from tradition leads to a mutation in that religion. And yet,

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[114] See Andrew O. Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation, Embodied Liberation in Advaita and Neo-Vedanta* (New York: State University of New York, 1998), for an example of the exploration of jivanmukti within a Neo-Vedantin context.

[115] Whereas Ramakrishna, with his rejection of women and gold, emphasized the *experience* of transcendence/spirituality by way of *sadhanas*, Vivekananda chose to emphasize a more practical application of spirituality by blending notions of social service with spiritual devotion. This pragmatism meant that Vivekananda could reach Westerners in ways that Ramakrishna, with his bouts of mystical transformations could not (Ramakrishna's spiritual practices included a reverence for Kali, dressing up and behaving as a handmaiden to Krishna, and at one point, becoming Hanuman). Vivekananda offered his own particular form of transnational Vedanta which, in particular, was more accessible to his western audiences. See Gwillym Beckerlegge, "The Early Spread of Vedanta Societies: An Example of "Imported Localism"," *Numen*, 51 (2004).

as I have already touched upon in my discussion on classical renunciation, tradition has proved to be a highly dynamic and thus a volatile source from which to measure the meaning of an "authentic" religion. What I mean is, even despite the emphasis placed upon Hinduism as a textual tradition, it is evident that changes in thoughts, ideals, and practices change dramatically within the interpretation of these texts.

Because Hinduism is viewed as an unchanging tradition, and the idea of an ethical mode of renunciation as found in the jivanmukti is viewed as something new, scholars such as Hacker assumed that the jivanmukti denoted Western-influenced notions of morality. In this sense, only the West could be responsible for Indian developments in morality or ethical action; thus modern Hinduism, including ethical renunciation, are actually derivatives of Western culture. In particular, figures like Vivekananda denote Western notions in their use of Schopenhauer's *tat tvam asi* ethic. Specifically, a paradox is formulated in which the West teaches the East morality. For Kripal, this marks Hacker's work as the most important piece to date on modern Hindu mystical ethics:[116]

> …Hacker demonstrates two theses, one philosophical and one historical: (1) that philosophically speaking, the traditional transethical nature of Vedāntic monism, whose actionless, relationless unity renders any true ethic structurally impossible, is fundamentally incompatible with what Hacker calls the "*tat tvam asi* ethic," that common Hindu formula which attempts to ground the ethical commandments to love the other in the Vedāntic monistic formula *tat tvam asi* (literally "you [the Self] are that [*brahman*]" but that here becomes "you [the Self] are that [Self of the other person]"); and (2) that, historically speaking, Swami Vivekananda, who first preached this now famous ethic, actually appropriated it not from some traditional Indic text or tradition but from the German Sanskritist Paul Deussen, who in turn

[116] Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess: The Mystical and the Ethical in the Teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda," *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, eds. G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (London and New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 231.

> borrowed it, again not from any Indian test, but from his philosophical mentor Arthur Schopenhauer.[117]

The overall implication is that there can be no moral mysticism found in Eastern tradition without Western influences. In the case of renunciatory practices in Hinduism, the implication is that Hindu religious practices are unchanging—unless, of course, they are influenced by the West. When this happens, the religious practices in question are no longer viewed as authentic. If the notion of authenticity is not in question, at the very least a dichotomy is established, where there is a tendency for scholars of Hinduism, particularly of renunciation, to reference tradition and modernity as historical points to denote the transition from the emphasis on other-world or renunciatory practice, to in-world or social service.[118]

More directly put, the assumption that renunciatory practices equate with tradition and modern practices do not, is a presentation of history that assumes an evolutionary pattern of ideas. For example, Kripal notes that Hacker was concerned with delineating a history of ideas when he placed the social service practices of a monk as stemming from European concepts:[119]

> …a European philosopher [Schopenhauer] imputes an association of ideas to the ancient Indians; his posthumous disciple [Deussen] tries to justify his master's notion, and presents his version of it to Indians in general [the Bombay lecture of 1893] and to the Hindu monk in particular [Vivekananda in 1886]; the European philosopher's idea becomes widely accepted in India, so much so that many Indians today take it to be actually Hindu.[120]

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[117] Ibid.
[118] Traditional ideals include both classical (500 bce-1000 ce) and early medieval (1000-1750 ce) periods, in which the development of the renouncer was evident. Modern ideals occur from 19th century to present, beginning with Rammohan Roy (1772-1833).
[119] Kripal, "Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess," 234.
[120] Ibid., as quoted from Paul Hacker, *Philology and Confrontation, Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (New York: SUNY, 1995), 305.

For Hacker, any religious developments must somehow be grounded in 'tradition' to make it legitimate. For example, instead of concerning himself with the way in which Schopenhauer derives and appropriates the tat tvam asi maxim, Hacker focuses on Vivekananda's appropriation of Schopenhauer's ideas. This is explicit in Hacker's assertion that Vivekananda learned *everything* from Deussen, yet Deussen learned *nothing* from Vivekananda. This was not because Deussen was incapable of learning anything from Vivekananda, but because Vivekananda had little to offer him, except by helping Deussen hone his Sanskrit, a skill of which Deussen was already quite good at.[121] While Vivekananda could claim to be a language expert because he could help Deussen in this way, Vivekananda was not viewed by Deussen as a prominent thinker.[122]

Deussen's line of thinking also appears to be supported by Hacker's own opinions, as Hacker "attributes the influence of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan on the tradition to their "louder voices"[123] and sees little that is original or even "worth discussing"[124] in Neo-Hinduism and its syncretisms."[125] Certainly, Kripal does not hold the same extreme opinions that Hacker does, attempting to leave room for judgment after a more in-depth study into those ideas in history are explored. Kripal is concerned with the historical and contextual issues that Hacker asserts—namely that Neo-Hinduism, including Neo-Vedānta, is a "significant break or shift from tradition," that arose out of colonialism.[126]

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[121] Hacker, 295.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid., 306.
[124] Ibid., 307.
[125] Kripal, "Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess," 234, quoting Hacker.
[126] Ibid.

This concern with new formations of religious practices within the context of Neo-Hinduism is not unlike that already discussed earlier in this chapter regarding classical renunciatory practices. Rather than looking at the fluidity of religious practices that are related to Hinduism, simultaneously acknowledging outside/colonialist influences and changes from within the tradition, external and internal developments are viewed as disparate realms of disproportionate value. For example, new developments are on one hand discounted as not being legitimate because they represent a departure from an "authentic" or traditional Hinduism. On the other hand, at least within the context of Hacker's work, if new and interesting developments do occur, then they are viewed as the result of European innovation and imagination. Religious practices that blend renunciation and social service are thus considered either impossible because they are illegitimate, or mundane because they are not 'really' Hindu. These analyses preoccupied with the origins of such practices relate to problems faced when attempting in discuss female renunciation—as in the issues that arise when discussing Vivekananda's renunciation and social service, so too female renunciation is viewed as illegitimate, at least within modern contexts.

To return to the notion of the jivanmukti and how this might contribute to our understanding of female renunciation as a way of denoting a blend of detachment and living in the world, I turn specifically to Kripal. His work has both its uses and problems. The benefit of his work in this study is that he discusses specific concepts concerning living in the world as understood by Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. In addition, Kripal ties his understanding of their divergent philosophies to the Goddess, of which Sarada represents. However, problematic is the fact that Kripal is not really

concerned with the jivanmukti per say, but more specifically is preoccupied with a 'moral mysticism.'[127] Kripal wants to join two visions: 1) emptiness, which he dubs as being 'inside the Goddess,' and 2) relational functions, which he considers to be 'outside the Goddess.' The result is a construction of a dichotomy between mysticism and ethicism.

> Such is the mythological inside-out, outside-in structure of the present essay on the mystico-ethical teachings of the nineteenth-century Bengali saint Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-86), whose social teachings clearly privilege the ontological truths "on the inside" of the goddess, and his disciple Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), whose social teachings just as clearly privilege the ethical, social, and physical needs of this fellow Indians and human beings "on the outside" of the goddess.[128]

Because this tension between outside and inside the goddess continues to exist, Kripal argues that a genuine moral mysticism cannot exist. At the same time, Kripal needs this dichotomy to keep with ideas drawn from Paul Hacker.[129] For Hacker, no such connection to tradition can be made between Neo-Hinduism and Advaita Vedānta, and thus Neo-Hinduism is considered an aberration.[130] In taking this stance, Hacker establishes a paradox that is seemingly irreconcilable. In keeping with this tradition of dichotomies, Kripal must also draw a clear and definitive line between camps. Though they use different terminology from each other, I would argue that Hacker and Kripal are attempting to encompass the same thoughts and ideas albeit using different language.

In emphasizing the dichotomy between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda's teachings, Kripal presents an either/or situation, in which integration, the fundamental

[127] Ibid., 231.
[128] Ibid., 230-31.
[129] As found in Hacker's work.
[130] Andrew O. Fort coins this as 'tradition-distortion' in *Jīvanmukti in Transformation*, 130.

aspect of the jivanmukti as insinuated through the quest for a 'moral mysticism,' is ultimately impossible. One is either inside or outside the goddess—one cannot be both. While Kripal provides excellent examples as to why an integrative approach cannot work, I am curious as to why concepts of Tantrism are neglected. Surely, as denoted by Feuerstein[131] and DasGupta Sherma,[132] Tantrism is an option that denotes the balance between in-world and other-worldly notions. This is in addition to the fact that Kripal suggested that Ramakrishna was a Tantrist in previous written work.[133] The dichotomy only works if Ramakrishna is not a Tantrist. Further, it appears that this dichotomy is in keeping with Hacker's false notions of history, so Kripal is forced to evaluate Ramakrishna as separate from a Tantric perspective.

Kripal further argues that inside/outside modes of the Goddess do not work because one is ultimately always forced to function in-world, or outside of the Goddess. Kripal states: "They may have accurately reflected the dialectical nature of existence—the inside and outside of the Goddess who gives birth to and then eats her own children—but in the end they had to be rejected for that other more respectable, more proper side of sanctity, the *dharma* of society and religion."[134] This dichotomy, in which the absorption into the Goddess and function outside of the Goddess posits tensions between the two realms, points to the ambivalence that can be viewed when analyzing scholars that have been studying Neo-Vedānta and the implications it has on social service as an integral approach. According to Kripal, the two sides become

[131] Georg Feurerstein, chapter 30, "The Tantric Revolution," *Wholeness or Transcendence? Ancient Lessons for The Emerging Global Civilization* (U.S.A.: Larson Publications, 1974), 252-265.
[132] Rita DasGupta Sherma, "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra," ed. Lance Nelson, *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 89-131.
[133] Kripal, *Kālī's Child*.
[134] Kripal, "Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess," 244.

inoperable when we attempt to blend them while simultaneously distinguishing them as different functions in belief. This is evident upon blending opposing ideals, in the tendency to opt for one ideal over another. The notion of integration, for example, is gaining popularity over mysticism and withdrawal from the world in part as a departure from it. However, if one looks closely at notions of integration,[135] the very idea of liberation dictates the emphasis on the material world. One must function in the world completely in order to be considered practicing an integral approach. That is, to be free from the world, one must be free in the world; therefore, the notion of enlightenment in this context means the embracing of the material world as part of that enlightenment.

Problematic is that integration has become the alternative world for 'outside the Goddess' in order to make it appear that two sides have been synthesized. The reality of the matter is that they have not been combined, and instead, a Western notion of morality is imposed and recreated to include integration. Kripal is not specifically attempting to address this sort of dialogue—his concern is primarily the historical accuracy of Hacker's claims. However, Kripal does contribute to this ongoing dialogue, especially considering the fact that his aim is to seek a moral mysticism.

Kripal comes by this mistaken comparison honestly, as it was the scholars who came before him, the scholars he was studying, who make this first illogical comparison. There appears to be this tendency to get caught up in the notions of

[135] Integration does tend to be used as a catch-phrase to denote varying levels of acceptance of the material world. The degree in which the material world is accepted as part of integration varies from scholar to scholar.

'being good,' a mystical stance, to 'acting good,' considered a moral stance.[136] However, goodness, or any concept of 'being good' is a mis-categorization, as mysticism was never about goodness in the first place, at least not in terms of Western morality. In describing a 'realized soul' that can do no harm, Kripal writes, "By virtue of his childlike, golden nature, the full mystic *is good*."[137] The purpose of Kripal's particular exploration is to show that the very nature of the mystic alludes to developments of social service—acting in world—in the first place, thus establishing a different way to found morality in tradition.

The need to firmly establish anything in 'tradition,' I argue, is primarily a Western notion of legitimacy that ultimately distorts valid argumentation. A mystic incapable of doing evil does not necessarily entail goodness. The mystic is incapable of bad acts because he withdraws completely from the world. Thus he cannot be considered good or bad because he withdraws from the world to avoid doing *any* act. The assumption should not be that the mystic is good, but rather that the "other-worldly" mystic is neutral, an entity that seeks to generate no action, good or bad.

In Kripal's exploration of what it means to be a mystic in opposition to a 'do-gooder,' he looks at translations of writings outlining Ramakrishna's teachings. Ramakrishna seems to have talked aggressively about 'do-gooders' and sets up a scenario in which he 'pees in the do-gooder's mouth.'

> But even this is not enough for Ramakrishna, for he has the man sleeping—ignorantly, pathetically—through it all in an attempt to demonstrate the utter vanity and pride, the sheer unconsciousness that supposedly lies behind any

[136] Please see my paper entitled "Being Good, Acting Good: Boundaries and Implications of Social Service and *Jīvanmukti*" for more detail about being and acting good.
[137] Kripal, "Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess," 245, his italics.

> notion of helping another human being. Such were Ramakrishna's feelings about those who think they can 'do good.'[138]

The suggestion is that Ramakrishna's rejection of moralism could be the rejection of colonialism, and that it must have felt good to "call the do-gooder vain and proud."[139] While Kripal alludes to a certain pettiness that Ramakrishna has toward Westerners, he also acknowledges that this example points to something greater going on between East and West:

> There were also clear, unmistakable and probably more important religious reasons that Ramakrishna rejected the do-gooder, and there was an impressive doctrinal foundation, rooted deeply in tradition, precolonial Hindu speculative systems, that supported, helped up, and even demanded his criticisms.[140]

Kripal later explores and describes Ramakrishna's rejection of Christians and their ideas as political as well.[141]

Kripal focuses on Ramakrishna and Christianity, implying that it was Ramakrishna who initiated a response to colonialism, which in turn led to Neo-Vedānta. However, Kripal also includes that modern Hinduism does not stem solely from Christian ideals, but rather from secularization and modernization.[142] In this way, the development of Hinduism could not have possibly only been influenced by the West. That said, I argue that modernization and industrialization are just other names for Western constructs that include capitalism, and that ultimately, Hinduism as a tradition still becomes 'Westernized.'

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[138] Ibid., 246.
[139] Ibid., 248.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 252.
[142] Ibid., 256.

Miller and Wertz argue in their anthropological study that it is the actions in which the individuals partake in, coupled with the perception of the renouncers by the community, that are the primary means to analyze renunciation. While their study deals with renouncers in Bhubaneshwar in the 1970's, I think their framework with which they study renouncers is equally applicable to Sarada. For example, even though Ramakrishna's devotees continued to view Sarada primarily as a householder after Ramakrishna's death, her own devotees viewed her as a spiritual leader and equal partner to Ramakrishna in terms of spiritual advancement.

Miller and Wertz found a diversity in practices that was neither rooted strictly within a classical context nor part of the jivanmukti ideal. Their findings denote that there is no 'true' renouncer, as each male fulfills his role in different ways according to his personality and needs of the community. Not only are individual renunciatory practices evident, but also are connections and/or ties to the lay community, with Miller and Wertz noting that "some ascetics have even been householders…."[143] Keeping this diversity in mind, Miller and Wertz provide a long list of possibilities for the Hindu ascetic which includes:

> "charismatic qualities," rather loosely described as a holiness or saintliness, that the layman can worship or revere; knowledge of Hindu religious thought, including both ancient Sanskrit texts and the teachings of ritual performances (puja) or of religious songs (kirtana); a distinctive style of life, accompanied either by austerities or by ordering one's entire life around a schedule of devotions and recitations of the name of his chosen deity; the observance of vows of celibacy, poverty, vegetarianism, and abstinence from intoxicating beverages.[144]

[143] Miller and Wertz, 3.
[144] Ibid., 2.

Further, they found that there were renouncers who would couple what could be perceived as traditional renunciatory practices with concern with social welfare activities in their respective communities. This in part has to do with the fact that the communities expect such interaction with their local ascetics as a means to fulfill the ascetic ideal.[145] While their study is specifically focused on male monastic communities, they reveal the diversity of renunciatory practices that could just as easily apply to women.

Arguably, the modern role of the ascetic outlined above by Miller and Wertz is not that different from that of Vivekananda's vision of the renouncer. While the individual ascetics addressed in Bhubaneswar are not conducting nearly the same scale of humanitarian work achieved by Vivekananda, they each work individually with the lay community in general. In terms of renouncers who belong to a particular monastic community like that found in the Ramakrishna Mission, Miller and Wertz argue that part of interacting with the community includes the renouncer's concern for social reform, and in particular, a concern for preserving a national culture in contrast to fears of Westernization of tradition.[146] Certainly this model of the renouncer, one who not only performs austerities but is a social activist is not unlike Vivekananda's call for monks to provide outreach in India as a means to assert their ability to look after their own—that is, not to be reliant on British colonialists, as will be discussed in chapter four.

Throughout discussions on jivanmukti, little attention is paid to gender. In terms of Kripal's study, Sarada in particular merely becomes an object of the Goddess, and

[145] Ibid., 21.
[146] Ibid., 29, 23 respectively.

subsequently an object of worship. Her practices, which I believe provide the ultimate model of living in the world while living outside of it, goes ignored, because there is no room for her in these debates. Sarada is silent, or silenced, even though it is evident that she had her own unique approach to living in the world, colonialism, and "doing good."

Kripal discusses Sarada in more abstract terms in an article entitled, "Perfecting the Mother's Silence." In his article, classifications about Sarada in relation to womanhood are accounted by Sarada's own actions, or more accurately, Sarada's non-action. He emphasizes an image of Sarada based foremost on what she doesn't say; hence the title of his article being analyzed here, "Perfecting the Mother's Silence." For Kripal, Sarada remains purposefully silent. This is evident in his translations of multitudes of Bengali texts written by Ramakrishna's and Sarada's disciples. Kripal argues that she often chooses not to speak, and when she does, it conveys her worldly concerns—being a dutiful wife to Ramakrishna, having children, and implied by her first two concerns, being forced into renunciation. According to Kripal, Sarada's renunciation is not an active practice but a forced one, exemplified by her refusal to get rid of colourful jewelry and dress after the death of Ramakrishna. At the same time, he fails to mention that she did live life simply, and never broke, at least to our knowledge, her celibacy her whole life (even after Ramakrishna's death).

In one sense, Kripal is legitimate in asserting Sarada's concern for this world. For instance, she rejected concerns of purity and purification by way of reaching out to particular women in need, such as prostitutes, against the orders of Ramakrishna. Further, she preferred to live in urban centers as opposed to being under the watchful

eyes of Ramakrishna's disciples. These were disciples whom felt that she was not behaving properly for being married to a divine figure; who felt she was someone who was not behaving properly even though she was increasingly viewed as a potentially sacred figure herself. For Kripal, her worldly concerns discount her from being a renouncer.

I argue that this omission has to do with his preoccupation with deconstructing Sarada as a divine figure. For him, she was not divine—it was only through Ramakrishna that she was so, and as a result, her practices related to divine or sacred experience such as renunciation (at least for Kripal), are not valid. For example, Kripal makes note in "Perfecting the Mother's Silence," that in June 1872, Ramakrishna invited Sarada to his room for a *puja*. Rather than partaking in puja alongside her husband, Ramakrishna made Sarada the object of worship by performing puja to her for approximately three hours. Ramakrishna, it is thought, ultimately viewed Sarada as a goddess.[147] Throughout, Kripal never questions Sarada's voice—her possible discomfort in being an object of worship; her possible disdain for being an object; or her possible religious experience that might have followed. Because this is not included, we cannot exclude it, opening the possibility up for a more feminist critique when looking at the role of Sarada.

Can we consider Sarada a jivanmukti? It seems that there can be an argument for such an understanding, and in doing so, would enable the reader to consider Sarada at least in some way as a renouncer. If we consider Ramakrishna's view of the universe as it connects with his understanding of *shakti*, then perhaps Sarada can be understood in an alternate light:

[147] Kripal, "Perfecting the Mother's Silence," 175.

> Śakti alone is the root of the universe. That Primal Energy has two aspects: vidyā and avidyā. Avidyā deludes. Avidyā conjures up ‘’woman and gold’, which casts the spell. Vidyā begets devotion, kindness, wisdom, and love, which lead one to God. This avidyā must be propitiated, and that is the purpose of the rites of Śakti worship.[148]

By the rites of Shakti worship, women are seen and worshipped as the Divine Goddess, much in the same way that Ramakrishna worshipped Sarada.[149] Further to this, every bride is said to embody Shakti.[150]

At issue with this is the fact that it has already been established that Ramakrishna was not a feminist, although this view of the universe provides one to easily create a feminist reading of his view of women and the way the world operates. I have already problematized this situation, by way of alternate views of Ramakrishna's attitudes toward not only Sarada but women in general. I also think that to claim Sarada as Shakti and thus a renouncer is also problematic, as it does not address the tension between her being a model householder, and her actually practicing and teaching renunciatory practices, both for the laity and the monastic community.

Perhaps what is key here is the acceptance that women may straddle two worlds—I have already mentioned Sarada operating in an 'liminal' state, in which she is part of the domestic sphere yet also part of the spiritual sphere. Shakti, and as a consequence, Sarada's divine status, allows her to create her own spiritual personality, even if it was in the latter part of her life. As she continued to operate in the world, while simultaneously taking part in renunciatory practices, she was able to provide a

[148] *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969), 116.
[149] Ibid., footnote.
[150] Ibid., 117.

model for women in whom they could become liberated in this lifetime, while at the same time still be married, or have a householding existence.

Gender and Renunciation

As already noted in the beginning of this chapter, the Hindu renunciatory tradition has been systematically asserted through texts, in which descriptions of renouncers provide markers in which to gauge current renunciatory practices. Those whose practices do not fall within the confines of this textual tradition tend to get rejected not as being part of Hindu norms and practices. However, as also mentioned previously, there is a divide between what people believe by way of texts and what people do and accept within their own communities. Hence there is evidence of a vast array of renunciatory and ascetic practices that do not necessarily fit neatly within the context of textual understandings of renunciation.

A case in point is Ramakrishna, who was viewed as a unique sannyasi. In particular, the inability to clearly define his practices or to aptly categorize his role in his religious community has led to discussions about his unorthodox religious ideas and practices. For example, while Kripal asserts that Ramakrishna was a Tantrist motivated by his homosexual fantasies, many of his followers emphasize his sannyasi training by Tota Puri. I believe that these differences in interpretations of Ramakrishna's actions point to his uniqueness, and I argue that such uniqueness paves the way for viewing Sarada in a new light in terms of her own renunciatory practices. Ramananda Chatterjee, for example, argues that Ramakrishna was definitely a

sannyasi, albeit a unique one, due to his partnership with Sarada.[151] As already mentioned, understanding Ramakrishna as a sannyasi has been hotly contested by scholars such as Kripal. Whether or not Kripal is correct in viewing Ramakrishna more as a Tantrist is besides the point here. That is, if devotees and followers choose to view Ramakrishna as a sannyasi, whether or not he was Tantrist becomes a mute point.

What is important, however, is the fact that even though many devotees might have recognized Ramakrishna as conducting Tantric practices, they still viewed him foremost as a sannyasi. His marriage with Sarada did not conflict with this idea, nor did Ramakrishna having a variety of gurus, including the sannyasi Tota Puri and the Tantrist Bhairavi Brahmani. In fact, it was the way that Ramakrishna incorporated many seemingly conflicting ideas into his spiritual life that contributed to his uniqueness. Arguably, if Ramakrishna can be viewed as a sannyasi despite his unique take by being married, so too could his wife, despite not belonging to another order besides the Mission.

It is difficult to determine why Sarada does not get the same consideration in terms of her 'experiences,' but one can only assume that it is in part due to the lack of works dedicated specifically to her. As already addressed in the first two chapters, very little has been written about Sarada specifically, that is until more recently. For many, one could only know Sarada through writings on Ramakrishna.[152] When one considers how much later these works were written, we can sense the difficulty in sifting through the actual and revisionist histories of her life.

[151] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 61.
[152] Ibid., 62.

What we do know is that as Sarada became more independent after Ramakrishna's death; and like Ramakrishna, she would council followers either to renounce or to get married,[153] pointing to the diverse ways that Sarada thought one could live a religious life. The diversity of followers denotes her involvement in a greater community as a leader to be listened to, functioning similarly to Khandelwal's *sannyasinis* (the female equivalent to the sannyasi). Khandelwal, for example, found that many female renouncers attempted to provide marriage counseling and even organize arranged marriages for community members when requested, in addition to partaking in renunciatory concerns such as meditations and providing spiritual guidance.[154] For me, this is only one of many indicators that support my suggestion that Sarada can perhaps be viewed as an early model for female renunciation. In particular, it points to how sannyasinis, while renouncers in terms of their concern for meditation, liberation, and living in a community of fellow renouncers, also willingly and actively participate in worldly, specifically householder, concerns.

While I think Khandelwal's work is important in locating similarities between Sarada's and modern renunciatory practices, it is clear that Sarada does not fit neatly within Khandelwal's criterion for a sannyasini. For example, Khandelwal distinguishes renouncers from other Hindu practitioners as being marked by the death rite, in which a guru performs the rite for the disciple as a symbol of the follower giving up her rights to inherit property and to denote her commitment to renouncing the world. Once the death rite has concluded, the individual is officially a renouncer, and henceforth differs from the householder by way of dress and where she lives.

[153] Sil, 100.
[154] Khandelwal, 70.

Even though Khandelwal's interpretation of the rules associated with renunciation may not be agreed upon by other scholars,[155] I think the fact that marriage is not necessarily prohibitive to renunciation does enable one to assert Sarada as a renouncer. For Khandelwal, renunciation can occur after getting married, as long as the individual gives up her spouse—marriage is not an excluding factor concerning renunciation.

The remaining sections of this chapter outline the scholarship and evidence to support my claims that Sarada is, at least in some form, a renouncer. Whether or not she can be considered a traditional renouncer is another matter entirely. That is because if she is indeed a renouncer, she is certainly an unorthodox one, primarily due to the emphasis placed upon her as being the ideal wife and mother. Perhaps she does not fit within the context of being a sannyasini because she does not apparently, at least to my knowledge, undergo the traditional death rites required in becoming a female renouncer. However, there are glimpses, especially after Ramakrishna's death, in which Sarada performs rituals associated with the sadhu. In particular, in 1893, she performed the "Austerity of the Five Fires."[156]

The fire austerity or *dhuni-tap* appears to be primarily reserved for the sadhu, both of the Shaivite and Vaishnava variety.[157] Hartsuiker argues that there is a textual basis for the practice of the fire austerity in the *Vedas*, however it has since taken on a variety of forms from its original inception. Given that Sarada was illiterate, it is unlikely that she would have come across this ritual in readings, although perhaps she

[155] Denton differentiates, for example, between householder ascetics and those who have never been married. Those who have never been married are considered to practice more extreme forms of asceticism (93).
[156] Swami Ghanananda, *Women Saints East and West,* eds Swami Ghanananda and John Stewart-Wallace (London: The Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre of London, 1955 (1st printing), 1972), 108.
[157] See Hartsuiker, 14, 55.

looked at this ritual as a standard practice for renouncers during her lifetime. The five fires, which include four fires and "taking the sun as the fifth fire", could potentially signify the 'death rite' considered crucial in works like Khandelwal's. For Hartsuiker, the practice of the fire austerity is an ascetic ritual that "the Sādhu symbolically sacrifices himself to the fire" and as such the individual becomes the actual offering.[158] If we are able to equate the fire ritual with a death rite, then perhaps Sarada does fit in a more traditional model of renunciation.

In terms of understanding the performance of this austerity within the context of Sarada, it is apparent that her performance of this ascetic ritual indicates at least in some way her status as a renouncer. Though she may not have necessarily been given an official death rite of the sannyasini, according to devotees, she also experienced samadhi, like Ramakrishna. Perhaps Sarada's moments of samadhi, then, could also be considered in part a constant reminder of her removal from the world as that of a renouncer.

The following sections on gender and renunciation continue to outline scholarship on renunciation, although this time outside of the context of classical or traditional formulations. Specifically, these sections draw from ideas about the role of women in Hinduism, while simultaneously outlining the ways that seemingly clear divides between male and female ritual practices are not so clear-cut. Throughout this process, I draw attention specifically to Sarada's religious practices as they relate to renunciation.

[158] Ibid., 117.

Benhabib: Preserving the Public and Private Realms

One way in which to evaluate Sarada in terms of feminist theoretical analysis, is to evaluate what is being said about Sarada in relation to constructions and assumptions about societal roles. In general, Benhabib's work entitled, *Situating the Self*, addresses assumptions made by scholars,[159] about how society operates using conceptual analysis and philosophy. In particular, Benhabib identifies assumptions about gender within society.[160] These assumptions are, for Benhabib, inevitably linked to a concept of separate public and private realms, or what I term, "the public/private dichotomy." These are realms that should not, ideally, be defined by gender distinctions. In practice, however, Benhabib argues that the dichotomy falls apart due to the presumption that such distinctions between gender as assigned to a particular realm, must exist. As a result, Benhabib calls for a reformulation of the dichotomy while at the same time preserving separate, yet intermingling realms of the public and the private.

Benhabib asserts that the public and private realms are not absolutely distinct. These realms, in their ideal forms, overcome traditional distinctions and assumptions. They also represent and make room for each other. In practice, however, these realms operate quite differently. For Benhabib, the public/private dichotomy refers to a split in societal functions that differentiates between the public life, which includes politics,

[159] See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self, Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary* Ethics (New York: Routledge1992). In particular, Benhabib critiques scholarly assumptions about universalism and the notion of reciprocity in relation to the public and private dichotomy. The scholars she notes include Hobbes, Rousseau, and Rawls, to name a few (157).

[160] Benhabib's exploration of Gilligan's work, which addresses these assumptions specifically are found in *Feminism as Critique*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) in chapter four entitled, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other, The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory," and in *Situating the Self*, chapter five, of the same title.

laws, and patriarchal structures, and the private, which includes foremost home life and motherhood. The implication of this split is that women often get relegated to the private life without a voice. These categories are oversimplifications that are primarily dictated by gender. These generalizations are perpetuated by patriarchal politics (i.e. even in democracies, patriarchal politics misguidedly represents all in any given society).

In her analysis, there is use in preserving the public and private realms. The private realm includes our 'privacy rights,' which includes our "moral and religious conscience," "economic liberties," and "non-interference from the political state" concerning issues of religion or lifestyle for example.[161] Benhabib suggests that we must reinterpret the dichotomy so the public and private realms are no longer at odds with one another, keeping in mind that the realms currently function in a democracy dominated by patriarchy. Benhabib reminds readers that traditionally, "[q]uestions of justice were from the beginning restricted to the "public sphere," whereas the private sphere was considered outside the realm of justice."[162] Benhabib, however, seeks to include the private into the realm of the public without collapsing the distinctions between the public and the private. In this way, the private may partake in and be protected by justice. Thus, by reinterpreting our experiences, aspects of public practice no longer have to be exclusive to certain groups. Not only is this interpretation of the dichotomy integral to removing the absolutism of the dichotomy, but this interpretation is also key in establishing Benhabib's qualified universalism.

[161] Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 108.
[162] Ibid., 109.

Identifying an idealized notion of the public/private dichotomy is key to Benhabib's understanding of the role of women within modern history. In relegating women to the home in a private realm, Benhabib argues in *Situating the Self*, that: "…the early modern female has no place. Woman is simply what man is not; namely they are not autonomous, independent, but by the same token, nonaggressive but nurturant, not competitive but giving, not public but private."[163] In being restricted to the home, women represent 'the realm of nature,' and thus cannot become a part of history the same way that men can. Benhabib is very critical of these pathological developments in society. The implication throughout *Situating the Self* is that one-sided modernity (i.e. patriarchal politics) ultimately led to the concretization of the (inadequate) public/private dichotomy that is identified with gender distinctions.

To bring the idea of qualified universalism back to the notion of the public/private dichotomy, Benhabib's argument rests on the idea that women are inadequately relegated to the realm of nature. Women are banished to the private realm devoid of any rights that may be experienced in the public realm. This banishment of women to the private means that their primary roles of labour are mothers and housewives—the keepers of the "household of emotions."[164] Certainly this is a problematic development for women struggling to operate in the public realm. The practicality of Benhabib's conceptual analysis emphasizes the problems concerning how societies function in relation to gender. At the same time, it must also be noted that Benhabib only aims to present and make known the problems of traditionally-functioning public

[163] Ibid.,157.
[164] As coined by Agnes Heller, ibid., 155.

and private realms—Benhabib does not offer a program to help alleviate problems of an inadequate public/private dichotomy.

Sarada, so it seems, is relegated to the private realm. It is not a matter of whether this was by choice or whether her relegation was strictly in terms of constructions by scholars like Rolland and Kripal. In both cases, while they approach her from significantly different viewpoints, Sarada still becomes fixed by her gender. Her renunciatory practice is always defined in terms of her gender—as the celibate wife of Ramakrishna, as a devotionally tantric goddess figure, and as the Mother of India. While these are certainly aspects of renunciatory practice, they are discounted as being genuine because they were not her choice—they were forced upon her. However, even if renunciation was forced upon her, these actions are further described in categorical terms that fit within the private realm described by Benhabib. Sarada, for example, is critiqued as being too concerned about 'this world.' Because of this, she in no way renounces, and she is in no way divine. Both Rolland and Kripal hold Sarada up in terms of whether she was a good wife, a good widow, a good religious figure, that are ultimately measured in terms of her gender as categorized by the private realm. I argue that this limits what we can know about Sarada, especially if we as scholars are trying to evaluate her actions separate from Ramakrishna and separate from societal expectations of her time.

In conclusion, I argue that there is room for a feminist critique of writings about Sarada. This is ultimately needed because of what is not said, and what is assumed about Sarada and her choices. We cannot conclude with certainty how she felt about her role as wife to Ramakrishna, nor can we conclude with certainty that she did not

purposefully act in a renunciatory way. This is evident by categorical assumptions about society and gender, as outlined using Benhabib's work.

Part of Sarada's relegation to the private realm has to do with how she symbolizes a political movement, namely a form of Hindutva. As will be noted in chapter four, Sarada becomes a highly politicized figure in which other women could follow, and men look to for the expectation of behaviour of their women, especially within the context of marriage. Devotees of Ramakrishna do this by way of signifying the importance of Sarada, but only within the context of Ramakrishna.

i. The Domestic

Previously, I addressed the ways in which renunciatory practices have been viewed as rooted in a textual tradition. However, and also already mentioned, texts tend to exclude female practitioners and rituals primarily practiced by women, as these texts were written from a male perspective. The renouncer, therefore, actually indicates the male renouncer.

In an effort to identify women's ritual activity, the analytic category of the "domestic" has been aptly used, with the result being an awareness of Hindu religious ritual that exists outside of formal, institutional (i.e. traditional) structures of Hinduism. As Leslie Orr states:

> The acknowledgement of the validity and significance of such an orientation seems particularly helpful in the study of women's religious lives within the Hindu tradition, whose institutional structures generally exclude women from publicly recognized roles as renunciants or ritual specialists and whose

> textual traditions focus largely on men as the central religious actors and on transcending attachment as the primary goal of religious activity.[165]

While Orr's concern is with medieval Tamilnadu, her sentiments concerning Hindu women and ritual are not restricted to this time period or location. As indicated by the emphasis placed upon a Hindu textual tradition, even as early as the *Vedas* the exclusion of women is evident. A woman's role is even more so articulated in *The Laws of Manu*, in which women are not in any way to partake in formal rituals such as renunciation. But by addressing women's rituals in terms of the domestic, female renunciatory practices can be identified, for example by way of *vrats* (vows). Though vrats are conducted by both men and women, partaking in various practices reminiscent of a renouncer such as extensive fasting, vrats are primarily conducted by women.[166]

The nature of the domestic ritual, aside from the idea that it encapsulates female religious practices in the home, also includes specific reasons that domestic rituals are conducted in the first place. Again using vrats as an example of domestic ritual, these rituals are articulated by the hopeful outcomes of the rituals which are highly personal. As Orr notes when quoting Sered: "…domestic religion has to do with the lives, sufferings and deaths of *particular*, usually well-loved, individuals."[167] Pearson also notes this focus in her analysis of vrats, a ritual which theoretically constitutes a form of renunciatory practices were it not for the reasons in which individuals fast—looking

[165] Leslie C. Orr, "Domesticity and Difference/Women and Men: Religious Life in Medieval Tamilnadu," in *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109.
[166] Denton, 32.
[167] Orr, quoting Sered, 109.

out for family members, devotion, protection, and so forth.[168] In contrast, according to Denton, to label a woman a renouncer she must perform renunciatory practices for the sole purpose of moksha, therefore assuming the renunciation can hold no relational meaning or outcome.

Sered's establishing of the domestic as a way to include women's practices in the study of religion broadens the ways we can understand Hindu religious practices. At the same time, including actions that are solely conducted for relational outcomes fails to acknowledge other reasons that domestic rituals are performed. To return to vrats, for example, Pearson also found that women partook in this ritual, not only as a means to protect the family, but as a meditative tool, used to calm the mind and become more spiritually aware. What this means is that even though the domestic is a useful category, the ways in which it is used to compartmentalize practices is limited. Vrats is a perfect example of this, for even though these rituals are unquestionably part of domestic religion, the fact that they are performed for different reasons other than for personal gains suggests that the category of the domestic is more complex and diverse than the label initially suggests.

The same issue arises when discussing the domestic within the context of renunciation. The label, "domestic" enables us to reformulate traditional concepts of renunciation as it relates to women—yet if we follow models of female renouncers presented to us by scholars such as Denton, the label no longer applies. We can note this in the form of the *pativrata* ideal ("the worshipful service of one's husband"[169]),

[168] See Pearson, chapter seven, entitled, ""Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind": Meanings and Functions of Vrats in Hindu Women's Religious Lives," *Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fasts in the Lives of Hindu Women* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 193.
[169] Denton, 32.

in which a woman makes her husband the object of worship in service, and in some instances, celibacy. While in her service, a woman might indeed appear as a renouncer, she is instead viewed as operating strictly in the domestic realm.[170] That is, it is only applicable if we accept as truth that a female renouncer can only be considered a renouncer if she performs all religious practices for the purpose of attaining moksha, rather than in devotion, or amid familial concerns. But as with vrats, renunciation straddles both the domestic and the formal modes of Hinduism, as is evident by Khandelwal's and Miller and Wertz's studies.

According to these studies, the renouncer represents more than one who removes herself from the world. In fact, similar to the jivanmukti, the 'new' renouncer seeks to simultaneously renounce and live in the world, which suggests that moksha is not necessarily the individual's only goal. There may also, for example, be a firm commitment to dharma. Renunciation in this context, therefore, is not viewed as separate from dharma. At the very least, concern about the world and those within it are not viewed as contradictory to a renunciatory lifestyle. Following Khandelwal's thematic study for example, we find that individual renouncers actively engage in the communities in which they live—particularly for women who would not feel safe otherwise to live in isolation. Such activities of the renouncer includes supporting and arranging marriages,[171] counseling community members,[172] and interacting with

[170] Sarada could well be considered a pativrata, in that all she did was for Ramakrishna, but Ramakrishna was also her guru, which I believe complicates her role as one. Denton argues that the pativrata ideal is not a great signifier of a woman's religiosity because it is so routine and formal. Instead, she argues, that vrats are a much better way to measure a woman's spiritual commitment (32-33). I note this because I think it speaks to the limits of the ideal that Sarada followed the pativrata ideal. This may have indeed been the case, but it was not her only reason for religious practice.
[171] Khandelwal, 59.
[172] Ibid., 82.

individuals on a day to day basis.[173] The concern for moksha in these instances is not absolute nor does it encapsulate what it means to be a modern, female renouncer. At the very least, even if the quest for moksha is not a secondary goal, it is not the key factor that articulates what it means to be a female renouncer.

The category of the domestic is not only useful in discussing the construction of religion and who practices what rituals, but also contributes to understanding the emphasis placed upon differing roles in religion according to gender. That is, it enables us to articulate new ways to understand and analyze women's roles in religion and society as a whole. Particularly, it helps to delineate the nature of Sarada the householder; she is consistently described as the ideal Indian woman, carefully trained under the guidance of her husband. Because of the emphasis that has been placed on this characterization of Sarada, it proves difficult to discuss her in any other context. But by recognizing the reason for and complexities of "the domestic" we can argue that Sarada the householder encapsulates much more than a typical wife and mother.

That is, the category of the domestic and how it relates to female religious practice are not restricted to scholarly debates. Devotees of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sarada have also used themes related to a 'domestic religion' to describe Sarada's religious practices. This suggests that the categorization of the 'domestic' is not necessarily strictly a useful delineation by scholars, but has been used for some time by Hindus themselves (see chapter four of this thesis for further discussion of the private, i.e. domestic realm). Sarada, for example, became dubbed

[173] See ibid., 61 for an example of this interaction. In this instance the female renouncer helps to look after a woman's child.

the Mother of India, Divine Mother of the Universe,[174] and her "children" were all of those who came to her for practical help as well as spiritual guidance. Her public role, and if we accept quotes attributed to her describing her own position in the scope of things, was that of a householder and nothing else. All that she did, in terms of religious practices as well as her day-to-day living was in service to her husband Ramakrishna, both when he was alive and after his death.

In portraying Sarada as the quintessential householder, disciples describe her as sweet and pure, rising to the challenges faced with having a famous husband with many followers. Yet there are those, primarily individuals who were not disciples of Ramakrishna, who view Sarada as a poor, down-trodden woman, whose life was filled with disappointment. Even though hagiography consistently depicts Sarada as the ideal wife and mother, Carl Olson argues that "there are hints that their [Sarada and Ramakrishna's] relationship was far from exemplary. Periods of separation, isolation of his wife, frustrated child-bearing desires and possible lack of his wife's sexual satisfaction are factors contributing to the baffling interpersonal relationship."[175] Olson contributes this alternate reading of their relationship to Ramakrishna possibly suffering from manic depression,[176] while Kripal contributes it to Ramakrishna's latent homosexuality. The debates surrounding the nature of Sarada and Ramakrishna's relationship indicates that Sarada's role as the ideal householder is not clear-cut, and certainly may have influenced the direction of her religious practices.

[174] Nikhilananda, 298; as the mother of all men, ibid., 82.
[175] Carl Olson, *The Mysterious Play of Kali, An Interpretive Study of Ramakrishna* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990), 42-43.
[176] Ibid., 49.

However, while it bears mentioning, I think it would be a mistake to give this too much credence when discussing Sarada and her religious practices. Often in emphasizing Sarada's more mundane, 'human' qualities, the issue of her and Ramakrishna's marriage gets cited, particularly within the context of having children. Her want of children[177] is meant to prove that she was not concerned with spiritual matters. But I do not view the two as mutually exclusive, especially when one emphasizes the nature of the jivanmukti, who can potentially be married and have children while simultaneously being enlightened. Alternatively, even if we accept that Sarada had initially wanted and expected to give birth to children, there is nothing that exempts her from having a change in attitude toward spiritual matters upon realizing that this would never happen.

In my view, the example of Sarada speaks to the inadequacies of the polarization between a domestic religion and a formal one. While such categories are useful, as mentioned before, at the same time men and women get relegated to one of the two categories with no way to cross this imaginary line. I believe that the academic debates concerning the legitimacy of the jivanmukti speak to this debate, though it does not address gender in the way I would prefer. Because of the separation between the domestic and formal, Sarada must be slotted into the domestic and therefore analyzed and interpreted only within the category of the householder. This is despite the fact that many of her religious practices were not in keeping with the traditional householder ideals. Perhaps at the heart of this issue are the ways Sarada interpreted her own actions that did not coincide with householder duties. She managed to create

[177] Nikhilananda, 79.

acceptance of her actions, even if unorthodox, by way of relating them back to her wifely duties and her devotion to Ramakrishna.

The most famous example of this, which might seemingly counter the idea that Sarada was a renouncer, was her refusal to remove her bangles once she became a widow. Rather than removing the bangles, Sarada instead argued that Ramakrishna had come to her in a dream, telling her that he would always be her husband, even in death, so she should not behave as a widow.[178] Whether or not the dream was real is inconsequential to this argument. What this example does show is that Sarada was able to use ideas about the householder (i.e. the domestic) to assert particular behaviours that were not in fact in keeping with householder ideals. In this sense, Sarada moved outside of domestic religion to create her own space for herself.

Another, perhaps more apt example supporting the idea that Sarada was at least in some form a renouncer, is the fact that she initiated newcomers into the Ramakrishna Math after Ramakrishna's death. In addition, while some individuals sought Sarada out as a follower of Ramakrishna, some disciples instead became followers of Sarada upon meeting her. Much like Ramakrishna, both householders and renouncers alike sought her out for blessings, initiations, and spiritual guidance.[179] In this sense, Sarada functioned as a guru, though to my knowledge she never proclaimed herself to be so. Aside from Sarada's own disciples, however, I do not believe that Sarada was considered a guru in her own right. I argue that there are a number of reasons for this.

First, Ramakrishna as a spiritually advanced person took precedence over any role that Sarada played while in Dakshineswar. Being over twenty years Sarada's senior,

[178] Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1955), 137.
[179] For an example of Sarada initiating disciples, see ibid., 209.

Ramakrishna was already firmly established as being spiritually enlightened. Ramakrishna's fame as a guru was also heightened by the written works of Mahendrenath,[180] and Vivekananda's lecture series throughout Europe and North America. All that Sarada knew about spiritual enlightenment and the goddess had been taught to her by Ramakrishna, by way of his careful teachings throughout the duration of their marriage. Thus, Sarada was not viewed in the same way, although once Ramakrishna became world renowned (after his death), mythological constructions about Sarada's childhood were written, in which she was described as the embodiment of Sita and therefore was more spiritually evolved.

Second, and related to Ramakrishna's fame, Sarada did not become viewed as a spiritually advanced person in her own right, but instead was only mentioned in her relation to Ramakrishna, particularly as his wife. She looked after both Ramakrishna and his followers, feeding them and caring for them in illness. Her role as the caregiver was later translated into meaning that she cared for the world; however, prior to Ramakrishna's death, she was largely viewed as caring as a wife should—in complete devotion to her husband Ramakrishna.

And finally, Sarada used the language of a householder in order to navigate her changing position after Ramakrishna's death. I argue that by using Ramakrishna in her dreams, and by her continuing devotion to him after his death as denoted by her offerings and talking to him as though he were alive,[181] she was granted certain freedoms she would not have otherwise experienced. This is exemplified by the few

[180] He was a householder disciple of Ramakrishna's who wrote *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (*Kathamrita*).
[181] See Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 96, for an example of Sarada listening to Ramakrishna's various requests; for Sarada speaking to Ramakrishna after his death, see ibid., 127.

years immediately after Ramakrishna's death, in which the disciples had abandoned her in favour of going on pilgrimages. Their travels resulted in homelessness for Sarada and utter poverty.[182] Upon their return however, Sarada was able to resume her role as a householder (rather than a widow) by asserting her continuing connection to Ramakrishna. Primarily through her dreams and visions of Ramakrishna, Sarada was able to justify providing initiations, being a guru, and advising the followers of Ramakrishna; after all, she was his wife, so surely she would know what he preferred for his disciples. In my view, situating herself in the domestic sphere in this way enabled her to ensure continuing support from Ramakrishna's followers, as well as allowing her to build her own group of followers which would also help tend to her. By this I do not mean that she was waited on hand and foot. This is not the case at all. In fact, Sarada is known as being somewhat of a work horse, all for the sake of her 'children'/followers. However, this role as the continuing advisor for Ramakrishna's followers meant that she had food and shelter, both of which she lacked in the years immediately following Ramakrishna's death. In this sense, Sarada was able to use the ideas about the domestic realm to her advantage, utilizing her role as Ramakrishna's wife to push the boundaries of acceptable behaviours for someone in her position.

At the same time, Sarada is depicted as being greater than a typical householder, which denotes her importance in terms of her ability to support Ramakrishna's attempts at enlightenment. For example, in order to support claims of Ramakrishna's spiritual advancement, Sarada is described in hagiography as holy in her own right. Even from childhood, Sarada had exhibited a proclivity toward spiritual advancement. And it was because Ramakrishna had a vision of Sarada when searching for a wife,

[182] Ibid., 102.

that the ultimate example of a spiritual marriage came to fruition and was subsequently so successful. Sarada's role as a nun, mother and spiritual teacher[183] can be traced through her youth, in which she is described as possessing spiritual greatness, as indicated by her propensity to meditate, and through her extreme compassion, which was evident even when she was young.[184] Sarada's inability to read and write—rather than being an indicator of her ignorance and inability to be spiritually advanced—is instead a marker of her purity, for it represented her being untouched by urban (evil?) life.[185] It is this purity and sweetness which is attributed to Sarada so often that contributes to her consistent association with the domestic. Yet if we follow assertions that Sarada was the embodiment of Sita,[186] we also should recognize that while Sita represents the devoted wife, she was also a figure who straddled both the world of the householder and the world of the renouncer, accompanying her husband in meditative pursuits, and was spiritually powerful in her own right.

According to Swami Vandanananda, the question of Sarada's renunciation is a given. In a collection of observations about Sarada, edited by Mookerjee, Vandanananda states in this lengthy quote:

> To say that she readily renounced all thought of sense-pleasure, most common in family life, would naturally mean the pre-supposition that she perhaps cherished such thought some time before she renounced it. But knowing as we do her divine origin and the purpose of her spiritual mission in the context of Sri Ramakrishna's immense contribution to the modern world, we can hardly entertain the idea that one who was the visible

[183] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 29.
[184] Ibid., 30.
[185] Ibid., 31.
[186] See chapter four, footnote five of this thesis.

> representation of the Mother Goddess of the universe could ever have felt the least trace of the body-idea.[187]

Sarada is described by her followers as being so spiritually advanced that she is never even faced with the difficult temptations that are described as tempting Ramakrishna. For example, Ramakrishna is attributed with saying that he was only able to avoid consummating the marriage with Sarada because she had acted in the utmost of purity, never once apparently trying to get him to succumb to worldly pleasures.[188]

I argue that the emphasis on Sarada's purity contains dual meanings. On one hand, it denotes her as being the perfect wife for Ramakrishna, for if it were not for her, Ramakrishna would have never succeeded in his spiritual pursuits. On the other hand, at least in terms of Sarada's own followers, Sarada as being pure and chaste is directly tied to the performance of austerities. As S.C. Chatterjee argues in Mookerjee's edited volume dedicated to Sarada, purity can only be attained by austerities, and the purity that results from austerities can be equated with God.[189] The implication is that Sarada's own purity and chasteness contributed to her own spiritual advancement—and she was not reliant on her role as Ramakrishna's wife for this advancement. This provides another framework in which to think about Sarada's divinity: she is never tainted by sex; she is always pure and chaste; and she performs all practices, both secular and spiritual, with complete devotion to her guru.[190]

Sarada's own followers appear to be more willing to view Sarada as being in partnership with Ramakrishna, as his spiritual peer rather than simply being a devoted

[187] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 33.
[188] Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 40-41.
[189] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Ramakrishna*, 78.
[190] Ibid., 77.

wife. Her devotees tend to revere both Ramakrishna and Sarada equally, with little differentiation between the householding roles of wife and husband. Dr. Nanda Lal Chatterjee even goes as far to say that Sarada does not get enough recognition for helping Ramakrishna, and that she should be known for her "self-effacement and renunciation."[191] In noting both of them as ascetics, Lal Chatterjee implies that Sarada's initial extreme poverty after Ramakrishna's death, prior to being taken in by his original disciples, denotes her very commitment to the practice of renunciation. Lal Chatterjee states: "in her teachings, she emphasized the importance of true renunciation (sannyasa)—of living in the world, yet not being of it."[192] Her version of renunciation included praying for the end of the suffering of humanity, and in her mind, this did not conflict with her emphasis on renunciatory practices.[193] I think this view of Sarada's religious practices again points to the way that Sarada straddled dual worlds as both a wife and renouncer, indicating that she cannot adequately be contained in the domestic realm.

Sarada is on one hand the model of domestic life by way of her support of her husband. The groundwork is laid for this idea in that her origins are said to come well before her birth as Sarada, in the form of Sita. On the other hand, Sarada's purity is not enough for her to be considered spiritually advanced until after her life with Ramakrishna is complete. Ramakrishna is described as molding and shaping her into the individual that the Ramakrishna Mission knows her to be today. In this way, she is continually relegated to the domestic sphere, both as an object of worship, as she is the Great Goddess, and as a human householder, when Ramakrishna must teach her how

[191] Ibid., 81.
[192] Ibid., 82-85.
[193] Ibid., 85.

to cook and perform her chores. Her isolation in her quarters after the first year that Ramakrishna and Sarada were together are also an indicator of the ways in which women navigate spirituality within the context of their house holding duties.

Sarada's ties to the domestic sphere remain constant, whether one is placing more emphasis on her renunciatory practices, or her role as the ideal wife and mother. One can see, as will be noted in chapter four, how her role, and the inability to conclusively define her place within the context of Ramakrishna's beliefs as well as the Mission's, is highly politicized. The greater emphasis that is placed on her ties to the domestic sphere provides a means to articulate Indian culture and women's place within it. While we have spent many pages looking at renunciation within the context of text, Sarada, her followers, and Ramakrishna's disciples, tend to reject textual analysis in favour of domestic religion, including regional festivals and domestic worship specifically.[194] This, I believe, speaks to the complexities of understanding Sarada's religious practices as outside of the householding role in which she was primarily designated.

ii. Celibacy

Celibacy is one of the primary factors for being considered a renouncer, and with this in mind, I argue that this indeed, means that we should re-evaluate the ways in which Sarada's renunciatory practices are interpreted. Because Sarada is written largely within the context of Ramakrishna's 'spiritual greatness,' very little, if anything, is directly said about Sarada's renunciatory practice. However, her renunciatory practice is alluded to, if not solely explicated in terms of celibacy. I

[194] Ghanananda, 96.

argue that because of this, her asceticism is "gendered," or described in terms of her being a woman, specifically in terms of her being Ramakrishna's wife. For example, Sarada's purity is not derived from ascetic practices per se (in contrast to traditional male renunciatory rites) but from her unconsummated marriage. As Ramakrishna's "immaculate companion," or more precise, as his child bride, she was also a virgin. This again points to a gendered renunciatory practice. We have no knowledge that Sarada partook in sexual acts outside the marriage, signifying perhaps her duty to her husband, yet it also points to her life-long renunciatory practice of celibacy.

Sarada's renunciatory practice is never emphasized but categorized in terms of traditional female roles (which in many cases, she actually disregarded). This is because she is still classified in terms of being a woman and a householder as indicated by her title, the Holy Mother. Through her celibacy, she does not become viewed as a renouncer, but instead is viewed as the mother of all of India.

Sarada's celibacy throughout her marriage to Ramakrishna goes unquestioned, and I have not found any evidence to counter this claim. At issue for scholars is whether or not Sarada chose a life of celibacy; for if she did not choose it, then she cannot be considered having chosen the life of a renouncer. Arguably, a girl who was married by the age of five could not foresee this arrangement, and since a celibate marriage was not the norm of this time (in fact, she was expected to have children and carry on in a normal householder situation), it seems unlikely that she meant to do this in order to become a renouncer. However, I do not see this as weakening my claim that Sarada represents new ideas about the female renouncer in general. Instead, I view this as an opportunity to denote the ways that Sarada responded to the situation

bestowed upon her—namely that she actively turned toward spiritual matters and accepted a renunciatory life. I turn to Spivak here, whom I find helpful in navigating the issues of debate surrounding Sarada's celibacy.

Spivak generally tends to locate and assert individual agency in history and literature where previously none was assumed. Such analysis on Spivak's part makes room for scholars to find alternate meanings in historical situations. For example, in her article entitled, "Moving Devi", she finds that while the plight of widows is a horrible one, the widows that she encountered in the past have been able to create their own way in the world, leading relatively happy lives.[195] Even though Spivak's observances have their limitations, I do find this example useful in the case of Sarada. Dangerous to this analysis is ignoring the fact that many widows do not have the opportunity to create such a space for themselves. However, Spivak's observations ultimately speak to the ways in which the widows she encountered have been able to make the best of a bad situation.

Previously I mentioned that Sarada was able to use language, visions, and connections to Ramakrishna to assert a particular role for herself after his death. My initial discussion had largely to do with how Sarada was categorized as a householder—in order for her to depart from the typical expectations of a devoted wife, she used the visions in particular, as a means to gain some freedoms that would not be afforded her had she only been viewed as a widow. For example, by relaying her visions to Ramakrishna's disciples, she was able to assert some power over the process of initiation, and in particular she could justify the wearing of bangles even in widowhood. Like Spivak's widows, we can observe through Sarada's visions how she

[195] Spivak, "Moving Devi," 154-55.

was able to create a life for herself apart from that of a life of destitution designated for the typical widow. I think Spivak's discourse also speaks to the fact that we can look to Sarada's actions and words[196] as affirmations of her own agency. It is this process that allows us to take into account Sarada's life long celibacy in more ways than simply being forced upon her.

Secular scholarship dealing with Sarada and Ramakrishna's celibate marriage have at the very least, been problematic. Explanations concerning their celibacy assume that Sarada was completely unhappy with the situation but could foresee no way out. This take is come by very honestly, as there is one well quoted situation in which Sarada lamented to Ramakrishna that she would never have children of her own.[197] Ramakrishna's response to Sarada's concern was that she would have many children, namely in the form of his disciples, and that she would become a mother to all.[198] It is difficult to assert with certainty the truth of this conversation, as it is largely used as an example of Ramakrishna's ability to foresee the future, as well as to confirm the success of Ramakrishna's teachings, as indicated by his many followers. However, if we view this conversation as true, denoting a simple exchange between husband and wife, it certainly speaks to Sarada's concern about her role as wife and mother. But if we recognize Sarada and Ramakrishna's exchange as being one of many shared moments, it seems evident that Sarada wanting children was not a

[196] If we accept quotes by disciples as legitimately coming directly from Sarada.
[197] This discourse is quoted by both scholars and disciples. In particular, Sarada's mother openly laments Sarada's situation at having no normal householding life with children. Ramakrishna responds, telling Sarada's mother that Sarada will have so many children calling her 'Mother' that her ears will burn (Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 54; Tapasyananda, 41).
[198] Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 72.

consistent concern for her. For example, two other moments appear to denote her acceptance of the celibate marriage, both of which do not get quoted nearly so often.

The first example is when Sarada first visited Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar. Ramakrishna told Sarada of his hope to have a celibate marriage due to his life as a renouncer. He also told her that if she wished for him to fulfill his householding duty to her, he would consummate their marriage. Otherwise, he hoped she would join him on his chosen spiritual path. Sarada responded in this way: "The Mother replied without a moment's hesitation, 'No, Why should I drag you to worldly ways? I have come to help you in your chosen path.'"[199]

The second example occurs well into their marriage, while Sarada was in Jayrambati visiting her mother. Ramakrishna later joined them, and upon his arrival Sarada's mother complained that Sarada would never have children of her own.[200] With Sarada there while her mother spoke, one would think this would be another opportunity to voice her displeasure with her arrangement with Ramakrishna. Instead, Sarada was silent, with Ramakrishna responding that Sarada would one day have many children.

These two examples suggest not only Sarada's devotion to Ramakrishna, but also implies that Sarada had accepted, at least at some point, her celibate marriage and the idea that her and Ramakrishna would not necessarily have a typical householding life. If we accept these instances as true, remembering that Sarada never left any writing of her own, then we can infer that she had come around to the idea of their unusual arrangement, suggesting, at least in part, that she accepted the life of celibacy. But

[199] Gambhirananda, 46.
[200] Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, 54.

this line of thinking tends to go unnoticed by scholars. Instead, scholars look for excuses as to why the marriage was never consummated. These excuses, rather than taking into account Sarada's own actions and possible choices, are instead situated in stereotypical, even traditional notions of householding duties. The underlying assumption in these instances is that it is inconceivable that Sarada would accept a life of celibacy.

The first and probably most famous discussion along this vein is in Jeffrey Kripal's work, *Kālī's Child.* His focus is primarily on Ramakrishna, but because of his theory that Ramakrishna was a homosexual, this inadvertently has bearing on Sarada. For Kripal, the reason why Sarada and Ramakrishna did not consummate their relationship was because Ramakrishna was gay, not because he was spiritually focused. Therefore, had Ramakrishna not been gay, the marriage would have been consummated. The second and perhaps more obscure example is in the work by Narasingha Sil entitled, *Divine Dowager*. His work is concerned with emphasizing the humanity of Sarada rather than her divinity. This in itself is not objectionable; however in attempting to emphasize her humanity, Sil also cannot find a plausible reason why the marriage was never consummated. Instead, and because celibacy in this context is viewed as inconceivable, Sil argues that there was no sex because Sarada was not very attractive.[201] Again, there is the suggestion that the marriage would have been consummated, were it not for some sort of glitch in the relationship, only this time it is not because Ramakrishna was gay, but because Sarada was ugly.

Distressing to me is the fact that in both examples Sarada is not treated as an autonomous entity. Instead, her plight (in both instances the celibacy is viewed as a

[201] Sil, 44.

dysfunction) is only articulated in terms of Ramakrishna's willingness or unwillingness to proceed. Perhaps this neglect may have something to do with traditional assumptions about sexuality and renunciation. For both Kripal and Sil, there is the assumption that Sarada would definitely have consummated her marriage, even though I have posited two examples that denote the contrary. I think that this assumption has largely to do with the idea that householding women would automatically prefer to consummate their relationship. The spiritual aims as they are tied to celibacy are not accepted as sincere, except in terms of hagiography and other devotees' writings.

This perspective is closely tied to assumptions about renunciation as well, and reminds us how a renunciatory life is gendered. Khandelwal for example, notes that women's celibacy is viewed differently from men's. This is because the retention of semen is viewed as a means to retain spiritual power. Women, in contrast, have power, but it occurs in the sex act or absorption of the semen.[202] Khandelwal also notes that women's fluids are discussed in terms of their ability to produce breast milk. The milk is thought to contain power, much like semen—in fact, semen is often described comparatively to breast milk. However, the milk is always to be shared, and is viewed as a source for others that is taken from women again and again. This is not so for semen, which as mentioned, is retained and shared by no one in terms of spiritual power.[203] This understanding of female celibacy means that the notion of the female renouncer is further complicated by ideals about domesticity. As found in my

[202] Meena Khandelwal, "Sexual Fluids, Emotions, Morality: Notes on the Gendering of Brahmacharya," in *Celibacy, Culture, and Society, The Anthropology of Abstinence*, eds. Elisa J. Sobo and Sandra Bell (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 157-179.
[203] Ibid.

discussion on texts, the role of a woman is situated in the domestic sphere, in which her power is to have sex with her husband and bear children as a result. Women in general cannot achieve the same kind of spiritual power as a male by way of celibacy. Such attitudes are further exacerbated by the fact that menstrual fluids, over which women have no control, are considered impure.[204] This inherent impurity means that a female renunciatory path is theoretically viewed as impossible. I believe that this also contributes to ongoing academic assumptions that Sarada would never even have considered a celibate marriage had it been her choice.

Khandelwal's analysis points to the embeddedness of the householding role for women within the context of Hindu spirituality. This embeddedness—that is, a woman's primary goal is that of a householder—continues to be understood in present day, as shown in the works of Kripal and Sil. And this certainly problematizes the ways in which scholars may analyze the female renouncer. If Sarada, as a model of renunciation, continues to be associated only with her role as a householder, then alternate spiritual pursuits which are evident in writings about her by her disciples, never get carefully examined in an alternate light. However, by understanding these connections between householding women and sexuality, one can point to the limitations of such categorizations and re-evaluate what it means to be a female renouncer. This new approach is no doubt complicated by the fact that Sarada was indeed married. In Denton's study on female renouncers, this would exclude Sarada from the category of renouncer altogether. However, the work of Miller and Wertz

[204] Ibid.

points to more unorthodox understandings of renouncers and monastic communities, noting that there exists renouncers who are or had been married.[205]

Sarada's commitment to a celibate marriage seems to point to her own spiritual advancement, despite alternate readings of her life. For example, throughout their marriage, Ramakrishna viewed their celibacy as the final test of his detachment and potential enlightenment. By not having sex, Ramakrishna was able to solidify his commitment and ability to foreclose on mundane desires. According to Swami Saradananda, Ramakrishna attributed at least part of his success to Sarada's own purity and spiritual understanding. Coupled with prayers to the Divine Goddess for guidance, Ramakrishna argued that the Goddess had essentially answered his prayers for protection against such temptations by granting him Sarada.[206] In particular, Ramakrishna told Golap-ma that Sarada was the Goddess Saraswati, sent to this world "with a view to sparing lustful men their well-deserved punishment for ogling a pretty female."[207] However, it is my understanding that Ramakrishna also referred to Sarada as a Goddess in other contexts, such as to help him realize enlightenment and so forth. In addition, it was not only Ramakrishna that affirmed Sarada's divine status—Sarada herself had dreams about being in contact with the Goddess, as well as entering ecstatic states indicative of her spiritual advancement.[208]

Perhaps it is not adequate to project too much meaning onto the marriage between Sarada and Ramakrishna. After all, it appears as if even the followers themselves

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[205] Miller and Wertz, 3.
[206] Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, originally written in five volumes in Bengali as *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, Swami Saradananda, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), 349.
[207] Sil, 44.
[208] Ibid., 56-57.

were not able to articulate the precise importance of Sarada's spiritual practices. For example, Vivekananda argued that only Sarada could comprehend the tensions between wanting to look after one's family and leading a renunciatory/spiritual life, and as such was considered Ramakrishna's first disciple.[209] However this importance of Sarada as the first disciple is continually used as a means to provide a model in which married women should behave, not, as I would prefer to argue, a marker of Sarada's own spiritual advancement within the marriage.

iii. Initiation

According to both Khandelwal and Denton, both of whom are the primary scholars of female renouncers, in order to even consider someone a renouncer, they must undergo some sort of initiation. While they differ on who qualifies to be initiated in the first place, the ritual itself is key to even begin to consider a woman as a renouncer. At issue is the way that scholars categorize the female renouncer. A sannyasini, for example, denotes the adherence to different rules than that of a *yogini*—thus the requirements needed to be accepted for initiation into a renunciatory life may be different, or depend on the guru, or may vary from region to region.

To pinpoint the nature and requirements of initiation in terms of studying Sarada is made difficult by this, in addition to the fact that Sarada's life, at least in marriage, was highly unorthodox. Specifically, I'm referring to the ways in which Ramakrishna experimented with meditation and other religious ritual practices, which in turn had an impact on Sarada's own practices. For example, during Ramakrishna's initiation under Tota Puri, Sarada was largely ignored, at least for a time, yet while Ramakrishna

[209] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 2-3.

was under the tutelage of Bhairavi Brahmani the Tantrist specialist, Sarada was brought into the fold as a goddess to be revered and worshipped.[210] From this Tantric perspective, Sarada can, in some ways, be considered a *grihi sadhika*. Even though, as McDaniel's notes, a grihi sadhika is a celibate who leaves her husband to focus on spiritual matters,[211] Sarada can in some ways fall into this category due to her celibacy and spiritual devotion. That is, in many ways Sarada lived with Ramakrishna as a devotee rather than a wife. That said, Sarada does not fit neatly into this category, but I argue that this only speaks to Sarada's uniqueness and unorthodox life as a householder.

My central argument throughout this chapter is that being married does not preclude Sarada from being considered a renouncer. In addition to being in an unconsummated marriage, suggesting that she and Ramakrishna did not have a typical marriage expected during this time in history, Sarada did go through an initiation of sorts, although again atypical. Although Sarada's unorthodox life does make it difficult to compartmentalize her ritual practices into categories already laid out by previous scholars, it also highlights the ways that female renunciation cannot be systematized. Useful here is to note the ways that those such as Khandelwal understand initiation for female renouncers, and then discuss Sarada within this context.

Khandelwal describes in her opening paragraph in *Women in Ochre Robes*, the ritual of initiation for the sannyasini. The willing renouncer must first find a guru who

[210] However, there was tension between Sarada and Yogeshwari, a bhairavi. Sarada was not happy with the guru staying with them in Dakshineshwar (Sil, 42).
[211] June McDaniel, "Does Tantric Ritual Empower Women? Renunciation and Domesticity among Female Bengali Tantrikas," in *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 160.

will accept her as a student or devotee. This guru then gives her the robes of a sannyasini, a new title indicating her ties to the guru, and a secret mantra. Thereafter, a death rite is performed, marking the sannyasini's entrance into what I consider a liminal state—her symbolic death denoting her commitment to living the life of a renouncer. At this point she is no longer supposed to own property, her 'ashram' changes, and she is expected to focus on achieving moksha.[212]

Khandelwal's observations in Hardwar, North India, are certainly not overtly applicable to Sarada's life or practice of renunciation. However, for Khandelwal, the process of initiation is not so much important because of the specific rituals involved but more so because of the way this process marks the female renouncer as symbolically dead. In symbolic death, the female renouncer undergoes a transformation in status and treatment; at the same time Khandelwal also acknowledges that these women are indeed very much alive and living in the world. Therefore, even though initiation is important in that it marks the practitioner as being a renouncer, at the same time it does not necessarily entail the removal from the world that initiation suggests. Ultimately, Khandelwal finds that while women undergo traditional initiation rites, they do not necessarily adhere to traditional renunciatory practices after initiation, even though they are still considered renouncers.

Of course, this brings me, yet again, to the question of Sarada's initiation. Sarada did not undergo the typical initiation of a sannyasini as described by Khandelwal. Some would no doubt argue that she was never even initiated and therefore never any kind of renouncer. Indeed, there would be difficulty in ascertaining an official initiation rite for her. However, some time after Ramakrishna's death, Sarada herself

[212] Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 1.

began to initiate students both on behalf of Ramakrishna and for herself as a guru, which suggests to me that initiates going to her assumed some sort of spiritual lineage in Sarada, either solely because of her connections to Ramakrishna or because of the spiritual advances she achieved in her own right. Whether or not she was herself initiated was inconsequential to her ability to initiate others into renunciation.

So there is a grey area, from the time that Sarada first came to live with Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar to after his death, in which we can argue one of two things. The first is that her initiation by Ramakrishna was so unorthodox that it failed to be recognized as an initiation in the first place. The second is that there was absolutely no initiation rite, yet Sarada's spiritual power was such that she could initiate others and enable them to renounce. Perhaps the latter is in keeping with Sister Nivedita's idea that Sarada was not simply special or different, but that she was in fact responsible for founding a new religious movement.[213]

Nonetheless, it is certain that there was no official death rite for Sarada, even though according to works about Ramakrishna's life, Ramakrishna is described as being Sarada's guru. In *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, Ramakrishna, who had previously been uninterested in attending to his wife, changed his mind once under one of his many gurus, Tota Puri. Tota Puri taught Ramakrishna about living as a sannyasi, giving Ramakrishna a mantra as well as giving Ramakrishna the death rite of a renouncer. According to this text, Tota Puri argued that it did not matter that Ramakrishna was married to Sarada:

> He [Ramakrishna] alone is firmly established in the knowledge of Brahman who can keep intact his renunciation, detachment, discrimination, and self-awareness even while living with his wife. He alone has attained supreme

[213] See *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 6.

> illumination who can always look upon man and woman alike as the Atman and deal with them accordingly.[214]

This statement by Tota Puri apparently allowed Ramakrishna to deal with Sarada freely, rather than with complete avoidance. As a spiritual test, Ramakrishna subsequently began imparting both spiritual and secular knowledge onto an adolescent Sarada, which included, "how to serve God, the guru, and the guest; how to perform household work skillfully and spend money discreetly; and most important, how to surrender everything to god and become expert in dealing with people according to place, time, and circumstance."[215] So while Ramakrishna's teachings for Sarada were not typical of his male devotees in that his male followers did not receive the secular teachings of a householder, Sarada also received spiritual teachings like those she would receive from any guru. The result, according to Swami Saradananda, was that Ramakrishna became Sarada's Chosen Deity, and functioned as a model for which Sarada could and wished to follow.[216] In terms of Ramakrishna's own practice of renunciation and how it relates to Sarada, it is said that while Ramakrishna did not experience any kind of carnal lust for his wife, he also treated her lovingly as a guru would to his disciple.[217] Others describe his treatment of her as fatherly—in either case it was a relationship in which he taught her and guided her in an asexual way.

As Ramakrishna guided and taught Sarada in the ways of spiritual matters, Sarada increasingly became viewed as spiritually advanced in her own right. What followed were individual devotees who recognized Sarada for her enlightenment. Sarada's

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[214] Saradananda, 326.
[215] Ibid., 326.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952), 567.

abilities to generate her own following are evident in excerpts from words and sayings by Ramakrishna's disciples. Swami Gambhirananda, for example, argued that in Sarada's acceptance of people, she influenced "nefarious" individuals to become her devotees, two of which included Padmavinode, who was described as a drunken beggar, and Amzad, a known robber. Sarada's conscious ignorance of caste rules enabled her to generate a following that others could not.[218] In this way, she appears to me strikingly different than Ramakrishna, for although Ramakrishna is described as accepting many into his fold, at the same time, he is not known predominantly for his association with lower castes and individuals of questionable pasts. Therefore, while information on precise initiations of followers are sparse, there is no question that Sarada herself developed her own following of disciples after Ramakrishna's death.

Sarada's role as a spiritual teacher and guru cannot be questioned, especially with excerpts from disciples who talk of Sarada's ability to provide "speechless transmission" and "transcendental bliss" just by looking upon a follower.[219] Arguably, this came as the result of Ramakrishna's training of Sarada over the years, specifically in terms of training Sarada as his successor when he was gone.[220] Not only was Ramakrishna Sarada's guru, but he had trained her in such a way as to provide her with the ability to carry on with his message. This in itself allowed her to teach others how to meditate and to perform initiations.[221]

Yet the conducting of initiations by Sarada occurred only after Ramakrishna's death. These initiations included men and women, both laity and those wishing to

[218] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 13-19.
[219] Ibid., 28.
[220] Ibid., 33.
[221] Ibid., 42.

enter the Ramakrishna Order.[222] It is clear that her initiates were diverse and that the rites were performed within a number of different contexts—some for those that wished to have Ramakrishna as their guru, and some of those who actually sought Sarada out to guide them. So Sarada provided initiation in two forms. One form were the initiations that were conducted in the name of Ramakrishna, in which Sarada claimed that Ramakrishna spoke to her, relaying the appropriate mantra for the initiate. It is said, for example, that Sarada's first initiation was Swami Yogananda (Yogen), and that the initiation was conducted on Ramakrishna's orders which came to Sarada in a dream after Ramakrishna's death. The other form included the initiations conducted only by Sarada, for her own followers without Ramakrishna's consent. The latter initiations appear to be fewer in number than the former, but they occurred nonetheless. These initiation rites, though not in keeping with traditional sannyasi rites, were markers of the transition to renunciation. While Sarada initiated renouncers and householders alike, pointing to the diverse body of followers that Sarada openly accepted, it should be noted that Sarada never shied away from initiating renouncers specifically.[223]

For her own devotees, Sarada is viewed at her best when she is considered a Guru, spiritual guide, and preceptor. S.C. Chatterjee states in Mookerjee's edited volume: "She had a penetrating insight into the minds of the disciples, and she would, of her own accord, select for them just those objects of worship which would satisfy their respective personal requirements as well as those of their family traditions."[224] For her followers, Sarada and the performance of initiations were not necessarily

[222] Ibid., 55.
[223] *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother*, 7
[224] *Sri Sarada Devi, Consort of Sri Ramakrishna*, 79.

accepted as merely a connection to Ramakrishna. Sarada was able, of her own doing, to create mantras and items that were best suited to individual initiates, which indicates her apt abilities as a guru.[225] I think that this indicates that Sarada, while perhaps not officially initiated into renunciation by Ramakrishna, showed that even without that rite she was able to embody the respect and power of a celibate (renunciatory) guru.

Sarada's own autonomy, at least in terms of dealing with devotees, is even more evident when we consider that Sarada took in and accepted those whom Ramakrishna would normally reject. Sil argues that this autonomous Sarada came to being over an extended period of time, in which she eventually came to function and act like a divine being of her own volition.[226] Previously, such talk of her divine status had apparently been met with resistance on her part. As she grew closer to death, she is also denoted as having grown an increasingly detached nature from the world, in sharp contrast to her earlier emphasis on mothering. Devotees argue that this was a sign that she was aware of *maya* and rejected all familial and devotional attachments in this world.[227]

Conclusion

This section of my thesis has attempted to address the ways that one can reconceptualize Sarada's religious practices, particularly within the context of renunciation. This practice has drawn attention to the ways in which scholars continue to uphold text-based evidence for religion over and above other sources, as well as pointed to the ways that Hinduism in particular is treated as unchanging. By critically

[225] *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother*, 9.
[226] Sil, 77.
[227] Ibid., 95.

evaluating these approaches to renunciation, I have highlighted the ways that Sarada can be understood as a renouncer.

CHAPTER FOUR

SARADA AND HER COLONIALIST CONTEXTS

Sarada, like her husband Ramakrishna, is treated by her devotees and his as an apolitical figure who transcends ideas about power and colonialism by way of her advanced spirituality. And in fact, writings about Sarada show that she seemed to have limited concern for colonial rule, India's independence, or the struggle of the Brahminical middle-class, particularly while Ramakrishna was alive. Sarada was by no means a political activist. Yet alternatively, Sarada said little to make one believe that she supported British rule, either. She was no doubt aware of their presence, and perhaps even understood the colonialist connections to Ramakrishna's followers, but writings suggest that this was of little importance to her. At the very least, even if important, the political struggle of India was something that her followers, as well as Ramakrishna's, took care of. Sarada, in turn, took care of the followers.

Despite the appearance of neutrality, however, the image of Sarada—which was shaped by the specific cultural context in which she lived—included a political identity (or a "politicized Sarada"). In part a response to colonialism, the political identity or representation of Sarada was a construction of traditional Brahminical elements that spoke to the Western middle-class devotees emerging out of

Vivekenanada's wing, and the Hindu middle class male patrons who viewed her as the feminine ideal. Such a construction of Sarada seems to contrast to her own leanings which suggest behaviours and actions that differed from the Brahminical approach. Therefore, there is a politic of Sarada, one which was established about Sarada yet in some ways was contradictory to her actions. One might assume that because this initial representation of Sarada occurred while she was alive that she might have protested in an effort to assert her autonomy, but there is no evidence to suggest this to be the case.[1] The implication is that perhaps Sarada had at least a basic knowledge of the struggles for India's independence despite not being politically active herself.

In order to understand fully the ways in which a politicized construction of Sarada was formulated, this chapter outlines the political setting in which Sarada lived, with specific foci on gender and class. While gender has been my theme throughout this thesis, of particular importance here is the way class (i.e. the Brahminical middle class) contributed to the shaping of Sarada as an ideal model for women specifically and India in general to follow. The middle class is of the utmost importance here, primarily because Ramakrishna and Vivekananda's followers were primarily of this class, and therefore were the ones who foremost contributed to the writings and shaping of understandings about Sarada. I believe that tracing the needs, wants and concerns of the middle class in this context is also significant because Sarada, while of the Brahmin caste, was by no means middle class due to her life-long poverty and lack of education. In many ways she was counter to what the middle class struggled for and wanted women to represent—she was barely educated, nor was she concerned (at

[1] In fact, Narasingha Sil, in *Divine Dowager, The Life and Teachings of Saradamani the Holy Mother* (London: Associated University Press, 2003) argues that Sarada internalized her hagiographic biography to mirror that of her spouse's, Ramakrishna (34).

least actively) with political matters such as those relating to India's independence. And Sarada certainly did not evoke feminist tendencies or concern herself with, at least overtly, human rights. In part, this had to do with the fact that Sarada did not appear to be the least concerned with class and/or caste boundaries, as can be shown by her welcoming of the marginalized classes into her fold. While devotees and scholars may attribute Sarada's welcoming of the marginalized as entirely spiritual in nature (she is the Mother and they are her children), this, I argue, also has political implications that can be related to colonialism—namely that she disregarded the colonial and *bhadralok* (respectable people)[2] ideas that the marginalized represented an uncivilized aspect of India.[3] While perhaps Sarada was not politically active or even especially vocal about human rights and political independence, it seems evident that she did have opinions on how society should be. Though her statements on such matters are not explicit, they are indeed evident by way of her "rebellious" actions (rebellious insomuch as there were times when she countered even the wishes of Ramakrishna), as will be noted later in this chapter.

Regardless of Sarada's true views on such matters (of which cannot be asserted with certainty), we must bear in mind that the constructions of Sarada are the result of a product of her colonial times. And while a "Sarada" is created by devotees to suit the needs of many, she was not merely silent in this process. She allowed these constructions to occur while she was alive, and they continue now that she is dead. As

[2] Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 87.
[3] Susie Tharu, "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree, Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Literature," in *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 260-61. Tharu notes that in bhadralok literature, ideals in keeping with Victorian notions of sexuality, for example, meant that whole groups of people including "weavers, fishermen, and palanquin bearers"(indicating lower or marginalized classes) were ignored or reformulated to keep within Victorian ideals.

a result, we see a Sarada that denotes the disjunction between two worlds—Sarada as politically situated in colonial India, and Sarada as a product of traditional Brahminical ideals. She not only indicates a sign of resistance to a particular Hindu nationalist agenda, but is also implicit in them. As a sign of the resistance toward any traditional Brahminical agenda, we also see the ambiguity of her role and the way she is constructed—on one hand indicating the ultimate wife and mother, yet on the other rejecting brahminical practices befitting her caste—yet here too, she is complicit in the shaping of an idealized Brahminism.

This chapter explores these ideas further, particularly in terms of the ways political portrayals of Sarada stem from colonial Indian consciousness. In doing so, I will be drawing from the public/private paradigm, already used by scholars who study colonial India[4] in order to highlight the role of Indian women as a response to colonialism, and the role of Sarada, who as a woman, was a particularly useful symbol for devotees wanting an independent India. The cultural and political context in which Sarada grew up and lived is of importance here, as her childhood and later adult life was used, as least partially, to construct and legitimate Sarada as a nationalist symbol. Therefore, interpretations of Sarada's childhood will be addressed here, as they relate to the aims of this chapter, as well as her interactions with others in her adult life. In terms of Sarada's life in adulthood, my aims here are not to provide a biography, as

[4] For examples of discussions of the public and the private as it pertains to nationalism, please see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India, The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), and Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005). For examples of discussions of the role of women as it relates to education and the private realm, please see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold, Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community, Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). These suggestions, however, are by no means exhaustive.

this has already been provided in my introduction, but to identify her relations to particular groups of people—namely the Indian middle class, marginalized groups, and western women. Using the premise of the public/private dichotomy, my approach is not only to identify the ways that groups perceived Sarada within this context, but to also denote the general climate in which Sarada lived, and her response to the constraints and freedoms for her living in this period of time. Ultimately, by establishing her interactions with various groups, I will also be able to provide a greater sense of what it meant to have Sarada represent the Mother India, and all the nationalist idealism that came with it.

Growing Up Sarada: Colonialist Understandings

As noted in chapter two, "The Textual Sarada," myth building was a means to highlight the divine status of Ramakrishna. This creation of hagiography was true not only in terms of Ramakrishna and Sarada's followers who wrote about her, but also true of orientalists such as Romain Rolland, who sought to understand the divine status of Ramakrishna without critiquing the Hindu culture in which both Ramakrishna and Sarada grew up. While I have already touched upon the specific ways that this hagiography was created, and how it can provide information to a reader outside of the scope of the actual hagiographic text, certain aspects of Sarada's life, as outlined by hagiography, need to be addressed here.

Sarada's divinity, as expressed through hagiography, denotes a young girl who was spiritually talented and especially devoted in her young age. Her mother, having received a vision just before pregnancy, knew the child that she would give birth to

would be special.[5] In many episodes in Sarada's youth, her actions are reflective of the goddess Sati, the ideal housewife to Shiva.[6] Sarada's embodiment of Sati is key to the ways in which devotees understood and continue to understand her. As the ideal wife and mother, she does not overstep her bounds, and she supports her husband's unorthodox behaviours, all because she understands him as being spiritually advanced. In turn, she is then a model, as the embodiment of Sati, for female followers.

As an embodiment of Sati, the mundane aspects of Sarada's life go unnoticed or unquestioned. Poor, uneducated, and generally housebound—in these respects, Sarada's life was unremarkable. But at a time when child marriage was being debated, and viewed by the bhadralok and colonialists alike as problematic to Hindu society,[7] it is interesting that in her adulthood, Sarada continued to represent an ideal role model for other women. Married at the age of five to twenty-three year old Ramakrishna, her life hardly seems like an endorsement for change in the nationalist

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[5] It is said that Shyamasundari Devi, Sarada's mother, had a vision of her pregnancy of Sarada. Swami Gambhirananda states it as thus:

> There suddenly issued a jingling sound from the direction of the oven, and a little girl came down from the branches of the tree. She laid her soft hands round Shyamasundari's neck, whereupon she fell down unconscious. She had no idea how long she lay there thus. Her relatives came there searching for her and carried her home. On regaining consciousness, she felt as though the little girl had entered her womb.

Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1955), 16-17.

[6] Sil notes how Sarada is viewed and continues to be worshipped as an embodiment of Sita in present day (25); Ghambirananda also refers to Sarada as the embodiment of Sita (6); Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother, Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962) connects Sarada to Sita on a number of occasions, including disciples' response to viewing Sarada's living conditions, proclaiming, "She is in exile, as it were, like Sita!" (56), and in a more explicit instance where Nikhilananda compares Sarada to Sita (112). To my knowledge, Sarada does not refer to herself as Sita, but had referred to herself as Bhagavati, the Divine Mother of the universe (*Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother, Her Conversations and Teachings*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, ed. Swami Adiswarananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, 2004), xv), Radha (Ibid., 206), as well as Kali (*Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder, A Compilation of Revelations, Reminiscences and Studies*, by Apostles, Monks, Savants, Scholars, Devotees (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), 28). Pertaining further to the idea that Sarada was the embodiment of the Goddess, separate instances are noted when Ramakrishna calls her Saraswati, and Vivekananda refers to her as Durga (*Sri Sarada Devi, The Great Wonder*, 28)

[7] Tanika Sarkar, "Rhetoric against the Age of Consent: Resisting Colonial Reason and Death of a Child Wife," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28: 36 (1993): 1869-1878.

front or indicative of the quest to return to India's golden age. At the same time, interestingly, she became a model for the very same people who rejected certain practices such as child marriage.[8]

The colonialist context is evident in the ways in which orientalists like Romain Rolland discuss and interpret this aspect of her life. Rather than condemning the practice, and to avoid condoning it at the same time, Rolland notes that Ramakrishna and Sarada's nuptials were only possible because Sarada (at five years old, no less) wanted it this way.[9] Arguably, part of this had to do with the fact that by the time Rolland had written his treatise on Ramakrishna, the Mission was already well established—he could not critically evaluate the nature of their relationship for risk of offence, and at risk of highlighting what some might feel may be drawbacks to Ramakrishna's behaviours/nature/life. At the same time, it is clear that he wanted Westerners to read and understand the greatness of Ramakrishna. And because of this, Rolland had to convince his western readers that while child marriage was generally a deplorable practice, Ramakrishna and Sarada's relationship was unique in terms of its advanced spiritual content.[10] In terms of both perspectives, the romanticization of Ramakrishna's marriage to Sarada was a means to dissuade readers from critically evaluating the marriage, so that Ramakrishna's spirituality (and subsequently Sarada's unwavering support for Ramakrishna) could be accepted and appreciated.

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[8] To my knowledge, Sarada never openly condemned child marriage. However, she did openly support and respect Gauri-ma, one of her attendants, who hid a girl to save her from an arranged marriage. The girl subsequently grew up and was initiated as a nun (*Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother*, 66).

[9] See chapter two, "The Textual Sarada," pages 63-66 in this thesis for a discussion of Rolland's understanding of Sarada.

[10] See Romain Rolland's section, "To My Western Readers," in *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), 4-14.

In particular, Sarada is depicted as ordinary, yet extraordinary, in that while she conducted herself in the typical manner of a Brahmin housewife, she lived in a unique situation with her husband. Apart from the obvious—that is, their failure to have sex—very few wives could say that their husbands had a growing population of followers due to views that he was spiritually advanced. And while Sarada's true feelings of her situation are not apparent in the texts, the ways in which writers/devotees understood Sarada's childhood seem to impose (or create) Sarada's point of view on the matter. In short, Sarada knew and expected what her future with Ramakrishna would hold.[11]

Embedded in hagiography, particularly in the context of works about Ramakrishna, Sarada is interpreted as an everyday girl, though certainly having the qualities as one extremely devout in nature and spiritually oriented at a young age. While indicating her mundane persona, which is inevitably contrasted with the greatness of Ramakrishna, Sarada was average yet special due to her role as Ramakrishna's wife. Whether Sarada was divine or not—whether she was in fact an incarnation of Sati, or just a village girl who married a "madman"—either understanding of Sarada can be understood within its greater colonial context. That is, and as will be discussed further in this chapter, the image of Sarada as a goddess (in the form of Sati, for example) lent itself easily to the nationalist project in terms of Sarada being Mother India. At the same time, the image of a mundane Sarada was of equal importance to her sacred counterpart because as a typical wife she could inspire other wives to follow in her footsteps, also as part of the greater nationalist project.

[11] In fact, Sarada is described as predicting her marriage to Ramakrishna prior to five years of age (Gambhirananda, 25).

Sarada and the Middle Class: Public and Private

Sarada's relationship with Ramakrishna's (and thus her own) middle class followers was an ambiguous one. On one hand she no doubt appreciated the help they afforded when she was a wandering, penniless, and hungry widow. On the other hand, she did not appear to have that much in common with them, nor were they her subject of focus. All the same, this middle class understood Sarada within their lives as it related to colonialism. For example, while Ramakrishna is described by Parama Roy as "an unlettered and somewhat eccentric sadhu,"[12] Roy also notes that most of Ramakrishna's disciples, both married and unmarried, came from the bhadralok, who, as a group, generally distrusted—even rejected—traditional (i.e. Brahminical) Hindu spirituality. As Roy states:

> Most of these disciples were bourgeois in occupation and English-educated, well-versed in the Utilitarian and Positivist thought of the nineteenth century, and inclined to rationalism and skepticism in religious questions.[13]

While many of the bhadralok experienced skepticism toward Ramakrishna's emphasis on mystical experiences,[14] inevitably, they viewed Ramakrishna's approach to spirituality as a needed alternative to the British preoccupation with capitalism. This was particularly important in the sense that Ramakrishna was viewed as being able to steer young Indians away from Western materialism, and bring them back into the

[12] Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic, Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 93.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Vivekananda is certainly included in those who were skeptical of Ramakrishna's mystical experiences. While Vivekananda and Ramakrishna were in contact with each other between their first meeting in 1881 and Ramakrishna's death 1886, meetings were intermittent, and described as a "testing period," in which Vivekananda did not entirely accept the teachings of Ramakrishna (Gwilym Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service, A Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22).

Hindu (i.e. spiritual) fold.[15] Certainly Ramakrishna could not help but be a part of, and perhaps a response to, the British occupation of India, yet I hardly think that Ramakrishna's main aims were to purposefully inspire Hindu youths to look to its local religious traditions again. This would be counter-intuitive to Ramakrishna's tendencies toward an ascetic lifestyle, as well as his intense devotionalism, in which all he saw was the Goddess. I think, more aptly, that this interpretation of the function and role of Ramakrishna was one that was determined after the fact—it was a way in which to understand how his followers, most of whom were rationalists,[16] found themselves following one who rejected such line of thought as detrimental to the spiritual path. In this way, Ramakrishna was utilized as a means to reject colonialism. This did not mean living precisely as Ramakrishna and Sarada had done, for it would have been impossible due to Ramakrishna's advanced understanding of Kali and the universe. But what Ramakrishna and Sarada did do is offer an alternative to followers' lives and an alternative to colonialist ideals. Sarada, meanwhile, represented a part in parcel of the overall rejection of colonialism by Ramakrishna's followers, simply by way of default. That is, Sarada became a secondary symbol of criticisms against materialism because she was married to Ramakrishna.

The role that Ramakrishna played, and thus Sarada, as a response to colonialism is more evident if we briefly trace the lines of connection from Ramakrishna to Vivekananda. While Ramakrishna touted Vivekananda as one of his closest disciples, Vivekananda in fact was highly skeptical of the guru, and did not become initiated as one of Ramakrishna's disciples until a few months before Ramakrishna's death in

[15] Roy, quoting Saradananda, 94, footnote 5.
[16] Ibid., 93.

1886.[17] As a product of the upper middle class, Vivekananda brought with him his own ideas of Ramakrishna as well as his own ideas about spirituality. Unlike Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's concerns about Hindu spirituality were rooted in concerns of the middle class,[18] as well as India's independence,[19] and he took these matters and related them as much as he could to his own interpretations of Ramakrishna's spirituality. This in turn, impacted the ways in which Sarada was also understood, particularly in terms of how she was understood in the domestic sphere.

With the colonization of India came the re-articulation of the domestic and/or private sphere. The private sphere, at least in terms of the split between domestic and public life was already in existence prior to colonialism, as can be noted in the context of Brahminical Hinduism. Within this tradition, women were carefully and strictly placed under the control of patriarchal heads, as can be seen in *The Laws of Manu*. However, scholars such as Wendy Doniger also note that the rules demarcated in *The Laws of Manu* were by no means ubiquitous, or Pan-Indian. In fact, some scholars have argued that women, prior to colonization, had relative freedom compared to the subsequent systematization of brahminical laws by the British and Indian pundits.[20] Therefore, while women had marked the purity of a society even prior to colonialization, as can be seen in *The Laws of Manu*, the expectation and meaning of that role shifted after colonialism.

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[17] Ibid., 101.
[18] One aspect of this concern was the idea that India's independence could be gained via practical application. See Kristen A. Hardy, "Negotiating Worlds, Re-Envisioning Modernity: Swami Vivekananda and Colonial Discourse" (MA diss., University of Manitoba, 2006), 278.
[19] Beckerlegge, 22.
[20] Please note, however, that attempts by Brahmins to systemize and therefore hierarchicalize the caste system were evident prior to colonization. For example, Wendy Doniger argues in her introduction to *The Laws of Manu*, that purity and vegetarianism outlined in *Manu* was a means for orthodox priests to assert their power over the warrior caste [*The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991)], xxxv-xxxviii.

The family and the home became the central site for the articulation of middle-class cultural identity. Through the domestic domain, the bhadralok was able to establish hegemony over subordinate classes. As Banerjee states:

> The first four decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of a newly rising English-educated middle-class, who called themselves bhadralok, literally meaning 'respectable men' or 'gentlemen', and claimed to represent the 'nature of public opinion'.[21]

This group included professionals, bureaucrats, and servicemen that were needed to maintain British rule. Yet while we can say that the bhadralok represented at least in some form a cohesive group, at the same time, scholars like Bhattacharya argue that there has been a history of using the term too freely or loosely. As Tithi Bhattacharya notes, the bhadralok did not share the same social positions, either culturally or economically. That said, in general they did distinguish themselves from the lower castes and Muslims, viewing themselves as below aristocracy and above manual labourers.[22]

In general, the bhadralok were usually marked by their distinct (often Western) education, urban living, and the fact that they were Hindu. Wealth was not necessarily a factor, but could be used to display a certain status, such as being a businessman. In this sense, the bhadralok included not only the "comfortable middle class" but also the

[21] Swapna M. Banerjee, "Subverting the Moral Universe: 'Narratives of Transgression' in the Construction of Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal," in *Beyond Representation, Colonial and Postcolonial Constructions of Indian Identity*, ed. Crispin Bates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 79.

[22] Tithi Bhattacharya, "A World of Learning: The Material Culture of Education and Class in Nineteenth-century Bengal," in *Beyond Representation, Colonial and Postcolonial Constructions of Indian Identity*, ed. Crispin Bates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179.

"poor but bhadra," the latter of which had the education but not the wealth (indicative of what Bhattacharya refers to as "genteel poverty").[23]

Bhattacharya notes that it was the impoverished genteel that made up the bulk of the intelligentsia in the late nineteenth century. At this time "the petty-bourgeoisies, like other classes, are denied the full development of its class potential due to a coercive and extraneous political apparatus. The avenue of survival for them is thus higher education."[24] While some within this group had limited control in colonial bureaucracy, others did not, leading to the development of nationalism that stemmed out of the bhadralok. This nationalism, at least according to Bhattacharya, had the potential to eliminate class and social group differences[25] in the hopes of creating a cohesive movement.

The common thread that connected the bhadralok, therefore, was the education of this group, though even this had variances. According to Bhattacharya, *vidya* (education) marked the knowledge of the bhadralok as well as privilege afforded this group.[26] At the same time, the education that was indicative of the middle class was also very specific. For example, by the 1840's, traditional (i.e. Sanskrit) education waned, simultaneously leading to social changes in society that was associated with the loss of clearly defined caste distinctions and roles.[27] While Brahmins were consulted by the British to help systematize the caste system, at the same time, as colonial rule continued in India, this systematization was being rejected and/or

[23] Ibid., 179-190.
[24] Ibid., 197.
[25] Ibid., 199-200.
[26] Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture, Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 85.
[27] Ibid., 91.

reconfigured by the bhadralok. For example, Ramakrishna's brother, Ramkumar, who was trained in Sanskrit but could not maintain a job, had to self-abnegate as temple purohit to his lower caste patron, Rani Rasmani.[28] Ramakrishna, then, could no doubt be aware of this shift away from traditional Hindu education, given that it was his brother who also brought him on at the temple (much to Ramakrishna's initial chagrin due to his having to work for a lower caste)[29]—Ramakrishna's disdain for the situation, I might add, was eventually erased by his increased and erratic devotionalism to Kali.

In addition to the emphasis on Western education, the bhadralok also envisioned a "new woman," who represented the good housewife (*sugirhini*) and the ideal mother. This new woman was simultaneously referred to as the *bhadramahila* (the female counterpart to the bhadralok), who not only indicated the perfect or ideal wife and mother, but also emulated the Victorian image of the perfect lady (in the later half of the 19th century).[30] While the new woman was to emulate Victorian principles, at the same time she was understood as distinct from westernized women; this notion no doubt influenced the way Vivekananda later articulated the notion of Mother India, and called for the particular Brahminical behaviours of Western women disciples as we will see later in this chapter. But this concept of a new woman was not strictly tied to the rejection of westernization, but it was also indicative of a rejection associated with domestic servants and those who made their wealth by way of their imperial

[28] Ibid., 88-89, citing Sumit Sarkar's *Writing Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 226.
[29] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kālī's Child, The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 60.
[30] Swapna Banerjee, 79.

ties.[31] The new role of women, therefore, was multi-faceted and multifunctional in that it not only contested western assumptions about Indians, but was a means for the bhadralok to firmly establish their place on the moral ladder.

In general, women represented a new formulation as the markers of a (Hindu) society—from a western perspective, women's actions and behaviours demarcated whether a community was deemed "civilized" or not.[32] In the advent of colonialism, this representation was initially rooted in British understandings of proper moral behaviour as well as in science, particularly in terms of the health and physical treatments of women and their children. As representing society, the health, status, and treatment of Indian women by their male counterparts were used as justifications of colonial rule—the horrible plight of Hindu women, for example, was the reason that India was deemed as uncivilized, which could ultimately be rectified with British rule.[33] This was not simply a patriarchal configuration, for as noted Katherine Mayo's work, *Mother India*, British women (and not merely the British government) also looked to Indian women—their status and their plight—as a marker of civilized society.[34] This was not dissimilar to the ways in which British women and children were represented by their own British society, for the ideal society, at least according to the British, represented Victorian, middle to upper class culture.[35] This idea about society and culture was ultimately imposed onto the women of India (and in some cases, adopted by them) by way of laws and outreach in the form of education and

[31] Ibid., 80.
[32] Chatterjee, 118.
[33] See Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1927) for an example of this attitude. Mayo's work is discussed at length in Sinha's *Specters of Mother India*.
[34] Sinha, 63.
[35] Tharu, 260.

medical centers established strictly for the care of women.[36] At the same time, aside from the establishment of non-government institutions, little was actually done to change the role of women as young wives and mothers—at least, women had little recourse had she wanted to use new formulations of laws that were meant to protect them.[37]

This re-articulation of Indian women was not restricted to a colonialist hand, but as noted, was also part of the Hindu middle-class project, as part of their response to colonial power. It was the bhadralok who, for example, worked closely with the British Empire. And it was this same middle class who sought to prove that India consisted of a civilized culture by showing women as partners in marriage. In many ways, therefore, one can see the emergence of a wife who was not only expected to adhere to traditional ways, but were also expected to adapt to new ideas about wifehood.[38] She was not only to tend to the duties of the home, but she was also be educated in the interests of her husband, including literature and politics, so that she would be a better partner to him.[39] The bhadralok viewed this as a positive development for women, yet some scholars, such as Partha Chatterjee, note that this was yet another way in which Hindu women could be controlled and ultimately oppressed.[40] According to Sikata Banerjee, the less power men had in India as a result of colonial rule, the more they sought to control the domestic sphere—a sphere that

[36] For examples of discussions on the education of women, see, Jane Haggis, "Ironies of Emancipation: Changing Configurations of 'Women's Work' in the 'Mission of Sisterhood' to Indian Women," *Feminist Review* 65 (Summer, 2000): 108-126; and Mary Hancock, "Home Science and the Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 35: 4 (2001): 871-903

[37] For example, see Viswanathan, 79-80. Indian women who converted to Christianity had expected to be protected by British law, yet they tended to be categorized by the religion (be it Hindu or Muslim) by the religion they had renounced.

[38] Chatterjee, 127.

[39] Ibid., 128-129.

[40] Ibid., 116.

colonialism could not, or at least did not, control.[41] From this perspective, autonomy and power for Indian people living under the thumb of colonialism was gained first within the private realm and then the public realm.[42]

Scholars such as Bhattacharya, argue that the notion of the public and private in association with the bhadralok should not be so clearly delineated. That is, to suppose, as Chatterjee does, that an elite consciousness first emerged in the private realm, only then to be able to be applied to the public realm is a mistake—to do so merely replicates the orientalist nature of the material and spiritual split.[43] However, make no mistake that the delineations between public and private is a useful one, and certainly takes into account the various ways in which the bhadralok conceived of their place in the political scheme of things, as well as the place of Indian women during colonial times.

The tensions between public and private realms, between tradition and modernity as exemplified by the 'women's question', denote the difficulty in determining a woman's place in nineteenth century India. On one hand, reformers were seemingly supportive of new movements to benefit women. On the other hand, the concepts under which reformers chose to debate the status of women were inadequate.

While scholars like Chatterjee argue that the "privatization" of women's rights did not mean the dissipation of the struggle of those rights, others, like Uma Chakravarti disagree. Because Indian nationalists accepted the patriarchal systems presented by the British, they continued to perpetuate certain patriarchal standards that inhibited women. For Chakravarti, the continued privatization of women's rights

[41] Sikata Banerjee, 19.
[42] Chatterjee, 120.
[43] Bhattacharya, *Sentinels of Culture*, 23.

meant that genuinely equal rights could not be attained. Instead, their relegation to the private realm only increased women's responsibilities, adding to their overall detriment. As Chakravarti states:

> While the separation between public and private and a division of labour continued to govern the female world centred around reproduction, the role of reproduction was enlarged to encompass the nurture of a whole class and the creation of a new culture. The residences of the middle classes for the reformers became 'homes,' an affective and moral unit rather than a space occupied by a conglomerate of individuals, thus acquiring an 'ideological clarification'. Into this reworked female world, which still corresponded to a broad division between public and private as before, the new project of mothering and conjugality was introduced, whose central actor was the young wife, the new woman of the present and future. The responsibility of turning the older household into a 'home' and creating an affective unit was that of young wives and it was to prepare them for such a responsibility that education was required. Thus, middle-class reformers were giving women a defined and limited 'agency', making them social actors through education for specific purposes.[44]

Even though women were seemingly allowed more independence as seen by their increased education and ability to engage in the struggles of Indian nationalism, their roles continued to be defined by men. While women's roles appeared extensive, in actuality the status of women continued to be limited due to their absolute connections to the home. Tanika Sarkar emphasizes this point when she writes in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, that for women, "the public sphere, at that stage [post 1870], remained integrally linked to domestic issues."[45] Women's independence, therefore, was only debated upon and was acceptable when addressed within the context of home life.

This is why, for example, independent and educated women like Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922) had difficulties when it came to demanding equality for

[44] Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History, The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 204.
[45] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation, Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 25.

women. In many ways, Ramabai represented the nationalist concept of the ideal Hindu woman—she was highly educated, partook in public life by offering talks to inspire other women,[46] published her critiques of the brahmin caste,[47] established the first home for Hindu widows,[48] and at least initially, maintained her status as a Hindu.[49] But contrary to the ideal she represented, Ramabai was not satisfied to discuss women's issues strictly in terms of the home. Her assertion for complete independence; an independence that was not at all tied to a nationalist agenda, frustrated the reformers who supposedly supported her. That said, Ramabai's conversion to Christianity further drew attention to fissures between nationalists. As Meera Kosambi states, even women were "aggravated by Ramabai's English and Christian connection, which added a nationalist and anti-imperialist dimension to the issue."[50] Their hostility toward her and the issues she addressed indicates problems with the nationalist stance on the status of women.

Just as education was a way to demarcate the bhadralok from others, the re-articulation of the private realm has been closely associated with how women were educated, and what topics of study they should follow. As a greater emphasis on nationhood emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indians called for greater education of women. The Hindu elite did not want women to be Western-educated like men, as they thought this would lead to disastrous consequences, but instead

[46] Meera Kosambi, "Women, Emancipation and Equality: Pandita Ramabai's Contribution to Women's Cause," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 (October 29, 1988): WS39.
[47] See Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's *The High-Caste Hindu Women* (Philadelphia: J.B. Rodgers Print Co., 1901).
[48] Kosambi, WS42.
[49] Ibid. Ramabai eventually converted to Christianity, citing the emphasis of love and forgiveness in the tradition.
[50] Ibid., WS48.

thought that the women should be educated on household matters.[51] At the same time, Charu Gupta's work on Uttar Pradesh shows that the Hindu elite recognized that women had to be educated at least a little bit outside of the realm of the household in order to prove that the nation was as civilized as the British.[52] A fine balance had to be struck, in which women were educated about running a smooth household, yet were also educated in some worldly matters including literature, math and science. The idea that they were not to be "too educated" was rooted in the idea that should they not be educated enough, or should they be educated too little, both instances would lead to an unhappy home life.[53]

The notion of educating a woman with the right mix of standardized and household information again points to the idea that women were the bearers of culture, as has already been discussed in my introduction. As the bearers of culture, they not only held the blame with what was wrong with society, but also represented all that should be preserved in it. As Gupta states: "Women symbolized all that was wrong with the system, its backwardness and disorder, and at the same time they were the core of family life; they also contained all that was worth preserving."[54] In general, this meant that there was tremendous pressure placed upon Hindu women, who had to adhere to the traditional rules and notions prescribed by her mother-in-law, yet in addition to that heavy work load, had to appease her Western-educated husband with extra study. While attempting to please her husband, she was simultaneously alienated from the household in which she lived. To educate herself in other matters

[51] Gupta, 163.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 166.
[54] Ibid.

aside from the household, the wife was able to listen to her husband and understand him in these matters. She was not expected to actively partake in discussions, but instead provided the support and inspiration he needed to help gain autonomy from British power.[55] In this way, the education of women was limiting, both in its systematization and by way of its uses by/for them.[56]

While the education of women was a concern for the middle classes, this was not a concern of Ramakrishna. While Sarada was largely illiterate and uneducated, writings about Ramakrishna suggest that he taught her all the knowledge needed to run a smooth household, including food preparation, cooking and etiquette;[57] with his knowledge, Sarada even attempted to learn to read.[58] Because Sarada had married him when she was five, and because he did not live at home with his mother, the teaching of Sarada about running a house hold seems to have fallen (for whatever reason) into his hands rather than his mother's. On occasions when Sarada would visit him at his mother's home beginning when she was approximately eleven years old, Ramakrishna would take the time to teach her on cultural and spiritual matters. When Sarada finally lived permanently with Ramakrishna in Dakshineshwar when she was 17, Ramakrishna again carefully went over how she should prepare and cook for him to suit his needs. It is said, for example, that Ramakrishna had a very weak stomach, and

[55] Ibid., 172.
[56] Ibid., 173, with the one exception, it seems, being Benares widows [see Gupta, footnote 167].
[57] Gambhirananda, 32.
[58] Ibid., 30-31. Interestingly, Ramakrishna was never present during these times. The first instance occurred when Sarada was a young girl staying with Ramakrishna's family; the second instance happened in Dakshineshwar, when a young girl would teach Sarada how to read while Ramakrishna was away for medical treatment.

that only Sarada, after having been taught everything by him, could provide him with the food that he needed.[59]

Sarada's education, therefore, was not only limited, but largely restricted to more traditional understandings of how women should be educated. However, Ramakrishna's devotees view things slightly differently. They argue that Sarada's education, while including the mundane things such as running a household, also entailed spiritual teachings that Sarada quickly understood and absorbed. These spiritual teachings did not include the studying of texts (such as the case of Pandita Ramabai), for as already mentioned, Sarada was largely illiterate. However, it did entail understanding Ramakrishna's spiritual perspective, and the practice of meditations as well as recognize that she was, indeed, a formulation of the goddess.[60] In this sense, Sarada was well-taught in the area of ritual, puja, and spiritual purity. What the writings by Ramakrishna's devotees fail to note, however, is that according to recordings of Sarada's early life, this sort of education was already well under way in her childhood, as her parents are described and were considered orthodoxly devout.[61]

While Sarada's education cannot really be seen as reflecting the concerns of the middle class Hindu, the notion of the relationship between husband and wife can. It was thought that through the education of their women, wives would not be merely subordinate to their husbands, but stand as a partner in helping her husband strive for

[59] Nikhilananda, 30-31.
[60] Gambhirananda, 114; Nikhilananda, 82.
[61] Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother*, 6th edition (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), 14.

the independence of India.[62] As a partner, she could support her husband by way of her new education. While Sarada and Ramakrishna's marriage was not rooted in concerns for an independent India, the middle-class devotees who wrote about them describe their marriage in a similar context. Because Sarada could understand and adhere to Ramakrishna's teachings, she became a partner to Ramakrishna, inspiring him and his followers. As his first disciple, Sarada could continue his mission even after Ramakrishna's death. It is difficult to determine how much Sarada and Ramakrishna viewed their marriage as a partnership, but it is evident that Ramakrishna's devotees in particular used ideas already prevalent in India and transposed those ideas onto Sarada's and Ramakrishna's marriage.

Interestingly, it was under the premise of their spiritual partnership that Sarada was able to assert perhaps more unorthodox behaviours after Ramakrishna's death. Because she was viewed as Ramakrishna's inspiration, help mate, and first devotee, she was able to assert particular truths that may have otherwise been viewed as unbecoming of a widow. Several examples can be noted, with the primary and most repeated, one being her refusal to remove her bangles after her husband's death. In death, Ramakrishna was able to continue to "educate" Sarada through dreams, and in a dream shortly after his death, he told Sarada that they would always be husband and wife, and that because of this she did not have to mark herself as a widow.[63] Perhaps her ability to formulate her own understanding and identity by way of this "education"

[62] Chatterjee, 130.
[63] Nikhilananda, , 93-94.

enabled her, like the widows of Benaras,[64] to reject stereotypes about widowhood and begin to establish her own ideas about asceticism.

In turn, Sarada's education by Ramakrishna enabled her to couch her own ideas about spirituality in Ramakrishna's name, initiating and teaching Ramakrishna's followers in new ways. This is not unlike Vivekananda, who after Ramakrishna's death, was also able to teach others his own ideas about spirituality (i.e. Neo-Vedanta) while simultaneously attributing it to his spiritual education with Ramakrishna. However, this approach could not work for everybody, and only those who were considered part of Ramakrishna's "inner circle" were able to assert their own ideas about spirituality as authentic as a result of Ramakrishna's teachings.[65]

Ramakrishna's early followers, with Vivekananda included, consisted of middle-class, Western educated men, who found themselves unemployed even though they were trained to be lawyers (again, Vivekananda) and other white collar workers. This mass unemployment marked the shift of focus by the British Empire to hire Indian workers to hiring and bringing in their own British citizens to work in India. This shift brought increasing disenchantment with the Empire, and marked the increasing urgency for Indians to assert their own, independent nation. At the same time, it is not evident in the first recordings about Ramakrishna's early devotees that this was a preoccupation of theirs when seeing Ramakrishna. It seems, in large part, that Ramakrishna was unconcerned of this plight. Instead, Ramakrishna spoke of a universality, which could be construed as an equality between the British and others,

[64] See Gupta, 173, footnote 167.
[65] Ramakrishna's "inner circle" was foremost comprised of fellow renouncers, but it also included a handful of householders, such as M.

in which *samadhi* could be found in all religions.[66] While scholars have argued that Ramakrishna's dabbling in other religious traditions was superficial at best,[67] at the same time this notion of universality possibly spoke to Ramakrishna's early followers as a way to assert a Hindu identity that was on par with Christianity (a growing number of missionaries were evident in India at this time). And perhaps this attributed to Ramakrishna's success in gaining ascetic (unmarried) devotees from the middle classes.

Vivekananda took this message of Ramakrishna's, and reconstructed it to also apply to issues surrounding unemployment. Rooted in Vivekananda's own experiences of India, Vivekananda took his concerns about the needs of the Indian people such as food, education,[68] and an economic revitalization, and applied them to Ramakrishna's understanding about the universality of spirituality[69] (We are all alike, you should help us).[70] The reasons for this shift were not far off from Vivekananda's own experiences. Initially part of a wealthy family,[71] after the death of his father, his family was extremely poor,[72] and though he thought he would be able to provide for them once he was a lawyer, he could not due to lack of work. His family had

[66] Roy, 94-95.
[67] Ibid., 95.
[68] For Vivekananda's stance on education, see Amiya Prosad Sen, *Swami Vivekananda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64-65.
[69] Ramakrishna's notion of the universality of spirituality is exemplified by his testing of the various world religions, including Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity (Roy, 94-95). For Vivekananda's understanding of universal spirituality as well as his application of it in the context of the West, see Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West, The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 33. For his primary speech given at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, stating the universality of religions, see *The World Congress of Religions: The Addresses and Papers Delivered Before the Parliament and an Abstract of the Congresses Held in the Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A., August 25 to October 15, 1893: Under the Auspices of the World's Colombian Exposition*, ed. J.W. Hansen (Vancouver, B.C.: J.M. MacGregor Publishing, Co, 1894), 375.
[70] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1847), 20.
[71] Hardy, 69.
[72] Ibid., 79.

experienced the hunger and poverty, which could be viewed as a result of colonial enterprise.

Vivekananda was quite young when he first met Ramakrishna, and scholars suggest that there was hesitation on Vivekananda's part to join Ramakrishna's growing monastic community. It seems that Vivekananda was torn between Ramakrishna's treatises on spirituality and the practical applications of the Brahmo Samaj, of which he was already a member.[73] The concerns of Vivekananda reflected the general concerns of the young men of his age and status: British rule could not help the Indian nation, and instead Indians (Hindus) must turn inward for their own emancipation. This came as a result of young, middle class Hindus (the bhadralok) first aspiring and joining in on what the British had to offer them—a western education—with the promise of work and prosperity. When these didn't come, these same young men began to re-evaluate their previous co-operation and adherence to British ideology.

These men, thus disenchanted with British rule and the broken promises, began to turn to nationalist ideology to assert independence. This was the setting in which many of the young men turned to Ramakrishna. Vivekananda, for example, also saw the Brahmo Samaj as limiting,[74] perhaps further reflection of British institutionalization of Hindu culture, and so instead turned to Ramakrishna's spiritual teachings as an alternative, not to mention that it was something that was more "authentically" Hindu (i.e. Brahminical). I argue that for Vivekananda, and those like

[73] Roy, 101.
[74] Sen, 22. Hardy argues that Ramakrishna offered a brand of spirituality that Vivekananda's father, who was a Hindu reformer, and his mother, who practiced "respectable forms of private devotion" could not (76).

him who joined Ramakrishna in Dakshineshwar, the move was politically motivated, in that under Ramakrishna they could formulate an alternative identity that was removed from anything that could be perceived as "British-influenced." At the same time, however, and certainly after Ramakrishna's death, these same young men took that tradition and merged it with growing concerns about colonial rule in India, as well as a specifically Hindu identity. The consciousness of this blending of traditional Hindu spirituality and new concern over independence was not necessarily explicit, but emerged over time as a result of Ramakrishna's death.

More clearly put, young men of the Brahmo Samaj found appeal in a figure such as Ramakrishna because he appeared to be somebody who was 'authentically Hindu' during a time when Indian (i.e. Hindu) identity was viewed as constantly threatened by colonialist (i.e. Western/Christian) influence.[75] While Vivekananda was certainly drawn to Ramakrishna for similar reasons, his views on Ramakrishna was more ambiguous, as he believed Ramakrishna's withdrawals into samadhi to be mental illness, and was embarrassed by some of Ramakrishna's other, unorthodox behaviours.[76] Thus while young members of the Samaj initially sought Ramakrishna as an alternative to imperialist religiosity, at the same time (and largely under the subsequent leadership of Vivekananda) Ramakrishna became reformulated and emphasized as a guru who personally rather than intellectually influenced his followers.[77] As a result, Vivekananda spoke little of Ramakrishna publically,

[75] Roy, 103.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 105.

promoting instead a "masculine" activism that departed from Ramakrishna's popular spirituality.[78]

Important to note here is that Vivekananda was not all that concerned about women's rights or reforms that were the buzz of his time. But he did outreach to the Indian middle-class, the group who predominantly spear-headed such reforms. Even though these reformers were apparently well-meaning in their attempt to gain equal rights for women, public position like those of Rammohun's and Ranade's continued to have grave implications for women. For example, Lata Mani argues that, "the equation of scripture, law and tradition, and the representation of women *as* tradition produced a specific matrix of constraints. Within which the question of sati was debated."[79] The debate of the 'women's question' was not only about discussing women's issues in a public forum, but was also about the ways in which reformers could appropriate and reformulate colonial discourse to give superiority to concepts of nationalism.

Once the question of difference was firmly established by Indian nationalists (that is, the difference between Indian and British), the "women's question" disappeared, apparently subsumed under the broader assertion of Hindu nationalism. Chatterjee argues that this late nineteenth century development was not a result of the neglect of women's rights, but was instead a result of "nationalism's success in situating the "women's question" in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of

[78] Ibid.
[79] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India," in *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 91.

political contest with the colonial state."[80] According to Chatterjee, women were able to assert their freedom by acquiring an education while simultaneously living in a household free from subjugation. In the process, these women gained societal acceptance from within the private domain rather than by public forum.[81]

Sarada was not so much caught up in the struggle between maintaining Brahminical tradition and adapting to a new (perhaps British?) way of being, or the struggle between the public and private domains. However, she would have been aware of this struggle, at least in terms of the concerns of the Bengali Hindu middle-class. This is because most of Ramakrishna's followers were part of this class, and she had regular interaction with them (see M.'s *Kathamrita*). In particular, she had intermittent interaction with the wives of the followers of Ramakrishna, and single women who sought Ramakrishna out. While Ramakrishna had little time for women (as tied to his stance against women and gold [kaminikanchan]), he would nonetheless send them to Sarada's hut to be fed or to sleep there for the night. Thus, Sarada spent much time with them in the confines of her living quarters.[82]

In general, Sarada adhered to a very traditional Brahminical lifestyle, in which her role as a wife was clearly in subordination to her husband's needs. And as Ramakrishna's devotees note in their writings time and time again, Sarada functioned as the ideal, Brahmin help mate. Thus, in support of this notion of Sarada as Ramakrishna's help mate, most stories outlining her early role in Ramakrishna's life, exemplify this function. A primary example of this, and an event that gets noted often, is that while Sarada married Ramakrishna when she was only five years old, she

[80] Chatterjee, 117.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Nikhilananda, 55.

had very little contact with him until she was seventeen. At seventeen, Sarada heard from her village Jayrambati (note that she was living with her family rather than her in-laws) that Ramakrishna's behaviour was increasingly erratic (likely in his quest for enlightenment) and that his health was, even at that time, in jeopardy due to his extensive sadhanas, in which he would not eat or sleep regularly. It is said that Sarada, as a result of the rumors of Ramakrishna's "craziness", was determined to go and see him and to look after him befitting the duties of a good wife. This despite the fact that Ramakrishna had never officially sent for her. This event—in which Sarada showed up at Dakshineswar unexpectedly with her father—marks Sarada's ongoing devotion to Ramakrishna, both as a wife, and according to Ramakrishna's devotees, as someone who understood Ramakrishna's greatness.[83] Her understanding that she could be a wife and help mate to his spiritual mission, even in celibacy, nonetheless became used as an apt model of marriage that other women could aspire to. In this way, while Sarada denotes the ways in which women represent the domestic realm, her life is used publicly, or in the public realm for other women to aspire to.

Yet Sarada's association with the private realm was arguably more extreme than for the women for which she was to model. For a time, Sarada shared a room with Ramakrishna, as a housewife generally would with her husband; however it was with the understanding that they would never have sex. But Sarada did not stay in Ramakrishna's room for very long once it was settled that she would be staying in Dakshineshwar with him. Devotees describe Sarada as being very distressed by Ramakrishna's states of samadhi, and in turn, Ramakrishna's states of ecstasy are said to have increased in Sarada's presence as a result of him seeing and worshipping her

[83] Ibid., 38

as the goddess. It was thus decided that while Sarada would tend to Ramakrishna's cooking needs, she would remain separate from him, in a separate room on the land of the Math.[84] At this point, not only does Sarada represent a model of the domestic sphere, but she literally becomes relegated to the private realm, rarely heard or seen by the devotees.[85]

Scholars like Kripal and Sil describe Sarada's new, confined quarters as intolerable.[86] In a 50 square foot living space, Sarada slept, cooked and stayed in those quarters with all the utensils and food stuffs she would need to see to Ramakrishna's needs. For a time, this small space was also shared with Ramakrishna's mother, who had eventually come to live with Ramakrishna in Dakshineshwar. In addition, the space would simultaneously be used to cook for the growing number of devotees. While Sarada and other female devotees cooked for the male devotees who were sitting and listening to Ramakrishna's spiritual teachings, Sarada also cooked separate food specific to Ramakrishna's liking, which included a refrain from puddings and rich foods that were typically found in Dakshineshwar, and instead an emphasis on spices and spicy foods in general,[87] as well as any other separate food dishes to cater to more finicky devotees. In Sarada's long day, she stayed in these quarters except for her early morning (between three or four a.m.) devotionals along the ghat.[88]

From the time that Sarada took up permanent residence in this small space, little is seen or heard from her in devotional accounts of her life. This is because she would

[84] Gambhirananda, 51-52.
[85] Ibid., 56.
[86] Sil, 62.
[87] Nikhilananda, 30-31.
[88] Ibid., 56-57.

rarely leave its confines. There are instances in which male devotees of Ramakrishna seek out Sarada, and try to peek at her in her closed quarters, but very little came out of such ventures.[89] Devotees were aware of her existence, supposed her greatness (which is why they wanted to seek her out in the first place), yet she remained silent, even anonymous. In contrast, female devotees of Ramakrishna, some of whom eventually turned to Sarada as a guru once Ramakrishna died, were able to give us a better sense of Sarada during this time period. This is because they cooked along side her during their visits to see Ramakrishna.

In their accounts, there are instances when Sarada wanted to leave her space, for a parade, or a gathering outside of Dakshineshwar—to accompany Ramakrishna on one of his few day trips. In one instance, she asked Ramakrishna for approval to go to a festival. His response is that she should do what she likes, so she decides not to attend.[90] When asked by a devotee why she does not go, she says it is because if Ramakrishna wanted her to go with him, he would have said so. By leaving the decision up to her, Sarada understood that she would only be going for her sake, and that Ramakrishna did not really want her to attend. When Ramakrishna hears of her decision, he is relieved, citing concerns for her safety for his not wanting her to go.[91] Some may interpret this episode as evidence of the oppressive nature of Ramakrishna, and Sarada's want for something other than the life she was living (as cooped up in the Music hall). In effect, Sarada was in purdah, be it her own choice or under the wishes of Ramakrishna. Whether she was forced or not is unclear, as writings on

[89] Ibid., 57.
[90] Ibid., 70-71.
[91] Ibid. There is also another instance in which Sarada wanted to attend a religious play with a female companion. Ramakrishna also refused this request (Gambhirananda, 34; Nikhilananda, 33).

Ramakrishna denote him as the kind and understanding husband, giving choices to Sarada about how to live. But the notion of purdah seems evident due to Sarada's isolation. This would have been in contrast to how she grew up, in which she had relative freedom to gather rice, play outside, and so on. However, Sarada's freedom in Jayrambati could also be linked to her family's relative poverty—the children (her being one of the oldest) contributed to the gathering of foods and maintaining the household, with depictions of Sarada's earlier life rooted in uncomplaining hard work.

While purdah was not applicable to Sarada's early childhood, there was increasing concern during the formulation of Ramakrishna's followers about the protection of their women. In particular, media outlined this concerns which related largely to the middle class and upper castes of Hindu societies. Men worried about women going on pilgrimages alone, and going semi-nude to the ghats.[92] Those that started to visit Ramakrishna would be those same men that would be aware of, and were primarily concerned with, keeping their women close. In this sense, Sarada's isolation is reflective of maintaining the sexual purity of their women.

Perhaps one example, albeit an oblique one, can be seen in the situation of Sarada, one early morning going to the ghats to pray. As already mentioned previously, Sarada would awake before sun rise to perform her ablutions in private, prior to the rest of the compound waking up. One morning she came across a crocodile and received quite a fright.[93] From then on, she was either to forgo the ablutions, or have someone accompany her to protect her. While the story gets told in terms of the elements and nature that scare and potentially threaten Sarada, this episode could be

[92] Gupta, 147, footnote 102.
[93] Nikhilananda, 56.

viewed as yet another reason for women to either stay at home, or be accompanied by a male companion. Others may view this event as representing Sarada's innate understanding as a wife, and in particular her adept understanding of Ramakrishna and his wants and needs. She is forever, and happily, in service to him.

For me, this event signifies a lesson in how a wife should behave, not simply in relation to Ramakrishna's spiritual greatness with Sarada as his help mate, but as a general lesson for his middle class followers, for which the women may follow. Wives, while operating "freely" in the domestic realm, should be able to intuitively note their husbands' wants and needs in order that their husbands may be satisfied. This lesson is not about sexuality, but how to behave publicly, or whether to even show oneself publicly. In turn, there is also a lesson for husbands: while it is still necessary to oversee a wife's actions (as noted by Sarada asking permission from Ramakrishna to go out that day), a husband should leave the ultimate decision to their wife, entrusting that she will make the right decision. In this way, there is a sense of freedom on behalf of the wives, yet they are still dictated by a patriarchal marriage, in which the right decision is not about their wants, but what is "best" for the marriage (i.e. preferred by their husbands).

For Ramakrishna's followers, Sarada represents the best of what the private or domestic realm has to offer. Sarada signifies the ultimate householder, which continues to be used as a model for women in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Time and again, Sarada is considered a partner to Ramakrishna, yet at the same time, always knowing her place as secondary to him in the form of his help mate. Her service to him, even though he is touted as a guru, can be used as a model for ordinary

householding women who may also serve their husbands as though they were gurus. This model of guru and the completely devoted follower provides the model of the ideal marriage.

However, the model of Ramakrishna and Sarada as representing the ideal marriage, and Sarada as representing the ideal wife, were not really models that everyone could follow, particularly if married couples already had children. It was widely assumed that Ramakrishna and Sarada's marriage was unconsummated, and this aspect of their marriage was in fact cited by devotees as the reason for the ideal spiritual nature of that marriage. Ramakrishna understood that not everyone could have a marriage like his, and so he encouraged married devotees to instead lessen the amount of sex and number of children they should have.[94] His call was for no more than two children[95]—a number that was not the norm of his times.

But curiously, his call for lesser children, while rooted in a call for a focus on more spiritual matters, was not unlike calls by the British for Indians to have fewer children for the sake of the health of women. While the interpretation and reason for the call for lesser children by Ramakrishna is significantly different than the concerns of the British (women) providing outreach to help Indian women, I argue that this is a means to reframe what was going on under British rule. Because Ramakrishna functioned and is touted as primarily a renouncer, it seems unlikely that he would have been concerned with colonial matters. However, his "inner circle" of followers were young men who were familiar with arguments against colonialism, and aware of their uncertain futures as a result of British rule. Their concerns, their reasons for following

[94] For Ramakrishna's rejection of the family in favor of the mystical, see Kripal, *Kālī's Child*, 139.
[95] Roy, 96.

Ramakrishna, and their hesitation to join him full-time would have been known to Ramakrishna. While Ramakrishna may not have been concerned with British rule per say, he was able to use existing issues related to colonialism and reformulate them so they suited his spiritual pursuits. At least, if it was not Ramakrishna who was concerned about these things, it was his followers who wrote about him. And it is these writings that continued to be used in present-day contexts.

The Bhadralok, Orientalism, and Sexuality

Ramakrishna gained his larger following by way of unemployed young men. Many of these young men, like Vivekananda, attended Ramakrishna's teachings in Dakshineshwar at the recommendation of Keshub Sen, the leader of the Brahmo Samaj. Thus, many of Ramakrishna's early followers were also former Brahmos. These Brahmos were disillusioned with the promises offered by the colonial government. They were educated, were well versed in English, and yet could not get a job with the civil service or otherwise. Where prior to the 1800's, the British sought to return India back to her golden age by way of teaming up with Brahmins to learn Sanskrit, to retrieve Vedic texts and meanings, as well as to delineate what an ideal Hindu society might consist of, at the time of Ramakrishna, British attitudes were changing as to what made a "civilized" Indian society. Instead of looking to Indian (i.e. Hindu) sources of an ideal civilization, which tended to be the way of early orientalists, the British government now sought to improve India (while simultaneously justifying their continued occupation of her) by "Christianizing" her.[96] This did not always mean conversion, but it did mean imparting Victorian principles

[96] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 36.

by way of a series of law and policy making.[97] At the same time, however, while the British took a "hands off" approach in terms of the ways in which India would be civilized by them,[98] largely so they would not offend or appear to be overstepping their bounds with local communities, this also meant that Indians were less likely to be hired by the British despite being educated according the standards of colonialists.[99]

The disillusionment of these young men, who had expected to be able to look after their families by way of their professions, realized that racism was an ever-present aspect of colonialism,[100] and that they would have to, as a nation, solve their own problems.[101] One of the ways in which young men sought to do this was by way of joining various nationalist movements, including that of the Brahmo Samaj. Yet the Samaj itself was not satisfying to all members, particularly after Keshub Chandra Sen's ill-timed decision to have his child-daughter married off in an arranged marriage, going against one of Sen's mandates to end child marriage.[102] Members like Vivekananda turned to Ramakrishna instead, who had little concern for policy and law-making as it tied with colonialism, but instead focused on spirituality. For some, Ramakrishna's Kali worship and the idea that the goddess was ever-present in everything, provided a universal approach to spirituality which was likely very

[97] This was particularly true after Hastings' time in India. During Hastings' governance of India, he opted to define India's laws according to Islamic and Hindu legal systems (see Metcalf and Metcalf, 57). Hastings' orientalist approach was eventually replaced by the theory of biological race, which also changed facets of reform (ibid., 63).
[98] Metcalf and Metcalf, 58. For a discussion of the ways in which the British put in place systems of "indirect rule," see ibid., 74.
[99] An example of this was that the British trained their own scholars in Sanskrit and Arabic so that they did not have to rely on Indian scholars (ibid., 57).
[100] For example, "half-castes" or Eurasians were denied entry into government positions (ibid., 65).
[101] Ibid., 118. Widespread unemployment was also influenced by a national economic depression in the 1820's-40's (ibid., 65).
[102] David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and The Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 141.

refreshing in contrast to the influx of Christian missionaries who sought to first condemn and then convert the heathen.

Yet the appeal of Ramakrishna by middle class followers also seemed to be rooted in the basic tenets that Ramakrishna preached. A Brahminical precept, kaminikanchan is highlighted by M. in the *Kathamrita*, and was noted by Ramakrishna time and time again as being the "greatest obstacle to religious truth."[103] Roy notes that scholars like Chatterjee argue that this lesson that young men should avoid women and gold, spoke to the middle class as a means to gain autonomy in troubling times, where the preoccupation of women and gold were associated with the West, and thus colonialism. As Roy states, "…the figure of *kaminikanchan* in the *Kathamrita* had a resonance that went beyond the fairly orthodox Brahmanical exhortations to cultivate chastity and poverty (both forms of non-attachment) and spoke quite directly to the dilemmas and anxieties engendered by colonialism…"[104] And these anxieties could not only be assayed by establishing a notion of autonomy by way of adopted notions of detachment in the face of ever-present materialism, but also by way of a bourgeois nationalist project that was rooted in these messages. As Roy aptly notes, the *Kathamrita*, for example, was for those Indians who knew English, were European educated, and middle class; quite apart from Ramakrishna's own life experiences.

But even if we were to accept that Ramakrishna's spirituality did not in fact reflect a notion of nationalism, we can retain the idea that his devotion may be translated into something more useful for the middle class men who sought refuge at

[103] Roy, 95.
[104] Ibid.

his temple. From their perspective, Ramakrishna's ideas about the goddess in everything meant that Hinduism and Kali worship could be viewed on par with Christianity. Thus, the "east" could be viewed as on par with the "west", and no longer would India have to be subordinated to British power. So while Ramakrishna himself was not so much interested in the politics of colonial rule, his notion of spirituality (or more precisely, Ramakrishna's devotees' interpretation of his spirituality) provided a much needed alternative to the more politically active groups such as the Brahmo Samaj, which for some, was becoming increasingly viewed as ineffectual.

So, to be clearer, it was the way in which the middle class politically interpreted the message of Ramakrishna that lent itself to become part of an effective response to colonialism. And while this response to colonialism is rooted in the universalist ideas of spirituality that were meant to highlight the equality of "east" and "west," Vivekananda in particular reworked the colonialist/orientalist paradigm by highlighting the ways in which the east could help "save" the west. That is, the west could offer outreach to India by way of funds and other resources in return for eastern spirituality.

Not only was Vivekananda's treatise to the West based on a subversion of orientalist ideals, but he also subverted Ramakrishna's notion of sexuality in order to shape a particular form of nationalism implicitly found in the Ramakrishna Mission. Since Kripal's seminal text *Kālī's Child*, the question of Ramakrishna's sexuality has been questioned. Aside from Kripal's assumption that Ramakrishna was gay, Ramakrishna's view of sexuality, whether he was homosexual or not, can be traced to

his ideas of devotionalism and kaminikanchan. As Roy notes, the dangers of women and gold as impeding spiritual realization resulted in Ramakrishna being harder on his householding followers than their unmarried counterparts. However, he encouraged celibacy for both groups—for the householder, celibacy should occur after one or two children were born, and for the unmarried man, life-long celibacy should be striven for. This was because, for Ramakrishna, all women were associated with sexuality.[105] At the same time, Ramakrishna's practices in terms of his own sexuality are at the very least ambiguous. Via his experimentation with devotion to Rama, for example, Ramakrishna assumed the role of a handmaiden, dressing and acting as a woman for brief periods in time. As Roy notes, Ramakrishna claimed that he would not have been able to sleep in the same bed as his wife for the months that he did had things not been that way.[106] Regardless, in these various instances Ramakrishna's sexuality is at the very least ambiguous, and could be considered a feminized masculinity that seemed counter-intuitive to the nationalist movements that were emerging during his time.

This is certainly true of the way Vivekananda spoke of his guru. Counter to Ramakrishna's approach to spirituality and life in general, Vivekananda's

> …own brand of Hinduness had—for the most part—a distinctly activist, nationalist, marital, worldly, and westward-looking cast to it. Using his authority as Ramakrishna's favorite disciple and the heir to his spiritual crown, he peremptorily put aside his guru's indictments of aggressive (heterosexual) masculinity as well as his condemnation of social activism.[107]

[105] Ibid., 96.
[106] Ibid., 97-98.
[107] Ibid., 106.

Arguably, Vivekananda not only subverted orientalist perspectives, or western views of the east, but he also subverted his own guru's message so that it was in keeping with his nationalist agenda.

The resulting transformation (or creation, perhaps) of Ramakrishna's notion of spirituality also meant a transformation of the way women were viewed. Rather than viewing Sarada as a fellow handmaiden, as Ramakrishna had done, Vivekananda's emphasis on heterosexuality meant that Sarada had to represent the traditional Brahminical housewife. This householder was not one to be admonished, as Ramakrishna did with so many of his male household followers, but one to be revered, for her spirituality and devotion as a wife despite her life long celibacy. Ultimately, what Vivekananda offered was a hyper-masculinity that was in typical fashion of nationalist movements of his time.[108] The male model was heterosexual, overtly masculine, and aggressive—no doubt countering colonialist assumptions of the feminine Indian. At the same time, this also meant that the women of India also played a particular role. In contrast to the hyper-masculine male, a woman should, in general, represent not only the modernization of India, but the traditions of India. While men pressed forward to attain India's independence, women were expected to retain the traditional cultural identity of India; in a way, preserving the facets of India that would be potentially lost if the occupation of India by the British were to continue.

The emphasis that reformers placed on spirituality implied that their ideas were entrenched in tradition, as spirituality was derived from a religion handed down from generation to generation. In addition, it was only this tradition, a tradition that was

[108] See Sikata Banerjee, for a section on Vivekananda (58-66) as he relates to nationalism.

ultimately Hindu, that could emancipate India from the grip of British rule. But as indicated previously, Indian reform was tied to colonial patriarchal structures, which in turn did very little for women. Thus, the early reformers who were gaining significant power and support in India, were emerging during a time that was particularly oppressive for women. Tripta Desai notes this in *Women in India, A Brief Historical Survey*, when she states, "by the beginnings of the nineteenth century, the status of women had plummeted so low as to bring the word 'degradation' a new and ignominious definition."[109] Krishna Baru, in his article, "Movement for Emancipation of Women in the Nineteenth Century," also makes this point, arguing that the troubling status of women in the early nineteenth century was due to "political decay" during the eighteenth century. This decay not only arose out of Muslim and European politics, but was also a result of "fossilised customs, tradition, superstition and irrational bigotry."[110] This state of decline—a shift from a glorified past to an uncertain present—is what contributed to women's lack of identity in India.[111] This is important to note, for it suggests that early on there was a tension between concepts of tradition and reform that could not simply be rectified under the banner of nationalism.

So while the nationalist legacy of middle-class devotees is attributed to Ramakrishna and followed through by Vivekananda, Sarada also had her role in the nationalist project. Notably, she was not particularly concerned with the ways in which Vivekananda went about his business in terms of "selling" Eastern spirituality to the west, although it is said that she gave her endorsement of his overall project.

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[109] Tripta Desai, *Women in India, A Brief Historical Survey* (New Delhi: Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1992), 30.
[110] Krishna Baru, "Movement for Emancipation of Women in the Nineteenth Century," in *Role and Status of Women in Indian Society*, ed. Renuka Ray (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1978), 36.
[111] Ibid.

No, Sarada's role in terms of the middle class and her connection to them is much different. By the time that Vivekananda began spreading the word of Ramakrishna with the blessing of Sarada,[112] Ramakrishna was already dead and Sarada was under the safe guard of his middle-class devotees (basically, they were the ones who could afford to look after her, and they were the ones that controlled the wealth and services that would fall under the Ramakrishna Mission). It can be argued that Ramakrishna himself was never really concerned with "the empty bellies" that Vivekananda claimed.[113] In fact, Ramakrishna was not really concerned with much except with his continual connection to Kali. Sarada, for example, is used as a model of this continuing spirituality that Vivekananda claimed was so prevalent in India. With Ramakrishna's death, she now became not only the model of the perfect housewife, but also the living model of ideal spirituality, being Ramakrishna's first disciple.

It is interesting that in terms of identifying with Sarada and using her as a role model, the middle class, in fact, had very little in common with her. Neither she nor Ramakrishna were concerned, or at least experienced, the weight of colonialism in the same way that their followers had.[114] Nor had they the same nationalist concerns that arose out of the struggle for emancipation from the British.

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[112] Nikhilananda, 255.

[113] Gwilym Beckerlegge, *The Ramakrishna Mission, the Making of a Modern Hindu Movement* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000), 95.

[114] Devotees continually note the isolation of Sarada's childhood village Jayrambati, as noted by Swami Tapaysyananda (11) and Gambhirananda (12). Swami Nikhilananda states that "It is doubtful whether any Westerners set foot in Jayrambati during Holy Mother's lifetime" (19).

Sarada and The Marginalized Classes

Sarada's relationship with the lower classes, and in particular with the marginalized was substantially more affectionate than her connection with the middle class. One could suppose that this was because they needed her more, and as the mother of all, she rose to this need. However, her relationship with marginalized groups such as thieves and prostitutes is an interesting one that bears further discussion, given that Ramakrishna reacted quite differently to these same people.

Ramakrishna's followers claimed that Ramakrishna's devotion to Kali was rooted in a universal notion of spirituality. Proof of this was evident in Ramakrishna's experimentation with Islam and Christianity. While focusing on these religions, he experienced samadhi (meditative union; spiritual ecstasy) in the same way he had done so when worshipping Kali. This phenomenological approach to spirituality meant that everyone had the potential access to the divine, although I cannot recall any accounts of followers also experiencing samadhi as a result of learning this message. Further proof that Ramakrishna believed that anyone could have access to the divine can be found in his experimentation with Tantrism, in which he confronted impurity while coming out unscathed. So while everyone had access to the divine, this experimentation also shows that there are many ways to access liberation as well. Through the acts of Tantrism, then, it can be shown that at least theoretically, Ramakrishna rejected caste rules and his concerns for maintaining purity as part of his Brahmin caste.

However, while Ramakrishna appeared to reject caste rules, it appears that he did in fact adhere to them. At the very least, he only wanted to surround himself with

people who were spiritually devout and therefore pure in caste. I say this because there are several instances in which he admonishes Sarada for her contact with "undesirables". When the marginalized classes (foremost women) came to visit Sarada in Dakshineshwar, Ramakrishna lectured Sarada and told her that this was not to happen. Even though Sarada considered them as her own children, just as Ramakrishna said she would have many, Ramakrishna feared that contact with these types of people would bring impurity to Ramakrishna and the temple grounds.[115] At no time during these instances, however, does Sarada heed Ramakrishna's warnings.

So what, if anything, does this have to do with understanding Sarada in her colonialist context? Again, I think this may speak to the ways that the emerging middle class used her to counter colonialism. In keeping with Vivekananda's aims at the World Parliament of Religions, there is the sense again that one must look after their own, much as Sarada looks after her own "children." Key to Sarada's contact with the marginalized was her complete acceptance of them. A prime example is found in an instance where Sarada goes from Jairambati to Dakshineswar on foot in the 1870's. She was slow, and thus encouraged her travelling party to go ahead without her. During her travels alone, she ran into a couple who are known as being dacoits, or robbers. The description of this encounter is one where rather than experiencing fear, Sarada accepted them as her parents, and touched by the honorifics, they accompanied Sarada to Dakshineshwar to meet Ramakrishna.[116]

[115] Examples of Ramakrishna's concerns for Sarada and her contact with "impure" people include Sarada's regular interactions with a prostitute (Gambhirananda, 83; Tapasyananda, 77), an "immoral" woman, presumably also a prostitute (Gambhirananda, 85; Nikhilananda, 80), as well as a follower of Madhura Bhava (Tapasyananda, 77).
[116] Tapasyananda, 97.

The idea of dacoits and contact with them, was in general discouraged in India during Sarada's time. They were to be feared, and certainly were watched for when people travelled from village to village. Further, the British had used the dacoits as an example of the proof of the lawless nature of Indian society. But as Douglas Peers notes, the increase in the number of dacoits, and the frequent occurrences of dacoits usually correlated with troubled times in rural communities, including rural Bengal.[117] Their role was not, at least by the bandits themselves, a political one. In contrast to British (and thus colonial) ideas about these individuals, Peers notes that the numbers of dacoits fluctuated and corresponded with times of famine, land loss, or loss of status during colonial rule.[118] Therefore, dacoits did not necessarily represent the lawlessness of Indian society, but rather were indicative of troubled economic times. Their presence thus fluctuated; heightening during times of hardships, and decreasing during times of prosperity. This would make sense during 1876-78 (the approximate time period that Sarada met her "parent" robbers), as it was a time, particularly in central and south India in which mass famine was being experienced, causing four million Indians to die, and affecting 36 million Indians as a result.[119] So for some, the life of banditry was a response to the increasing poverty of rural regions that often came as a result of colonialists stripping individuals from their land, or as a result of the new ways in which colonialists had restructured the caste system—where some groups experienced a "boost" in class as a result, others lost credibility. But aside from the "typical" dacoit, there were also those Indians who were discharged soldiers,

[117] Douglas M. Peers, *India Under Colonial Rule 1700-1885* (United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 63.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid., 75.

who had once fought for Britain. Those soldiers who took up dacoity did not necessarily do so to alleviate their poverty, but instead did it to reclaim their status as warriors.[120] Just like the middle class sought to establish themselves firmly as part of upper-caste society by acting out traditional rules for women, so too, the dacoit sought to re-establish their place high in the caste system through their actions as warriors.

It is doubtful that Sarada understood the dacoits precisely in these terms, but certainly her rejection of them and others as undesirable, dangerous, and to be avoided, speaks to the ways in which she quietly attempted to reformulate general understandings of them. Interestingly, this would have been counter-intuitive to the ways in which the middle class, who often adopted colonialist stances about the on-goings of Indian society,[121] viewed and treated them. While the encounter with the dacoit couple, outlined in hagiography about Sarada is supposed to show Sarada's ultimate compassion for all beings, it also speaks to the ways that even Sarada partook and responded to the political climate of her times, particularly in her rejection of assumptions about the dacoit.

Sarada and White Women

Middle-class Indians were not the only people that were significant to the legacy of Ramakrishna and Sarada. While abroad on the lecture circuit, Vivakenanda also found an audience in the Western middle class, particularly in white women who were looking for alternatives to the patriarchal confines of Christianity and secular western

[120] Ibid., 63.
[121] Often they would adopt colonialist stances and reformulated their own responses to support their nationalist agenda. For example, Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), who responded sympathetically to Christian doctrine/ideology, was, like colonialists, against sati, but he did not reject a Hindu past in the process (Metcalf and Metcalf, 85).

society. Jayawardena notes this aptly in her discussion of Sister Nivedita (formerly Margaret Noble) and her relationship with Vivekananda. Women like Nivedita were not the *memsahibs* of early colonialism, whom as Stearns notes denoted "a caricature of the British domestic ideal, with earnest yet rather useless women, focused on the domestic and social setting, shielded from most of the realities of the outside world."[122] Instead, the women that Vivekananda spoke to were indicative of the shifts in the role of Western European and North American women to more active participants in Indian society that began to emerge in the late 19th century. These women sought reform, moving outside of the domestic ideal to meet concerns about women's rights and education in India.[123]

However, as noted previously, Vivekananda was not so much concerned with women's rights, but with general outreach to feed and clothe India. Jayawardena notes this in specific examples, in which Vivekananda chose to evade questions on the women's questions and women's rights in his talks abroad.[124] Vivekananda's preference, it seems, lay in philosophical discussions about spirituality, as this was the one way in which to outreach to the west. Despite this oversight (oversight in the sense that many of his western female followers were in fact very interested in women's education and women's rights in India), his western female followers did in fact contribute to the improvement of the role of women in India, but did so within the parameters of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. It is within this context that Sarada

[122] Peter N. Stearns, *Gender in World History*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 89.
[123] Ibid., 89-90.
[124] Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden, Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 188.

had contact with white women, namely in the form of Sister Nivedita and Mrs. Ole Bull.

Vivekananda had many female followers in the west; there were those that funded his projects in India, those who funded the building of Ramakrishna Missions in North America and Europe, and finally, there were those who went to India to help Vivekananda with his outreach programs. These women, it seems, found the Christian systems of outreach unsatisfactory, and instead sought new ways to show their commitment to the improvement of Indian society. These women also rejected Christianity as patriarchal, instead finding Vivekananda's notion of spirituality a pleasant alternative. As Jayawardena notes, many of these women were feminists, seeking out their own place and own ways in which to help others[125]—in particular, to help Indian women.

Thus, it is these women with whom Sarada had contact with, even if briefly, after Ramakrishna's death. Articulated at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, but certainly beginning prior to this, Vivekananda formulated his notion of universal spirituality not only on Ramakrishna, but Sarada as well. As already mentioned, according to Vivekananda Sarada represented the living embodiment of Ramakrishna's spirituality. The women who heard Vivekananda's lectures, therefore, also heard of Sarada and her ideal religious practices. Many sought to meet her as a result, including Sister Nivedita.

Sister Nivedita sought Sarada out after coming to India, with the instructions by Vivekananda to meet with her. While Nivedita was concerned with administering help for the Ramakrishna Mission, she was also concerned with establishing a school

[125] Ibid., 6.

for girls under the Sarada Math organization. It is said that Sarada supported Nivedita's, and thus Vivekananda's endeavors, particularly in terms of lending her name to the cause. That said, Sarada's active participation in these projects were limited to discussions and visitations with devotees and those who sought her guidance in general. Like Ramakrishna, Sarada's actions and practices were firmly rooted in religiosity, and had little to do with the nationalist movements and activities of reform.

That said, Sarada could no doubt be aware of such nationalist projects or nation building, as well as the help from western women to accomplish thus. Sarada's interaction with the western world, and subsequently western women is an interesting one. On one hand, she did little to bring them into her fold. Her concerns, it seems, were largely focused on novice monks who sought the guidance of Ramakrishna by way of Sarada, or on the marginalized. However, Sarada's take on supporting the down trodden was rooted in her kindness in which she individually doled out on those visitors who were determined to see her. Her contact with white women, therefore, was not rooted in establishing organizations that systematically supported this outreach. At the same time, her willingness to meet with Vivekananda's female devotees also denotes her awareness in systemic outreach, and her support of such organizations. While her participation was seemingly peripheral, even if superficial, it was still enough to suggest an endorsement of Vivekananda's efforts.[126] It appears to me that Sarada understood her role as a model for these western women. As already

[126] Very little has been said on works about Sarada concerning her contact with white women. There are photographs denoting her meeting with Sister Nivedita, Mrs. Ole Bull, and Miss Mcleod, but writings tell us little otherwise. In one instance, we know that these North American and European devotees attended the celebrations of the opening of the Math, at which Sarada was also there (Gambhirananda, 182).

mentioned previously, for example, her role was one of showing them her existing practices, which included at least theoretically, her adhering to her brahminical caste. This is despite the fact that Sarada was by no means the "ultimate" Brahmin. Thus, Sarada's role in the thick of things was largely symbolic; and while she herself may not have adhered to all the purifying practices that would have been befitting a Brahmin woman, she played her role adequately enough so that western women understood how they were to behave while they were in India under the pretext of following Vivekananda and helping the Ramakrishna Mission.

But what did Sarada's contact with white women mean in the greater scope of understanding Sarada in a colonial context? There are two ways in which Sarada is significant in this manner. First, there is the way in which she is used as a model for other women, both white/western and Hindu, to follow. In this construction of Sarada as the Holy Mother, Sarada is to be revered, yet at the same time she is someone who any woman can be like. In using her as a model, while instilling a sense of Hindu nationalism at the same time it also removes the idea of the woman's question. That is, Sarada is uplifted as maintaining her spirituality and inciting that same spirituality in others during the troubling time of British occupation of India. As far as Vivekananda was concerned, it was the west that should look to *her* for religious guidance, and not Indians to missionaries or to Christians in general. At the same time, Vivekananda's refusal to deal with the issues of women's oppression in India—a concern that was consistently raised by nationalists and colonialists alike—was avoided by way of using Sarada as a model. She was uneducated; she grew up in poverty; she was the product of child marriage and of early widowhood. While

Vivekananda aimed to fight poverty and provide education by way of the Ramakrishna Mission, his emphasis on Sarada as a purely spiritual figure meant that Sarada as a person—Sarada as she lived and practiced spirituality—did not come into conflict with Vivekananda's nationalist vision that came in the form of Sarada as Mother India. Sarada's advanced spirituality enabled Vivekananda to avoid the discomfort of having to deal with the issues of child marriage and Sarada's subsequent widowhood because Sarada was special. These rules did not apply to her. And if all women strove to be like her, they too would not be concerned with such issues, as they would be understood in an entirely new context. That is, in Sarada's devotion to her husband, and understanding that he too was special, child marriage was legitimated, and her role as a widow became extremely important in that she had to continue to carry out Ramakrishna's message where he could not. What this meant was that Vivekananda ignored Sarada's year of neglect she experienced the year after Ramakrishna's death, and so too did the other original followers of Ramakrishna. It was not until a *woman* stepped in, a wife of one of Ramakrishna's householding followers, that Sarada's neglect was addressed. At the same time, Sarada did little to voice her experiences of poverty, nor to my knowledge did she accuse Ramakrishna's followers of neglecting her. Perhaps she did not want to look a gift horse in the mouth. After all, her position as a widow was a precarious one, and the hospitality that she eventually received from Ramakrishna's followers could have been viewed as tenuous. It was not until she was established in Kolkata and gained her own followers willing to look after her or see to her that she would have had stability. Even so, I use

the term, 'stability' lightly, as it has been said that Sarada always doted on others rather than getting tended to herself. This was true even when she was quite ill.

But how does this tension between Vivekananda's nationalist project and his treatment of the women's question, both by way of producing images of Sarada, relate to white women? While Vivekananda was not wholly concerned with nationalism in the revolutionary sense that we find in various Samaj organizations, the white women that joined him tended to assume that the emancipation of India by the British was needed. In this sense, they must have been aware of the ways in which Vivekananda's discussions about Sarada evoked such nationalist sentiments. At the same time, these women were also instructed to behave like Sarada.[127] They understood that as part of their allegiance to Vivekananda, in accepting him as their guru, they would have to appear and act Indian inasmuch as was possible being white Christian women.[128]

And yet, despite having Sarada as a role model, this was not sufficient enough to remove the woman's question from the hearts of Vivekananda's Western European followers entirely. This brings me to the second way in which Sarada can be understood in her colonial context. For as much as Sarada represented the traditional householder in the sense that she remained steadfastly loyal to her husband both in devotion and in servitude, the western women that Vivekananda had "signed on" to help him viewed Sarada not in terms of these specificities, but in terms of a general point of view that could be applied to the idea of a relationship between disciple and guru, citizen and state. These women, who were asked to model themselves after

[127] Roy, 120.
[128] These western followers of Vivekananda did not feel as though they had to give up their family religions to become his disciples. See Gwilym Beckerlegge, "The Early Spread of Vedanta Societies: An Example of "Imported Localism"," *Numen*, 51 (2004), 300.

Sarada, would never do so in the very mundane sense, but instead draw from her devotion and compassion and apply them to their concerns for women's rights. For example, Nivedita, never having married, came to India under the presumption that she would adhere to Brahminical rules of caste. At the same time, she was continually concerned with the education of girls, women's rights, and eventually the possible need for revolution to support the nationalist cause.[129] This is a far cry from the personality of Sarada, who while quietly subversive, never overtly accepted or dismissed political aims of those around her. These white women whom Vivekananda had recruited were feminists, and in this sense, seemed to go against his hesitancy to deal with the liberation of women. At the same time, it is inevitable that the women he would gain as followers from Europe and North America would in fact be this type of woman. For it was the feminists who acted on their own accord, could freely move to India if they wanted to, and would dole out their funds to him as they saw fit. On one hand Vivekananda rejected feminism, as can still be seen today in talks at the Ramakrishna Mission, yet on the other hand, he depended on feminists to help him carry out his goals.

Sarada as Mother India

I have already pointed to some of the ways in which Sarada became a model of nationalism; generally, the ideal wife and mother were created and articulated by the bhadralok, and particularly, Vivekananda represented Sarada as the ideal wife and householder. Sarada was not the only representation of nationalism, nor was she the

[129] See Jayawardena, chapter 13 entitled, "Irish Rebellion and "muscular Hinduism," Margaret Noble as Vivekananda's "Lioness.""

only embodiment of nationalism in India, but I think that the way in which Vivekananda used Sarada as a nationalist symbol speaks to that which Gupta notes as the ways that mother as a nationalist symbol/identity coexisted uneasily with the masculine ideologies of a nation. Certainly as Gupta also notes, it contributed to the ambiguity of female agency[130] (and thus calls to question the agency of Sarada herself).

As suggested in my discussion of the public and private realms, as well as the concerns of the bhadralok in general, women were one of the glues to, as well as tensions for, ideas about a wider Hindu unity.[131] While the domestic domain represented the inner core of national culture, and was a place where Hindu men could impose power and take control, it was the Hindu woman who "was the harbinger of the spiritual essence of the home, which became an essential marker of identity." [132] The management of such female bodies represented a civilized/sectarian Hindu identity, which included not only ways to solve the "woman's question" (as discussed above), but also included the defense of female domesticity[133]—in the case of Sarada, the defense of traditional brahminical domesticity. And just as Gupta notes, while women could be blamed for the collapse of Indian society, they were also responsible for men's potential.[134]

The ways in which women were used as models or representing certain brands of nationalism here (and hence denoted as purveyors of Mother India) should not be confused with late-colonial manifestations of feminism as it pertained to nationalism.

[130] Gupta, 9.
[131] Ibid., 27.
[132] Ibid., 123, footnote 1.
[133] Ibid., 124.
[134] Ibid., 127.

Mrinalini Sinha notes, for example, that in the late-colonial period in India, Indian women sought to reject the idea that women should split themselves along communal lines (i.e. Muslim, Hindu) in an effort to reject more orthodox inclinations of religious practices (but certainly religious practices were not the only concern for them). As Sinha notes,

> The politics of liberal Indian feminism, indeed, signaled the emergence of new subject positions for the modern Indian woman. The discursive figure of the modern Indian woman, once the signifier of national cultural difference, was now rearticulated in the discourse of liberal feminism as the model for the citizen of a new nation-state.[135]

What this meant was a new role for women as part of the nationalist project, rejecting the idea that women held a certain "Indianness" as culturally different from the West. It also meant that increasingly, women were rejecting other imagined boundaries in India in order to come together as women to fight for their general rights.[136] If we relate this back to the ways in which Vivekananda understood Sarada as Mother India, we can note that Vivekananda's discourses mark a precursor to such change. However, the new feminist movements that emerged in India just after Vivekananda's time is important to note, as it no doubt influenced the ways in which white women, for example, understood Sarada in later times. Thus, and to reiterate, Vivekananda used Sarada as a symbolic model for nationalism, but in the more traditional sense—a sense that preserved more orthodox brahminical practices and traditions as they pertained to women, and a sense that helped to differentiate the Indian from colonialists.

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[135] Mrinalini, Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India," *Feminist Studies*, 26, 3, Points of Departure: India and the South Asian Diaspora (Autumn, 2000): 626.
[136] Ibid.

But Sarada as representing the Mother India was not a new symbol of nationalism. As Gupta notes, the notion of "mother" as a nationalist symbol is indicative of the motherland, the mother tongue, and motherhood.[137] While Gupta's focus is on Uttar Pradesh, her ideas about nationalism and how they relate to Indian women are no less applicable to Bengal. In terms of Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission, the motherland would be indicative of a Hindu India, the mother tongue represented by Bengali (though Vivekananda was fluent in English) and motherhood itself represented by the compassionate and loving Sarada, who according to Vivekananda, represented traditional Brahminical ideals of womanhood. However, Gupta also notes, and I think this is equally applicable to the way in which Vivekananda constructed Sarada as the Mother India, that the mother, as it functions as a nationalist symbol, is always changing—it is not fixed, nor does its meaning remain the same.[138] Thus, even within the single example of Sarada, we can see the ways in which her importance and her role as a symbol of motherhood (and subsequently, nationalism) has also changed. Where once she indicated solely her devotion as help mate to her husband, steadfast despite accusations that he was insane, she later functioned as an intermediary between a dead Ramakrishna and his disciples, offering initiations and guidance in a greater leadership role.

Theoretically, we could argue that while Sarada was an historical figure, her representation as Mother India became something more than that—signifying the political and geographical (even religious?) demarcations of colonial Bengal. Her significance, while ever-changing while she was alive, also changed and transformed

[137] Gupta, 196.
[138] Ibid.

with her death. For example, as time has passed her role and its significance in relation to both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda has increased. In particular, she is the one attributed to ensuring that the Ramakrishna Mission (a cohesive gathering of monks initiated under Ramakrishna, or after his death, in the name of Ramakrishna) be formed.

Despite the Ramakrishna Mission asserting itself as "politically neutral"[139] in order to avoid involvement with independence and nationalist movements, Vivekananda's assertion of Hinduism as the "mother of all religious traditions," and his emphasis on universalism to signify a connection between East and West, created a form of nationalism within his preaching of religious universalism (Neo-Vedanta). This nationalism, I argue, stems from what Beckerlegge calls, "imported localism" or "glocalism" (globalized localism).[140] While Vivekananda himself offered his own interpretation of Hinduism, which certainly marked a departure from Ramakrishna's practices, and was theoretically also different from traditional Hinduism in general, he offered ideas about Hinduism to the West that was relatively new. At the same time, in order to legitimate his ideas about Hinduism, he rooted them in traditional texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Puranas.[141] In this way, he replicated orthodox Brahminical stances on India's ties to a "golden age" by way of his assertion of the validity of his arguments using ancient texts. Unlike orthodox Brahmins, he was offering a malleable, new "product" under the name of Hinduism in order to affirm a universal religion. In this way, Sarada as Mother India, not only indicates tradition,

[139] It was because of this neutrality that Sister Nivedita, for example, parted ways with the organization (Jayawardena, 191).
[140] Beckerlegge, "The Early Spread of Vedanta Societies," 306.
[141] Ibid., 308.

but also the ways in which new things were happening in Hinduism. Specifically, Sarada was indicative of a particular form of Hindu nationalism under the auspices of universalism in order to gain support not only in India, but in North America and Europe.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

It is apparent by the extant writings on Sarada that she must be understood in different contexts in order to gain a full scope of how she was perceived by various followers, be it her own, Ramakrishna's, or Vivekananda's. Further, academic interpretations and understandings of Sarada are reliant on these writings to further elaborate on Sarada's personality and life. The canon of texts available on Sarada appears enormous, but in reality, the details and key stories used to articulate Sarada's life are often repeated. Thus, what appears, at least superficially, to be a plethora of work to draw from, is in fact, quite limited in scope. As a result, it is true, after all is said and done, that it remains difficult to ascertain just who Sarada was—what she was thinking and feeling about her role as Ramakrishna's wife, and how she conceptualized herself as a spiritual guru in her own right. At the same time, we can gain a picture of how she was used, created, shaped, and interpreted in colonial India and in present day, both in terms of her political embodiment as Mother of India (as Divine Mother), and as a mothering ascetic focused on *seva* (service).

The repetitive nature of the stories about Sarada, while a limitation in terms of the information accessible to scholars, do elucidate the meaning and function of Sarada for her followers, the Sarada Math, and the Ramakrishna Mission. Not only do many recurring episodes—such as Sarada's encounter with the dacoit, and her

limited interaction with Bhairavi Brahmani, function as moral tales on how an ideal woman should behave, but they also set the stage for the eventual greatness of Sarada Devi. And this stage is always rooted in the particularly (if not extremely) (com)passionate nature of Sarada, with examples noted at every stage of her life. In her childhood, this included caring for her parents and uncles, as well as feeding starving children rice amid famine; the ability to mediate, even as a young girl, between quarrelsome friends. As a teenager and young wife, writings point to her dignified and steadfast loyalty to her husband, despite hearing rumours about his madness, as well as accepting marginalized individuals who sought out Ramakrishna. And after Ramakrishna's death, examples of Sarada's nature are rooted in looking after her and Ramakrishna's disciples, no matter what their background and/or follies. The reiteration of Sarada's life events in text strengthens and affirms the importance of Sarada to Ramakrishna's mission of spiritual enlightenment—while he could focus on and tutor the pure and devoted in spiritual matters, Sarada could take in the vagabonds and look after the material needs of Ramakrishna and his inner circle.

Even Sarada's "follies"—that is her human weaknesses (of which Ramakrishna's own weaknesses are not so emphasized in the same way) are transformed to contain the underlying message of Sarada's devotion, loyalty, and compassion. For example, at five years old, her attachment to the jewelry borrowed for her wedding to Ramakrishna served to foreshadow her later devotion to Ramakrishna as his wife after Ramakrishna's death. The refusal to remove her bangles as a widow, while a horrific taboo to many, only reinforced Sarada's steadfastness in her wifely duties, and in the eyes of her followers, to Ramakrishna.

And it is this sort of folly—this humanness that is not emphasized to the same degree in writings about Ramakrishna or Vivekananda—that additionally denotes the ways in which only Sarada could outreach to the masses (in contrast to Ramakrishna who could or would not).

So perhaps for the average reader, these stories of events could be viewed as as redundant, the function of this repetition is in fact a powerful tool used to assert, reiterate, convince, and transform, Sarada into the ultimate follower of Ramakrishna, and the ultimate "helpmate in his Mission" (to borrow a title from Swami Nikhilananda). In turn, Sarada's own followers retain these events but add detail and their own perspective, arguing that these stories denote Sarada's own proclivities toward enlightenment—she was not only a helpmate but a spiritual guru in her own right.

I must interject here, and add that while these are subtle differences between the ways that Ramakrishna's and Sarada's followers wrote about Sarada, this delineation is often times not so explicit. I believe that part of this has to do with the fact that some followers straddled both camps—they may have sought Ramakrishna out, for example, but ended up finding Sarada in his stead. This, for many, was not about choosing one guru over another, but about seeking the benefits of and guidance from both figures. The other part has to do with who wrote the bulk of the Sarada canon—namely Ramakrishna's followers. Certainly the voices of writers impacted the earliest formations of who and what Sarada was.

The question then becomes, what was Sarada's hand in her own constructed identity? Overall, her responses to such creations of her identity in writings are hazy or vague at best. Even when she does respond, one must question if specific dialogue

attributed to Sarada is to be trusted; as Narasingha Sil notes, Sarada herself contributed to the hagiographical interpretation of her own life. This is in addition to the fact that all perspectives of Sarada are written by a second voice and never come from the hand of Sarada's own pen. It is not so much that Sarada is invisible, but even by way of her own device, Sarada is ever-changing, ever-responding in new ways to life events—she is essentially a chameleon. Therefore, there is no consistency (except, perhaps of her compassion, love and caring for others) that would help the reader ascertain with certainty "Sarada's voice."

But as noted throughout my thesis, this does not mean that things cannot be observed or said about Sarada. And this is because while she was a chameleon, she continues to be revered and written about in new contexts. The question then becomes not, "who was Sarada?," but "Who was she to others?" In this sense, it becomes very clear that she was different things to different people, even if in subtleties.

But more importantly, this work highlights the ways in which religious practices, particularly in the form of renunciation, have been studied and assumed by academics. These assumptions have been rooted in what scholars refer to as "tradition," resulting in limited and unchanging notions of whom and what a renouncer is. In general, these assumptions speak to the impact of imperial rule—the ways in which religious systems, including Hinduism and Islam were systematized as a means to comprehend (and control?) the colonized. In the context of Hinduism, the explicit cooperation of the bhadralok and brahmins helped to formulate and assert "legitimate" forms of renunciation that scholars continue to adhere to in the present age. In particular, these assumptions speak to specific issues

of caste and gender, with the establishment of an "official" renunciation created at the exclusion of non-brahmins and women; the result being that female renouncers were essentially viewed as deviants from tradition, despite the fact that their practices had existed alongside official forms of renunciation for centuries.

The lack of recognition of various forms of renunciation has certainly impacted the ways in which those who do not fit the mold have been studied. Meena Khandelwal and Lynn Teskey Denton are two scholars who have drawn attention to this lack via their studies on female renunciation, but more still needs to be done. By re-evaluating Sarada within this context, for example, we see that there are many ways in which to understand her, specifically outside of the context of Ramakrishna's religious practices and life. By questioning the claims of the renunciatory tradition, I have been able to draw attention to the ways in which Sarada was, in fact, a renouncer. I believe that this project has resulted in a more in-depth understanding of her, and has simultaneously drawn attention to a person who is more than compassion, and more than loyalty. I think, therefore, that other wives of famous gurus, as well as Hindu women in general, could also be studied more closely to provide more in-depth understandings of women and their religious practices. This would not only allow scholars to identify the significance of Hindu female renunciatory practices, but may also contribute to new scholarship that moves away from women as tied to the domestic/private realm. While understanding women in the context of the domestic sphere has certainly been useful in articulating their place in society, the political milieu in which they lived, and their religious roles, I look forward to the day when we can study women outside of this scope—to move

forward from the confines of the domestic realm in order to simply look at women and women's practices.

In chapter three, "Mothering Renouncer: Sarada and Renunciatory Practices," it was important to clarify and negotiate between the public and private realms in order to understand the interpretations of Sarada's religious practices. Interestingly, however, there was not an unwavering split between the public and private, as can be noted by the ways in which Sarada's followers understood her—as a renouncer, as well as a wife. I think this clearly speaks to the ways in which traditional formulations of renunciation do not work for everybody, and that despite attempts to systematize religious practice, people find their own ways to articulate their beliefs and rituals, even if contradictory to mainstream assumptions. Yet despite acknowledging the agency of Sarada's followers here, as noted at the beginning of this conclusion, Sarada has largely been constructed outside of the context of renunciation, instead used to highlight compassion and loyalty, primarily in the context of her husband.

So, why was this the case? Why hasn't Sarada been understood primarily as a guru and renouncer? I think that this partially has to do with the fact that in the period that Sarada lived; assumptions about renunciation were already well in place, and writings about Sarada's role as a wife and mother echoed the sentiments about the role of women in religion that were already firmly established. The role of women, then, can be seen as an extension of the systematization of Hinduism and renunciation under colonial rule. And despite that it was not the colonizer who primarily wrote about Sarada (with the exception of Europeans like Rolland and Müller), it is apparent that the colonized benefited from some of the assumptions

about Hindu practice. Thus, we can see that the academic and socio-political influences were, and I argue continue to be, closely intertwined with one another.

This connection between academic and socio-political understandings about Hindu practice is not only about what is authentic and/or inauthentic tradition, but is also rooted in the way women are perceived. Women were (and a result of continuing scholarship, continue to be) identified by their bodies—their ability to give birth, their sexual relations with their husbands, and their codes of conduct by way of dress and behaviour that supposedly reflected their culture. Debates and ongoing events during colonial India speak to this presumption about women, both in terms of how Hindus articulated the ideal woman, and in terms of women's daily lives. The female body did not belong to any individual woman, but became a marker of a nation; and this nation was conceived of primarily by men/the patriarchy. With this in mind, it is no wonder that female renunciation was largely ignored in both scholarship and in life. With traditional renunciation representing the rejection of the body by way of extreme fasting and austerities, a woman's body could not be rejected because of its greater symbolism as society.

As my fourth chapter entitled, "Sarada and Her Colonialist Contexts" shows, Sarada was part of this overall construction of the female body. As the Mother of India, she represented the nation in a way that emphasized traditional Hinduism. In turn, Sarada gave her body to followers who came to see and worship her (and according to followers, much to her detriment). A mere touch of Sarada was all that was needed to purify a body and cleanse the nation. And so, one can trace the importance of Sarada from India, to North American and Europe, where

Vivekananda eventually took these ideas about Sarada and shared them with non-Hindus.

As a result, this research provides a foundation for a more intimate look at the ways other Hindus formulated the notion of woman and womanhood in Western society. For example, was Vivekananda's construction of ideal womanhood not only influenced by his respect for Sarada, but by Pandita Ramabai, who was lecturing on the oppression of Brahmin women in North America and Europe at the same time that Vivekananda was also abroad? If so, how did Ramabai's criticisms on the treatment of Hindu women impact not only Vivekananda's formulations and ideas about female religious practices, but his sense of nationalism as it was tied to womanhood? In turn, how did Ramabai's Western supporters differ in ideology and attitude from Vivekananda's followers? While this line of questioning moves away from the focus of Sarada, I believe that Sarada may function as a starting point from which to ask these questions.

I also think that such a project (or perhaps one along a similar vein) would highlight the ways in which many women of colonial India (as well as women in Western societies during this time period) were agents of their own making, in spite of the use of the female body by patriarchal systems. Despite the challenges of definitively ascertaining Sarada's "voice," the many interpretations of Sarada do point to other women's lives—many of whom have left writings of their own and were politically active (such as Sister Nivedita, for example).

In all, however, I think this work provides a fundamental basis for addressing the multitude of voices present in the formulation of Sarada. It is evident, when all is said and done, that different groups of people understood her to be different things.

And even when there does seem to be consistency about the nature of Sarada, the underlying meaning and/or purpose behind such constructions of Sarada, had diverse interpretations, be it spiritual or political.

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