



The Householder, the Ascetic and the Politician: women sadhus at the Kumbh Mela

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Sheba Chhachhi

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*So free am I, so gloriously free
Free from the three petty things-
From mortar, pestle and my twisted lord
Freed from rebirth and death am I
And all that has held me down
Is hurled away.*

— Mutta, from the *Therigatha*
(Songs of the Nuns) 6th century B.C.

Translated from Pali by Uma Chakravathy and Kumkum Roy,
Women Writing in India Vol. I, Eds. Tharu & Lalitha

I

Mutta may or may not have recognised the thousands of women sadhus gathered at the first Kumbh Mela of the new millenium, in Allahabad, January 2002.

Like her, these women have stepped out of the narrow confines of the domestic. Whether moved by a profound devotion, answering a spiritual call, simply attracted to the chastity and simplicity of a mendicant's life, or, obversely, cast out by family, society or circumstance, the woman ascetic surrenders the pleasures, burdens and markers of ordinary female existence. Unlike Mutta, they are bound into a complex parallel social order, structured by ritual, patriarchal hierarchies and increasingly, the politics of power.

The woman seeking initiation is systematically stripped of her secular identity. Shorn of hair, clothes, name, kith and kin, the elaborate ritual culminates in her performing her own death rites. Reborn a *sadhvi*, (more commonly called a *mai*) committed to a rigorous code of conduct and personal spiritual practice, she is formally presented to the rest of the *akhada* to which she now owes allegiance. In return she receives spiritual guidance from her guru, tenuous legitimacy, protection, occasional material support and the possibility of refuge. In essence, though, these are women on their own—autonomous, highly mobile, and curiously trans-gender, they negotiate these structures within the narratives of their particular lives.

In the grand spectacle of the Kumbh, power is constructed by and through performance. Performance has always been an integral part of the culture of religion in India. But today women are increasingly emerging as significant protagonists in this arena, whether manifesting in the humble tent from which an ageing *mai* graciously accepts offerings for the display of her young disciple's swollen feet (a testimony to her vow of remaining standing for a year), or the attractive *mai* on the huge television screens sermonising in mellifluous Sanskritised Hindi.

Many years ago, Shri Shri Mahant Mira Puri had shown me photographs of herself as a young initiate: shaven, austere, withdrawn into *sadhana*. Today that fragile androgyny has retreated behind the pomp and circumstance of mahanthood, the now long hair concealed beneath a large, assertive turban. Mahant Mira's *lila* is rich and varied. She moves seamlessly from the warm, caring mother with the new initiates, to the playful 'master' with her closest disciples, to the powerful meditator with awestruck visitors.

The inward drawn gaze of the yogi has always attracted the curious, almost envious eyes of the lay person. In fact, the performance of the trans-social self (nakedness, 'mad' behavior, and severe ascetic practice, for example) serves to underline the ascetic's freedom from ordinary social mores, eliciting both reverence and revenue. The assertion/enactment of aberration, paradoxically, becomes a bridge between the world of the householder and that of the ascetic. However, even though obedient daughters-in-law make offerings to chillum smoking naga sadhus, the Dharma Shastras forbid interaction between the 'good wife' and women ascetics!

II

Mahant Mira is unusual as one of only three women mahants of the oldest, most respected *akhada*, the *juna akhada*, but her position is by no means a sinecure. The *maivada* is thronged by hundreds of *mais* from all over the country. Only briefly a sorority, they congregate at the Kumbh for sacred purposes as well as pragmatic ones. They may need help from the Mahant to secure, for instance, the much sought after sadhu identity card, but after that they will return to independent lives, linked through a huge network of ashrams, sacred sites and events.

Could this community of women be moulded into a constituency? The Mahant's aspirations meet with a curious form of recognition—she is invited to share the dais with Sadhvi Rithambara at the first ever Vishva Sadhvi Sammelan. A mixture of coercion and cajoling is needed to persuade the women of the *maivada* to attend. Here the *mais* are individually garlanded, welcomed as *sadhvis*, a term they do not use themselves. Indeed, the vituperative rant against the loss of cultural values, the dangers of westernisation and the need to prevent cow slaughter seem to have little connection with the largely rural, non-literate Shaivite *mais* that finally fill the space. However, when issues closer to their lives, such as domestic violence and alcoholism are addressed, heads nod, hands go up and when women's *shakti* is invoked, there is an enthusiastic response.

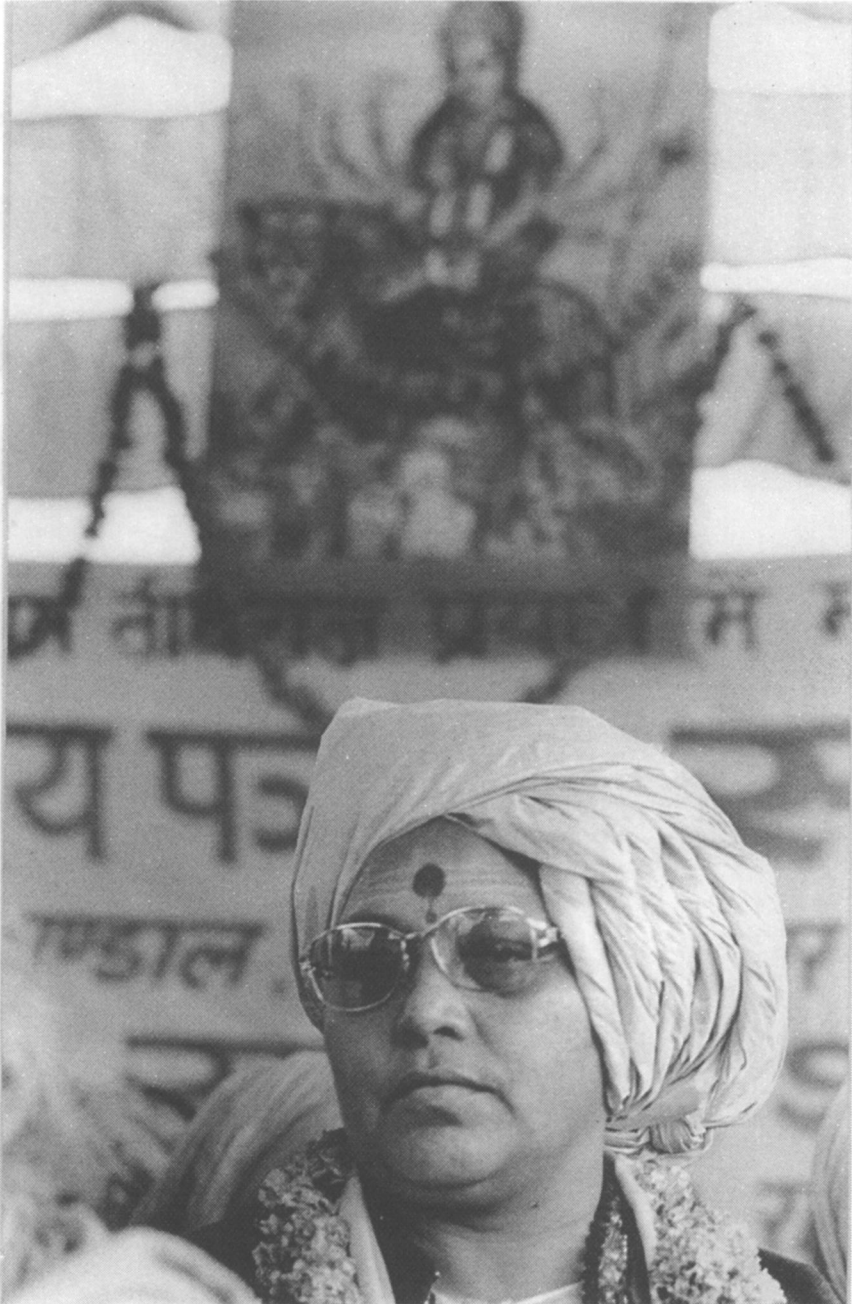
Her customary flamboyance cloaked behind a mask of sobriety, is this just another of the many roles that I have seen Mahant Mira play? Or will I have to bear witness to the transformation of the gentle *mais* into *sadhvis* of the ilk of Rithambara—her triumphant face engraved upon the nation's consciousness as she revelled in the destruction of the Babri Masjid? Will the long lineage of the *bairagan*, her expanded heart detached from both anger and desire, 'free from all that has held her down' vanish from sight in order to survive?

These images are excerpted from an ongoing photographic project on women ascetics.

MAI/MAHANT

Kumbh Mela 2002

PHOTO ESSAY by SHEBA CHHACHHI



Shri Shri Mahant Mira Puri





