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(Working) Title of Dissertation: **The Female Guru as Jagadjananī: A Transcultural History of “Universal Motherhood” in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

Project Summary:

My project undertakes a begriffsgeschichte of the Shakta-Tantric concept of Ādiśakti-Jagadjananī which came to be associated with maternal affect in the hagiographies of female gurus in Bengal as they were projected as compassionate ‘universal mothers’ (Jagadjananī) and deified as manifestations of the Cosmic Feminine (Ādiśakti). I historicize and contextualize these discourses of ‘universal motherhood’ against the intellectual-cultural backdrop of the late 19th and 20th centuries in which the ideology of spiritual motherhood gained transnational resonances in South Asia and beyond in a global climate characterized by catastrophic World Wars and the Cold War paranoia and an equally turbulent national context marked by South Asia’s journey from a colonized polity to independent statehood while negotiating the trauma of Partition(1947).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

(A) To underscore how the female gurus were seen/saw themselves as agents in nation-making.

(B) Without overlooking how intra-cult gender and caste dynamics differentiated the language of deification of the respective gurus, the project will trace overlaps that their discourses of universal motherhood enjoyed with contemporary intellectual-theological developments in war-stricken Europe, America and Japan.

(C) Focusing on voices of devotees of foreign and non-Hindu origin, it will explore how these gurus were appraised as ‘universal mothers’ transcendent of religious, cultural and national boundaries and were drawn into messianic discourses of alternative world-making.

The key subjects of this project are Sarasvatī Devi/Satīmā(1752-1839) of Kartābhajā sect, Sāradā Mā (1853-1920), Ānandamayī Mā(1896-1982), Śobhā Mā(1921-2004) and Mira Alfassa/‘Mother’ of Pondicherry(1878-1973).

METHODOLOGY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The project takes an inter-disciplinary approach, blending intellectual history with hermeneutics derived from Religious Studies and applies the global-intellectual optic to a “conception of global scale” embedded in the South Asian theological context which drew newer transcultural significations through the agency of female gurus and their devotee-

networks. It opens new pathways in transcultural intellectual history through its Asia-centric approach and focus on female intellectual subjects while charting new terrains for historical studies on motherhood in South Asia by moving beyond the cultural and intellectual boundaries of the nation.