



# Navigating Tradition: A Phenomenological Study on the Empowerment of Hindu Women as Sarathi in Bali's Ngaben Rituals

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## Abstract

Deepening women involvement through empowerment have changed the social life and structures. Factors such as masculinism and patriarchy are evident in hindering the empowerment of women across context. This present study is in a form of phenomenological study that focuses on redefining Hindu woman position as Sarathi within traditional society and the kind of empowerment they receive. There are six primary informants who are involved in this study and currently working as Sarathi through purposive sampling. The data are collected through in-depth interview and observation. There will also be supporting data from informants working around the Sarathi who work as priests. This study reveals that even though in many occasions Sarathi is descendant of a priest, the professionalism from practicing to become Sarathi make them labelled as achieved status instead of ascribed status. Furthermore, among four aspects of empowerment (power of decision making, control over resources, freedom of mobility, and self-esteem), control over resources is considered as the weakest empowerment received by the Sarathi while others are experienced well by the Hindu women working as Sarathi.

**Keywords:** Bali, Empowerment, Ngaben, Phenomenological Study, Rituals, Sarathi, Tradition, Women Status.

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## Introduction

Modernization and globalization have changed the nature of social life and social structures. One of the impacts is the changed view of the role equality between men and women in the context of society. However, even though some of the studies show substantial gender role inequality (Bali moune-Lutz & McGillivray, 2015; Buchmann et al., 2008; Charles, 2013), the societal split of priorities regarding the male-oriented roles is slowly shifting towards gender equality.

In such traditional societies that are strongly committed to the preservation of traditions yet pass through a long-term course of correction, the change in the roles of people is also evident (Carter, 2022; Ellingsæter, 2023). These factors such as masculinism and patriarchy play a great role in hindering the empowerment of women roles in the cultural undertaking in many developing countries including Indonesia (Yunis et al., 2019). Bali, as an example of a region with a very close-knit community that is highly adapted to local cultural practices, is also exhibiting comparable symptoms and undergoing the same transformation described above. Historically, according to the research by Marhaeni and Saskara (2018), Balinese women thought culture was an obstacle to advancement in many areas particularly on welfare issue.

The study by Putra and Creese (2012) serves as an indication of the beginning of a deepening involvement of women in traditional cultural roles. In this research, cultural songs which were once sung dominantly by men, now involve women for various personal, religious, and social reasons. Balinese women are also



starting to play a more significant role in cultural preservation in relation to the implementation of traditional religious activities. They are involved in the preparation of offerings from the initial planning, directing, coordinating, and controlling religious ceremonies until the activities are completed. All these activities are carried out by Balinese women as a tradition passed down through generations, contributing to the sustainability of Balinese culture as an enduring icon of world cultural tourism (Suhardi, 2015).

Rituals are inseparable from the culture of Balinese Hindu society (Budasi et al., 2021; Diarmita et al., 2019; Raka et al., 2020). Atmaja (2017) writes that in connection with ceremonies that require offerings, three fundamental frameworks in Hinduism (ritual, philosophy, ethics) form a meaningful unity. Offerings are not only symbolic but also carry philosophical and ethical meanings. This has implications for the rituals performed by the Balinese people, symbolizing devotion to Hindu deities and also relating to the improvement of philosophical and ethical qualities reflected in noble character within the community.

One of the prominent and well-known rituals in Bali is the *Ngaben* ritual. Hindus believe that *Ngaben* facilitates and expedites the process of liberating the soul from the body (Patera et al., 2023). In the hustle and bustle of the ceremony process and ritual means, the role of the figure preparing all the ceremony paraphernalia becomes crucial. In Hindu concept, this figure is known as *Sarathi*. Therefore, the presence of the figure who prepares the ritual means, also known as *Sarathi*, is very important. Without a leading figure preparing the ceremonial means, a ritual cannot be conducted. The ceremonial means or offerings are the embodiment of ourselves, reflection of the faces of the gods, and representing the universe as outlined in the *Yadnya Prakirti* scripture.

The interpretation and the significance of the ceremonial paraphernalia is explained further by Wiana (2004) as denoting an offering or oblation. This concept is related to the fact that offerings are created by Hindu-Balinese adherents to be presented or offered to God or deities in their manifestation, ancestral spirits, and supernatural beings. *Sarathi*, commonly known as the offering maker, is the person responsible for creating offerings served as a means for Hindu religious ceremonies. In its implementation, it adheres to predefined rules, embodying sacred meanings and symbols. The *Sarathi* plays a role as an assistant to the ceremony conductor or priest.

*Sarathi* is also known as a group of individuals, primarily women, who prepare offerings upon the request of the someone knowledgeable in ceremonial practices, selected through consensus to lead, and guided the organizing committee responsible for coordinating the *Ngaben* ritual by involving the congregation as workers/performers. In the *Ngaben* rituals, there is a structured hierarchy of offerings based on their significance (low, medium, high).

The *Sarathi*, in this context, functions to prepare the means for Hindu Balinese ceremonies until they become offerings during the *Ngaben* ceremony (funeral rites). These *Sarathi* are typically members of the Balinese community, especially women, responsible for preparing offerings in each traditional village. Each traditional village in Bali is equipped with three main temples namely the Village Temple, Puseh Temple, and Dalem Temple. Thus, *Sarathi* is also formed by the traditional village to prepare offerings for ceremonies in the village. For instance, in the *Ngaben* rituals among neighbours or small community, the preparation of the offerings is done by the *Sarathi* of each community. This is done to ensure that the priest is not overly burdened with the details of the ceremony and its components. Considering the complexity of the work and the culture surrounding it, it is crucial to examine the role of Hindu women as *Sarathi* in the context of local culture.

## Review of Related Literature

The *Sarathi* has also been highlighted in various previous research articles. Traditionally, *Sarathi* refers to the role of women responsible for providing ritual paraphernalia in Hindu ceremonies (Mariyatni et al., 2021). Adhikang (2019), in his article titled "Sarathi Banten between Profession and Yadnya: in the Perspective of Free Market Competition," states that ceremonies appear to be significantly dominant in the modern society compared to ethics and philosophy. Ritual paraphernal consists of many components, diverse ornaments with various variations. Nowadays, preparing ritual paraphernalia is no longer feasible to be made individually. The practical and quick paradigm due to limited time prompts the choice to



purchase these items, which is seen as a fast, accurate, and safe option. The demand from modern society for quick and instant solutions opens opportunities for service providers and products related to ritual paraphernalia.

As a result, *Sarathi* emerges, ready to provide all the ceremony necessities promptly. This cooperation based on mutual need gives rise to new social capital in society. *Sarathi* becomes a form of social capital that can quickly or gradually be contested by participants as a new industry. The demand, followed by the provision, positions *Sarathi* as sellers and providers of ritual paraphernalia (Adi, 2019). In its evolution, the role of *Sarathi* expands not only to ensuring the availability of ritual paraphernalia but also focuses on financial management related to the ritual process. From this explanation, it is evident that the empowerment of women in the cultural context possesses distinct characteristics that cannot be generalized, unlike empowerment in other contexts such as economics, politics, and agriculture. Its case-by-case nature renders this research transferrable to similar cases and contexts within other communities and cultures.

Upon further examination, the significant role of women in this local culture cannot be realized without empowerment. Empowerment is viewed as a long-term educational process that involves skills and awareness of one's existence (Soharwardi & Ahmad, 2020). The empowerment of women is a widely discussed issue internationally (Lestari et al., 2019; Ortega-Sánchez & Heras-Sevilla, 2023; Purwanti et al., 2018; Putri et al., 2023; Supriyadi et al., 2019), and efforts to strengthen women's roles have been extensively undertaken in crucial contexts such as health and the economy (Gupta & Yesudian, 2006). According to Tabassum et al. (2019) women's empowerment, in general, can be defined as the ability to make decisions independently in social, economic, and political contexts. Women's empowerment can also be understood as a process that provides women with more opportunities to determine their own socio-economic path for broader interests (Manuere & Phiri, 2018).

Studies on the importance of empowering women role has been extensively conducted in various contexts. For instance, a study by Alkire et al. (2013) provides a clear depiction that the empowerment of women in the agricultural context is gradually but steadily occurring. Still based on their research, the role of women in this context involves the ability to make decisions regarding agricultural production levels, seek resources that support productivity, manage expenditures and income, assume leadership roles in their communities, and determine working hours. Similar findings on the empowerment of women in the agricultural sector have been revealed in other studies (Malapit et al., 2019; Mishra & Sam, 2016; Sell & Minot, 2018; Sraboni et al., 2014).

In addition to the fields of agriculture and economics, indications of the empowerment of women are also positively evident in the area of politics. In studies conducted by Sundström et al. (2017) and Arriola et al. (2014) during the period 1990-2012, women's involvement in exercising political choices, participating in civil rights, and engaging in practical politics (such as women's representation in legislative bodies and cabinets) showed a significant increase.

While the aforementioned studies provide comprehensive insights into the empowerment of women in the contexts of agriculture, economics, and politics, there is currently a lack of research specifically focusing on the extent of this empowerment in the cultural context. This is indicated by the absence of an index used as a reference to measure the level of women's empowerment in cultural contexts. This can be interpreted as culture having highly diverse characteristics that cannot be generalized into an index. Therefore, the study should be localized, each case is examined specifically as what the researchers conducted in this present study. Hence, the research questions in this study can be formulated as follows: (1) What is the role of women as *Sarathi* in the *Ngaben* ritual within the Balinese Hindu community? (2) What forms of empowerment are provided by the indigenous community to support the role of women in their capacity as *Sarathi*?

## Method

This study employed a phenomenological approach, presenting data through in-depth descriptions. This method was selected due to the unique nature of the phenomenon being examined—the *Ngaben* ritual and



the role of women as *Sarathi*, which is specific to Hindu Bali. Six women who serve as *Sarathi* were chosen as informants based on the following criteria: 1) Direct involvement as *Sarathi* in the *Ngaben* ritual, responsible for the availability of ritual paraphernalia; 2) Over 10 years of experience as *Sarathi*; 3) Willingness to participate in the research. Each informant was asked to sign a written consent form, affixed with a duty stamp, indicating their agreement to share their experiences and allowing their personal information to be cited. The duty stamp, in accordance with Indonesian law, also means that the informants can legally challenge any incorrect or false statements made by the researchers. The signed consent forms were used to obtain ethical clearance from the National Research and Innovation Agency of the Republic of Indonesia. Data collection included interviews with the *Sarathi* and their immediate environment to gather secondary data on their role in the *Ngaben* ritual. The process began with bracketing, where the researcher set aside any preconceptions about the *Sarathi*. In-depth interviews were conducted with the six informants to gather firsthand accounts of their experiences. The data were then analysed to identify common themes, patterns, and structures that capture the essence of the phenomenon. These patterns will be described in detailed explanations in the research findings.

In addition to in-depth interviews, the researcher also conducted direct observations to assess the extent of empowerment experienced by the informants in this study. In social contexts such as culture, empowerment is measured by four main indicators: the power of decision-making, control over resources and freedom of mobility, and self-esteem. The framework of aspects for interviews and direct observations were adapted from Baig et al. (2018), Huq (2017), Paul et al. (2017), Dulhunty (2023a), Soharwardi et al. (2020).

**Table 1 Women Empowerment Indicators in Bali Ngaben Rituals**

No	Indicators of women empowerment	Aspects
1	The Power of Decision Making	The decision to spend the earnings after ceremony The decision to maintain one's health The decision about large purchases
2	Control Over Resources	Accessibility over materials for rituals Control over income as capital to make offerings for upcoming <i>Ngaben</i> ritual
3	Freedom of Mobility	Mobility restrictions to prepare the ceremony Violence against mobility
4	Self-esteem	Justifying violence at home caused by arguments over ceremony preparation Get help independently in time of struggling caused by preparing offerings for <i>Ngaben</i> Ritual

## Results and Discussion

### Redefining *Sarathi's* Position in the *Ngaben* Ritual

The role of *Sarathi* in the *Ngaben* ceremony, is crucial because *Sarathi* is an individual or group with expertise or a profession in preparing the *Ngaben* ritual. This profession is often inherited within a family, which holds legitimacy as individuals knowledgeable about religion, ceremonies, and ritual paraphernalia, although it does not immediately turn them into expert. Due to this demand, the traditional community forms a *Sarathi* association, where the *Sarathi* group in the community is trained first by an elder female priest until they become proficient. Only then are they released to practice making offerings in the *Ngaben* ritual. Each religious leader has a group of 5-10 prospective *Sarathi* who are trained over a one-year period. In their journey, *Sarathi* also undergoes experiential learning, where prospective *Sarathi* dive directly into learning and practicing in real conditions.

The position of *Sarathi* in every ritual, especially in the *Ngaben* ritual, is assuredly under the female priest. Therefore, as an expert in the art of creating paraphernalia, the female priest must precede the ritual before

it is continued by the *Sarathi*. However, the creation of ritual paraphernalia is done independently by Sarathi. Some activities of Sarathi can be seen in the illustration below.



**Figure 1. A group of Sarathi are involved in the making of offering and assisting the Tapini in Ngaben Ritual process**

From the supporting data gathered from three informants who are all priests or religious leaders, it was found that a woman can become a *Sarathi* through training based on sacred scriptures (lontar) and must have a good track record of character and personality. This is considered a sacred matter since *Sarathi* will be involved in divine aspects. The informants also added that the position of *Sarathi* has undergone significant changes, initially focusing on preparing ritual paraphernalia but now extending to assisting in the entire ceremony process until completion.

Moreover, the second informant, also a Hindu priest who interacts daily with *Sarathi*, mentioned that the current role of *Sarathi* has expanded to financial management. In Balinese culture, when someone experiences a tragedy such as death, it is normal to contribute money to help alleviate the bereaved family's burden. In this case, the collected funds are handed over to the *Sarathi* to manage as capital assistance for the creation of ritual paraphernalia.

Reviewing the social status in modern society based on the explanation by Prato et al. (2019), a *Sarathi*, being a professional, can be categorized as an achieved status. Achieved status refers to a social position acquired by individuals through effort, skills, achievements, or personal decisions. It is a status that someone obtains throughout their life as a result of their own efforts and accomplishments. The concept of achieved status also supports the idea of meritocracy, where social positions should be based on merit, performance, and individual effort. In a meritocratic society, individuals are valued based on their achievements and abilities (Maitner, 2023).

The current status of *Sarathi* as an achieved status is also influenced by social mobility. Social mobility, both vertical (moving up or down in the social hierarchy) and horizontal (changes in the scope or type of work), can help someone achieve a higher status through education, training, or other achievements. This, in turn, can open doors for social and economic change. This distinguishes the status of *Sarathi* from an Ascribed status, where an Ascribed status is a social position given to an individual regardless of effort, skills, or personal achievements. This status is determined by factors such as descent, gender, age, or ethnic group. Although often found within a family where the parents are religious leaders, their descendants do not automatically hold the same status or other statuses related to Hindu cultural practices in Bali. If someone wants to become a *Sarathi*, they still have to go through the aforementioned process.

### **The Empowerment of Hindu Women as *Sarathi* in Bali Ngaben Ritual**

Becoming a *Sarathi* is acknowledged as an honour for those who undertake it. Besides enhancing one's understanding of religion, a *Sarathi* can gain detailed knowledge about the ritual paraphernalia of the ongoing ceremony. With the passage of time, the understanding of the requirements for ritual paraphernalia also increases, and it is not specific to just one type of ceremony, such as the *Ngaben* ceremony (funeral), but also includes ceremonies related to birth, adulthood, marriage, and many others



that are part of the Bali Hindu community. This fact aligns with the statements provided by the informant as follows:

"... I feel proud to dedicate myself as a Sarathi because I can contribute to the continuity of the religion, also enhancing my understanding of the proper ceremony procession." (Informant 1)

The pride of being a *Sarathi* is also expressed by another informant who emphasizes this role enables them to feel that they can help preserve ancestral traditions. Here is a quote from the interview with the informant.

"...not many young people nowadays are willing to become *Sarathi* because of cultural shifts, so I try my best to stay in this path because it is a tradition passed down from our ancestors." (informant 4)

From the statement above, it can be understood that the role of a Sarathi is not an easy task. It is reflected in the statement indicating that the current generation is disinclined to become Sarathi due to cultural shifts that erode existing local traditions. In this perspective, Sarathi becomes a guardian of ancestral traditions. Upon closer examination, preserving culture related to religious beliefs is indeed considered one of the most challenging tasks (Nesbitt, 2007). Nesbitt further explains that the main difficulty lies in the numerous variables to consider, such as differences in race, gender, social class, and supporting preservation activities. The most challenging part, according to Daskon (2010), is determining which of these variables should be prioritized.

From this explanation, the effort that can be made is to empower the cultural practitioners themselves, in this case, the Sarathi. In this segment, the forms of empowerment obtained by Hindu women as Sarathi will be explained. Firstly, in decision-making, Sarathi has full control over certain decisions, such as how to use the income obtained for their own and their family's needs. This fact is reflected in the following interview quote:

"...when I get money after work, even though it's not much, I use it for the daily needs of the family, helping my husband to meet the household expenses. My husband also gives money every few days. What the money is for is left for me to decide, except for significant expenses; I need to ask for permission first." (Informant 2)

From that statement and referring to the indicators stated in **Error! Reference source not found.** it can be concluded that empowerment of women in decision-making, especially those related to health and economics, is quite dominant. This perspective is evident, especially when compared to other research that focuses on the role of women in the context of Eastern cultures in decision-making. In a study by Kabir (2013), women's independent decision-making is only around 15%, with more than 50% being joint decisions. In contrast to contexts where the community follows a matrilineal system, where women are the heads of the family (Sariyev et al., 2020), the independence of Sarathi in decision-making is an example of positive women's empowerment. This is also in line with the trend shown in the research by Ang et al. (2023), indicating that although only 14.7% of Indonesian women have completed tertiary education, the decision-making index related to household affairs is at 73.

Regarding control over resources, there are two main aspects that must be controlled by a Sarathi, namely control over the availability of ritual paraphernalia materials and control over the flow of capital. The following is one informant's statement regarding this aspect:

"...Yes, if it's about money, we need capital first because in the beginning, customers are only required to make a down payment. Meanwhile, the needs for materials and ritual paraphernalia are definitely more than the down payment. So far, we are free to manage the flow of money for capital. But sometimes, we



have to borrow first, sometimes people wait for an auspicious day, so those who have ceremonies are not just one or two parties, it can be more." (Informant 6)

From the statement above, it is evident that *Sarathi* generally has control over access to the availability of supporting materials for *Ngaben* ritual. However, *Sarathi* does not receive sufficient empowerment in terms of funding to support their profession as *Sarathi*. Although they have the freedom to manage their capital, the amount of capital often is not enough to meet the needs for providing ritual paraphernalia. This fact is in contrast to the research conducted by Akter et al. (2017), which found that women in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines have the same access and control over resources as men on average. Forms of empowerment are needed in this case through several available avenues. The argument by Kantor (2003) clearly states that control over resources can elevate the position of women in households and organizations. Therefore, Hindu women who work as *Sarathi* need to be provided with education that also includes access to funding. Training for *Sarathi* should not be limited to teaching them how to make ritual paraphernalia. This perspective aligns with Kamau (2021) and Khan et al. (2017), who explain that education and employment must go hand in hand to strengthen women's role in controlling resources.

Another focus of empowerment in this research is freedom of mobility. Generally, this aspect can be said to have received good empowerment. From the results of interviews and observations conducted, there were no restrictions on the mobility of Hindu women working as *Sarathi*. Similarly, there were no instances of violence against their mobility. *Sarathi*, in their mobility when preparing rituals, receive empowerment, such as being provided with special vehicles to pick them up and take them to their destinations. In eastern cultures, women's mobility is often restricted due to patriarchal laws (Dulhunty, 2023). Although some of these restrictions are beginning to open up, the concept of freedom of mobility in some countries is still far from being completely "free" (Nichols, 2022)

Socio-economic and demographic attributes influence the level of self-esteem in Hindu women working as *Sarathi*. As one of the main predictors of women's empowerment (Al-Qahtani et al., 2021), strengthening self-esteem becomes crucial, meaning justifications for violence against women need to be eliminated. Violence can sometimes come from those closest to us, known as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). From the statements of the informants, it can be understood that Hindu women working as *Sarathi* do not experience justified forms of violence in any form, as reflected in the following quote:

"My family at home fully understand the profession I do. In terms of income, it may not be much, but the family knows that I am dedicated to religion and the Hindu community in general, so there has never been any issue."

This statement introduces a new context to the findings of this research. In the context of Hindu women as *Sarathi* in Bali, it appears that economic conditions and the nature of this profession do not have a close relationship with the violence experienced by women. A good understanding within the family environment that being a *Sarathi* is a calling to fulfil religious duties seems to be the key factor. As a comparison, Dalal's (2011) research indicates two main factors influencing the level of violence experienced by Hindu women: economic well-being and social status within the caste system. Violence due to poor economic conditions and being perceived as belonging to a lower caste includes emotional, physical, and sexual violence. Additionally, Bengesai et al. (2021) and Murugan et al. (2021) emphasize that effective efforts to prevent and address intimate partner violence (IPV) involve economic empowerment, household bargaining power, and freedom of movement. However, the common dilemma is that women experiencing violence often hesitate to self-report (Huis et al., 2020). The findings of this study suggest that economic conditions and social status do not always correlate with IPV. It ultimately depends on the level of understanding between partners, trust-building, and religious beliefs.

## Conclusion

*Sarathi* is a professional in a field whose duties have shifted from initially focusing on the creation of ritual paraphernalia to assisting in the execution of rituals and acting as a manager in overseeing financial and



operational flows. While sometimes an individual becomes a Sarathi due to family factors, the status of Sarathi is considered an achieved status rather than an ascribed status. Regardless of the background or status of a prospective Sarathi, they must undergo extensive training from a female priest based on sacred scriptures and complemented by experiential learning. The empowerment of Balinese Hindu women in the role of Sarathi is determined by four main indicators: the power of decision-making, control over resources, freedom of mobility, and self-esteem. The findings of this research generally indicate that Sarathi experience substantial empowerment in decision-making, freedom of mobility, and self-esteem.

#### *Ethical Approval and Conflict of interest*

This research was supported by the Research and Community Services Institute (LPPM) of State Hindu University I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study and the authors collected the data based on ethical principles of research.

#### *Author Contribution Statement*

The authors contributed equally in conceptualization, methodology, data collection, and critical analysis of the research.

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#### *Data Availability Statement*

The collected data has been available on the text.

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