

Breaking Barriers: Women's Spiritual Liberation in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the convergence of women's spirituality and gender equality, emphasising the potential impact of women's involvement in events such as the Mahakumbh Mela 2025. Despite the historical challenges posed by patriarchal mindsets, women are now discovering avenues for spiritual growth and leadership. This study examines the challenges encountered by women, their methods of spiritual emancipation, and the implications of these phenomena for society at large. Women's spirituality, influenced by cultural and religious elements, serves as a potent force that empowers individuals and communities. To examine women lived experiences through essential thematic perspectives such as geographical accessibility, bodily autonomy, work and caregiving, representation, and intersectional identity, to understand how holy spaces influence and transform gendered realities. The research demonstrates the significance of education, feminist theology, and supportive networks for women seeking to reclaim their spiritual autonomy. The female sadhus at the Mahakumbh Mela exemplify the dismantling of gender boundaries and the advocacy for societal change by women. The findings indicate that the integration of spirituality with action is transforming social norms, fostering greater acceptance, and motivating future generations to advocate for gender equality in spiritual leadership.

Keywords: *Spiritual leadership, Gender equality, Convergence, Thematic perspective, Feminist theology*

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality has historically served as a crucial influence in women's life, providing avenues for empowerment, resilience, and an enhanced sense of purpose. For ages, patriarchal norms have restricted women's spiritual expressions and leadership, relegating them to subordinate places within religious institutions. This marginalisation has precluded women from adequately exploring and exercising their spiritual potential. However, in modern times, substantial cultural changes are starting to challenge these standards.

In India, the Mahakumbh Mela, one of the greatest religious assemblies globally, has traditionally been predominated by male ascetics and spiritual authorities. The increasing participation of female individuals, especially female sadhus, signifies a pivotal juncture in the pursuit of gender equality within spirituality. These women confront established gender hierarchies, leveraging their exposure to promote spiritual inclusiveness and social progress. Their involvement in events such as the Mahakumbh Mela highlights a significant societal transformation, as women assert their autonomy in both spiritual and secular spheres.

The ascendancy of feminist theology, the influence of education, and the formation of supporting communities have together empowered women to reconfigure their spiritual responsibilities. This research examines the dynamics of women utilising spiritual platforms to transcend patriarchal limitations and promote extensive societal transformation. In addition to that the study also analyses the pathways women pursue, the obstacles they encounter, and the societal ramifications of their spiritual emancipation, thereby enhancing the debate on gender equality in religious and cultural frameworks.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of spirituality, gender, and leadership has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly in contexts where women challenge long-standing patriarchal structures in religious traditions. This literature review explores existing research in five thematic areas that align with the objectives of this study: historical marginalization in spiritual roles, the emergence of women's spiritual leadership, the role of education in reclaiming agency, sacred festivals like the Mahakumbh Mela, and the broader societal implications of women's spiritual liberation.

Historical Marginalization and Feminist Spirituality

Traditional religious systems across cultures have systematically marginalized women's access to spiritual authority and leadership. In the Indian context, despite the reverence for feminine divinity through concepts like Shakti, practical and institutional access to spiritual authority for women has been minimal (Narayanan, 1999). Classical texts such as the Manusmriti reinforced gender hierarchies that confined women's roles to the domestic and devotional realms.

Feminist scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) and Carol P. Christ (1989) advocate for the reinterpretation of religious narratives and symbols to recover suppressed feminine spiritual agency. Their work set the foundation for feminist theology, which aims to re-center the experiences and leadership of women in spiritual traditions. Similarly, King (1993) emphasized spirituality as both a site of protest and empowerment for women reclaiming sacred space.

Emergence of Women's Spiritual Leadership in India

In India, things have changed a lot in the last few decades. There are now charismatic female gurus and ascetics who question traditional views about who may lead in religion. Pandya (2015) talks about how Mata Amritanandamayi and other modern gurus lead. He says that their spiritual appeal helps them break down institutional obstacles. Dasgupta (2023) focuses at the political and spiritual strength of women's sadhvis in the Hindu Right and how they deal with the boundaries of asceticism, gender, and power.

Research on woman-led akharas and female saints like Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai reveals even further how women have always chosen their own spiritual paths outside of institutions (Pechilis, 2004). At recent Kumbh Melas, all-women akharas and female sadhus came back. This shows that women are becoming more visible and taking more control of dharmic leadership (Rudert, 2019).

Education and Reclamation of Spiritual Agency

Education is a key way for women to gain spiritual freedom. Tisdell (2003) says that spiritual growth and adult education are very closely linked, especially for women who are trying to gain power and are on the fringes of society. With spiritual literacy, women can read the Bible in new ways, talk about theology, and take on leadership roles that have historically been held by men.

Kumar and Pradeepika (2021) found that women academic leaders in India often use spiritual frameworks to assert their professional authority. Lahmar (2024) goes into more detail about this idea in a Muslim context, saying that the relationship between motherhood and spirituality affects how women lead with compassion and change in schools. Pandey et al. (2017) show that women with higher spiritual intelligence are better leaders and more resilient.

Mahakumbh Mela as a Case Study for Gendered Sacred Space

The Mahakumbh Mela exemplifies the dynamics of women's negotiation of spiritual authority within public sacred spaces. Historically male-dominated, recent Melas have witnessed increased female participation through akharas such as the Saryu Nari Shakti Peeth and the Kinnar Akhara (Jha, 2020). These movements assert the rights of women and transgender individuals to occupy sacred spaces, symbolising the broader struggle for gender justice within Hinduism. Spina (2017) examines the Adhiparasakthi movement, highlighting how both diasporic and local goddess-based communities cultivate novel expressions of women's spiritual

leadership and ritual authority. The case studies demonstrate that the Kumbh Mela is transforming into a venue for spiritual activism and reflects wider gender transformations.

Societal Implications of Women's Spiritual Liberation

There are big changes in society when women are spiritually free. It can change the values of a community, the way it is led, and the way people of different generations get along. Eagly and Carli (2007) say that women who are leaders because of their spiritual beliefs are more likely to act in ways that are fair, caring, and open to others. Researchers in India, such as Smith (2015) and Hore (2024), have found that gender-equal spiritual spaces are linked to changes in how families work and how people feel about women's empowerment. Maate Mahadevi, the first female Jagadguru in the Lingayat tradition, is an example of how education, devotion, and leadership can come together to make powerful examples of female spiritual leadership in India.

Research Gap

A significant number of research has explored the role of spirituality in women's lives, limited attention has been given to the intersection of education, activism, and spiritual leadership. Additionally, the role of events like the Mahakumbh Mela in challenging patriarchal norms and fostering gender equality in spirituality remains underexplored. Other than this it is also important to understand the lived experiences of women during the event. This study addresses these gaps by examining the transformative potential of female participation in such events. To address these gaps following objectives are designed.

Objectives

Across spiritual traditions, women's roles have often been restricted by patriarchal norms and institutionalized exclusions, limiting their access to leadership, sacred rituals, and public religious participation. Yet, in recent years, there has been a visible shift as women increasingly assert their spiritual agency, challenge traditional boundaries, and reclaim space within religious life. The Mahakumbh Mela 2025, as one of the world's largest religious gatherings, offers a unique lens to explore these evolving dynamics. This study seeks to understand how women navigate, experience, and transform sacred spaces by examining their motivations, struggles, leadership roles, and everyday acts of devotion while also considering the broader socio-cultural forces of education, identity, and modern institutional support that shape their spiritual journeys.

- To examine the spiritual journeys of women at the Mahakumbh Mela 2025, focusing on the challenges they face, the pathways they adopt for spiritual growth, and their expressions of leadership and agency within a traditionally male-dominated religious landscape.
- To analyse women lived experiences through key thematic lenses including spatial access, bodily autonomy, labor and care work, representation, and intersectional identity to understand how sacred spaces reflect and reshape gendered realities.
- To assess the impact of education, institutional support, and modern socio-cultural shifts in empowering women to reclaim their spiritual agency and contribute to a more inclusive vision of religious participation in contemporary India.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources and a interview for primary data collection. The analysis draws on existing literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports on women's spirituality, gender, and leadership. Additionally, historical and contemporary texts on feminist theology and spiritual practices were examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Interviews were conducted of female participation in the Mahakumbh Mela and insights from previous research were used to contextualize findings within broader societal and cultural shifts. This approach ensures a robust and nuanced exploration of the subject, grounded in established scholarship.

For the analysis of primary data collected through the interview protocol, thematic analysis is conducted. The population sought for the current study were the female visiting to Mahakumbh. This sample was chosen to

extract the perspective of visitor about the travel experience. Additionally, the female which included were from different age groups, occupation, and income levels to better emphasise the 360-degree predominance of experience. Started with judgemental sampling, then in some circumstances changed to snowball sample. Consequently, in this research we used a multi-sampling technique. Twenty-seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with female visitors (see Table 1) were carried out.

Table 1: Demographic details

S.No.	Respondent ID	Age Group	Education Level	Occupation	Region
1	R001	25	Secondary	Sadhvi	Punjab
2	R002	45	Postgraduate	NGO Worker	Tamil Nadu
3	R003	20	Secondary	Student	Uttar Pradesh
4	R004	18	Graduate	Student	Madhya Pradesh
5	R005	36	Graduate	Teacher	Madhya Pradesh
6	R006	65	Primary	Vendor	Uttar Pradesh
7	R007	62	No formal education	Homemaker	West Bengal
8	R008	48	No formal education	Vendor	Madhya Pradesh
9	R009	35	No formal education	Sadhvi	Bihar
10	R010	32	No formal education	Vendor	West Bengal
11	R011	45	Graduate	Teacher	Bihar
12	R012	52	No formal education	Sadhvi	Punjab
13	R013	63	Graduate	Retired	Bihar
14	R014	62	No formal education	NGO Worker	Bihar
15	R015	65	Primary	Sadhvi	Bihar
16	R016	25	Secondary	Vendor	Madhya Pradesh
17	R017	26	Graduate	Student	Punjab
18	R018	62	Secondary	Retired	Madhya Pradesh
19	R019	36	No formal education	Teacher	Uttar Pradesh
20	R020	17	Primary	Student	Punjab
21	R021	38	Graduate	NGO Worker	Madhya Pradesh
22	R022	58	Secondary	Sadhvi	Maharashtra
23	R023	62	Postgraduate	Retired	Bihar
24	R024	65	Postgraduate	NGO Worker	Bihar
25	R025	51	Secondary	Teacher	Punjab
26	R026	35	No formal education	Homemaker	Uttar Pradesh
27	R027	65	No formal education	Vendor	Madhya Pradesh

Basic Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses, focusing on emerging themes such as “Spiritual participation”, “Gendered experience of space”, ‘Representation and symbolism”, “Agency and resistance”, “Labor and invisibility”, “Body, health, and hygiene”, “Identity and intersectionality”, “Modernity and change” and “Emotional and psychological experience”.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Details

S.No.	Respondent ID	Parent Code	Sub Code	Illustrative Quote
1	R001	Spiritual participation	Motivations for Attending	I came because my mother and grandmother did. This is not just a festival—it is my duty and my prayer.
2	R002	Spiritual participation	Ritual Practices	When I take the dip in the Ganga, I feel like all my sins are washed away. It is the purest I have ever felt.

S.No.	Respondent ID	Parent Code	Sub Code	Illustrative Quote
3	R003	Spiritual participation	Role of Female Ascetics	We are not just women in saffron; we are seekers of truth, just like the men. Why should we be treated differently?
4	R004	Gendered experience of space	Access and Mobility	It's hard to move through the crowd as a woman, especially alone. People push, and it feels unsafe sometimes.
5	R005	Gendered experience of space	Safety and Surveillance	There were police around, but that didn't stop the stares. You always have to be alert.
6	R006	Gendered experience of space	Spatial Segregation	They made a special area for women to bathe, which is good, but it's so exposed, it still feels uncomfortable.
7	R007	Representation and symbolism	Media Portrayal	The cameras always go to the sadhvis with tattoos and dreadlocks. But what about the rest of us?
8	R008	Representation and symbolism	Religious Iconography	They call the Ganga 'Mother,' but real mothers here get no place to rest or clean their children.
9	R009	Representation and symbolism	Public Discourse	The speeches are full of praise for women's sacrifices, but no one talks about our struggles.
10	R010	Agency and resistance	Religious Leadership	I started my own akhara because no one would let me speak in theirs. Now we have our own voice.
11	R011	Agency and resistance	Feminist Consciousness	I came here not to be told what to do, but to find out who I am.
12	R012	Agency and resistance	Civil Society Participation	Our group distributes sanitary pads and teaches young girls about hygiene. It's our seva.
13	R013	Labor and invisibility	Informal Economy	I've been selling bangles here every Kumbh since I was 12. But they only see me as part of the background.
14	R014	Labor and invisibility	Volunteerism	I cook for 300 people every day in the camp. No one thanks us, but we do it for the pilgrims.
15	R015	Labor and invisibility	Emotional and Care Work	While my husband went for the bath, I stayed back to look after the kids and elders. That's devotion too.
16	R016	Body, health, and hygiene	Menstrual Health	I didn't bathe in the river this time. They say it's not pure if you're bleeding. I felt ashamed.
17	R017	Body, health, and hygiene	Sanitation Access	The toilets were too far and too dirty. Many of us just avoided eating to manage.
18	R018	Body, health, and hygiene	Medical and Social Services	The women's health camp gave us medicines and told us things we never knew about our own bodies.
19	R019	Identity and intersectionality	Caste and Class	I clean others' tents and cook their food. I am here, but not one of them.
20	R020	Identity and intersectionality	Age and Marital Status	As a widow, I was told not to come. But I came anyway—to find peace for myself.
21	R021	Identity and intersectionality	Regional and Cultural Background	People laughed at my language and clothes. But I have the same faith as them.
22	R022	Modernity and change	Digital Engagement	I shared my bath photo with my friends back home. They couldn't believe I was really here.
23	R023	Modernity and change	Changing Norms	My daughter came with me wearing jeans. Ten years ago, that would have caused a scene.

S.No.	Respondent ID	Parent Code	Sub Code	Illustrative Quote
24	R024	Modernity and change	Policy and Institutional Support	This time, the government arranged pink toilets and security volunteers just for women. It made a difference.
25	R025	Emotional and psychological experience	Awe and Devotion	When I heard the conch and chants at dawn, I wept. It was like the river was calling me.
26	R026	Emotional and psychological experience	Fear and Discomfort	I was terrified of being lost in the crowd. I held my sister's hand like my life depended on it.
27	R027	Emotional and psychological experience	Community and Solidarity	We met other women from Punjab and cooked together. It felt like we were one big family.

Every in-depth interview was a forty-to-sixty-minute conversation. Maintaining a suitable, private, and confidential atmosphere for the participant, a one-on-one interview was chosen above any other data collecting technique and a special attention was paid to their privacy.

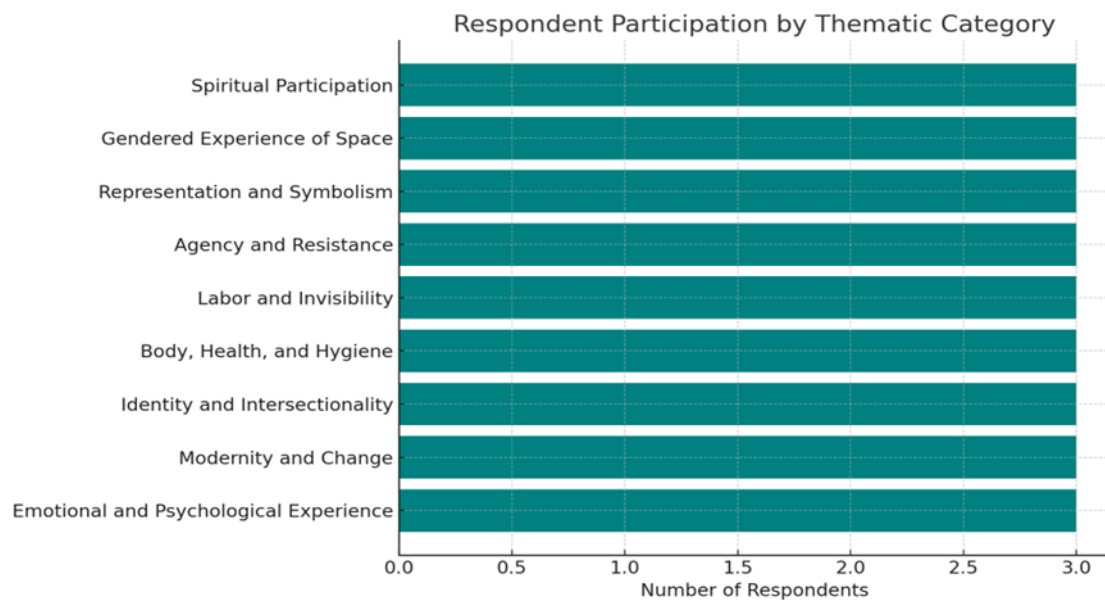


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents per theme

The above horizontal bar chart illustrates the even distribution of 3 respondents per theme, reflecting the diversity and breadth of women lived experiences in each domain of inquiry at the Mahakumbh Mela 2025.

Table 3: Response analysis

S.No.	Theme	Sub-Codes	Respondents
1	Spiritual Participation	Motivations, Ritual Practices, Role of Female Ascetics	3
2	Gendered Experience of Space	Access & Mobility, Safety, Spatial Segregation	3
3	Representation and Symbolism	Media Portrayal, Iconography, Public Discourse	3
4	Agency and Resistance	Religious Leadership, Feminist Consciousness, Civil Society Participation	3
5	Labor and Invisibility	Informal Economy, Volunteerism, Care Work	3
6	Body, Health, and Hygiene	Menstrual Health, Sanitation Access, Medical Services	3
7	Identity and Intersectionality	Caste/Class, Age/Marital Status, Regional/Cultural	3
8	Modernity and Change	Digital Engagement, Changing Norms, Institutional Support	3
9	Emotional and Psychological Experience	Awe/Devotion, Fear, Community/Solidarity	3

Thematic Interpretation

The thematic framework based on the voices of 27 people shows that women take part in religious megastructures like the Mahakumbh Mela in many different ways. Spiritual Participation and Emotional Experience show how people incorporate their faith into their lives. On the other hand, Gendered Space and Body & Health show how the way things are set up can make safety, access, and taboos harder to deal with. Two clear examples of how new forms of agency and resistance are changing sacred spaces are grassroots activism and women-led religious leadership.

People also talked about Representation and Symbolism, saying that the media and society often make women's spiritual roles seem less important or too easy. On the other hand, the theme of Labour and Invisibility draws attention to the important but often overlooked work that women do to keep the Mela going, both physically and emotionally. All of the themes are based on identity and intersectionality because a woman's caste, class, age, and cultural background have a big impact on how she lives her life.

Modernity and Change tells stories that show how things are changing. For instance, how digital technologies and government policies are working together. The Civil Society Participation sub-code shows that the community is where real change happens. Women in this code ask for room to work together to make their lives better.

FINDINGS

The thematic framework based on the stories of 27 respondents shows that they have a deep and complicated understanding of how women have been involved in and changed their roles in religious megastructures like the Mahakumbh Mela. Two themes that show how deeply women's spiritual participation is a part of them are Spiritual Participation and Emotional Experience. These topics are about how women live their faith, how it affects who they are, and what their religious involvement means to them. But these close experiences happen in complicated social situations that are affected by worries about Body & Health and Gendered Space. These issues make structural problems like limited access, safety concerns, and long-lasting taboos even worse. Other research has found similar problems that show how religious groups run by men restrict women's spiritual freedom (Chaves, 2011; Daaleman & Frey, 2004).

The theme of Emerging Agency and Resistance shows how women use religious groups and grassroots movements led by women to show their spiritual leadership and activism, even though there are these limits. Barker and Arnett (2006) and Miller (2006) both said that reading holy texts from a feminist point of view and following goddess worship traditions can help women become leaders. What they said is like what these results show. The Civil Society Participation sub-code says that this agency is for more than one person; it's for a group of people. This is because women work together to make their communities better and change the way things are done. These acts of resistance are part of a bigger shift in spiritual landscapes that is breaking down old, male-dominated hierarchies.

People also talked about Representation and Symbolism, which is when stories in the media and culture make women's spiritual roles seem like tokens or too simple, turning their complex contributions into simple symbols instead of real agents of change. The theme of Labour and Invisibility also brings attention to the important but often unnoticed physical and emotional work that women do to keep religious events like the Mela going. This is like Koenig's (2009) work, which talks about how important community support and networks are. For example, women's circles are safe places for healing and empowerment, but their work often goes unnoticed.

Based on their caste, class, age, and culture, different women have different spiritual experiences. This shows how important it is to look at religious participation from a lot of different angles (Crenshaw, 1991). Through this lens, we can see that groups that are already on the outside have even more problems. We can't just tell the same story over and over again when we think about women's spirituality. We need to think about it in more complicated ways. The ideas of the participants in the context of Modernity and Change show how digital technologies and policy frameworks are becoming more common to help people feel like they belong. It looks like real change happens when people in the community work together, not when the government makes

changes from the top down. Being involved in your own community is very important if you want to change spiritual spaces and rules.

The results show even more clearly how hard it is for women to stay on their spiritual paths. Women feel like they don't belong because of patriarchal ideas that put caregiving roles first and don't give women many chances to lead. They also feel like they don't belong because they need men to make money (Ai et al., 2003; Henderson et al., 2006). Women often feel guilty about putting their own growth ahead of their family duties, which can make it hard for them to be spiritually free. Chaves (2011) said something similar about how religious groups help keep gender roles strong.

Women are still finding new ways to become leaders and grow spiritually, even though they have these problems. They are doing this in a number of ways, such as by meditating, being present, and writing in a journal. Koenig's (2009) study on the importance of shared spiritual spaces backs up the idea that women's circles can help people heal and get stronger by bringing people together. Barker and Arnett (2006) and Miller (2006) have both talked about how feminist theology lets women question what men say.

This process includes a lot of education because it teaches women how to read religious texts critically and push for change in religious institutions (Gottlieb, 2007; Koenig, 2009). Women who are spiritual leaders and have been educated often use both modern and ancient knowledge to make spiritual spaces that are open to everyone and go beyond what is usually expected. The Mahakumbh Mela 2025 is a great example of how to make spirituality fair for everyone, regardless of gender. The increasing number of female sadhus makes it clear that men have been in charge of these areas for a long time. This shows that people are more aware of the environment and are doing more to help it (Chavez, 2012; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). This change is well-known in the case of Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati. She shows how religion and education can change what it means to be a leader in Indian religious traditions.

Women who lead spiritually don't just change the event; they also change society by combining spirituality with activism. Women in charge use their power to make the world a better place by fighting for equal rights for men and women, a clean environment, and a fair society. This fits in with larger cultural trends that want to make everyone feel welcome (Crenshaw, 1991; Koenig, 2009). This integration fights against old stereotypes and tells young people that spirituality can help them work together and feel stronger.

The Mahakumbh Mela microcosm shows that making female spiritual leaders more visible can change how society works and shake up systems that are based on men. Education, activism, and community support all work together to give people full power that goes beyond just changing one person to help society move forward. Women who are spiritually active, especially through Mela projects that focus on justice and the environment, show that spirituality can be a strong force for change in the world.

CONCLUSION

The way women are involved in religious megastructures like the Mahakumbh Mela shows that spiritual authority and social roles have changed a lot. Women are actively taking back their spiritual power in a number of ways, such as through personal devotion, education, and group activism, even though patriarchy has its limits. The fact that more and more women are becoming sadhus and spiritual leaders at the Mahakumbh Mela 2025 is a big challenge to traditional gender roles. It makes spiritual spaces more welcoming and empowering for everyone.

Education is one of the most important things that helps women read and think critically about sacred texts and fight for changes in religious institutions. Women can lead spiritually and politically to make the world a better place. For example, they can fight for gender equality and protect the environment.

The results show that women's spiritual involvement helps them grow as people and is a big part of making the world a better place. The Mahakumbh Mela is an example of how spiritual places can change over time to become places where women from different backgrounds can fight back, gain strength, and work together to improve their own lives and the lives of others.

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