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“Leave Everything and Sing to God”:
The Performance of Devotional Asceticism by Female Sadhus of Rajasthan

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University
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Abstract

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This dissertation is an ethnographic performative study of female asceticism in the north Indian state of Rajasthan. It offers a new model of Hindu asceticism and renunciation through examination and analysis of what I refer to as female sadhus’ “rhetoric of renunciation,” their song, story (including life story), and textual practices. These practices create and express a form of asceticism that has been underrepresented in religious studies on asceticism in South Asia. One of the purposes of this dissertation is to bring this level of practice and experience—what I have called “devotional asceticism”—to the study of asceticism and to show that devotion and asceticism are neither distinct nor contradictory religious paths for the female sadhus of Rajasthan, but rather are experienced as the same path/phenomenon by these sadhus. Since the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with think of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation *as* a form of asceticism, it is important for scholars of religion to expand the boundaries of “what counts” in categorizations of asceticism and to include these expressions of devotional performance. These performances, too, constitute types of religious sources with which to study South Asian traditions, more broadly, and South Asian asceticism(s) in particular. Through performance, narrative, and textual analysis of the female sadhus’ rhetorical practices, this dissertation highlights the specificity of female asceticism in Rajasthan; it also illuminates the complex and multiple ways renunciant devotional practice provides a strategic and a constructive means by which female ascetics push beyond dominant, textual representations of asceticism, and thus, distinguish their form of asceticism from the authoritative Brahmanical model. Through performance of their practices, the Rajasthani female sadhus model their lives on the devotional traditions of north Indian poet-saints (*sants*) in the construction of ascetic identity and practice as well as exert agency and negotiate authority as female ascetics in what is often perceived to be a male-dominated tradition of renunciation. In its use of the lens of devotional performance, this dissertation shifts the representation of whose voices are heard in the construction of asceticism as a category that carries power and authority in South Asian religions.

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For Gangagiri

For my parents

This one's for you, too, Sheila...wherever you are.

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Besides a professional accomplishment, this dissertation also represents a personal journey that I have had the privilege of sharing with certain people. The friendship of Melia Rhea Belli, Jennifer B. Saunders, Kate Zubko, Perundevi Srinivasan, Nancy Kenton, and Bimla Gour has energized, sustained, and nurtured me over the years. Thanks Melia for making me laugh when I wanted to cry and for reminding me daily of the gifts I bring to this world; thanks Jennifer for your love and loyalty and for believing in me as a scholar; thanks Kate for your rock-hard patience and the gentleness with which you touch people’s lives; thank you Devi for your chutzpah, your poetry, and your bravery; thank you Nancy for inspiring me to be courageous and to take risks; and thanks Bimla for making Hindi language study an adventure of the mind and soul, and for making my visits to India, north and south, memorable. All of you manifest the many faces of the Goddess, and I am honored to have you as my friends and/or colleagues.

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my wings and thanks to my teachers, colleagues, and friends—past, present, and those yet to come—for teaching me how to fly and to soar above the clouds.

A Note on Transliteration and Translation

This dissertation contains names and terms in Sanskrit, Hindi, and Rajasthani (i.e., Mewari and Marwari) languages. There is considerable variation in the spelling and pronunciation of words in Hindi and in Rajasthani. To avoid confusion, I have used the standard Hindi form of a word, which traditionally drops the spelling (and pronunciation) of the final a vowel. So, Sanskritic words such as *karma*, *dharmā*, *yoga*, *sannyāsa*, and *mokṣa*, for instance, appear in both standard modern Hindi and in everyday conversational Hindi as *dharm*, *karm*, *yog*, *sannyās*, and *mokṣ*. In instances in which a word or name is more familiar in its Sanskritic context, I use the Sanskrit form of the word, such as *Purāṇa* and *Veda*, instead of *Purān* and *Ved*. Many of the people I worked with in Rajasthan, sadhu and/or householder, switch between Rajasthani, Hindi, and occasionally, Gujarati, in everyday speech contexts as well as in performance contexts, and thus I indicate in the text the Rajasthani and/or Gujarati forms of words that were used by my collaborators.

I have used the conventional transliteration system, with one exception. To indicate the symbol *ṛh* for the “tongue-flap” Hindi consonant, I have used *ḍ* (or, if aspirated, *ḍh*). Hence, *anparḥ* appears as *anpaḍ*, and *paṛhnā*, as *paḍhnā*. I have also used diacritical marks for the transliterated terms; however, terms which have become integrated into American English, such as *guru*, *chai*, and *sari*, appear without diacritics (and are not italicized). In addition, place names (e.g., Rajasthan), names of languages (e.g., Hindi), and the names of the sadhus (e.g., Devi Nath) appear without diacritics. I have, though, used diacritics for the names of deities. In the spirit of making the term *sādhu* more user-friendly for American English speakers, I have left out the diacritics and do not italicize this word, which are now standard practices in most academic studies on sadhus.

All translations of stories, songs, and texts are my own. Either Manvendra Singh, my field assistant, or Kalpana Chander Sanadhya, my Brahmin host sister, assisted me with these translations, especially with those performances which had occurred in Rajasthani (or Gujarati). All translations of the Rajasthani sadhus’ oral traditions were made from performances recorded by me and transcribed either by me or by Manvendra’s sisters, Rajmani and Diya; and by Kalpana Sanadhya and her sister-in-law, Jaya Sanadhya.

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Real sadhus sing to God—Gangagiri Maharaj.

INTRODUCTION

Our hearts love gathering in fellowship [*satsang*] with sadhus who sing to God.
 We receive bliss just by being with *sants* [holy people] who sing to God.
 Our hearts love gathering with sadhus who sing to God.
 Whether we go to the Ganga or to the Jamuna [rivers],
 Whether we go to the Ganga or to the Jamuna [rivers],
 Our hearts love gathering with sadhus who sing to God.
 We receive bliss just by being with *sants* who sing to God.

I first recorded this song (*bhajan*) in southwest Rajasthan in the summer of 2003 from two female Hindu ascetics, or sadhus, who sang it in order to illustrate their own understanding of asceticism as a path of “singing to God.” This song captures the ways in which the female sadhus I worked with for almost two years conceptualize, experience, and practice asceticism. Their devotional practices, the subject of my dissertation, illuminate a new way to think about both the category and phenomenon of asceticism in religious studies and in South Asian studies.

This dissertation is an ethnographic performative study of female asceticism in the north Indian state of Rajasthan. It offers a new model of Hindu asceticism and renunciation through examination and analysis of what I refer to as the sadhus’ “rhetoric of renunciation,” their song, story (including life story), and textual practices. These practices create and express a form of asceticism that has been underrepresented in religious studies on asceticism in South Asia. One of the purposes of my dissertation is to bring this level of practice and experience—what I have called “devotional asceticism”—

to the study of asceticism and to show that devotion and asceticism are neither distinct nor contradictory religious paths for the female sadhus of Rajasthan, but rather are experienced as the same path/phenomenon by these sadhus.

Since the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with think of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation *as* a form of asceticism, it is important for scholars of religion to expand the boundaries of “what counts” in categorizations of asceticism and to include these expressions of devotional performance. These performances, too, constitute types of religious sources with which to study South Asian traditions, more broadly, and South Asian asceticism(s) in particular. Through performance, narrative, and textual analysis of the sadhus’ rhetorical practices, this dissertation highlights the specificity of female asceticism in Rajasthan; it also demonstrates the complex and multiple ways renunciant practice provides a strategic and a constructive means by which female ascetics push beyond dominant, textual representations of asceticism, and thus, distinguish their form of asceticism from the authoritative Brahmanical (male) model. Through performance of their practices, the Rajasthani female sadhus model their lives on the devotional traditions of north Indian poet-saints (*sants*) in the construction of ascetic identity and practice as well as exert agency and negotiate authority as female ascetics in what is often perceived to be a male-dominated tradition of renunciation. In its use of the lens of devotional performance, this dissertation shifts the representation of whose voices are heard in the construction of asceticism as a category that carries power and authority in South Asian religions.

Background and Research Community

My research is based on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork with twenty-one female sadhus from southwest Rajasthan, a region known as Mewar. This number represents a population sample of female ascetics in this area of Rajasthan.¹ I conducted my research in 2001, 2003 and between 2004 and 2006. These female sadhus are celibate renouncers, who have renounced marriage, family, domestic responsibilities, work, and economic security in order to devote themselves to the worship of God. The female sadhus' ages vary between twenty and ninety-three years, with the average age being sixty-seven years. They belong to one of two pan-Indian Śaivaite ascetic traditions, the Daśanāmi and Nāth orders, founded by the semi-legendary figures Ādi Śankaracārya (ca. 8th-9th CE) and Gorakhnāth (ca. 11th-12th CE), respectively. In India, ascetic orders operate as voluntary associations with which sadhus become formal members through receipt of initiation from a guru, not as monastic centers that initiates officially join. While Daśanāmi and Nāth orders have official centers or *maths* where sadhus may live (temporarily or permanently) in organized communities,² it is not obligatory for them to reside at these centers upon their receipt of initiation (cf. Khandelwal 2004; Gross 1991).

Both the Daśanāmi and Nāth orders traditionally patronize the deity Śiva, whom most ascetics of these orders consider as a model of their radical way of life. To show their membership in either of these two orders, sadhus, including female sadhus, wear saffron-colored garments, known as *bhagvā*, which literally translates as “God’s color.”

¹ I discuss the process by which I found the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked in the Ethnographic Methods section of Chapter Two.

² The main Nāth center is located in Junāgaḍ, Gujarat. For the Daśanāmis, there are four major centers located in Badrināth, north India; Dwarka, west India; Pūrī, east India; and Rāmeśwaram, south India.

Although they are members of renunciant traditions that patronize Śiva, the female sadhus are eclectic in their chosen deity—they worship not only Śiva, particularly in his regionally known form as Bholenāth (lit., “innocent Lord”), but also Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rām, Hanumān, and the Goddess in any of her myriad (benign and/or frightening) forms. At the same time, the female sadhus speak of God in the generic sense as *bhagvān*, meaning ‘Lord,’ and understand *bhagvān* to be nameless and formless. Almost all of the female sadhus independently, in their own temples and ashrams, rather than in a single cenobitic monastic community of Daśanāmi or Nāth sadhus. A few of the sadhus reside with their male guru and/or guru-brothers (i.e., male sadhus who were initiated by the same guru), and co-manage the ashram. The majority of the female sadhus are either non-literate or semi-literate, having received no more than a fourth grade education. Despite their lack of formal education, most female sadhus believe that their devotion to God imbues them with divine knowledge. As one female sadhu told me, “My *bhakti* [devotion] is my power.” For these sadhus, religious experience rather than formal knowledge and learning endows them with spiritual authority and power. Finally, though they have renounced the world, including the social ties that once defined their lives, the female sadhus are involved in the world, meeting their devotees and/or disciples daily, and serving them as manifestations of *bhagvān* through means of their devotional practices.

Note on Terminology

Female ascetics of the Daśanāmi order are known as *sannyāsinīs*, and Nāths as *yoginīs* (or Nāths). The Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with, however, call themselves sadhus, and occasionally, *māīs* (lit., “mother”), rather than *sannyāsinīs* and Nāths and *sādhvīs*. I never heard the sadhus I worked with describe themselves as

sādhvīs.³ Even though the grammatically feminine form of sadhu is *sādhvī*—the standard term used by scholars of South Asian asceticism to characterize female renunciants—the sadhus associate this term not with female renunciants like themselves, but rather with female householders who become possessed by gods and/or goddesses.⁴ In light of the female sadhus’ own usage and understanding, I use the term sadhu in this dissertation.

“Real Sadhus Sing to God”: The Context of This Study

For most of the Rajasthani female sadhus, devotion (*bhakti*) is equivalent to renunciation (*sannyās*). They perceive their practices of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation as *ascetic* practices, using either the word *tap*, or *tapas*, which means ascetic practice, or *tapasya*, asceticism, in their descriptions of these practices. When I started working with the female sadhus in the summer of 2001, I had observed that many of them were singing *bhajans*, telling religious stories, narrating their own personal stories, and reciting and/or discussing sacred texts in their daily meetings, not just with me, but also with anyone who visited them. However, I did not realize that the female sadhus themselves associate devotional practice and, more broadly devotion, with asceticism until I had one illuminating conversation with Gangagiri.

One July afternoon in 2003 I visited Gangagiri at her hermitage; I had not seen her for several days as I had been working with another female sadhu who lived in a village twelve kilometers outside of Udaipur city where Gangagiri resides. Each female sadhu in my field study knows that I meet with other local female sadhus for my

³ Jain female ascetics, however, refer to themselves as *sādhvīs*. See Anne Vallely (2002)

⁴ ⁴ The female sadhus’ association of the term *sādhvī* with female householders who become possessed by god and/or the goddess implies an understanding of possession as a form of asceticism. I thank my co-advisor Joyce Flueckiger for pointing out this correlation. As important this understanding of asceticism, I deal only with the form of asceticism that the female sadhus create through their devotional practices.

research. In fact, since the population of female sadhus in Mewar is quite small in comparison to that of male sadhus,⁵ most of the female sadhus know each other. Several of them introduced me to other female sadhus in the area. So, it is not uncommon during our conversational exchanges for the sadhus to ask me which sadhu (or sadhus) I saw and what we discussed. On that day, Gangagiri asked where I had gone and whom I had visited. After I informed her of my visit with the other female sadhu, Gangagiri matter-of-factly asked me, “Did she sing a *bhajan* for you?” After a moment’s pause I replied, “No, *māi rām* [title for holy women, lit., “holy mother”], she did not.” In response Gangagiri said, “If she did not sing a *bhajan* for you, [then] she’s not a real sadhu. Real sadhus sing to God.”

Gangagiri’s statement alerted me to her understanding and experience of devotion as asceticism, and that, for her, renunciatory status and authority are directly linked to the expression of devotional practice. This view of *bhakti* as a form of asceticism is not exclusive to Gangagiri, but rather is shared amongst most of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked. As I listened carefully to the discourses and devotional performances of the other female sadhus I met, I began to discover that, like Gangagiri, many of them conceptualize devotion as asceticism and *vice versa*. Tulsigiri, for instance, often tells me that “What we sadhus do is *satsang* [communal worship]; I mean, we sadhus sing to God. This is our ‘daily routine’.” Echoing Tulsigiri’s comment, Santosh Puri similarly explains that “*bhakti* is renunciation.” And Gangagiri maintains that “renunciation and *bhakti* are the same. There is no difference [between them].” It makes sense, then, that the Rajasthani female sadhus not only frequently inquire about the other

⁵ Between 2004 and 2006 the female ascetic population in the region of Mewar consists of roughly thirty sadhus.

female sadhus whom I work with, but also are usually eager to hear both their own devotional performances that I record on tape as well as those of the other sadhus.

Most of the Rajasthani female sadhus, thus, explicitly associate renunciation with “singing to God [*bhajan karnā*].” Their use of the phrase “singing to God” functions as a popular trope for *bhakti*, and, in this respect, includes their practices of storytelling and textual recitation. Through these practices the female sadhus not only perform what I refer to as *devotional asceticism*, that is, asceticism as it is constructed and produced through daily devotional practice, but also perform their understanding of *bhakti* as a form of asceticism. In this way, as this dissertation shall demonstrate, the Rajasthani female sadhus performatively construct and express through the genres of story, song, and sacred text *bhakti* as a *different* kind of *tapas*, and therefore, devotional asceticism as a *different* kind of asceticism than Brahmanical asceticism.

“Death and Denial”: The Brahmanical Model of Hindu Asceticism

Brahmanical textual representations of asceticism have often served as the dominant model in religious studies on asceticism. From a historico-social perspective, asceticism and renunciation emerged as a “new” element within the Brahmanical tradition that challenged the validity and authority of the Vedic values of sacrifice, marriage, progeny (i.e., sons), and immortality⁶ in most Brahmanical discourse, and hence became associated with an alternative set of religio-social values, ideals, and practices (Olivelle 1992, 19-57; cf. Gross 1992, 7-45; but cf. Heesterman 1964). Wendy

⁶ Immortality as conceived in the Brahmanical texts is often discussed vaguely in terms of ‘everlasting life’ in a heavenly abode that consisted of both departed ancestors and deities. See *Brāhmanas* 2.1.2.1.1 and 2.1.2.1.2 in Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (ed.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism* (1990). Notions of immortality as liberation from the world of existence (*sansār*) appear in later Vedic texts, such as the *Upaniṣads*, and become part of the interpretive frameworks of renunciant traditions in India. See also Olivelle (1996).

Doniger explains: ‘The whole tradition of asceticism...the *samnyāsa* or ascetic stage of life, and the goal of *mokṣa* [liberation], was originally a violent challenge to the Brahmanical sacrificial system’ (Doniger 1971, 280, cited from Gross 1992, 13).

In his discussion of the theology and practice of renunciation in the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*⁷ (ca. 300 CE-1400 CE), Patrick Olivelle characterizes the interface between the emerging new world of renunciation and the “old” Vedic sacrificial world in terms of a “conflict” between “world-denying” and “world-affirming” ideologies and ways of life, respectively (Olivelle 1992, 22-23). The contrast between these opposing worldviews is further exemplified in the early Brahmanical literature (e.g., the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*) through use of the dualistic images of the celibate ascetic and the householder. As Olivelle states:

From the perspective of the new framework for understanding the human individual, the claim that a son constitutes a person’s immortality would have seemed downright silly...A son issues from his father’s semen, but he is not the continuation of his father’s existence. Individuals are now considered as complete in themselves, with personal continuities of their own from one life to another. The family is no longer needed to transform the individual into a complete person. The son is the father’s self but the result of the father’s desire...The householder is replaced by the celibate ascetic as the new religious ideal (Olivelle 1992, 42-43).

Thus, in the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, “renunciation,” Olivelle states, “is defined as an essentially *negative* and even antinomian state” (1992, 101, italics mine). Brahmanical textual understandings frequently, if not exclusively, emphasize, then, not only (the necessity of) abandoning or “throwing down” the world, but also “detachment from and disgust toward (*vairāgya*) all worldly things” as the *sine qua non* of renunciation (Olivelle 1992, 75; cf. Olivelle 1975). In writing about renunciation, Kirin Narayan, working off of the dominant model, explains that it “involves a symbolic death:

⁷ These are a compendium of authoritative Brahmanical renouncer texts that “draw extensively from other Brahmanical sources, such as the Upaniṣads, the epics, and the Purāṇas” (Olivelle 1992, 8).

renouncing all personal ties and possessions, the *sannyasi* [renouncer] must devote himself to contemplating the Inner Self” (Narayan 1989, 68).

Not only the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* but also most (ancient and classical) Brahmanical literature has portrayed renunciation via emphasis on the life-negating ideals and/or practices of individualism, celibacy, detachment, solitude, isolation, begging, perpetual wandering, acting mad and/or like animals, and liberation, *mokṣ*, from the world (Olivelle 1992, 58-81, 101-114). The image of permanently escaping to the wilderness, forest, or jungle operated as popular tropes for expressing a life-negating renunciatory worldview. A passage from the sixth chapter of the *Laws of Manu* (ca. 100 CE-300 CE), a Brahmanical text that discusses topics as various as ethics, civil and/or domestic law, duty, and religio-social institutions (e.g., marriage, widowhood, and renunciation), illustrates many of these “negative” renunciatory ideals and practices:

Departing from his house...let him wander about absolutely silent, and caring nothing for enjoyments that may be offered. Let him always wander alone without any companion in order to attain (final liberation), fully understanding that the solitary (man who) neither forsakes nor is forsaken, gains his end. He shall neither possess a fire nor a dwelling, he may go to a village for his food, (he shall be) indifferent to everything, firm of purpose, meditating (and) concentrating his mind on Brahman. A potsherd (instead of an almsbowl), the roots of trees (for a dwelling), coarse worn-out garments, life in solitude and indifference towards everything are the marks of one who has attained liberation (*Manu* VI, 41-44, cited from Narayan 1989, 68).

In the dominant model of Brahmanical asceticism, devotion appears to play little or no role in the lives of renunciators. The lack of emphasis on *bhakti* within the Brahmanical model may have to do with the fact that, derived from the root *bhaj*, meaning “to share,” “to connect,” “to partake,” “to love,” “to adore,” and “to revere” (Monier-Williams 1995, 743), devotion implies (the formation of) connection, or relationship, between the divine and the devotee as well as connection between devotees (cf. Cutler 1987; Ramanujan 1999; Martin 2000; Hawley 2005). With its privileging of

connection with the divine, *bhakti*, then, envisions the religious goal in terms of union with God, often conceived in *bhakti* traditions as having form, qualities, and attributes (*sagun*). In contrast, Brahmanical asceticism pivots on the severing of relationships; and on dis-connection not only from the world, the perceived locus of suffering, but also from an ego-driven self. Likewise, the purpose of asceticism is not, as *bhakti* insists, to create relationship with God, conceived in Brahmanical frameworks as *brahman*, i.e., the impersonal and ineffable Absolute without qualities (*nirgun*). On the contrary, since its purpose consists in the recognition of the *ātman*, or self, as the *brahman*, Self, the Brahmanical model of asceticism instead underscores absorption and/or dissolution into, rather than union with the divine. Thus, the implications of such a Brahmanical model of asceticism are not only that devotion is antithetical to asceticism, but that devotion and asceticism also constitute wholly separate paths to the divine.

Devotion and Asceticism as Irreconcilable Categories in Scholarly Discourse

The dominant Brahmanical model has influenced the ways scholars conceptualize the relationship between devotion and asceticism. The scholarship on religion in South Asia typically describes devotion and asceticism as distinct, even contradictory, religio-cultural phenomena. For instance, in his description of their ultimate goals, C.J. Fuller implies that *bhakti* and renunciation represent separate, and therefore, opposing religious value systems. He writes:

[D]evotionalism ideally enables everyone to achieve closeness to god and liberation from rebirth without renouncing the world, so that householders within caste society, irrespective of their station, can aspire to the renunciators' goals (Fuller 1992, 165).

Rita Dasgupta Sherma makes a similar distinction in her portrayal of *bhakti*:

Bhakti...provides a path to an emotional, loving relationship to God envisioned as simultaneously universal and omnipresent and personal and intimate. *Bhakti* is marked by

intense longing and passionate desire for communion with God...the advent of devotion was especially fortuitous for women because it did not demand the renunciation of family life and the eradication of sexual desire, which was demanded by the ascetic or monastic path (Sherma 2005, 27-28).

As Sherma suggests, unlike *bhakti*, which, she implies, is a positive value system, renunciation is viewed as the rejection of family and of society, and thus, as the abnegation of the world. Olivelle highlights this aspect: “renunciation... is a negative state...a denial of all that makes society what it is. Being an anti-structure to the established society, it is defined...by its rejection of the social structures. This is what sets it apart from all other...religious institutions of the world” (Olivelle 1975). Renunciation is conceptualized by means of the dominant metaphors of worldly rejection and negation because it is thought to be informed by an underlying value system that associates existence with endless suffering and constant rebirth. Olivelle explains:

A major concept in the emerging new world was *samsara*, a category that provided the framework for understanding and evaluating human life. According to this new understanding, life is ultimately and essentially suffering, subject as it is to repeated births and deaths. The goal of human existence, therefore, should be to transcend this bondage to the cycle of rebirth and to reach the realm of total freedom and bliss called *moksha*...ascetic withdrawal from society...was seen as the necessary precondition for achieving liberation (Olivelle 1995, 533).

Apart from being seen as contradictory value systems, *bhakti* and renunciation are also depicted as distinct religious paths (cf. Valley 2002, 188). In his description of the Ramanandi ascetics, which is based on the work of Peter van der Veer (1988) and Richard Burghart (1983), Fuller implies this standard scholarly assumption by highlighting what he suggests is an unusual, if not ironic, phenomenon of devotional ascetics in the Ramanandi order:

Even though they are all renouncers, some Ramanandis emphasize devotion as the path of salvation, whereas others emphasize renunciation itself, although neither section actually denies the value of the other’s path. Devotionalist Ramanandis...regard themselves as belonging to a higher grade of ascetic than those committed to the path of renunciation. The latter, who call themselves *tyagi*, literally “renouncer,”

disagree...Renunciatory Ramanandis refer to devotionalists as “wearer of garments,” implying that their renunciation of the world is incomplete, so that as a group they are inferior (Fuller, 1992, 167; italics mine).

Fuller continues to reproduce the scholarly assumption that devotion and renunciation are in and of themselves (supposed to be) distinct paths to God by referring to the devotional Ramanandis as “devotionalists” and the Renunciatory Ramanandis as “renouncers,” implying that devotional ascetics, and by extension, devotional asceticism constitute an oxymoron by orthodox standards. Fuller’s distinction between the devotionalists and renouncers further assumes that renunciation is not only different from, but also superior to devotion that is pursued as an ascetic path. Indeed, Fuller refers to the Renunciatory Ramanandis as “true renouncers” (1992, 167). Robert L. Gross replicates this bias in his account of the Tyagi sub-division of the Ramanandis: “The Tyagis are *the most austere* section of the Ramanandi Vairagis [ascetics] and are referred to as *tapasi sakha* or ‘penance branch’ because they emphasize the practice of hatha yoga and perform extreme *tapas* (austerities, self-mortification” (Gross 1991, 155; italics mine).

Implicit in both scholarly characterizations of Ramanandi asceticism is an assumption of the authoritative Brahmanical model of asceticism as normative in which, as I explained earlier, devotion appears to be irreconcilable with renunciation as a way of life. Note here Fuller’s description of the Ramanandis: “...among the renouncers there is a group of ‘great renouncers,’ who are invariably wanderers. Since wandering is a clear sign of renunciation and total rejection of the householder’s settled life, great renouncers (and all itinerants) claim superiority over sedentary Ramanandis...” (167). That Ramanandi renunciatory asceticism is better than its devotional form(s), and that the former reveals “true asceticism,” is expressed by the Renunciatory Ramanandis

themselves. The fact that the order emphasizes two main divisions—renouncers and devotionalists—in its hagiographical self-representation captures the ways in which ascetic traditions, too, not only distinguish between devotion and renunciation (Fuller 1992, 169), but also base their views of “real” renunciation on an assumed standard Brahmanical model of asceticism. The lifestyle of the Renunciatory Ramanandis, particularly the Tyagis, pivots, in fact, on the ideals propounded by this dominant model.

Gross elaborates:

The... “great renunciants” ...live under absolutely no shelter and wear no clothing except for a banana-bark loincloth; many of them keep silence, do prolonged fasts, and practice hatha-yoga intensively. They are constantly engaged in the practice of some form of tapas (Gross 1991, 154).

Besides distinguishing between devotion and renunciation as separate religious paths, *bhakti* is also distinguished from the path of action (*karm-mārg*) and that of gnosis and wisdom (*jnān-mārg*) as one of three parallel, yet different, approaches to the divine. As it tends to be aligned predominantly with the *jnān-mārg*, renunciation is often regarded as an intellectual path, whereas *bhakti* is primarily understood to be the path of fervent, sometimes uncontrollable, emotions and feelings (cf. Ramanujan 1999; Kinsely 1981). For example, Kapil N. Tiwari portrays knowledge (*jnān*) as the “metaphysical foundation” of renunciation. He writes:

Renunciation as linked with...*Jnāna* results in turning the concern of man away from external things to his essential inner nature by accomplishing which everything else is accomplished. *Jnāna* and renunciation take place simultaneously as one of the *Upaniṣads* says: “Verily, after they have found this soul, the *Brahmaṇas* cease from desiring children, from desiring possessions, from desiring the world, and wander about as beggars”...[I]t may be asserted that the monistic philosophy of Samkara cannot justify its claim without ascertaining the role of *Jnāna* for the release from bondage which results from misapprehension, giving rise to attachment (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*) and delusion (*moha*). Contrariwise, when misapprehension is destroyed by right knowledge, defects of existence are completely destroyed. This is followed by the destruction of attachment (*pravr̥tti*) with the consequence of renunciation...It is for this reason that Self-knowledge which leads to the destruction of *ahamkāra* [the ego]...has been rated to be of the highest value (Tiwari 1977, 37-38).

Likewise, Gross distinguishes *bhakti* from an intellectual path in his statement that “...the hallmark of *bhakti* is intense love for God, and it is this emotional tone running through Hindu devotional religious experience that takes precedence over any intellectual attempt to account for what is going in [*sic*]...” (Gross 1991, 269). Similarly, Karine Schomer implicitly portrays *bhakti* as an emotion-oriented path and asceticism as a speculative, mystical path:

The devotional transformation of medieval Hinduism known as the bhakti movement was a phenomenon of crucial importance in the history of Indian religion... From ritual observance and the performance of prescribed duties, or alternately, ascetic withdrawal in search of *speculative* knowledge of the divine, the heart of religion became the cultivation of a loving relationship between the individual and a personally conceived supreme god (Schomer 1987, 1; italics mine).

Other scholars have described the historical development of *bhakti* in the Indian subcontinent in terms of a series of self-contained movements that, between the fifth and fifteenth century CE, arose in stark opposition not only to Brahmanical (or priestly) orthodoxy, but also to orthodox renunciation (cf. Schomer and McLeod 1987; Vaudeville 1987; Lorenzen 1996; Valley 2002, 188).⁸ Historically, devotion and renunciation are repeatedly distinguished in the scholarly literature as opposing religious movements and/or institutions. The opposition between them is thought to have had both theological and social dimensions. From a theological standpoint, *bhakti* is typically regarded as a movement that constructs deity and divinity as separate, and therefore, considers union with (a personal) God, rather than, as renunciation would seemingly have it, absorption into (an impersonal) *brahman*, to be the ultimate goal of human existence. *Bhakti* is described as being predominantly concerned with realization of oneself in relationship to a divine other. Renunciation, on the other hand, is thought to be concerned with

⁸ Nancy Martin stresses: “[the *bhakti* movement] is situated within a stream of religious reform” (Martin 2000, 183).

realization of oneself *as* divine, and thus, the destruction of any “I/Thou” distinctions in perception and experience. Nancy Martin emphasizes the theological uniqueness of *bhakti* vis-à-vis, as she implies, orthodox or Brahmanical renunciation:

Bhakti philosophy and theology developed in opposition to Hindu *advaita* [non-dual] philosophers who argued that Ultimate Reality was an impersonal Oneness to be realized rather than a supreme God to be loved. The *bhaktas* articulated a desire to experience God rather than to become God, whether their orientation was *nirgun* [impersonal] or *sagun* [personal] (Martin 2000, 185).

At the same time, scholars usually distinguish the *bhakti* movement and Brahmanical orthodoxy and/or asceticism as illustrative of two distinct social ideologies. Because of its emphasis on unconditional love as the *sine qua non* of the path, *bhakti* is characterized as an egalitarian movement that allowed everyone, irrespective of caste, class, and gender, into its fold. Fuller echoes an understanding of the *bhakti* movement as inherently egalitarian and liberal:

...true devotion can be felt by anyone—male or female, high or low, rich or poor, learned or illiterate—without renouncing the world, so that the male Brahmins’ claim to privileged access to the divine and to potential liberation through renunciation is subverted (Fuller 1992, 157).

In contrast, Brahmanical orthodoxy, and by extension, Brahmanical asceticism are seen as traditions that, in David Lorenzen’s words, “had become the exclusive province of a small, all-male, Brahmin elite who unilaterally barred the rest of the population from any direct eligibility for salvation, or even from hearing the Vedic texts on which the Brahmins’ religious authority depended” (Lorenzen 1995, 15). Olivelle concurs with Lorenzen’s portrayal of Brahmanical orthodoxy as, *contra* the *bhakti* movement, exclusive and hegemonic. He writes,

...the internal logic of *bhakti* contradicted the elitism inherent in the institutions of renunciation. Renouncers were religious virtuosi; and in theologies where mystical quests and ascetic discipline were central, the claim could be made that only renouncers were able to achieve the highest goal of religion, namely liberation. Love, on the other hand, is egalitarian; anyone can love (Olivelle 2000, 284).

Finally, *bhakti* and renunciation are often depicted by scholars as gendered female and male forms of religiosity, respectively. Vernacular language and Brahmanical literary sources that portray women as especially apt for a life of devotion, and that represent renunciation and asceticism as a way of life largely intended for males, have become the conceptual foundations upon which scholars have frequently theorized devotion and asceticism in dichotomous, and often, gendered ways.⁹ On devotion, for example, A.K. Ramanujan emphasizes that

An especially arresting aspect of the *bhakti* milieu... is the extent to which *bhakti* itself appears as ‘feminine’ in nature, by contrast to Vedic sacrifice, which may be considered as ‘masculine’ in ethos, personnel, and language. The chief mood of *bhakti* is the erotic (*śringāra*), seen almost entirely from an Indian woman’s point of view, whether in its phase of separation or of union. Thus, when saints both male and female address love poems to Kṛṣṇa and Śiva and adopt such feminine personae as wife (*kāntā*), illicit lover (*parakīya*), trysting woman (*abhisārikā*), even Rādhā herself, they are drawing on a long, rich history (Ramanujan 1999, 270).

Here, in his representation of devotion as feminine, Ramanujan alludes particularly to popular Vaiṣṇava theological and literary notions that all devotees are “female” in the eyes of a gendered male God (cf. Hawley 1986; Narayanan 2003). Though he does not mention renunciation, Ramanujan’s characterization of Vedic sacrifice as “masculine” vis-à-vis “feminine” devotion mimics analytic representations of renunciation and *bhakti* as wholly separate categories that become aligned with men and women, respectively, in the scholarly discourse. Because *bhakti* is not only associated with inner feelings and emotions and eroticism, but also promotes an attitude of love, surrender, and dependence, it has been associated with “the domain of women” (Vallely 2002, 215) and therefore “is seen as a feminized form of worship” (Khandelwal 2004,

⁹ In the popular *bhakti* Sanskrit literature, Rādhā, the consort and illicit lover of Kṛṣṇa, is often used as a symbol to depict the notion of devotion as gendered female. See the *Gītāgovinda*, B.S. Miller translation, 1977, as cited in C.J. Fuller, 1992, 156 & 160; see also Kinsley 1981 and Ramanujan 1999.

212).¹⁰ According to Vallely, “...there is a cultural assumption that women innately possess the virtues of the ideal devotee [214]...Surrender, sacrifice, and nurture are [considered to be the] natural attributes of the ideal woman” (Vallely 2002, 216). By contrast, with its purported androcentric ideals of detachment, individualism, and semen-retention, renunciation is often identified with the realm of men, and thus, is cast as a masculine tradition.

In sum, the representation of devotion and renunciation in academic discourse as distinct and opposing value systems; as parallel but separate religious paths; as a non-rational/emotional path of love and a rational/intellectual path of study, respectively; as historically distinct institutions; as grounded in contradictory theologies and social ideologies; and as gendered feminine and masculine forms of religious expression has produced the perception that they are mutually exclusive categories. “On the face of it,” Vallely explains, “they do appear to be distinct and even opposing paths. But at their

¹⁰ Note, for example, the following poem from the Sanskrit drama, the *Gītagovinda*, composed during the twelfth century by the Bengali Brahmin, Jayadeva. In this song, *bhakti*, eroticism, and femininity are conflated in the exemplary figure of Rādhā:

Revel in wild luxury on the sweet thicket floor!
Your laughing face begs ardently for his love.
Radha, enter Madhava’s [Kṛṣṇa’s] intimate world!

Revel in a thick bed of red petals plucked as offerings!
Strings of pearls are quivering on your rounded breast.
Radha, enter Madhava’s intimate world!...

Revel where swarming bees drunk on honey buzz soft tones!
Your emotion is rich in the mood of love.
Radha, enter Madhava’s intimate world!...

Bearing you in his mind so long
Has wearied him, inflamed with love.
He longs to drink your sweet berry lips’ nectar.
Ornament his body with yours now!
He worships your lotus feet—a slave bought
With Shri’s flashing glance. Why are you afraid?
[B.S. Miller translation, 1977, 118-119; cited from Fuller 1992, 155-56]

most basic levels, both are about connecting with a divine power—tapping into it, experiencing it, and benefitting from it” (Vallely 2002, 190).

“*Connection and Community*”: An Alternative Devotional Model of Hindu Asceticism

In their conceptualization of devotional practice as asceticism, the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with indicate that devotion and asceticism represent the same path. At the same time, however, they distinguish their form of asceticism from the dominant Brahmanical model. While it is a legitimate model, (this form of) Brahmanical asceticism represents only one kind of asceticism. Brahmanical asceticism, Meena Khandelwal argues, is “a tradition that was created by and for elite men” (Khandelwal 2004, 5). As such, it reflects primarily an androcentric model that negates the *conceptual* possibility of female ascetics in its understanding that, aside from self-realization, the goal of ascetic practice (*tapas*) is the retention of semen (cf. Khandelwal 2001). By retaining semen through practices of celibacy (*brahmacārya*), and by moving it upwards toward the head through means of ascetic disciplines where it becomes transmuted into a spiritual substance, it is thought that renunciators may acquire extraordinary ascetic powers and wisdom, by which they not only realize themselves *as God/brahman*, but also experience liberation, *mokṣ*, from what is perceived to be an illusory and impermanent world (cf. Khandelwal 2001; Alter 1997; Kaelber 1989; Varenne 1976). In contrast to the “negative” or world-denying model of Brahmanical asceticism, devotional asceticism, I suggest, represents a positive, world-affirming model. For most of the Rajasthani female sadhus, devotional practice, conceived as *tapas*, also enables them to produce power, knowledge, and most importantly love.

Furthermore, their song, story, and sacred text practices are considered to be more than just ascetic practices through which the female sadhus “meet” God; they are also means through which they serve God and the world “with love.” Unlike Brahmanical asceticism, devotional asceticism emphasizes the ideals of relationship with God, rather than realization of God; connection with, instead of rejection of, the world; and community/fellowship (*satsang*) rather than individualism, isolation, and solitude. Though an alternative to the Brahmanical model, devotional asceticism, as this dissertation shall demonstrate, coexists with and complements the renunciant ideologies and practices created by the dominant Brahmanical model.

Devotional Asceticism as a New Model of Hindu Asceticism

Devotional asceticism as enacted through devotional practice by the Rajasthani female sadhus, thus, represents a new way to think about asceticism in religious studies on asceticism in South Asia. Since the female sadhus I worked with experience devotion (and devotional practice) as asceticism, it seems necessary to characterize their lives and religiosity beyond simply ‘asceticism.’ I have called this tradition devotional asceticism, a term that makes explicit through a new analytic category what other scholars of religion in South Asia have similarly observed.¹¹

This new analytic category goes beyond describing devotional ascetic practices as everyday practice that is distinguished from an ideal ascetic practice (Vallely 2002; see

¹¹ Although the important work of scholars like Peter van der Veer (1988), Robert Lewis Gross (1991), Anne Vallely (2002), and Meena Khandelwal (2004) illustrates that asceticism is practiced as a devotional path by some Indian sadhus, some of these studies assume the dominant model of asceticism by concentrating on the standard ascetic practices of fasting, meditation, and prayer in their representations of asceticism (but cf. Khandelwal 2004). This scholarship, moreover, primarily represents ascetics’ experiences of *bhakti* in terms of the ideals of surrender and dependence. For the Rajasthani sadhus, *bhakti* is not only viewed as a path of surrender and love; more significantly, it is also experienced as a form of asceticism through practices of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation. For a detailed description of these studies, see the review of the literature on asceticism in Chapter Two.

also Teskey Denton 2004; Gross 1991); it offers devotional asceticism as a new *model* of Hindu asceticism that is distinct from the more dominant model of Brahmanical asceticism. It moves beyond implicitly assuming the latter as the singular ideal representation of asceticism on which devotional varieties of asceticism have been grafted (and are, therefore, somehow secondary). A new analytic category acknowledges that devotion changes the nature and purpose of asceticism for its practitioners and produces a different kind of asceticism vis-à-vis the dominant model.

While devotional asceticism constitutes a new model of Hindu renunciation, it nonetheless shares certain practices and values with the Brahmanical model. For instance, Rajasthani female sadhus are celibate, and their discourses emphasize the importance of celibacy for renunciation. Some of the female sadhus have said that ascetics who live like householders, that is, have sexual relationships, are not only “fake [*nugara*]” sadhus, but also create a “stain [*dāg*]” on the reputation of sadhus everywhere. As Santosh Puri told me, “What kind of *bhakti* can be done when sadhus live like householders?” Moreover, the female sadhus speak about the Brahmanical value of detachment, characterizing themselves as detached from the drama (*nāṭak*) and illusions (*māyā*) of the world. However, the female sadhus distinguish themselves from this model in that they understand their detachment enables them to love everyone and everything in the world as “the same.” “For us,” Tulsigiri teaches, “everyone is God.” For these female sadhus, detachment involves discerning the nature of existence as impermanent and illusory and engaging themselves in that existence in order, as the sadhus say, to heal the suffering and pain of the world. Detachment, therefore, effects worldly involvement from the female sadhus; and yet it shields them from the quagmires of everyday life.

Finally, the female sadhus invoke the Brahmanical model through emphasis on the ideal of wandering (*ghumnā-phirnā*) in their personal narratives. Many of the female sadhus explained that after they took renunciation (*sannyās lenā; fakīri lenā*) they wandered throughout the Indian subcontinent. Some of them travelled alone; and some with other female sadhus. Most of them travelled on foot and/or by bus or train to popular pilgrimage centers, such as Haridwar, Rishikesh, Badrinath and Amarnath in north India; Dwarka in west India; Puri in east India; and Rameswaram in the south. Similarly, several of the female sadhus discussed living a life of solitude (*ekānt*) in the forest and/or jungle. Shiv Puri told me that she spent her days alone in the jungle, meditating on God. Of course, we have to juxtapose the female sadhus' stories of wandering with the fact that most of them are more often *stāndhāri*, settled in one place. In the twenty-two months that I worked with the female sadhus, all but two of them stayed at their own dwellings, rather than travelled outside of the immediate region and/or the state for any length of time. Even if the male guru or guru-brother(s) with whom she resided travelled, either to solicit donations or to make a pilgrimage, the female sadhus usually opted to stay behind at the ashram/temple.¹²

Despite their emphasis on the classic Brahmanical ideals of celibacy, detachment, itinerancy, and solitude, the female sadhus spend a large portion of their lives stationary, serving their constituency through means of their devotional practices. Both devotional asceticism and Brahmanical asceticism, then, not only coexist as distinct, yet

¹² This was the case for Uma Saraswati, whose male guru and three resident guru-brothers (*guru-bhai*) constantly travelled to different regions of north and central India in order to solicit funds for their expanding ashram and temple in Dilwaria village, Rajsamand district. In the absence of the male sadhus, Uma Saraswati managed the ashram/temple, purchased supplies such as milk, food, and gas for cooking, and met with her disciples and devotees.

complementary, forms of asceticism, they also coexist in the lives of individual female sadhus of Rajasthan.

Meena Khandelwal (2004) also proposes an alternative analytical model of renunciation as gendered feminine, or more specifically, maternal. Khandelwal's work on female asceticism in Haridwar is one of the first studies on Indian asceticism to emphasize that renunciation is neither synonymous with nor reflective of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Khandelwal writes: "Equating sannyasa with brahmanical orthodoxy makes it difficult to see the general "undetermined" potential of sannyasa, the potential for protest and eccentricity" (Khandelwal 2004, 197). Part of this inherent "eccentricity," as Khandelwal argues, involves the gendering of renunciation by the female ascetics with whom she worked as maternal, in ethos and in practice. "...[R]enunciatory discourse and practice," Khandelwal explains, "are not only highly gendered, but they are sometimes gendered feminine. Sannyasa imagines itself alternatively as ungendered, as hypermasculine, and as maternally feminine" (Khandelwal 2004, 192).

While the dominant Brahmanical ideals of celibacy, detachment, and (periodic) isolation continue to inform their ascetic lives, the Haridwari female ascetics Khandelwal describes construct and experience asceticism primarily through the maternal values of compassion, love, selfless service, and "motherly" scolding, and through practices of preparing food and feeding others (Khandelwal 2004, 184-90). Khandelwal emphasizes that female ascetics "are more personally *involved* with food" than male ascetics (187; italics in original). She maintains that "[f]or male sadhus the role of being fed is consistent with their identities as both male and renouncer, while women... seem to be very comfortable in the quintessentially female role of feeding people" (187). By

reconceptualizing renunciation through the lens of spiritual motherhood in their rhetoric and practices the Haridwari female ascetics communicate what Khandelwal characterizes as “the specificity of a renunciant female voice.” She explains:

I believe it is possible to talk about the specificity of a renunciant female voice. In addition to remarks about motherly gurus and motherly behavior on the part of female renouncers, the insistence that women don't *need* sannyasa because they can achieve all of its goals within the home indicates that sannyasinis stress the similarities between renunciation and the domestic roles of most women. They distinguish themselves from literal mothers by becoming more universal models of motherhood and by emphasizing compassion over attachment and celibacy over sexuality and fertility... Since it is the role of the mother that offers them power and respect in Hindu society, desexualizes them, and is least threatening to their male peers, it is not so surprising that they emphasize maternal identities (Khandelwal 2004, 192; italics in original).

Like the Haridwar female ascetics, the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with similarly underscore in their renunciant discourses and performances the values of love (*prem*), selfless service (*sevā*), and compassion (*karunā*). Gangagiri frequently teaches that “love is what God is” and that, because everything on the planet represents a manifestation of God, and hence, of love, the duty of sadhus is to serve not only God, but, more importantly, all creation “with love.” Although the values Gangagiri emphasizes clearly possess maternal overtones, the majority of the female sadhus I worked with situate such values primarily within a *bhakti* framework. To these female sadhus, love, service, surrender, self-sacrifice, and dependence on the divine are also consistent with the behavior and role of the ideal devotee (*bhakt*) of God. As Tulsigiri says, “We [sadhus] are God's *bhakts*. We love everyone, rich or poor, man or woman, sick or healthy, young or old, as the same. You [the supplicant] are God for us.” Not only Tulsigiri, but most of the female sadhus refer to themselves as the “*bhakts* of *bhagvān*,” rather than, as Khandelwal describes for the Haridwari female ascetics, “mothers.”

The Rajasthani female sadhus certainly draw on maternal models in their use of appellations such as “*māī rām*,” “*mātājī*” (lit. revered mother), and “*mātā rām*” to refer themselves and to other female sadhus, but they draw on other models as well, including the model of the *sants*, extraordinary devotees of God, in the construction of both ascetic identity and asceticism. A devotional model of asceticism, therefore, not only exhibits the potential for eccentricity in *sannyās* that Khandelwal discusses but also supplements her model of renunciation as maternal. My model further accounts for the specificity of female asceticism in its Rajasthani context.

Performing Asceticism through the Rhetoric of Renunciation: Ethnographic Models

In addition to developing a model of devotional asceticism, this dissertation differs from other scholarly work that has identified devotional practice by ascetics by analyzing their performances of devotion through story, song, and sacred text—the sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation. I concentrate on these particular religious practices, indigenous “ways of speaking” for these female sadhus (Hymes 1974), that constitute “a core repertoire of performance genres” (Flueckiger 1996, 11) which the Rajasthani sadhus use to construct and enact ascetic identity and devotional asceticism. Gangagiri’s statement that “Real sadhus sing to God” highlights the significance Rajasthani female sadhus attribute to performance for their form of asceticism.¹³

Studies of South Asian expressive traditions (cf. Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1991) as well as studies of the complex relationship between specific forms of women’s religious praxis and their lives outside those contexts (cf. Raheja and Gold 1994;

¹³ See Chapter Two, “Interpretive Foundations,” for my discussion of the performance-centered and narrative methodologies informing my representation and analyses of the female sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation.

Pitchman 2007) have influenced my understanding of the song, story, and sacred text practices of the female sadhus as sites for the performative construction of devotional asceticism. I wanted to learn not only what stories, songs, and sacred texts matter to Rajasthani female ascetics, but also how they perform these traditions as a strategy with which to communicate what meanings of asceticism matter. By the same token, I wanted to learn how the meanings embedded in particular performance contexts (e.g., *satsang*) affect the meanings performers and their audiences attribute to expressive practices, and how those practices thereby engage values that conform with or diverge from those more central to Brahmanical traditions. To this extent, I sought to understand the ways in which sadhus' conceptualizations and experiences of both ascetic identity and asceticism constitute "a performative accomplishment" (Langellier and Peterson 2004, 30) and the crucial issues of power and gender that arise in specific types of devotional performance.

My concentration particularly on the relationship between female sadhus' devotional performances to asceticism is informed by several models of performative ethnography (i.e., ethnographic studies that examine indigenous interpretations and experiences of culture through the frame of performance). One model is Kirin Narayan's study (1989) of Hindu renunciation through analysis of the religious narrative teachings and folktales of one male sadhu, Swamiji. Narayan, who seeks to understand the transformative power of storytelling in religion, explores the ways Swamiji draws on narrative as a means with which to communicate with his audience and impart religious teachings, values, and attitudes. Narayan explains: "This figure, a sadhu who magnetically draws listeners to hear stories laden with religious teachings that will change their lives, has seemed to me the icon of my research (224)." Religious

storytelling, as Narayan shows, represents not only a context in which the everyday cultural concerns of a particular male sadhu converge, but is also a vehicle through which Swamiji critiques the social situations he aims to change. Narayan's work lays the foundation for performative studies of Hindu asceticism by providing an interpretive framework of renunciant performance as a means through which sadhus vocalize their lives, experiences, and values, and in so doing, mirror the inherent complexity and specificity of asceticism in practice.

Joyce Flueckiger's narrative ethnography (2006) of a female Muslim healer (*pirānimā*), Amma, in the south Indian state of Hyderabad is another performance model informing my dissertation, particularly in her emphasis on repertoire of healing practices. Flueckiger examines the ways in which Amma's healing practices create what Flueckiger terms as "vernacular Islam," Islam as it is "lived locally" and "shaped and voiced by individuals in specific contexts and in specific relationships" (Flueckiger 2006, 2). Flueckiger argues that in Amma's healing room healing is possible across lines of religious affiliation because of the performance of a cosmology, ritual grammar, and narrative repertoire that is shared across religious identities.

Apart from illustrating the ways Islam takes shape in its Hyderbadi contexts through examination of Amma's healing and ritual practices, Flueckiger additionally demonstrates that personal narrative performance allows Amma to negotiate her authority to practice as a female healer in Islam, a public ritual role "traditionally limited to men" (Flueckiger 2006, 4; cf. Flueckiger 2003, 76-102). Though she understands her ritual position to be outside the boundaries of her gender, as Flueckiger discusses, Amma legitimates her own ritual authority through performance of her personal narratives,

constructing her unusual ritual role in terms of being called by God to practice ritual healing in the public realm (Flueckiger 2006, 136-67). Flueckiger explains:

...when Amma says she is called by God to this work through dreams and visions, unusual as it might be for a woman, it is difficult for those who may not agree that she should sit in this role to argue openly with her, at least theoretically. Her relationship with God and its demands supersede traditional social/religious gender roles (Flueckiger 2006, 236).

Flueckiger's examination of gender and vernacular Islam as they are created and performed through Amma's practices expands the boundaries of "what counts" in religious studies on Islam (Flueckiger 2006, xii). This dissertation, too, stretches the parameters of what counts as Hindu asceticism in religious and anthropological studies on asceticism. By thinking about asceticism in the way the Rajasthani female sadhus themselves understand and experience it, devotional asceticism represents a site of flexibility and innovation in a tradition that is widely perceived by both scholars of religion and of South Asia to be wholly distinct from devotion.

A third model informing my work is Saba Mahmood's performative ethnographic study of the women's mosque (or Islamist) movement in Cairo, Egypt (2005). Mahmood investigates Muslim women's "virtuous practices" through the multiple lenses of scriptural study of *Quran* and/or *hadīth* and of other edificatory Islamic literature, ritual behaviors, and bodily forms of comportment such as veiling and/or styles of dress, as vehicles for the constitution of Islamic piety (i.e., "closeness to God"), or the "ideal virtuous self" (Mahmood 2005, 3). Of particular significance is Mahmood's discussion that Muslim women's virtuous practices perform and therefore create what they understand to be Islamic piety. Mahmood draws on Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity' with which to explain the notion of repetitive bodily and speech acts as engendering processes of self, specifically the "pious self," formation (Mahmood 2005,

160-67). In this framework, Islamic piety and the pious self do not simply precede their constitutive practices, but rather are repeatedly enacted through Muslim women's virtuous performances, through which they also enact modesty and femininity (160).

Mahmood explains:

Both views (the mosque participants' and Butler's) suggest that it is through the repeated performance of virtuous practice (norms in Butler's terms) that the subject's will, desire, intellect, and body come to acquire a particular form. The mosque participants' understanding of virtues may be rendered in Butlerian terms in that they regard virtuous performances *not so much as manifestations of their will but more as actions that produce the will in its particularity*. In this conception, one might say that the pious subject does not precede the performance of normative virtues but is enacted through the performance. Virtuous actions may well be understood as performatives; *they enact that which they name: a virtuous self* (Mahmood 2005, 163; italics mine).

Although she understands the idea of performance in Butlerian terms of the stylized repetition of acts rather than, as this dissertation understands it, in the folkloristic sense of a bounded and heightened *communicative act*, Mahmood's representation of Muslim women's virtuous performances as inherently constructive and, as she implies, transformative acts parallels my argument that the Rajasthani female sadhus' practices constitute a performance strategy by which means they create and enact devotional asceticism. In this respect, devotional asceticism does not precede their renunciant performances but is, instead, repeatedly constituted both through and *as* the female sadhus' practices. Unlike piety, which, as Mahmood explains, is produced through women's performances of *normative* practices and virtues, devotional asceticism is created through the sadhus' performances of practices and ideals that represent an alternative to the dominant Brahmanical practices/ideals.

Finally, Elaine Lawless' ethnographic study of the lives and rhetorical practices of female Pentecostal preachers and pastors in Missouri, Illinois (1988) has been influential in my examination and analysis of the female sadhus' renunciant performances. Lawless

seeks to understand the ways in which the female Pentecostal preachers/pastors with whom she worked validate and negotiate their spiritual positions of leadership and authority in a fundamentalist church that envisions women's place to be in the home, and that, on account of its interpretation of Biblical scripture, considers women to be subordinate to men (Lawless 1988, 1-15, 145-65). Lawless demonstrates that the female Pentecostal preachers/pastors legitimate their unusual lives of power and authority to themselves and to their congregations through performance of their "spiritual" life stories and sermons. These performances constitute what Lawless refers to as "narrative strategies" by which means the female preachers/pastors script an alternative role to the normative ones of wife, mother, and caretaker. At the same time, the female preachers/pastors are able to script alternative lives because of their emphasis on maternal themes and images (e.g., the handmaiden of the Lord), by virtue of which they represent themselves in a manner that is perceived to be "traditional" by both themselves and their congregations. Lawless explains:

Oddly, even in the face of their obvious heresy, it is the strong connection these women maintain with a conservative fundamentalism that enables them to acquire the position of power and authority in a church as pastor and provides the means for them to maintain that position. The maternal and reproductive images they employ as religious strategies serve to strip their presence behind the pulpit of its most threatening aspects (Lawless 1988, 145).

As Lawless indicates, insofar as they invoke patriarchal idioms of female gender that subordinate women to male authority, the female preachers and pastors enter into traditionally male spheres and positions of religious power. Mahmood makes a similar point about the Egyptian women's mosque movement. "[W]omen's subordination to feminine virtues, such as shyness, modesty, and humility," Mahmood suggests, "appears

to be the necessary condition for their enhanced public role in religious and political life” (Mahmood 2005, 6).

Lawless’ work provides a theoretical perspective for understanding the Rajasthani female sadhus’ own gendered negotiations in a patriarchal Indian society and in the male-dominated traditions of renunciation. However, unlike the female Pentecostal preachers and pastors, the female sadhus’ self-constructions are neither grounded in nor informed by dominant discourses that portray women as inferior, weak, or subordinate.¹⁴ At the same time, the authority of these female sadhus depends on their self-representations as traditional. Thus, the female sadhus represent themselves as traditional sadhus by situating their devotional asceticism in traditions of north Indian *bhakti* religiosity. In drawing on these (medieval) traditions as a performance strategy for their own self-representation, the Rajasthani female sadhus legitimate both their form of asceticism and their individual renunciant positions of spiritual authority and power.

The Context of *Sant Bhakti* in the Devotional Asceticism of Rajasthani Sadhus

As I mentioned earlier, the Rajasthani female sadhus in this study are members of one of two pan-Indian, Śaivaite ascetic traditions, the Daśanāmi and the Nāth. In these traditions, the ideological systems of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) and/or Tantric Yoga constitute the primary interpretive frameworks (cf. Khandelwal 2004, 27; Gold 1992; Gross 1992, 56; Schomer 1987; Tiwari 1977).¹⁵ In both Advaita Vedanta and Tantric Yoga, there is a relative lack of emphasis on *bhakti*. However, as Hirst (1993) points out,

¹⁴ Meena Khandelwal confirms a similar pattern amongst the Haridwari female ascetics with whom she worked. Khandelwal writes, “No sannyasini I met suggested that the underrepresentation of women in sannyasa has to do with women’s spiritual inferiority” (Khandelwal 2004, 193).

¹⁵ Advaita Vedanta is the primary interpretive framework for the Daśanāmi tradition, whereas the Nāth tradition emphasizes both Advaita Vedanta and Tantric Yoga frameworks.

Śankara (ca. 8th-9th century CE), who is often credited in the scholarly literature with systematizing Advaita Vedanta, recognized the importance of *bhakti* as a means to Self-realization. Even contemporary leaders of the Daśanāmi order, the *jagad-gurus*, have promoted *bhakti* from an Advaita Vedanta perspective as a method for Self-knowledge and realization (cf. Cenker 1982; Dazey 1983). Nevertheless, the influence of Advaita Vedanta and Tantric Yoga has effected in the Daśanāmi and Nāth traditions greater emphasis on philosophical study, reflection, meditation, and yogic practice than on *bhakti* as methods of attaining salvific knowledge and liberation. Citing Dazey's work (1993), Khandelwal concurs on the peripheral nature of *bhakti* in Śaivaite ascetic traditions: "The reciting of Om and ritual worship [i.e., devotionism] may be prescribed for renunciators in the monastic textbooks, but they are clearly presented as *secondary*" (Khandelwal 2004, 206, ft. note 5; italics mine).

Given their ascetic orders' preferred ideologies and practices, the fact that most of the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with equate *bhakti* with asceticism is also significant. That is, while it may be common for Śaiva ascetics in general to acknowledge like Śankara did the importance of *bhakti* (as a tool) for Self-realization (Dazey 1993), it is unusual for these *types* of ascetics to prioritize *bhakti* over Advaita Vedanta or Tantric Yoga, or by extension, to conceptualize *bhakti* as asceticism. Of course, this is not to say that the Rajasthani female sadhus are not influenced by Advaita Vedanta and Tantric Yoga. They are. Their renunciant discourses are saturated with the teachings of these two ideological systems. At the same time, the female sadhus often reinterpret these teachings from the overarching perspective of *bhakti* (rather than the other way around). So, if not from within the conceptual template of their own ascetic traditions (Daśanāmi or Nāth),

where does the female sadhus' emphasis on *bhakti* come from? What has shaped their understanding and practice of asceticism?

Before I answer this question, it is important to put the female sadhus' *bhakti* orientation into historical perspective with respect to the larger phenomenon of Hindu asceticism. While *bhakti* is largely absent in Śaiva asceticism (and, broadly speaking, in the dominant Brahmanical model), the use of *bhakti* as a guiding conceptual framework is found in other forms of Hindu asceticism. Śaiva asceticism represents only one type of asceticism in South Asia. Indian asceticism, in fact, typically consists of two main branches: Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava.¹⁶ Hence, in addition to Śaiva-based ascetic traditions like the Daśanāmi, Nāth, and Lingayat,¹⁷ there are also numerous Vaiṣṇava traditions of asceticism, of which the largest group are the Ramanandis (cf. Lamb 2003; Hartsuiker 1993; Bedi 1991; Gross 1991).¹⁸ Vaiṣṇava ascetics are known as *vairāgis*, “the dispassionate ones.” And, unlike Śaiva (forms of) asceticism, Vaiṣṇava asceticism, from its inception as an organized sectarian institution, has been deeply influenced by *bhakti* traditions (Khandelwal 2004, 206 ft. note 8; Gross 1991, 57-61). The history of late classical and medieval Vaiṣṇava asceticism, therefore, is marked by significant interaction with *bhakti* traditions and incorporation of *bhakti* beliefs into its overall conceptual structure and practice.

¹⁶ Khandelwal notes: “Two of the most general sectarian categories divide Hindus into followers of either Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu” (Khandelwal 2004, 27).

¹⁷ As Gross points out, the Lingayats are an ascetic sect that is almost exclusively located in the state of Mysore in South India (Gross 1991, 56). One of the most famous figures in the history of Lingayat devotionalism is the female saint Mahadeviyakka, who composed poems of love to Śiva, whom she considered to be her “real” husband, and who wandered about naked and covered in ashes. See Ramanujan 1999; Ramaswamy 1997; and Kinsley 1981.

¹⁸ According to Gross, the Ramanandis are not only the largest Vaiṣṇava sect, but also the largest ascetic population in India (Gross 1991, 59). The Ramanandis are not, however, a monolithic religious order. As Gross describes, the order “comprises a widespread and diffuse network of subsections” (61).

The historical evidence suggests that the *bhakti* philosopher Ramanuja (ca. 11th-12th century CE), founder of the orthodox Vaiṣṇava tradition known as the Śrīvaiṣṇavas or Śrī *sampradāya*, was one of the first thinkers to shape what gradually became Vaiṣṇava asceticism (Khandelwal 2004, 27-28; Gross 1991, 57). In contrast to Śankara who taught absolute monism, Ramanuja developed an ideological system called qualified monism (*viśiṣṭādvaita*), which posits a distinction between deity and devotee. More significantly, Ramanuja's ideological position enabled him to incorporate a devotional outlook into the framework of his religious teachings in which he emphasized devotion rather than knowledge as the means of liberation. Because, for him, God and devotee are ultimately separate, Ramanuja envisioned liberation as union with, as opposed to the Advaita Vedanta position of dissolution into, God.¹⁹ The *bhakti* orientation of early Vaiṣṇava asceticism à la Ramanuja was, thus, rooted in the devotional movements that, beginning in south India with the Tamil Ālvars ("divers"), swept through and transformed the face of the Indian subcontinent between the sixth and seventeenth centuries of the Common Era (cf. Martin 2000; Schomer 1987; Ramanujan 1999).

Following Ramanuja in influencing the devotional aspect of Vaiṣṇava asceticism were Nimbarka (ca. 12th century CE), Madhva (ca. 12th-13th century CE), Visnuswami (ca. 13th-15th century CE), and the sixteenth century Bengali ecstatic, Caitanya (Gross 1991, 58; McDaniel 1989, 27-85; cf. Dimock 1966).²⁰ Like Ramanuja, all of these

¹⁹ Gross explains: "Ramanuja...reacted against Shankara's teachings and developed an opposing theology based on Bhakti and...devotion to a personal god...He stressed the worship of Viṣṇu and his consort Lakṣmī and incorporated the earlier mystical Vaiṣṇavaite devotional hymns of the Tamil Ālvars" (Gross 1991, 57).

²⁰ As cited in Gross (1991, 59), Ghurye (1953) claims that there are few ascetics in the Śrī *sampradāya* of Ramanuja, and that the earliest *vairāgīs* were associated with the Nimbarka *sampradāya*.

thinkers founded their own traditions and preached devotion as a path to the divine.²¹

Nimbarka founded the Nimbarka or Sanaka *sampradāya*, which promoted devotion to the forms of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. Madhva, who was originally a Daśanāmi sadhu but left the order, propagated the teachings of theistic dualism (*dvaita*) and started the Brahma *sampradāya*, emphasizing devotion to Lakṣmi-Narāyan; Visnuswami began the Rudra *sampradāya*; and Caitanya is credited with founding Gaudiya *sampradāya*, which teaches ecstatic devotion to Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā (Gross 1991, 58).²²

Within this broad framework of Vaiṣṇava traditions is the Ramanandi ascetic order, which traces its origin to the teachings of Ramananda (Gross 1991, 59-61; cf. Fuller 1992, 164; Martin 2000, 187).²³ Ramananda is thought to have been born in Prayag in northern India, and to have lived between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries CE (Gross 1991, 59). He is considered to be the first *bhakti* poet-saint of the Hindi-speaking regions of north India (Fuller 1992, 164; Martin 2000). Ramananda is further believed to have been initiated as an ascetic into Ramanuja's Śrī *sampradāya*. However, his uncompromising liberal views on caste and gender equality became a source of contention to the extent that Ramananda eventually formed his own sub-sect of Ramanandis within the Śrī *sampradāya* (Gross 1991, 58).

Apart from his acceptance of all castes and women into the order, Ramananda preached devotion to the divine in the forms of Ram and Sita as the way to divine

²¹ Although the original founders of the Vaiṣṇava orders were celibate ascetics, not everyone who joined the sect were celibate. It is important to point out that Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhva, and Visnuswami did not found ascetic orders per se, but rather Vaiṣṇava sectarian orders. Most of these orders' constituency consisted of householders, and the Śrī *sampradāya* today consists almost exclusively of householders. According to Gross, not until the early medieval period (ca. 13th -14th centuries) did large numbers of ascetics join the Vaiṣṇava orders (Gross 1991, 58).

²² Followers of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava align themselves with Madhva's Brahma *sampradāya* (Gross 1991, 58).

²³ The Ramanandis, like the other Vaiṣṇava traditions, consists of both ascetics and householders. However, unlike the four main Vaiṣṇava traditions (i.e., Sri, Sanaka, Brahma, and Rudra *sampradāyas*), ascetics outnumber householders in the Ramanandi order (cf. van der Veer 1988; R. Lamb 2003).

realization. Informing Ramananda's views on caste, gender, and *bhakti* as the ultimate path to the Lord was the idea that deity and devotee are essentially the same.²⁴

Ramananda's egalitarian teachings and earnest *bhakti*-orientation earned him recognition in Nabhaji's *Bhakta Māla* (lit., "Garland of Devotee"), a collection of semi-historical accounts of devotional saints (Gross 1991, 60; cf. Lorenzen 1996). According to this hagiographical source, Ramananda is thought to have initiated twelve disciples from different castes. Included among his disciples are the legendary Kabir (ca. fifteenth century CE), a weaver from the *juhala* caste, and the *camar* (an untouchable leatherworker whose members dispose of the carcasses of dead animals), Raidas (Gross 1991, 60; Martin 2000, 183).²⁵ Whether or not they became disciples of Ramananda, both Kabir and Raidas (or Rohidas) were independently pivotal *bhakti* figures in the catalyzation and development of the medieval *bhakti sant* movement that blossomed throughout India.

The *sant* movement, consisting of renowned *bhakti* poet-saints, or *sants*, who composed poems and songs of fervent love and devotion to God in the regional, vernacular languages (Schomer 1987, 1; Martin 2000, 183), like the earlier *bhakti* traditions from the Tamil and Kannada-speaking areas, promoted "the cultivation of a loving relationship between the individual and a personally conceived supreme god"

²⁴ Gross explains: "...one of the central tenets of the Rāmānandīs is that there is no difference between Bhāgwān [*sic*] and bhakta, between god and devotee; and, therefore, the distinctions between castes are meaningless" (1991, 60).

²⁵ The accuracy of these claims has been challenged by several scholars (cf. Martin 2000; Lorenzen 1996; Schomer and McLeod 1987; Hess 1982, 1987). The argument that Kabir and Raidas received initiation from Ramananda is considered to be a strategy for establishing their legitimacy amongst devotional traditions, rather than historical fact (see also Schomer 1987, 5). Schomer argues: "What is likely is that later tradition invented the connection with Ramanand in order to give them [i.e., Kabir, Raidas, etc.] Brahmanical respectability by affiliating them with the orthodox mainstream of the *bhakti* movement; because of [Ramananda's] liberal views, he was at least a plausible guru for these largely low-caste men and women." (Schomer 1987, 5).

(Schomer 1987, 1).²⁶ All individuals, regardless of caste, class, gender, and education, were seen as spiritual equals in the eyes of God (Martin 2000, 184). Everyone, not just the educated Brahmin priests who conducted rituals in the temple, had the right to worship God and to experience divine truth through means of loving devotion to the divine.²⁷

As a generic term, *sant* means ‘one who knows the truth’ or ‘one who has experienced Ultimate Reality’ (Schomer 1987, 2). Historically, however, the term has been primarily used to refer to the medieval *bhakti* saints associated with two different devotional groups, namely the southern and northern *sants*. The southern *sants* are characterized as non-sectarian (and non-orthodox) Vaiṣṇavas who flourished between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries in Maharashtra and who preached *prem-bhakti*, love for God, in the form of Vitobha or Vittala at Pandharpur (Schomer 1987, 3; Vaudeville 1987, 29-31). The Marathi-speaking *sants* are also collectively known as the Varkāris, or the pilgrims’ order, because devotees make an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur (Schomer 1987, 4). Some of the well-known members of this group are Jnaneshwar, who is credited as the founder of the southern *sant* group, Namdev (1270-1350), Eknath (1548-1600), Tukaram (1598-1649), and his female disciple Bahina Bai (1628-1700) (cf. Schomer 1987, 4; Vaudeville 1987, 29; Feldhaus 1985, 1981; Abbot 1985 [1929]).

²⁶ A number of scholars have cautioned that the *bhakti* movement is not a monolithic tradition (cf. Hawley 2007; Shukla-Bhatt 2007; Ramanujan 1999; Schomer 1987). As Karine Schomer explains, “it is equally if not more important to conceive of [the *bhakti* movement] as a cluster of individual *bhakti* groups, each with its particular emphases. These groups are strongly regional, moreover, so that they are distinguished not only by their doctrinal content but by their separate histories” (Schomer 1987, 2).

²⁷ Karine Schomer writes, “Salvation, once considered unattainable except by men of the three upper castes, came to be seen as the prerogative of all, and spiritual leadership shifted from the Brahmin priest knowledgeable about ritual and Sanskrit scriptures to the [humble] figure of the popular poet-saint...” (Schomer 1987, 1).

The northern *sant* movement, which flourished from the fifteenth century onward, stretches from the regions of the Punjab to Rajasthan. Individual *sants* associated with this group taught devotion to a nameless, formless, and genderless God (*bhagvān*), and their teachings are generally grouped in the scholarly literature under the category of *nirgun bhakti* (devotion to God without qualities), though the distinction between *nirgun* and *sagun* (God with qualities) *bhakti* is not always recognized (nor emphasized) by the *sants* themselves (Schomer 1987, 61-90; Vaudeville 1987, 26; cf. Hawley 1995; Lorenzen 1995). Although the notion of devotion to a nameless and formless Absolute may seem like a logical contradiction, it was not perceived as such by the northern *sants*. An understanding of God as *nirgun* does not imply the abolition of *bhakti* (but cf. Stall 1987), which presumes a distinction between deity and devotee, but rather, as Vaudeville points out, a recognition of God as beyond qualities. Vaudeville explains:

For the *Sants*...*nirguṇa* is a somewhat magic word. They would talk of the ultimate object of their own *bhakti* as *nirguṇa*, but for them, *nirguṇa* should not be interpreted as ‘that which is deprived of qualities’ but rather as ‘that which is beyond the three *guṇas*’ (inherent to material nature, *prakṛti*) and even beyond the traditional distinction between the *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa* aspects of the Godhead (Vaudeville 1987, 28).

Apart from Kabir and Raidas, the *sants* belonging to the northern group are Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who founded the Sikh religious tradition, and Dadu Dayal of Rajasthan (1544-1603). Of these figures, scholars frequently characterize Kabir, Nanak, and Dadu Dayal as the major players behind the development of the (northern) *sant* movement (Schomer 1987, 6; Lorenzen 1996). *Sants* like Kabir, Raidas, and Dadu are believed to have founded their own traditions (e.g., the Kabir and Raidas *panthis*, and the Dadu *panthis*, respectively). Whether they are from the northern or southern groups, as a movement the *sants* preached through song and story not only the hypocrisy of caste (and Brahmanical) hegemony, but also the power of devotion and, more specifically, the glory

of the divine name. They gathered in fellowship for devotional singing (*satsang*)—which some scholars maintain is a form of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*—in order to remember and experience God. *Sant satsang* and devotionalism, more broadly, have influenced many of the practices of popular Hinduism, and *sant* poetry and teachings have become embedded features of present-day Indian (religio-social and/or political) discourse (Schomer 1987; Mukta 1997; Hawley 2005). Not only does *sant* rhetoric constitute a principal component of the rhetoric of renunciation of most of the female sadhus I worked with, but *sant bhakti* attitudes and ideals also underlie these sadhus' understandings and practices of asceticism.

In their use of *bhakti* as an organizing interpretive frame for the construction and expression of asceticism, the Rajasthani female sadhus are more like Vaiṣṇava than Śaiva sadhus. In this respect, it appears that the Rajasthani female sadhus approximate themselves to Vaiṣṇava sadhus. However, the female sadhus do not attribute their *bhakti*-orientation to the influence of Vaiṣṇava asceticism, or to its earliest founders. This may be due, in part, to the fact that most of the female sadhus I worked with consider their spiritual lineage to lie outside of the tradition of orthodox asceticism (whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava) altogether. Though they have taken formal initiation into a particular ascetic tradition, many of the female sadhus situate themselves and their devotional form of asceticism in the north Indian *bhakti* traditions of the *sants*.

What significance, then, does initiation into Śaiva asceticism have for the female sadhus? It formally aligns them with an ascetic institution (Daśanāmi or Nāth), and hence, with an ascetic tradition of teachers. To this extent, initiation into a Śaivaite ascetic order seems to enable the Rajasthani female sadhus to legitimate socially their

renunciation, rather than to claim a particular Śaiva ascetic tradition or heritage. At the same time, however, initiation by a guru offers what the female sadhus describe as a spiritual “family,” implying that initiation creates a spiritual lineage that protects ascetics against individuals (sadhus or householders) who might deny their legitimacy simply on the basis of their female gender. Gangagiri explains:

If I go to the *Kumbh Melā* [religious festival for sadhus] everyone knows me. Everybody acknowledges me. I can sit in the *panghat* [queue] of sadhus, and nobody would say ‘tū’ [second person singular form of address used to address children or adults of lower status than the speaker] to me. Everybody will say that ‘she is the [sadhu] from Rani Road. She has knowledge.’ It should be like this. One’s guru matters. A guru is like your [spiritual] family. When you get children married, [people] see the parents of the children, isn’t it? Like this, sadhus see the guru of the sadhu as [his/her] family... The guru is [one’s] family as well. If the guru will be of a good family, [s/he] will do nothing but the *bhajans* of God... She [mentions the name of woman] does not get invited to festivals because she doesn’t have a guru. She doesn’t have a house [*thikāna*]... If she doesn’t have a guru, she doesn’t have a house. Who is going to recognize a sadhu without a guru? Who will accept this thing? No sadhu knows [mentions the same woman]. Everybody acknowledges me. Whether I’m in Haridwar or Kashi, everybody acknowledges me.

During my fieldwork, I met a few women who lived as if they were sadhus, but who had never received formal initiation into any tradition.²⁸ Like the initiated female sadhus, these “sadhus,” too, wore ochre robes and participated in the local religious and social gatherings (e.g., feasting ceremonies, *bhaṇḍāras*) that were sponsored by other sadhus in Rajasthan and beyond. While the majority of the female sadhus I worked with admired these individuals’ ascetic determination and discipline, they did not consider

²⁸ The reason for these female “sadhus” not having received formal initiation into any tradition of renunciation is that they were still married, and thus, living as householders. And, as these “sadhus” told me, since their husbands did not give them permission to renounce, the teachers from whom these women had requested initiation had also refused to initiate them as ascetics. While this is a little mentioned detail in the scholarly literature on asceticism, the giving of renunciant initiation only to women who have received permission from their families appears to be a common, pan-Indian practice with Indian ascetic orders. Early on in the preliminary stages of my research, I also worked with female renunciants (*sannyāsinīs*) of the Chinmaya mission in Coimbatore, South India (and had been given permission to do so by the abbot of the Chinmaya order). According to the head female *sannyāsinī* of the Coimbatore center, women are allowed entry as *sannyāsinīs* only with the permission of their families. Also, there is an age limit to women’s and men’s renunciation. In reviewing my fieldnotes from 2002, initiates must be 30 years of age or under in order to be eligible for renunciation in the Chinmaya order. This requirement, however, is standard for Indian ascetic orders.

them as sadhus, and referred to them as *bāīs* (lit., “sisters”) or householders, rather than as sadhus or *māīs* (lit., “holy mothers”).²⁹

It is important to emphasize that the Rajasthani female sadhus became either a Daśanāmi or Nāth not because they preferred (the ideology and practices of) Śaiva asceticism over Vaiṣṇava asceticism. Several of the female sadhus in fact were raised in Vaiṣṇava families. Rather, their initiation into Śaiva ascetic orders appears to be a direct result of their devotion either to a particular teacher or deity (e.g., Śiva or the Goddess). But even before they took initiation, the female sadhus had been expressing themselves religiously through the same *bhakti* practices through which they continue to construct and express themselves as ascetics. As Gangagiri says, “I have been singing *bhajans* since before I knew how to wear shoes.”

Initiation, therefore, provides a gateway through which they formally/ritually enter into the world of asceticism, but, at the same time, the Rajasthani female sadhus practice asceticism as they choose, rather than as their orders (or even gurus) might dictate. The religious freedom afforded to sadhus in traditions of Śaiva asceticism stems from the fact that, while renunciation may be, broadly speaking, an institution, it is not institutionalized in terms of its doctrines, practices, social organization, and spiritual leadership (Khandelwal 2004). For this reason, as Khandelwal argues, renunciation constitutes “a site of undetermination” that allows sadhus to be eclectic in their understandings and practices of asceticism (2004, 43-45). She explains:

[T]he social world of sannyasa operates on a free market model without any authoritative hierarchy. The current Dashanami monastic heads are not like Popes charged with the responsibility for determining the saintly authenticity of particular holy persons. There

²⁹ On one occasion I had told a female sadhu that I went to visit a woman who had styled herself as a sadhu, even though she had never taken formal initiation. This female sadhu responded, “Why are you talking to her? I told you she’s not a sadhu, she’s a householder!”

are little in the way of institutional constraints on who can call herself a sadhu or wear the ochre robes of sannyasa. One implication is that there is space for independent renouncers who reject institutional affiliation...Sannyasa's privileging of Advaita philosophy and its lack of a centralized institutional authority combine to create possibilities for women to lead unscripted and unconventional lives (Khandelwal 2004, 45).

Thus, the fact that the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with are Śaiva ascetics makes little difference for their own conceptualization and practice of either asceticism or ascetic identity. In their self-representations, the female sadhus primarily characterize themselves as sadhus, rather than as Daśanāmi or Nāths (see Chapter Six). More significantly, these female sadhus not only associate their form of asceticism with, but also model themselves upon the *bhakti* religiosity of the *sants*, whom the sadhus regard as the *bhakt*s of *bhagvān par excellence*.

Many of the female sadhus place themselves in *sant* traditions by explicitly invoking the names of specific *sants* and by singing the songs and/or narrating the stories that are attributed to the *sants* in the context of explaining their own lives and practices (see Chapters Four and Six). For example, in response to my question Who is a sadhu? Tulsigiri replied, "We are the *sants* of India. Have you heard of Kabir? We [too] are the *bhakt*s [devotees] of the Lord, and we sing *bhajans* to God." As with Tulsigiri, most of the female sadhus also frequently compare themselves to the *sants* in various ways. On one occasion, Gangagiri's performance of a *bhajan* that she attributed to Kabir evoked a story of her own life as a child who was always "singing *bhajans* to God," despite protestations from her family. While she did not explicitly characterize herself as a *sant*, the contiguity of her performances suggests that Gangagiri not only perceives herself as a *sant* (she, too, publicly refers to herself as a "*bhakt* of God"), but also views her asceticism as an expression of *sant bhakti*. The female sadhus, furthermore, attribute not

only their devotional asceticism, but specifically female asceticism in Rajasthan to the female *sant* Mira Bai, emphasizing that it is by her “grace [*kripā*]” that women have been able to renounce the world (see Chapter Four). It is important to point out that though scholars of *sant* traditions consider Mira Bai as primarily a *sagun bhakt* rather than as a *sant* (cf. Schomer and McLeod 1987), the female sadhus themselves characterize her and others, such as the fifteenth century Gujarati poet-saint Narsi Mehta, as a *sant* (see Chapter Four). Thus, I use *sant* generically to mean “devotional saint,” rather than simply saints associated with the *nirgun* movement.

Authority, Agency, and the Power of Performance for Female Sadhus

In drawing upon *sant bhakti* traditions in the construction of asceticism and ascetic identity, the female sadhus cross beyond the threshold of dominant renunciant frameworks. Also, through performance of *sant* rhetoric as the rhetoric of renunciation, the female sadhus construct *bhakti*, specifically *sant* (or *nirgunī*) *bhakti*, as a category of religious authority for Hindu asceticism. In most South Asian religions, *bhakti* represents a form of direct religious experience that confers upon the devotee having such experience religious authority (McDaniel 1989). *Bhakti* “as a form of religious authority has traditionally been more accessible to women and others excluded from hierarchical religious power because it occurs outside of institutional structures” (Pasulka 2007, 59; cf. Ramanujan 1999; Ramaswamy 1997). Not surprisingly, the *sants*, many of whom were female and/or from low-caste communities, appealed to *bhakti* in the expression of their own discontent with the Brahmanical hegemony, and like the *sants*, the female

sadhus, too, appeal to *bhakti* in constructing devotional asceticism.³⁰ The sadhus' use of *bhakti* as a category of authority illustrates the ways in which female ascetics participate both in the production and innovation of a religious institution that has been seen as primarily male-defined and male-controlled. Thus, even though *bhakti* is largely located outside the parameters of the Brahmanical model of asceticism (but not necessarily outside the parameters of Hindu asceticism *per se*) it constitutes a source of religious power and authority for the Rajasthani female sadhus. By 'power' I mean, as various anthropologists of gender have explained, the ability to wield (formal or informal) influence either in one's own or in other's choices (see M. Rosaldo 1974, 21, especially footnote 2; cf. Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Ortner 1996).

By conceptualizing asceticism in terms of *bhakti*, and by performing asceticism as a *bhakti* path of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation, the Rajasthani female sadhus expand not only what counts as asceticism, but also who counts as a sadhu.³¹ To quote Gangagiri's words once more: "Real sadhus sing to God." In the production of this discourse, and as such, knowledge about asceticism, power is as much gendered female as it is gendered male. *Bhakti* in the form of devotional practice is a kind of power that is culturally available to female ascetics, and for the Rajasthani female sadhus in particular, it enables them to exert power, and therefore, agency in Hindu renunciation.

³⁰ Nancy Martin concurs: "Leadership within the community was based on religious experience rather than heredity (at least in the early stages of the movements), and these leaders composed songs of love, complaint, and praise to their chosen forms of God. Among their numbers were untouchables and women as well as *brahmans*" (Martin 2000, 184).

³¹ Grace Jantzen's, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (1997), has been influential in my own thinking about the relationship between power and gender in renunciant constructions of asceticism in the tradition of Hindu renunciation. Although she argues that medieval Christian men controlled and defined what mysticism "really" is and who counts as a "real" mystic, Jantzen shows the ways in which female mystics "pushed back" against androcentric ideologies and practices in the construction of their own traditions of mysticism. Unlike Jantzen, however, through documentation and analysis of the female sadhus' performances, I argue that in renunciant constructions of asceticism, power is as much gendered female as it is gendered male, and that the Rajasthani female ascetics I worked define both what asceticism is and who counts as an ascetic through their performances.

In anthropological and feminist discourse, notions of power and agency are entwined (Bellamy 2007; Flueckiger 2006, 2007; Maggi 2004; Karp and Masolo 2000; Kratz 2000; Jantzen 1997, 1998; Ortner 1996). In fact, as anthropologist Corinne A. Kratz observes, “theoretical emphasis these days often falls on ‘agency’ (Kratz 2000, 137). In most of this literature, the concept of agency is often linked to individual subjectivity (but cf. Bellamy 2007), which implies an understanding of “the autonomous individual self as the seat of epistemological and moral agency” (Karp and Masolo 2000, 1), but refers to more than simply the autonomy of an intentional subject (Kratz 2000, 137; cf. Ortner 1996, 1-20). Theories of agency, whether they concentrate on actions, actors, or consequences (or, perhaps, a combination of all three elements—see Kratz 2000), tend to emphasize the diverse and complex ways in which “human beings in interaction with one another produce effects on the world” (Karp and Masolo 2000, 1), as well as their ability “to appropriate or reshape values and ideals that help to mold social identity” (Pintchman 2007, 4). In her discussion of agency as expressed by Kalasha women in the Hindu Kush, Wynne Maggi underscores that “...individual women have the capacity to significantly rearrange their physical, ritual, and social worlds in specific ways” (Maggi 2004, 41). At the same time, as Kratz explains, “[a]gency includes not only one’s own effects on the world but also the extent to which one controls others’ actions and effects as well” (Kratz 2000, 137). Theories of agency further address the larger socio-cultural structures and/or institutions of power within which persons are embedded, and the creativity those persons (or communities of persons) exercise in negotiating such structures (Flueckiger 2007; Maggi 2004; Ortner 1996).

An ethnographic study of female sadhus who are members of a religious institution that has been primarily male-dominated necessitates an examination of agency, and more specifically, female ascetics' exercise of gendered agency in the tradition of renunciation.³² The interrelation between gender and agency has been explored by anthropologists and feminist theorists (Flueckiger 2006, 2007; Maggi 2004; Kratz 2000). According to Henrietta Moore, there exists "an established link between gender difference and types of agency" (Moore 1995, 50, cited from Maggi 2004, 41). Agency is not only experienced in gendered ways, but, as Maggi argues, "is always structurally rooted...in specific times and places" and, I would add here, in specific practices (Maggi 2004, 43; see also Bellamy 2007 for her discussion on place and context in analyses of agency). A recent body of ethnographic work by religious studies scholars of South Asia amply documents Hindu women's ritual practices as a source for the expression of female agency and power (cf. Pitchman 2007). For example, Joyce Flueckiger's essay on *mātāmmas* (women who have exchanged *tālīs*³³ with one of many forms of the South Indian village goddess) in the popular temple town of Tirupati illustrates that the ritual practice of exchanging *tālīs* with the goddess enables protection, agency, and freedom of movement for the women with whom she worked (Flueckiger 2007, 35-54). Through examination of the personal narratives of two *mātāmmas*, Veshamma and Govindamma, Flueckiger argues that

The *matamma* tradition offers an alternative context to that of marriage in which a woman's powers and auspiciousness may be marked and expressed...[Veshamma's and Govindamma's] *tali* relationships with the goddess give matammas freedom (even compulsion) to move beyond the social and physical constraints often imposed by *talis* given by husbands and give them a site of refuge and protection" (Flueckiger 2007, 52).

³² According to recent statistics cited by Khandelwal (2004), female ascetics constitute less than 15% of the total ascetic population in India.

³³ As Flueckiger explains, a *tālī* is a gold disk pendant most often associated with marriage (Flueckiger 2007, 35).

In this dissertation, I am particularly concerned with demonstrating not only devotional practice as a context in which the agency of the Rajasthani female sadhus is rooted and expressed, but also the gendered ways these sadhus experience agency in the construction of devotional asceticism. These issues are explored in later chapters, and a model of female agency in Hindu asceticism is presented in the Conclusion. Here, I simply note that devotional practice offers the female sadhus a strategy with which to exert agency and power, and that it does so in a manner that allows for the constitution and negotiation of their authority in a male-dominated tradition of renunciation and, more broadly, in a patriarchal Indian society.

The issue of female agency in renunciation evokes questions about the limits to and constraints on the agency of the Rajasthani female sadhus. “[S]tudies of the ways in which people resist, negotiate, or appropriate some feature of their world,” Sherry Ortner suggests, “are also inadequate and misleading without careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their ‘agency,’ and that limit the transformative potential of all such intentionalized activity” (Ortner 1996, 2). In informal conversations, the Rajasthani female sadhus frequently respond to my question, “Have you ever experienced any problem as a ‘lady’ sadhu?” with answers along the lines of, “We are sadhus, so whom should we fear?” or “No, I have no problems; I do what I want [as a female sadhu].”

But are the female sadhus as unconstrained by the “structural arrangements” of their culture as they claim to be? Citing the work of sociologist Kumkum Sangari (1993), Khandelwal cautions scholars to avoid simplistic privileging of discursive forms of resistance as readily indicative of the agentive power of female ascetics to “consider both

social practices and discursive modes, or more importantly, [to] look at the relationship between the two” (Khandelwal 2004, 199). Khandelwal warns of the dangers of valorizing female ascetics’ relationship to an inherently masculinist social order in terms of either subversion of or complicity with that order (Khandelwal 2004, 199-202; see also Ortner 1996 for a similar discussion). Despite their statements to the contrary, the social practices of the Rajasthani female sadhus indicate that there are everyday limitations to female agency within which they have to structure their lives. What are these social practices of the female sadhus?

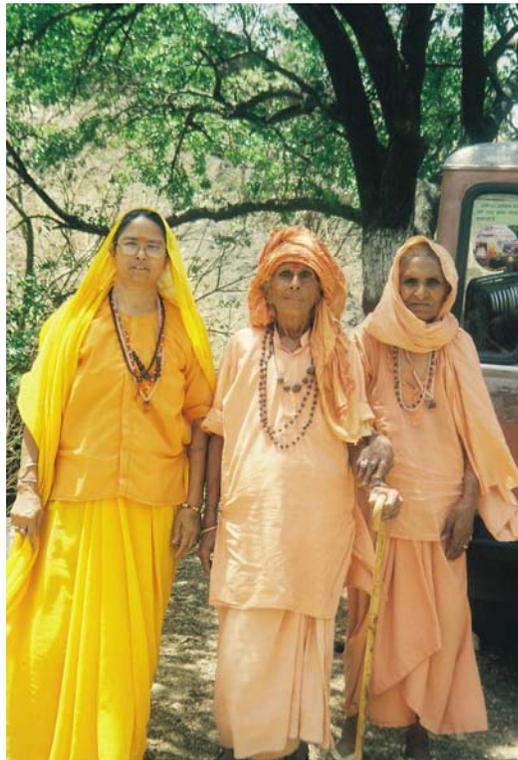
Let us take as an example their forms of ascetic dress. Most of the female sadhus wear (saffron-colored) garments that mask their female gender and female sexual characteristics, making themselves look androgynous. In fact, the standard ascetic dress amongst the female sadhus I worked with consists of a blouse and skirt, rather than a sari or *salwār kameez* (tunic-style shirt and pajama-like trousers), the standard dress for Indian women. The sadhus’ blouses are often large and hide their breasts, long-sleeved, and fall beneath the waist; their skirts, which usually consist of three yards of cloth draped around the waist, fall well beneath their ankles. Furthermore, many of the female sadhus wear pieces of cloth that have been tied in the form of a turban on their head. This article of clothing, signifying a sadhu’s royal status, is also a common feature of male sadhus’ dress. The female sadhus’ choice of androgynous and/or masculine clothing, indeed, sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between male and female sadhus.



Santosh Puri cleans and sorts dry lentils for the evening meal. Her style of ascetic dress with which she covers herself from head-to-toe is common for female sadhus in Rajasthan and beyond. Photo by A. DeNapoli.



Uma Saraswati sits for evening *satsang*. Covering the head with a turban-style wrap is also common for sadhus.



Left to right: Jamuna Bharti's, Gangagiri's, and Kesar Giri's style of comportment. Both photos by Antoinette DeNapoli.

But why do the female sadhus choose such styles of aesthetic comportment? One possibility is that many sadhus, regardless of gender, believe that while the body has gender, the soul remains ungendered (cf. Khandelwal 2004). The Rajasthani female sadhus describe the soul (*ātma*) as “air [*havā*],” implying that it has no gender. By wearing androgynous forms of dress perhaps the female sadhus I met communicate their shared perception of the soul as ultimately ungendered. At the same time, though, their choice of androgynous dress may also symbolize to the female sadhus a change of roles (cf. Bynum 1991, 38). Their entry into the world of renunciation enables female sadhus to participate in an alternative role to the normative one of wife, mother, and caretaker. Gangagiri once told me that “I no longer have to do the work [*karm*] of women,” implying not that she perceives herself as a man, but rather that asceticism provides a means by which she transcends the culturally-determined roles and norms for women.³⁴

The world of renunciation, however, is primarily male-dominated, and this social fact points to the ways in which androgynous ascetic dress offers, to use Bynum’s words, a “social mechanism” that enables the female sadhus who operate in traditionally male-dominated role and institution to become the ascetic warriors that many perceive themselves to be (see Chapter Four). This dress also, practically speaking, safeguards their female bodies (and their reputations) from physical and/or sexual harassment and violence (cf. Khandelwal 2004, 200-202). Bynum describes the dress of medieval Christian female mystics, who similarly adopted male forms of dress,

³⁴ None of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked ever suggested that they view themselves as men. Though they refer to themselves in the masculine as ‘sadhus,’ the female sadhus are well aware of their female gender, and their emphasis on the values of love, service to God and the world, and compassion for all forms of life demonstrate continuity with female social roles (see also Bynum 1987, 1991; Vallely 2002; Khandelwal 2004).

[T]he male dress adopted in fact by such women as Joan of Arc, Margery Kempe, Dorothy of Montau and Christina of Markyate was less a religious symbol than a social mechanism. Joan of Arc wore it in order to be a warrior; Margery Kempe and Dorothy of Montau in order to go more safely on pilgrimage; Christina of Markyate in order to escape husband and family. Although a powerful and sometimes threatening image to the men who encountered it, so much so that they perhaps saw female cross-dressing where none existed, to women it was a means to change roles (Bynum 1991, 38).

The Rajasthani female sadhus' androgynous dress styles function, therefore, as an implicit social commentary on the necessity of female modesty and its limitations on female agency in renunciation (cf. Khandelwal 2004). Even their decision to stay in their own ashrams and temples rather than travel for reasons of pilgrimage or for ceremonial occasions implicates not so much the female sadhus' challenge to the Brahmanical peripatetic ideal as their practice of modesty that stems from an underlying fear of male sexual violence. Khandelwal concurs: "While sannyasinis may be motivated to regulate their behavior to maintain a good reputation... female modesty (even for sannyasinis) is also ultimately enforced by the threat of male violence. Female celibacy... can be violated by male sexual aggression, and most sannyasinis, like householder women, assume the responsibility for protecting their virtue" (2004, 200). In the following conversation, one of the female sadhus I worked with, Santosh Puri, speaks about the problems that females face simply on account of their gender, and that female sadhus must protect themselves (i.e., their bodies and reputations) not only from male violence, but also from potentially damaging village gossip.

Now, the men are very bad. See, the times are bad. Young or old, a helpless girl will go on and road and men will grab and take her... It's bad for a girl to become a woman... I don't let sadhus near me, nor do I allow them to come to me. I don't go to them either... I don't let them sit here [in the temple]. If they come, I give them *chai*, I feed them *roti* [bread], and I give them a gift. Afterwards, I tell them to go... I am a woman. That's why I don't let [male] sadhus sit here. It needs to be like this. What if I'm sleeping and he [the sadhu] opens the door? It's not the right to keep [male] sadhus; it's not right to keep them overnight, either. The villagers won't allow such a situation to happen... The villagers will say, 'What will that man do with a woman.'

Although staying in place illustrates the inherent social constrictions on female agency in renunciation, it also allows the Rajasthani sadhus to exercise their agency and power. They control what happens (or does not happen) in their own ashrams/temples (even if they share their places of residence with male sadhus and/or gurus), places they created with help of financial assistance from devotees. A female sadhu would not normally have this freedom/agency in other religious places, especially at a male sadhu's ashram/temple. Agency for the Rajasthani female sadhus, therefore, is directly linked to their location in their own places of residence and to the devotional practices through which they construct ascetic identity and devotional asceticism.

Caste and Ascetic Identity

As I mentioned earlier, the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with come from various castes; the majority are Rajputs (11), followed by Brahmins (6), Baniyas (4), and one Tribal. I intentionally use the present verbal tense to describe their caste status, because most of the female sadhus themselves discuss their caste identity along with their ascetic identity in their renunciant discourses.³⁵ The female sadhus even inquire about the caste of other sadhus whom they meet for the first time. On one occasion, Gangagiri, whom Tulsigiri had invited to her ashram for *bhajan satsang*, asked Tulsigiri's guru-brother, Manmohan Giri, about his caste.³⁶

³⁵ Several scholars, *contra* Louis Dumont (1960), have argued that caste continues to play a significant role in the lives of ascetics, and that sadhus do not “die” to their caste identities upon initiation into renunciation. See, for example, Narayan (1989) and Burghart (1983). See also the Literature Review section of Chapter Two.

³⁶ The way Gangagiri stated her question to Manmohan Giri was, “Which caste are you from? [*kaunsi jāti ke hain?*]” Initially I had assumed that Gangagiri was inquiring about Manmohan Giri's ascetic “caste,” but after discussions with Gangagiri and my field assistant, Manvendra Singh, realized her question related to his birth caste.

For the Rajput and Brahmin female sadhus, in particular, caste plays an important role in their individual ascetic self-representations. According to these sadhus, the caste (*jāti*) in which an individual is born determines his/her inner nature or personality (*svabhāva*). Caste is believed to indicate, regardless of his/her gender, a sadhu's inherent ability to withstand the spiritual difficulties of ascetic life. The Rajput and Brahmin female sadhus I worked with attribute their own ascetic/devotional power, in part, to their high-caste backgrounds. While they do not deny that sadhus from other castes can develop the power to withstand spiritual challenges, these sadhus also admit that this power is "natural" to members of their caste. Rajput female sadhus, for example, tell me that their courage and bravery (*himmat*) stem not only from their *bhakti* to *bhagvān*, but also from their being born into the warrior Rajput caste (see Chapter Four).³⁷ Some of the sadhus even attribute their *bhakti* to their (high) caste. Most of the Rajput female sadhus perceive Mira Bai's fierce and uncompromising *bhakti* to be the result of her being born Rajput (see Chapter Four). Similarly, Mayanath, a Rajput sadhu, attributes, Rajput women's capacity for selfless devotion toward their husbands and families to their caste, and explicitly associates her own ascetic devotion with her birth in a Rajput community. She further thinks that Rajput and Brahmin women are innately predisposed towards asceticism than are women of other castes. In her words: "When Rajput women's husbands die, instead of spending their lives in seclusion [*pardā*], they become *ṛsis* and *munis* [i.e., they become sadhus]." ³⁸

³⁷ Lindsey Harlan similarly observes that the Rajput female householders with whom she worked in Rajasthan attribute their powers of protection and self-sacrifice for their husbands and families to their caste (Harlan 1992).

³⁸ While Mayanath did not mention Brahmin women in this statement, she discussed them later on in our conversation, suggesting that because of their caste, Brahmin women, like Rajput women, tend to become sadhus.

Although they emphasize the importance of their own castes, the Rajasthani female sadhus appear to be indifferent to the castes of their devotees. These sadhus indicate in their statements that they can neither become ritually impure by feeding their low-caste devotees, nor by accepting the food of low-caste devotees, because as sadhus they remain unaffected by the relative purity/impurity of householders. Many of the female sadhus have low-caste devotees, whom they regularly serve with love and respect. The Rajasthani sadhus, however, do not ignore caste distinctions amongst ascetics in their own traditions. On this issue Kirin Narayan explains, “All Indian sadhus were, after all, born into a particular caste, and the indoctrination of upbringing does not altogether vanish with initiation” (Narayan 1989, 77). One context in which caste distinctions tend to be apparent amongst (male and female) Indian ascetics of any order is at public feasting ceremonies (*bhaṇḍāras*), where concerns over ritual purity often loom large for sadhus.³⁹ In the *bhaṇḍāras* that some of the Rajasthani sadhus I worked with sponsored, low-caste sadhus eat in separate lines (*panghat*) from the high-caste sadhus, and the latter are served their meals before the former are served. Also, the cooks hired for these events almost always are Brahmins.⁴⁰ Generally speaking, the sadhus’ behaviors at public feasting ceremonies suggest a difference between their rhetoric of caste equality and their practice of caste distinction.

³⁹ Sadhus often sponsor *bhaṇḍāras* in order to mark a special occasion, such as the completion of a fast, or the commemoration of the *samādhi* (the day when a sadhu left his/her physical body) of a guru or guru-brother/sister. These events are usually by invitation only, and local Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava ascetics are invited to participate.

⁴⁰ Because of their perceived caste purity, Brahmins are often hired to prepare and serve meals not only at *bhaṇḍāras*, but also in Indian households more generally. I will also note here that the meals served at *bhaṇḍāras* tend to be simple: they consist of one or two vegetables, lentil soup (*dāl*), bread (*rotī*), and a sweet-dish (*halva*). For information about Indian caste hierarchies and issues of purity and pollution see Marriott (1991).

Besides the patterns of social organization evident at *bhaṇḍāras*, both the Daśanāmi and Nāth female sadhus emphasize that they will not “mix with [*ikaṭṭhā*],” that is, they will neither sit with nor, more significantly, eat with necrophagous Aghoris, for example, considering these types of ascetics to be impure, and thus, untouchable (cf. Narayan 1989, 77; see also Douglas 1971).⁴¹ My research supports the argument other scholars have made about the relevance of caste for ascetics and/or ascetic communities (Sinclair-Brull 1997; Narayan 1991, 73-78); Burghart 1983; but cf. Gross 1991). Thus, as Narayan states, “What distinguishes sadhus from other people, then, is not an outright rejection of the values of caste so much as an alternative life-style pivoting around spiritual concerns” (Narayan 1991, 77). Apart from their caste identities as foundational to their construction of ascetic identity, the particular region in which they live also influences the female sadhus’ understanding and practice of asceticism.

The Rajasthani Cultural Context

Rajasthan as a cultural region matters to the female sadhus with whom I worked, and their performative construction of devotional asceticism is related to their perception of Rajasthan, specifically Mewar, as “the land of the brave [*vīr*].” The north Indian state of Rajasthan is hardly a homogenous socio-political and cultural entity, but rather consists of a plethora of ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religious and social groups (Lodrick 1991; cf. Schomer, Erdman, Rudolph et. al 1991). The region’s climate is arid

⁴¹ Mayanath, for example, explained to me that while she accepts food from most sadhus, she refuses to accept food from Aghoris, implying that their food is, on account of their physical state of impurity, impure, and that by eating their food, Mayanath risks absorbing that impurity into her own being.

and/or semi-arid,⁴² and its landscape is signaled by the presence of the great Indian, or Thar, Desert in the northwest and the stunning Aravalli mountain range in the southeastern part of the state. The area or district in which I conducted my own fieldwork, Udaipur, is located in southwest Rajasthan, and is the former capital of the former princely state of Mewar.

The rather small size of Udaipur, which is characterized in the tourist literature I purchased from the local bazaars as the “Venice of the East,” belies the relatively large population of people residing in this district. When I first arrived in Udaipur in 2001, the district’s population was approximately 390,000. In the last seven years, however, the population has blossomed to just over 550, 000 residents. Today the bustling Udaipur city contains over a dozen or so Internet cafes⁴³; popular coffee houses such as Café Coffee Day⁴⁴, which is similar to Starbucks; a DHL domestic/international postal service; and there was talk in 2006 amongst local bazaar owners of the popular fast food chain McDonalds coming into the city.⁴⁵ As Lindsey Harlan observes (1992), Udaipur exemplifies “the juxtaposition of tradition and innovation” (4). Here, as elsewhere in India, one finds ancient temples and royal palaces situated amidst modern buildings and convenience shops; and auto rickshaws vying for precious road space not only with

⁴² Certain areas in the state, particularly in the southwest and southeast, transform into lush green habitats in the summer months of the monsoon (July through September). After the monsoon rains come in July, Udaipur looks like a whole different region of India from what it looks like before the monsoon.

⁴³ In 2001, there were only three Internet cafes, located primarily in the “old City,” that is, along Lake Palace Road. The number of Internet cafes in the city itself, however, has exploded, with there being over a dozen or so cafes.

⁴⁴ In addition to Café Coffee Day, Udaipur city has Café 0294, which is named after the city’s telephone code, and Café Namaste.

⁴⁵ McDonalds, as well as Kentucky Fried Chicken and Dominoes Pizza, have penetrated into Jaipur, the capital of the state, located in northeast Rajasthan.

pedestrians and animals, but also with the latest models of cars and sports utility vehicles.⁴⁶

Situated atop a hillock, Udaipur city has two major lakes, Lake Picchola and Lake Fateh Sagar. On the city's west side lies Lake Picchola; it is surrounded by ancient temple buildings,⁴⁷ bathing ghats, numerous restaurants, bazaars (shops), and two or three-storied private residences painted in bright colors, a scenery that imbues the area surrounding Lake Picchola (i.e., the "Old City") with its lively, and at times chaotic, ambience. To the north of Lake Picchola is Fateh Sagar Lake, an artificial water body that was reconstructed in the early nineteenth century under the auspices of the Udaipur *mahārāṇā* (great king) Fateh Singh (ca. 1884-1930). The city also has three major temple complexes that patron one of the three great deities Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the Goddess: Mahakaleshwar (Śiva) Temple, Jagdish (Viṣṇu) Temple, and Neemach Mata (Dūrgā). Besides these popular temples are the lesser-known temples, shrines, and ashrams, including those of the female sadhus. Two of these sadhus live near the vicinity of Lake Fateh Sagar, one near Lake Picchola, and another directly behind the Mahakaleshwar Temple. Most of the female sadhus, though, reside outside of Udaipur city, in temples and hermitages situated in small villages and towns.

A distinct Mewari ethos is evident in the renunciatory discourses of the Rajasthani female sadhus. This ethos is signaled by martial themes that most of the female sadhus

⁴⁶ Harlan conducted her research in Udaipur in the late 1980s, and at this time, she indicates that there were very few automobiles, even auto rickshaws, on the road. Harlan does not mention SUVs most likely because these were not popular forms of transportation in the subcontinent, as they now are. During the time that I conducted my research in Udaipur (2001; 2002-2003; 2004-2006) I noticed that cars and SUVs dominate the roadways. With the increasing growth of the Indian middle and upper-middle class throughout the Indian subcontinent, more people are purchasing automobiles for personal transportation. Today, the roads of Udaipur are heavily congested, with autos, rickshaws, motorcycles, bicycles, SUV's, government and private buses, pedestrians, animals, and so forth.

⁴⁷ These temples are no longer active religious sites, but serve as primarily tourist attractions in the city.

themselves emphasize, such as bravery (*bahādurī*; *dikhavā*) and courage (*himmat*), and sacrifice (*balidān*). The female sadhus identify with these warrior ideals, considering them to be, along with *bhakti*, qualities of “real” ascetics (see chapters Four and Six). Many of the female sadhus often characterize the path of renunciation as a “difficult [*kathin*]” path for “the brave of heart,” likening ascetics to warrior-heroes.⁴⁸ Additionally, the sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation consists of popular religious stories and *bhajans* about legendary ascetics, namely Baba Ram Dev, Gopichand, and Mira Bai, who, as the female sadhus describe, not only possessed the warrior virtues of bravery, courage, and sacrifice, but also themselves came from warrior clans/castes.⁴⁹ The representation of warrior ideals as ascetic virtues by the Rajasthani female sadhus reveals the ways in which (popular local perceptions of) Rajasthan’s martial history has captivated the minds and memories of its local inhabitants, including its female sadhus.⁵⁰

Rajasthan, the land of Rajputs (lit., “sons of Kings”),⁵¹ has been described in both the scholarly and popular literature as “the land of Kings.” The formation of Rajasthan as an independent state occurred approximately two years following India’s Independence from British sovereignty in 1949 (Erdman 1991, 45). Prior to that time, Rajasthan consisted of a collection of separate provinces (or kingdoms) that were governed by individual Rajput rulers in cooperation with local British officials (Lodrick, 1991, 1-44).

⁴⁸ Ann G. Gold (1988) writes: “Any study of Rajasthani attitudes concerning release and renunciation should...remain cognizant of warrior ideals...Many of the most important village deities, as well as innumerable minor ones, find the source of their divinity on the battlefield” (Gold 1988, 25).

⁴⁹ Another ascetic, Pabuji, was also from a warrior (*ṣatriya*) caste. Though the female sadhus with whom I worked did not perform his songs or stories, Pabuji is considered to be a popular warrior-hero in Rajasthan, and bards sing his songs and tell his stories as part of the epic performance of Pabuji throughout the region. See Smith (1991).

⁵⁰ This observation holds true for most of the female sadhus, regardless of their castes, not only for Rajput female sadhus.

⁵¹ Deryck O. Lodrick explains that though Rajasthan is consistently identified by its inhabitants as “the land of Rajputs,” Rajputs actually make-up only 5.6% of the population (Lodrick 1991, 18).

One of these provinces was Mewar, in southwest Rajasthan, and the representation of Mewar's martial history in classic British accounts (e.g., Colonel Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* [1829]) highlights a string of semi-legendary rulers (*mahārāṇās*) known for their valor, chivalry, and honor (cf. Harlan 1992; Schomer, Erdman, and Rudolph et. al 1991).⁵² Mewar is thought to have been founded by the valorous Rajput ruler, Udai Singh, who was a member of the Sisodiya dynasty of Rajputs.⁵³ More important, Udai Singh, according to a legend that is widely-known and widely-told, established Udaipur on account of the advice (and blessings) that he received from a sadhu.⁵⁴ An account of this legend, as told by Ashok Singhal in *Udaipur: The City of Lakes*, is as follows:

One...day, while chasing a rabbit Maharana Udai Singh reached near Picchola, where, on a nearby hill he saw a meditating sadhu. Maharana went near him and touched his feet. Sadhu blessed Maharana and said, "If you will establish a city on this land then that city will never be conquered by your enemies". Maharana, acting on this advice of sadhu built a palace there... (Singhal, no publication date is given).⁵⁵

Well before British occupation of the region, not only Mewar's history, but also Rajasthan's history, more broadly, is marked by Rajput rulers' cooperation with as well as opposition to foreign Muslim rule (Lodrick 1991, 8). Beginning with the Turks, then the Afghans, and finally the Mughals, a time period spanning approximately three centuries (ca. 13th-16th centuries), Rajput rulers not only resisted, but even accommodated the various Muslim powers. Of the Rajput kingdoms, however, Mewar has gained the

⁵² As Lodrick points out, "It was this romantic picture of a noble, feudal aristocracy presented in Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*...that became part of the British consciousness, and subsequently came to dominate British views of Rajputs and of Rajasthan" (Lodrick 1991, 10).

⁵³ According to the self-representation of Sisodiya Rajputs, the Sisodiya dynasty is descended from the Surya Vamsh, or Sun-God. See Harlan (1992).

⁵⁴ Some of the Rajasthani female sadhus mentioned this legend in their discussions of Udaipur/Mewar.

⁵⁵ Singhal's, *Udaipur: The City of Lakes*, is a pamphlet-sized book I purchased from the local folk museum, Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal. It is widely sold in bazaars throughout Udaipur, and many Mewari householders whom I met recommended this book to me in order me to get a sense of local representations of Mewari history.

distinction for being the most resistant to (and defiant of) Muslim domination (Harlan 1991, 2). This distinction, according to scholarly and popular accounts of Mewari history, derives from the fact that, unlike the other kingdoms, Mewar refused to form any political alliance with the Mughal Muslim empire, most notably under the rule of Akbar (ca. 16th century). The conflict between the two powers resulted in the bloody battle at Haldigathi, Mewar, in which Mewar's *mahārāṇā*, Rana Pratap Singh (son of Rana Udai Singh), led thousands of soldiers, including ascetics,⁵⁶ into battle against Akbar's army, which included prominent Rajput chiefs (Lodrick 1991, 8). With the support of various Rajput kingdoms, Akbar was able to defeat Rana Pratap at Haldigathi in 1576 (Lodrick 1991, 8). A life-sized image of Rana Pratap Singh, along with his beloved horse who led him into battle, Chetak, located in the tourist center of Motri Magri (Pearl Hill) in Udaipur city, commemorates the battle at Haldigathi as a definitive moment in Mewar's martial history. Though Mewar was defeated by Akbar's imperial forces, tales of the bravery, courage, and sacrifice of rulers like Rana Pratap Singh, and later on, of *mahārāṇā* Karan Singh (ca. 17th century), *mahārāṇā* Jai Singh (ca. 17th century), and *mahārāṇā* Fateh Singh (19th/20th century), continue to be told by Mewaris (both householders and sadhus), which enables them to construct not only a particular interpretation of Mewari history, but also a distinctive Mewari identity. Lodrick concurs:

[I]t was the "Mewar" tradition of opposition to the Mughals that came to be accepted as standard Rajput history, a perspective on the past encouraged by nationalists during their struggle for independence from yet another alien central power during the 19th and 20th centuries. Centuries of Rajput rule and traditions of Rajput culture have thus set their imprint firmly on the minds of Rajasthanis, non-Rajputs as well as Rajputs, representing what has been called the Nostalgic-Romantic tradition in modern Rajasthani culture (Lodrick 1991, 30).

⁵⁶ Several sadhus with whom I worked told me that numerous ascetics had joined Rana Pratap's army to fight against Akbar's army.

The female sadhus' construction of devotional asceticism is intimately informed, then, by an underlying Rajasthani Rajput ethos of bravery, valor, and sacrifice, and by local perceptions of Mewar as a land of heroic warriors who have sacrificed themselves in battle. Undoubtedly, these perceptions of Mewari and, by extension, Rajput identity have played an influential role in the female sadhus' characterization of the path of asceticism as, to use Gangagiri's words, "a battlefield of *bhakti*." Moreover, their rhetoric of renunciation consists of Mewari oral legends about the relationships fostered between ascetics and Rajasthani Rajput rulers, tales through which the female sadhus represent asceticism as a royal path of spiritual power (see Chapter Six). One of the reasons I pursued dissertation research in Rajasthan, specifically Mewar, is that I wanted to work with female Hindu sadhus living in a region of India that remains understudied in the scholarship on asceticism (but cf. Valley 2002), and to learn whether or not, and to which extent, female sadhus draw on regional expressive traditions in their renunciant performances with which to construct a Rajasthani (form of) asceticism. While the ascetic/heroic virtues of bravery, courage, and sacrifice emphasized in their performances are not uniquely Rajasthani, the sadhus' use of songs/stories that they attribute to regional figures and saints is, I suggest, what gives their form of asceticism its distinctly Rajasthani character (see Chapter Four).

Organization of the Dissertation

This study of female asceticism exists within a larger framework of academic studies on asceticism in South Asia. In Chapter Two I provide a literature review of the scholarship on asceticism and discuss the academic assumptions about asceticism in South Asia that have contributed to a particular kind of analytic representation, and

therefore model, of asceticism. In addition to the literature review, I discuss the methods and theories underlying both my fieldwork practices with the sadhus and my analysis of their devotional performances. Chapter Three explores the personal narrative performances of the female sadhus as a “narrative strategy” through which they exercise agency and negotiate authority in renunciation. This chapter suggests ways through which the personal narratives of female sadhus can help scholars of religion to understand the ways in which other holy women in India experience and interpret their lives. I analyze here how personal narratives are gendered constructions. Through analysis of the female sadhus’ personal narrative performances, and through comparison of their performances with those of the male sadhus with whom I also worked, I demonstrate the themes the Rajasthani sadhus emphasize in their construction of asceticism and ascetic identity that enable them to represent and experience their lives in gendered ways. Chapter Four examines the popular religious narrative performances of the female sadhus and their use of narratives about legendary regional female *sants* such as Mira, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai with which to legitimate their own unusual lives of power and authority. This chapter also explores Rajasthani sadhus’ use of their narrative traditions with which to create a female ascetic lineage/tradition.

In Chapter Five I shift my focus from the narrative performances of the sadhus to their sacred text performances, such as the Hindi *Rāmcaritmānas* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. For the sadhus with whom I worked, religious authority often pivots on knowledge of textual traditions. I analyze the ways in which female sadhus who are only “first class passed [i.e., have minimal elementary school education, or none at all]” create their religious authority through textual knowledge. I also explore the performance strategies

with which sadhus, male and female, who are semi-literate or non-literate, reconfigure the concept of the text beyond the written book in order to construct a relationship with textual traditions. Furthermore, I discuss *satsang*, or devotional fellowship, as a context in which the particular performance strategies employed in their recitation of texts enable semi- and non-literate sadhus to become “literate” in textual traditions. Chapter Six explores the devotional song, *bhajan*, performances of the female sadhus. It also examines the female sadhus’ conversational narratives about the efficacy of *bhajan* singing. Like chapter four, this chapter illustrates the sadhus use’ of rhetoric attributed to regional and pan-regional devotional saints. The Conclusion outlines the differences between the models of Brahmanical asceticism and devotional asceticism. It also presents the key concepts on which a model of devotional asceticism as constructed in the practices of the sadhus pivots, and how this model shifts academic discourse on Hindu asceticism beyond the Brahmanical one.

Several weeks before I arrived in Udaipur to conduct dissertation research in 2004, one of the female sadhus with whom I worked, Lehar Nath, passed away. In February 2006, six weeks before I left Udaipur to return to the United States, another sadhu, Pratap Puri, passed away. On July 26, 2008, five days after Guru Purnima (a Hindu holy day that honors the guru), Gangagiri Maharaj, whose teachings, discourses, and performances provide the backbone of this dissertation, left her physical body. She was 93 years old. Although some of the female sadhus have passed on from this world, I have chosen to write this dissertation in the ethnographic present as my own rhetorical strategy in order to evoke for my readers what my co-advisor Joyce Flueckiger refers to as “the immediacy” of the female sadhus’ teachings on and experiences of asceticism

(Flueckiger 2006, 35). In doing so, I follow the writing style and the reasoning for its usage adopted by Flueckiger in her recent book *Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (2006). Most of the female sadhus I worked with are elderly, between sixty-seven and ninety-three years of age. The epilogue addresses their concerns about preserving their devotional traditions and ashrams and temples for future generations of ascetics and the issue of transmission of spiritual lineage.

Your ‘training’ has prepared you to live with the sadhus—Tulsigiri Maharaj

CHAPTER TWO

Interpretive Foundations: Literature Review, Theories, and Methods

“Sister,” Tulsigiri says to me, “your ‘training’ has prepared you to live with the sadhus.” Gangagiri, seated next to Tulsigiri, remarks, “everything in life requires the right ‘training.’ Sadhus have to learn things, too.” Prompted by my questions for clarification about their statements, Tulsigiri adds, “You have studied [Hindi], right? You speak our language; you have made a lot of effort, and now your ‘department’ has sent you to live with the sadhus.” These comments were made in the context of a *bhajan satsang* that took place at Tulsigiri’s ashram in November 2005. While Tulsigiri’s statements about my “training” imply a sense of trust in my ability to live and work with the sadhus of Mewar, it also brings up pertinent questions about the discourses and methods that have, as Tulsigiri says, “prepared” me to analyze the female sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation.

In this chapter, I discuss the interpretive foundations of my dissertation. This study exists within a larger sphere of academic discourse on asceticism in South Asia that has influenced my own interpretations of female asceticism in Rajasthan. It is, moreover, informed by analytical models that are drawn from both performance/folklore and narrative studies, and by ethnographic-based methodological practices. This chapter is divided into two parts. In Part One, I provide a review of the literature on Indian asceticism and discuss the assumptions and/or models of asceticism embedded in this discourse. Part Two describes the theories on which I draw to analyze the Rajasthani

female sadhus' performances and the methods that enabled me not only to collect my data, but also to foster personal relationships with them.

I. The Literature Review

Textual Studies on Asceticism

Most text-based scholarship on asceticism describes renunciation (*sannyās*) as a radical way of life that rejects “all that makes society what it is” (Olivelle 1975, 75; cf. Olivelle 1981, 1995, 1998).⁵⁷ In his examination of the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, authoritative texts on Brahmanical renunciation, Patrick Olivelle contends that renunciation as a path and an institution could not exist in Indian society without its antistructural element (Olivelle, 1992). Textual studies demonstrate that, as an ideological system, “*sannyāsa* is used exclusively in Brahmanical writings” to describe the way of life of a renouncer who abandons the structures and values of society in order to follow the divine in pursuit of the ultimate goal of liberation (*mokṣ*) from the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*sansār*) (Olivelle 1981, 265; cf. Bronkhorst 1998, 23-28; Gonda 1961, 1965; Kane 1968-1974, vols. I-V; Olivelle 1986, 57-65; 1992, 62-67; 1993, 120-121).

In examining the relationship of renunciation to the broader Brahmanical (and Vedic) sacrificial tradition, Johannes Bronkhorst similarly postulates that “*Samnyāsa* took on religious forms which sanctified the separation between the *samnyāsin* and

⁵⁷ There are an extensive number of textual studies that deal with the topic of the origin of asceticism in Indian religions. Some of these studies suggest that asceticism's origins lie in Vedic/Brahmanic sacrificial frameworks, while others propose non-Vedic sources. A third argument, developed in the work of Johannes Bronkhorst (1998), posits both Vedic and non-Vedic origins for Indian asceticism. Though the puzzling and complex debate regarding asceticism's origins is important, it goes beyond the scope of this chapter and of this dissertation more broadly. For more information on this discussion, I refer the reader to the following studies: Biardeau 1976; Dumont 1960; Heesterman 1964, 1982; P.V. Kane 1968; Olivelle 1981, 1984, 1992, 1993, 1995.

human society and added a religious dimension to this incredibly hard way of [living] one's life" (Bronkhorst 1998, 45). *Sannyās*, however, was not the only term used in the Brahmanical writings to refer to the complex of ideals and religious practices associated with the radical life of the world renouncer. *Sannyās*, in fact, did not signify the idea of a world-negating way of life vis-à-vis the world-affirming life of the Brahminic householder until several centuries after the composition of the Dharmaśāstric texts, the *Laws of Manu* (ca. 3rd-4th centuries CE; ca. Olivelle 1981).⁵⁸

Textual scholars have discussed that the Brahmanical authors created a comprehensive, conceptual framework with which to describe the essential features and practices of renunciation. Within this framework, words such as *parivrajya* and *pravrajya*, meaning 'one who goes forth,' and *bhikṣu*, or 'beggar,' constituted some of the earliest and most common terms to communicate the idea of the abandonment and abnegation of society; they were used in the Brahmanical writings centuries before *sannyās* was ever used as a synonym for them. During the formative period of the semantic development of *sannyās* in classical literature (3rd century BCE-4th century CE), this particular term came to encompass all the previous terms that had been used to signify the lifestyle of a world renouncer and, after a while, came to mean world renunciation, specifically. Olivelle has drawn attention to the *Vaikhānasa Smārtasūtra* and the *Deutero-Baudhāyana*, both of which represent classical *sūtra* literature, as well as didactic portions of the *Mahābhārata*, particularly the *Śāntiparvan* and the *Anugītā*, in

⁵⁸ According to Olivelle, a formal definition of renunciation (*sannyās*) occurs in the *medieval* text, the *Yatidharmaparakāṣa*, dated around the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries (Olivelle 1975, 1981). See also Bronkhorst 1998, 23.

the Dharmaśāstric literature⁵⁹ (ca. 3rd-2nd century BCE to 3rd and 4th century CE), in which *sannyās* progressively acquired its general meaning of world-negation in the “vocabulary of renunciation” and as a common title of the fourth *āśrama*, or stage of life (Olivelle 1981, 265-274; cf. Olivelle 1993, 131-160). In fact, these are the texts that underscore a shared Brahminic understanding of *sannyās* (1) as the ritual of renunciation; (2) as a synonym for earlier terms like *parivrajya*; (3) and as a permanent religious way of life consisting of the practices of wandering mendicancy, poverty, celibacy, solitude, isolation, and beggary. Importantly, Olivelle emphasizes that the earliest usage of *sannyās* refers specifically to the abandonment of ritual activity, “considered within Brahmanism as the most distinctive feature of renunciation” (Olivelle 1981, 273; cf. Olivelle 1975). During the development of the semantic field of *sannyās*, more technical meanings emerged in texts like the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Manu*, and the *Āśrama Upaniṣad* (a text that is part of the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* anthology). These technical meanings, however, became obsolete over time. Olivelle places the formalization of classical meanings of *sannyās* as the concept for world-negation at around the 3rd-4th century CE with the *Dharmaśāstras* (Olivelle 1981; 1992; 1993).

Scholars of Indian asceticism have primarily relied upon classical, Brahmanical textual interpretations of renunciation, particularly as it was envisaged as a world-

⁵⁹ Olivelle states that the term *sannyās* is absent from Dharmaśāstric texts like *Gautama*, *Proto-Baudhāyana*, and *Apastamba*. It is, however, found in the *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*—and Olivelle notes how Vasiṣṭha is the first Dharmaśāstric writer to use this term—*Manu*, and the *Yajñavalkya Dharmaśāstra*. According to Olivelle, *sannyās* has a very restricted meaning in these sources as the abandonment of “all the accessories of the ritual, such as the sacred fires, the sacrificial thread, the top-knot, and the sacrificial utensils (Olivelle 1981, 268).” In *Manu*, for instance, *sannyās* refers to a very particular type of ascetic, namely the *vedasamnyāsika*, who gives up all ritual activity but does not, however, leave home and family. The development of *sannyās* from the abandonment of all ritual activity to a radical way of life occurred in classical *sūtra* texts such as the *Deutero-Baudhāyana* and the *Āgniveśya Grhyasūtra* in which *sannyās* “comes to be increasingly used without an object...[to refer to] the performance of the rite by which one becomes a renouncer” (1981, 271).

negating institution associated with the fourth *āśrama*, to argue for its opposition to the impermanent, ritually-prescribed, social world of the caste-conscious Hindu householder (cf. Dumont 1960, 1980; Heesterman 1964, 1982, 1985). Louis Dumont, for example, proposes the theory that Hinduism reflects the dialectical opposition between the renouncer outside-of-the-world and the Brahmin householder (or “man”) in-the-world. Dumont isolates the institution of caste as the fulcrum upon which the renouncer enacts his own radical individualism vis-à-vis the householder who, for as long as he remains within the encompassing strictures and regulations of caste, is dependent on it and exists interdependently within it. Unlike Dumont, J.C. Heesterman postulates what he called an “orthogenetic”⁶⁰ theory of renunciation in Brahmanical traditions of Hinduism according to which the two dichotomous poles of life become fused due to the general evolution of the sacrificial ritual itself. Heesterman’s theory of renunciation contributes, at least in theory, the potential dissolution of the hierarchical opposition between the renouncer and householder in Brahmanical Hindu thought. However, his attempt to blunt these conceptual binaries was not entirely successful, as Heesterman could not resolve the conflict between what he perceived as the atemporal institution of renunciation and the social world of ceaseless historical, cultural, religious, political and economic changes (cf. Olivelle 1993; Thapar 1982).

⁶⁰ See the following works by Heesterman: “Brahmin, Ritual, and Renouncer.” *WZKS* 8:1-31 (1964), “Householder and Wanderer,” In Madan, ed. *Way of Life: King, Householder, and Renouncer. Essays in Honor of Louis Dumont* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982), *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Heesterman’s term, “orthogenetic,” means that the “ideal” Hindu renouncer signified the individualization of the classical sacrificial ritual performed by the “ideal” Brahmin, householder priest. In this light, Heesterman’s orthogenetic theory of *sannyās* argues that the institution is not anti-brahmanical. Rather, “the institution of renunciation is already implied in classical ritual thinking.” Moreover, “the difference between classical ritualism and renunciation,” continues Heesterman, “seems to be a matter rather of degree than of principle” (1964).

It is important to discuss here the ways in which Dumont and Heesterman use the term *sannyās* in their work, and the theoretical impact their interpretations had on the propagation of a textually-based, Brahminic model of asceticism in religious studies on asceticism in South Asia. Both Dumont and Heesterman situate the category of *sannyās* (as they do other categories, e.g., the ‘householder’) within a larger (Hindu) religious framework. Though not explicitly stated in their work, it appears that the implied framework within which their structural interpretations of Hindu asceticism, and by extension, the Hindu traditions, are grounded is the *āśrama* system, the “caste-and-life stage system.” As Olivelle (1993) discusses, there exists both an “original” and a “classical” Brahminic textual formulation of the concept of the *āśrama* system.

The classical formulation, in particular, is found in the *Smṛtis* and later texts, such as the *Mahābhārata* and some *Purāṇas*. The classical formulations of the *āśrama* system tend to associate renunciation not only with the idea of world denial/rejection, but also with the fourth *āśrama*. A similar association is apparent in Dumont and in Heesterman’s theories of asceticism. For instance, a critical reading of his classic 1960 essay, “World Renunciation in Indian Religions,” illuminates Dumont’s assumption that *sannyās* is equated with the classical Brahmanical representation of renunciation, and that this way of life is synonymous with the fourth stage of life (*caturāśrama*). While Dumont does not specify the particular classical texts on which he bases his theories of *sannyās* as categorically opposed to the life of a (Vedic) householder, it does seem that he relies upon the Dharmaśāstric model of (Brahmanical) asceticism as a foundation upon which to create his thesis on the structural dichotomy betwixt the renouncer and householder. Dharmaśāstric models give the classical formulation of the *āśrama* system as obligatory

life stages or modes within the life of a *male*. In this system, renunciation is considered to be an “institution” distinct from that of householding. However, we need to keep in mind what Olivelle says about the Dharmasāstric texts: that they neither simply equate *sannyās* with renunciation nor do they use this term to signify the fourth *āśrama*. That Dumont uses the term ‘*sannyāsī*’ to represent the individual who takes initiation into the “institution” of renunciation indicates that he may have used what were later formulations of the classical notion of *sannyās* somewhat anachronistically in his reading of earlier Sanskrit and Vedic texts on asceticism.

Similarly, Heesterman (1964) discusses the institution of world renunciation and, as such, suggests a generalized application of *sannyās* as both radical lifestyle and title for the *caturthāśrama*. Heesterman often cites early classical texts, such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and *Manu*, for instance, in his description and analyses of world renouncers and their religious practices. Here, too, it seems that Heesterman conflates the specific terms for renunciation and for the ascetics in those texts with the ways in which *sannyās* becomes used in later configurations and developments of the term. Olivelle’s research convincingly argues that *Manu*, specifically, does not use *sannyās* to refer to the individual who, as Heesterman puts it, “can turn his back on the world, because he is emancipated from the relations which govern the world (1964, 28),” for the *vedasannyāsika* is “technically still a householder” (Olivelle 1981).

Significantly, in their use of classical textual representations of renunciation in constructing a model of asceticism as a world-negating path of rugged individualism and rigorous penance, Dumont and Heesterman’s theories of asceticism deny female ascetics as a class a voice in the scholarly discourse. Of course, the classical Brahmanical

discourse itself reserved the practice of renunciation as the fourth and final stage of life almost exclusively for men. This is not to say, however, that the Brahmanical tradition universally denied renunciation to women. On the contrary, Olivelle suggests that there is evidence within the Brahmanical tradition suggesting that female ascetics did, in fact, exist and that they were accepted by certain Brahminic traditions. According to Olivelle, female ascetics are described approvingly in the *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (VDS, 19.29-34, cited from Olivelle 1993, 189). Moreover, the *Arthaśāstra* advises kings “to use female ascetics for a variety of political purposes including secret agents and spies [indicating that] female ascetics were a common phenomenon in ancient Indian society” (Olivelle 1993, 189). Furthermore, the *Mahābhārata* depicts several instances of female ascetics, such as Sulabha (MBh 12.308, cited from Olivelle, 1993, 189) and Amba (MBh 5.173.14, qtd. from Olivelle 1993, 189); and the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* features Shabari, the disciple of the renowned sage Matanga. She not only performs austerities but even earns the love of Ram himself (*Valmīki Rāmāyaṇa* 3.69-70, cited from Olivelle 1993, 189).

Nevertheless, classical Brahmanical texts like the *Dharmaśāstras* ascribed to Manu, Yajñavalkya, along with the *Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra*, the *Vaiṣṇava Smārtasūtra*, and the *Mahābhārata* represent renunciation as a way of life primarily intended for high-caste men (Olivelle 1981, 1993). In the classical formulations of asceticism, although males of the first three castes, i.e., the 'twice-born', can become ascetics, all women and all men of what the Brahminic tradition viewed as lower-castes were banned from taking initiation into asceticism. Since taking vows of renunciation in the classical framework required that initiates be learned in the traditions of the *Vedas* and *Smṛtis*, this requisite posed obstacles for women (and for low-caste, uneducated males) who wanted to

renounce, and who, on account of their female gender, were often denied by the Brahminic tradition itself the right to learn these texts (cf. Findly 1985, 40; Harlan 1992, 215; Young 1987, 2002; Young 1994). In the classical system, women's roles are defined primarily in terms of their gender roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. Female asceticism not only, then, signifies the rejection of normative female roles, but also challenges normative (male) ideals of domesticity, a rejection that, in the view of some Brahmanical authors can lead to the degradation of the cosmos (Olivelle 1993). Interestingly, when Brahmanical texts mention female ascetics, they usually issue cautionary warnings about their legitimacy, imposing nominal fines on those who entered into relationships with them (Olivelle 1993, 187-188; 2004, 499).⁶¹ For most classical Brahmanic texts, the independent mode of life characteristic of asceticism is seen as "repugnant" for women (Olivelle 1993, 188). In light of the (male) ideals of celibacy, wandering, begging, isolation, penance, and even acting insane emphasized by the Brahminic model, asceticism, the texts argue, is unthinkable for women as a way of life.

The scholarly privileging of classical Brahminic formulations of renunciation not only promotes what some scholars of Indian asceticism refer to as a "masculine" model of renunciation, but also, I suggest, overlooks the ways the *classical* system effected the gendering of asceticism (cf., Harlan 1992, 216; Khandelwal 2004; Narayanan 1993). The structural model of (Brahmanical) asceticism proposed by Dumont and Heesterman does not consider that the classical representation of the *āśrama* system, and of asceticism, more specifically, represents, to use Olivelle's words (1993), a *theological construct*,

⁶¹ Olivelle notes that in texts like *Manu*, the *Yajñavalkya Dharmasātra*, and even the *Arthasāstra*, Brahmanical thinkers did not outlaw women's practice of renunciation. However, they did consider sexual intercourse with these women a crime and imposed small fines on those who fraternized with them (Olivelle 1993, 189).

rather than a depiction of the actual social situation of Indian renouncers in the classical (and/or medieval) period of Brahmanic Hinduism. By assuming the rhetoric on the *āśrama* system to be representative of men and women's everyday lives and practices (not only at that time, but also in contemporary India), Dumont's and Heesterman's model of asceticism excludes women as well as privileges androcentric models of religious behavior and experience as universal. Olivelle rightly states: "the fact that the [*āśrama*] system was envisaged exclusively for men does not necessarily mean that women did not participate in the social institutions comprehended by that system" (1993, 188).⁶²

Celibacy and Semen Retention: Dominant Motifs in Brahmanical Discourse on Asceticism

The gendering of renunciation as masculine in Brahmanical textual discourse, as several scholars discuss, relates to its dominant theme of celibacy (*brahmacārya*) (cf. Gross 1992, 220; Khandelwal 1996; 1997; 2001, 157-179; Marglin 1985; Olivelle 1993, 186). Brahmanical discourse characterizes celibacy in the (male) physiological and somatic terms of semen retention (Khandelwal 2001, 158-163). Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty explains that in Brahmanical Hindu traditions semen is not only viewed as the vital source of energy in the physical body, but also as the most positive, creative element in the universe (O'Flaherty 1973; cf. Kaelber 1988). In the Brahminic framework, the male ascetic who controls his sexuality taps into this powerful life force (cf. Kaelber 1989, 17-20, 30-33). By engaging in celibacy, it is thought that a male ascetic stores up

⁶² In a more recent essay (2004), Olivelle further argues that "normative texts and legal literature, at the same time as they place limits on women's rights to self and property, also reveal that women did enjoy agency and independence that would be unimaginable if we were to take their normative rhetoric at face value" (Olivelle 2004, 501).

his semen and through psycho-physical austerities (*tapas*) channels its energy through his body to achieve self-realization (cf. Alter 1992; 1994; 1997; Babb 1975, 118; van der Veer 1987 & 1989). Approached somatically, celibacy produces spiritual power only for men.⁶³

The flip side of the coin is that, from a Brahmanical perspective, sexual practice poses a lingering danger for male ascetics through seminal loss (Kaelber 1988). That is, male spiritual debilitation is considered to be the direct result of sexual practice, which signified, like fertility and domesticity, the world of women (Gross 1992; Khandelwal 2001; Marglin 1985; Olivelle 1993; cf. Gold and Raheja 1994). Reacting to the Brahmanical model of asceticism engendered by classical textual discourse and analytically reproduced in Dumont's and Heesterman's broader theories about Hindu religiosity, scholarly research on Hindu popular traditions, including women's traditions, consequently, developed a version of a feminine equivalent of celibacy that only partially questions the dominant textual model/theory. This scholarship suggests that temporary and intermittent chastity channeled through performance of ritual practices (*vrats*) that are geared primarily toward personal and/or familial well-being offers a powerful means by which women control what the orthodox texts perceive as a "dangerous" and "lustful" female sexuality (Babb 1975; Bennet 1983; Leslie 1989, 286, cited from Khandelwal 2001, 63; O'Flaherty 1980). Scholars such as Susan S. Wadley (1983), Mary McGee (1991), and Anne Mackenzie Pearson (1996) persuasively argue that through practices of chastity, householder women transform their lives and their loved ones' lives and obtain a

⁶³ Although from a physiological standpoint in which dimorphic sexual differences determined who could and who could not practice lifelong celibacy (cf. Khandelwal 2001), there are instances in which the Brahmanic tradition views celibacy as "dangerous" for women and, when carried to an extreme, for men, because of its potential to disrupt the lineal regeneration of human beings and the renewal of the cosmos. See Harlan (1992, 217); Marglin (1985, 47-55).

better rebirth. These analytic theories of female chastity provide an important alternative framework to the Brahminic model of celibacy with which to understand female forms of asceticism. But the question that looms large in this scholarship, and which this dissertation attempts to answer, is: What do female ascetics “produce” in lieu of semen through their devotional ascetic practices?

Anthropological and Ethnographic Studies on Asceticism

The anthropological and ethnographic literature on asceticism in South Asia documents its historical and sociological specificity in the articulation of an alternative analytic framework to Dumont’s and Heesterman’s more monolithic structural theories⁶⁴ (cf. Miller & Wertz 1976; Burghart 1983a; 1983b; Gold & Gold 1984; Narayan 1989; Gross 1991; Gold 1992).⁶⁵ The framework proposed by much of this scholarship implicitly pivots on a theoretical model that distinguishes between “ideal” and “everyday” forms of asceticism/renunciation (Vallely 2002). For instance, Richard Burghart (1983), who worked extensively with Ramanandi sadhus of north India (Vaiṣṇava ascetics who worship divinity in the forms of Sītā and Rām and who refer to

⁶⁴ Apart from anthropological works on renunciation, it is important to emphasize here a collection of essays composed by T.N. Madan in his monograph, *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). These essays depict the ways in which ascetical practices are an inherent and significant aspect of a householder’s ritual life. The attention drawn to the complexity of a householder’s way of life challenges particularly Dumont’s earlier thesis that “the secret of Hinduism” lies in its opposition between otherworldly asceticism and this worldly householdership. There are other more recent anthropological investigations of Hindu female householder’s religiosity, in particular, that demonstrate their incorporation of asceticism into their ritual practices of fasting and *vratas*. See Anne Pearson’s, *Because It Gives me Peace of Mind* (New York: SUNY, 1996) for an excellent discussion of the ways in which householder women can and do become, albeit temporarily, like Hindu female sadhus via these ritual practices.

⁶⁵ In making this statement I do not mean to suggest that textual studies do not illustrate the context-specificity of asceticism. Olivelle’s work on Indian renunciation is an example of textual studies that more than quell the suspicion of textual work as lacking historical specificity. Also, Walter Kaelber’s work on *tapas* aptly shows the various ways in which ancient and early classical texts conceptualized the broad range of ‘asceticism’ and ascetics in India. See Kaelber’s, *TaptaMarga: Asceticism and Initiation in Vedic India* (New York: SUNY, 1989).

themselves as *bairāgis* or *tyāgis*), challenges the dominant scholarly assumption that ascetics typically renounce caste and social networks of kinship. In the alternative framework he proposes, Burghart suggests that hierarchy and caste are relevant to specific types of renunciators, even if these patterns of relationality are not immediately evident in the daily exchanges that occur between sadhus and householders (1983, 643; see also van der Veer 1987, 1989).

Similarly, Robert Lewis Gross (1991) locates wide differences of belief and practice amongst the Ramanandi male sadhus with whom he worked and discusses that many of these sadhus entered into various kinds of social relationships/exchanges with householders. Based on the system of sadhu-householder exchanges exhibited by the Ramanandis whom he studied, Gross promotes a relational model of asceticism as an alternative to the standard Brahmanical representation of the solitary, wandering, and aloof ascetic. Kirin Narayan's work offers a similar understanding of asceticism as relational through her examination of life and practices of a male Hindu renouncer, whom she addresses as Swamiji (lit., "revered teacher"). Narayan contends that in telling religious stories, sadhus like Swamiji create a sense of community, and that narrative performance itself creates a means by which sadhus become involved in the lives of their disciples and devotees. Furthermore, Ann Gold (1992), who recorded a Rajashtani oral variant of the legend of the renouncer-king, Gopi Chand, suggests that the epic alternatively understands asceticism as a path involving interdependence between otherworldly/worldly attitudes and between modes of detachment and attachment, indifference and compassion.

Importantly, some of this scholarship on asceticism addresses that devotion plays an important role in ascetics' everyday experiences and practices of asceticism (cf. Gross Miller and Wertz 1976; Gross 1991; van der Veer 1998; Valley 2002; Khandelwal 2004). Gross, for instance, describes that for the male Ramanandi sadhus with whom he worked, "the path of *bhakti* or devotion supersedes all other yogic orientations" (Gross 1991, 256). These Ramanandi sadhus consider "the attainment of *prapatti*, exclusive devotion and total surrender to God...[as]...the culmination of all *yoga-sadhana* [spiritual practice] and the fundamental aim of renunciation and asceticism" (Gross 1991, 257; cf. van der Veer 1998). Many of the sadhus Gross interviewed expressed their devotion through recitation of the Tulsidas *Rāmcāritmānas*, a sixteenth-century vernacular version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, the order's quintessential sacred text. Gross examines selective passages in this devotional text as well as interpretations of passages given by some of the sadhus he worked with in order to underscore the nature of devotion (as surrender) in the Ramanandis' expression of asceticism. Overall, Gross suggests that, for these sadhus, "*Bhakti* is...the means and ends of an all encompassing spiritual life" (1991, 257).

Khandelwal also observes that Anand Mata, a female ascetic with whom she worked in Haridwar, north India, expressed her asceticism in terms of a devotional path (*bhakti sādhana*) that highlights the "transcendent goals of love, which draws one into social relationships, and detachment from those same relationships" (Khandelwal 2004, 77). Anand Mata, according to Khandelwal, "imbue[s] her life with the spirit of bhakti" (72). Khandelwal explains:

Anand Mata valued the knowledge contained in scripture but felt that one should absorb the spirit of texts rather than engage in intellectual debate about their meaning. For her, Paramatma is love (*prem*) and the meaning of bhakti *sadhana* is to permeate one's every

thought and action with Paramatma, with love. Much has been written about medieval bhakti female saints who dedicated themselves to a god envisioned as a husband or lover. Anand Mata's devotion, however, was not directed toward any particular deity... Rather, it was a diffuse sort of devotion or "total surrender" that is thought to arise from the knowledge that Paramatma is everywhere and is everything... this habit of seeing the divine in all living and insentient beings is a kind of bhakti informed by Advaita [philosophy of non-dualism, monism] (Khandelwal 2004, 76).

Likewise, in her ethnographic study of Jain female asceticism in Rajasthan, Vallely distinguishes between the "official" or, as she characterizes, the "discursive" representation of Jain asceticism and the everyday, i.e., the "phenomenological" Jain asceticism (Vallely 2002, 171-221; cf. pg. 185). As Vallely discusses, in the view of the official (literary and scholarly) depictions, including that of the public ideology of ascetic life, asceticism constitutes a *nivrtti marg*, an austere ascetic path of turning away from the world. Apart from an emphasis on individualism, "[i]ts dominant metaphors," Vallely writes, "are those of separation, detachment, and disconnection; of isolation, aloneness, and independence" (2002, 179). Vallely continues,

The discourse of Jain asceticism is of self-realization and total aloneness, relegating all other dimensions to the periphery... But this is the realm of the ideal. The public ideology of asceticism is a fixed, logical, ahistorical, and archetypal portrait. It delineates the 'formal grammar' of ascetic life and is distinct from the dynamic, 'discursive' fabric of monastic life, where divinity, devotion, and—in general—efforts to 'connect' rather than 'disconnect' govern day-to-day life (Vallely 2002, 179).

Thus, as with the Brahmanical model of Hindu asceticism, the ideal representation of Jain asceticism, as Vallely demonstrates, conceives of devotion as peripheral to the nature and texture of asceticism in general. Vallely notes that "[i]n the public ideology... devotion is seen to exist only as a tool in the ascetic's arsenal of self-purification" (Vallely 2004, 206). Vallely's research with the Jain nuns, however, reveals competing interpretations of and discourses on asceticism vis-à-vis the hegemonic rhetoric expressed by Jain public ideology. Despite the official claims made by Jain ascetics, Jain texts, and scholars of Jain traditions, for many of the nuns Vallely worked

with, “devotion permeates ascetic life” (Vallely 2002, 194). These Jain ascetics, like the Ramanandi ascetics whom Gross worked with, the female ascetics whom Khandelwal studied, and the Rajasthani female sadhus whose lives and practices I discuss and analyze in this dissertation, define devotion in terms of love and surrender (Vallely 2002, 206). In fact, the majority of the Jain nuns view and, as such, experience their ascetic practices of fasting, prayer, and meditation as *devotional* practices. Vallely explains,

Bhakti structures the lives of the devotees. They learn to see their spiritual progress as a result of their guru’s grace and benevolence as much as, if not more than, their own efforts. And perhaps even more important, the [female] ascetics embark on ascetic practices as devotional practices...In the day-to-day life at the monastery, devotion underpins, inspires, and invigorates ascetic practices. In the nuns’ more private moments, when they are not giving lectures on Jain *dharma* [duty] to the householders or counseling them on their worldly troubles, *nivrtti* recedes into the background of their talk, and *bhakti*—the basis of their asceticism—emerges forcefully (Vallely 2002, 195).

On the whole, Vallely observes that the Jain nuns consider devotion and asceticism to be “compatible. Indeed, the two are inseparable” (Vallely 2002, 178); devotion and asceticism coexist as complementary paths in Jain (female) asceticism. As Valley maintains, “Miracles and efforts to connect with divinity, like devotional practices, are seen to conflict with the ascetic rhetoric of aloneness and detachment on the *discursive* level only. Within the monastery, ‘competing’ ideologies coexist and even thrive” (Vallely 2002, 193; italics in original).

Although helpful in its insights, some of the anthropological and ethnographic literature on asceticism implicitly assumes the Brahmanical model as the singular ideal representation of asceticism with which to understand devotional ascetic practice. What is more, with the exception of Khandelwal’s and Vallely’s work, the scholarship does not address the pertinent issue of female asceticism. In those rare cases in which the literature

mentions female ascetics, it classifies them as wandering beggars or as widows (Oman 1905; Briggs 1938; Gross 1991).

Contrary to what the Brahmanical/discursive model suggests, feminist-oriented scholars assert both the conceptual and everyday importance of female ascetics in South Asian religions (Bartholomeusz 1994; Findly 1985; Khandelwal 2004; Marglin 1985; Narayanan 1999; Ojha 1980, 1985, 1988; Teskey Denton 1991, 2004; Young 1987; S. Young 1994). Female Hindu ascetics, in particular, are not an insignificant minority in India, and their numbers are estimated to be somewhere between 10-15 percent of the total ascetic population (Denton 1991, 212; Gross 1992, 121; Narayan 1989; Ojha 1981, 264-265). The question, then, is in its examination of female ascetics, how does this scholarship represent the lives of these unusual women who renounce the world, who constitute what the (dominant) Brahmanical model of *sannyās* considers to be, as Meena Khandelwal contends, “categorical impossibilities” (Khandelwal 2004, 5)?

Ethnographic/Anthropological Studies of Female Asceticism in South Asia

Catherine C. Ojha was one of the first scholars to discuss the phenomenon of female Hindu asceticism. Her work focuses on female ascetics who reside in the pilgrimage town of Varanasi (Ojha 1980; 1985; 1988). While Ojha’s work displays a remarkable effort to describe women had previously gone unmentioned in academic discourse, she assumes the Dharmasāstric model of asceticism in her own analyses of the lives and practices of Varanasi female ascetics. Ojha argues that these ascetics “have to survive within the frame of systems which are essentially male oriented, have been designed and organized by males for males (1981, 262).” She represents female ascetics as socially marginal beings because they have “adopted a behaviour intended for males

and [have] therefore left the orthodox norm behind” (Ojha 1988, 34). For Ojha, female ascetics “appeared to be...quite badly informed about the particularities of their way of life” and “don’t participate fully in the official religious culture which is primarily intended for men” (1981, 263). This dissertation questions what it means to be “badly informed.”

Other studies on female asceticism have investigated women who are either part of a single cenobitic community or who claim no affiliation to any religious institution or organization. This scholarship has discussed asceticism predominantly through the lens of hierarchy, caste, purity, spiritual authority, and the pan-Indian institutionalization of asceticism in South Asia (Teskey Denton 1991, 2004; King 1984; Llewellyn 1995; White 1980). For example, Lynn Teskey Denton (1991) discusses varieties of female asceticism in Varanasi, which she labels as ‘celibate student,’ ‘renunciant,’ and ‘tantric.’ As with Ojha’s work, Teskey Denton’s recent book (2004) analyzes Varanasi female ascetics’ experiences and practices of asceticism through use of the Dharmaśāstric model (Teskey Denton 2004, 24-28).⁶⁶ In so doing, she emphasizes the marginal status of female ascetics vis-à-vis that of male ascetics and female ascetics’ anomalous position vis-à-vis that of householder women. Teskey Denton views the differences of belief and practice between female ascetics and female householders as rigidly reproducing the dominant binary of renunciation as masculine and domesticity as feminine.

Ojha and Teskey Denton’s theories start with a Brahmanical model of asceticism (and of womanhood) and assume its applicability to the women whom they study. While it is important to pay attention to the ways orthodox textual writings construct the category of renunciation, it is equally as important to ask whether, and to what extent,

⁶⁶ Teskey Denton monograph was published posthumously in 2004.

female ascetics construct themselves on the basis of the ideals and practices emphasized in those texts, and how their individual understandings either conform with or diverge from the values more central to textual traditions.

Caroline Walker Bynum questions the inherent adequacy of male models to represent the “whole story” of women’s religious experiences (Bynum 1992, 27-51). In a convincing critique of Victor’s Turner’s theory of liminality, Bynum suggests that medieval, Christian female saints’ lives and practices depict not the processual, social dramas of liminality characteristic of medieval male saints. On the contrary, female saints’ experiences demonstrate continuity with their ordinary social lives as women. As Walker Bynum states, “...liminality itself may be less a universal moment of meaning needed by human beings...than an escape for those who bear the burdens and reap the benefits of a high place in the social structure” (Bynum 1992, 34).

Recent scholarship on female asceticism in South Asia and Hindu female asceticism, in particular, draws on Bynum’s theory of female continuity to promote alternative frameworks of women’s religious experience(s) to authoritative male models of liminality (Gold, Hausner, and Khandelwal 2006; Hallstrom 2004; Khandelwal 2004; Pechilis 2004; Baccheta 2002; Sarkar & Butalia 1995; Richman 1986; Babb 1984, 1986; for Buddhism see Salgado 2004; Gutschow 2001, 2002; Bartholomeusz 1994; for Jainism see Valley 2006).

To take as an example, Lawrence Babb (1984) contends that the Brahma Kumari organization has “exploited another possibility inherent in [the dominant] construct as a way of developing a culturally legitimate conception of world renunciation for women (Babb 1984, 412).” According to the Brahma Kumaris, the ascetic practice of celibacy

transforms women into the purified “daughters of Brahma” who can reclaim the religious power and spiritual authority they supposedly lost when they became sexual beings.⁶⁷ As Babb explains, while Brahma Kumari discourse suggests that celibacy, and therefore, asceticism, may represent alternatives to Brahmanical interpretations of womanhood, the movement itself perceives these paths to holiness to be wholly continuous with “true” womanhood, particularly as it is believed to have been expressed in the age of truth, the *satya yūg* (Babb1986).

Lisa Hallstrom discusses that the Bengali ascetic-saint and guru, Anandamayi Ma, interpreted her religious experiences and practices, in part, through the lens of spiritual motherhood, casting herself as a mother goddess, and considering her devotees as her “children” (2004). Likewise, Wendy Sinclair-Brull, who conducted ethnographic research with female ascetics of the Sarada Mandiram order in Kerala, a South Indian branch of the Ramakrishna Sarada Math, suggests that women internalize images and roles associated with dominant notions of Indian motherhood, and that the female ascetics’ practices of counseling devotees and other female ascetics of the order tend to reflect continuity with female social roles and domestic practices (Sinclair-Brull 1997). Sinclair-Brull’s work sheds new light on the significance of purity, hierarchy, and pollution to the social contexts of the female ascetics of the Kerala Sarada Mandiram order, themes which have been largely regarded in the scholarly literature on Hindu religions as householder issues. Sinclair-Brull, thus, challenges Dumont’s claim that the

⁶⁷ Tessa Bartholomeusz’ ethno-historical study of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist nuns, the *dāsā sil mātāvōs*, or “Mothers of the Ten Precepts,” also suggests that female Buddhist ascetics construct themselves in their discourses in ways that suggest continuity, rather than liminality with, female biological roles (Bartholomeusz 1994).

renouncer, who seemingly exists on the outskirts of Hindu society, represents the antithesis to the householder (Sinclair-Brull 1997).

Furthermore, Sarkar & Butalia (1995) and Baccheta (2002) discuss the ways in which Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati, female ascetics associated with right-wing Hindu movements, rely upon Sanskritic images of motherhood (or femininity) in their public religious discourses with which to represent themselves as “traditional” women who are concerned for the welfare of the ‘Hindu’ nation, gendered in their speeches as ‘Mother India [*bharat mātā*’] (cf. Menon 2006). Though, as the work of Sarkar and Butalia and Baccheta collectively suggests, their rhetoric is located in imagined notions of the ‘Hindu’ nation, it enables these female ascetics to expand beyond dominant (Brahminic) constructions of femininity and to include female asceticism within the framework of “traditional” womanhood. The authors further argue that while the rhetoric of these ascetics resists values that are central to Brahmanical Hinduism, and thus, displaces, albeit temporarily, Brahmanical (male) authority, it is not meant to be a global challenge to the oppressive patriarchal practices of the culture. Rather, such rhetoric effectively establishes female ascetics’ continuity with maternal roles/behaviors.

The argument for maternal continuity in female experiences of asceticism receives its most developed form in Meena Khandelwal’s ethnography (2004) of female ascetics in Haridwar, north India. As I discussed in the Introduction, Khandelwal speaks about the ambiguities in the rhetoric of Hindu renunciation, suggesting three analytical frameworks of renunciation as ungendered, as gendered masculine (or hypermasculine), or as gendered feminine, with which to understand the tradition of renunciation. Khandelwal argues that the practices and discourses of the female ascetics with whom

she worked indicate the importance of maternal behaviors and attitudes in women's experiences of asceticism. As Khandelwal shows, these female ascetics construct notions of selfhood and relationship, of gender and kinship primarily through the lens of motherhood, redefining dominant Brahmanical ideals such as solitude, isolation, mobility, and detachment. Khandelwal, in effect, emphasizes the similarities between the values the Haridwari female ascetics stress in their discourses and practices and the values that are seen as representative of female householders' lives (e.g., compassion, nurturing, love, and selfless service). For Khandelwal, the expression of maternal femininity represents a means by which female ascetics forge powerful and meaningful social relationships and, more importantly, resist sociological erasure by orthodox (male) traditions of asceticism.

Since the publication of Khandelwal's 2004 monograph, an anthology consisting of ethnographic studies of female asceticism in South Asia has emerged (cf. Gold, Khandelwal, and Hausner 2006; cf. McDaniel 2007).⁶⁸ These studies constitute compelling portraits of individual female ascetics and their various ascetic practices. In their Introduction to the volume, editors Meena Khandelwal and Sondra Hausner discuss that the purpose of the new anthology is to represent ethnographically traditions of asceticism from women's perspectives and experiences, and, more specifically, to show the various and often complex ways in which female ascetics' experiences articulate and/or resist textually-defined ascetic traditions (Hausner and Khandelwal 2006, 24).⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Due to space limitations, I shall concentrate on ethnographic studies discussing female Hindu asceticism.

⁶⁹ Hausner and Khandelwal point out that all the female ascetics with whom the various authors worked "follow renunciant traditions that have scriptural referents" (24). At the same time, Hausner and Khandelwal emphasize: "We do not seek to substitute ethnographic methods for textually-based ones, for the two are complementary. Thus this work complements that of feminist scholars working with textual sources who have written on women ascetics, just as it complements that of feminist scholars working ethnographically with householder women in South Asia" (2006, 24).

While Hausner and Khandelwal emphasize that ascetic and householder women share common values and concerns (2006, 3), the act and practices of renunciation readily distinguish the lives of female ascetics from that of female householders. The authors write:

For all the women in this book, the act and practices of renunciation are in part about attempting to free oneself from the ideological—and sometimes theological—constructs that undermine the female gender so strongly in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. And for most, renunciation is one of the more legitimate ways to either quietly avoid or reject outright the powerful cultural expectations that all women will become docile wives and perfect mothers (Hausner and Khandelwal 2006, 5).

Hausner and Khandelwal underscore that female ascetics' understandings and practices of renunciation clearly illustrate that "their thoughts and actions are not exclusively determined by patriarchal models of renunciation" (2006, 24). Collectively, the essays describe the alternative frameworks and/or models with which female ascetics construct themselves and express their religiosity vis-à-vis dominant renouncer (male) perspectives. The central theme that emerges from the volume is that female ascetics in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions express continuity with female biological and/or social roles, a pattern identified through practices that promote an ideology of worldly engagement. These women, however, experience continuity with traditional gender roles not as wives/mothers, but rather as renouncers (Hausner 2006, 126).

Khandelwal's essay, for example, shows that Baiji, a female ascetic with whom she worked, draws on modern neo-Hindu discourses in her representation of renunciation as a path of social activism, which she expresses by offering public religious lectures, preparing food for public consumption and distribution, and counseling devotees/disciples (Khandelwal 2006, 39-68). Similarly, Hausner examines the ways in which Radha Giri, a female ascetic from Haridwar, articulates and experiences her vision

of social activism through practices of staying in place and caring for abused and orphaned children (Hausner 2006, 125-138). “[W]omen renouncers,” Hausner explains, “use their sedentary seats as bases from which to care for people. They do not reject the world but immerse themselves in it, using the religious power with which they are bestowed for the benefit of others” (2006, 126). Kalyani Devaki Menon’s study further documents specifically right-wing female ascetics’ use of sacred texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* with which they not only justify publicly their own “righteous” worldly involvement, but also promote explicitly a Hindu nationalist political agenda (Menon 2006, 141-169). Menon explains,

Hindu nationalist *sadhvis* use the Bhagavad Gita to suggest that it is not only possible, but in fact imperative for them to engage in righteous action that upholds dharma...these female renouncers also argue that is the sacred duty of Hindus to participate in this struggle for dharma identified as the struggle to establish India as a Hindu nation (Menon 2006, 142).

Two essays in this volume explore female ascetics’ performative practices of devotional (*bhajan*) singing and (personal) storytelling that, like the social ascetic practices discussed by Hausner and Khandelwal, communicate an understanding of renunciation as a path of social engagement. Kristin Hanssen discusses that the singing practices of the Baul ascetic Tara and her husband Karun, function, in part, as a respectable form of begging through which they not only exchange spiritual blessings verbalized in the form of song for material goods (e.g., money, food, etc.), but also “challenge Brahmin claims of ritual superiority” (Hanssen 2006, 95).⁷⁰ Both Tara and Karun consider their songs as powerful vehicles that provide spiritual “nourishment” to the hearts, minds, and souls of their listeners, and as such, enable them to catalyze

⁷⁰ According to both Hanssen’s and Knight’s essays, it is common for Baul ascetics to be married. In fact, Knight observes that unmarried female Baul ascetics are considered by the larger Baul ascetic community to be marginal, and their status much lower than married female Bauls. See also Jeanne Openshaw (2003).

reciprocal relationships with householders (Hanssen 2006, 95-123).⁷¹ As Hanssen points out, for Bauls, “connecting with others is important. Becoming Baul...does not involve detachment from society. Tara and her husband continue to cultivate ties to neighbors, friends, and family, and they also strive to enlarge their social network through practices of begging” (Hanssen 2006, 96).

Lisa I. Knight examines the life stories and perspectives of Vaiṣṇava and Muslim, unmarried female Baul ascetics (2006, 191-222). In narrating their personal stories, these female ascetics articulate their awareness of the pressing societal expectations to marry and bear children and attribute their marginal social position to their single status. Their asceticism, Knight suggests, thus helps unmarried female Baul ascetics to deal with concerns about their “otherwise problematic gender identity and status within the larger non-Baul society” (192). By taking renunciation, unmarried female Baul ascetics are able to leave their households, though not without obstacles posed by their families, and pursue a musical/spiritual path. Importantly, for these female ascetics, renunciation, as Knight argues, does not signify worldly rejection, but rather rejection of society’s (normative) expectations of marriage and domesticity.⁷²

In sum, studies of Indian asceticism have often partially or unquestionably assumed the dominant Brahmanical textual model as the ideal in constructing theories about ascetics and about asceticism. But as this review of the literature shows, studies of female asceticism have begun to challenge the universal applicability of the Brahmanical (or an authoritative) male model as representative of women’s ascetic experiences. In so

⁷¹ Hanssen emphasizes that “[w]hile the songs [Tara and Karun] sing bear the capacity to nourish others, the alms they receive in return are viewed as tokens of devotion and appreciation” (2006, 96).

⁷² Knight elaborates: “For most of the women I interviewed, renunciation did not precipitate any severing of social ties, but because it did loosen society’s claim on them, it provided them with an excuse for evading societal roles and expectations” (Knight 2006, 192).

doing, this scholarship has proposed female models of asceticism, which includes an understanding of female asceticism as continuous with women's socio-biological roles. This dissertation builds on the insights and analytical models developed by these studies, offering devotional asceticism as a new model Hindu renunciation. Moreover, the analyses and model of devotional asceticism I propose on the basis of those analyses further along the current scholarly discourse by examining female sadhus' *performances* of asceticism through their singing, storytelling, and textual practices, and the ways in which the Rajasthani female sadhus' constructions of ascetic identity and devotional asceticism constitute a "performative accomplishment" (Langellier and Peterson 2004, 30).

II A. The Theoretical Tools/Approaches

Performance-Centered Theories and Methods

I argue that the Rajasthani female sadhus' performances do not merely reflect their understandings of, but more importantly, create devotional asceticism. My analyses of the female sadhus' rhetoric of renunciation are informed by performance-centered theories and models. Performance theorist, Richard Bauman, defines performance as "an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (1992, 41). The performance frame helps participants to interpret what Bauman (1977, 27) and others, namely Charles L. Briggs (1988), Dell Hymes (1974) and Joel Sherzer (1992), refer to as a "speech event"⁷³ by means of the "mutually interactive and interdependent" variables of the performance context that affect the emerging, communicative exchange between performers and their audiences

⁷³ Bauman defines the "speech event," as "...a culturally defined, bounded segment of the flow of behavior and experience constituting a meaningful context for action," in *Verbal Art as Performance* (1977), p. 27.

(Bauman 1977, 13). Performance theorists understand, then, that performance as a communicative event more than simply reflects social reality; it also creates it (Bauman 1989).

As cited in Flueckiger's work (1996), Hymes reconfigures Jakobson's⁷⁴ model of communication, identifying the differential components of a performance context in terms of settings (i.e., the times and places for events), participants (addresser, addressee, and audience), purposes, and verbal text in relation to linguistic styles, manner of delivery, rules of interaction, and speech genres (Flueckiger 1996, 22).⁷⁵ A performance-centered approach to a marked speech event can show that "the variables of context and text [are] interdependent" (Flueckiger 1996, 22; 2006). A shift in any of these components affects both *what* performance does and *how* it creates meaning for participants (cf. Bauman 1986, 4). Joyce B. Flueckiger explains: "Sometimes these shifts make little difference in the experience and creative potential of the performance, but other times they do directly affect what is created through the performance and/or how it is received or experienced by participants and audiences" (Flueckiger 2006, 25).

Bauman explains that **what** performance does is to transform "the basic referential...uses of language." "[T]here is something going on in the communicative interchange," Bauman contends, which says... 'interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey'"

(Bauman 1977, 9). **How** performance creates meaning for participants is illustrated by

⁷⁴ See also Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, edited by T.A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960): 350-373.

⁷⁵ See Joel Sherzer's essay (1991), "Ethnography of Speaking," in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (pp. 76-91) for a brief synopsis of Hymes's method of exploring speech events as performance. Also, see Flueckiger's helpful visual reproduction of A.K. Ramanujan's diagram of Jakobson's model for communication and its implications for social organizations of indigenously classified genres (1996, 22).

Briggs' idea of "contextualization cues," or interactional frames whereby participants "in a communicative event provide each other with cues that signal how words and actions are to be interpreted" (Briggs 1998, 14). These features signal what is important *indigenously* for the analyst and hence "direct us to those aspects of context that the participants in the performance event themselves foreground." Briggs explains:

[C]ommunicative contexts are not dictated by the social and physical environment, but are created by the participants in the course of the interaction. Communication is punctuated with "contextualization cues" that signal which features of the physical, social, and linguistic setting are being utilized at the time in creating interpretive frameworks for deciphering the meaning of what is being said (Briggs 1988, 15).

Apart from the verbal cues used in the framing of speech events, the expressive means or, "channel," employed in performance (e.g., dance/song) also functions as cues that indigenously signal how participants are to understand the meanings/messages created and communicated through performance (Flueckiger 1996; cf. Bauman 1986). For example, in her study of women's performances of *sua nāc* (lit., "parrot dance") in Chhattisgarh, Flueckiger discusses that the dance tradition that is performed by low-status female dancers for high-status female patrons creates a different meaning than the song tradition that is performed by women to other women of similar or equal social/economic status (Flueckiger 1996, 78). Flueckiger explains:

As a dance tradition...[e]mphasis is placed on the channel itself, the dance, and the nonverbal, iconographic message of the tradition, one reinforcing a public image of women as fertile, auspicious, and life-giving. In contrast, in the...song tradition...the focus shifts to the verbal message of the text. This verbal message gives voice to the private suffering to which a woman is born, a startling contrast from the positive nonverbal image of the dance (Flueckiger 1996, 78).

Contextualization cues, however they may be expressed, thus, act as a type of indigenous cultural commentary by virtue of which performance creates and communicates meaning for participants that, in turn, allows them to construct themselves

and their everyday social worlds in ways that not only support and reproduce, but also challenge or reinterpret normative ideals and practices. Performance, then, possesses the inherent potential to produce transformative effects for both performers and audiences beyond the immediate speech event itself. In Briggs' words:

...performances are created by real individuals in the course of specific human encounters. One thing that performance features do is to select elements of the ongoing linguistic, social, cultural, political, historical, and natural environment to accord them a meaning and role within the performance. Verbal art cannot exist without real people in real settings; nevertheless, recasting the situation into the language of the story realm transforms the "real world" itself. This transformative effect extends back from the performance to the broader social setting, since the performativity of verbal art holds the potential for changing the relationship between the participants and the way they perceive themselves and their environment (Briggs 1998, 359).

Using the theories and methods developed by scholars of performance and folklore studies (cf. Tedlock 1983), I examine and analyze three different genres of the Rajasthani female sadhus' rhetoric of renunciation that are susceptible to performance: devotional songs (*bhajans*), popular religious stories (*kahāniyān*), and textual recitations (*pāṭh*). In my analyses, I draw attention to the contexts of the sadhus' performances and the meanings that are embedded and performatively created in those contexts. While both performance and folklore theorists often characterize the genres of folktale, legend, story, song, proverb, riddle, joke (or lie), and oral epic as forms of "verbal art," I suggest that the Rajasthani female sadhus' songs, stories, and textual recitations constitute more than simply verbal art; rather, they are *devotional ascetic practices* through which they create relationships with God as well as with their constituency of devotees and disciples. To this extent, I consider the sadhus' rhetorical practices, including their renunciatory discourses, to be synonymous with devotional acts of religious performance.

At the same time, I am particularly interested in the ways in which the Rajasthani female sadhus draw on their “aesthetically heightened” *bhakti* practices in the capacity of what Roger Abrahams describes as “an implement for argument, a tool for persuasion” in the construction of ascetic identity and devotional asceticism (Abrahams 1968, 146). I concentrate on the sadhus’ song, story, and sacred text performances of devotional asceticism for several related reasons. First, as explained in the last chapter, these are the ways of speaking to which the sadhus themselves attach religious significance and with which they equate (their practice of) asceticism. Second, as folklore scholar Joel Sherzer contends, “it is especially in *verbally artistic discourse* that cultural meanings and symbols are exploited to the fullest...and the essence of language-culture relationships become salient” (Sherzer 1987, 296; italics mine).

The implication of Sherzer’s statement is, thus, that heightened or “artistic” speech acts an efficacious rhetorical strategy with which participants creatively imagine and articulate alternatives to dominant socio-cultural and religious values and institutions.⁷⁶ Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja (1994) concur with Sherzer’s theory of performance. In their examination of the oral expressive traditions of rural north Indian women, Gold and Raheja argue that poetic speech, “rather than ordinary talk,” demonstrates “the particular power of performance traditions to present creative viewpoints and to serve as reservoirs for cultural alternatives” (Gold and Raheja 1994, 67; cf. Bauman 1977, 44-45; Abrahams 1968). In this light, performance, as Gold and Raheja suggest, provides, then, not only a potentially powerful medium for

⁷⁶ It will become evident in the following pages that performance as the female sadhus I worked with use it is more than simply a rhetorical strategy; it is also, and more significantly, a devotional strategy that enables them to create and exercise their authority and agency as female ascetics in the male-dominated tradition of renunciation.

expressing individual or group resistance to dominant male models of gender and/or religiosity, but also, as James Scott observes, “a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that makes them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance” (Scott 1990, 160, cited from Narayan 1995, 254). In her analysis of Kangra women’s songs, Kirin Narayan similarly concedes the power of performance to “distance [people] from the folklore that they use...even as they draw upon folklore forms to express how they perceive a social situation” (Narayan 1995, 258).

Narrative Methodologies: The Life History Approach

In addition to their devotional songs, popular religious stories, and textual recitations, I examine and analyze the Rajasthani sadhus’ “everyday” discourse that is also susceptible to performance—their life stories.⁷⁷ I consider their life story performances as a distinct and fourth genre of the female sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation. Unlike the three other performance genres for which they provide specific indigenous categorizations (i.e., *bhajan*, *kahānī*, *pāṭh*), I never heard the female sadhus use any term to characterize their life stories, and so I refer to this genre simply as ‘life story.’ But why include these storytelling practices in their renunciatory rhetoric? At first glance, their life story performances do not appear to be traditional devotional practices in the sense that their songs, religious stories, and textual recitations are. After all, how does telling her life story enable a female sadhu to remember and connect with God, which is, for the sadhus, the underlying purpose of their *bhajan*, *kahānī*, and *pāṭh* practices? In the following pages, however, it shall become evident that their personal narrative practices provide a means by which the female sadhus create and express

⁷⁷ I also refer to life stories as personal experience narratives (see The Personal Narratives Group, 1991).

devotion to God in much the same way that they do through their other devotional practices. That is, telling their own stories offers a social occasion in which the female sadhus narrate the ways in which God works in their everyday worlds; they attribute all the events and circumstances of their lives to the divine. Personal storytelling, therefore, not only allows the sadhus to remember, and thus, to connect with God, but it also becomes a testimony to the power and presence of God in their lives. In this way, the personal narratives of the female sadhus represent, as Elaine Lawless suggests for the female Pentecostal preachers and pastors with whom she worked, “spiritual” life stories (Lawless 1988, 60).

But there is another reason why I include the sadhus’ life stories in their renunciatory rhetoric. Apart from its devotional function, personal narrative performance, as with their *bhajan*, *kahānī*, and *pāṭh* performances, provides a strategy with which the female sadhus construct a sense of self, that is, an ascetic identity, and, by extension, devotional asceticism. As theories of oral history, including life history, argue, “the performance of personal narrative is a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a “self” to their audience” (Borland 1991, 71). Personal narratives represent, then, “fictions,” not in the sense of lies, of course, but rather in the sense of personal “creations” illustrating individual’s internal interpretive processes through which they shape and constitute their identities (cf. Lawless 1998; Behar 1993; Gluck and Patai 1991; Crapanzano 1980).⁷⁸ Folklore specialist Jeff Titon writes: “The life story tells who one thinks one is and how one thinks one came to be that way....So life storytelling is a fiction, a making, an ordered past imposed by a present personality upon

⁷⁸ According to Lawless, in personal narrative performance, “[h]istory will be modified, melded, pushed, and molded to create a ‘fiction’ that is based on truth, but is, in fact, a created story” (Lawless 1988, 65).

a disordered life” (Titon 1980, 290; cited from Lawless 1988, 62). Against the backdrop of this theoretical framework, I understand the female sadhus’ life stories as “consciously constructed ‘fictions,’” in which they represent themselves and their form of asceticism in gendered ways (Lawless 1988, 65). Let me emphasize, though, that, to the Rajasthani sadhus, their personal narratives represent accounts of real experience, embedded in the larger context of their lives.

The female sadhus’ life story constructions emerged in dialogical conversational contexts. Katherine Borland explains that “we are forever constructing our own identities through social interactions” (Borland 1991, 71), and thus oral narratives are directly rooted in a complex web of human social activity. At the same time, the sadhus’ stories arose, in part, in response to questions I asked, such as “Why did you become a sadhu?” or “What influenced you to take renunciation?” The context of our interactions mirrors the constructed nature of their personal narratives. The sadhus’ life stories were created and negotiated in a context where the terms of our daily interactions had already been established. That is, the sadhus understood that I visited them everyday *because* they were sadhus, and more specifically, female sadhus. I told the sadhus that I came to India in order to learn the “daily routine [*dincārya*] of sadhus.”

In the beginning stages of my fieldwork, I initially resisted framing my meetings with the sadhus in this way, thinking that they, rather than I, should determine which identity(ies) are important to their own self-perceptions.⁷⁹ I was hoping, somewhat naïvely perhaps, that the sadhus themselves would “naturally” talk about their lives and

⁷⁹ Importantly, Elaine Lawless discusses that analysts’ perceptions of the identity of the people with whom they work may not necessarily be the identity, or the most important identity, with which these collaborators perceive themselves. As Lawless states, “we must be prepared to recognize that they have many *other* identities *as well*” (Lawless 1988, 62; italics in original).

identities as if my presence made little or no difference to their individual self-representations. As such, I simply said to the sadhus that I came to India to study Hindi and to learn about Indian culture (which was, of course, an accurate representation). But, despite my own assumptions, I learned that my presence did affect what the female sadhus told me about their lives (cf. Abu-Lughod 1993; Gluck and Patai 1991). Borland writes: “For the very fact that we constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories” (1991, 64). Not only this, my fieldwork assistant, host family members who accompanied me during fieldwork trips, and even people who were present during my meetings with the sadhus were constantly ‘translating’ me to them, saying that “Anita’s come [to India] to study sadhus” (cf. Behar 1993).

These well-meaning introductions, though they established the parameters of my encounters with the sadhus, strategically positioned me within Indian culture, more broadly, and within the everyday lives of sadhus. My field assistant and my host families seemed to understand not only that it is unusual for anyone, Indian or foreign, to work with sadhus, but that it is also extremely unusual for a single, foreign woman to do so on a daily and extended basis. Most people, foreigners, too, who visit sadhus seek either their blessings or desire to hear their religious teachings; and, if invited to do so, some individuals might even smoke the chillum (hashish pipe) with sadhus as a gesture of peace. The framework established by my field assistant and host families enabled me to develop working relationships with the female sadhus (I describe the nature of these relationships below). So, as my fieldwork progressed, I, too, began to translate myself to the sadhus in the much same terms that I heard others translate me. To this extent, the

identity the female sadhus created and affirmed in their narratives almost always pivoted on what they thought I was there to hear—their *sadhu* identity (cf. Lawless 1988, 62).

While the questions I asked most of the female sadhus about when and why they sought renunciation evoked the performance of their personal narratives, I did not ask those questions until I had been working with the sadhus for at least six months or more. In fact, early on in my research I learned that female sadhus simply do not talk about their lives when asked directly. For example, on one occasion, one member of my first host family, an elderly man who accompanied me on my field journeys, and whom I affectionately called “Dadaji [respected grandfather],” told a female sadhu, Champanath, that I wanted “to hear her life story [*jīvan kī kahānī*].” Champanath appeared confused; she clearly did not expect to be asked (nor was she prepared to answer) such a question, and said, “What do you mean?” Dadaji elaborated by saying, “[Tell us] why you became a sadhu; what you do as a sadhu, etc.” Champanath remarked, “What’s there to tell? I worship God [*bhagvān*] and serve the temple. That’s it.” That was, quite literally, the beginning and end of Champanath’s story. On another occasion, the (at the time) unmarried daughter of the third host family I lived with, Kalpana, joined me on a visit to Gangagiri’s place. As Kalpana had been assisting me with transcriptions, she had become interested in learning about the details of Gangagiri’s life prior to her renunciation. On that day Kalpana casually asked Gangagiri, “when did you marry, *māī rām* [holy mother]?” Her response was simply, “You don’t put a harness meant for a donkey on an elephant.” End of story.

Both of these examples illustrate two salient points. First, the life story is not a genre with which the Rajasthani sadhus I worked with are familiar. I suspect that, unlike

the popular religious stories (*kahāniyān*), the personal narrative genre is not likely to be a “living” oral tradition in the lives of sadhus (Lawless 1988). Lawless aptly cautions scholars from assuming that the life story (or oral autobiography) genre exists as a living oral tradition in the lives of the people whom we study. Lawless explains: “It is unrealistic to assume that one can innocently ask the narrator, ‘So, tell me your life story’ and the storyteller will lean back and tell her life story uninterrupted to the folklorist who sits quietly nodding, waiting patiently for the narrator to continue when there is a pause, resisting the temptation to distort the flow when there is a question” (1988, 62). Second, and this point elaborates on the first one, as individuals who have supposedly “died to the world,” sadhus, male or female, traditionally do not speak about their lives with others. To do so might indicate that the sadhu still remains attached to her/his former life and identity, and thus is attached to his/her ego-self. Several scholars have discussed the methodological difficulties they encountered in eliciting the life stories of the sadhus whom they studied (cf. Gross 1991; Khandelwal 2004; Khandelwal and Hausner 2006, 23).⁸⁰ Gross, for example, describes the sheer reluctance amongst the Ramanandi sadhus he worked with in narrating their personal stories. And Gangagiri’s statement to Kalpana poignantly shows what appears to be a shared perspective amongst renouncers—that sadhus have no life story to tell.

But the Rajasthani sadhus I worked with do, in fact, share their own personal stories. The questions scholars of religion must ask, then, are: what are the contexts in which sadhus’ life stories emerge, and how are their stories and their performances

⁸⁰ Hausner and Khandelwal concur: “...cultural ideals and religious propriety sometimes caution renouncers against talking about their lives prior to initiation, for this is the life they have deliberately left behind. It is bad form for Hindu renouncers to speak freely and openly about their childhoods, families, or troubles before renunciation” (2006, 23).

shaped by those contexts? Many of the Rajasthani female sadhus talk about their personal experiences in the context of either singing *bhajans* or telling popular stories about the lives of legendary *sants*, especially female *sants* like Mira Bai. After one *bhajan* performance, Gangagiri discussed her unusual childhood of singing *bhajans*, as she said, “before I even knew how to tie my shoes.” Similarly, Tulsigiri’s narrative performance about Anusuya, a female character from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* who was the wife of the renowned sage (*r̥ṣi*) Gautama, evoked a story about her own husband, who renounced the world, which led to an extended narrative about Tulsigiri’s own taking of renunciation.

Furthermore, as I said earlier, the female sadhus’ life stories are embedded in conversational contexts. Everyday “talk” between the female (and male) sadhus and their audience of listeners, including me, then, often constitutes the verbal springboard from which they discuss the events of their individual lives. A conversation about the soaring prices of ghee, or clarified butter, the failing health of a family member, train travel, food preparation, the weather, and so on may trigger associations and/or memories for the sadhus, and thus these contexts provide occasions for personal storytelling by sadhus. In contexts where two or more female sadhus are present, if one recounts the details of her life others are more likely to do the same. Depending on the context and the topic of the conversation, these personal storytelling events occasionally transform into lively and entertaining competitions between the sadhus, with each sadhu performing her life in a manner that upstages the performance of another sadhu.

For instance, a conversation about her extensive knowledge of the Tulsī *Rāmāyaṇā*, a Hindi devotional text that Rajasthani female sadhus recite either from a printed text or, more commonly, from memory, evoked from Gangagiri a story about her childhood. “I

only studied to the first class. I never went to school [after that]. But I taught myself the alphabet [*akṣar*] and learned to read *Rāmāyan*. Can you imagine? A first class passed woman reading [the] *Rāmāyan*.” In response, Tulsigiri exclaimed, “Hey, at least you went to school, *māi rām*. I myself never even saw the school.” Sometimes, in these contexts of personal storytelling, I questioned the female sadhus further about certain details that emerged in the telling of their stories, attempting to elicit more extended life narratives; most of the time, though, I only listened, as I, like most members of the audience, was caught up in the sadhus’ narrative performance. So, while the female sadhus tell their life stories, I emphasize that they do so not with the intention of giving me, the researcher, or their devotees/disciples, their ‘life story,’ but rather for illustrating specific points and, most importantly, for creating relationships with their spiritual constituency.

The female sadhus’ personal experience narratives, therefore, are not ‘life stories’ in the sense in which the term has traditionally been understood in field of feminist oral history/life history studies—as a coherent and global account of a woman’s life experience until the moment of the interview (cf. Chanfrault-Duchet 1991, 77). Rather, the life stories I recorded constitute vignettes, that is, portraits of particular life moments, “each developed into a concrete story that follows the rules of traditional religious...narrative” (Lawless 1988, 62). As I discuss in Chapter Three, the female sadhus’ life stories reveal in terms of their structures and themes striking similarities to the traditional religious narratives of India’s renowned female *bhakti sants*, which, in turn, provide alternative models of gender and, more broadly, of asceticism to dominant patriarchal models for the sadhus. In my analysis, I draw attention to the “narrated event

[i.e., the life story]” (Bauman 1986) as a “meaning system” (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991, 77; cf. Babcock 1977) or text in which the concepts, values, symbols, and interpretive frameworks that the female sadhus themselves emphasize (or index) to interpret and experience their lives are embedded. Moreover, I focus on the “narrative event [i.e., the performance]” as a “meaning-constructing activity” (Borland 1991, 63) through which the female sadhus create and communicate both an ‘ascetic self,’ or sadhu identity, and devotional asceticism.

In sum, the Rajasthani sadhus’ personal narratives constitute primary religious sources for understanding and documenting female ascetics’ voices, experiences, histories, and culture. The female sadhus’ life stories (1) suggest the ways in which female ascetics establish and negotiate their public renunciant positions of status, power, and authority in a male-dominated path; (2) illustrate the specificity of female asceticism in Rajasthan; (3) and furthermore, reveal the multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses with which female ascetics express their own views. Because “the individual carries the cultural and the social” (Okely 1989, 9), the sadhus’ life stories can show how individual female ascetics support shared symbolic and cultural systems of representation as well as how dominant/normative ideologies become challenged or subverted. But even in instances in which the female sadhus express what Judith Okely characterizes as “moments of resistance and subversion” through their narrative performances, we should not lose sight of the ways in which they remain “defined by the [very] structures [that] they resist” (Okely 1989, 10). As Okely suggests: “[W]hether in defiance or conformity [,] [t]he individual moment has its hidden structures, unique in combination yet always culturally and historically shaped” (Okely 1989, 10). While the Rajasthani female

sadhus' life stories are not simply transparent representations of experience, and by extension, reproductions of 'reality' (cf. Yamane 2000; Gluck and Patai 1991), they are individualized social constructions that illuminate a gendered "rhetoric of symbols" with which female ascetics imagine, create, and therefore experience their everyday worlds as both ascetics and women (Crapanzano 1980).

Sadhus' Textual Performances: Social Occasions for the Negotiation of Meaning

Like their song and (personal and popular) narrative performances, the Rajasthani female sadhus' textual performances are an essential part of their rhetoric of renunciation. By 'textual performances' I mean both the female sadhus' recitation (from either memory or the printed book) of written textual traditions, including—whether or not the printed text is present—the renunciator discourses and/or commentaries that emerge in conjunction with their recitations, and the oral and performance traditions which the female sadhus themselves associate with written/literate textual traditions. For many of these sadhus, the practice/tradition of devotional asceticism is created through daily performance of the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Bhagavad Gītā*. Most female sadhus equate textual traditions like the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* not simply with the printed text itself, but also with (a repertoire of) particular songs and stories (cf. Flueckiger 1991a). By means of their textual performances, the sadhus construct ascetic identity and legitimate their spiritual position as female ascetics in the predominantly male tradition of renunciation.

To take an example, Gangagiri recites "*Gītājī*,"⁸¹ the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *nirguṇī bhajan* texts such as the *Kabir Gutka* and *Gorak Gutka* (pamphlet-sized texts

⁸¹ This is how many of the female sadhus I worked with refer to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. My co-advisor, Dr. Laurie Patton has also shared with me via personal communication (March 2006) that the women Sanskritists with whom she worked in Maharashtra personalize the text by reverently referring to it as

containing devotional songs of the *sants*, including Gorakhnath) everyday, twice a day, either alone or in the company of others (i.e., sadhus and householders). And, like many female sadhus I worked with, Gangagiri also sings *bhajans* that are not found in the written version of the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa*, but that she explicitly identifies with this textual tradition. Likewise, Sharda Puri regularly recites verses (*ślokas*) from the *Śiva Purāṇas* as a means to experience God (*bhagvān*) in her life. As she told me, “God is right here, in the book (*kitāb*). If I want to talk to God, I read [*padhnā*] the text.”

For both Gangagiri and Sharda Puri, the performance of (oral and/or written) sacred texts represents an act of worship and devotion; they experience the power and presence of God through means of the text. At the same time, textual performance can be an interactive and enjoyable religious experience of union (*yog*) with God. On one occasion, I observed Sharda Puri reading aloud from the printed *Śiva Purāṇa* stories about the gods’ exploits. With the text nestled like a baby in her lap, Sharda Puri was laughing as she dramatically enacted different scenes of the stories for her devotees. Remarkably, Sharda Puri interacted not only with members of her audience, but also with the text: she addressed it as if God himself were sitting in her lap. Many of the female sadhus understand the text to be a living entity filled with knowledge, salvific power, and divine authority, and they address their texts much like they would address a person of high-status by appending the honorific “*jī*,” as in *Gītā-jī* (respected *Gītā*), to the text.

As these examples suggest, both Gangagiri’s and Sharda Puri’s ascetic authority directly pivots on their knowledge of performed and/or written versions of their sacred texts, particularly, but not exclusively, the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa*. Performing their texts in

“*Gītājī*.” This personalization additionally indicates that both the female sadhus I worked with and the women Sanskritists discussed by Patton conceptualize the text as a living being.

public contexts, then, provides, I suggest, a strategy by which the female sadhus create their spiritual authority because it allows them to create a relationship with textual traditions. More significantly, both Gangagiri and Sharda Puri are semi-literate sadhus, having received no more than a first-grade education. Not only for the literate sadhus, but also for the semi-literate and the non-literate female sadhus with whom I worked, establishing a relationship with the text is important to their exercise of spiritual authority. Thus, I explore the ways in which the Rajasthani female sadhus, particularly non-literate and semi-literate sadhus, performatively create relationships with their sacred texts. Moreover, I examine Rajasthani sadhus' reconfiguration of the *idea* of the text either as a song (*Tulsi Rāmāyaṇa*) or as a conversation (*Gītā*) by which their relationship with the *written textual traditions* of the *Tulsi Rāmāyaṇa* and/or the *Bhagavad Gītā* becomes rhetorically established. In doing so, I discuss the various performance strategies the female sadhus use to become "literate" in those textual traditions. Furthermore, I analyze the concepts, ideas, and values that these sadhus emphasize in their textual performances for the construction of devotional asceticism.

Regardless of their literacy level, the Rajasthani female sadhus understand that their *bhakti* to *bhagvān* empowers them to learn and understand their sacred texts. Apart from their *bhakti*, though, that non-literate and semi-literate sadhus are able to construct a relationship with textual traditions indexes the fact that texts themselves are transmitted orally and performatively, and their meaning(s) are socially worked out amongst sadhus in devotional contexts of fellowship (*satsang*). Laurie Patton's forthcoming work with women Sanskritists provides new evidence for the ways in which the written *Gītā* was not only a formative text in the creation of identity for at least seventy percent of the

literate women Sanskritists with whom she worked. More importantly, as Patton argues, the written text also became a **function** of literacy for these women and for their non-literate relatives. Patton's example of an educated female Sanskritist describing the textual practices of her non-literate grandmother well illustrates this phenomenon: "My grandmother was illiterate but she still recited *ślokas* and taught them to all of us."⁸²

There are several analytical tools with which to understand both the social processes and the rhetorical strategies by which Rajasthani female sadhus not only become textually competent, but also create their form of asceticism through textual performance. In her work, Joyce Flueckiger uses the idea of the "literacy event," developed by Shirley Brice Heath (1982), to discuss women's textual performances of "*Rāmāyāna*" in Chhattisgarh, India (1991). Like Flueckiger, I also apply Heath's notion to my own analyses of the sadhus' textual practices. According to Heath, the literacy event is "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (1982, 93). Heath, who collected her data amongst working-class, Black families in Trackton, uses the literacy event to determine the extent to which residents' understanding of written texts is orally constructed. Heath contends that for the Trackton community, written materials are always socially worked out and "reshaped and reworded into an oral mode" (1982, 100). Heath explains:

Among Trackton adults, reading was a social activity which did not focus on a single individual. *Solitary reading without oral explanation was viewed as unacceptable, strange, and indicative of a particular kind of failure*, which kept individuals from being social. Narratives, jokes, sidetracking talk, and negotiation of meaning of written texts kept social relations alive. When several members of the community jointly focused on and interpreted written materials, *authority did not rest in the materials themselves, but in the meanings which would be negotiated by the participants* (Heath 1982, 96; italics mine).

⁸² Personal Communication from Professor Patton dated 11/28/2004. See her forthcoming, *Grandmother Language: Sanskrit, Women, and Religious Identity in Maharashtra and Beyond*, and her essay in Pintchman (2007).

In addition to Heath's model of the oralization of literacy, I incorporate Jonathon Boyarin's (1993) theory that textual performances "of reading" offer occasions for the social construction of meaning amongst religious participants. More specifically, Boyarin discusses the creative role of texts in Jewish life and argues that Jewish scriptures like the Midrash not only provide an occasion for dialogue but that they are also "themselves records of discourse" (1993, 222). In these performative contexts, Boyarin is interested in how males of an informal study group who meet at a yeshiva on the Lower East Side of New York City construct interpretations of religious identity and negotiate meanings of Jewish "tradition" through an interaction between what he calls "voices around the texts" and "voices in the texts" (1993, 212-237). The voices of the students and teachers at the yeshiva constitute Boyarin's notion of "voices around the text"; the sayings of the rabbinic sages are the "voices in the texts." What Boyarin observed in these textual performances of Jewish scripture at the yeshiva similarly applies to what I saw at the *Gītā* and *Rāmāyaṇā* recitation *satsangs* of the Rajasthani female sadhus—that the voices in the text interface with the voices outside of the text in the construction of textual meaning and, more broadly, devotional asceticism. According to Boyarin, "Text and speech are of equal priority in Jewish study" (1993, 229). Jewish sacred texts are not perceived simply as "fixed" and "written" texts "to be 'merely repeated'" (229). Rather, as records and, hence, occasions for religious discourse and learning, they "not only are read as simultaneously oral and literate, but *arose* as that 'complex mixture'" (229, italics in original). Furthermore, the "voices around the text" are at the same time the "voices in the text;" the questioning and interrogation of scriptural sources are a means by which

participants, whether “inside” or “outside” of the texts, socially and orally reflect on and debate the interactions between text and everyday life (Boyarin 1993, 229).

The female sadhus’ performances of the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* are no coincidence in their performances of asceticism. Like the rabbinic literature, the written versions of these texts represent both records of and occasions for social discourse. In his examination of performances of the written *Rāmcarimānas* text in the north Indian city of Benares, Phillip Lutgendorf (1991) explains that, as a literary composition, the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇā* internally depicts the telling of the story of Ram through four dialogues, or frames, each of which occurs within carefully delineated contexts. Similarly, the *Gītā* symbolizes another kind of literary text that frames the communicative exchange between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as dialogical. Moreover, the primary oral discourse between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is contextualized as a story told to the blind king Dhritarashtra by Sanjaya, and Sanjaya’s own telling of the story is further framed as an oralized “memory” of what he heard from the great sage Vyasa, who, according to indigenous legends, dictated the story as Ganesha wrote it down (see Doniger 1991, 33).⁸³

In the practices of the Rajasthani sadhus, the broadly conceived textual traditions of the *Gītā* and the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa* are (re)conceptualized, (re)interpreted, and therefore, (re)inscribed through means of performance. As I discuss in Chapter Five, non-literate and semi-literate male and female sadhus rework both the written and the performed versions of these *bhakti* traditions into an oral mode through multiple performance strategies in order, as they say, to “write the text in the heart,” that is, to understand and, as a result, embody these textual traditions. Such textual embodiment readily allows the

⁸³ I refer to Barbara Stoler Miller’s Translation of the *Gītā* here.

female sadhus to create and express ascetic authority and identity. At the same time, they perform the *Gītā* and Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa* because these texts illustrate the values and concepts the female sadhus consider to be central to their experiences and practices of asceticism. The understandings not only of asceticism but also of the texts themselves that the sadhus create and articulate through textual performance are never “fixed” *ipso facto*. That is, textual meaning is “fluid,” subject to change and unstable, because of the various ways in which sadhus orally and performatively negotiate it (cf. Doniger 1991). Thus, textual performance has the creative potential to transform and empower sadhus; it also provides a strategy by which the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with construct their own tradition of devotional asceticism.

II B. Ethnographic Methods

Fieldwork Collaborators and Fieldwork Assistants: Conducting Research in Rajasthan

As I discussed in the Introduction, this dissertation is based on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the region of Mewar in southwest Rajasthan with twenty-one female sadhus. I worked mainly in the district of Udaipur, which consists of Udaipur city, towns such as Gogunda, Kelwara, Dilwaria, Nathdwara, and Sarsuniya, and a number of small villages (e.g., LoSingh, Shyalpura, Kavita, Marvas, Oden, and Gadvada). Besides Udaipur district, I also conducted research in the districts of Rajsamand and Jaisamand, which are approximately one-hundred kilometers and seventy-five kilometers, respectively, in different directions from Udaipur city. While I worked primarily with female sadhus, whom I met through contacts provided by my host families, I also worked with fifteen male sadhus for comparative purposes. In fact, my interactions with the female sadhus often involved meeting male sadhus, who were either

the guru or the guru-brother of the female sadhus. Out of the twenty-one female sadhus I worked with, eight reside in the same ashram/temple with their male guru/guru-brother(s).

The total number of ascetics I worked with is thirty-six male and female sadhus. Their ages, as I mentioned in the last chapter, vary between thirty and ninety-eight years; the average age of the women is sixty-seven and that of the men is seventy-five (see the Epilogue in which I discuss the aging demographics of the sadhus and why this path is still a viable option for female sadhus, in particular). Often, elderly ascetics themselves told me with great pride in their voices that “I am one-hundred and eight years old.” This is an auspicious number, usually the number of times sadhus repeat, either silently or aloud, the names of God during their *mantra* or *japa* (chanting) practices. But it additionally signifies a multivocal symbol on which ascetics strategically draw in order to articulate a shared perception of the agelessness and eternal/immortal nature of the soul (*ātma*). Be that as it may, following such an idiomatic response, either the sadhus themselves or their devotees/disciples revealed their “real” age.

To assist me in my research and data collection, I hired a field assistant, a twenty-four year-old (2004), Rajput male by the name of Manvendra Singh.⁸⁴ He was recommended to me in the summer of 2001,⁸⁵ three years before I began formal dissertation research, by a female colleague who was completing her dissertation at Syracuse University, and who had worked with Manvendra on her dissertation project for

⁸⁴ As Manvendra himself told me, his late father, Ashiya Ranchor Singh, who used to be the director of the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal, Udaipur’s folk art and cultural center, had worked with American scholar Lindsey Harlan, as well as with a number of French and English scholars. Manvendra has also worked with Lindsey Harlan.

⁸⁵ During this time I was a student on an Emory Abroad Hindi Language Program. In addition to studying intermediate Hindi, I also conducted preliminary research with the Rajasthani sadhus.

several years.⁸⁶ Manvendra accompanied me on most of my fieldwork journeys and participated in my meetings with the sadhus in various ways. In addition to helping me in some conversations with the sadhus, Manvendra assisted me in conducting informal interviews and in taping the sadhus' performances. My interactions with the sadhus always took place in Hindi. While I am trained to speak modern standard Hindi, which, as I learned, is the *lingua franca* of educated Indian intellectuals, not the everyday “*bolchāl*” Hindi one hears spoken in the streets and bazaars, and more importantly, in the home—many of my sadhu collaborators speak one of several Rajasthani dialects (e.g., Marwari and Mewari); some also speak Gujarati, and some (western) Hindi. The majority of the sadhus, though, speak a colorful medley of Hindi, Mewari, and Bhojpuri. Born in eastern Rajasthan, Manvendra speaks Rajasthani, the standard Hindi that I speak, and several other Indian languages.⁸⁷ Whenever the sadhus switched from speaking the Hindi that I could understand and converse in to speaking a dialect of Rajasthani, Manvendra helped to translate their Rajasthani into Hindi for me.

The Rajasthani sadhus enjoyed Manvendra's company, including his wit, and respected his devotional propensities (Manvendra had a penchant for storytelling and *bhajan* singing, which he displayed for the sadhus). The Rajput female sadhus approvingly commented on my decision to work with a Rajput.⁸⁸ According to these sadhus, Rajputs consider honesty to be equivalent to their own honor, thus implying in their statements that Manvendra would be a trustworthy field assistant. On our fieldwork

⁸⁶ Sally Steindorf introduced me to Manvendra Singh in the summer of 2001, the year in which she herself had been a student on the American Institute of Indian Language Hindi year-long program in Udaipur. I, too, became a student on the AIIS Hindi Language Program for the academic year 2002-2003.

⁸⁷ Manvendra was educated at prestigious English-speaking Catholic schools, and thus speaks fluent English. Our discussions with the sadhus, however, took place in Hindi.

⁸⁸ A few of the Brahmin female sadhus, too, approved of my use of a Rajput field assistant.

journeys, Manvendra occasionally brought his mother, Shiv Kunwar (which the female sadhus enjoyed). Her interest in joining us stemmed primarily from her desire to receive the blessings of the sadhus. Several of the female sadhus I worked with developed a close relationship with Shiv Kunwar, whom Gangagiri accepted as her disciple.⁸⁹ If we worked in the district of Udaipur, Manvendra and I usually travelled on his motorcycle. On many occasions, though, Manvendra rented a small private car for my research trips.⁹⁰ This turned out to be a very good idea for several reasons. We could bring others (e.g., Manvendra's mother or members of my host family) to meet the sadhus. Also, during our visits, many of the sadhus expressed the desire to visit temples or other sacred places both within and beyond Rajasthan. Having my own transportation, then, made it a lot easier for me not only to navigate my way around a variety of independent research sites, but also to interact with the Rajasthani sadhus in contexts outside of their own temples/ashrams. On many occasions, one or several female sadhus, along with a few devotees, packed into the car with me while Manvendra drove us to the homes of other devotees/disciples who were scattered throughout Rajasthan.

When I conducted formal dissertation research between 2004 and 2006, I interacted with each of my sadhu collaborators at least three times by conducting participant observation, during which I conversed with the sadhus and observed their daily routines and interactions with devotees, disciples, and visitors. Since the Rajasthani sadhus, like many other sadhus, meet people regularly, part of my research also entailed interacting with these participants and listening to their descriptions and interpretations of

⁸⁹ There was no formal ritual to mark this occasion. Gangagiri simply told Shiv Kunwar, "by your love you have become my disciple," a statement Shiv Kunwar interpreted as initiation into discipleship.

⁹⁰ When he was not assisting scholars with their research, Manvendra worked as an Indian tour guide for different Israeli groups. Thus, Manvendra was able to rent vehicles through his tour guide connections. Eventually, though, Manvendra purchased his own vehicle, which we used for daily fieldwork.

religious events and/or performances. This interaction always occurred in the ashrams and/or temples of the sadhus, and the sadhus, too, participated in my conversations with their devotees and disciples. Sometimes lively and energetic exchanges ensued between the sadhus and their disciples about the meaning of a song or a story. Likewise, when several sadhus were gathered together in an ashram/temple, often engaging and sometimes even heated debates about the path of renunciation emerged amongst them. These discussions enabled me to observe the various ways sadhus individually understand this concept. Overall, I spent anywhere between four to eight hours a day, five to six days a week, as a participant observer at the sadhus' ashrams, temples or hermitages, after which I returned home and composed my field notes late into the night, and sometimes early the next morning. In cases where I journeyed more than fifty kilometers outside of Udaipur district, I spent three to five days at the field site. I usually had my own small room to which I could retreat for rest or to gather my thoughts. While I did not bring along my computer to the ashrams in which I worked, I brought a notebook in which I could write notes for further reflection.

After several meetings it usually became evident to me who was interested in participating in my study and who was not. Though I ended up working with a total of thirty-six sadhus, the bedrock of my research is based on the observations, interactions, and interviews I conducted with thirteen female sadhus and five male sadhus. In her work with the female Muslim healer, Amma, Flueckiger well describes the issues involved for the fieldworker who must decide with whom s/he will conduct research: "While the experience of every individual is worthy of documentation and study, not all individuals are equally articulate, observant, interpretive, or dramatic in relating their own or others'

experiences” (Flueckiger 2006, 22). The eighteen male and female sadhus whose lives and practices I describe and analyze in the following pages were clearly interested in my project. As the most articulate and communicative of my collaborators, these sadhus played an active role in shaping my research schedule and field methods. They taught me about the diversity and meanings of their devotional traditions; they patiently and thoughtfully answered my questions about their lives and traditions; and, in the case of three female sadhus (Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Shiv Puri), they reviewed my translations of (some of their) performances and of (some of the) interviews I conducted with them. Not only that, several sadhus sponsored public feasting (*bhaṇḍāras*) on my behalf, to which they invited other sadhus from various ascetic traditions and lineages to participate. Such opportunities gave me access to a larger (local) community (*samāḥ*) of ascetics and sensitized me to social culture of renunciation in Udaipur, particularly in terms of the hierarchies amongst different orders and even amongst members of the same order. Thus, while I chose to work closely with eighteen male and female sadhus, it is also accurate to say that they, too, chose me and my project.

Renunciation, Relationships, and Reciprocity: Becoming an Ethnographer-Disciple

The process of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, as a number of anthropologists, ethnographers, and scholars of religion have discussed, is inextricably linked to developing personal relationships with our collaborators beyond simply the static and Cartesian researcher/informant binary (cf. Flueckiger 2006; Hausner and Khandelwal 2006; Maggi 2004; Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1993; Lawless 1998, 1993; see also Gluck and Patai 1991 for the ethical dilemmas and political implications of ethnographic research). Despite the dominant Brahmanical and academic representations

of asceticism as a path of separation and detachment, the Rajasthani sadhus I worked with create spiritual relationships with their disciples and devotees (cf. Gold, Khandelwal, and Hausner 2006; Khandelwal 2004; Vallely 2002; Gross 1991). And, while I was conducting my research with them, the female sadhus fostered a relationship with me, the ethnographer-fieldworker, and I fostered one with them. The relationship(s) I was able, and indeed, fortunate to have with the thirteen female sadhus with whom I worked closely developed on account of several related factors. First, the time I spent working with these sadhus on account of my extended visits enabled me to develop a relationship with them beyond the researcher/informant one. While I was not able to meet with all thirteen sadhus everyday (both the distances between their ashrams, and the sheer number of women with whom I established a personal relationship, would have made this task impossible), I visited five of thirteen female sadhus—those who lived in Udaipur city/district—four to five times a week, and interacted with each of the thirteen sadhus at least every three weeks.⁹¹

Second, and most importantly, I shared personal information about my own life with these sadhus. I told them about my divorce from my ex-husband, to whom I had been married for seven years (when I first met the sadhus in 2001 I was married; but when I saw them again in 2002, I was divorced); about the difficulties of living in India as a single Caucasian female; about being grabbed, pushed, and harassed by both young and old Indian men alike who were either walking on the street or riding on their motorcycles; about worrying about and missing my own family in the United States;

⁹¹ The exception to this pattern was when either a female sadhu or I was out of station. In my case, I travelled to Jaipur and Delhi to meet with my institutional advisor, in Jaipur, and with my funding research institute, AIIS, in Delhi, every eight to ten weeks. Also, occasionally AIIS sponsored academic conferences, which I would also attend.

about the rigors of a Ph.D. program and my fears about meeting the expectations of my program, and so forth. I had told the sadhus so many details about my personal and professional life because I wanted my research practices to be both ethical and reciprocal.

I am well aware of the social, financial, and cultural differences that contributed to the hierarchical and unequal power dynamics in my daily encounters with the female sadhus. One activity that marked the inherent power imbalance between me and the female sadhus was my writing of fieldnotes and research reports. My writing of this dissertation constitutes further evidence of the power I have in relation to the sadhus with whom I worked. As anthropologists have argued, “writing culture” is not simply an act of representation; it is, more significantly, an act of power (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1993). I exercise my power in writing Rajasthani female sadhu culture through my representation of their lives and interpretation of their rhetoric. I chose which performances to include in this dissertation and why. I also decided how to analyze them as well as the female sadhus who performed them for me and others.

Aside from my representational power, I also have financial power over the female sadhus. I, the researcher, was well funded by both a university and a research institute that enabled me to live relatively comfortably in Rajasthan. The female sadhus, however, lived in material poverty, surviving on the donations of food, cash, and clothing their devotees/disciples bequeathed them. Occasionally, the inherently unequal power differentials between me and the Rajasthani female sadhus reared its ugly head whenever the sadhus asked me about the cost of my plane ticket, of living and travelling in India, of being able to hire a field assistant, of living in America, of having received an education, let alone advanced degrees, and so forth. Masking my own discomfort, my standard

response to their legitimate questions was simply to say that “my institute,” “my department,” or “my government” paid for all the expenses of my research, travel, and board.⁹² But no matter how much I tried to soften or downplay the economic and social differences distinguishing me from the sadhus by invoking various educational institutions as shield, neither I nor the female sadhus ever pretended that these differences did not exist. However, by sharing my own experiences, that is, by practicing “reciprocal ethnography” I was able to narrow, if only slightly, the inequity gap between me and the sadhus (Lawless 1993).

But simply exchanging personal details was not enough for my encounters with the female sadhus to qualify as reciprocity, at least not in the sense I understand the term. So, in exchange for their knowledge and teachings, I gifted the sadhus with materials which they could use, such as money, cloth, fuel, materials for their worship (*pūjā*) altars (e.g., incense, clay lamps, wicks, oil), vegetables, grains, spices, tobacco, and, of course, fresh milk for our tea. The female sadhus never asked me to purchase these items; in fact, they never asked anything of me except that I keep coming back to them. But the sadhus did not have to ask me, or any of their devotees for that matter, for anything, as it was implicitly understood in our interactions that sadhus completely depend on others for their economic support. Some might object to my research practices with the Rajasthani sadhus, claiming that I bought my data; but I prefer to frame what I did in the field in terms of practicing sadhu-devotee reciprocity—the sadhus gave me the data I needed to

⁹² Not only the sadhus, but also my host families frequently asked me these types of questions. Needless to say, I found these sorts of questions unsettling because it was difficult to explain that while my financial situation *in India* was better than what many Indians experience, it is considered to be near poverty level in the United States. It seemed to me that the Indians I spoke with about issues of money—a topic any Westerner living in India can hardly avoid—assumed that many Westerners (especially those who could afford to come to India) are rich. When I explained to my host families and to the sadhus that many Americans live in dire poverty, they were shocked.

be able to conduct my research, write my dissertation, and attain my degree. And, because I could afford to do so, I gave them the material supplies they needed to survive. Even if my fieldwork practices never quite equalized the power differences between me and the female sadhus, they enabled me to create more ethical ethnographic encounters with my collaborators.

Thus, the reflexive act of reciprocity enabled me to develop and deepen my relationship(s) with the female sadhus, not just as ascetics, but also as persons. The female sadhus themselves marked our deepening friendship in various ways. From a linguistic standpoint, some of the sadhus went from addressing me as “*āp* [lit., “you,” second person plural/honorific]” to “*tū* [“you,” second person singular].” *Āp* is used by the speaker to show respect and/or deference to the authority/status of the individual being spoken to, and hence, establishes a formal interaction between speakers. *Tū*, however, is used to signify familiarity between speakers (e.g., between parents and children; husbands and wives;⁹³ mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, etc.) and/or the status/authority of the speaker over the individual being addressed. By addressing me with the informal *tū*, the sadhus implied a sense of familiarity between us and the informal and personal nature of our everyday conversational exchanges.

Aside from the linguistic indicators, almost all of the thirteen female sadhus used popular metaphors of “meeting” to mark our friendship. The sadhus frequently told me that “we have met [in this life] because we loved each other in a previous life.” On many occasions Gangagiri said to me, “[because] we promised to meet [again] in the last birth, we have met in this birth. Ours is a love that goes back lifetimes.” Tulsigiri was

⁹³ As I learned, Indian husbands often address their wives as *tū*, and (most) wives address their husbands as *āp*.

convinced that she and I had “sang *bhajans* together in our last birth,” and met again in the current birth in order to continue singing *bhajans*.

But there was a further way in which the female sadhus marked our intimate ties to one another. Many of them explicitly referred to me as their disciple (*cheli*). Indeed, once my relationship(s) with the female sadhus became more personal, and thus, reciprocal, my status changed from ethnographer-fieldworker to ethnographer-disciple. There was no official initiation ritual to mark this change in my status. The sadhus simply told me, “you belong to me now [*tū merī hai*],” or “you are my disciple.”⁹⁴ It goes without saying that to become the disciple of not one, but thirteen female sadhus is no easy task to accomplish for any person; it is a responsibility not to be taken lightly by the student and may have serious ramifications for those who underestimate, abuse, or exploit it. I often heard my host family members and my field assistant, Manvendra Singh, discuss the seriousness and intensity of the relationship between the teacher and the disciple. In these instances, someone would always invoke a very popular Indian idiom about gurus, which I shall paraphrase as follows: ‘If you upset God, God will forgive you. But if you upset the guru, even God can’t help you.’ Perhaps my family uttered these poignant phrases in order to caution me in my own pursuit of developing personal relationships with the sadhus. One elderly man, Dadaji, who was one of the first people to introduce me to female sadhus in Mewar, frankly said, “Look, these women will expect something from you. If you become their disciple you cannot refuse them. You will have to give them whatever they ask [for].”

⁹⁴ Shortly before I departed India to return to the United States in 2006, Gangagiri bequeathed me with three *rudrākṣa* beads, which she placed on a thin, red rope to form a necklace (*mālā*). She told me that she was giving me these beads in order that I remember her as my guru, and that I never forget I am her *cheli*.

Let me state here that I never told the sadhus that I considered myself as their disciple. To do so, in my view, would have been duplicitous, especially since all of the sadhus knew that I was working with other female sadhus. I knew that if I agreed to become one female sadhu's disciple, not only was word bound to get out in the local sadhu *samāj*, but that my initiation as a particular sadhu's *cheli* would also inevitably change my relationship with the other female sadhus. How initiation would change my relationship with other sadhus I was not exactly sure.⁹⁵ I only knew that it would, and thus decided not to pursue initiation from any sadhu. I negotiated my position with the sadhus by carefully sidestepping the initiation issue as best as I could.

For example, whenever a female sadhu asked me directly to let her initiate me as her disciple (and several of them did), I thanked them and simply said that I would wait for *bhagvān* to guide me in my decision. They accepted my answer.⁹⁶ No one ever forced the issue afterwards (though, sometimes, some of the sadhus' devotees would gently remind me of the offer). These instances aside, however, most of the Rajasthani female sadhus did not ask me to become their disciple; rather, they acted as if I already were their disciple. I neither accepted nor denied their statements; instead, I allowed the female sadhus to determine the nature and terms of our relationship. But they alone constructed

⁹⁵ I assumed, of course, that initiation from a particular female sadhu would certainly limit my interactions with other sadhus, as learning from other women would pose a breach between guru and disciple. Also, other women, I thought, might refuse to answer any of questions, or even refuse to allow me to visit them, telling me to go sit at the feet of my guru instead.

⁹⁶ One female sadhu I had been working with while living in Jaipur on the AIIS Hindi language program wanted me to become a formal member of her "blood family [*khun kā rīstā*]" by marrying her younger brother. This female sadhu was elder to me only by a decade. Trying to mask my shock at her question, I asked this sadhu why she wanted me to marry her brother. Her response was that not only did she want to create a "world family," but also felt that I would make a great sister-in-law, and thus, acceptable companion for domestic and international.

my identity as their “*pardesi chelī* [foreign disciple],”⁹⁷ and publicly promoted this identity to others. While, initially, I had serious concerns that being an “informal” disciple of the female sadhus would create obstacles in my being able to conduct research (e.g., semi-structured or structured interviews, which I, in fact, did, and about which I say more below) that required a formality which belies the intimacy shared between sadhu and *chelī*, I learned that the sadhus actually shared more about their lives and traditions with me than they probably would have had they perceived me only as an ethnographer.

The sadhus emphasized the disciple aspect of my identity, yet they never lost sight of the ethnographer side of my identity, either. The sadhus seemed to understand what feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod suggests about the construction of identity in the ethnographic encounter—that identities are situated in particular historical, social, political, and ethnographic contexts (Abu-Lughod 1993). As the contexts of our encounters with collaborators shift, our identities, too, will change and transform. Despite this ever-present fact of my researcher identity (after all, I was in India to collect and document their traditions), it did not seem to matter to the sadhus with whom I established personal relationships that I was a researcher or that I was meeting with other (male and female) sadhus in and beyond Rajasthan. What mattered instead was that I was *their* disciple; that I was sincere in desire to learn, understand, and share their teachings and practices others “in [my] country,” and most importantly, that I came back to the sadhus again and again.

⁹⁷ After referring to me as their *pardesi chelī*, sadhus like Tulsigiri would say, “for *bhagvān*, there’s no *desi* [national] or *pardesi* [foreign], only the *ātma*.”

***Renouncing Assumptions, Embodying Knowledge:
The Fieldwork Practices of an Ethnographer-Disciple***

Even as an informal disciple, the female sadhus had certain expectations of me. One of those expectations was that I would behave in a manner that would not bring disrepute on me or my host families.⁹⁸ That is, as a single woman, I was expected to abstain from having sexual relationships with men, Indian or foreign. Because I had divulged the details of my personal life, and therefore, my single *and* celibate status, there was the implicit expectation in my interactions with the sadhus that I would remain celibate throughout the research process. While no sadhu ever explicitly declared such expectations, the statements some of them made to me indicated so. For instance, hearing the story of my divorce and, thereafter, a failed relationship, Mayanath gently said, “Anita, stay here [in India]. I’ll take care of you. You can live here and concentrate [*dhyān lagānā*] on your studies [*padhāī*]. You can become a sadhu.”⁹⁹ Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I received many offers from female sadhus, including those with whom I temporarily worked in east Rajasthan,¹⁰⁰ to live in their ashrams and take up the life of a sadhu.

There was one event, however, that made quite clear to me where the female sadhus stood on the issue of my sexual practices. In July 2003, I went to visit Tulsigiri who, at the time, had been residing with her guru in Udaipur city, near Dudh Talai. When I approached Tulsigiri she appeared extremely upset. “How could you, Anita?” she said.

⁹⁸ Not only the female sadhus, but also the host families with whom I lived held similar expectations about my remaining single and celibate throughout my research activities.

⁹⁹ It was not entirely clear to me if Mayanath meant that, in her view, I would become a sadhu, or that I could live like one. Either way, the difference is not a significant one, because many sadhu and householder collaborators assumed that in living like a sadhu I would become one.

¹⁰⁰ While I was a student on the academic year-long AIIS Hindi Language Program in Jaipur, Rajasthan, I worked with three female sadhus of the Ananda Marg sect, a transnational organization. In exchange for the sadhus’ help and hospitality, I volunteered on weekends at the ashram’s orphanage, which was adjoined to the main center, teaching girls between the ages of three and eighteen the English language.

“How could I what?,” I asked, growing concerned with the tenor of Tulsigiri’s voice.

“We know that you like to work with sadhus but did you have to marry one?” I thought I had heard Tulsigiri incorrectly, so I quickly called Dadaji over to the scene. Once their conversation ensued, I put the pieces together: approximately a week back there had been a young foreign woman from Austria who had married an Indian sadhu at the Mahakaleshwar Temple, the one behind which Gangagiri and Devi Nath separately reside (see the newspaper clipping of this incident, which is titled, “Foreign Woman Falls for Indian Baba,” below).

Tulsigiri is non-literate; so when I asked how she had heard about the incident, she told me that Gangagiri, who told her the story just two days before, had heard from some devotees that “that foreign girl who comes to you everyday has married a sadhu right here at Mahakaleshwar.” The news spread amongst the sadhus like wildfire. In my panic-stricken state, and with Dadaji’s assistance (he laughed the whole time, but this was no laughing matter to me), I explained to Tulsigiri that the woman in the newspaper was not me. She was from Austria and I was from America (to which Tulsigiri innocently replied, “What’s the difference?”); that woman’s name was Sandra, and my name is Anita. Tulsigiri quickly understood that there had been a grave misunderstanding, and then said, “I knew our Anita wouldn’t do that. I told [the others] it wasn’t you [in the newspaper]. But who listens to Tulsigiri?” I spent the next few weeks explaining to every sadhu I visited that I was not the woman in the newspaper.¹⁰¹ When I got around to reading about this incident in the newspaper—Dadaji’s neighbor, who was convinced that

¹⁰¹ Not all the sadhus, of course, had heard about the event. But, listening to my rendition of the tale, many of them were quite confident that a “girl with good *sanskārs* [traits] like me” would not do such a thing anyway. Most of the sadhus advised me not to worry about what had happened and to continue with my research.

the woman in the newspaper was me, shared his copy—and looked at a picture of Sandra along with her new husband, Rakesh Baba, I was instantly struck by the physical similarities between us. The whole experience taught me that my behavior *as an unmarried woman* in the local community affects the sadhus' perceptions of me, which, in turn, affects not only my being able to conduct research with them, but also the kind of relationships I am able to have with them, and thus, the kind of data I receive.

Austrian Woman Weds Indian Sadhu in Udaipur. Article appeared in the Rajasthan Patrika.

राजस्थान पत्रिका उदयपुर, मंगलवार, 8 जुलाई, 2003

उदयपुर, 7 जुलाई।

दो बच्चों और पत्नी को छोड़ कर सन्यास ले चुका उदयपुर का रकेश अहीर उर्फ शंकर बाबा को आदिट्ट्या की करीब तीस वर्षीय सान्द्रा को भा गया। दोनों ने सोमवार को यहां महाकालेश्वर मंदिर में भगवान को साक्षी मानकर विवाह कर लिया। सांद्रा रकेश को गौडगिफ्ट मानती है।

पेशे से प्राइवेट स्कूल में फिलोसोफी विषय की अध्यापिका बताने वाली सान्द्रा गत वर्ष भारत भ्रमण पर निकली और गत मार्च में वह पुष्कर [अजमेर] पहुंची। तेईस मार्च को उसका 31वां जन्मदिन था। कोई परिवार का सदस्य, साथी-मित्र नहीं होने के कारण उसने अकेले ही अपना जन्मदिन मनाया। वह ऐसे मौके पर अपने आपको काफी अकेला महसूस कर रही थी।

सान्द्रा बताती है कि उस रात उसने जैसे जैसे थिराई और अगली सुबह उठने के बाद उसने सबसे पहले बाईं घुंघुं कर रकेश अहीर को देखा, जो पहली नजर में उसे भा गया। सान्द्रा ने बताया कि पुष्कर में दोस्ती होने के बाद उन दोनों ने भारत भ्रमण किया। वे नेपाल भी गए। वहां से करीब दो माह पूर्व वे उदयपुर पहुंचे। वह कहती है कि उसने कभी शादी के बारे में नहीं सोचा था दोस्त तो उसके कई हैं। लेकिन रकेश को पाकर वह उसे अपनाने से स्वयं को रोक नहीं पाई। रकेश को वह गौडगिफ्ट मानती है। वह उसे अपने आदिट्ट्या ले जाना चाहती है। लेकिन विना पासपोर्ट के रकेश को अपने साथ ले जा पाना संभव नहीं है।

इसके लिए वह रकेश को साथ लेकर विभिन्न सरकारी केंद्रों/संस्थानों का भ्रमण लगा रही है। पासपोर्ट बनवाने के लिए वह विश्व भ्रमण पर निकली हुई है। सान्द्रा और रकेश अहीर ने सोमवार दोपहर महाकालेश्वर मंदिर में भगवान को साक्षी मानकर एक दूसरे के गले में माला पहनाई और वे विवाह बंधन में बंध गए। कभी देहलीगेट पर ताम्र पल्लवों और लंगडाने मोटों की माल लगाने वाला करीब चालीस वर्षीय रकेश अहीर अब अपने आपको को भोले बाबा का भक्त बताता है। उसके गुरु ने ही उसे शंकर गिरी बाबा नाम दिया है।

वह कहता है कि दो वर्ष पूर्व उसने घर-परिवार त्याग कर सन्यासी जीवन अपना लिया था। लेकिन पुष्कर में सान्द्रा से मुलाकात के बाद वह भी उसी का होकर रह गया। वह सान्द्रा के साथ आदिट्ट्या जाना चाहता है। लेकिन स्थानीय प्रशासन उसके पासपोर्ट में बाधक बना हुआ है।

उपर, स्थानीय पुलिस प्रशासन का कहना है कि भूपालपुर स्थित कुष्णपुर निवासी रकेश अहीर शादीशुदा होकर दो बच्चों का पिता है। उसके खिलाफ शहर के भूपालपुर थाने में विभिन्न प्रकृति के आपराधिक प्रकरण दर्ज रहे हैं। इनमें जानलेवा हमला, अश्लील रूप से हथियार रखने, मार्गपीट जैसे मामले दर्ज हैं। इसके अलावा उदासीन पत्नी ने भी दहेज प्रतर्द्धना का एक मामला दर्ज करवाया था।

हालांकि इन मामलों का अदालत से निस्तारण हो चुका है। पासपोर्ट प्रक्रिया पूरी होने में विलम्ब के बारे में पुलिस प्रशासन का कहना है कि रकेश न्यायालय में निस्तारित मामलों की प्रतियां उपलब्ध करा दे तो उनकी तरफ से कोई देरी नहीं है। अदालती निर्णयों की प्रती तो उसे ही उपलब्ध करानी होगी। [कास]

उदयपुर के महाकालेश्वर मंदिर में सोमवार को भगवान को साक्षी मानकर एक दूसरे की माला पहना कर विवाह बंधन में बंधे सान्द्रा व रकेश।

प्रक्रिया को लेकर सान्द्रा ने स्थानीय प्रशासन के प्रति आक्रोश जाहिर किया। स्वयं को करीब पचास करोड़ रुपए की मालकिन मानना है, जिसे किराए दे रख और उसके

मैं स्कूल में उसका दो लाख रुपए मासिक वेतन है, जिसमें से कटकटा कर उसे एक लाख रुपए मिल जाते हैं। बड़ा आलिशान मकान है, जिसे किराए दे रख और उसके

कहती है कि आदिट्ट्या

पत्रिका फोटो



Another expectation that the female sadhus repeatedly verbalized in our interactions was that I learn “from my heart,” that is, internalize their devotional traditions. Needless to say, participant observation with the sadhus went beyond simply observing their devotional performances and asking them questions about their everyday lives and practices. In *satsang*, the female sadhus repeatedly insisted that I sing *bhajans* or recite chapters of the *Tulsi Rāmāyaṇā* or *Bhagavad Gītā* with them. In doing so, the sadhus themselves implied that “real ethnographer-disciples,” like “real sadhus,” sing to

bhagvān. So, after I had transcribed a song, I often memorized its lyrics and the melody with which the sadhus had performed it. Once I learned a song well enough, I was not only singing it in *satsang* with the sadhus (which they considered an impressive display of my own knowledge), but also on my own. This practice of singing some of the same songs the sadhus sang enabled me to create my own status, and therefore, authority amongst the sadhus with whom I worked. Before I developed my own modest repertoire of *bhajans*, the female sadhus frequently characterized me as “*bholī-bhālī*,” that is as innocent and, more precisely, naïve about devotional practice. Once, early on in the year I conducted formal dissertation fieldwork, Tulsigiri had asked me to sing a *bhajan*, to which Gangagiri responded, “What can she sing? She has no knowledge of *bhajans*. What does she know?” Gangagiri’s comment pierced my paper-thin ego like a razor sharp blade. I never forgot it. But the experience taught me that my role as an ethnographer-disciple pivoted on my ability to perform both with and for the sadhus. Once I learned four or five songs I had recorded from the sadhus, a skill I developed on account of the help of my Brahmin host family, I began to sing for the sadhus. By doing so, the sadhus, including Gangagiri, started to refer to me as “a knower.” My own singing of songs, in fact, prompted the female sadhus to sing and comment on their *bhajans*.

At the same time, this practice allowed me to experience a different type of relationship to the data I was collecting than I would have had I only recorded and translated them. That is, I began to embody the sadhus’ performative traditions as verbal forms of knowledge and power that affected my own understanding of devotion, and by extension, of asceticism. To this extent, I experienced their songs, stories, and sacred texts in the ways that the female sadhus themselves had described: as living entities

whose knowledge and power become embedded in the fiber of the singer's being with every single performance, transforming her from within. Furthermore, I began to understand the nature and complexity of the female sadhus' relationships to their devotional traditions, and that their experiences of asceticism were directly tied to the knowledge that was created through means of their devotional performances of song, story, and sacred text.

Yet, to understand the asceticism of the female sadhus I had to do more than learn to sing their *bhajans* and recite their texts "from my heart"; I also had to learn *how* to listen carefully for the concepts, categories, and frameworks through which they experienced their lives as female ascetics. Lawless rightly contends that "learning how to be a good scholar means learning how to listen" (Lawless 1993). This insight has clearly been the case for my own development as a scholar and researcher in India. Learning how to conduct fieldwork with both male and female Rajasthani sadhus who have, at least ideologically speaking, "died to the world" has been a process of discovering, and therefore, renouncing my own presuppositions about asceticism.

As I discussed earlier, when I began conducting preliminary research, I told my collaborators, renunciants and lay alike, that I came to learn the Hindi language and Hindu religious practices, though I made explicit that I was especially interested in learning *sadhu-dharma*, or the religious practices of renunciants. This presentation of my research motivations, however, was much too broad a category, and the ways the female sadhus answered this question revealed, on the one hand, my own "context-free" presuppositions about renunciation and, yet, on the other, the "context-sensitivity" of conceptual categories, such as renunciation, in the field. Hearing my questions about

sadhu-dharma, the female sadhus offered the generic response: “Speak the truth; do good work; and serve others with love.” Whereas I had interpreted *sadhu-dharma* to denote a particular set of attitudes, behaviors, and practices that create and constitute the phenomenon of renunciation, such as detachment, isolation, wandering, and meditation, the female sadhus’ responses indicated another interpretation of the term. For these sadhus, *sadhu-dharma* implied, in part, that their duty as renunciants was to teach others about the path of (righteous) action, devotion, and knowledge through means of their devotional practices. With my own presuppositions of renunciation in mind, I pressed the sadhus to discuss values that were more central to the Brahmanical model of asceticism than to their own practice of asceticism. Many of them replied with something like, “Look, I am uneducated (*anpad*). You should go to [such and such sadhu] who can tell you what you want to know [about renunciation]. I am only first-class [or first grade] passed. What can a first-class passed person know?”

But the female sadhus *do* know renunciation, not as an abstract construct or androcentric model; but rather as a situated “lived practice” experienced through their songs, stories, and sacred texts (Narayanan 2003; Smith 1963). W.C. Smith’s statement that “The participant is concerned with God; the observer [is] concerned with ‘religion,’” or, in this context, “renunciation,” was certainly the case with the Rajasthani female sadhus and with me, the ethnographer-disciple (Smith 1963, 131). Female sadhus concern themselves with *bhagvān*; they understand and experience their asceticism as *bhakti* to *bhagvān*, and vice versa. This form of asceticism is created, enacted, and legitimated through their renunciant devotional performances.

Thus, when I *heard* the significance with which the female sadhus regard their devotional ascetic practices, I understood that these situated *bhakti* practices function as strategies through which they conceptualize and construct devotional asceticism. Thus, I not only recorded their performances, but also began actively soliciting the female sadhus' devotional performances. Moreover, in lieu of asking questions like, "what is renunciation?," or "what does renunciation mean to you?," I asked, "why does Mira Bai leave her palace and comforts to sing with sadhus?" "Is Mira's singing of *bhajans* renunciation?" or "How does the Prostitute 'cross over' the ocean of existence, and what does the ocean of existence mean to you?," That is, I drew on the content of the songs, stories, and sacred texts that the sadhus performed to ask more specific questions about their understandings of renunciation. The sadhus performed these traditions not only to communicate religious values to their devotees, but also the values with which they identity as ascetics. Furthermore, I framed my meetings with the female sadhus by telling them that "I have come to hear your *bhajans*. Will you sing for me today?" Reframing my project and my questions produced an observable difference in the female sadhus' perception of me and my research project, and this change, in turn, shaped the kinds of data I received. Observing my desire to learn about what they considered to be significant for their own way of life—whether it was memorizing the lines of a *bhajan* or learning how to make a proper *chappāttī*, or unleavened bread—the female sadhus shared their teachings and traditions. Santosh Puri told me, "I have so many *bhajans* to sing. I can fill all your tapes with my *bhajans*." And my own singing of their *bhajans* created me, as I said earlier, as a "knower" within this community of female sadhus.

Besides my fieldwork practices of participant observation and the recording and transcribing of the sadhus' devotional performances, I conducted semi-structured, informal interviews with the principal thirteen female sadhus and five male sadhus based on a questionnaire I constructed after many months of fieldwork. The questions were a means to understand particular categories of religious experience and practice I heard the sadhus discuss in their renunciant discourses. More specifically, I asked the sadhus to speak about their understanding of liberation (*mokṣ*; *mukti*), devotion, (*bhakti*), action (*karm*), and knowledge (*jnān*). Likewise, I asked the sadhus to describe their individual perceptions of what it means to "meet God" through devotional singing, storytelling, and recitation. I further asked the female sadhus, in particular, to discuss their own views of the social changes they noticed in their local community of ascetics and the ways these changes were affecting their own lives as female ascetics. The latter types of questions helped me to understand the normative cultural perceptions of gender that are experienced by and prescribed for Indian women and the ways these understandings are created, subverted, or reconfigured by the sadhus through their performances.

Finally, in the last phase of my fieldwork, I shifted from recording and transcribing performances to discussing them with the female sadhus. I wanted to know the ways in which individual female sadhus themselves understand and articulate the meanings of their devotional practices both within and outside of performance contexts. I asked the sadhus to comment on the voices, images, and symbols in their performed texts. This method indexes the theory of oral literary criticism as articulated by folklore expert Alan Dundes (1966). Dundes explains the significance of the fieldwork practice of oral literary criticism for folklore studies as follows.

The current interest in the collection of context...has partially obscured the equally necessary and important task of collecting the meaning(s) of folklore. One must distinguish between use and meaning. The collection of context and preferably a number of different contexts for the same item of folklore is certainly helpful in ascertaining the meaning or meanings of an item of folklore. But it cannot be assumed the collection of context per se automatically ensures the collection of meaning...For this reason, *folklorists must actively seek to elicit the meaning of folklore from the folk* (Dundes 1966, 506-507, italics in original; quoted from Narayan, 1995, 244).

Similarly, Kirin Narayan (2003) points out that "...scholars generally have interpreted song texts as representing the subjectivity and emotions of a generic...woman in a particular regional context. Songs thus become textual *objects* on which general theoretical statements about women can be based rather than the lived *practices* of reflective subjects" (Narayan 2003, 24). Several of the female sadhus expressed their individual agency not only by performing their songs, stories, and sacred texts, but also by interpreting the meaning of these traditions, which differed from some of the audience's interpretations. In doing so, the female sadhus created and established themselves as religious experts. The elicitation and integration of the female sadhus' commentaries into my fieldwork practices, thus, assisted me in translating their performances. After I had translated a performance, I often returned to meet the sadhus whose performances I had recorded earlier. I explained my translation of the text and asked the sadhus to review and comment on my translations. These interactions stimulated many discussions on the semantic ranges of the words and the context-specificity of the ideas and concepts illustrated in the texts.

More significantly, as with the act of sharing the details of my personal experiences and gifting them with needed material supplies, the practice of oral literary criticism created a sense of reciprocity between the female sadhus and me. By bringing my transcriptions of their songs and stories and my taped recordings of their

performances back to the Rajasthani female sadhus for further scrutiny and critique, I, the ethnographer-disciple, held myself accountable to them as well as to their devotional traditions (Abu-Lughod 1993; Lawless 1993). The renunciant performances that appear in the next four chapters, thus, arose from multiple fieldwork methods as well as from the relationships of reciprocity constituted via such practices with the female sadhus. Let us now turn to the practices through which the sadhus perform devotional asceticism.



Left to right: Sadhus Shiv Puri and Mayanath. Photo by Antoinette DeNapoli.

I started singing *bhajans* when I was jumping and playing as a child.

Gangagiri Maharaj

CHAPTER THREE

“By the Sweetness of the Tongue”: Female Agency and the Performance of Asceticism through Personal Narrative

Introduction

One March afternoon in 2005 while sitting in the courtyard of her small thatched-leaf hermitage, Gangagiri Maharaj described to me an occasion in which she got on a government bus, and there was no seat available. According to her account, weary from a day’s traveling in the *Kumbh Melā* festival,¹⁰² and barely enduring the weight of a heavy bag filled with cloth and other items tucked under one arm, Gangagiri discovered a way to change her difficult situation. She explained:

I couldn’t keep standing like that; I had to sit [down]...Nearby sat two policemen. Slowly, I approached them and said, “You may wear the uniform [*vardī*] of the government, but I wear the uniform of God. Keep this in mind.” One of those poor fellows got up and said, “*Dattā*’ [a term of endearment for Indian sadhus], please, you sit.” I couldn’t just say, “Hey, you stand up and I’ll sit.”...Like this, I have completed my life, with the sweetness of my tongue.

This brief vignette narrates a sadhu’s status, power, and authority, as carried by the ochre-colored sadhu garb, *bhagvā*. Whether the story reflects what Gangagiri actually said to the policemen or what she wished she had said to them is not relevant to this examination. True or false, it is an indication of her self-representation (cf. Lawless 1988,

¹⁰² The *Kumbh Melā* is India’s most famous, month-long ceremonial gathering in which male and female sadhus from different Hindu sectarian traditions come from all over the country to participate in this festival. It occurs every twelve years in different sacred sites of India. Householder disciples of the sadhus also participate in the festivities, and many householders set up vending and food sites for the sadhus.

69). What I find significant in this narrative construction of her life is Gangagiri's use of culture-specific symbols, such as the ochre cloth, to get what she wants: a seat on an overcrowded bus. Even her decision to approach the two policemen is motivated by an unstated understanding of the religious hierarchy Gangagiri perceives between sadhus and police officers. In her comparison of the two "uniforms" Gangagiri establishes her own authority as God's representative vis-à-vis that of the policemen, who, she implies, represent a lesser, secular power—the government. In this way, her story expresses a cultural value that Gangagiri assumes sadhus, policemen, and others in Indian society share.

If, as several scholars have suggested (Lawless 1988; Etter-Lewis 1991; Abu-Lughod 1993; Yamane 2000; Flueckiger 2006; and Leela Prasad 2007), oral narratives reflect and constitute "a shared understanding of the world" (Lawless, 67; cf. Gloria Goodwin Raheja 2003) and represent "a primary linguistic vehicle" by which means individuals make their everyday religious, social, and cultural worlds meaningful (Yamane, 183), then it behooves us to ask what themes the female sadhus' personal narratives illuminate in the expression and interpretation of their own experiences. My inquiry stems from my observation that female sadhus, by virtue of their public religious position as renunciators, occupy an ambiguous social status. Meena Khandelwal concurs that in Indian society renunciation and womanhood signify mutually exclusive social categories. Consequently, women who pursue renunciation as an alternative to domesticity, regardless of their age, caste, and/or class status, are perceived as "anomalies"; and while, as Khandelwal explains, these women "are respected by ordinary and even conservative people as sources of both spiritual power and everyday morality,"

female sadhus are more often suspected than are male sadhus for their transgression of gender norms (6). In this respect, Khandelwal rightly argues that female sadhus “transgress social norms...but construct themselves as exceptions” (21). This chapter explores the ways in which performing personal narratives enables the female sadhus I worked with to represent themselves not just as exceptions to gender norms, but also as a class of sadhus who experience agency in a gendered way.

Although few religious and anthropological studies on renunciation in South Asia have demonstrated the complexities of male and female sadhus’ lives in the discussion of their personal experience narratives (Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold 2006; Gross 1992; Miller and Wertz 1976), these studies do not consider the life story to be what Elaine Lawless calls an “alternative narrative strateg[y]” in individual’s self-representations (1988, 69). Similarly, rarely do scholars of religion ask how sadhus construct their life narratives in a gendered way and how such constructions communicate gendered “narrative strategies” (Lawless 1988, 66-67; cf. Prasad 2004, 170) in the negotiation of status, power, and authority in Indian society.

This chapter has two immediate foci: to examine the themes that the Rajasthani female sadhus select in the performance of their personal narratives and to analyze the meanings they attribute to those themes in the interpretation of their lives as sadhus. Embedded in the Rajasthani female sadhus’ personal narratives are three shared themes: duty (*kartavya*), destiny (*bhāgya*), and devotion (*bhakti*). Through performance of these themes the female sadhus communicate a gendered discourse on female agency in the tradition of renunciation. At the same time, the sadhus also promote a perception of difference; neutralize widespread societal views of their ascetic lives as transgressive;

and validate their own ascetic identity. While they emphasize duty, destiny, and devotion in their narrative performances in order to resist the notion of personal agency in their becoming sadhus (i.e., to deny they have *chosen* their path of asceticism), as narrative strategies these themes enable the female sadhus to exert agency by constructing themselves in a manner that creates a rich space of possibilities for negotiating their lives within the bounds of Hindu tradition. Through analysis of these interrelated themes we understand some of the ways in which the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with imagine and articulate both their authority and agency in an institution in which they are clearly minorities.¹⁰³

I. “*Doing God’s Work*”: Duty (*kartavya*)

In the personal narratives of the female sadhus, the theme of duty, or *kartavya*, appears consistently and provides a conceptual frame out of which the sadhus weaved the content and structure of their life stories. Almost all of the female sadhus understand *kartavya* to mean their duty and responsibility to God, *bhagvān*, and/or the Goddess, *devī*, with whom they have developed an intensely personal relationship or “connection [yog; *sambandh*] “since their childhood. This intimate connection with the divine is not only the most significant relationship in their life; it also singularly determines how the female sadhus live as ascetics.

For instance, Shiv Puri carefully described to me her intimate relationship with God and the Goddess and their direct influence over her life, from the everyday business decisions she makes about running her ashram to the spiritual decisions she makes about

¹⁰³ As I said in the last chapter in my review of the literature on asceticism, according to citations of census data by both Gross (1992) and Khandelwal (2004), female Hindu sadhus comprise approximately 10-15% of the ascetic population in the Indian subcontinent.

her religious practices. A sadhu in her late fifties who heads a sprawling ashram that is nestled between two mountains in a small town approximately fifty-six miles north of Udaipur city, the former capital of Mewar, I met Shiv Puri at her ashram through another female sadhu (Mayanath) in the summer of 2001. For six months out of the year, Shiv Puri stays at her ashram and temple, and the rest of the time she travels to Bombay, visiting devotees and collecting donations for her temple. Her son, Shankar, his wife, and their three young children also reside at the temple full-time. Shiv Puri's relationship with Shankar and his family is, as she told me, as that of a guru and her disciples, implying it is not one of mother/son. As the resident *pujārī* and *pujārīnī*, Shankar and his wife perform the worship rituals to the different deities in the temple, and manage the temple grounds in Shiv Puri's absence. At the time that I met Shiv Puri again in the summer of 2005, right before the monsoon season, both she and Shankar were overseeing the construction of another, larger ashram (*dharmaśāla*) on her temple property, the purpose of which was to accommodate more guests at the site (Shiv Puri told me she would build me my own room in order that I could live and work there at the ashram). I recorded Shiv Puri's personal narrative on this visit back to her ashram. During that conversation on her life, and while she sat with me and my fieldwork assistant Manvendra Singh in the main room of her ashram, Shiv Puri, holding her youngest "disciple," or granddaughter, in her lap, discussed her relationship with God and the Goddess as one of duty. On his breaks from construction work, Shankar occasionally stopped by and listened to his mother's/guru's telling of her life story.

A [Antoinette]: There's a lot going on here [at the ashram]. You're very busy now-a-days, right?.

SP [Shiv Puri]: How?

A: In maintaining the ashram.

SP: Actually, it's like this: Bholenāth [a name for God in the form of Shiva] and Dūrgā Maī [a name for the Goddess] talk to me through my soul [*ātma*]. Now, when God [*bhagvān*] tells me, "You have to do this" and "it's imperative that you do this," to me this means that I have to do whatever God tells me to do.

MS [Manvendra Singh]: Yes, o.k.

SP: Before I was a sadhu, I lived as a householder. I used to see so many *sants* and sadhus that I thought [that] I am seeing God [in seeing their form]. When I became a sadhu, I also traveled a lot in this whole India; I traveled a lot with sadhus, but I didn't see God anymore [in the form of the sadhus].

MS: You yourself have seen what is [a real sadhu] and what isn't [a real sadhu].

SP: Yes! I neither have the interest [*rūcī*] to live amongst other sadhus, nor do I have any interest to live as a householder. God has directly [*sīdhā*] released [*chutkāra denā*] me from this ocean of existence [*sāgar se*] and made me happier [*sukhāntar karnā*] [because of it]. So, I have to do his work.

A: [speaking to the eldest grandchild of Shiv Puri]: What happened? [For some time, Shiv Puri talks with her grandson, who cut open the skin on his arm while playing outside, and seeks to be comforted by her, whom he addresses as *mātā*.]

SP: [returning to our conversation] Therefore, my only interest is to do God's work, and [God] will do the rest.¹⁰⁴

This passage implicitly illustrates the notion of *kartavya* as a determinative force in Shiv Puri's life through use of the compulsory form of the Hindi verb "*karnā*," meaning "to have to do" (*karnā hai*). As a noun, *kartavya* means not only "duty" but also "what is to be done," and connotes the idea of responsibility and obligation.¹⁰⁵ Shiv Puri herself alludes to *kartavya* as her duty and obligation in her explanation at four different points in her story in the context of her statement, "I have to do God's work." This conversation on her life emerged from my observation about the construction work being done at her ashram. Shiv Puri responds to my statement by emphasizing that the work at the temple is not of her doing, but rather it is what Bholenāth and the Durgā Maī order

¹⁰⁴ The Hindi for the English translation is: "*isliye mere ko rūcī hai jo bhagvān kā kām bākī voh karnā.*"

¹⁰⁵ My translation of *kartavya* is based on the meanings that the female sadhus I worked with emphasized. A standard definition of the term can also be found in R.S. McGregor, *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

her to do as their devotee. By framing her response in this way, Shiv Puri suggests the lack of personal agency on her part in determining the course of her renunciant life, carefully constructing her religious and/or social actions as an obligatory part of what is for her a mutually dependent (*āpas men; paraspar*) relationship with both God and the Goddess.¹⁰⁶ In this framework, every action, every decision of hers is determined and guided by what God (*bhagvān* or *bholenāth*) tells her to do; and as she makes explicit in this passage, Shiv Puri must obey God's word: it is her duty as God's devotee (*bhakt*).

Although she does not use the word *kartavya* in this conversation, Shiv Puri has used it in many of our other conversations about her life and work. Like Shiv Puri, most of the women sadhus refer directly to *kartavya* in descriptions of themselves as the “beggars” (*bhikārī*) or “peons” (*caparāsī*) of God, and of their life work, as “a duty to serve.” Incorporating both valences of the term, Tulsigiri tells me while we sit in the ashram of her *guru*, whom she is visiting for the upcoming religious holiday of *Guru Pūrṇimā*,¹⁰⁷ that “we sadhus are the beggars of God (*bhagvān ke bhikārī*), and our duty (*kartavya*) is to serve you as a form of God.” For the female sadhus, serving humanity occurs through various means such as sharing their religious teachings; offering spiritual counsel; singing devotional songs and prayers; telling popular stories; and feeding others “with love,” because, as Gangagiri, the informal guru of Tulsigiri¹⁰⁸, often explains,

¹⁰⁶ In the construction of her sentence, Shiv Puri clearly expresses the idea that she shares a complementary or reciprocal relationship with Bholenāth and Dūrgā Maī: “*mere bholenāth aur jagadambā maī ke āpas men paraspar ātmā se bāt hotī hai.*”

¹⁰⁷ *Guru Pūrṇimā* is one of the most important religious holidays in India. Literally meaning, “on the full moon (*pūrṇimā*), worship the guru,” devotees and disciples gather at the ashrams and/or religious hermitages of their gurus to pay them respect and to worship them as the form (*rūp*) of God. Many Indians believe that the guru is the human embodiment of God, and only through the guru does one get to God. The day that I went to visit Tulsigiri, several hundreds of devotees had already started setting up their tents and food kitchens (*bhaṇḍāras*) in preparation for the upcoming holiday.

¹⁰⁸ While Tulsigiri recognizes someone else as her guru, i.e., the teacher who gave her initiation into renunciation, she always remarked that Gangagiri was her guru, by which she meant the teacher who did

“love is what God is.” These modes of religiosity are not only constitutive of the female sadhus’ duty *par excellence*, but also qualify as different ways of doing “God’s work,” who, as they tell me, exists in everything and in everyone (*sab ke andar hai, bhagvān*).¹⁰⁹

Perhaps most significant to this analysis of the narrative theme of *kartavya* is that, according to the sadhus, their duty to God not only stems from their being his devotees, but also from their being chosen by God to become sadhus in this birth for the sole purpose of serving God in that capacity. In her study of Pentecostal women preachers and pastors of Missouri, Elaine Lawless observes that these women’s “spiritual life stories”¹¹⁰ consistently depicted the theme of their being called by God to “preach from the pulpit,” in light of which they were able to legitimize their claim to spiritual power (Lawless 1988, 76-80). In the female sadhus’ personal narratives as well, we find the use of a similar “narrative strategy.” Shiv Puri’s statement above that “God has directly released me from this ocean of existence and made me happier. So, I have to do his work” reveals her perception that her asceticism represents God’s decision, not her own, with which she is clearly, as she states, “happier” as a result. Likewise, Shiv Puri indicates that, though chosen by God, she, too, has to make an effort to live the life that God has decided for

not give her formal initiation into renunciation, but who nevertheless taught her about the path. Sometimes Tulsigiri referred to Gangagiri as her “*dādā guru*,” or grandfather (or grandparent) guru, using kin terms to describe their spiritual relationship. Her formal guru was the “brother” to Gangagiri, which makes her, in a spiritual sense, Tulsigiri’s spiritual grandparent.

¹⁰⁹ Even the ochre-clothing that all sadhus wear serves as a constant reminder of and symbol for their duty to God. Gangagiri made this notion very clear to me in one of our conversations. “The sadhu is the peon (*chaparāsī*) of God,” she said. Pointing to her own clothing, she further explained to me that “this is the uniform of God,” thus underscoring the association she perceives between her religious life and her duty to God. Not surprisingly, the story I related at the start of this chapter about Gangagiri’s encounter with the two policemen on the bus emerged directly from this conversation.

¹¹⁰ As I explained in the last chapter in the narrative methodologies discussion, Lawless uses the phrase “spiritual life stories” specifically to mean the “consciously created fictions,” or story constructions, whose purpose is to affirm the spiritual identity of the woman preacher narrating the story. These stories are, thus, not history—though they do contain the unique life experiences of the women preachers—in the sense that the storytellers themselves perceive but rather stories that have become “standardized” with each retelling in order to promote the particular identity of the storyteller.

her. That is, God may have decided her fate, but, in the end, she has to act in the world in a manner that demonstrates and manifests God's plan for her life.

Thus, for many of the Rajasthani female sadhus, an ascetic life represents the actualization of a divine directive. Moreover, not unlike the meanings that the women preachers in Lawless' study attributed to their position, the extent to which the sadhus succeed in their path itself serves as ever present proof of God's power over their lives (Lawless 1988, 76).¹¹¹ From this perspective, the female sadhus take control of their lives. Yet, mindful that direct claims to the status, power, and authority signified by their position could in fact de-legitimize them in the eyes of a patriarchal society, the sadhus represent their agency, their taking control of their worlds, as the result of a divine source. Interpreting their lives in this way allows the sadhus to negotiate, albeit not without obstacles and interference from family members, societal expectations with their own religious desires, as only a fool would question God's authority, by virtue of whom they are able to lead alternative lives. But how did the female sadhus know they were chosen by God? What were the signs that led them to such an interpretation of their lives?

¹¹¹ I can give an example of the life of a woman with whom I worked, who perceived and called herself a sadhu, yet whom others perceived as a householder. This particular female "sadhu" lived as a householder—she lived with her husband, eldest son, and his family—and, while she was aware of the contradiction that her living arrangement posed to her religious position, she claimed that her "marriage" was for the sake of appeasing her husband, and that there was no sexual relationship between them, or there hadn't been one for a number of years. Moreover, as she herself told me on various occasions, for much of her married life she had been trying to escape, though unsuccessfully, from her husband and family. The other sadhus with whom I worked, even though they appreciated this "sadhu's" effort at trying to live as a sadhu, they were, nonetheless, convinced that God had not chosen her to become a sadhu in this life. On the contrary, as they explained to me, her destiny in this birth was to live as a householder (*grihasth*), and this explains, to the minds of the sadhus, at least, why this particular female "sadhu" could not successfully renounce her marriage and family obligations. The sadhus were, however, equally convinced that, after all the effort she made in this birth, this woman would surely become destined to live as a sadhu in her next birth (*aglā janam*).

II. “*Everything Happens because of Destiny*”: Destiny and Fate (*bhāgya/kismet*)

To answer this question we need to consider the next narrative theme of destiny, or *bhāgya*. Almost every sadhu I talked to interprets not just her asceticism, but more generally, all the events of her life, such as the life cycle and/or life-altering moments of marriage, the birth of children, widowhood, death, meeting the guru, and initiation (*dīkṣa*) into renunciation as the result (*phal*) of destiny. Along with this, the everyday realities of existence like caste (*jātī*), class status, disease (*rog*) and/or health (*svāsthya*), the type of food eaten on a specific day, and so forth, are illustrative of the “ripening [*paknā*]” of female sadhus’ *bhāgya*. Included in this interpretive framework is my own relationship with the female sadhus, who address me as either their “sister [*dīdī*],” “friend [*sakhī*],” or “disciple [*cheli*],” and regularly tell me that our meeting (*milnā*) together in India was “because it was written in [our] destiny.”

An example of the way the Rajasthani female sadhus understand their asceticism as the result of destiny is the personal narrative of Gangagiri, who, in the story below, discusses her experiences of meeting her guru, Gauri Giriji, in Kashi. Of all the female sadhus with whom I have worked, not only have I known Gangagiri for the longest period of time, but she is the sadhu with whom I have developed the closest working relationship in the two years I spent conducting field research in Mewar. In many ways, she is my guru, and I am her (foreign) disciple, and what I have learned about her life and work developed from a shared understanding of our spiritual connection as guru and disciple. To contextualize our relationship, I met Gangagiri through a host family in the summer of 2001, while I was studying on a Hindi language program. She was living in a small hermitage behind the Mahakaleshwar temple in Udaipur City. Although a recent

(2004) decision made by the Mahakaleshwar temple trust only allows Nāth sadhus to reside on temple property, because of her advanced age and the fact that she has been living there for the past thirty-three years, the board of directors permits Gangagiri to remain at Mahakaleshwar, and temple priests supply her with food and water daily. Since her place is located just 1.5 kilometers from the host family with whom I stayed in 2005 and part of 2006, I visited Gangagiri regularly, bringing her on the request of my Brahmin host family to their house for an afternoon meal two to three days per week. On the day that Gangagiri narrated the story of how she met her guru, Gauri Giriji, Manvendra Singh was also present. In her words:

GG [Gangagiri]: My guru was at the Sri Mahant Akhḍa [place of assembly for *Daśanāmi* sadhus] in Kashi. He gave me *dīkṣa* [initiation] when he was eighty-five years old...He was eighty-five years old, but his body was like an elephant's, big and fat. My guru was old. He was the Mahant [director] of the *akhḍa* [ascetic order] forty years.

MS: He gave you *dīkṣā*?

GG: Yes, he gave me *dīkṣā* ...This was my fate [*kismet*]...I didn't know that I'd go to Kashi without a penny or that I'd come to wear the ochre robes [*bhagmā pahanā*]...[My guru's] name was Sri Mahant Gauri Giri.

MS: Gauri Giriji?

A: O.k., Gauri Giriji was your guru.

GG: He lived in Kashi...But, originally, he lived here in Udaipur, in the village of Savina. He stayed in Chitoor at the Kala Mata temple [a Kali temple located within the Chitoorgarh fort]. Then he stayed at another [unnamed] Goddess temple near Ayar [name of a town in Udaipur] and lived there for nineteen years. He lived during the royal court [*darbār*] of Fateh Singh [the great grandfather of Udaipur's current Maharana, Arvind Singh]...It's been many years.

MS: How many years have passed since then? Sixty, seventy?

GG: Yes. It was during the time of Fateh Singh. He stayed [at the Kali Mata temple] for twenty years, and then left [for Kashi]. He knew the language of this place [i.e., Rajasthan].

MS: The Mewari language?

GG: Yes. He noticed the way I lived and started to speak [Mewari] to me. He asked me, 'Bai [sister], where do you live?' But people don't speak like this in Kashi.

MS: No one will speak Mewari there.

GG: Yes, they don't speak like this [in Kashi]. I looked around for this voice and didn't see anyone. I was sitting outside of the door [of a temple, the name of which is unspecified here]. It was shut. There was no one outside talking. I looked and saw the door was shut, but the window was open. He asked, "Which village do you live in? I am from Sarara village. What is your *gotra* [i.e., an exogamous subdivision of a caste group]? Are you a Goswami [which is, actually, Gangagiri's *gotra*]? Did you make the *darśan* of Lord Vishvanath? Are you hungry? Do you have to eat?" I didn't speak to him. But I had to eat. I was hungry.

He had this gold tiffin with three parts. Each part could fit a kilo [of food]. It was so big that tiffin. He took it and went to Shankartaya [the name of her guru's *akhada*] to bring bread...It's a small place, our *akhada*. My guru Maharaj used to sit and do *sādhana* [spiritual practices] everyday. He did this for forty years. Afterwards, he became old. Later, someone else sat on the seat [i.e., took over the *akhada*]. He used to care for that small place; he used to come to the *akhada* to take *rotīs* [breads]. He said, "Child [*betā*, unisex term of endearment for children], I am going to take *rotīs*. Don't go.' He told me, 'Come on, child. Let's go. When did you eat *rotī*? Let's go. I am your father and you are my daughter.'" There wasn't any wrath in his words. But I didn't have any faith. I thought, "Where will he take me?" I had never seen him before. They [i.e., some sadhus she had seen at the temple where she originally heard her guru's voice] told me, "He's our very old Mahant. Go with him [to the *akhada*]."...I thought if he walks ahead of me, I'll go in another gulley and leave. But he made me walk first. He said, "You go first." I asked myself, "Is this destiny? What's happening to me?"

MS: It was your destiny...

GG: Because of destiny [*bhāgya*], people get everything: food, bread, the guru. Everything in life is a matter of fate [*kismet*].

Even before she tells me this story about Gauri Giriji, Gangagiri mentions a number of other times in our interactions that she had "found" her guru in Kashi "because of [her] destiny." Her phrasing of the sentence illustrates this idea: *mujh ko guru mile*. To express the notion of meeting someone in Hindi requires use of the indirect construction of the verb *milnā*, meaning "to meet." Depending on how the speaker phrases the construction, the sentence can convey either the idea of agency, as in the speaker intended to meet someone, or it can convey the idea of passivity, that the encounter happened "by accident" or "by chance." In the latter case, a correct translation for *milnā*

would also be “to find,” as in “to come upon by chance.”¹¹² Gangagiri’s specific wording of the sentence communicates the latter sense of the term—her encounter with the guru was “by chance,” unintended by her.¹¹³ In her narrative, too, Gangagiri interprets her experience of meeting Gauri Giriji as one of chance, emphasizing the narrative theme of destiny (*bhāgya*) at three different points and telling us that “this was my fate.”

Although it is commonly said in India that individuals seeking to renounce the world go to Kashi (or Haridwar) with only that intention in mind, Gangagiri’s interpretation provides a counterpoint to this assumption. Not only does she not know she would find her guru in Kashi, but she also does not know that she would “come to wear the ochre robes,” or become a sadhu, by going to Kashi; everything that happens to her there is unplanned. Once she arrives in Kashi, Gauri Giriji, as Gangagiri tells the story, seems to know from the moment of their initial encounter that Gangagiri will become his disciple, and he *actively* pursues her. But Gangagiri resists his attempts. Both her explicit resistance to Gauri Giriji and her implicit fear of him similarly support her view that destiny, and not her own personal choice, played a role in her becoming a sadhu. In the end, however, Gangagiri becomes Gauri Giriji’s disciple and takes renunciation, because it is her fate. She stresses at the end of her story, “[b]ecause of destiny, people get everything: food, bread, the guru. Everything in life is a matter of fate.”

Not only is “everything in life,” as Gangagiri maintains, “a matter of fate,” it is, more significantly, “written” by God or, as some of the sadhus tell me, by God’s attendant, the goddess Vidhātā Mātā, in a “book [*kitāb*] “that is kept, as the sadhus say,

¹¹² See also the *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, edited by R.S. McGregor (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the English term “to find” I am using the definition provided in the *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edition (New York: Random House Reference, 2001), p. 719.

¹¹³ Had Gangagiri’s meeting with Gaurigiri not been by chance, she would have said, “*mai guruji se milī,*” I [intentionally] met my guru.”

“in God’s office [*daftar*].” According to the female sadhus, at the time of our death God “reads” what has been written in the book and, therewith, pronounces our fate, which cannot be changed. Of course, in their descriptions of *bhāgya* the female sadhus emphasize that it signifies the cumulative effect of all their actions from a previous birth (*pūrva janam*) and manifests in the present birth at the appropriate moment. In this light, while God writes our every word, thought, and deed in his book, we, or more precisely, our actions, that is, our *karm*, affects and, thus, plots the course of a future birth.

Mayanath, who manages a popular Bholenāth (Śiva) temple with an adjoining ashram approximately twenty-five kilometers outside of Udaipur city in Gogunda village, narrates a local idiom to me that underscores the importance of both *bhāgya* and *karm*, destiny and action, in determining the course, texture, and shape of one’s life: “You act [as if] no one is watching, but I [Vidhātā Mātā] write [your deeds] page-by-page.”¹¹⁴

Gangagiri similarly explains her understanding of *bhāgya* and *karm* as co-determinants of an individual’s life. She says:

Whatever we say, whatever we think, automatically becomes written in [God’s] book. It gets written in our future [*bhāg*]. This is our destiny. Our actions [*karm*] turn into letters [*akṣar*]...Every thought will turn into a letter...If you curse [*gālī denā*] someone, that, too, will be written in your destiny...Like, you are writing [my words] here [in your notebook]...In that way [our destiny] is being written there [in God’s book].

Thus, by invoking the dual narrative themes of destiny and *karm* in their narrative performances, the female sadhus express “opposed and complementary” notions of agency in their taking of renunciation (Babb 1983, 173). Citing the research of anthropologists Sheryl B. Daniel and E. Valentine Daniel, who discuss the availability of

¹¹⁴ The Marwari form of this idiom is: “*āp karo chāne chāne, mūn likhū pāne pāne*.” My research assistant, Manvendra Singh, agreed that this is a popular idiom in Rajasthan and is not only accepted by sadhus, but also by householders.

two alternative theories of fate, namely “headwriting” and *karm* in Tamilnadu, Lawrence Babb suggests that

To refer to headwriting is to establish a frame of reference in which the individual ultimately has no control over his actions and is thus not finally responsible for his destiny. Conversely, to stress karma is to lay emphasis on willful action, and thus to imply genuine moral responsibility. Which of these frames of reference is chosen depends on the interests and intentions of the chooser. If he wishes to elude blame for some misdeed, or to console himself with the thought of the inevitability of some misfortune, then the fatalistic interpretation will have an obvious appeal. But if he wishes to stress the culpability of the performer of some misdeed, or to encourage himself in the belief that the course of his destiny can be altered for the better, then the karmic frame of reference is the most suitable recourse (Daniel and Daniel 1973, 354-55; cited in Babb 1983, 173).

Babb’s thesis can help us to analyze the female sadhus’ use of the motifs of destiny and *karm* as narrative strategies with which they performatively negotiate their ambiguous position as ascetics. Interpreting their lives through the framework of destiny, the sadhus not only invoke a higher moral order, which no one can judge, to validate their religious lives as ascetics, but also create and sustain their individual agency as female sadhus in a patriarchal society and male-dominated religious path. By emphasizing destiny as the original source of their asceticism, the sadhus indicate that they have little or no control over becoming ascetics in this birth. In their view, destiny will happen when it is meant to happen, and when it does, they cannot be stopped by anyone from their destiny of becoming sadhus (As Gangagiri told me, “Who could stop me [from becoming a sadhu]?”). Note that the female sadhus’ emphasis on destiny in interpreting their individual asceticism is not an excuse for passivity (cf. Courtright 2009).¹¹⁵ On the

¹¹⁵ In the February issue of *Religion Dispatches*, an academic web-blog dedicated to discussing the theme of religion in contemporary Western cinema, Paul Courtright analyzes the incredibly successful film that has received ten Oscar nominations, *Slumdog Millionaire*. According to Courtright, destiny constitutes a popular religio-cultural theme through which the narrative of *Slumdog Millionaire* is framed and

contrary, perceiving their lives through the traditional cultural lens of destiny motivates the female sadhus to take control of their own lives and, by extension, their destinies.¹¹⁶ That is, as a narrative category destiny enables the agency of the sadhus, rather than their passivity. Evidence that destiny promotes female agency in renunciation is underscored by the fact that most female sadhus juxtapose this narrative category with *karm*, suggesting personal choice and power. Thus, while destiny operates as a shared cultural framework for many Indians—Hindu, Muslim, or Christian—the female sadhus themselves draw upon this framework as a strategy in the interpretation and construction of their lives to legitimate their individual asceticism.

In this way, the integration of the combined themes of *bhāgya* and *karm* provides a performative narrative strategy with which Rajasthani female sadhus communicate through personal narrative performance that their renunciation of the world represents neither a personal choice to break away from what the society constructs as normative gender roles (even though it *is* a personal choice on their part. Ultimately the sadhus themselves decide to follow God’s order), nor an escape from domestic hardship, as their society often erroneously assumes. On the contrary, though asceticism is a path of action, it is first and foremost considered to be a destined path of devotional and dutiful action to

interpreted. As Courtright explains, “destiny is a broadly shared Indian cultural perspective.” Courtright’s sophisticated analysis of *Slumdog* underscores that destiny hardly denotes passivity in an Indian context. In Courtright’s words: “Being written—destiny—is not the same as passive acceptance. Jamal’s [main character] sense of destiny does lead him to resignation; it energizes him.” Courtright’s observation equally applies to the female sadhus with whom I worked. Their understanding of their becoming sadhus enables their agency, not passivity. That is, by interpreting their asceticism through means of the traditional category of destiny, the female sadhus situate their lives in a religious framework that enables them to exercise agency and authority as female sadhus. See Courtright “Life as a Game Show: Reading *Slumdog Millionaire*” (2009), *Religion Dispatches* (http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/mediaculture/1137/life_as_a_game_show%3A_reading_slumdog_millionaire/). I thank Dr. Courtright for recommending this informative web-blog to me. Personal communication, February 21, 2009.

¹¹⁶ See Tessa Bartholomeusz (1994) for a comparison with Theravadin Buddhist female renunciators’ understandings of fate.

the Rajasthani female sadhus. And while destiny may put them on the path of asceticism, the female sadhus understand that they still have to make a “good” effort to manifest their destiny as sadhus. As Sharda Puri, a sadhu from Losingh village in Udaipur district, explains: “Just as the lines of destiny can be increased by good works, so can they can be erased, too, by bad works.” In their worldview, *bhāgya* and *karm* mysteriously interface and intertwine in the actualization of what they believe is a divine directive, which the sadhus feel in their souls—that inner, secret place where God and the Goddess speak to them.

Since it is impossible to prove, at least empirically, that one’s asceticism constitutes the fruit (*phal*) of the good works (*karm*) from a past life (or lives), the female sadhus understand their lives more globally as the product of “God’s will [*bhagvān kī icchā*],” even as they affirm the importance of *karm* as a source of destiny. And, in India people can easily inquire about their destiny by visiting either the family astrologer (*jyotiṣī*) or the family guru, who, based on details such as the time, day, and place of birth, reads the supplicant’s horoscope by consulting several astrological texts. Other avenues for determining destiny include, but are not limited to, the prophecy of holy people and/or visions (*darśan*) of divine beings. All of these cultural mediums for predicting destiny are indicative of God’s will and, as such, it is not unusual to find them as salient motifs in the female sadhus’ personal experience narratives.

For instance, parts of the life story Shiv Puri narrates to me upon my return to her ashram in 2005 underscores each of these motifs in order to support her interpretation of her asceticism as the manifestation of destiny. As her namesake suggests, Shiv Puri was born on the Hindu holy day of *Śiva Rātri*, a festival honoring the god Śiva; due to the

auspicious day of her birth, Shiv Puri's parents named her Śivā. Three days after her birth, however, her mother went crazy (*pāgal*) and remained so, according to Shiv Puri, for eighty days. After relating these events to the family astrologer, Shiv Puri's father learned that his daughter would become a sadhu by the age of thirty-two. As she emphasizes, "[T]hat astrologer explained all the details of my birth to my father and said, 'when this girl of yours is thirty-two, she'll surely become a sadhu. It's final, fixed.' This happened when I was only three." Two more events, namely a vision or appearance of the deities Bholenāth and Durgā Maī, who told her that she would become a sadhu exactly two years after the birth of her third child, a son (Shankar), and a powerful prophecy made by her mother, Indra Kunwār, that she would "sit on the throne of a sadhu, and people would come from all over India to pay her their respects," revealed to Shiv Puri her destiny to become a sadhu.

In response to my question, How did you know that you would become a sadhu in this life," Shiv Puri vividly recounted her experience of having received a special vision (*darśan*) of Bholenāth and Durgā Māī, suggesting that this particular vision provided proof of her ascetic destiny. With her "disciple" Shankar sitting by her side, this is how Shiv Puri told me that story.

SP: I was telling you [before] that I had Chanda [my eldest daughter] and one more girl. Then my soul made a request to God: "Bholenāth, I am about to leave [my family]."

This happened. So, [after a while], Bholenāth told me, "A son has been born [to you]."

Bholenāth spoke to me as if I already had a son; but I didn't have a son. Twelve months before [Shankar was born], God told me this. He said, "Now don't leave [to become a sadhu] for two more years." [In the vision] I could see myself with a young son, and I had placed him on my shoulders.

MS: This was a dream?

A: This happened to you in a dream?

SP: (emphasizes) This [experience] was nothing like a dream. I had a vision [uses the Hindi word “*dr̥stānt*” to describe her experience]. [Shiv Puri returns to recounting this visionary experience] With the child on my shoulders, I climbed a step; there was water coming from somewhere. I climbed another step. I kept climbing like this, until I reached the top of a mountain. There was a Śivji temple over there.

A: O.k.

SP: It was a Śivji temple, but inside I couldn’t find Śivji. I only saw the sparkling of diamonds. None of the gods and goddesses were present [in the temple]. So, a grandmother-like figure appeared [to me]. I said [to her], “Mahārāj [a respectful way of addressing the caretaker of a temple], whose temple is this?”

She said to me, “This is the temple of three-hundred and sixty million [*chattīs crore*] gods and goddesses.” She spoke like this. I went inside and saw that there wasn’t a single god. So, I told her, “There isn’t a single god in here!” [But then she responded]

“Your personal god is just coming.” [Shiv Puri’s eldest grandchild returns to the room, and complains that the cut on his arm has not stopped bleeding. Shiv Puri and Antoinette both talk with the child in a comforting way. Then his father, obviously annoyed with his constant interruptions, tells the child to sit and be quiet. Shiv Puri says this more gently to him.]

SP: Nandi [the cow who appears with Śiva] was seated [in the temple]...My son grabbed his feet, and then Śivji appeared.

MS: Wow!

SP: Śivji appeared in this form [points to the poster on a nearby wall that depicts Śiva as an ascetic].

A: He appeared [to you] in that form?

SP: With this form. He gave me *darśan* four times.

A: In that form, right?

SP: Yes, in that form.

A: O.k., in the form of an ascetic...And when Śivji appeared before you [Shiv Puri finishes the thought]

SP: It was only this form of Śiva [who appeared].

A: Right, but this form came in a dream?

SP: No, not a dream.

MS: She said “*dr̥stānt*”; it means a feeling, a sight [of the deity] came to her.

SP: [repeats the word] *Dr̥stānt*...It happened in an awakened [*jāgrit*] state.

MS: Meaning, when God gives *darśan*, he himself comes directly to you.

A: O.k.

SP: [In this state] My eyes were opened, and then the sight [*naza*] [of Shiva] came. Then, the light [*prakāś*] was falling [from Śiva’s palm that was facing her]. From [Śiva’s] hands, the light was falling. He was giving [me] blessings [*āśirvād*].

A: O.k.

SP: The light was so strong that my eyes closed [suddenly]. Then God [*bhagvān*] spoke the *guru mantra* from his very mouth. I learned it.

A: [Śivji] gave you the *guru mantra*?

MS: Yes. God [*bhagvān*] gave [her] the *guru mantra*.

SP: I studied that *mantra*. Śivji gave the *guru mantra*, right? Then Mother [referring to Durgā Maī] was standing nearby him [to Śivji]. I said, “Mother, you, too, give me blessings.” She said, “Make a request; make a request. What do you need?”

I said, “I need to see everything in this world in the form of the mother.”

A: [You wanted to see] Everything in the form of the Mother.

SP: Yes. [I said] “I need to see everything in the form of the Mother; not anything bad.” The mother said, “So be it” [*tathāstu*]. Śivji gave me *darśan*. A year later, he was born [pointing to Shankar who is seated by her side].

In this segment of her life story, Shiv Puri’s performance reinforces her perception of the personal relationship she has with Bholenāth and Durgā Māī. Just as these deities ordered her to build a bigger ashram for the growing number of devotees who visit the site, in the same way they, or at least Bholenāth (whose name she interchanges with Śiva’s throughout the story), ordered Shiv Puri to remain a householder for two more years after the birth of her third child, Shankar. The deities’ communicate with Shiv Puri through means of her visions, which she refers to as *drśtānt*, and which happens to her while she remains in “an awakened state.” More significantly, to sanction her view that destiny played a role in her becoming a sadhu in this birth, Shiv Puri’s narrative construction of her visionary experience pivots on her receiving the *guru mantra* from Śiva, those sacred syllables the guru whispers into his/her disciple’s ear at the time of initiation (*dīkṣā*) into renunciation. The ascetic form in which Śiva appears to Shiv Puri in her vision is also especially significant, as it symbolically portends her fate to become a sadhu.

Through her performance Shiv Puri not only constructs herself as the disciple of Śiva and Durgā Māī, but also communicates her perception that God initiated her as a

sadhu. The vision itself constitutes a form of initiation into the tradition renunciation while Shiv Puri is still a householder. Her being a householder at the time of her initiation seems to have posed no obstacle for Shiv Puri because, as she emphasizes in an earlier conversation, since her childhood she had considered herself as a sadhu, not as a householder. Her narrative reconstruction of the vision in which she sees herself carrying a boy child on her shoulders also implies that the deities sanctioned her householder status, at least for a little while. Her being a householder might even signify to Shiv Puri a form of *kartavya* to the gods, on account of which Śiva and Durgā Māī send a to her womb a disciple who will help her to run her ashram so that she can serve them as a sadhu later on in her life. That is, from the narrative’s point of view, that the child in the Shiv Puri’s vision is the same person who helps her to manage her expanding ashram today is hardly coincidental—Bholenāth and Durgā Māī know what is best for Shiv Puri, even if it means that she must remain a householder, albeit temporarily, in order to fulfill her duty to them as a sadhu.

In other conversations, I learned that Shiv Puri does, in fact, have a mortal guru; however, she only recognizes Śiva and Durgā Māī as her formal teachers. On the same day she told me this story, Shiv Puri also said, “I didn’t learn from a guru; I didn’t learn from anyone. I made a guru, for sure; but I didn’t learn from anyone. Śivji gave me the *guru mantra* directly.” To be sure, by attributing her initiation into asceticism to Śiva and Durgā Māī, Shiv Puri validates her position as a female ascetic in what is often viewed as a male-dominated tradition of renunciation. At the same time, though, Shiv Puri suggests that her relationship with the divine and its duties supersede all other types of relationships, not only the spiritual relationship she has with her mortal guru, but even the

worldly relationship she once had with her children and family as a householder.

Although essential to an interpretation of Shiv Puri's life, similar external portents of destiny appear as motifs in only some of the sadhus' stories. Lacking these signs how did the sadhus know that destiny played a crucial role in the unfolding of their lives?

III. "I Found Truth in Singing Bhajans to God": Devotion (*Bhakti*)

Like the narrative themes of duty and destiny, devotion, or *bhakti*, also appears as a defining leitmotif in the personal narratives of the Rajasthani female sadhus. Their emphasis on *bhakti* strengthens the sadhus' claims of having an intimate relationship with the divine. At the same time, *bhakti* also provides the broader interpretive frame for their narrative performances. In addition to an intense feeling of love, adoration, respect, and devotion to God, the female sadhus conceptualize *bhakti* as a form of asceticism, and express their devotional asceticism through practices of individual and/or communal devotional singing (*bhajan satsang*), prayer, religious storytelling, scriptural study, and deity worship in temples or in other sacred places.

In all of the stories of sadhus interviewed, devotion arises "automatically [*apne āp hī*]" in their childhood. The immediate and unexplained emergence of devotion at a time in their lives when they should have been "jumping and playing" like other children their age signals to the female sadhus the ripening of their destiny as well as the beginning of a life dedicated to God. As Gangagiri explains,

When I was young, my father was a *satsangī* [one who held devotional meetings or *satsangs*]. He used to sing *bhajans*. My grandfather, the old man, used to sit in the front [of the *satsang*] and sing *bhajans*, too. His disciple was also an old man who also sang *bhajans*. I started singing *bhajans*, too. I was crazy [*bāvlī*] then, I just kept singing to God and [did] nothing else. I still remember that time. I must have learned three-hundred

and fifty *bhajans* by the time I was five or six years old, just while playing and jumping in my childhood.

As with Shiv Puri's implicit use of the theme of *kartavya* in her narrative performance above, in this performance, too, Gangagiri does not explicitly mention the word *bhakti* to express what might strike the reader as a seemingly unusual childhood devotional religiosity. However, embedded in her statement is the idea that the practice of singing *bhajans* is equivalent to an inner experience of *bhakti* to God (*bhagvān*). In this framework, the phrase "singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān*" not only articulates an expression of devotion to God, but also functions as a popular rhetorical trope signifying Gangagiri's singing experience as *bhakti* to *bhagvān*. Through daily conversations with the female sadhus I began to understand that for most of these sadhus their repeated use of the phrase "singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān*" acts much like a shared code word, or symbolic language, alluding to an internal and spontaneous devotional experience of the divine.

Moreover, this statement connotes the female sadhus' shared understanding about renunciation. During informal interviews, when I asked the female sadhus to speak about what renunciation means to them, using the terms *sannyās* and/or *fakīrī* in my questions, they consistently defined these words in the context of the practice of singing *bhajans*. As Gangagiri frequently says, "renunciation means to sing to God."¹¹⁷ Making the association that singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān* qualifies both as *bhakti* and as renunciation, I queried the sadhus further in order to understand whether or not they perceive their renunciation as a form of *bhakti* as well. Without exception, the Rajasthani sadhus replied that renunciation of the world and devotion to God are the same thing (*ek hī bāt hai*). Gangagiri says: "[R]enunciation is simply *bhakti*; there is no difference between them."

¹¹⁷ As Gangagiri said to me, "*sannyās kā matlab, bhagvān ka bhajan bolnā.*"

In this light, whether explicit or implicit in the female sadhus' stories, the narrative theme of devotion is polyvalent and must be understood in terms of a broader context of meaning, in which singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān* simultaneously identifies a trope for *bhakti* itself and for a life of asceticism. To these sadhus, *bhakti* via the practice of singing *bhajans* to God exemplifies asceticism *par excellence*, as it enables them to remember and experience God everyday, and thus, to fulfill the destiny for which they were born.

Concomitant with their experiences of *bhakti* to *bhagvān* are also feelings of detachment (*vairāg*) from family members, school and home responsibilities, and especially the pressing societal expectations of marriage and householding. As Tulsigiri reflected, “from the beginning of my life, I found truth by singing *bhajans* to God.” Absorbed in the intensity of her devotion, Tulsigiri became inwardly detached from societal concerns, because of which she vehemently resisted her parents' repeated attempts to arrange her wedding. She told me, “I didn't want to marry...I took the wedding jewelry that came from my in-laws and threw it [away].” Devotion to God, thus, not only made the female sadhus detached, it also made them brave.¹¹⁸ A common pattern in their stories is rebellion against parental (or anyone else's) attempts to thwart their devotional lives. A vignette from Gangagiri's personal narrative expresses this idea well:

My father used to say, ‘Don't sing *bhajans*.’ I said, ‘you keep singing *bhajans*, so why can't I sing?’ He said, ‘we can sing, but you don't sing!’ I asked why, and he said, ‘because then you'll become *abhisānī*.’ I said, ‘What is *abhisānī*?’ He said, ‘it means you'll become a sadhu.’ I used to

¹¹⁸ My suggestion about the power of the female sadhus' devotion, or *bhakti*, to God stems from Lawless' apt observation that “[r]eligion makes women brave” (1988, 82). Her thesis, while based on the patterns she analyzed in the women preachers' “life stories,” is also applicable to the lives of the sadhus, for whom devotion, or *bhakti*, to God (*bhagvān*) makes them brave.

say [to him], ‘I will sing *bhajans* and become a sadhu.’ I must have said this ten times, at least.

Here, Gangagiri suggests that becoming a sadhu in adulthood seems to be “continuous” with her childhood experiences of devotion to *bhagvān* and detachment from the world (Bynum 1987, 289; 1988; 1992; Khandelwal 2004, 181 & 184). While the ceremony of initiation into asceticism may formalize women’s identities as ascetics, the ritual itself does not appear to signify a cognitive disjunction, or rupture, from the perception they have always maintained of themselves in both childhood and adulthood—that of an ascetic. Ramanujan (1982), Bynum (1987), Bartholomeusz (1996), and Khandelwal (2004) have argued that female asceticism and, more precisely, the symbols and categories female ascetics across religious traditions use in the expression of their experiences signify “continuity”—rather than liminality—with their biological and social roles as mothers, nurturers, and caretakers, in contrast to male experiences of rupture from their everyday roles (cf. Gold 1994, 151). As Caroline Walker Bynum explains,

[W]omen’s sense of religious self seems more continuous with their sense of social and biological self; women’s images are most profoundly deepening, not inversions of what ‘woman’ is; women’s symbols express less contradiction and opposition than synthesis and paradox (Bynum 1987, 289).

In the female sadhus’ case, the narrative theme of devotion effectively links their religiosity and/or the religious tendencies of their childhood with their formal renunciation of the world in adulthood, and hence, validates their asceticism and ascetic identity. But the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion more than promote and justify their ascetic identity and asceticism; they also situate the sadhus in a pan-Indian framework of female *sant* devotional religiosity.

Through emphasis on duty, destiny, and devotion in their personal narrative performances, the female sadhus construct their lives in ways that reflect themes similar to those found in popular and literary vernacular language stories about the religious lives of India's most renowned and controversial female *sants*, such as the Kannada saint, Mahadeviyakka, the Tamil Alvar Antal, Bahinabai of Maharashtra, Mira Bai of Rajasthan, and Lalleshwari of Kashmir (Ramanujan 1999). In his study of the lives of these unusual women, A.K. Ramanujan has isolated five key patterns: early dedication to God; denial of marriage; defying societal norms; initiation; and marrying the Lord (1999, 270-78). With the exception of marrying the Lord, the Rajasthani female sadhus' narratives feature all of these life story themes. Such thematic correspondences, first of all, strongly suggest these female sadhus' familiarity with the structure and content of the narratives of popular female *sants*, particularly, in this case, those of the Mira Bai—and their use of such narratives as possible models of gender, *post factum*, for constructing and interpreting their own lives (Lawless 1988; but cf. Flueckiger 2003). Second, these themes indicate the implicit *sant* devotional discourses that the sadhus are negotiating through their personal narratives. Finally, these narrative patterns bespeak the gendered religio-devotional experiences of women, illustrating, as Bynum (1987) and Lawless (1988) similarly discuss in their work, the significance of gender in the selection of life story themes and in the attribution of meaning to those themes. But what are the gendered implications of the female sadhus' themes of duty, destiny, and devotion? And what do they suggest about female agency in renunciation?

IV. Gendered Implications of Female Sadhus' Personal Narrative Themes

Immediately evident is that the narrative strategies of duty, destiny, and devotion function to communicate the female sadhus' "perception of difference"¹¹⁹ vis-à-vis three diverse groups of persons: all householders, women in general, and most male sadhus. According to the female sadhus, their destiny to become ascetics in this birth makes them, as people, different from all householders. That is, destiny not only assigns group membership, it also draws boundaries of difference between groups—in this case, between householders and sadhus. But even this proposition has to be carefully nuanced, because, from the perspective of most of the female sadhus with whom I worked, difference exists not just amongst people of the same gender, but even amongst people of the same group (householders or sadhus). Apart from destiny, then, what else informs the Rajasthani female sadhus' perception of difference from women in general?

A consistent sub-theme the female sadhus underscore in their personal narrative performances is the characteristic of fearlessness or bravery (*himmat*) when dealing either with family, strangers, divine or demonic beings, wild animals, or with the realities of traveling alone as a female sadhu in cities, towns, and jungles. For example, at the age of eleven, Shiv Puri enjoyed going alone to the jungle and did so regularly for seven years. On one of her excursions she encountered a tiger. What she saw, however, was not a tiger. She explains,

I heard people screaming in the background, 'Tiger! Tiger!' and, all of a sudden, the beast jumped out in front of me... Running toward me it moved like a motorcycle. But what did I see? I swear to you I saw a donkey, not a tiger; at the same time, I thought, 'he sure moves fast for a

¹¹⁹ I borrow this phrase from Lawless (1988). The female sadhus' use of these narrative themes to construct themselves as "exceptional" (Khandelwal 2004, 21) and as different mirrors some of the ways the Pentecostal women preachers in Lawless' study underscored in their stories what she calls "a perception of difference" in order to validate the "living script," that is, their religious lives as preachers (1988, 69-72).

donkey!’ The whole situation struck me as odd, but I wasn’t afraid...I wasn’t afraid as a child and I’m not afraid as an adult. I stopped fearing a long time ago.

Gangagiri, too, while narrating a story about her traveling experience on a train, describes a fearless attitude when she is approached by the ticket-taker. She says, “I [used to] travel alone on trains, and without any ticket. When the ticket taker came, I showed him my eyes...All this is from the penance [*tap*] of my *bhajans*.”

Both narratives construct the female sadhus as fearless. But Gangagiri’s story makes explicit the idea that this characteristic is not a “natural” component of her gender; rather, her bravery is the effect of the “penance of [her] *bhajans*.” The female sadhus’ fearless attitude stems from the power evoked by their *bhakti*, and by extension, by their devotional asceticism. To the female sadhus, their ascetic/devotional power distinguishes them from women in general, who, in the view of dominant male constructions of Indian femininity, are often represented as passive, weak, and dependent (Doniger and Smith 1991, 197-98).¹²⁰ Let me emphasize, however, that householder women would not necessarily construct themselves, either in their personal stories or in statements about their lives, as weak, passive, or dependent.¹²¹ As several scholars have argued, women’s oral traditions in South Asia, whether story, poem, song, or ritual tale (*vrata kathā*), describe the inner powers of women, which are often attributed to devotional and/or ritual practice, and which provide alternative images of femininity to orthodox Brahmanical understandings (Gold and Raheja 1994; Narayan 1997; Raheja 2003; Gold 2003; Lamb

¹²⁰ To give another example, in a conversation with Gangagiri’s daughter, whom Gangagiri strictly regarded as a disciple (*cheli*), I asked her why she did not become a sadhu, like her mother. Her response was, “I don’t have the courage (*himmat*) to be a sadhu.” Most of the householder women I spoke with, whether devotees or family members of the sadhus, agreed that one must be “strong” in order to renounce the world. It is for reasons such as these that female sadhus are respected in their society.

¹²¹ I thank my co-advisor, Joyce Flueckiger, for pointing this important detail out to me in a personal communication, January 2008.

2003). Thus, through their emphasis on the theme of fearlessness, the Rajasthani female sadhus not only challenge Brahmanical notions of femininity, but also “traditionalize” their bravery and, as their stories suggest, their asceticism by situating these themes in the broader framework of *bhakti*.

For the sadhus to question dominant representations of femininity through emphasis on their bravery is not a denial of their womanhood. On the contrary, they identify as women in their personal narratives, but view themselves through an alternative lens of femininity, one that includes implicit understandings of gender androgyny, rather than static male/female polarities.¹²² Shiv Puri’s narrative of her visionary experience, in which she receives blessings from Śiva and Durgā Māī, may express an underlying perception of gender androgyny in her embodiment of the power of both deities. From a comparative perspective, the female sadhus’ perception of themselves as brave because of their *bhakti* to God approximates the self-understanding of a female Muslim healer, Amma, living in Hyderabad, South India, whose life, rhetoric, and work is the focus of Joyce Flueckiger’s recent narrative ethnography on gender and “vernacular” Islam in South Asia (2006; cf. 2003). As Flueckiger observes from an examination of Amma’s statements and life narratives, Amma attributes her own power as a healer to her inner courage (*himmat*), which arises from her devotion to God, or

¹²² Ethnographic studies on women’s renunciation in South Asia have emphasized more the similarities than the differences between the everyday worlds of female sadhus and householders (cf. Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold 2006; Khandelwal 2004; Teskey Denton 2004; Gutschow 2001; Bartholomeusz 1994; but cf. Valley 2004). Following the insights of Walker Bynum’s theory of female continuity in Christian religious practice and piety (1987, 1992), many of these scholars contend that female sadhus’ religious roles reflect continuity with their biological and social roles. By pointing out the ways the female sadhus with whom I worked construct a perception of themselves as different from women in general, I do not mean to suggest that this perception translates as a gendered difference in their daily social roles. On the contrary, my point is that, while female sadhus and householders continue to perform similar social roles in terms of food preparation and living either with or close to their families, whom the sadhus regard as “disciples,” the sadhus, nevertheless, understand that their dedication to God makes them different from “ordinary” women, with whom they happen to share the same gender.

Allah (Flueckiger 2003, 94), and which she feels distinguishes her from other women. Like the female sadhus, Amma also “on many levels... identifies” with her “caste” as a woman but, unlike the sadhus, she understands her life path “...to be outside the bounds and possibilities of her gender” (Flueckiger 2003, 78).

While their renunciant position role accords them (spiritual) status, the female sadhus believe their connection to God endows them with the power and authority to control their lives. However, only by disclaimers of personal agency do the female sadhus actually maintain their own status, power, and authority (Lawless 1988, 76). On this basis alone, even though unstated in their narratives, the female sadhus implicate a perception of *gendered* difference vis-à-vis most of their male counterparts by their very selection of the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion in the interpretation of their lives. Through emphasis on these themes, the female sadhus suggest that while men and women are “the same” at the level of the soul, gender, nonetheless, makes each class of sadhus socially different from the other—that is, gender subjects sadhus to the different gendered expectations and norms institutionalized by their society and culture (Lorber 1994). To this extent, their narrative themes, in refracting an implied recognition of this socially-constituted difference between male and female sadhus, also function as what Lawless calls “ritual disclaimers” or “disclaimers of intent” by allowing the female sadhus to neutralize societal perceptions of their religious lives as transgressive (1988, 76).

Finally, the interpretation of their lives through the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion provides a strategy by which the female sadhus validate their ascetic identity.¹²³

¹²³ As a number of anthropologists and folklorists have emphasized, I understand that the identity validated in the female sadhus’ personal narratives more than likely reflects the identity that I, as the ethnographer,

As the female sadhus often say, “We are the *sadhus* of India,” highlighting the significance of *this* identity in both their renunciatory discourses and performances. Their ascetic identity, though it signifies an alternative to the normative roles of wife, mother, and widow, identifies the sadhus as women who live the path in a gendered way. What is more, their emphasis on the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion makes the female sadhus’ narrative performances gendered constructions.

V. Narrative Patterns in the Male Sadhus’ Stories

To understand the female sadhus’ personal stories (and the themes they emphasize) as gendered constructions requires that we also examine the themes, patterns, and symbols in the life narratives of the Rajasthani male sadhus with whom I also worked. For all but one of the male sadhus I interviewed, detachment (*vairāgya*), practice (*abhyās*), personal effort (*prayās*), and good works (*kārya*) surfaced as pivotal themes around which they weaved the form and content of their narratives. Through the integration and interplay of these themes, the male sadhus not only strengthen their own self-image as individual agents of their lives, but also legitimate their claims for becoming sadhus in the first place. That is, they became sadhus not simply because they could—which the female sadhus clearly recognize—but rather because they wanted to.

was looking for them to validate. After all, the reason for my interviewing them was because they were sadhus, a fact they understood—even if I never explicitly verbalized this—from the very beginning of our meetings. Moreover, I recognize that their “sadhu” identity may not be the most important or only identity through which they experience and interpret their lives. Nevertheless, in making sense of their lives to me, their narrative themes validated this identity as the most significant aspect of who they were. Indeed, in the context of our meetings their stories explicitly and implicitly pivoted on this particular identity. Because the sadhu identity was what the sadhus (male and female) “affirmed” to in our daily interactions (Lawless 1988, 62), I suggest that their personal narratives were meant to reinforce and validate this identity, as well as provide reasons (and disclaimers) for how and why they became sadhus. For a discussion of how story constructions reflect and constitute multiple understandings of the context of ethnographer/informant relationships, see Lawless (1988, 60-69), Narayan (1988), Gluck and Patai (1991), Borland (1991), and Behar (1993).

The male sadhus consciously chose to renounce the world, without considering what, if any, role duty, destiny, and devotion played in effecting the outcome of their own decisions.

V. A. “Water Doesn’t Stay on a Slippery Pot”: Detachment (*vairāgya*)

As an example of a male sadhu’s personal narrative, I offer two vignettes of a larger story that Nityananda Puriji told Manvendra Singh and me in the presence of his disciple Sharda Puri, while the four of us, using the burlap coverings of empty rice bags as our cushions, sat on the floor around the *dhūnī*, or fire pit, in the main room of the ashram that he and Sharda Puri managed together. Nityananda Puriji’s narrative is typical of the stories I collected from the thirteen male sadhus whom I interviewed in its integration of themes, symbols, and images. My initial meeting with Nityananda Puriji and Sharda Puriji happened in the summer of 2001, during a day-trip to a popular Vaiṣṇava (Śrī Nāth or Kṛṣṇa) temple in Nathdwara.¹²⁴ Both sadhus had come to the temple for its monthly distribution of essential food items, such as spices, wheat, corn, and vegetables which, as sadhus they receive at no cost to them. While Nityananda Puri and Sharda Puri waited for their supplies, I purchased a meal for them on the advice of a colleague. They then invited me to come to their ashram in Losingh village, Udaipur district. Three and a half years later in May 2005 I encountered the sadhus again at a *bhaṇḍāra*, or feasting festival, sponsored by Mayanath at her Bholenāth ashram in Gogunda, to commemorate the *samādhi* of her *guru-bhāī*, or “spiritual-brother,” Shankar Nathji. At this event, which was brimming with all types of sadhus who came from all

¹²⁴ Nathdwara is located approximately forty-eight kilometers from Udaipur on the Udaipur-Ajmer highway. The temple of Śrī Nāthji, a popular pilgrimage spot, attracts thousands of devotees every year from all over India and beyond.

over the region and from different parts of north India, Nityananda Puri not only remembered me but also reminded me of his invitation to come to his ashram; I recorded the story below on my third visit to his ashram in August 2005.

In this meeting Sharda Puri had discussed several events from her life that led her to take renunciation; following her narration, Nityananda interjected himself into the discussion, telling Manvendra and me that it was common for people—men and women—to renounce the world after they finished their householding duties. In response to his statement, Manvendra asks:

MS [Manvendra Singh]: That's right; people take [renunciation after their householding is completed.] Were you also married [like Sharda Puri] before you renounced?

NP [Nityananda Puri]: Yes, I was married; I also worked in the army [before I renounced].

MS: Okay, you worked in the army.

NP: Yes.

MS: Where? Was it before or after Independence?

NP: It was before Independence. In the year 1942, there was a war, right? The Second World War. During the Second World War I was stationed in Singapore.

MS: My mother's father was also there [during that war].

NP: When we took Singapore—[interjects] right now Singapur is a separate country; but Singapur [was] a part of India, so we took Singapur before Independence, in the time of British government. After that we [Indians] revolted and joined the independent Indian army—the Azad Hind Phoj. At that time we all went to Singapore in 1942. Then I got injured over there [in Singapore] and was sent to Japan. The Japanese took us [injured soldiers] over there and gave us treatment. My hands and feet, everything became useless. Then I came back home [place unstated, probably Delhi], and I [discovered then] that the program of my first death anniversary was going on.

MS: Your death program?

NP: Yes. Everyone thought I was dead. I came [back home] and someone said,

“You didn't die! Your first death anniversary is going on. Brother, it's happening right now. What will you do after going home? If you have 'died,' a dead person can't go home.” So, I stayed at the well [near my home in the village] for two years.

MS: But everyone came to know that you were alive?

NP: Yes, everybody came to know; and everybody told me to come back home.

MS: You were married, had children...

NP: There was one boy and one girl. I arranged their weddings.

MS: Where were you born?

NP: I was born in Shahadara, Delhi.

MS: Are you Punjabi by birth?

NP: No, I was a Brahmin. For some reason I joined the army. Because of some family reason. Those people [my family] didn't like me. I had three brothers; my brothers and sisters didn't like me, neither did the other [members of my family]. That's why; because of the rivalry [*duśmani rakh karnā*] with them I joined the army. I did my BSc [Bachelor's of Science degree] in Agriculture in 1927, and then I joined the army.

A [Antoinette]: How old were you when you when you received your BSc?

NP: I was approximately twenty or twenty-one years old. I worked for fourteen years in the army and then I renounced the world [*sannyās lenā*].

MS: How many years have passed since you renounced?

NP: I renounced in 1944.

MS: In 1944? O.k., so sixty years have passed.

NP: Sixty-one years [have passed].

A: O.k., sixty-one years have passed since you took renunciation. So you must have seen a lot of changes since then? A lot must have happened since then.

NP: I have heard a lot, seen a lot, and understood a lot. Some people kept saying something or other and even now they still say. But, why should [what others say] affect me? We have an idiom in India: "Water doesn't stay on a slippery pot."...Sadhus should be like this [i.e., like slippery pots]. Let the world say what it wants to say. We [sadhus] have to do what we have to do. We don't have anything to do with the world.

In this narrative segment, Nityananda Puriji provides some personal and historical details that contextualize his life and lend a chronological structure to his narrative: he completed his BSc in Agriculture in 1927; married and had two children; joined the independent Indian army, the Azad Hind Phoj—most likely in 1928—in which he served for fourteen years during which time he was stationed in Singapore in 1942 for World War II; was sent to Japan to recover from his war injuries that rendered his body “useless”; returned to India after the war in 1942 only to discover that his death ceremony was being performed at his home; and, finally, renounced the world in 1944, two years

after his return to India. Three-quarters of the way through his story, Nityananda Puri briefly recapitulates the three main events of his life for me, omitting this time the fact of his marriage and his having had children. He is clear about the number of years that have elapsed since he took renunciation—sixty-one. What Nityananda Puri does not state in this narrative but reveals to me later in another conversation is that, on the order of his guru, he left north India to come to Rajasthan more than fifty years ago—he did not remember the exact dates; after some searching in the region, he settled in Udaipur, in what he called “the land of the brave [*vīr*],” as the *pūjāri* and caretaker of the small Śiva temple and ashram in Losingh village.

This life narrative emerges from Nityananda Puri’s statement that sadhus often take renunciation after they have completed all the duties and responsibilities associated with householding (*grhasth*). His view articulates orthodox understandings of taking renunciation as explicated in classical Sanskrit *smṛti* sources, such as the *Dharmaśāstras* and the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, according to which individuals, ideally high-caste men, renounce the world at a particular age and station in life, or *āśrama* (Olivelle 1992; 1995). Patrick Olivelle explains,

...the classical formulation considers the *āśramas* not as alternative paths open to an adult male but as obligatory modes of life suitable for different periods of a man’s life...The *āśramas* accompany an individual as he grows old and assumes new and different duties and responsibilities. The entry into each *āśrama* is a rite of passage that signals the closing of one period of life and the beginning of another (Olivelle 1992, 132).

According to Olivelle, the texts vary on the issue of the age in which an individual ought to enter an *āśrama* and the number of years he can remain in it; yet, with respect to renunciation in particular a consensus does emerge amongst some of the medieval sources that “a man can become a renouncer sometime after he is 70 years old, depending

on his age at his vedic initiation” (Olivelle 1992, 133). These texts assume that by 70 years of age a man will have completed his householding duties and be ready, as the saying goes, to retire to the forest. As with the women sadhus’ saying, “singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān*,” the phrase ‘retiring to the forest’ functions as a trope in classical, Sanskritic texts for renouncing the world. In our conversations several of the male sadhus invoked the dominant discourse on renunciation from the *Dharmaśāstras*, either citing specific texts or, as more often the case, using the generalized phrase “in the *Dharmaśāstras*” to explain authoritative precepts on the *āśrama* of renunciation.

Nityananda Puriji, for example, is more than familiar with Śāstric injunctions (*nīyam*) on the specificities, including the exceptions, of the all *āśramas*, and has quoted a number of *ślokas* to me, even from the *Brahma Sūtras*, in response to my questions about the nature and meaning of renunciation. Likewise, Devendra Digambara Sarasvati invokes *Manu*, citing by means of his meticulous and indefatigable memory several *ślokas* to support standard understandings of renunciation as an *āśrama* dedicated for individuals in their old age, for whom there was nothing more to do (or see) except worship God in the desire to achieve liberation (*mokṣ*). Prior to his citation of the scriptural precepts on renunciation, I had assumed Digambara Sarasvati was already a renunciant (*sannyāsī*); but, as he informed me, Digambara Sarasvati had only taken formal vows of renunciation just six months before our meeting (2005), classifying the pre-renunciant period of his life as celibate studentship, or *brahmacārya*. “One should only renounce when the senses [*indriya*] no longer function; this is the rule,” Digambara Sarasvati explained. On the surface, my male sadhu collaborators seem to be exemplars of such orthodox scriptural views, as most of the sadhus who quoted from the classical

texts have already surpassed 70 years of age—Nityananda Puriji himself told me he was over 90 years old (2005); Digambara Sarasvati, too, was almost 90 years the summer I interviewed him (August 2005). However, once the male sadhus started sharing their personal stories with me, I realized that their lives are not simply living testaments to the texts of which they have intimate knowledge; on the contrary, their stories illuminate another pattern in men’s experiences of renunciation—that of a break with Brahmanical discourses on renunciation.

As Nityananda Puriji’s narrative illustrates, his entry into renunciation provides an exception to authoritative views on the subject, a pattern shared by many of the male sadhus. If we follow the dates Nityananda Puri supplies us in his narrative, at the time of separating from his family in 1944 he would have been 36 or 37 years old, with a wife and two young children, hardly the age of a man ready to leave everything behind and retire to the forest. In fact, in another narrative segment of his life that I recorded Nityananda Puri does confirm that he was approximately 36 or 37 years old when he left his family to renounce the world.

Remarkably, Nityananda Puri’s decision to renounce occurs on account of an accidental assumption by his family—they thought he had died in the war. Thus, upon his return home Nityananda Puri discovers that his first anniversary death rites are taking place. In itself this detail of his “death” is symbolic of the turn his life would take, as part of the initiation procedure for renouncers consists of a “death” ceremony in which they perform their own *śraddhā* rituals that signify the end of who they once were, cutting themselves off, symbolically at least, from the social world that defined and shaped them as individuals. In accordance with Brahmanical cosmological understandings, for

renunciants death is also symbolic of a new beginning, a rebirth, as a sadhu. But Nityananda Puri's renunciation does not occur for another two years, until which time he exists as a "liminal" being, that is "betwixt and between" the two ritual worlds of householding and renunciation. In short, by virtue of his unexpected "death" Nityananda Puri has no identity in the world, because of which he lives as if he were a disembodied spirit (*bhūt-pret*), on the margins of his household and society, by the village well, where his "presence [continues to] affect the living" (Gold 1988, 63). Even the well where he stays for two years before leaving his family, which appears as a recurrent symbol in the local folklore that I have heard from some of the sadhus for the ambiguous space that either familial or non-familial spirits occupy, signifies his, albeit temporary, ghost-like existence on earth until the time in which he takes initiation into renunciation (cf. Gold 1988, 63-79).

Although his family discovers after the fact of the ceremony that he is alive and invites him to return home, Nityananda Puri refuses their requests. Not only his refusal to return back to householding but also his dispassionate response to hearing about his own "death" might seem surprising—after all, his "death" was an accident. Why can't he go back? Further examination of the narrative reveals that Nityananda Puri's reaction to this event is congruous with the authoritative perspectives of the *Śāstras*, the voice of which appears in the guise of the unidentified person who says to him, "you have died; a dead person can't go home." Implicit in this statement is the belief that an individual moves from one *āśrama* to the next in a particular order without ever going back to the previous *āśrama*. Olivelle maintains,

The association of the *āśramas* with distinct periods of life produced another consequence: as one is unable to return to an earlier age, so one is

not permitted to assume an earlier *āśrama* ... A verse ascribed to Dakṣa states this principle clearly: ‘In the case of the three (*āśramas*), it is possible to proceed only with and never against the grain. A man who goes against the grain becomes thereby the vilest of sinners.’” (Olivelle 1992, 133-34).

Nityananda Puri’s “death,” though, removes him from the *āśrama* system completely. His decision to stay by the well and, later on, to renounce the world instead of returning to householding, thus, situates him within the bounds of Śāstric tradition and, in doing so, offers us a broader framework with which to understand his own experience of renunciation. Through his narrative Nityananda Puri veritably constructs himself as an exception to the rules of tradition but accounts for his exception by carefully tracing the steps of unusual situation back to his being in the Indian army where he sustained irreversible injuries as a result of his fighting in World War II. Because of his injuries, Nityananda Puri becomes, in a sense, like an invalid, and unable to fight again, he returns to India, to his family and his home in Delhi. However, not only his symbolic death, but also his perception of his body as “useless” explicitly suggest that to Nityananda Puri’s mind he could no longer perform his duties as a husband and as a father to his family, which left him as a “dead” man with no other choice but to renounce the world. In this light, as his narrative demonstrates, Nityananda Puri’s renunciation does not go “against the grain” of authoritative prescriptions on the practice, but rather creatively accommodates them through motifs of illness and/or injury that allow for alternative interpretations of tradition. Aside from his injury, Nityananda Puri further emphasizes his accommodation to Brahmanical orthodoxy in his statement halfway through the narrative that he arranged the marriages of his two children. Even as a renouncer he manages to perform his householder duties in an effort to conform to Śāstric prescriptions.

Nityananda Puri's narrative pivots on the theme of illness, by which means he negotiates precepts with, albeit unexpected, quotidian life experiences, such as injury and death, in order to construct and validate his own renunciation as normative (cf. Prasad 2004; 2007). As Lila Prasad aptly observes, "oral narrations index interpretations of existential predicaments that challenge moral reconciliation" (Prasad 2004, 160). The structure and content of Nityananda Puri's narrative follows a noticeable pattern that is variously expressed in the stories that I recorded from other male sadhus, in which an injury, illness or a personal crisis serves as an identifiable catalyst for a permanent life of renunciation. For example, for one sadhu the loss of an eye made him feel ostracized from society which, in turn, led him to renounce the world; for another it was the loss of a limb. Even more common as a narrative motif was an unacceptable personal and/or domestic situation that prompted a sadhu's renunciation of the world. One sadhu described to me the emotional pain he experienced when a woman to whom he proposed marriage rejected him; as he explained to me, this experience led to his grave disillusionment with society and, ultimately, his counter-rejection of his lover—and everything she symbolized—by renouncing the world. Nityananda Puri's story similarly exhibits the crisis motif but his story only indirectly associates it with his renunciation. He tells us that "[t]hose people [i.e., my family] didn't like me...[so]...because of the rivalry with them I joined the army."

By making this statement, Nityananda Puri seems to be poignantly aware of common assumptions inherent in Indian society that sadhus often renounce the world because of their desire to escape from domestic hardships or difficulties. Yet by juxtaposing his seemingly contentious family life with his joining the army, and not his

renunciation, Nityananda Puri attempts to assuage the possible misperception that his audience would view his renunciation as motivated by the intent to escape from domestic duress. However, Nityananda Puri's narrative is clear on the fact that he is sent home *because* of a war injury which, leaving him unable to function in the capacity of a householder, extends him *de facto* the option of becoming a sadhu. This detail is significant: of all the options available to them in Indian society, and regardless of their underlying intentions in pursuing them, these male sadhus construct their religious lives as a conscious choice, a deliberate decision that not only accounts for but at the same time explains the extenuating circumstances of their lives. Nityananda Puri may surrender to a symbolic death but he understands this rite as his passage to freedom from the relationships and situations he sought to escape initially by joining the army. By accepting his own "death," Nityananda consciously breaks with his former world as a householder and, because his action complies with Śāstric precepts, he allows himself the right to a new life as a renouncer (cf. Bynum 1992, 27-51). His renunciation of family and society is decisive. What is more, Nityananda Puri's performance of asceticism communicates a gendered discourse on agency in renunciation.

Nowhere in his narrative does Nityananda Puri interpret his experience of renunciation as the effect of destiny or divine will; moreover, his rivalry with his family is not perceived as the result of a spontaneously-arising inner experience of devotion to God that makes him brave enough to resist expected social norms. On the contrary, Nityananda Puri's life constitutes the product of his own individual practice (*abhyās*) and effort (*prayās*), themes that remain hidden in this narrative but surface more explicitly in another telling of his life story that I analyze below. But Nityananda Puri's personal

narrative is not wholly unlike the stories that the female sadhus told me. If we read between the lines, Nityananda Puri's narrative illuminates two themes characteristic of the content of the female sadhus' stories, namely those of detachment (*vairāgya*; *vairāg*) and duty (*kartavya*). In the context of this narrative, these themes are not only interwoven together but are also integrated in an implicit pedagogical discourse that comments on sadhus' proper relationship to the world. Nityananda Puri inserts this discourse at the end of his narrative, in response to my observation that he must have witnessed many changes in the sixty-one years that he has lived as a sadhu. In his view, sadhus should be "like slippery pots," that is, detached from what the "world" says or thinks about them. As Nityananda Puri explains, "Let the world say what it wants to say... We don't have anything to do with the world."

Perhaps because of his discomfort with revealing personal details from his life, the very discussion of which might suggest his unrelinquished attachment to the past, and hence, compromise his reputation as a sadhu, Nityananda Puri uses my question as an opportunity to bring the discussion back to what he considers meaningful for me (and Manvendra) to know about his interpretation of renunciation—that it is above everything else an experience of detachment from the world. His statement tangibly verbalizes the dominant Brahmanic textual tradition of asceticism than that of the *sant* devotional traditions featured in the narratives of the female sadhus. At the same time, by framing his renunciation in terms of detachment Nityananda Puri obliquely comments on the irrelevance of the reasons behind sadhus' renunciation of the world; instead of their intentions, what matters to Nityananda Puri is the way a sadhu conducts himself or herself in the world once s/he has renounced it—as a detached observer. By virtue of its

didacticism, Nityananda Puri's discourse is both prescriptive in its view of detachment as the *sine qua non* of sadhus' experiences of renunciation and proscriptive in its warning that sadhus avoid concerning themselves with what the world thinks of their lives.

Nityananda Puri's interpretation of detachment, however, is gendered, revealing an experience of renunciation that differs from the women's representations of the path in their personal narratives.

More specifically, even though the stories of the female sadhus similarly underscore the theme of detachment, they view it either as concurrent with or as the product of their devotion to God; in each case, as the women sadhus tell me, detachment arises spontaneously as a feeling (*bhāv*; *mahsūs*) from within the heart/mind of the individual. In contrast, Nityananda Puri's narrative seems to suggest that (the feeling of) detachment must actively be cultivated by the individual who is intent on experiencing God in this world. In his descriptions of the term that he gave me in other conversational contexts, detachment ought to be cultivated for the purpose of "knowing oneself" as the highest Self (*paramātmā*). Through the daily practice of detachment, Nityananda Puri explained, an initiate can reflect on the soul (*ātma chintan karnā*) and, through such reflection, achieve what he considers to be the goal of his path—release from the world, or *mokṣ*. From his perspective, not only detachment but also the relationship with the *paramātmā* that ensues because of it, stems from a combination of sustained self-effort and consistent practice. Nityananda Puri intimates this perspective in the context of his statement that "We [sadhus] have to do what we have to do [and] we don't have anything to do with the world."

Interwoven in this understanding of detachment is the notion of duty. In his integration of the implicit theme of *kartavya* into his personal narrative, evident in his similar use of the verb form “have to do,” Nityananda Puri represents his detachment as a constitutive element of duty—it is what he *has to do* in order to live as a sadhu. How do the male sadhus define duty? When Nityananda Puri in particular discusses his interpretation of duty, without exception he uses the term “*kartavya*,” and in doing so, refers to the obligations, responsibilities, and ethical and moral actions that he considers requisite for all sadhus, regardless of gender. Since Nityananda Puri does not consider himself to be chosen by God to live as a sadhu in this birth, even though by being a sadhu he qualifies as God’s devotee (*bhakt*), he does not explicitly juxtapose his sense of duty vis-à-vis God (*bhagvān*), like the female sadhus do. Rather, in his view, which most of the male sadhus whom I asked also expressed, one performs his/her duty for the sake of duty itself—that is, because its performance is powerful and transformative, an interpretation with which the female sadhus would also agree.

Nityananda Puri’s vision echoes orthodox Hindu conceptualizations of duty, or *dharma*. From the broader perspective of Brahmanical Hindu cosmology, according to which all life in the cosmos participates in an intricate web of subtle and gross interrelationships, or connections (*bandhu*), humans, as integral members of this cosmically interlinked design, must perform their duty—based on their caste, gender, age, and stage of life, or *varnāśramadharmā*—in order to maintain the order of the society and the of universe.¹²⁵ In a Puranic framework, itself borrowing upon ancient

¹²⁵ See Gavin Flood (1996) and Klaus Klostermaier (1994) as general reference texts on orthodox, Sanskritic notions of Hindu *dharma*; see also *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1988), and *Classical Hindu Mythology*, translated and edited by Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen (1978).

Vedic ideas of the universe, whereas acts of duty and righteousness produce goodness, virtue, and truth, i.e., (*sat; sattva*) in the cosmos, which trickle down into human societies, non-action or wrong actions produce the opposite effect—evil, destruction, and ignorance (*tamas*) in the cosmos. In this way, both textual and non-textual conceptualizations of duty, particularly those that I heard elaborated by the male sadhus, concede the idea of its performance, without the necessity of having a divine object for its expression, as intrinsically powerful and efficacious.

However, because sadhus are thought to lie outside of the caste system altogether, some scholars have insisted that sadhus have no individual or otherwise cosmic duty (*dharma*) to perform in the world (cf. Dumont 1960; Olivelle 1975). Olivelle, for example, maintains, “Renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*)...is a negative state—as its very name suggests—a denial of all that makes society what it is. Being an anti-structure to the established society, it is defined not by what it is, but by its rejection of the social structures” (1975, 74). Olivelle not only proposes the idea a “negative *dharma*” for sadhus, but similarly characterizes their life path in terms of “...the negation of the *dharma* of life-in-the-world” (1975, 80). “We may even say,” continues Olivelle, “that its [renunciation’s] *dharma* consists in the denial of the *dharma* of society. It is this essentially negative nature of renunciation that sets it apart from all other states of life and made it impossible for it to be totally integrated into the *āśrama* theory of life” (1975, 80).

In their re-reading of the classical textual sources on renunciation, such as the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, other scholars have convincingly reevaluated Olivelle’s theory on the negative state of duty in renunciation. Lise Vail, for instance, contends that, contrary

to previous positions on the topic, sadhus do construct and maintain notions of duty that can be generally characterized as “positive”; some of the “positively expressed dharmic virtues” that Vail identifies in her examination of the sources are: tranquility; wisdom; and kindness; others include “purity, knowledge, and equanimity” (2002, 383). Central to Vail’s thesis is her observation that while they reject most aspects of Brahmanical householder *dharma*, sadhus “recreate” for themselves notions of duty that mirror their own unique religious and social worlds as individuals who participate in what is a wholistically governed cosmic system (2002, 392). As Vail states,

We can easily argue that the totality of Hindu dharma is *not* subsumed under *varnāśramadharmā*—the rules of caste, class, and stage of life. Renouncer-as-Brahman...and Brahman-as-Absolute are in these texts viewed as the supreme *dharma*—a super moral, nondualistic, natural, and highest Self-expression of what morality is—an intrinsic Good (*sat*) basic to human and divine nature. The idea that the renouncer’s behavior and state of mind constitute an antinomian state is, I think, a point of view that primarily expresses the concept of a unified householder Brahmin morality and society, with its dualistic conceptions of good and bad, external purity and impurity, necessary performance of rites, and social insider vs. outsider conceptions. The Samn U [*Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*] authors’ virtue ethics must be evaluated from the core of their own stated or implied value system. Hinduism as a whole does allow for such plural moral systems, though many common virtues and codes of behavior are widely shared. (italics in original; Vail 2002, 392).

Nityananda Puri’s representations of his experiences of renunciation likewise support the position that both notions and enactments of *kartavya* are weaved into the variously defined and expressed religiosities of sadhus. As the excerpt above explicates, since, as Nityananda Puri explained to me, the guiding purpose of sadhus’ life path is to experience the individual soul (*ātma*) as the highest soul/self (*paramātma*), in which all the seeming mental and physical dualities of existence “melt [*līn ho jānā*]” in an overriding flood of unity with the “Self [*paramātma*],” their duty qualifies as supreme

vis-à-vis that of householders. There is no other duty or moral imperative more important than that of realizing oneself as divinity. Understandably, duty so conceptualized structures and determines most of the Rajasthani male sadhus' experiences and interpretations of their life path; thus, instead of themes like destiny and devotion, renunciation for the male sadhus necessarily implicates the importance of personal agency and action as illustrative of their religious lives. We find arguments for agency in renunciation threaded throughout the personal narratives of the male sadhus through performance of the narrative themes of practice (*abhyās*), effort (*prayās; pratyan*), and work (*kārya*).

V. B. “*Everything Happens from Practice*”: Practice, Effort, and Action

The next “conversational narrative” (Prasad 2004, 2007) that I collected from Nityananda Puri, which progressively metamorphosized into a life narrative, and thereafter a teaching on the meaning of renunciation (*sannyās*), underlines these three themes as explicit markers for the construction of his ascetic identity and practice. I recorded this narrative approximately a week after Nityananda Puri had narrated the above vignette of his life. The context of our conversation concerned my attempts to understand Nityananda Puri's position on what role, if any, he perceived destiny to play in his becoming a sadhu. Since, over the sixth months in which I had been conducting fieldwork, I had heard the female sadhus, including Nityananda Puri's disciple Sharda Puri, construct their lives in light of the themes of destiny and devotion, I wanted to learn whether the male sadhus similarly expressed and understood their lives through these themes, or whether these ideas signify instead gendered interpretations of asceticism.

Participating in my discussion with Nityananda Puri were Sharda Puri and my fieldwork assistant Manvendra Singh.

Nityananda Puri [NP]: Everything happens from practice.

Antoinette [A]: Yes; my question is, If our fate [*bhāgya*] is already decided, then how can we change it? If, in every birth, our fate is determined by what we did in the last birth, is there any way to change what's already written? If I wanted to be a sadhu in this birth, but it was not in my fate, then I could not become a sadhu, right?

NP: [emphatically] No, no. It's not like that at all.

A: O.k., so it's not like that?

NP: No.

A: But if my fate is "fixed" [uses English word]?

NP: Look, as much "service" [uses English word] as you can do, you will benefit by that much [in other words, 'you reap what you sow']. If you keep sleeping after you eat and drink, then you are not going to get anything. But if you practice, if you make an effort [to do] postures every morning and evening [thought trails off and does not finish the rest of the sentence]. It's exactly like that. You'll see that you will surely get whatever you want [through practice and effort]. You will certainly get it. If you will be intent on working [for what you want], then you get that thing. But if you're lazy, you'll get nothing.

A: And those who have renounced the world do so for the sake of attaining liberation [*mokṣ*]?

NP: It's like this—when I went to my guru in order to take renunciation [*sannyās*], I won't speak for anyone else here, but at that time I went to my guru because there was this fixed belief in my heart that I will certainly achieve liberation [*mokṣ*]. This is why I left [my home]. Now, [when I was there with my guru] I served him for a few days; and whatever knowledge he gave me I went out [into the world] in order to practice it. By separating myself from my guru, I went out to experience the knowledge he gave me.

I'll tell you something else you'll find such *mahatmas* [an honorific term for sadhus] who say, "What is there now to do? Now we have become *sannyāsīs*; we are in the form of Brahma [*svarūp*]—so, what else is there left for us to do?" Shouldn't one reflect on the *ātma* [after taking renunciation]? It's not like I can get renunciation simply by wearing the ochre robes!

Manvendra [M]: This is just the first step.

NP: This [taking renunciation] is the first step. Therefore, when we take renunciation it doesn't mean that I can say, "Now I am a *sannyāsī* so I no longer have to do any work [*kārya*] or duties [*kartavya*]."

M: Right; this is just the beginning.

NP: Our first duty [as sadhus] is to analyze the essence of the *ātma*.

M: Exactly!

NP: The second [duty] is, whatever someone says it is our duty to listen to that. Having listened to what was said it then becomes our duty to analyze that, too. After analyzing [what is said by others, or by the guru], whatever decision we make inside our hearts that, “Hey, this such and such *mahātma* is not good,” then, o.k., [make the decision]. Why? Is this body of ours only meant for eating and drinking, and dying? No! We need to know ourselves. Without knowing [oneself], without making any effort, we cannot know ourselves [as the *paramātma*]. This is the real situation of the renunciant.

But now-a-days, 90% of the sadhus, what do they say? “We are sadhus. Why should we care? Nothing else remains for us.”

A: O.k., some sadhus speak like this.

NP: Look, the *paramātma* [literally, “beyond the [limitations of the] soul,” meaning the soul that has realized its pure, non-dualistic nature as God. That is, when the *ātma* has become the *paramātma*; thus, *paramātma* may also connote another name for the formless, numberless, and nameless God] will cry [if we don’t analyze ourselves]! When we become united with the *paramātma*, it will come to you. This is the meaning of renunciation—that we shall keep all the lusts of the world [*vāsanāṅ*] on one side. I told you before that ‘renunciation’ means that all kinds of lusts [*sarvoparan*]; all kinds of imaginations [*kalpon*]; all kinds of thirsts [*trṣṇā*]...

Sharda Puri [SP]: [interjects here] are destroyed.

NP: It [renunciation] means to sacrifice [*tyāg karnā*] every kind of lust; “to throw down,” [*nyās kar denā*] [speaks emphatically] this is renunciation.

M: To throw down [*nyās*] means the same as to sacrifice [*tyāg*]?

NP: The meaning of ‘throwing down’ [*nyās kā matlab*] is only to renounce [*tyāg karnā*]

SP: Yes, renunciation means to sacrifice. But it’s not like you have to sacrifice eating bread, too.

In his textured narrative, Nityananda Puri explicitly identifies practice (*abhyās*),

effort (*prayās*; *pratyan*), and action (*kārya*) as the key markers of a renunciant life.

Through emphasis on these ideals, Nityananda Puri performatively invokes classical

Brahmanic textual notions of renunciation into his narrative. Based on his explications of

these themes, we can group them under the umbrella theme of *kartavya*; that is, like

detachment, the idea of sadhus’ duty encompasses the elements of practice, effort, and

action, because of which initiates “get everything,” most significantly, an experience in

which the individual soul realizes itself as the great soul, the *paramātmā*. Nityananda Puri plugs his story within this definitive framework in his contextualization of the details of his own renunciation. As the story makes clear, his renunciation stems from a “fixed” desire in his “heart” to achieve liberation, or *mokṣ*. Having renounced the world, Nityananda Puri believes he will attain *mokṣ* from the lusts, thirsts, and imaginations characteristic of human experience in that very world. “This is why I left [for Haridwar]” he explains—because of his own choice. Even the expression Nityananda Puri uses to articulate this idea, “to take renunciation [*sannyās lenā*],” implies that he himself chose to renounce rather than, as the female sadhus understand, God called them to asceticism, and the complete statement he makes in the context of “I went to see my guru in order to take renunciation” similarly connotes that he chose not only his path, but also chose his guru, too, whose knowledge Nityananda Puri would later test through the means of daily effort and practice.

That Nityananda Puri’s encounter with the guru constitutes a conscious choice and not the mysterious hand of destiny reveals a significant distinction between male and female sadhus’ experiences of renunciation. We can summarize this gendered difference as: according to my data, men tend to choose their gurus and women are chosen by their gurus. For Nityananda Puri, as for most of the male sadhus, initiates carefully select their guru; yet, Gangagiri’s narrative above illustrates the opposite idea: because of destiny, she “found” her guru, Gaurigiriji who, in turn, chose her to be his disciple (*chelā*). Her emphasis on the resistance she felt to following her guru in the alleyway, as well as on the trenchant fear of him she experienced during their initial encounter, enable Gangagiri to represent the life-altering experience of “meeting the guru” as Gaurigiriji’s choice,

rather than as her own. This is not to say that Gangagiri had less agency than Nityananda Puri had in meeting, and thus, in choosing her guru, but rather that, as with her asceticism, Gangagiri attempts to deny any personal agency by emphasizing the role of destiny. In doing so, like most of the female sadhus, Gangagiri constructs agency in a gendered way.

Nityananda Puri, in contrast, understands his experience of meeting his guru as a careful selection process in which he searched, listened, tested, chose, and finally learned from the one whom he decided would be his guru. “Look,” he explains to me, “you have to search for someone [to be your guru]. Understand that you have to make a guru. But don’t just make anyone [your guru]; choose someone with knowledge.” In this conversational context Nityananda Puri describes his experience of choosing a guru. Following his departure from home, Nityananda Puri sets off for Haridwar in order “to become a sadhu.” But, as he recounts, “I didn’t tell anyone that I was going [to Haridwar] to become a sadhu; I didn’t tell anyone that I have to make someone my guru. I said nothing.” With only “two-thousand rupees in silver coins” in his pocket, and through the assistance of a “naked sadhu” whom he met on the way to Haridwar, Nityananda Puri arrives at an ashram that was packed with many “big,” or learned, sadhus and gurus. He remains there for some time, in order to fulfill his intention of making someone his guru who would give him initiation into renunciation. After much searching, observation, and thought on the matter, Nityananda Puri reaches a decision. He says,

Then I thought [to myself], “whatever he is, he is the one [i.e., guru] for me. I will become only his disciple.” So my guru said, “Hey child [*bacchā*; an endearing way that some gurus address their disciples], Look here: There are so many *mahants* [i.e., learned sadhus] from large *maths* [ashrams and/or ascetic institutions], who have property and wealth. It would have been better if you would have become their disciple.” But I

told him, “I don’t need a *math* or wealth; I need a guru! Either you can make me your disciple or not. But if you refuse, I’ll leave [and find someone else to make a guru].” ...Look, what I mean to say is, when a guru can examine us, we, too, have to examine our guru. You should filter the water and then drink it.

In comparison with the narratives of the female sadhus, this story illustrates a role reversal between teacher and disciple: a determined Nityananda Puri chooses his reluctant guru, a process he equates metaphorically with the filtering of water, while the hesitant guru resists his persistent and demanding *chela*. Whether an individual chooses the guru or whether s/he takes renunciation, male sadhus conceptualize their asceticism in terms of the crucial elements of practice, effort, and action. But what accounts for these gendered interpretations of renunciation?

Nityananda Puri’s story sheds light on this issue. How he represents his religious life correlates directly with how he understands the meaning of renunciation itself. Nityananda Puri tells us that renunciation (*sannyās*) means “to throw down” or “to sacrifice” all types of “lusts”; all kinds of “impressions of the imagination”; and all forms of “thirst,” or desires. Renunciation, so defined, signifies an intense, active process; hence, detachment, practice, effort, and hard work are implied by his definition of the term. Only through the consistent implementation of these means do sadhus progressively climb the “steps” of their path and fulfill their duty as sadhus. In fact, as Nityananda Puri emphasizes, (taking) renunciation is “only the first step [*pahalī siddhī*].” Neither initiation into the path itself, nor simply wearing the ochre robes absolves sadhus from their duties, of which Nityananda Puri identifies two: to analyze the essence of the soul and to analyze others’ words (and actions). Because, in Nityananda Puri’s mind, renunciation constitutes an active process of introspection, reflection, and analysis, it not

only requires but demands of sadhus individual agency in order for them to be successful in that path. If, as the female sadhus described to me, renunciation were an experience of “singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān*”—inner and spontaneous experiences of devotion to the divine and detachment from the world, then both sadhus’ being on the path and their success (or failure) in it might be interpreted as destiny. But, as Nityananda Puri clarifies at the beginning of his narrative, destiny is not a factor in whether or not one becomes (and stays) a sadhu in this birth. In his view, “[i]t’s not like that at all.”

In another conversation with Nityananda Puri about the role of destiny as an indeterminate force in one’s life he maintains, “How do we know what our destiny is? How do we know that it was written in our destiny, and that’s why we became sadhus [in this birth]? All these things are only imaginary [*kapol-kalpita*].” Nevertheless, Nityananda Puri slightly qualifies his position on destiny, telling me that “our lives have a little to do with destiny,” and he gives me an example to illustrate his point:

If I want [to build] a house I have to bring the bricks, ‘cement,’¹²⁶ clay, and four men who will build it. All of these items must come together to build a house. If one of these is missing, the house cannot be built. So, we ourselves have to make the effort [*prayāsa*] [to build a house]. First we have to bring the bricks, then the cement, then the sand, and then we have to call the people to construct the house. O.k.? Understand that destiny happens; but it doesn’t mean it has to be written [in order] for it to happen.

Nityananda Puri’s qualification of the meaning of destiny turns the concept on its head. Rather than interpret destiny as a determinative force in our lives, he prefers to think of it as that which we determine and, thus, control. Likewise, destiny is not “written” before we take birth; instead, we write it as we plot the course of our lives.

Nityananda Puri’s clever re-appropriation and reinterpretation of the concept of destiny

¹²⁶ As a reminder to the reader, words in single quotation marks indicate that the speaker used the English word rather than Hindi one.

reinforces the underlying importance of male agency in renunciation, a view most of the male sadhus shared. As Digambara Devendra Saraswati,¹²⁷ the *mahant*, or head sadhu, of an ashram in Dilwaria, Rajsamand district, stressed in one of our meetings, “[o]ur own two hands create [our] destiny.”

Their reinterpretations of the term aside, however, most of the sadhus whom I asked undermine or scoff at the idea of destiny as an explanation for their own asceticism for several reasons. As the second of Nityananda Puri’s conversational narratives suggests, male sadhus¹²⁸ can use the concept as an excuse to avoid the discipline, or *sādhana*, required of initiates for inner, spiritual advancement which, for male and female sadhus alike, is the general goal of the path. “[N]ow-a-days,” Nityananda Puri informs me, “ninety percent of the sadhus...say, ‘We’re sadhus. Why should we care? Nothing else remains for us to do.’” While his estimate may be an exaggeration, Nityananda Puri’s concern over the growing number of male sadhus who abuse their position to claim spiritual superiority is plausible. Renunciation is an unregulated, social institution that “lacks [any] centralized...authority” and has a reputation for attracting people of questionable character and intentions (Khandelwal 2004, 45). Fraudulent (*pākhaṇḍī*) sadhus, whether the subject of folklore (Bloomfield 1924) or local gossip, are a problem in India. Recognizing this, the male sadhus’ emphases on practice, effort and hard work prudently defend the veracity of their religious lives to others.

¹²⁷ As it was explained to me by Devendra Saraswati, the title “Digambara” here refers to a branch of renouncers in the Daśanāmi sect known as *nāgā bābās* who roam around naked, or “clad in sky,” which is the literal meaning of *digambara*. At the time that I met him, Devendra Saraswati was, however, wearing a small loincloth around his body. According to him, earlier in his life, particularly when he wandered as an itinerant *bābā* throughout India, he remained naked as a testament to his own detachment from the world.

¹²⁸ While Nityananda Puri did not actually say “male” sadhus in the context of our conversations, it was clear to me that he was referring to male sadhus in particular.

Not all the male sadhus, however, agree with these dominant male views of destiny; of the thirteen sadhus whom I interviewed, three of them suggested that the possibility of oneself choosing renunciation, rather than being chosen by God, creates a greater probability for the presence of imposter (male) sadhus on the path. From these sadhus' perspectives, God (*bhagvān*; *paramātmā*) decides for whom renunciation "is written" in this birth, and to this extent, initiates' renunciation is considered to be "pure [*śuddh*]," as its source lies in an infallible divine, instead of morally fallible humans. As one male sadhu said, "the ones for whom renunciation is written" will not harm anyone; cheat anyone; beat or kill anyone; or "fill [their] stomach" unnecessarily, because their lives rest in God's hands. For these three sadhus, in my experience in the minority, destiny was as, if not more, important a theme as those of practice, effort, and hard work in their personal narrative performances.

V. C. "Only God Knows": Illness, Destiny, and Renunciation in Male Sadhus' Narratives

An example of male sadhus' alternative interpretation of agency in renunciation is the life story that Baldevgiri, whom I met for the first time in 2005, told me and Manvendra Singh. Shortly after my departure from Udaipur in the summer of 2003, Baldevgiri began residing at Mayanath's ashram in Gogunda; he served as both the *pujārī* of the adjoining temple and the 'assistant' caretaker of the ashram. In my initial encounter with him I remember being startled by and unsure of his commanding presence and forthright personality. One afternoon, Manvendra and I had arrived unannounced at Mayanath's ashram, a usual practice for us, since Mayanath, as most of the sadhus, did not have a phone at her hermitage. The temple and the ashram were empty, however. On

the assumption that Mayanath would eventually return to the site in the early afternoon, Manvendra left on his motorcycle to purchase some milk for tea. During his absence, I sat under the magnificent mango tree that graced the front of the ashram and provided shade for temple visitors and passersby. While writing some details about the ashram in my notebook, a government bus pulled up at the site. I mistakenly thought Mayanath had returned. To my surprise, I saw a tall, lean man dressed in ochre-colored clothing jump off the bus; with the gait of a lion rushing toward its prey, he moved rapidly toward me, making direct eye contact and looking very serious. Not knowing who he was and thinking I might be in a difficult situation, I crammed the notebook into my purse and stood up to leave. Immediately Baldevgiri called out, “Hello! Hello! [using the English word] Don’t be afraid. Please sit [down] and let me make you some tea.” After several meetings with him, I became comfortable with the multi-faceted complexity to Baldevgiri’s character, and many conversations on his life, his stories, and his work evolved from our daily meetings over eating food and drinking tea at the ashram.

In one of those conversations, Baldevgiri explained to me that, “The life of a *mahātma* is extremely meaningful; it is a very difficult life to get. Only the one in whose destiny it happens gets the life of a *mahātma*.” Baldevgiri spoke these exact words before he began to narrate his life story to me and Manvendra. Born in Madhya Pradesh, the middle child of three brothers and the son of Brahmin parents who lived in a Hanuman ashram/temple they built, Baldevgiri was, as he described, a “sickly child.” From early on in his childhood he developed mysterious stomach problems that left him unable to eat or drink. Although his parents had sought numerous types of treatments from various

doctors, “nothing worked.” Having exhausted their allopathic options, Baldevgiri’s mother made a bold move. He told us,

Baldevgiri [BD]: I wasn’t getting well...I was born in the Hanumān ashram, o.k.? So, what did my mother do? She went to the temple and put me there.

Antoinette [A]: She placed you in the temple?

BG: She put me there.

Manvendra Singh [MS]: Just you?

A: Because you were ill, right?

BG: I was sick [*bimār*]; the doctors couldn’t do anything to make me well again. So, my mother brought me to the temple, put me there, and said to Mahadev [Śiva]: “It’s you who can make him well and it’s you who can kill him.”

A: How old were you when this happened?

BG: I was approximately seven or eight years old. I was young.

His mother’s plan worked; after several days of staying in the Hanumān temple, Baldevgiri became well again. This is how he described his experience:

BD: I slept [in the temple] for several days. Then I got up and came from there. I said [to my mother], “I need food [*rotī*].” I ate half of a piece of bread [*rotī*]. Since that time, my mother accepted this, and she thought “Now he will do your [Hanuman’s] *pūjā*.” What did she think?

A: That you would do Hanuman’s *pūjā*.

BD: Yes, I would do Hanuman’s *pūjā*. Since then, such a [feeling of] detachment [*vairāg*] occurred in my soul [*ātma*] that I thought, “I never want to marry.” There was no longer any meaning for me to marry. And, if I were to have married [someone] then I couldn’t do Hanuman’s *pūjā* anymore. Instead I thought, “I will do *bhajans*, and from the *bhajans* I will earn something [here he means “spiritual profits”] for my soul, my life, and my family’s life so that everything shall turn out good.

As his story implies, by the grace and power of Mahadev, Baldevgiri emerged victorious over his mysterious illness. His life, however, would take another unexpected turn when an equally mysterious sadhu showed up at his family’s ashram.

BD: After this [i.e., after I got well and my mother dedicated me to the service of Hanuman], a *mahātma* came. We had an ashram, right? The *mahātma* came to the ashram. He said, “I’ll take this child.” My mother said, “I give him to you; take him!”

A: How old were you when the *mahātma* came to your ashram?

BD: I was ten, fifteen years old...From there [the temple], the *mahātma* took me. He explained a lot to me.

MS: From there where did he take you?

BD: We came to the banks of the Narbada river.

MS: O.k., you arrived at the banks of the Narbada river in Madhya Pradesh?

BD: In Madhya Pradesh...We came on the banks of [the river]. He had a small hermitage [*kuṭiyā*] there. He kept me there for some days and taught me a lot. He even told me, "Son, don't become a *mahātma*." But, what was inside of me? That was detachment. How did this detachment happen? In the [feeling] that I would only do *bhajans*. This is what we call detachment. This detachment has been there since childhood. It comes from within [the soul]. Only from that [detachment] is a *mahātma* made. Only the one for whom it is destined to happen becomes detached...

A: You didn't choose to become a sadhu?

BD: I didn't choose to become a sadhu. You don't choose [to become a sadhu]. There has to be detachment. If it [detachment] doesn't come [automatically], you can never become a sadhu...Everything is written in your destiny. Every morsel [of food] and water is written in your destiny. The food of this place [Mayanath's ashram] is written [for me]. As long as my destiny to be here is written, then I'll remain for that many days. But when my food and water are no longer written [in this place], then I will move on.

A: Your food and water? What?

BD: Yes, bread; the one who eats, his name is written only on that food...The *mahātmās* have a saying that the *paramātmā* tells us [what to do]. Like, the *paramātmā* says, "Now your work is no longer of this place. Go to another place." So we have to go to another place.

A: So, I mean, you really don't know how long you'll stay here then [at Mayanath's ashram]?

BD: No, I don't know; it could be that I leave tomorrow. But it's my wish to stay here. Do you understand?

A: I understand that within you is the wish to remain here. But until God [*bhagvān*] says, "Go from here," you can stay. But you don't know when you'll go or how long you'll stay.

BD: Yes, it's like this...only God knows.

Of all the personal narratives I recorded from the male sadhus, Baldevgiri's is atypical; his narrative self-representation reflects the opposite of Nityananda Puri's. Baldevgiri explicitly structures his story around the narrative themes of destiny and detachment, and implicitly around devotion. At the outset of this telling, not only does Baldevgiri invoke destiny to frame all the events of his life, he also identifies detachment,

the feeling that, in his mind, arises automatically from within the soul, as the *sine qua non* of his renunciation. As with the female sadhus, for Baldevgiri, too, detachment arises early in his childhood, erasing any desire thereafter for him to fulfill social expectations of marriage and householding. Had he married, Baldevgiri tells us, he would not have been able to do “Hanuman’s *pūjā*.” In itself, this statement implicates the influence of devotion to Hanuman, to Mahadev, as well, in his becoming a sadhu; Baldevgiri’s characterization of his religiosity in the context of “doing *bhajans*” in order to earn the “spiritual currency” to make “everything...turn out good” further announces a trope for the signification of his experience of devotion to the divine, one that seems synonymous with his experience of renunciation. His seamless stitching of these themes together in his narrative identifies an understanding of renunciation that approximates the interpretations expressed by the female sadhus.

Through use of these narrative themes Baldevgiri consciously deflects the possibility of his own agency accounting for his renunciation. For clarification, I asked him if he chose his path, to which he adamantly replied, “I didn’t choose to become a sadhu. You don’t choose to become a sadhu.” Rather, in his case, destiny, or perhaps the *paramātmā*, chose him to become a sadhu. But, apart from his soul being inundated with feelings of detachment, how did Baldevgiri know that the life of a *mahātma* was written for him? To answer this question we need to focus on the motif of illness (*bīmārī*) in Baldevgiri’s story. Just as the predictions of an astrologer, visions of gods and goddesses, and the prophesying of elders signified portents of destiny in the stories of most of the female sadhus, illness serves a similar purpose in Baldevgiri’s narrative. And yet, illness

is more than a sign of Baldevgiri's destiny; it is also the catalyst for his renunciation of the world.

Baldevgiri's narrative shares the motif of illness with Nityananda Puri's. Just as Nityananda Puri's injury, which renders him "dead" or incapable as a householder, serves as a conduit for his renunciation of the world, Baldevgiri's illness also sets him on the path of becoming a sadhu. In this respect, Baldevgiri's use of illness as a narrative motif may reflect an implicit accommodation to authoritative understandings of renunciation. However, a noticeable difference between the two sadhus' approaches to illness still remains: whereas agency is born of Nityananda Puri's injury, passivity results from Baldevgiri's. Four conjoined events in the narrative, all of which stem from the impetus of Baldevgiri's illness, promote this idea. Unsuccessful in finding treatments for her son's illness, Baldevgiri's mother decides to place him in the Hanuman temple, requesting Mahadev's assistance. Her method of beseeching the deity similarly suggests that Baldevgiri's mystery illness has a divine source: "It's you who can make him well and it's you who can kill him." Alone and separated from his family, Baldevgiri remains in the temple until Mahadev heals him. As soon as Mahadev cures him of his illness Baldevgiri's mother once again decides to dedicate him to the service of Hanuman. Occurring in the context of a Hanuman temple, Baldevgiri's miraculous healing in turn validates his belief that his renunciation was "written" before his birth. For the majority of the male (and some female) sadhus, Hanuman is their patron deity, a symbol not only of the virtues of celibacy (*brahmacārya*) and virility (*vīr*) but also of devotion to God (cf. Alter 1992; 1994; Khandelwal 2001). In our conversations, the male sadhus explained that Hanuman's permanent state of celibacy simultaneously intensifies and maintains his

devotion to God, because of which they identified him as a moral exemplar of their path. To this extent, as Bynum suggests in her study of the lives of medieval Christian saints (Bynum 1996, 27-51), the male sadhus' symbols, such as ritual "death" and/or ritual healing by celibate deities, underscore their experiences of renunciation as one in which they must separate completely from their former worlds and selves. Though, in Baldevgiri's case, his complete "break" from family does not happen until he becomes a teenager.

By linking the three events of his (1) being placed in the Hanuman temple by his mother; (2) being healed in that temple by Mahadev; and (3) being dedicated as Hanuman's *pujārī* by his mother to his mystery illness in his narrative self-representation, Baldevgiri constructs a direct chain of divine causation, and in doing so communicates the inevitability of his renunciation to his audience. The fourth event that cements this perception of his life in the story is the mystery sadhu who appears at the family temple and announces his plans to take the young Baldevgiri away from his parents, a decision to which Baldevgiri's mother, not surprisingly, voices no objection (cf. Kakar 1982).

The apparent thematic distinctions between the two sadhus' stories alert us to the ways particular individuals of the same gender accept and/or resist culturally normative understandings of their gender in their narrative self-representations. That is, the patterned use of the themes of practice, effort, and hard work by the male sadhus reflects and reproduces dominant (male) constructions of Indian masculinity. The male sadhus' perception of these themes as efficacious constituents of (male) renunciation depicts their internalization and acceptance of the behavioral norms attributed their gender, expressed via the notion that men choose their worlds, and by doing so, create their destinies.

“[T]aken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions” about gender thus underlie and shape the male sadhus’ interpretations of their religiosity, producing in turn gendered narratives of renunciation (Lorber 1994, 13). Although Bynum represents male religiosity as an experience of gender reversal (1987; 1988; 1992), my data suggest that while the male sadhus break with their personal and social worlds in their renunciation of the world, they do not necessarily break with dominant constructions of manhood, but rather appropriate them in the interpretation of their own asceticism. This observation offers another explanation for why the majority of the male sadhus I worked with rejected the significance of destiny in their taking renunciation—the very idea “disrupts” normative expectations of masculinity by questioning the role of male agency (Lorber 1994).

Yet, Baldevgiri’s story does illustrate a break with normative representations of masculinity by means of his appropriation of the narrative themes of destiny, detachment, and devotion, all of which allow him to resist, as the female sadhus do, notions of personal agency in his “taking” renunciation. But even his “feminine” self-representation does not constitute his categorical rejection of masculinity. On the contrary, Baldevgiri’s utilization of the narrative sub-theme of illness as well as the narrative symbol of ritualized (near) “death,” in this case, underscores “continuity” with dominant male constructions of a religious self. While he interprets these (male) experiences through the lens of “feminine themes,” rather than the “masculine” ones of practice, effort, and hard work, his doing so demonstrates more a strategy for authorizing himself as a “real” *male* sadhu to his audience than a perception of himself as feminized. As multiple views of renunciation coexist amongst the Rajasthani sadhus, other male sadhus who hear this story would not necessarily discount the validity of Baldevgiri’s interpretations, nor

would they perceive him as “fake” because of them. Rather, in its depiction of an alternative view of men’s experiences of renunciation, Baldevgiri’s story leaves open the question of whether destiny affects one’s becoming a sadhu, because, ultimately, as Baldevgiri himself maintains—and, if pressed, the other sadhus might also concede—“only God knows.” On the whole, then, Baldevgiri does not assert destiny, but instead lets it be part of the narrative. His performance contrasts with those of female sadhus, in which destiny acts as the woof on which they weave their narratives.

Conclusions: What the Personal Narrative Performances of the Sadhus Create

When we examine the lives of the sadhus through the various narrative themes and symbols integrated into their personal narratives, several illuminating patterns emerge. Through the motif of injury and/or illness the male sadhus construct themselves in accordance to authoritative precepts on renunciation for two reasons. First, in the view of most of the (medieval) textual sources, ideally high-caste males of an advanced age are eligible for renunciation, because by then, as the authors of the texts assumed, males have fulfilled not only their domestic but also their social and ritual obligations, including their “three debts” to the gods, teachers, and ancestors. Second, from an anthropological perspective, societal expectations of householding remain embedded in the “social body” of Indian culture to such an extent that they are constantly produced, enacted, and reinforced at both the “micro” and “macro” levels of society, such as the family, religious institutions, the workplace, the economy, and the government (Lorber 1994, 96). Although Brahmanical constructions and models have masculinized the tradition of renunciation (Khandelwal 2004), men who deviate from the traditional model of householding by renouncing the world still experience various forms of emotional and

social stigmatization. Their narrative strategies, thus, represent religious responses to the potential for such stigmatization.



Sadhu Gauri Shankar Bharati prepares to do *pūjā* to the monkey-god Hanumān, who symbolizes celibacy and asceticism for many sadhus in Rajasthan and beyond. Photo by Antoinette DeNapoli.

Male sadhus like Devendra Saraswati and Nityananda Puri renounced without either fulfilling or completing the traditional expectations of marriage and householding for caste Hindus. While these sadhus are *de facto* exceptions to the Śāstric precepts, they utilize narrative strategies for minimizing this fact in order to legitimate their renunciation. In sharp contrast to the men, most of the female sadhus I worked with had both fulfilled and completed their householding duties before they formally renounced the world. Sharda Puri, the disciple of Nityananda Puri, explains the process by which she came to renounce the world:

Nobody influenced me to renounce [the world]. I used to do my rituals [*pūjā-pāth*] at home, too. ... There were responsibilities [that] I had to take care of as a householder. After doing all that I said, “Now I don’t want it anymore [householding]. So please release me from this.” They [her adult children; by this time she was a widow] released me, because there was nothing more for me to do [as a householder].

Sharda Puri’s narrative matter-of-factly expresses an underlying recognition of and compliance with traditional precepts that identify an appropriate time to take renunciation—after all the householding duties are finished. If it were not for the

undeniable fact of her gender, Sharda Puri, like most of the Rajasthani female sadhus, would have been considered as an exemplar of the Brahmanical textual prescriptions on renunciation. Nevertheless, with the forceful combination of the authoritative texts that reserve renunciation primarily for males, and societal norms that associate womanhood with domesticity against them, the strategy of the female sadhus for expressing their right to lead alternative lives is to draw on the traditional religious ideas of duty, destiny, and devotion in the performance of their personal narratives, and represent themselves through these narrative strategies as exceptions to gendered norms.

While their lives may transcend the normative boundaries of their gender, as their personal narratives amply illustrate, the female sadhus still perceive themselves as women; their narrative themes subtly reflect and reinforce this perception of themselves. Emphasizing their connection with God, however, clearly allows the sadhus to expand what counts as femininity for them. Through the power of their devotion to God, they stand up for themselves—in trains, jungles, markets, the home—against family, friends, and strangers, often facing great adversity because of it, just to be able, as they say, “to sing to God,” that is, to be able to lead the life which, in their views, they were destined for in this birth. Because of their relationship with God, the female sadhus become empowered, as they told me, “[to] leave everything,” but only, of course, after having fulfilled their socio-ritual duties as householders.

On the one hand, then, the lives of the Rajasthani female sadhus are strikingly similar to those of the Pentecostal women preachers in Lawless’ study. By virtue of their religious positions, both the sadhus and the Pentecostal preachers employ various types of narrative strategies in their constructions of self as a means to negotiate their daily

lives with societal norms and pressures. Even though these women know they are different from everyone else, they carefully and convincingly account for that difference by interpreting their lives through traditional frameworks and ideas, which, in turn, traditionalize their own exceptional lives, providing them their status, power, and authority (Lawless 1988, 57-87). On the other hand, however, and as Lawless suggests, the Pentecostal women preachers can remain preachers as long as they are able to straddle successfully the demands of their religious duties with their domestic ones. That is, only as long as these women remain wives and mothers are they able to justify their religious position (and the prestige and spiritual authority that come with it) as preachers to their congregations, which are run by men (Lawless 1988, 145-170). In this respect, the female sadhus could not be more different from the women preachers, because by renouncing the world, the sadhus renounce the roles of wife, mother, daughter, caretaker, and so forth. Renunciation, as such, implies a rejection of these social roles (and social identities) through which Indian women, in particular, gain their status, power, and authority. While being a sadhu also carries status, power, and authority in Indian society, this status is often attributed to and associated with men, not women.

As this chapter has shown, no sadhu is exempt from having to negotiate and validate his/her life and position in some way to others; yet, for the female sadhus, their negotiations are especially poignant in light of their social contexts. Additionally, the narrative strategies of the sadhus have different implications for negotiating their asceticism. Whereas the male sadhus' narrative strategies of practice, effort, and hard work promote notions of agency, as these themes support dominant understandings of masculinity, the female sadhus' narrative strategies resist it, indicating, as a result, their

recognition of gender differences. Only by downplaying agency through their emphases on the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion are the female sadhus empowered to enact and maintain agency in their lives, which they must in order to (be able to) lead alternative lives (cf. Khandelwal 2004).

Gangagiri's story about her encounter with the two policemen that I described at the beginning of this chapter illustrates that the female sadhus negotiate through performance of personal stories their everyday lives as women and as ascetics. Not only does Gangagiri's narrative depict the nature and process of the female sadhus' negotiations of their lives, but it also acutely comments on how negotiating agency is (and, perhaps, shall remain) a gendered issue. Most significantly, the story, even in its implicit rejection of personal agency for female sadhus, vividly offers its listeners (and readers) a strategy for enacting female agency in a patriarchal society and renunciant path. That is, despite the many obstacles involved, the worlds of women sadhus are possible and hence flourish by "the sweetness of [their] tongue[s]."

What we sadhus do is *satsang*. This is our *vaikunth*—Gangagiri Maharaj.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Forget Happiness! Give Me Suffering Instead”: Gender and the Performance of Devotional Asceticism through Popular Narrative

Introduction

“I know many stories,” Gangagiri says to the packed group of devotees who have gathered in the courtyard of Tulsigiri’s ashram in Shyalpura village where Gangagiri has been invited for *satsang*. Gangagiri is sort of a celebrity in Shyalpura, loved by Tulsigiri and her devotees. Many men and women from the village have come to listen to Gangagiri’s stories and teachings. Some stop by while taking respite from their work in the nearby corn fields to participate in the event; and a few villagers inquire about me, the foreign woman from “Amreeka [America]” who has accompanied Gangagiri to Shyalpura. “Hey Maharaj,” Tulsigiri calls out to Gangagiri from inside her ashram, engaged in the task of finding empty burlap covers to give to the steady stream of devotees entering the courtyard, what about Mira’s story?” Emerging from the ashram with two tattered covers in hand, Tulsigiri asks me, “*Dīdī* [lit., “sister”] have you heard Mira’s story?” Gangagiri remarks approvingly, “Yes, yes. That’s a great story. Tell it.” Tulsigiri then begins her narrative performance of Mira Bai’s journey on the ascetic path:

[T]ulsi [G]iri: Okay, *bhagvān* [this is Tulsigiri’s way of addressing her audience], Mira Bai took birth, and when she was twelve years old she had to become a *yogī* (*joganiyā*). It had been twelve years since her birth, so Mira Bai was reminded that it was time to become a *yogī*. God said, ‘Hey friend, it’s been twelve years already.’ The astrologer (*jyotiṣi*) who tells about the past and the future, he saw it correctly. The astrologer said that whether it happens now or later, it will happen [i.e., Mira will become a *yogī*]. Rana Dudaji [Mira’s grandfather] said to the Brahmin [the astrologer], ‘But the young girl of mine is

only twelve years old. She won't become a *yogī*! I will put you in the grinder and crush you into pieces. But if it does happen, then I will give you half of the kingdom.'

[G]anga[G]iri: She [Mira] was the daughter of the Rathores. She was a Rathore from Merta [village name].

[TG]: So, the Brahmin said [Gangagiri interrupts TG here]
[GG]: Dudaji Merta, he was Mira's grandfather.

[TG]: Okay, so Mira Bai's mother said, 'Respected astrologer, you take this gift of pearls.' Mira's mother told this very thing. She told that astrologer, 'take this gift of diamonds and pearls and change Mira's name.' 'Yashoda Bai,' the astrologer said, 'there isn't any problem with the name.' 'You have to change Mira's name. That girl of mine won't become a *yogī*,' [repeated Mira's mother]. The astrologer said, 'Look Mother, if your daughter were a piece of paper, then I could write the name on another piece of paper. But your daughter is hardly a piece of paper which can be changed. I will write it on a stone. But I can't change what's already been written in her destiny.' Mira's mother said, 'Now what will happen? The astrologer is saying she will become a *yogī* at twelve years old.' Rana Dudaji said, 'Don't worry. Let this issue go. Let her become twelve years old then we'll see what happens.'... The astrologer told them, 'She will definitely become a *yogī*, whether it's one day earlier or one day later—she will be a *yogī*!'

Mira Bai was sleeping. She started to dream: 'Today I will go to fill the water. But I have never filled the water before.' The dream came in the morning; later that morning her servants came. 'Sister, we have come to bathe you.' Mira said, 'Servant girls, bathe me quickly.' 'Why,' they asked... 'Listen, this morning I had a dream that I would go to fill water at the well. So, today I will go to the well. Girls, wash me and put on my makeup. Today, I'm going to the well to bring water.' They said, 'Sister, your grandfather, Dudaji, will put us on the grindstone and crush us. Sister, from where will he allow you to take water?' 'Don't tell him,' [Mira says]. 'If he asks, I will answer him.' She put a pot in her hands and went. There wasn't anyone at the well. Rohidas was there [nearby] making shoes. He was stringing shoes like this [shows with her hands]. Now tell me what instruments was he playing? He was stringing shoes. But Mira heard the sound of bells and cymbals playing. She asked her servants, 'From where are these cymbals and bells being played?' The servant girls said, 'A circle of devotional singing is happening [*bhajan mandalī*]; *satsang* [i.e., communal devotional worship] is happening.' 'Where is such a great *satsang* happening?' Mira Bai asked. The girls said, 'Listen sister, you are, well, one who lives in the palace. What do you have to do with bells and cymbals?' 'No, tell me, servant-girls!' Mira said. 'They must be coming from the temple,' the girls said... 'Where's the temple?' Mira asked. She started wandering here and there in the small alleys. The bells were being played here and there, so she started wandering here and there in the alleys. But she didn't find the temple where the bells were being played.

Now, Rohidas' store was open. The sound of the bells-cymbals was coming from there. Mira went into the hut of Rohidas. But there weren't any bells-cymbals being played. Rohidas was making shoes; there weren't any instruments. But she heard the sound of the bells. Mira thought, 'Who's playing

the bells?’ She asked Rohidas, ‘Where are the bells-cymbals being played?’ Mira saw a gathering of sadhus and *sants* sitting near him. She approached them and touched their feet.

[GG]: Big, big *sants* and big, big men used to come to him [Rohidas]. Big, big kings and *sants* used to come to him because he was such a great man.

[TG]: There was a gathering [*satsang*] of sadhus and *sants*. He [Rohidas] used to make [leather] shoes. Others used to come and they used to think, ‘this is a *sant*?’ Others would say, ‘*chi-chi* [colloquial Hindi expression for disapproval of someone’s actions]. The one who is making shoes is a *sant*?’ The sadhus who came used to sit far from him. They didn’t even drink his water. So, what happened was...Mira Bai fell at his feet. She fell at his feet and said, ‘*Dattā* [term of endearment for a respected teacher or *guru*], please put your hand on my head. She grabbed his hand and said, ‘Put your hand on my head. Give me a *mantra* in my ears and put a *mālā* on my throat.’¹²⁹ He said, ‘Look, sister Mira Bai, I am from a low caste. I am from the community of shoe makers (*balāī*).’

[GG]: Leather workers [repeats again].

[TG]: Yes, he was a leather shoe maker [*balāī chamar*]. Rohidas said, ‘You are a girl from a big family, and if the King discovers that you have fallen at my feet, he’ll kill me.’ Rohidas addressed the other sadhus, ‘I am from a low caste. You people give her the *mālā*.’...All the *sants* prohibited it. They said, ‘We won’t give it.’ When the *sants* said no, Mira Bai approached Rohidas again and said, ‘I have accepted only you as my guru, *Dattā*. You give it [the *mālā/mantra*].’ Rohidas gave her the cloth [*bheg denā*, meaning he gave Mira the ochre robes, which symbolizes her initiation into renunciation]. Then all [of the sadhus] said, ‘Mira Bai, you have taken *bheg*; now you have to bow at the feet of your guru one-hundred and eight times.’ ...

Okay, Mira took *bheg* and left [to return to the palace]. The King saw Mira and said, ‘What is this that Mira’s wearing? Where did she go in such clothes?’ Mira was in the palace. ‘Who gave her these clothes?’ [said the Rana]. Mira Bai told him, ‘I have met my *guru*, Rohidas, who gave me *bheg*.’ See, the one who read Mira’s *janampatri* [horoscope], it happened exactly as he told to the King: ‘She will be twelve years old and she will take *bheg*.’ That’s what he said, just like this. Well, it was twelve years. So, the Rana thought, ‘Today she has taken *bheg* and tomorrow she will consider her people dead!’ Mira became a *yogī* at twelve years of age. Therefore, *bhagvān*, Mira herself gave the answer to her family.

This story and the understanding of asceticism Gangagiri and Tulsigiri articulate through its performance push back at the dominant Brahmanical model/tradition of

¹²⁹ Initially, Mira’s actions are indicative of her wanting to make Rohidas her *guru*. However, as the narration progresses, it becomes clear that Rohidas, at Mira’s insistence, gives her more than just the ‘*guru-mantra*.’ He gives her the ‘*bheg*,’ or ochre-ropes of renunciation. Thus, this segment of Tulsi’s narrative depicts Mira asking Rohidas not only to make her a disciple, but also to initiate her into renunciation.

asceticism. For many female sadhus of Mewar, storytelling not only signifies the everyday life of a sadhu, but more significantly, also creates asceticism as *satsang*, a communal experience of devotional fellowship in remembrance of God or of the *sants* [saints] who dedicated themselves to the worship of God. Aside from the idea of asceticism as a product of destiny, a motif we explored in the last chapter, a theme that also emerges in this narrative of Mira's life is asceticism as *satsang*.

Most Rajasthani female sadhus characterize their form of asceticism as *satsang*. “*Satsang*,” Santosh Puri tells me as she prepares Indian tea over a wood fire, “means to remember God, to think about God day and night. I only do *satsang* here [at the temple]; this is my worship [*pūjā*], my service [*sevā*] to God.” *Satsang* represents an expansive concept pivotal to Indian devotional, or *bhakti*, traditions, not traditionally to orthodox traditions of renunciation and asceticism. Brahmanic texts usually neither equate asceticism with devotional practice (e.g., storytelling), nor conceptualize asceticism as *satsang*, devotional fellowship.¹³⁰ In these texts, asceticism mostly constitutes a rigorous path of isolation, solitude, detachment, and psycho-physical penance (Olivelle 1992a).

¹³⁰ The authoritative or orthodox texts on renunciation and asceticism to which I am referring are: The *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); The *Upaniṣads*, trans. Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). While these specific sources do not use the term *satsang*, the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, specifically, use that of devotion, representing this term in several interrelated ways. Devotion appears a few times in the *Nāradaparivrājaka Upaniṣad* (NPU); the *Brhat Samnyāsa Upaniṣad* (BSU); and the *Śātyāyanīya Upaniṣad* (SU). These sources discuss devotion in terms of either the personal worship of God (NPU, SU), or the teacher who imparts knowledge of Brahman, as God (SU), or as a general religious path (BU). In the *Nāradaparivrājaka Upaniṣad*, in particular, there is a story in which Narada, “a jewel among ascetics,” came to the Naimisa forest, “a sanctuary noted for that distinctive joy resulting from penance, and filled with saintly people.” There, he sang many songs about “devotion to the Lord,” namely Viṣṇu, to a throng of “men, beasts, demigods, gods, centaurs, and nymphs.” This scene, the only one of all three renouncer texts, approximates *bhakti* notions of *satsang*, that is, of people gathered together for the purpose of remembering God. And yet, the authors of this text represent this *satsang*-like scene as a context in which Narada, who is asked by those gathered before him to explain the way to attain liberation, teaches that the way to liberation is through the means of Vedic study and initiation, a path, as Narada suggests, is exclusive to men. Thus, devotion, which appears to have been a pivotal theme in Narada's song performances, becomes explicitly overshadowed by the text's emphasis on formal Vedic learning and initiation (NPU 1.129-132, Olivelle, trans., pp. 170-72).

And yet, storytelling, and by extension, *satsang* constitute definitive *bhakti* practices through which Rajasthani female sadhus create their tradition of devotional asceticism, and thus, distinguish themselves from the dominant, Brahmanical model.

As Santosh Puri's statement suggests, *satsang* doubly signifies devotional religiosity and devotional practice, and one of the principal ways the female sadhus "do" *satsang* and "connect with God," along with singing *bhajans* and reciting texts, is through means of storytelling, or popular religious narrative performance, a daily practice for these sadhus. In their studies of the practices of female religious specialists, Joyce Flueckiger (2006), who has worked extensively with a female Muslim healer in South India, and Elaine Lawless (1988), who has studied Pentecostal women preachers in various regions of the central United States, have similarly suggested that narrative performance is a cultural "strategy" that enables women in uncommon positions of power and authority to create and negotiate individual religious authority and identity, as well as to construct religious community. Their work on indigenous categories of narrative performance provides scholars of religion a new model with which to consider the nature and meaning of female religiosity and religious practice in its gendered contexts.

Since the Rajasthani female sadhus, who also hold unusual public religious positions of power and authority, conceptualize asceticism through the particular lens of *satsang*, how do they use *satsang* narrative performances as a strategy with which to construct devotional asceticism? What are the concepts, values, and/or virtues they emphasize in these performance contexts that will help scholars of religion and of asceticism in South Asia to understand both the range and the specificity of their individual religious experiences as female ascetics?

In this chapter, we shift from examination of the Rajasthani female sadhus' personal narratives to their popular religious narratives, which they characterize as *kahāniyān*, and which are performed in the context of *satsang*. Like their personal narratives, *kahāniyān* are another important genre in these sadhus' rhetoric of renunciation. These narratives include verbal portraits of the devotional lives of the legendary, regionally-specific female *sants*, or devotees of God, Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai. I examine the values and virtues the sadhus underscore in these narrative performances and analyze the meanings they assign to them in order to understand the underlying religious frameworks operative in their conceptual worlds.

My analyses of their performances indicate that the female sadhus emphasize a combination of the ascetic virtues of suffering (*dukh*), sacrifice (*balidān*; *arpan*; *tyāg*), and struggle (*kaṣṭ*), and the *bhakti* value of love (*prem*) with which to construct and express devotional asceticism as an alternative to Brahmanical asceticism. Their vision of asceticism blends these different, yet complementary, ideals in innovative ways. Moreover, the female sadhus understand standard ascetic virtues like sacrifice and suffering on the basis of *bhakti* frameworks. In this devotional asceticism framework, the female sadhus not only imagine and experience *bhakti* as a form of asceticism, but also represent their ascetic identities in terms of being the “beggars” and/or “spiritual warriors” of God. While both types of expressions are traditionally found in the dominant, Brahmanic textual rhetoric on asceticism, as we shall see, the sadhus interpret them primarily through a *sant bhakti* lens. The sadhus thereby position themselves within the tradition of *sant* devotional religiosity, including that of female *sants*, on which grounds they, in turn, claim and legitimate individual religious authority and spiritual

power as female sadhus. Significantly, the female sadhus' emphases on "tradition" with respect to particular ascetic and *bhakti* values function as types of "modesty" strategies that help them to express and promote humility and self-effacement, and as such, negotiate their individual agency as well as their public renunciant positions of power and authority (Newman 1987, cited in Jantzen 1995, 170). Through use of *sant bhakti* frameworks in the performative construction of their lives and identities, the female sadhus situate not only themselves, but more globally, also their alternative form of asceticism within the bounds of the tradition of Hindu renunciation.

Narrative Motifs and Religious Frameworks: The Construction of Devotional Asceticism

Female sadhus perform popular religious narratives for audiences of visitors, devotees, and/or disciples to underscore particular concepts, values, and virtues which they consider to be significant for everyday religious and ethical living. For instance, one of Gangagiri's favorite religious narratives, which she has narrated to me and others on many occasions over the course of our six-year relationship, is from the Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*, about Kunti, the queen mother of the Pandava brothers. In telling this story, Gangagiri usually concentrates on the episode in which the battle for the throne between the Pandavas and Kauravas on the field of Kurukshetra is over, and the leadership of the kingdom has become, once again, firmly established in the hands of the Pandavas. In describing this event Gangagiri said,

At the time when the Kauravas were killed, Śrī Kṛṣṇa said to Kunti, who was his aunt, "We have killed our enemies, [because of which] you have received peace [*śāntī*]. Now ask, what [else] do you want?" Śrī Kṛṣṇa spoke like this [to Kunti]. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, said, "I need suffering [*dukh*]." [Śrī Kṛṣṇa] said, "But you have suffered your whole life. You have the throne back now, so why are you asking for more suffering?" Then mother Kunti said, "To hell with happiness [*sukhe ke māthe par sule padhe*]! You forget God when you're happy

[Gangagiri substitutes “Rām” for God here]. Give me suffering so great that it will make [me] chant the name of God [*prabhu*]. [Śrī Kṛṣṇa] told her, “Thank you, aunty, thank you.” When there is happiness, everyone forgets [God’s] name, but [during times of] suffering, they remember. You have to sacrifice happiness [*balihārī karnā*]. Suffering is good; [emphasizes] suffering is good.

Gangagiri often tells this story to audiences of predominantly householders, many of whom visit her daily at her hermitage in order to pay their respects and, more specifically, to discuss their own life “troubles” (*taklīf, musībat*). Over steaming cups of sweet tea (*chai*) and, if available, sweet biscuits, Gangagiri gently encourages these concerned men and women, who sit at her feet on tattered burlap sacks with faces on the brink of tears, to have faith (*śraddh*) and remember God, *bhagvān*, through their myriad difficulties. And, after a momentary pause, she shares the Kunti narrative to illustrate further these spiritual teachings. Through performance of the Kunti story Gangagiri counsels her visitors to value suffering, which she thinks householders avoid out of fear and ignorance, and to turn life’s unexpected tragedies and difficulties into powerful experiences of personal religious transformation. In these contexts, Gangagiri employs the Kunti narrative to communicate what she herself understands to be the important religious and moral values by which means householders empower themselves in their everyday lives.

But, whether or not she is teaching householders, Gangagiri also performs this particular story from her repertoire of popular religious narratives because it expresses the virtues with which she identifies as an ascetic. In this Kunti story (and in the others she has told), Gangagiri emphasizes two specific ascetic virtues, namely suffering (*dukh*) and sacrifice (*balihārī*), and in doing so, indexes two concepts that are also pivotal to the dominant Brahmanical model of asceticism, which informs her understanding of

asceticism.¹³¹ Analytically speaking, what I find significant is the similarity between Gangagiri's conception of suffering as "good" and the Brahmanical textually articulated (male) practice of *tapas* (Hindi, *tap*), which literally means "heat," but more generally refers to practices of penance and self-denial that sadhus voluntarily undertake for spiritual development and transformation (cf. Klostermaier 1996; Pearson 1996, 55; Olivelle 1992a & b; 1995; 2004; Gross 1992, 326; Stoler Miller 1996). Robert Gross elaborates, "In general, *tapas* is virtually equivalent to asceticism and world renunciation," and as such, connotes experiences of suffering and sacrifice (1992, 326-327). Klostermaier explains the specialized ways sadhus, in general, practice *tapas* as voluntary suffering in asceticism:

Tapas may mean anything, from real self-torture and record-breaking austerities to the recitation of sacred syllables and the chanting of melodies. Fasting, *prāṇayama* (breath control), *japa* (repetition of a name of God or a short mantra), and study of scriptures are among the most common practices. At the *melās* [large festivals in which sadhus gather together for the purpose of religious teaching and practice] one can observe other varieties of *tapas*: lying on a bed of thorns or nails, prolonged standing on one leg, lifting one arm for years till it is withered, looking straight into the sun for long hours, and spiritual sportive feats. Many ascetics keep silence for years... Although perhaps under Christian influence the practices associated with *sādhana* [spiritual disciple] are often associated with theistic ideas not very different from the ideas of the value of voluntary suffering and self-mortification, originally they had nothing to do with either ethical perfection or pleasing God. *Tapas* used to be seen as psychophysical energy, the accumulation of which determined one's position in

¹³¹ As a number of scholars have discussed, in Indian traditions suffering constitutes a multi-valent concept with various implications in the different philosophical/theological systems of thought in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (see the essays in Tiwari, ed., *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, 1986). And, in the Hindu traditions of renunciation, the standard view of suffering is that of the mental pain and sorrow that arise from being trapped in an illusory and impermanent world. Renouncer traditions, thus, promote the goal of *moks*, or liberation/freedom from the cycle of existence, as the ultimate means to escape and end human pain and suffering. However, to think that this is the only way in which traditions of renunciation and asceticism understand the nature and meaning of suffering would be shortsighted. Suffering is not simply that which is bad and should be avoided; rather, from the perspective of renouncer traditions, including those of yoga, suffering is to be understood in order to acquire inner spiritual transformation. In this sense, suffering connotes discipline into the nature of the self and the world; more precisely, it connotes disciplines of asceticism. While the female sadhus generally speak about human existence in terms of suffering, their use of this term in other contexts implies ascetic discipline. I thank Laurie Patton for a discussion we had on the meaning of suffering from particularly yogic perspectives. Personal communication, March 26, 2008.

the universe. The aim, therefore, was to reach a higher position with greater power through *tapas* (Klostermaier 1994, 56).

As Klostermaier details, the concept of *tapas* provides a religious framework within which sadhus construct and understand voluntary physical and/or mental experiences of suffering as a type of *sādhana*, or religious discipline, done for the purpose of developing inner spiritual power. Gross concurs, “Without *tapas* and without the sense of self-sacrifice that it suggests, spiritual realization and salvation are not possible” (Gross 1992, 327). While Klostermaier intimates that Indian sadhus’ positive valuation of suffering appears to cut across issues of gender (perhaps even sectarian affiliation), I found that in narrative performance contexts, the female sadhus discuss the religious and moral value of suffering more than the male sadhus. Other female sadhus’ performed narratives also emphasize similar ascetic virtues. Though she herself does not explicitly associate *tapas* with suffering, Gangagiri’s narrative, I suggest, pivots on an implied view of *tapas* as voluntary suffering for development of spiritual power, knowledge, and wisdom. Through experience of suffering, Gangagiri suggests that Kunti herself participates in the powerful *bhakti* practice of remembering the name of God (*nāmasmarana*); and Kunti’s devotion, as told in this story, communicates a particular virtue that is important to Gangagiri’s own self-understanding of asceticism—that “suffering is good.”

Apart from suffering, though, Gangagiri’s emphasis on sacrifice, which similarly implies notions of penance, austerity, and self-denial, also remains foundational to the standard model of Brahmanical asceticism, and more specifically, to general Brahmanical textual definitions of world renunciation itself. As a term, renunciation traditionally denotes “to thrown down,” “to give up,” or “to sacrifice” worldly desires and attachments

(Olivelle 1975). In his analysis of the theology of renunciation expressed in the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, authoritative texts on this radical lifestyle, Olivelle discusses that renunciation (*sannyāsa*) literally means “discarding” or “abandonment” (1992a, 59), and that a renouncer “is defined by what he has given up rather than by what he does” (Olivelle 1992a, 67). The Rajasthani male and female sadhus voice related understandings of renunciation in the context of their personal narratives. Recall from the last chapter Nityananda Puri’s definition of renunciation: “to sacrifice (*nyās kar denā*) all the lusts, thirsts, and imaginations”—which, he further explained, people erroneously confuse with happiness (*sukh*)—in order to experience the self (*ātma*) as the Supreme Self (*paramātmā*). Nityananda Puri made this statement in the presence of Sharda Puri, his female ascetic disciple, who agreed with this dominant view of renunciation (though she clarified later on that renunciation does not mean to sacrifice “things like bread”). From their shared perspectives, renunciation broadly connotes a life of penance and self-denial, a life of sacrifice and suffering, in which the sadhus (ideally) “give up” not merely material items and objects, but more precisely, those mental attachments that ensnare vulnerable humans in an illusory and impermanent worldly existence and prevent them from realizing their full spiritual potential.

But the value of the Kunti story to Gangagiri extends beyond the (dominant) framework of Brahminic asceticism it refracts and promotes in this performance context. In her personal devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Kunti’s religiosity remains significantly different from most representations of ascetic religiosity expressed in orthodox texts on renunciation (Olivelle 2004; 1992a; cf. Khandelwal 2004; 2001; cf. Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold 2006). In his description above, Klostermaier rightly observes that the underlying

spiritual purpose of *tapas* was not for renunciators to experience a theistic conception of deity, but rather, as he explains, either to become through the accumulation of inner power greater than deity, or as developed in yogic traditions, to become deity itself (cf. Sherma 2004; Olivelle 1992a, 1996; Stoler Miller 1996).

In Gangagiri's narrative, though Kunti expresses and embodies the ascetic ideals of suffering and sacrifice, her personal devotion to Lord Krishna also explicitly illustrates an underlying *bhakti* framework. We might say that in her view of suffering as "good," Gangagiri summons not only classic renouncer understandings, but also *bhakti* views of suffering to interpret this story (cf. Sharma 1986, 23-37). In his discussion of Indian perspectives on suffering, Karl Potter notes that *bhakti* traditions promote the virtue of suffering. He states:

Now [the] lower-class values [of *bhakti*] are uppermost; there is glory in servitude, even servility, as in the *prapatti* doctrine of Srivaisnavism. Now moods (*rasas*) come to be of central interest to philosophers. Instead of turning one's back on vicissitudes and seeking a cure, one immerses oneself in those vicissitudes... Now there is suffering: Radha suffers as she longs for Krsna, and the *bhakti* advice is worlds apart from the classical Indian philosophical position—she should lose herself in Krsna, not as the *jīva* loses itself in Brahman, but as the devoted long-suffering servant loses himself in his master, or the lover in his or her beloved (Potter 1986, 5).

Whether the concept of devotion is explicitly illustrated in the female sadhus' stories or not (and, in the stories we examine below, devotion is the explicit theme), what we need to understand is that *bhakti* frameworks are embedded features of renunciator performance contexts. The female sadhus view their performances as *satsang*. Gangagiri's statement in the epigraph to this chapter highlights this view: "What we sadhus do is *satsang*." Such a shared understanding of performance as a communal experience of *satsang* makes explicit that their narratives arise from devotional contexts,

on which the female sadhus draw to construct devotional asceticism.¹³² The novelty of what we encounter with the narrative performances of the female sadhus, then, is not only that they emphasize sacrifice and suffering, but that they also translate these ascetic virtues in an entirely new context—that of *bhakti*. But why should the female sadhus' perceptions of their narrative performances as *satsang* matter to us? *Bhakti*, as Sherma discusses,

[P]rovides a path to an emotional, loving relationship to God envisioned as simultaneously universal and omnipresent *and* personal and intimate. *Bhakti* is marked by intense longing and passionate desire for communion with God... The advent of devotion was especially fortuitous for women because it did not demand the renunciation of family life and the eradication of sexual desire, which was demanded by the ascetic or monastic path (Sherma 2005, 28).

The last few sentences of Sherma's description of *bhakti* are especially relevant to understanding the female sadhus' use of narrative performance to construct a particular vision of asceticism. *Bhakti* is not an ascetic path,¹³³ nor does it claim to be; and yet, the female sadhus, who have formally renounced family life and sexual practices, adopt the popular ideals of this path by either relying on the *bhakti* frameworks implicit in performance contexts, or by explicitly underscoring *bhakti* concepts such as love (*prem*), charity (*dān*; *denā*), and service (*sevā*) featured in the stories, to create their own form of asceticism. As Gangagiri teaches, "Love is what God (*bhagvān*) is," implying that a

¹³² I will also point out here that the audience of disciples, visitors, and/or devotees listening to (and, in some cases, participating in) the religious narrative performances of the female sadhus also understands that the devotional contexts of the stories implicitly frame the meanings and values that the sadhus ascribe to their narratives. Like the female sadhus, the listeners similarly draw on implicit *bhakti* paradigms to understand the message of the stories, and sometimes they ascribe meanings and values other than what the sadhus themselves emphasize. But, even in these instances, their meanings support *bhakti* understandings of particular concepts and ideals.

¹³³ A number of scholars have discussed that the legendary founders of medieval north Indian *bhakti* movements, while they promoted and, to certain extents, participated in an ascetic lifestyle, were not sadhus. On the contrary, the *sants* were householders who sought, like sadhus, sought to attain liberation through love of a personal (or impersonal) God. On studies of the history of the *sant* movement, and the lives of the *sants*, see Hawley 1987, 1988; Schomer and Macleod, ed., 1987; Lorenzen 1995, 1996. See also Martin 2000.

bhakti framework informs and affects her life and work as a (female) ascetic. The Rajasthani female sadhus' shared emphasis on love, either in their narrative performances or in their renunciant discourses, is a significant point to underscore, because the Brahminic texts often represent asceticism as an "elitist" path concerned primarily with the ideals of discipline, dispassion and detachment (cf. Stoler Miller 1996, 29-43). Its ideals, in fact, starkly contrast with the essential *bhakti* value of love.¹³⁴ Olivelle explains,

Most *bhakti* sects accepted the institution of renunciation, often redefining its meaning as withdrawal from worldly concerns so as to focus solely on devotion to God. Nevertheless, the internal logic of *bhakti* contradicted the elitism inherent in the institution of renunciation. Renouncers were religious virtuosi; and in theologies where mystical quests and ascetic disciplines were central, the claim could be made that only renouncers were able to achieve the highest goal of religion, namely liberation. Love, on the other hand, is egalitarian; anyone can love. Indeed, *bhakti* literature is filled with examples of poor and ignorant men and women who gain divine favor by the intensity of their love (Olivelle 2004, 284).

For Gangagiri, then, the Kunti story depicts the virtues of suffering, sacrifice, and love with which she identifies and, thus, emphasizes in her performance of devotional asceticism. And, as we shall see, the narratives of Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai, in which female sadhus highlight similar values, constitute paradigms for the model of devotional asceticism these sadhus construct through means of their song, story, and sacred text performances. To this extent, I consider these stories to exemplify *female devotional asceticism*, rather than simply female devotionism. Indeed, these are the narratives with which the sadhus create themselves as *female* ascetics in what is frequently perceived to be a male-dominated tradition of asceticism.

¹³⁴ In his definition of the term, John Stratton Hawley notes, "*Bhakti* means, broadly, love—love of God" (Hawley 1987, 53).

But an important question arises: what if Gangagiri had performed the story of the sage Mandavya from the *Mahābhārata* instead of her favorite Kunti narrative?¹³⁵ His is also a tragic tale of physical and mental suffering/sacrifice, which Mandavya endured by being impaled on a stake by soldiers on the orders of a king, who thought him to be a robber disguised as a sage in the forest (Rajagopalachari trans., 1994, 38-40). Would Gangagiri perceive his suffering and sacrifice to be less powerful to God because of his male gender? Would she reconfigure these ascetic concepts through means of *bhakti* frameworks in the interpretation of his asceticism?¹³⁶ We need to ask, what role, if any, does the gender of the devotees featured in the Rajasthani female sadhus' religious narratives play in their constructions of devotional asceticism?

Although I never heard Gangagiri speak about Mandavya in the context of our daily conversations, she performs religious narratives of other popular male *bhaktis* and *sants*, such as Sughanmal, Jad Bharat, and Narsi Mehta, who also represent paragons of (a model of) devotional asceticism.¹³⁷ In descriptions of these stories, too, Gangagiri frequently highlights the virtues of suffering and sacrifice. For example, "To believe in God," Gangagiri says prior to her performance, "you have to sacrifice everything to him." Since this performance implicitly hinges on a shared understanding between Gangagiri and her audience of the context as *satsang*, and that the underlying purpose of this performance is to express the importance of devotion to God, Gangagiri's emphasis on

¹³⁵ I thank my advisor, Laurie L. Patton, for bringing the Mandavya story to my attention. Personal communication March 26, 2008.

¹³⁶ According to Rajagopalachari's translation of this story, the sage Mandavya "spent his days in penance and the practice of truth," on account of which he achieved "strength of mind and knowledge of the scriptures." See C. Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1994, 32nd edition), pp. 38.40.

¹³⁷ Because, like Kunti, Mandavya is also a figure featured in the *Mahābhārata* epic, I invoke his example to make my point about male devotional ascetics, even though Gangagiri herself uses examples from *bhakti* traditions.

sacrifice, while based on dominant renunciatory notions of “giving up” all worldly desires and attachments for individual spiritual advancement, more precisely alludes to a *bhakti* vision of “leaving everything” in order to dedicate oneself to God. In Gangagiri’s view, Suganmal’s sacrifice illustrates his intense love of God; his expression of asceticism, therefore, illustrates *bhakti*.¹³⁸ For Gangagiri, Suganmal’s story refracts popular *bhakti* values as much as ascetic ones. The gender of the devotees, then, seems to play little or no role in either the ascetic virtues the female sadhus select or in the meanings they attribute to them.¹³⁹

Then why focus specifically on narratives of female devotional asceticism? Often, in these narrative performances we discover an embedded, gendered discourse on suffering, one which has both personal and social implications for the ways the female sadhus construct and experience their asceticism and ascetic identity. Implied in their narrative performances is a view that the suffering experienced by the female *sants* signifies not just a religious result of voluntary penance and self-denial, but more significantly, a social fact of their subordinate gender status in a patriarchal Indian society. In the interpretation of this type of gendered-related suffering, the female sadhus adopt and weave into their narrative performances a specific religious ideology according to which female power, or *śakti*, arises from the suffering that women on the devotional path, in particular, experience on account of their subordinate female gender status. To

¹³⁸ According to Gangagiri’s telling of the story, in order to prove his faith in God, Suganmal, on the orders of the king Hansketu who refused to believe in God’s power to save devotees from death, jumped into a cauldron of boiling oil. But, when he jumped into the oil, as Gangagiri says, “it felt cold to him.” God saved him by making the boiling oil “cool.” In Gangagiri’s mind, Suganmal depicts the virtue of sacrifice because he was willing to sacrifice “everything,” including his own life, out of his love for God. A full account of Gangagiri’s Suganmal narrative is found in the Appendix.

¹³⁹ Thus, males like Tukaram, of the southern *sant* tradition, for instance, are devotional ascetics. I emphasize Suganmal, Jad Bharat, and Narsi Mehta, as these are the *sants* Gangagiri herself discusses in her teachings.

the Rajasthani female sadhus, then, women's devotional, moral, and spiritual *śakti* stems from multiple sources, namely *tapas* and gender-related sufferings and struggles.

But this gendered "ideology of *śakti* gained through suffering" (Egnor 1990, 15) employed by the Rajasthani sadhus in their narrative performances of female devotional asceticism is not an exclusively female "ascetic" viewpoint. As several scholars have discussed, householder women themselves construct and experience their religious/devotional lives and social identities through use of a gendered paradigm of suffering as empowering for women (see Wadley's edited volume 1990; Feldhaus 1982; Pearson 1996).¹⁴⁰ The research of Margaret Egnor (1990), Holly Baker Reynolds (1990), Sheryl B. Daniel (1990), and Kenneth David (1990), for example, has variously demonstrated that Tamil women householders, in particular, perceive their everyday sufferings as efficacious sources of individual spiritual empowerment and religious transformation. These Tamil female householders conceptualize female *śakti* in terms of the suffering engendered by their subordinate gender status. Egnor explains,

...none of these women saw a contradiction between her possession of *śakti* and her subordinate role as female. Nor did any of them see her subordination as the restriction of power which might otherwise have grown beyond control. On the contrary, for each woman the possession of extraordinary *śakti* came as a consequence of her subordinate status, or more accurately, as a consequence of the suffering that that subordination entailed (Egnor 1990, 14).

Not only Tamil female householders, but Banarsi householders, too, associate female moral, spiritual, and devotional power with the suffering experienced (either in the family, or more broadly, in the society) as a result of their low gender status. In her study of householder women's *vrat*, or votive, practices in Banares, Anne Mackenzie Pearson (1996) discusses that the householders with whom she worked not only consider

¹⁴⁰ I thank Laurie Patton for pointing this important detail out to me. Personal communication March 26, 2008.

vrats to be a potent religious avenue for the accumulation of *śakti*, but also understand that suffering, whether it stems from women being “lower than men” in the social hierarchy or from their practices of intense self-control, “brings *shakti*” (1996, 216). In an interview, one of Pearson’s collaborators maintained,

Everyone has some *shakti*, but women have more of it because they do more rituals and fasts. Women also gain *shakti* because of their place in the family. Husbands and fathers control women’s wills. We must always be lower than men. You must control your own desires, too. You must have perfect fidelity to your husband even in thought. When women have children, they bear pain and suppress their own desires for their children. That brings *shakti*, too. (Pearson 1996, 216).

And, finally, the famous Maharastrian female householder saint, Bahina Bai, has similarly employed a gendered ideology of suffering as empowering for women in her poetry and songs (cf. Feldhaus 1982; Vanita 1989; Abbot trans., 1985 reprint). One of the only female *bhakti* saints, as Anne Feldhaus discusses, to have reconciled duty to husband with devotion to God, Bahina Bai’s autobiographical poems reflect a keen awareness of the ways orthodox religious structures and institutions prohibit women from attaining the ‘highest goal’ of divine union simply on the basis of their female gender (Feldhaus 1982, 594; cf. Vanita 1989, 59).¹⁴¹ Most of Bahina’s struggles arose from her tumultuous relationship with a jealous and unsympathetic husband, a learned Brahmin priest who, at least until the time that he, too, converted to *bhakti* teachings, prevented her from divine worship and meeting her guru, Tukaram, using threats and, in several

¹⁴¹ In one of her poems Bahina Bai says,

The *Vedas* cry aloud, and the *Puranas* shout that no good can come of a woman. I was born with a woman’s body—how am I, now, to attain the Goal? They’re foolish, selfish, seductive, deceptive—any link with a woman brings harm. Bahina says, “If a woman’s body’s so harmful, how in this world will I reach the Goal?” . . . I haven’t the right to hear the *Vedas*. The Brahmins keep secret the *Gāyatrī mantra*. I must not say ‘*OM*,’ I may not hear *mantras*’ names. I must not speak of these things with another (cited in Feldhaus 1982, 594).

See also a similar translation of this verse in Vanita 1989, p. 59.

instances, physical violence (Feldhaus 1982 595-598; Vanita 1989, 58). During this difficult period, Bahina Bai expressed in one poem that her “daily life was full of troubles” (Vanita 1989, 58). And yet, Bahina values her suffering; to her it serves as a conduit for inner strength, religious understanding, and devotional power. In one poem she suggested this idea:

71 (1) My body is responsible for my joys and woes. It is necessary that I suffer them. (2) But if this suffering means the putting far away of sin, I count it as a welcome good. (3) I wish the longing of my heart to express itself in singing God’s praise, even while my body is suffering torture. (4) Says Bahini, “I suffer what is in my Fate” (Abbot trans., 1985 reprint, 42; poetry appears in this format in Abbot’s translation).

Bahina Bai’s believed suffering helped her to achieve inner purification of the soul and acquire *śakti*. More than just a vehicle for female empowerment, Bahina Bai further understood gender-specific suffering to be a way for females, in particular, to unite with the divine. In another poem Bahina intimated this sentiment: “Fate’s cord around me has at last been broken. My soul has become purified. God has shown me his mercy [meaning she had a divine vision of God]” (Abbot trans., 1985, 42). Thus, the religious discourse attributed to the *bhakti* saint Bahina Bai, as well as the discourses on female *śakti* expressed by female householders from various regions of India collectively illuminate an interpretive framework that associates female spiritual power and moral authority with suffering engendered, in part, by a subordinate female gender status.

The reason for this brief excursion is to place into a broader perspective the female sadhus’ use of a gendered, religious framework of suffering, and more importantly, to draw attention to the fact that not just female householders, but even the female sadhus with whom I worked employ this ideology (or a similar version of it) to interpret and explain their religious narratives, a phenomenon which might indicate—

however oblique or however direct—their identification with female householders, perhaps with all women, who suffer troubles and difficulties on account of their female “caste,” regardless of their individual spiritual power, marital status, age, and religious identity (cf. Flueckiger 2006, 137-142).¹⁴²

Therefore, through narrative performances of female devotional asceticism, the female sadhus underscore ascetic virtues like suffering but interpret them from the perspective of multiple religious frameworks, including gendered ideologies of suffering, in the construction of devotional asceticism. By emphasizing suffering, the sadhus suggest that women, on the grounds of the double nature of their suffering (i.e., suffering that is simultaneously self and other inflicted), make better devotees of God than men. But apart from the Indian female householders with whom they share this view, the sadhus’ understanding of suffering as empowering for women also compare to notions of the value of suffering and pain expressed by the early female Christian martyrs in their individual narrative self-representations (Perkins 1995, 104-123). As Judith Perkins discusses in her analysis of the *Passion of Perpetua*, a Christian text, female martyrs like Perpetua, “a 21-year-old wellborn matron with a nursing baby” (104), for instance, “recognizes and relies on the power gained through her own sufferings” (108), to interpret and experience the nature and meaning of her individual religiosity as a

¹⁴² In her discussion of the ways Amma negotiates gender in the healing room through the means of her personal narrative performances and patient testimonials, Flueckiger (2006) discusses that not only the women (Hindu and Muslim) who come to Amma for healing, but also Amma herself perceive what they refer to as ‘the caste of women’ to be “one filled with suffering and troubles” (137). According to Amma, ‘there are only two castes: men and women,’ and as Flueckiger points out, the difference Amma draws between the two genders is on the basis that women suffer and experience pain because of their female gender. In the healing room, as Flueckiger emphasizes, women create and enforce notions of female gender identity through personal narratives of suffering and pain.

Christian woman who rebels against Roman ideologies.¹⁴³ Let us turn now to the stories of three female *sants* to discover how Rajasthani female sadhus perform their tradition of devotional asceticism via such narratives.

Three Narrative Portraits of Female Devotional Asceticism

II.A. “*Sacrificing all Happiness to God*”: Mira Bai

Gangagiri shared the following Mira Bai narrative shortly after the Kunti performance in which she had already elaborated on the importance of the virtues of suffering and sacrifice. This story illuminates one of the central themes of the female sadhus’ popular narratives of (female) devotional asceticism, namely devotion to God, but here Gangagiri emphasizes the ascetic concept of sacrifice. In framing her performance Gangagiri explained, “Mira used to say this [i.e., you have to sacrifice all happiness] to the Rana,” and then she told a small group of householders, including me and my field assistant, Manvendra Singh, this Mira story:

[G]angagiri: [The] Rana was [Mira Bai’s] brother-in-law [*devar*], not her husband, [but] her brother-in-law. She used to invite sadhus and *sants* [to the palace]. She made them sing *bhajans*; she made them share knowledge. She used to feed them. The brother-in-law didn’t like it, o.k. He said, “We are from a big house [that is, we are royal Rajputs], but those sadhus are from every community [they come from high and low castes]. They sing *bhajans* here; they do *satsang* [communal religious gathering] here. And you make food and feed them. I don’t like it.” He didn’t like it.

[A]ntoinette: He didn’t like it?

[G]angagiri: The brother-in-law, he didn’t like it. Mira’s husband had died. She was married to Bhoj Raj. The husband’s name was Bhoj Raj. Her brother-in-law prohibited her [from *satsang*, i.e., from worshipping God]. But she used to do *satsang* anyway; she used to compose *bhajans* herself and sing them with [the sadhus]. She used to feed them. But the Rana didn’t like it. He used to say, “No!” So, what did he do? He sent her a bowl of poison, but it turned into nectar. The

¹⁴³ The female sadhus’ views that suffering constitutes a gender-related source of devotional power compare to the understandings of suffering and sacrifice expressed in the testimonial writings of American Pentecostal women from the early 20th century. See R. Marie Griffith, “Female Suffering and Religious Devotion in American Pentecostalism,” in *Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism*, edited by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brereton (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 184-207).

Rana sent a bowl of poison [disguised as milk] through a servant [girl] to Mira Bai [to kill her]. She was doing the *sevā* of God [meaning, she was worshipping God] at the time. “O.k., take this cup [of milk],” [the servant girl said]. She drank it, but God [*bhagvān*] turned [that poison] into immortal nectar [*āmṛt*]. Nothing happened to Mira. Absolutely nothing. Why? God was there with her. God was walking along with her. You have to believe in [God] like Mira, and then you have to sacrifice [*arpan karnā*] all happiness to him.

This story accords with the earliest hagiographical representations of Mira’s life in the classic Hindi devotional text, Nabhadās’ the *Bhaktamāl*, or “Garland of Devotees,” (cf. Shukla-Bhatt 2007; Hawley 2005, 1988, 1987; Mukta 1997), in which Mira Bai, born a Rajput princess from the royal “house,” or clan, of Mertiya at the end of the fifteenth century (ca. 1498), was married into the reigning Sisodiya family to a prince of Chitoor, the former capital of Mewar. Here, Gangagiri identifies Mira Bai’s husband as Bhoj Raj, who is widely thought to have died shortly after their marriage. Several scholars have speculated on the ambiguous identity of the Rana in the poems, songs, and stories either attributed to or about Mira Bai, suggesting this figure may have been her husband, brother-in-law, or father-in-law (Hawley 2005; Martin 2000; Mukta 1997; Harlan 1992). Gangagiri, though, is quite certain that the Rana appellation stands for Mira Bai’s brother-in-law, whom she identified in other conversations as the Rana Kumbha.

In Gangagiri’s narrative, the Rana is a vicious and calculating man. And in another Mira narrative performance, Gangagiri asserted, “The Rana was a wicked man. He had no knowledge. He didn’t know God.” As this particular telling illustrates, the Rana prohibits Mira Bai from the worship of God, *bhagvān*. Her devotional asceticism involved meeting with *sants* and *sadhus*, “of every caste,” whom she fed and with whom she sang *bhajans* to the divine. However, “the Rana,” as Gangagiri emphasizes several times, “didn’t like it.” Nevertheless, Mira Bai continued to worship God, composing and singing *bhajans*, and she continued to meet with the *sants* and *sadhus*. This story,

particularly in its representation of Mira's persistence in her devotion to God, captures the subversive and oppositional elements of female devotional asceticism. Since, in most of the written and oral representations of her life, including Gangagiri's, Mira Bai seemingly challenges orthodox notions of the *pativrata* ideal, according to which wives must worship their husbands as God, not only some of the authors of these Mira sources, but even the scholars who have analyzed the rhetoric associated with her name have almost exclusively focused on Mira's seeming acts of subversion and resistance as the defining qualities of her *bhakti* (cf. Shukla-Bhatt 2007; Hawley 2005; Jain and Sharma 2004; Mukta 1997; Harlan 1992).

A case in point, in her insightful discussion of Mira's life from the particular viewpoint of noble Rajput women, Lindsey Harlan suggests that Mira exemplifies what she refers to as the "*bhakt* paradigm," that is, a moral vision of "limitless" devotion to God in his Kṛṣṇa form (Harlan 1992, 205-222). According to Harlan, because of what Rajput women themselves emphasize in their interpretations of Mira's life, underlying the *bhakt* paradigm that Mira illustrates is the not-so-subtle message of subversion and resistance to the *pativrata* ideal, a value both cherished and emulated by Rajput female householders who seek to promote an "ethic of protection" in the expression of Rajput gender roles and duties. Harlan elucidates,

If, as Rajput women say, Mira is the quintessential unbound *bhakt*, then we can appreciate how subversive unlimited *bhakti* really is. To commit oneself to God requires leaving home for the road and the forest. Nevertheless, *bhakti* is not something performed by saints alone. All women agree that one should be devoted to God but feel that this devotion must serve rather than interfere with devotion to a husband. Practiced in the home and for the benefit of the household, devotion to God enables women to become better *pativratas*... Encompassed by domestic concerns, *bhakti* reinforces the *pativrata* ideal (Harlan 1992, 222-223).

Similarly, in his examination of the lives of three *bhakti* saints of North India, Hawley interprets the *Bhaktamāl*'s portrayal of Mira's life to be illustrative of the specific virtue of fearlessness (Hawley 1987, 52-72).¹⁴⁴ In recognition of those particular qualities of Mira's religious character that Nabhaji, the *Bhaktamāl*'s author, highlights, Hawley further explains,

Mention is...made [in Nabhaji's poem on Mira's life] of the fearless, shameless quality of Mira's personality, which is presented as if it emerged from her singing. The poem then cites the great example of Mira's fearlessness: the episode in which she gladly drank the poison her husband or in-laws served up to her. As if in consequence of her fearlessness, she had no reason to fear, for the poison turned to ambrosia in her throat (Hawley 1987, 56).

In his analyses of other "Mira" manuscripts, Hawley contends that "Mira is so successful as an embodiment of one Rajput ideal—brave independence of action," and therewith characterizes her as a "paragon of courage," an example of "fearlessness" (Hawley 2005, 117-137). In Hawley's view, which is based on multiple representations of Mira Bai in numerous sources, she thus stands for, as he says, "a radical image of *bhakti* womanhood" (Hawley 2005, 130). Linked in their interpretations of Mira's devotional life to this "radical" theme of *bhakti* womanhood, scholars Neelima Shukla-Bhatt (2007) and Parita Mukta (1997; 1987), who study the Mira tradition in the region of Gujarat and neighboring Saurashtra, also understand the *bhajans* attributed to Mira to be indicative of her "resistance to oppression" (Shukla-Bhatt 2007, 282). Shukla-Bhatt, in particular, maintains, "[t]he outspoken rejection of oppressive norms on the strength of intense love for Krsna...has come to be recognized as a hallmark of Mira's sensitivity

¹⁴⁴ More specifically, the *bhakti* saints analyzed by Hawley, in addition to Mira Bai, are Narasi Mehta and Pipa Das. See Hawley, "Morality Beyond Morality in the Lives of Three Hindu Saints," in *Saints and Virtues*, edited by John Stratton Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 52-72.

and...has had an appeal across caste/class boundaries in Gujarat” (Shukla-Bhatt 2007, 283). Mukta also concurs that

Mira stands up in the bhajans, sharply and unambiguously, for personal liberties. Her resistance to social norms and obligations, and her assertion of liberties based on the dictates of her heart, form a major theme of a large body of bhajans in Rajasthan as well as Saurashtra (Mukta 1997, 127).

Hence, on the basis of her informants’ understandings, from Mukta’s perspective, Mira represents “the voice of the oppressed people, just as the *bhakts* become Mira through their singing” (Mukta 1997, 87). Mira’s image and life symbolize for the low-caste communities in which Mukta worked, the exposure of, and more precisely, the possibility of an end to “a common suffering and a common humiliation” (Mukta 1997, 104).

My research with the Rajasthani female sadhus contributes an alternative view to the current scholarly discourse on Mira Bai. To the female sadhus I worked with, Mira Bai exemplifies not so much the *bhakt* paradigm, as Harlan suggests, but rather a paradigm of devotional asceticism. Moreover, Gangagiri suggests that Mira does not represent solely the virtue of fearlessness or the notion of resistance to oppression and orthodox social norms, even though these themes are certainly evident in Gangagiri’s narrative. On the contrary, Gangagiri underscores the virtue of sacrifice to interpret Mira’s life. “You have to believe in God, and then you have to sacrifice all happiness to him [*arpan karnā*],” she explains at the end of her performance. But Gangagiri’s emphasis on sacrifice hardly distinguishes this Mira narrative from other narratives on male devotional asceticism she has performed. Remember, even Sughanmal exemplifies this ascetic virtue. Gangagiri’s *commentary* on both of these narratives of devotional asceticism is, in fact, almost the same. However, her *performance* of the stories of Mira

and Sukanmal are different. What is special about Gangagiri's performance of the Mira narrative?

Our answer rests in the content and structure of the narrative. In the first respect, explicit in Gangagiri's story is the understanding that Mira repeatedly suffered at the hands of the Rana (and possibly at the hands of her in-laws). Although Gangagiri does not mention in this particular story that Mira suffered, Gangagiri did not have to say this explicitly because everyone in the audience already assumed this implied detail to be "common knowledge" of the performance context. With the exception of perhaps a few minor details, all of the Mira Bai stories I recorded from Gangagiri are related versions of a single tale—that of female suffering on the path of God.

Also implicit in the performance context is Gangagiri's understanding that Mira's repeated sufferings stem precisely from cultural perceptions of her subordinate female gender status. In the eyes of the Rana, Mira's devotional asceticism, a context where she experiences perhaps too much freedom, poses a serious problem to the norms of Rajput female behavior. Hawley concurs, "...the milieu in which [Mira] belongs, that of a traditional Rajasthani princess, has definite almost inflexible expectations for women" (Hawley 1987, 59). As several scholars have discussed, Rajput gender norms require females to remain hidden in certain parts of the home, and to conceal themselves in public from the ever-present male gaze (cf. Schomer et. al 2001; Mukta 1997; Gold and Raheja 1994; Harlan 1992).¹⁴⁵ One method of concealment used by Rajput (and by other

¹⁴⁵ Ann Gold has pointed out the ways in which these Rajput norms of female gender, particularly that of concealment through *pardā*, can be manipulated and been used by Rajput and other high-caste women in a manner that gives them freedom, not restriction, and allows them to move in public (male) spheres without transgressing gender norms (Gold and Raheja 1994). Likewise, restrictions such as remaining sequestered in "female" space, the *zenāna*, while the home, while perhaps more applicable to royal and noble Rajput women, are not followed by the village Rajput women who, out of economic necessity, have to work outside their homes (Harlan 1992). In my fieldwork, I encountered many village Rajput women, devotees

high-caste) women in shared domestic and public spaces is the veil, or *pardā*, by which means, it is believed, they safeguard their honor (*izzat*) and modesty (*śarm*), and by extension, the honor of the larger Rajput community from potential social ruin. Likewise, to protect caste honor, Rajput women should avoid socializing with certain categories of men, particularly those who come from low-castes. Mira, however, by placing herself in public male spaces and amongst sadhus from low-castes in order to express her devotional asceticism, disrupts Rajput requisites of normative female behavior, and suffers as a result (cf. Harlan 1992).

In the case of its structure, Gangagiri's narrative focuses predominantly on Mira's suffering. This was the element of Mira's life most discussed by the female sadhus who told me her story. I was always struck by the fact that, of the twelve or so Mira narratives I received from the female sadhus, only two described in any detail her birth and childhood, and only one discussed her experience of "dissolving" into the *mūrtī* of God at the end of her life. The rest of the stories, however, clearly focused on Mira's trials of suffering in the Sisodiya palace. For instance, one of the first events that Shiv Puri vividly described in her narration of Mira's life story was the poison scene. She said, "They [the in-laws] tried to poison her. How they tortured (*satāya*) Mira! But God turned that poison into nectar. Those people [the in-laws] really ate her head [a Hindi idiom that means to annoy someone or, in this case, to make her/him suffer]."

Thus, in this narrative performance of Mira Bai Gangagiri uses a key concept from the dominant Brahmanical framework in her selection of the virtue of sacrifice, and

of the female sadhus with whom I worked, who concealed themselves by means of the edges of their saris (*ghunghat*) when in mixed-gender contexts, but who removed their veils when they remained only in the company of other females. And there were some Rajput women I met, such as the daughter of one of the female sadhus, who did not use the veil in any context, whether gender-mixed or gender-segregated.

even implicates partial use of a gendered ideology of suffering as sacrifice. But how does Gangagiri understand and explain the notion of sacrifice? She consistently describes sacrifice in terms of devotees' duty (*kartavya*) to God. For Gangagiri, devotees, and especially those on the path of devotional asceticism, must sacrifice "all happiness," i.e., all worldly "thirsts, lusts, and imaginations," as the sadhus say, at the feet of God, because this constitutes an expression of duty to the divine. The concept of duty then implicitly frames the way Gangagiri constructs devotional asceticism. Recall from the discussion in chapter three the ways in which the notion of duty repeatedly surfaced as a salient theme in the female sadhus' personal narrative performances of asceticism.

More significantly, in their life story performances the female sadhus view duty particularly through a *bhakti* lens; that is, from their perspectives, to become a sadhu signifies not only a religious duty, but also a personal expression of devotion to God. In this particular Mira narrative performance, as well, Gangagiri draws on *bhakti* understandings of duty as devotion to interpret Mira's devotional asceticism as exemplary of sacrifice. She explains why Mira Bai had had to leave everything, i.e., family, home, status and power, and personal comforts, by saying, "Look, God is expensive. He's not lying in the road where you can just go and catch him in your hands." While Gangagiri emphasizes the standard ascetic virtue of sacrifice, she interprets it from the perspective of *bhakti* to mean "leaving everything" for the purpose of expressing duty and devotion to God. In addition, the *bhakti* frameworks from which Gangagiri are rooted in the paradigms of devotion expressed in sources such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the poetry and songs of the legendary *bhakti sants* of medieval Indian history such as Kabir, Narsi Mehta, and Dadu Dayal (cf. Stoler Miller, trans. 1988; Hess

1982, 1987; Schomer & McLeod 1987; Kishwar and Vanita, 1989; Lorenzen 1995, 1996; Hawley 1988, 2005).

Although no explicit mention is made in this Mira narrative of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Gangagiri recites this scripture every morning after she performs *pūjā* to the deities and the *dhūnī*, or sacred fire pit. She also reads the text silently in the early afternoons when she has no visitors and can concentrate just on the text. As such, its religious and ethical teachings provide an underlying framework with which she interprets the virtues of sacrifice, duty, and devotion in narrative performances of female devotional asceticism. In the *Gītā*, for instance, Lord Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna, dejected by the thought of killing his brothers, cousins, and teachers in war, to fulfill his duty (*dharm*) as a warrior (*kṣatriya*) and fight on the battlefield of Kurukshetra against the Pandavas. He explains that Arjuna must perceive his actions on the battlefield not just in terms of satisfying his caste duty, but more importantly, as an expression of his religious duty to God, otherwise he shall suffer the consequences of rebirth in the endless cycle of existence (Stoler Miller, trans. 1988, 29-39). In this light, dutiful action becomes represented in the text as a form of “sacrifice” that Arjuna must offer to Kṛṣṇa: “Actions imprison the world unless it is done as sacrifice; freed from attachment, Arjuna, perform action as sacrifice!” Kṛṣṇa teaches (*BG* 3.9, Stoler Miller, translation, 1988, 42). Actions performed as a sacrifice, in Kṛṣṇa’s view also constitute a form of “surrender” (*BG* 3.30), or devotion, to the divine by which means devotees “...worship me with true faith, entrusting their minds to me” (*BG* 12.2). As we can see from this brief example, *Gītā* ideas of sacrifice, duty, and devotion certainly underpin and inform Gangagiri’s interpretations of these concepts in her construction of devotional asceticism.

Likewise, the *bhakti* frameworks illustrated in the rhetoric of the medieval *bhaktas* and *sants* have similarly influenced Gangagiri's interpretations of narratives of female devotional asceticism. *Sant* perspectives often construct notions of devotion to the divine by using metaphors of money and/or precious gems, such as diamonds and pearls. In this religious framework, *bhakti* represents a form of spiritual currency that devotees offer to the divine in exchange for divine vision and/or union. Linda Hess, for example, has eloquently discussed the dramatic and often elusive ways Kabir invokes metaphors of money in the "upside-down" language of his poetry in order to express the significance of devotion to an impersonal God (Hess 1982, 1987; cf. Schomer & Macleod 1987). Similar representations of *bhakti* are evident in the discourse of the female *sadhus*. In our conversations, Gangagiri frequently suggests the importance of *bhakti* to God by using metaphors of money and/or precious gems. A typical comment of hers in our daily interactions is "*bhakti* is expensive" or "a *bhakt* is like a diamond (*hīrā*)," i.e., precious to God. Even the statement, "God is expensive," indexes Gangagiri's use of a specifically *sant bhakti* framework in the construction of devotional asceticism. Compare Gangagiri's portrayal of *bhakti* as "expensive" to Bahina Bai's view: 'You cannot buy *bhakti* in the marketplace. You cannot find it in the forest. In exchange for *bhakti* you have to give your heart' (Vanita 1989, 60).

Several *bhakti* frameworks, embedded in the performance context of the Mira Bai narrative, thus play a pivotal role in Gangagiri's interpretation of the ascetic virtue of sacrifice which she explicitly associates with a life of devotional asceticism. To Gangagiri, Mira Bai exemplifies the virtue of sacrifice because she voluntarily "leaves everything," despite the sufferings she experiences at the hands of the "wicked" Rana

Kumbha, in order to dedicate herself to the worship and remembrance of God. But a life of sacrifice and by implication suffering represents the “price” Mira has to pay as God’s *bhakt*. That is, through her spiritual and physical sacrifices, Mira Bai expresses her duty and devotion to God. Mira’s duty to God, what Hawley (1987) refers to as an example of *bhakti dharma*¹⁴⁶ in the lives of the *bhakti* saints (53), not only, as several scholars have maintained, takes precedence over and, finally, supersedes (secular) duty to family, but even broadens orthodox notions of *stridharm*, or women’s duty to their husbands and families, as Mira’s duty to God in the form of Kṛṣṇa constitutes a *bhakti* version of *stridharm* (Hawley 1987, 2005; Harlan 1992; cf. Jain and Sharma 2004).

More than duty and devotion, though, Mira’s sacrifice of “all happiness” further suggests to Gangagiri an intense, personal love (*prem*) of God. Like the ascetic virtue of sacrifice, the *bhakti* value of love appears as a salient theme in Gangagiri’s Mira Bai narratives. Though not stated in this particular Mira performance, in other performances Gangagiri underscored love as a defining feature of Mira’s devotional asceticism. This particular value, in fact, creates Mira as the *bhakt par excellence* in the view of the Rajasthani female sadhus. “Nobody loved God the way Mira did,” Gangagiri asserts at the conclusion of one of her Mira narrative performances, to which Tulsigiri exclaims, “That’s right, sister! Mira really loved God.” In this respect, the female sadhus’ view of Mira’s devotional asceticism as exemplary of the *bhakti* value of love compares to and supports Hawley’s observation that Mira’s *bhakti dharm* reveals “an ethics of character that focuses on love” (Hawley 1987, 53). From the shared perspective of the Rajasthani

¹⁴⁶ Hawley suggests that the *bhakti* saints Mira Bai, Narasi Mehta, and Pipa Das, for example, “present a *dharma* of their own, an ethic based on certain qualities of character and communal identification that are not quite ignored but certainly obscured in the teaching of traditional *varnāśramadharmā*. In effect they present to the readers a new version of dharma, a *bhakti dharma*” (1987, 53).

sadhus, Mira expresses this *bhakti* quality of love by singing *bhajans* and feeding the sadhus and *sants*, who also participated in her *bhajan satsangs* in order to worship and experience God. To the female sadhus, Mira's devotional practices illustrate types of religious charity (*dān*) and service (*sevā*), through which means she worships *bhagvān* by serving humanity, which represents divine form on earth. Along with Mira's "sacrifice" of all worldly happiness, Mira's love, charity and service also constitute and express the foundation and texture of devotional asceticism.

II B. "Becoming Powerful through Struggle": Rupa Rani

Our next narrative of the life of the female *sant* Rupa Rani illustrates another theme of the sadhus' narratives of devotional asceticism, namely, devotion to the guru (as God), but emphasizes this motif through the idea of struggle. In this narrative performance, Shiv Puri, the performer, highlights religious ideals and concepts constitutive of multiple religious frameworks, including gender-related and caste-specific ones, to construct devotional asceticism. On the day that I visited Shiv Puri at her ashram, in the middle of a hot July summer in 2005, I encountered five female Rajput householder devotees, two of them relatives of Shiv Puri, who had arrived from a nearby village to pay their respects to her, their guru. My visit had prompted Shiv Puri to form an informal *bhajan satsang* session, consisting of her and the five female devotees.¹⁴⁷ Everyone, including my field assistant, Manvendra Singh, gathered in Shiv Puri's personal room, located behind the ashram compound, where it was cool and dry, and where we found a much appreciated reprieve from the loud construction activities

¹⁴⁷ Shiv Puri's disciple, that is, her daughter-in-law, who also serves as a *pūjārīnī* of the temple, joined in the *bhajan satsang* a few times when she came to distribute water or tea, or to retrieve her nine-month old daughter from Shiv Puri's lap.

happening at and around the ashram at the time (Shiv Puri was in the process of expanding her ashram). In this context of *bhajan satsang*, I recorded the Rupa Rani narrative I analyze below. The story, however, emerged not from a *bhajan* (though after its telling, Shiv Puri and her disciples performed a Rupa Rani *bhajan*), but rather from an incident illustrative of how women employ various methods to negotiate religious activities, even meeting the guru, with domestic obligations—a key theme of Shiv Puri’s Rupa Rani story.¹⁴⁸ After an hour of singing, Shiv Puri’s relatives had made their way towards the door to leave. As they exited, Shiv Puri shouted, “And don’t tell anyone [she named several women] are here singing *bhajans*!” I asked Shiv Puri why she prohibited these women from telling others about their devotional activities. Her response fell hard on my ears. I discovered that Shiv Puri spoke to these householders not as a sadhu, but as a *female* sadhu who acutely recognizes the many, sometimes unavoidable, difficulties women who worship God endure in a patriarchal society. In response to my question, Shiv Puri told Rupa Rani’s story:

Have you heard of our [i.e., India’s] Rupa Rani? O.k., she used to leave the palace [in secret] to meet with her guru. He would call her to come in the assembly [*jhamle*] of *sants* and sadhus to worship God. She had to walk through the jungle in the night. On the way, she encountered fraudulent people who emerged on the path [that she took to her guru’s place]—[frightening characters who] would stick out their tongues and release a terrible laughter. A lot of frauds appeared on the path. Rupa Rani used to go to meet her guru. He [the guru] would say, “You come in the assembly,” and she went, o.k. She had to go, right? But her husband, what did he do? He put a snake on the lattice [on which Rupa would climb to enter the palace in order that her husband wouldn’t know she had gone to meet her guru], and in this way he learned Rupa Rani came home [because she had to enter through the front door instead]. The women of India

¹⁴⁸ It is very possible that Shiv Puri would have told a Rupa Rani story even if I had not asked my question. In this *satsang*, Shiv Puri and her female devotees performed the *bhajans* attributed to legendary female *sants*, most of whom were also Rajputs, such as Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai. They also performed a *bhajan* attributed to Bhartrhari, a legendary Nath devotee who had also been a Rajput before his initiation. Prior to their song performances, Shiv Puri would provide a brief narrative about the lives of these *sants*. In this respect, she probably would have done the same in the case of Rupa Rani, but my question certainly affected how she performed this story, and shows the way stories evolve from particular interactions between performer and audience, and in this case, performer and ethnographer.

endure so many restrictions [*pratibandh*]. In our Rajput community, too, there are so many difficult customs [*mushkil bandhan*] women have to follow. But [by enduring these obstacles] they have developed so much *śakti*. Some [Rajput] women in our community [have become so powerful that] they took baths of fire with their husbands [i.e., they immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres].

Very little scholarship on the life of the female *sant* Rupa Rani is available. In consulting the works of other scholars, I have found one essay written by Sonal Shukla that discusses her life in any illuminating detail (Shukla 1989, 63-73).¹⁴⁹ In this informative piece focused specifically on the religious lives of several legendary female saints from Gujarat, such as Jaisal and Toral, Loyal, and Gangagasati, Shukla briefly discusses Rupa Rani, not because she hailed from this region, but rather because she is considered by Indians familiar with her story to be a *satī*. In her explication of this term, Shukla elaborates, “Some other *bhakta* women...who sacrificed their lives in the interest of their communities are also called Sati. An unusual and glorified life qualified a woman to get the title of Sati” (Shukla 1987, 72).

While Shiv Puri does not explicitly use the word *satī* in her narrative, she implicitly ascribes this religious status to Rupa Rani by associating her with Rajput women who have taken what she calls, “baths of fire,” that is, women who immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, *satīs* (after she told Manvendra and me Rupa's story, Shiv Puri, also a Rajput, proudly mentioned that in her family several

¹⁴⁹ In narrative performance contexts, the female sadhus never provided historical dates for the lives of the female *sants*. Many times, the only semblance of historicity I received from the sadhus was, “this is an old story,” or “in the time of Lord Kṛṣṇa,” implying in their minds that these female *sants* were probably not of the *Kālī Yūga*, or the age of “darkness”—a concept the female sadhus use in terms of understanding time and “history.” In Mira's case, though, most of the female sadhus consider her to have been born during India's “recent” history, that is, “in our age,” the time of the *Kālī Yūga* when the Ranas (and not the British) still maintained control over the region. But when it comes to dating Rupa Rani's life, based on the fact that the female sadhus believe that she, like Mira Bai, lived during the time of the *Kālī Yūga*, and more specifically, when the *bhakti* movement(s) inundated and changed the religious landscape of north India, we might date her life, or more accurately, the stories and songs attributed to her, to between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries of the Common Era.

women had become *satīs*). Though a Rajput, Rupa Rani, however, is not a *satī* in this sense of the term. Lindsey Harlan explains: “In the minds of Rajputs...[to become] a *sati* does not, as is often assumed, result from the act of self-immolation. The word *sati* means ‘a good woman’ and not, as English speakers tend to think, an act” (Harlan 1992, 115). In other Indian caste communities, too, *satī* connotes a woman (or wife) of “good” or “virtuous” character. In this religious framework, we should understand Rupa’s devotional asceticism to be illustrative of her “glorious” life as a *satī*, because, as Shukla concurs, she sacrificed her life “in the interest of” her *bhakti* community (Shukla 1987, 71).

A similar view of sacrifice underpins Shiv Puri’s Rupa Rani narrative performance. However, for Shiv Puri, Rupa Rani’s implied *satī* status stems not so much from the sacrifices she made as much as from the *śakti*, or power, she developed in making those sacrifices for her *bhakti* community, her guru, and by extension, God. But how does Shiv Puri understand the source of this power? By stating that, “[t]he women of India endure so many restrictions [*pratibandh*]... But [by enduring them] they have developed so much *śakti*,” Shiv Puri makes poignantly explicit her view that female power and inner strength derive from the sufferings and difficulties women experience in having to follow, sometimes reluctantly, traditional customs which intentionally restrict females on the basis of their subordinate gender status. A common perception shared amongst Rajasthani female sadhus is that regardless of her religious propensities and marital status, a woman has to “endure so many difficulties [*bahut hī kaṣṭ ʻtānā*]” or “suffer so many problems and pains [*dukh bhognā*]” on account of traditional attitudes and practices, implying that gender is directly related to women’s social experiences of

suffering. I understand Shiv Puri's use of the phrase, "to endure great difficulties," to mean, more specifically, the concept of struggle (*kaṣṭ*). As Shiv Puri suggests, Rupa Rani's experience of oppression/danger parallels those of Shiv Puri's female devotees leaving their "bounded" homes in order to participate in *bhajan satsang* and worship God. In this narrative performance, Shiv Puri thus invokes a gendered ideology of suffering as religiously empowering for women, implying that struggle (like suffering) is a foundational virtue of devotional asceticism.

Although Shiv Puri's selection of the virtue of struggle is explicitly based on a gendered ideology of suffering, her emphasis on this particular concept also implicates a dominant framework of Brahmanical asceticism. Here, too, struggle, like the virtues of suffering and sacrifice, constitutes an ideal integral to most traditions of orthodox renunciation, one through which Rajasthani sadhus, in general, understand and experience their individual renunciant identities and religiosities. Amongst the collaborators in my own field study, the male and female sadhus individually and/or collectively alluded to the ascetic notion of struggle in the context of either descriptions of their religious lives as "difficult," or definitions of renunciation as a path in which sadhus (are supposed to) make "great efforts [*bahut hī kaṣṭ/prayās*]" with respect to their religious practices and personal spiritual advancement. In both cases, the sadhus implied in these statements an underlying perception of the heroic nature of asceticism. This is an important point to underscore because the concepts of suffering, sacrifice, and struggle which reveal the motif of heroism embedded in a Brahminic asceticism model are similarly extolled as ideals in Rajput/warrior frameworks (cf. Harlan 1992; Jain and Sharma 2004). We find a cross-fertilization of ideas between ascetic and warrior cultures:

in matters of religiosity, ascetics represent themselves as warriors, and in the case of warriors, in matters of battle, they construct themselves as ascetics (cf. Hawley 1987, 67; Smith 1991; Harlan 1992; Schomer et al, 2001; Jain and Sharma 2004). Though a sadhu, Shiv Puri is a Shaktavat Sisodiya Rajput by birth,¹⁵⁰ a fact not only of which she is proud (she always mentions this detail in our meetings), but also on the basis of which she constructs her ascetic identity. In light of this identity, Shiv Puri's emphasis on struggle may be as motivated by Rajput frameworks, in which the ideals of sacrifice and struggle define caste identity and female behavior, as by a model of Brahmanical asceticism.

In Rajput traditions, as Harlan discusses, the ideals of sacrifice and struggle represent a "Rajput way of life" and constitute the social duty of all Rajputs, regardless of gender (Harlan 1992, 122; cf. Jain and Sharma 2004, 147-154). However, "[t]he contexts and contents of these ideals," according to Harlan, are gendered (123). For example, the Rajput males studied by Harlan understand sacrifice and struggle in terms of the notion of the *saka*, or "the battle unto death," which depicts a "symbolic summation" of these ideals (122). Harlan explains,

Preparing for the *saka* (the cutting down), Rajputs donned the garb of ascetics, which showed that they intended to sacrifice their lives in accord with duty and with the reward of a place in warrior heaven. Today the *saka* remains a powerful symbol of caste identity and personal integrity and represents to all Rajputs the idea that sacrifice is both a natural proclivity and a moral imperative (Harlan 1992, 122).

¹⁵⁰ According to the local Mewari lore, Shaktavat Rajputs are thought to be descended from the lineage of Shakti Singh, the younger brother of Rana Pratap Singh, who was one of the rulers of Mewar and courageously fought to keep the region from falling into the hands of Muslim hegemony. People (sadhus and householders) who tell this story frequently mention that due to Rana Pratap's bravery, Mewar was one of the only regions of Rajasthan that the Muslim invaders could not control. In conversations about her life, Shiv Puri similarly explained that she was descended from the lineage of Shakti Singh, and received much respect from the villagers who come to her ashram because of the reputation of her ancestors as "brave" Rajputs. See the discussion on the Rajasthani cultural contexts in the Introduction to the dissertation.

Whereas the Rajput men associate the caste duties of sacrifice and struggle with the image of the *saka* who willingly gives his own life on the battlefield, the females Harlan interviewed situate these ideals specifically within the domestic context of family and home (123). From their perspectives, Rajput women fulfill their caste duties and preserve the honor and integrity of the larger Rajput community by selflessly serving their husbands and their families with love and devotion. Harlan elucidates, "...a Rajput woman gives to her family as her husband gives to his subjects" (123). Through a life of "sacrificial devotion to the husband" and the family (123), Rajput women acquire *sat*,¹⁵¹ a term often glossed as "truth" or "purity," but which may also signify "moral goodness," and prepare themselves to become *saīs*, the female equivalent of the male *saka*, who in an ultimate display of self-sacrifice (*balidān*) follow their husbands in death to an afterlife in heaven (123-24). Harlan contends, "by dying as a *sati* a woman acquires the insight and confidence that she has done her duty and done it well" (124).

How then might Rajput frameworks underlie and inform Shiv Puri's understandings of the ideals of sacrifice and struggle in her interpretation of Rupa Rani's life? Her perception that female *śakti* derives from enduring gender-related struggles and sacrifices may also refer to the Rajput notion of *sat*. Harlan elaborates, "*Sat* is essentially an autogenerative moral fuel. Produced by good activity, it generates good activity" (1992, 129). By struggling *through*, rather than against, the myriad restrictions enforced on her because of her female gender, Rupa Rani acquires not only devotional power, but also *sat*, moral power, which, in turn, enables her to struggle and sacrifice in her

¹⁵¹ Importantly, Harlan discusses that *sat* is not an exclusive female quality (Harlan 1992, 124). As Harlan explains, "Carrying all the connotations of the English colloquialism "the right stuff" it also defines the realized character of Rajput males. *Sat* is the agent resulting from and catalyzing compliance with the Rajput code of military chivalry and administrative generosity" (Harlan 1992, 124).

everyday life. In doing so, Rupa Rani further manifests and fulfills her duty as a Rajput woman. But duty to whom and for what purpose? This proposition remains incomplete. We need to consider here the principal reason behind Rupa Rani's daily struggles and sacrifices, and then we must consider how Shiv Puri conceptualizes the concept of duty.

Implicit in Shiv Puri's narrative is an understanding that Rupa Rani's struggles and sacrifices emerge from a direct sense of duty. However, in this particular case, unlike Rajput female householders, Rupa Rani directs her duty neither to the husband nor to the family, not even to the larger Rajput community. On the contrary, Rupa Rani struggles through traditional restrictions and intentionally sacrifices worldly concerns on the sole basis of a religious duty to her guru, and by extension, to her *bhakti* community of sadhus and *sants*. Shiv Puri's statement in the context of, "Rupa Rani used to go to meet her guru. He would say, 'You come in the assembly' [so] she *had* to go, right? (italics mine)," supports this view of her life as one of religious duty. In this description, Shiv Puri uses the compulsory form of the Hindi verb, "to have to go," implying that Rupa Rani's actions pivot on an underlying perception of duty to the guru. More significantly, the popular narrative theme of duty to the guru, and not to husband and family, evokes a motif central to both Sanskritic and vernacular *bhakti* traditions—that is, the daily struggles and sacrifices that devotees (male or female) endure on the grounds of duty to the guru illuminate, more broadly, their devotion to the divine. By means of the *bhakti* frameworks embedded in this performance context, Shiv Puri, like Gangagiri in her Mira narrative performance, understands duty to be constitutive of ultimately devotion to God, the highest priority in the life of a *bhakt*. In this narrative performance, as well, Shiv Puri's translation of struggle wraps tightly around a *bhakti* vision of an ascetic/heroic

concept. Although her emphasis on struggle and sacrifice in the narrative is based on ideals drawn from multiple and co-existing religious frameworks, which also remain embedded features of the performance context, by interpreting these virtues via specifically *bhakti* frameworks, Shiv Puri constructs devotional asceticism in a manner that not only sympathetically acknowledges gendered experiences of suffering, but also implies the inherent exceptionalism of female devotees of God.

II C. “*More of a Sadhu than We Are*”: Karma Bai

Interestingly, our final narrative about Karma Bai illustrates this very theme of females as the ideal devotees of God because of an embedded perception in the story of their “natural,” or inherent, ability to love, a subdued, yet ever-present, notion in the model of devotional asceticism constructed by the female sadhus. On a crisp early morning in January 2006, before Gangagiri narrated the story of Karma Bai to me and my Brahmin host sister—who had accompanied me to Gangagiri’s hermitage in order to assist me with transcription questions—she had performed a *bhajan* attributed to the famous Gujarati *bhakti* saint Narsi Mehta.¹⁵² In the *bhajan*, Narsi Mehta lovingly pleads with God to “meet” him, and then proceeds to ask God why, when He has met *bhakts* like Mira Bai, Kabir, and Karma Bai, does He not meet Narsi, who also loves Him? Hearing

¹⁵² Narsi Mehta (also known as Narasi or Narasingh Mehta), as Neelima Shukla-Bhatt discusses, is one of the most influential *bhakti* poets of Gujarat, and is believed to have lived in the early part of the fifteenth century of the common era (ca. 1414-1480 CE). Shukla-Bhatt elaborates, “Narasingh’s songs and the hagiographic narratives about him form a part of the cultural heritage of Gujarat in which its people across religious and class/caste boundaries take great pride” (Shukla Bhatt 2003, 4). See Shukla-Bhatt, “Nectar of Devotion’: Bhakti-rasa in the Tradition of Gujarati Saint-Poet Narasinha Mehta,” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2003. For more on the life story of Narsi Mehta, see Hawley, “Morality Beyond Morality in the Lives of Three Hindu Saints,” in *Saints and Virtues*, edited by John S. Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 52-72. Gangagiri’s *bhajan* and narrative performances, unlike those of the other female sadhus, frequently featured Narsi Mehta. But this detail is not so surprising when we consider the fact that Gangagiri is a native of Gujarat, moving to Rajasthan after her parents married her to a Brahmin man who resided with his family in a village southwest of Udaipur. Her narrative performances are based on the stories she learned as a child living in Limri, Gujarat.

the *bhajan* refer to Karma Bai, another of God's female *bhaktis* about whom I knew little at the time, prompted me to ask Gangagiri about her life and deeds. To my question, "Who was Karma Bai," my Brahmin host sister replied, "Sister (*dīdī*), Karma Bai was one of God's greatest devotees." But why was this so? I thought. "[Karma Bai] had real faith [*sahi śraddh*] in God," Gangagiri answered. She continued, "Not everybody has faith like this [i.e., faith especially in the midst of difficulty] but she did. So, God came to her." Then Gangagiri told me and my host sister the story of Karma Bai:

Karma Bai had a lot of land. All the people in her house died. She never married. Her mother and father died, and she didn't have any brothers or sisters. She was alone. But she was awakened [*jāgrī*]. She had a lot of land. From what she earned in her fields, she gave half of it away [to others], and with the other half she made different kinds of sweet dishes [*khīnch*], and brought them to the temple [to feed the sadhus and the gods]. She made sweet dishes of millet and wheat and corn. She pounded the grains, added the sugar, ghee, oil, and then boiled them. She made so many [different] sweet dishes [that] she gave half of it away to anyone who came, and the other half she gave to the temple.

One day, eight, ten, fifteen sadhus came [to Karma Bai's home]. They had to go on a pilgrimage, but had to walk because there were no cars in those days. They wanted someone to serve [the temple gods]. They thought, "We have to go [on a pilgrimage], but someone has to take responsibility [for the temple]." They said to Karma Bai, "Sister, you serve the temple and feed the gods. We're going on a pilgrimage. You stay here and serve [the temple]." "If I have to serve, I'll do it from here [my home]," thought Karma Bai. "Take whatever you need from the store, and we'll give the money [to the storekeeper] when we return," said the sadhus. The sadhus spoke like this to Karma Bai and left [for their pilgrimage].

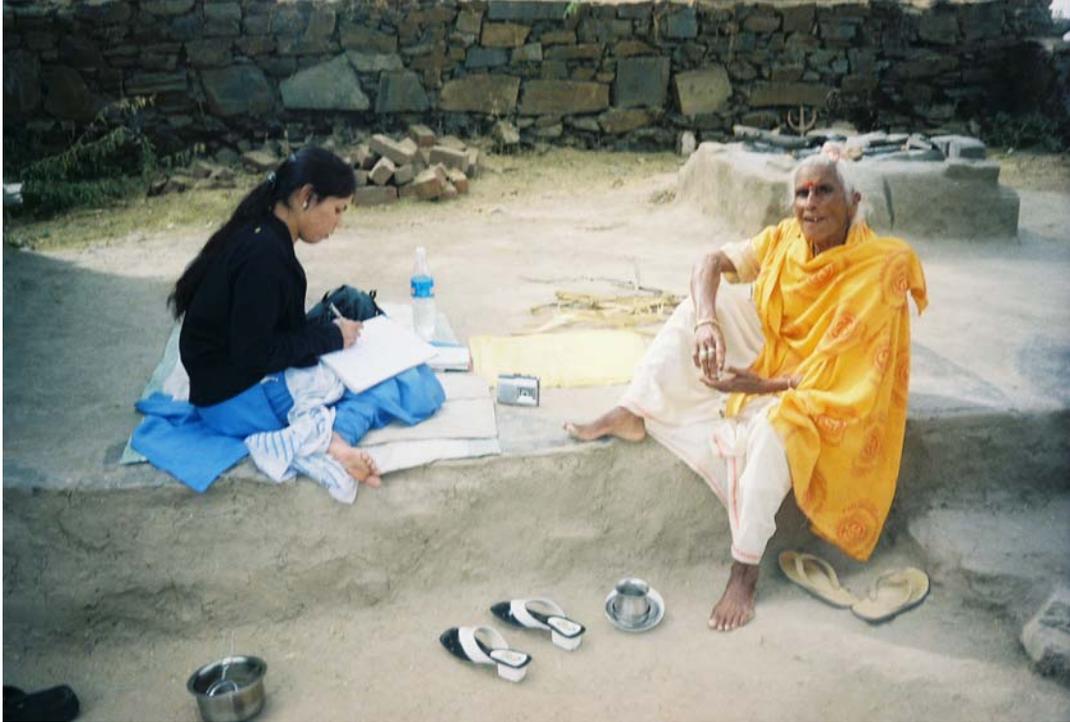
"I'll make sweet dishes and feed [the gods]," said Karma Bai. She spent the whole day serving the deities. She pounded and threshed the grains; she filled [separate pots] with [the different] grains, and then boiled them. [Karma Bai] thought, "I should buy plenty of sugar, ghee, and oil [because] if five members [of God's family] come today, ten will come tomorrow." God has a big family, o.k. And those sadhus told her, "Whatever you need, take it from the store, and we'll pay [the storekeeper] when we return." But [Karma Bai] spent a lot of money. She bought ghee, sugar, cane, oil, incense, and so forth. The sadhus returned [from pilgrimage] and asked the storekeeper, "How much do we owe?" The storekeeper said, "She spent this much money." "How could you have spent so much money? Who came to the temple [and ate all the food]?" the sadhus asked Karma Bai. She said, "You told me to serve God, so I did. God and his whole family came [to the temple]. They ate a lot; God ate a lot of food." Karma Bai explained. Those sadhus replied, "But we also serve God, and he doesn't eat [the food]. God doesn't eat the food, sister. How can we believe what you say? We serve God everyday and we've never seen God eat the food." "But it's true!

God eats,” said Karma Bai. The sadhus told her, “We’ll believe it when we see it! We’ll believe it when we see it!”

Later on, Karma Bai said to God [who was at her home], “You have to come [to my house tomorrow] and eat.” God said, “You have faith in me, so I come here to eat. But I won’t come to eat while others are watching me [because they have no faith]. If you alone call me, I’ll come. But I won’t come and eat while everyone else watches.” Karma Bai pleaded, “But those sadhus are questioning my honor [*izzat*]! If you don’t come, they’ll call me a liar [*jhūṭī*], and think I ate all the food myself! You have to come.” After all, this was an issue of [her] honor [*izzat kī bāt*]. When the devotee calls [God] with such love in [her] heart, God has to come, right? God said, “O.k., I’ll come; but you have to put up a curtain [*pardā*].” “Alright,” said Karma Bai. So, the next day, God came [to her home] and ate. He brought his whole family, too. Everyone came, and they ate [the sweet dishes Karma Bai had prepared]. In the curtain that was hung was a hole. Karma Bai had put that hole there so the sadhus could see God eating the food. She told those sadhus, “Look through the hole. They’re eating, right?” They looked through the hole and saw she was right. “It’s true!” they said, “All the gods have come to her place, and they’re eating [the food].” Those sadhus fell at her feet and said, “Sister, you’re not a sadhu, but you’re more of a sadhu than we are. We serve God, too, but he doesn’t come to [the temple] to eat. But you make sweet dishes [with love] and God and his whole family come [here] to eat. This is the story of Karma Bai.

In contrast to Mira Bai and Rupa Rani, both of whom were Rajputs, Karma Bai was born into the Jāt community, a caste of cultivators, and is thought to have lived in the city of Pūrī in Orissa near the famous Jagganāth temple where the *mūrtīs* of Kṛṣṇa, his sister Subhadra, and his brother Balarāma, as Gangagiri explained, are housed and worshipped daily by Brahmin priests.¹⁵³ In framing this performance, Gangagiri explains that what makes Karma Bai “one of God’s greatest devotees” is her “real faith in God.” But what does she mean by “real faith”?

¹⁵³ As with Rupa Rani, there is a dearth of scholarly literature available on the historicity and life of the female *sant* Karma Bai. I have been able to find a scholarly reference to her life in the “Glossary of Devotees” section in David Lorenzen’s monograph, *Praises to a Formless God* (1996), in which he briefly describes that Karma Bai was “a devotee of the god Jagganath of the city of Puri,” and that she fed God everyday “with little concern for ritual purity” (Lorenzen 1996, 266).



Gangagiri narrates the story of Karma Bai to Kalpana Sanadhya. Photo by Antoinette DeNapoli.

In light of our conversations, Gangagiri's use of the phrase "real faith" implies the *bhakti* value of love. That is, according to Gangagiri, Karma Bai is an ideal devotee because, like Mira Bai, "she really loved" God. In the story, like Mira, Karma Bai also expresses love via voluntary acts of charity (*dān*) and service (*sevā*): she offers free grain to others, and to the sadhus and deities, the sweet dishes that she herself prepares. In this story, much more than what we observed in Mira's, food plays a pivotal role in Karma Bai's *bhakti* to God (*bhagvān*). Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) and Grace Jantzen (1995) have both discussed the significant role food played in the asceticism of the medieval Christian female saints. Bynum explains,

...food was a powerful symbol. Like body, food must be broken and spilled forth in order to give life. Macerated by teeth before it can be assimilated to sustain life, food mirrors and recapitulates both suffering and fertility. Thus food, by what it is, seems to symbolize sacrifice and service (Bynum 1987, 30).

Food was not only a “powerful symbol,” it was also a gender-related symbol. Jantzen elucidates,

...women’s preoccupation with food was by no means all to do with renunciation. The everyday reality was that women on the whole were the ones who prepared food and were responsible for feeding men and children. Holy women extended this in their efforts to serve Christ by feeding others, especially those who were too poor to be able to feed themselves in the famines of the late medieval period (Jantzen 1995, 211; cf. Bynum 1987, 30).

Bynum and Jantzen’s observations similarly apply to the devotional asceticism of Karma Bai. A prosperous and magnanimous landowner, Karma Bai donates half of the grains she receives from her fields to the poor, and the other half she gives to the sadhus and deities at the Jagganāth temple. Though wealthy, Karma Bai still lives by her own choice a simple, religious existence. Without any material concerns, she spends her days preparing multiple sweet dishes, or *khīnch*,¹⁵⁴ bringing these to the temple and offering them to the sadhus and the deities there. The food Karma Bai offers to God symbolizes her body, that is, the female self whose own sacrifice feeds and nourishes many others, including the gods. But Karma Bai’s symbolic self-sacrifice, as the performance frame suggests, also represents an expression of her love. By feeding others “with love,” Karma Bai serves God; and by feeding God “with love,” she creates an intimate relationship with God and with his “big” family.

Thus, Karma Bai’s delicious daily food offerings as expressions of her love to the divine constitute a hallmark of her devotional asceticism. Even the *bhajans* attributed to Karma Bai that I recorded from the female sadhus highlight the importance of food and

¹⁵⁴ As the female sadhus explained, *khīnch*, a Rajasthani term, is a sweet dish, similar in its consistency to *khīr*, another Indian sweet dish, but made as separated dishes with corn, millet, and wheat instead of rice.

its preparation for God's daily worship.¹⁵⁵ In some of these *bhajans* Karma Bai describes in great detail to God the ways she has prepared the sweet dishes for him, and in doing so, obliquely expresses her love for him. And, as a Karma Bai story that Shiv Puri told me illustrates, when he does not come to eat her food, she becomes emotionally distraught, threatening to break his image into small pieces. In this case, God not eating the sweet dishes signifies a rejection of Karma Bai's love. However, as Shiv Giri maintains in her performance, "God had to come right?" implying that God does appear to Karma Bai and eats *khīnch*, drawn to her because of her love, and not his hunger. By feeding God, then, Karma Bai demonstrates the power of her "real faith"; she "really" believes "in her heart and mind," as Gangagiri told me in other conversations, that God will come, eat the *khīnch*, and enjoy it. Not surprisingly, everyday God and his "big family" arrive at Karma Bai's home and feast on the delectable sweet dishes she has prepared for them. Yet, in an unpredictable twist of fate, this becomes the very source of her troubles with the sadhus.

As the narrative dramatically shows, the group of male sadhus who asked Karma Bai to serve the temple and the gods while in their absence on pilgrimage now suspect her of foul play. Without as much as saying so, they accuse Karma Bai of being greedy and gluttonous, and attempt to tarnish her good name, or honor (*izzat*). The sadhus base their erroneous claims on the fact that Karma Bai spent more money than they had initially anticipated on the purchase of food supplies for the temple. Unlike the sadhus, however, in the expectation that not only God, but his whole family would also come and eat, Karma Bai carefully decides the amount of ghee, sugar, and oil she will need to make

¹⁵⁵ I have included a famous Rajasthani Karma Bai *bhajan*, "Karma Bai's Sweet Dishes" (*karma bai ro khīncharo*), which I recorded on the day Shiv Puri and her female Rajput householder devotees gathered for *bhajan satsang* at her ashram, in the Appendix.

the *khīnch*, and therewith, purchases these materials on the agreed understanding that the sadhus will pay the storekeeper upon their return to the temple.

When the sadhus return to the city and inquire about their debt from the storekeeper, consumed by a mixture of shock and anger, they immediately confront Karma Bai by asking her, “How could you have spent so much money? Who came to the temple [and ate all the food]?” In response, Karma Bai tells them only what she knows—the truth: “You told me to serve God, so I did. God and His...family came to the temple. They ate the food. God ate the food.” But the sadhus find this answer unacceptable. “How can we believe what you say? We serve God everyday and we’ve never seen God eat the food,” is their callous reply to Karma Bai. “But it’s true! God eats,” she exclaims, her pleas of course falling on deaf ears. Beyond their perceptions of her as greedy and gluttonous, the sadhus further imply that Karma Bai is a liar (*jhūtī*). And, as if to humiliate her more than they have already, the sadhus challenge Karma Bai to prove that God and His family really do eat the *khīnch* in her home: “We’ll believe it when we see it,” are the sadhus’ last words to Karma Bai as they set off from her place.

Karma Bai’s ordeal with the male sadhus leaves her emotionally disturbed. “After all,” Gangagiri reflects in her performance, “this was an issue of [her] honor.” In their questioning of Karma Bai’s honor the male sadhus fail to comprehend that her seemingly miraculous power to attract God and his family as honored guests to her home by offering them delicious sweet dishes stems from nothing less, and perhaps nothing more, than her unshakeable faith, her love of God.¹⁵⁶ But the devotional power Karma Bai has

¹⁵⁶ This Karma Bai story shares thematic features with the oral tale of the Jungli Rani (“Queen from the Jungle” or “Uncivilized Queen”), analyzed by Ann Grodzins Gold (1994). In this story, because of her devotional power, the Jungli Rani becomes accused by the King’s other jealous wives, and by the King himself, of “dangerous magic.” Gold explains, “...her devotion [to the Sun God] is perceived as dangerous

managed to produce and wield through her expression of love becomes confused with duplicity by the male sadhus, because of which they suspect her good name and accuse her of greed, gluttony, and lying. In the face of these serious accusations, Karma Bai, as the narrative intimates, suffers a great deal of emotional pain.

And yet, Karma Bai's suffering is neither unnoticed nor unappreciated by God. Implicit in Gangagiri's narrative is the message that not only the daily sacrifices Karma Bai makes on behalf of her faith in God by donating food and grain, but also the emotional suffering she experiences in the expression and defense of that faith draw God to her like a magnet. Importantly, in this story we encounter both the idea that women's suffering stems from their subordinate female gender status as well as that women's ability to feel pain is a direct result of their female gender. This gender-related power endows Karma Bai with the ability to feel love, and as such, this makes her in God's eyes a better devotee than the male sadhus. In her description of *bhakti* from a Tamil perspective, Margaret Egnor discusses the powerful role gender plays in females' ability to attract God via their love:

Bhakti is a religion of emotion, of feeling (*unarcci*) as Tamils say, and without it all religion is empty. The emotion of the devotee, the pang of his longing and his love, give him a genuine power over the god he loves, the power to make the god come to him. It is this emotion alone that gives him that power. Women are regarded as inherently more religious than men, because they have naturally this power of feeling, of suffering for others, of love. It is said that male worshippers who seek union with the deity must "soften," that is, they must become like females, before their desire will be consummated (Egnor 1991 20-21).

[because] [i]t fosters independence from, rather than submission to, familial demands—whether natal or marital" (161). But, as Gold points out, the Jungli Rani's devotional power hardly constitutes an example of dangerous magic, on the basis that she does not use her power for selfish or harmful means, but rather to create auspiciousness for her own family. In this tale, as well, the Jungli Rani's reputation as an auspicious queen becomes redeemed in the eyes of the King. See Gold, "The Jungli Rani: Devotional Power or Dangerous Magic," in *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 147-163.

On account of her love, God listens to and “meets” Karma Bai; however, he only agrees to grant her request to show up at her home once more and eat the *khīnch* in front of the disbelieving sadhus on the stipulation that she hang a curtain (*pardā*). But why would God ask Karma Bai to place a curtain between him and the male sadhus? How might we understand God’s seemingly unusual request to Karma Bai? As several scholars have discussed, more than just a tool for restriction, the curtain, in its role as a shield, creates distance between the viewer and the viewed, and by so doing, protects the privacy of its female wearers (cf. Gold and Raheja 1994). In her examination of the concept of veiling, or purdah (*pardā*), in women’s oral traditions in North India, Ann Grodzins Gold maintains that it “is not a monolithic prison, but a subtle, fluid, and often highly manipulable bundle of precepts and practice” (Gold 1994, 169). For instance, in the case of male deities like Dev Narayanji, Gold suggests that purdah is used by devotees to protect and shield him from the “unpleasant sight” of liquor, a substance required by the lesser deity Bhairuji, and imbibed by his worshippers. From this perspective, purdah, as Gold argues, “gives license to perform displeasing or insubordinate acts” (Gold 1994, 169).

Gold’s theory of purdah is similarly applicable to our analysis of the Karma Bai narrative. In this story, the curtain may shield not so much God from the “unpleasant sight” of the sadhus, but rather the sadhus from God’s displeasure. As God informs Karma Bai, “You have faith in me, so I come here to eat. But I won’t come to eat while others are watching me [because they have no faith].” But there is another possibility. In making her request to God, Karma Bai remains motivated by the desire to redeem the perception of her honor in the eyes of the male sadhus. As the use of purdah also signifies

the protection and maintenance of female honor, God's request to Karma Bai for a curtain indicates not only his understanding of but also, perhaps, his identification with the emotional suffering Karma Bai experiences at the thought of losing her honor. In a reversal of the idea implicit in the Mira and Rupa narratives that female devotees acquire devotional power and "meet" God by means of their own mental and/or physical suffering, in this story we find that God "meets" Karma Bai through his identification with her pain and suffering. Gangagiri's statement in the narrative to the effect that, "When the devotee calls [God] with such love in [her] heart, God has to come, right?" implies that God not only recognizes and understands Karma's love, but also empathizes with the suffering she experiences on account of her "real" love for him. God's request for a curtain intimates his identification with Karma Bai's pain and his intention to do something about it. Hence, while the curtain creates distance between God and his male devotees, it simultaneously creates intimacy and relationship between him and Karma Bai, a reward for her endearing faith in him. And God certainly ameliorates Karma Bai's suffering and her mounting fears by coming with his whole family to her home to eat the different sweet dishes she has prepared for them.

Witnessing this divine event through a mere hole in the curtain, the sadhus exclaim in amazement, "It's true!...All the gods [are here] and they're eating!" Once they realize the power of Karma Bai's faith in God, the sadhus immediately prostrate at her feet and say, "Sister, you're not a sadhu, but you're more of a sadhu than we are." This is a strong statement of asceticism implying *bhakti*/love. And the sadhus are right. Karma Bai is a "better" sadhu than they because she "really loves" God; through faith she recovers her honor in the eyes of the male sadhus and empowers herself within that

community of male religious authority. The image of the sadhus genuflecting before Karma Bai therefore evokes a theme central to the message of this narrative—that of the submission of male religious authority to female spiritual power.¹⁵⁷

Performance and Narrative Meaning: Karma Bai’s Story in Mahipati’s *Bhaktavijaya*

In another version of Karma Bai’s story we witness a similar motif. According to Mahipati’s (1715 CE) Marathi text, the *Bhaktavijaya* (“Victory of the Devotees of the Lord”), Karma Bai loses all her loved ones to death (Abbott and Godwale, trans., 1999, reprint vol. 2: 33-37). She loses her husband while pregnant with their only son; her son upon the birth of her only grandson; and, finally, her grandson while he was still a young child (Mahipati’s story mentions nothing about what happened to the daughter-in-law after the death of Karma Bai’s son). A group of Vaiṣṇava sadhus who were making a pilgrimage to the Jagganāth temple, upon seeing the depressed condition of Karma Bai, instructed her to worship the image of Gopal (a form of Kṛṣṇa) day and night. Searching through their belongings, the sadhus bequeathed Karma Bai with a small *mūrtī* of Gopal, which she treated as if it were her own grandson.¹⁵⁸

In devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Karma Bai fed the *mūrtī* dishes of buttermilk and rice daily. “Seeing her feelings of devotion,” explains the text, “Hari began to eat at her house.” A

¹⁵⁷ Grace Jantzen also discusses the ways the medieval Christian female saints used their divine visions, in which they received spiritual power from God (and Jesus), as a means to subordinate, albeit obliquely, male ecclesiastical authority to female spiritual power. See Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997 reprint).

¹⁵⁸ The text states,

Just as she used to play with her grandson, so now she acted crazily over the idol. The moment she saw it she would take away from it the effect of an evil eye and caress it in her love. She would take warm water and bathe the idol as she used to do with her little child on her feet. The placing the god in a cradle, with love she would swing it. In her love she used to dress it in garments and adornments. Nothing pleased her aside from the idol of Krishna (Abbott and Godwale, 1999, vol. 2: 35).

Brahman who lodged for a single night at Karma Bai's place observed her feeding the *mūrtī* early the next morning. He advised her to perform a series of ritual procedures and ablutions before offering food to the *mūrtī*, in order not to upset God, and then left.

Karma Bai followed his instructions; however, she took too much time in doing so, and Jagganāth, hungry from the delay, became annoyed with the whole situation. So, one night, he appeared in a dream of priest of the Jagganāth temple, and told him to inform Karma Bai to stop following the rules she received from "a very orthodox Brahman" (36). The next day, the priest explained to Karma Bai what Jagganāth had told him in the dream. When Karma Bai brought the offering to Jagganāth, he came and ate "from her hand" in the presence of all the devotees and the Brahmin priests (36).¹⁵⁹

Mahipati's narrative of Karma Bai's life illustrates and emphasizes what Gangagiri has voiced to me on many occasions: "the power of a *bhakt* is a great thing." But I would add here in light of these Karma Bai narratives that the devotional power of a female *bhakt* is especially "a great thing" in her potential to subordinate male religious authority through the power of her "natural" love, a value Gangagiri explicitly identifies in her narrative performance. Both Karma Bai stories similarly underscore this view of love. In Mahipati's version, Karma Bai's love of God overrules orthodox Brahmanical precepts and regulations with respect to food preparation and food offerings for *pūjā*. The state of Karma Bai's bodily cleanliness at the time she makes and offers the food hardly matters to God, or Jagganāth, because she serves him with, as the female sadhus told me,

¹⁵⁹ On this point, Mahipati's text elaborates,

He Whom Brahmadev and other gods and Shiv continually contemplate in their hearts, He eats from the hand of Karmabai. This is novel indeed. He Whom the various forms of *yoga* and various opinions search for, He eats from the hand of Karmabai. It is novel indeed. [Another priest said]...Even Brahmadev is unable to describe *the power of a bhakta*. All the people worshipped the feet of Karmabai (Abbot and Godwale, 1999, vol. 2: 36, italics mine).

“a pure heart,” i.e., “with love.” Karma Bai’s love is powerful enough to make God come to her and eat out of her own hand, much to the surprise of the Brahmin priests. In deference to her devotional power, the Brahmin priests extol Karma Bai’s praises and fall at her feet, an act which validates devotion as a potent conduit for divine encounter, even as it criticizes the validity of “empty” ritual procedures for divine worship. Likewise, in Gangagiri’s version of the story, Karma Bai’s female power of emotion and, as Gangagiri says, her “real faith” attract God to her in a manner that explodes orthodox male notions of ritual exchange and divine encounter in *pūjā*. That is, in exchange for Karma Bai’s love, symbolized through her *khīnch* offering, God appears in his physical form to Karma Bai, and in his actual partaking of the meal, validates that love. In each of the narratives, God’s validation of Karma Bai’s love puts the male religious authorities to shame, for they lack this virtue, on the basis of which Karma Bai herself earns devotional power and spiritual authority vis-à-vis male ritual authority.

And yet the differences in content between the two versions of Karma Bai’s story are not insignificant to our narrative analysis. Performance of this story produces several illuminating shifts with respect to the identities of the male religious authorities and Karma Bai’s marital status. On the latter issue, whereas in Mahipati’s story Karma Bai is a widowed householder, in Gangagiri’s narrative she never marries. This performance shift in Karma Bai’s identity is significant because an unmarried woman is further down on the hierarchy than a married (or widowed) woman would be. Gangagiri’s story suggests, therefore, that Karma Bai’s *bhakti* to *bhagvān*, rather than her relationship to either affinal and/or consanguineal kin, empowers her as a woman. At the same time, each Karma Bai story emphasizes, as Gangagiri’s says, that “she was alone.” That is,

both narratives use Karma Bai's condition of being alone either as a widowed or as an unmarried woman as an interpretive frame through which to focus and understand the nature and meaning of her religious life as God's *bhakt*. This shared narrative emphasis may, indeed, express a larger message of the *bhakti* movement itself: on the path of devotion, the individual remains responsible for his/her own spiritual development (cf. Lorenzen 1995; 1996). Contrary to the teachings put forth by Brahmanical orthodoxy, no priest, or any religious intermediary for that matter, effects *bhakt*'s spiritual transformation and relationship with God. Rather, through development and expression of "real faith," or love, devotees themselves, as the female sadhus say, "meet" God and "cross over" this "ocean of existence." From a *bhakti* perspective, not only Karma Bai's alone (i.e., unmarried/widowed) status, but more significantly, her female gender matters to the theology underpinning the movement.

Why is this? The identity of the male religious authorities as Brahmin priests in Mahipati's narrative and the identity of the *bhakt* as female in both the performed and written versions strongly support and identify the central social message of the *bhakti* movement. In its rejection of religious hierarchy, soteriological dualities, and established ritual codes associated with Brahmanical traditions, and more specifically, the Brahmanical priesthood, *bhakti* opened up a whole new route for individual religious expression and self-realization, especially for women and low-caste people who had been denied access to positions of religious authority and spiritual power in the priesthood by Brahmanical orthodoxy (cf. Lorenzen 1995; Schomer & McLeod 1987; Olivelle 2004, 284; Sherma 2005, 28).¹⁶⁰ From this perspective, in Mahipati's version of the story,

¹⁶⁰ Laurie Patton's new work on women Sanskrit specialists, priestesses, and scholars in Maharashtra documents the ways are taking control over ritual and educational roles once maintained by male religious

Karma Bai's female character represents not only God's *bhakt par excellence*, but also a symbol of the larger message of the *bhakti* movement. Similarly, the subordination of male priestly authority to female spiritual power that we witness in the narrative constitutes the symbolic subordination of Brahmanical traditions and orthodoxy to (the power of) the *bhakti* traditions. In Mahipati's story, *bhakti* religion reigns victorious over its priestly competitor, and his version of the Karma Bai tale depicts and promotes this particular message.

In Gangagiri's narrative, on the other hand, the male sadhus, not the Brahmin priests, constitute Karma Bai's leading interlocutors. On account of this shift in Gangagiri's narrative from emphasis on priestly identities to that of sadhu identities, the central theological tension that this story underscores is not so much that between *bhakti* and Brahmanical orthodoxy as that between *bhakti* and asceticism, which does, however, have Brahmanical foundations (cf. Khandelwal 2004, 23-45; Olivelle 1975, 1981, 1992, 2004). Hence, the spiritual victory that Karma Bai humbly achieves over the male sadhus seems to suggest the power and authority of *bhakti* over asceticism. At the same time, what we also have to consider is that in Gangagiri's narrative, Karma Bai is not simply God's devotee, she is also a sadhu. In their statement to Karma Bai that, "Sister, you are a more of a sadhu than we are," which is not just an apologetic, the male sadhus verbalize a key theme underpinning this performed narrative: that *bhakti* is asceticism. Therefore, through Karma Bai's example, Gangagiri's narrative, unlike Mahipati's story, constructs the notion of *bhakti* "as" asceticism, not that of *bhakti* "over" asceticism.

specialists and authorities. See Patton, *Grandmother Language: Women and Sanskrit in Maharashtra and Beyond*, forthcoming. See also Patton's essay, "The Cat in the Courtyard: The Performance of Sanskrit and the Religious Experience of Women," in Tracy Pintchman (ed.), *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (2007).

Moreover, as it is based on the underlying quality of love, Karma Bai's devotional asceticism is greater than the mechanistic, rule-bound asceticism of the male sadhus. In this way, Gangagiri's narrative constructs *female* devotional asceticism as greater than *male* asceticism. Nevertheless, while Karma Bai's female gender provides her an advantage over the male sadhus, and male devotees, in general, with respect to her "natural" ability to feel and express love, her example demonstrates a general model of devotional asceticism, rather than just that of female devotional asceticism. To Gangagiri, Karma Bai poignantly exemplifies what all devotees, especially sadhus, on *this* path should strive to attain and embody in their everyday religiosity.

Devotional Asceticism--A New Model of Renunciation: Its Meanings and Implications

Devotional asceticism represents a new model of renunciation, one that is based on ideals drawn from both *bhakti* and renouncer frameworks, on which grounds the female sadhus create their form of asceticism as an alternative to the more dominant model/tradition of Brahmanical asceticism. We find strong evidence for the existence and impact of a model of devotional asceticism in the female sadhus' descriptions of their own path and of ascetic identity.

As discussed earlier, Rajasthani female sadhus consistently construct renunciation (*sannyās*) as devotion (*bhakti*). "Renunciation," Gangagiri explains, "is *bhakti*. Understand [that] there's no difference [between them]." Recall from the last chapter on personal narrative performance, the female sadhus often describe renunciation as a path of "singing to God," a common phrase they used to mean the practice of *bhajan* singing. "Renunciation," Gangagiri teaches, "means to sing [*bhajans*] to God," that is, "to leave

everything and sing to God.” In the view of the female sadhus, *bhajan* singing represents *tapas*, a form of ascetic practice enabling them to purify the soul, *ātma*, and acquire religious knowledge and spiritual power (see chapter six). *Bhajan* singing, then, not just the variety of “spiritual sportive feats” to which Klostermaier refers in his description of *tapas* quoted above (cf. Gross 1992, 329-336), constitutes the asceticism of female sadhus through they express personal devotion and love to the divine.

Bhajan singing, however, is only one of the several ways through which the female sadhus create a model of devotional asceticism. Other daily practices such as religious storytelling (of which the performed narratives of Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai in this chapter are examples), and the reading and/or recitation of scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Rāmcharitmānas*, also constitute expressions of renunciation *as bhakti*. Through these practices, female sadhus not only embody and actualize ascetic virtues, but more importantly, the *bhakti* values of service, charity, and love. In descriptions of their everyday lives and work, the female sadhus directly associate *bhajan* singing, religious storytelling, and textual reading/recitation with *sevā*, or service to the divine. Through these acts they share spiritual blessings, religious teachings, and salvific knowledge with humanity. To the female sadhus, humanity represents divine manifestation on earth, and as such, to serve humanity by means of these particular *bhakti* practices is to serve and love God “with [one’s] heart and mind.” Included in this *sevā* are the female sadhus’ practices of offering food (and drink) to the visitors who come to them in order to receive guidance and spiritual counsel. Feeding and nourishing others physically, like the feeding of the soul through their *bhakti* practices of singing,

storytelling, and religious reading/recitation is an act of love, charity, and service through which the female sadhus simultaneously serve God.

In these representations of devotion as asceticism, Rajasthani female sadhus construct and express a path of devotional asceticism that approximates the renunciation of the female sadhus studied by Meena Khandelwal (2004). Khandelwal explains that the female ascetics with whom she worked in the north Indian pilgrimage town of Haridwar described renunciation as a path of either devotion (*bhakti*) and love (*prem*) and/or service (*karma sevā*—meaning either ritual action or social action, though these understandings were not viewed as mutually exclusive by the Haridwar female ascetics) through which they realize the transcendent goal of renunciation, namely *mokṣ*, or liberation (Khandelwal 2004, 47-116). For the Haridwari female sadhus, *bhakti*/love and *sevā* were expressed primarily through practices of feeding, nurturing (even scolding), and counseling others. What my research with the Rajasthani sadhus contributes to existing studies of female asceticism in South Asia is that devotional practice may also signify *tapas*, and more broadly, asceticism to female sadhus. Many of the female sadhus with whom I worked consider their devotional practices both as a form of asceticism as well as *sevā*. For example, Tulsigiri herself equates the practice of *bhajan* singing with sadhus' *sevā* to the divine:

We [sadhus] are the beggars of God [*bhagvān ke bhikhārī*]. We belong in God's house... We [live] for God. [Antoinette asks a question here, "And what does that mean to be a beggar of God?"] As a beggar of God, I sing *bhajans*. I mean, we [sadhus] do God's *sevā* [by singing *bhajans*]. For the helpless people, we make them confident; we make their pain and suffering go away [by singing *bhajans*]...It's like this, through *sevā* we become connected with God. For us [sadhus], it's not like *sevā* doesn't happen until and unless we give God water and flowers, o.k. [Tulsigiri distinguishes between *pūjā* and *sevā* here]. That's not *sevā* [for us sadhus]. Our *sevā* happens from above; it is a *sevā* of connection, the connection we make with God [by singing *bhajans*]... We are at the feet

of God. We are the ones who do the *sevā* of God. But when [householders] do God's *sevā*, they give water, flowers, and so forth. Their *sevā* happens like this. But our *sevā* is different... This is how we understand *sevā*, o.k.—you are God for us [sadhus]. You are God for me. Even a child is God, and the old people, too. And we [sadhus] do not think about what community [*samāj*] people come from. To us, everyone is the same; everyone is God. This is *sevā*—the *sevā* of the sadhus.

Beggars of God

Significantly, in her representation of *bhajan* singing as *sevā*, Tulsigiri constructs not only renunciant religiosity, but also renouncer identity via her characterization of the sadhus as beggars of God. “We [sadhus] are the beggars of God,” she explains to me and Manvendra Singh, my field assistant. Tulsigiri's use of the poignant metaphor of the sadhu as beggar directly corresponds to the dominant representations of renunciants as beggars discussed in classical Brahmanical texts on renunciation, such as the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*.¹⁶¹ In his discussion of how the ascetic concept of mendicancy is understood in the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* Olivelle explains,

Another distinctive feature of a renouncer's life is mendicancy, from which is derived a common Sanskrit name for a renouncer, *bhikṣu* (“beggar”). Mendicancy is the inevitable result of a renouncer's abandonment of all possessions. A renouncer is totally separated from economic activities; he is neither an owner nor producer. Owning nothing that is his own, a renouncer is reduced to fulfilling all his requirements by begging (Olivelle 1992 a, 103).

Tulsigiri's use of the sadhu as beggar metaphor implies both literal and symbolic understandings similar to Brahmanical renunciant interpretations of beggary. As a sadhu, Tulsigiri does not earn any real income; she has to live off of donations of cash (most visitors to the temples of sadhus, male and female, leave modest rupee donations at the feet of the *mūrtīs*), food (devotees, or regular visitors, will donate five or ten pound bags

¹⁶¹ After Tulsigiri described herself as a beggar of God, Manvendra Singh immediately turned to me and confirmed (in English), “This is exactly how a sadhu should be. She's correct.” Not just the sadhus, but lay householders, too, understand the orthodox connotations underlying the motif of the sadhu as beggar. Most householders expect that (male and female) sadhus should perceive themselves from the particular vantage point of beggary, and they often judge sadhus harshly in instances in which they do not use (or imply) this motif in their discourses.

of usually rice and/or wheat to sadhus), material supplies, and so forth that visitors make either to the temple or directly to her. Like a beggar, Tulsigiri remains completely dependent on the kindness and compassion of householders for her economic survival. But beggary is a necessary requirement of renunciation. Not only in Brahmanical discourse, but also in the statements of contemporary male and female sadhus, renunciation means to sacrifice not simply the desire for worldly things, but the very things themselves. Detached from worldly “lusts, thirsts, and imaginations,” as Nityananda Puri says, sadhus are supposed to live simply in order to be able to turn their concentration inward toward discovering and analyzing the *ātma*. The sadhus must depend on others for their basic living necessities. Robert Gross elaborates, “In general, the sadhus are economically non-productive and subsist by begging. While this particular life style is symbolic of their renunciant status and their detachment from the material world of the householders, the sadhus are [also literally] dependent on the caste Hindus for supports” (Gross 1992, 160).

Although through her use of the sadhu as beggar metaphor Tulsigiri clearly draws on a traditional image used in Brahmanical renunciant discourse to construct sadhu identity, she reconfigures the meaning of this pivotal image from a particularly *bhakti* perspective. To her (and to the other female sadhus who repeatedly used this image in their discourses) the ideal of begging is perceived not so much in the literal sense of begging for food, as instructed in classical texts on renunciation, but rather in the symbolic sense of begging for “God’s love.”¹⁶²

¹⁶² Interestingly, to understand the significance of the *bhakti* vision in light of which the female sadhus interpret beggar motifs, I shall quote a verse from the *Brhat Samnyāsa Upaniṣad (BSU)*, which discusses the necessity of literal begging: “A fast is better than eating only at night. What is given unasked is better than a fast. Begged food is better than what is given unasked. Let him, therefore, subsist on begged food”

For example, Tulsigiri repeatedly emphasized that she is a “beggar before God,” not “before the world.” This understanding of begging “before God” is significant because, even though Tulsigiri remains completely dependent on others’ charity for her livelihood (a fact she herself recognizes), she does not and will not ask devotees for handouts. “If people give, I accept; but I never ask [them] for anything,” she told me in a conversation we had at her guru’s ashram two days before the *Guru Pūrṇimā* holiday. Instead, Tulsigiri said, “I depend on God for everything.” I heard other Rajasthani female sadhus express similar views about begging. Remarkably, these female sadhus consider the actual practice of begging, which classical texts recommend in varying degrees as a *sine qua non* of renunciation, to be not only demeaning (“no sadhu should ever beg,” Gangagiri told me in one conversation), but also a philosophical contradiction to the underlying purpose of their way of life—which is to depend on God, the ultimate source of the universe, not on the world, for everything. “I have God and no one else,” Gangagiri stressed in our daily meetings. In a life story performance in which she described experiences of wandering alone as a female sadhu in India, Gangagiri tellingly remarked, “I spent three days without food and water, and still I never begged [from anyone].”

In this respect, the common ascetic motif of “beggar of God” in the female sadhus’ everyday discourses connotes a *bhakti* vision of begging for the love and mercy and vision of God. “If people really loved God,” Gangagiri says, “they would never fear,” implying that God would provide for devotees’ physical, emotional, and spiritual needs on the basis of love shared between deity and devotee. The female sadhus, therefore,

(BSU 2.265, cited from Olivelle, trans. 1992, 252). In this respect, we understand some of the ways the Rajasthani female sadhus via their renunciatory discourses and teachings differentiate their devotional asceticism from orthodox notions of asceticism.

consider themselves as beggars only because they desire to experience God's love and, as Tulsigiri puts it, to live "in God's house.

Warriors of God

Apart from the motif of sadhu as beggar, another way the female sadhus construct the specificity of sadhu identity is through use of heroic motifs and metaphors that portray sadhus as the "spiritual warriors" or heroes of God. In a discourse about the meaning and purpose of renunciation, Gangagiri described the religiosity of sadhus in the following way:

You neither get *mokṣ* [liberation] by wearing *bhagmā* [saffron-colored garment], nor do you get it by taking renunciation. When all the brave warriors [*ghanān sūro*] go to fight in the battlefield, they tie so many weapons on their bodies and then they go [to fight]. For sadhus, too, life is a battlefield of *bhakti* ... Sadhus have to bear the pain of the thunderbolt [*vajrā*; a religious symbol that represents "the weapon" that bestows knowledge and understanding upon the initiate whom it pierces]. The mentality of a sadhu is fierce [*svabhāv bhārī*] as s/he has to die before s/he [literally] dies. The sadhu lives like a dead person. S/he's the living dead.

The metaphor of sadhus as brave or fierce warriors surfaces as a common leitmotif in both male and female sadhus' renunciant discourses, and provides a theological backdrop for constructions of ascetic identity and asceticism. When I asked them to describe their path, most of the (male and female) sadhus initially responded by invoking a popular Mewari idiom that echoes an explicit perception of the heroic nature of asceticism: "To become a warrior/hero (*sūr*) is easy/it happens in the blink of an eye; but to become a sadhu is difficult (*kāthin*)/it takes a whole lifetime." In both this Rajasthani idiom and in Gangagiri's elaborate description, the direct association of asceticism with heroism and of renunciators with "spiritual heroes" who conquer death itself, have antecedents in scriptures on traditions of renunciation, such as the *Samnyāsa*

Upaniṣads and the *Upaniṣads* (Olivelle 1992a; 1996), and yoga, namely *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (for yoga, see Varenne 1976; Eliade 1969; Stoler Miller, trans. 1996; for *Gītā*, see Stoler Miller, trans., 1986; Patton, trans., 2008).¹⁶³

Aside from its various textual parallels, the motif of heroic, or militant, asceticism has a historical basis as well. Several scholars of Indian asceticism have discussed that militant groups such as the Nāga Bābās (i.e., the “naked” and “fighting” *sannyāsīs*), were recruited into Śaivite Daśanāmi orders perhaps as early the thirteenth century CE, but certainly by the sixteenth century CE, in order “to defend Hinduism and protect [these] monastic institutions [not only] from Muslim attack and harassment,” but also from attacks by rival ascetic Hindu groups (Gross 1992, 62; cf. Flood 1996, 79; Hartsuiker 1993, 31-34, also cited in Flood 1996, 287; van der Veer 1988, 66-182).¹⁶⁴ The Vairāgis, another sect of militant ascetics, were also recruited into specifically Vaiṣṇava traditions of renunciation and asceticism for similar purposes (van der Veer 1988). Both militant groups of ascetics, even before their induction into the highly organized Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite ascetic organizations, played a defining role in the history and development of asceticism in the South Asian subcontinent between the seventh and eighteenth centuries

¹⁶³ In her translation of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, Stoler Miller comments, “In the Indian view, the practitioner of yoga is not a passive person, but a *spiritual hero* who is active and potent” (Stoler Miller 1996, 3, italics mine).

¹⁶⁴ In his study of the sadhus of north India, Robert Lewis Gross cites several influential studies on the history and development of militant asceticism in India, such as Farquar (1925), Ghosh (1930), Sarkar (1950), and Ghurye (1953). Even British colonel James Tod, author of the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, as Gross points out, describes that “there were numerous naked militant ascetics called Nāgas scattered throughout Rajputana [i.e., Rajasthan] called gosains and jogis (apparently referring to both Daśanāmi Nāga Saṁnyāsīs and Kanphata Yogis (Gross 1992, 64). Gavin Flood also discusses an ancient group/sect of ascetics known as the Vratyas discussed in the fifteenth book of the *Artharva Veda Samhita*, who exhibited “a close connection...between asceticism and martialism” (Flood 1996, 79). In this discussion, Flood explains that while the Vratyas may have been the earliest antecedents of the phenomenon of martial asceticism in India, ascetic and martial connections are also demonstrated by the fact that “ascetic ideologies and practices emerged within the ruling or warrior classes of Indian society” (79).

CE, after which these militant movements became increasingly suppressed by the British colonialists in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE (Gross 1992, 62-75).

By selectively invoking the fierce warrior image, Gangagiri draws on renouncer and/or yogic frameworks with which to construct asceticism.¹⁶⁵ Through use of this particular image, she carefully communicates a view shared amongst the male and female sadhus that asceticism is a “difficult,” and as such, a heroic way of life. Her statement implies, though, that the difficulty of asceticism stems from the intense or extreme nature of the disciplines that sadhus must practice everyday in order to attain the goals of spiritual perfection and, as she makes explicit, the ultimate goal of *mokṣa*. Like the soldiers who fight to the death in battle, the sadhus signify “spiritual warriors” by the fact that through the means of ascetic/yogic practices, they, too, suffer, sacrifice, and struggle on a battlefield where they not only “die” to their former worldly desires and attachments (and even to their former selves), but also, and more significantly, conquer death itself. As Gangagiri explains, the sadhus are the “living dead,” meaning that they have “died,” or emotionally freed themselves of the concerns, obligations, and the normative social structures that trap householders in the world, *sansār*. However, for Gangagiri, the significant difference between the two groups of fierce warriors is that, unlike the soldiers who give their lives on a battlefield of war, the sadhus sacrifice themselves “on the

¹⁶⁵ In his discussion of the yogic practices amongst the male sadhus with whom he worked, Gross makes an insightful remark: “Though it can be argued that without asceticism and renunciation in Indian religious tradition there would be no yoga, in the contemporary context it is quite difficult to distinguish where asceticism leaves off and yoga begins. From my research on the sadhus, yogic and ascetic ideals and beliefs are practically synonymous” (Gross 1992, 234). My data supports Gross’ observation. During my fieldwork with the Rajasthani female sadhus, they did not always distinguish between renunciation and yoga in descriptions of their practices and often said these two paths were similar as the purported goal of both was to experience the divine. While I understand that the concepts and ideals constitutive of both renouncer and yogic paradigms have influenced the female sadhus’ constructions of devotional asceticism, I cannot say which of their practices are particularly “ascetic” and which of those are specifically “yogic,” since the sadhus themselves did not make such distinctions in their discourses.

battlefield of *bhakti*.” The sadhus’ battle is to protect and practice devotion to God in a world of disbelief.

Thus, in constructions of sadhu identity, Gangagiri chooses metaphors and images of heroism inherent in traditions of renunciation and yoga, but reinterprets them through a *bhakti* framework. Even though both male and female sadhus use heroic imagery to construct asceticism and ascetic identity, the female sadhus specifically couch this martial discourse (and language) predominantly in *bhakti* terms. Hence, the rigorous ascetic/yogic practices implied in Gangagiri’s description include, but are not necessarily limited to, the *satsang* practices of singing, storytelling, and scriptural reading/recitation, by which means initiates “meet” or unite with God (*bhagvān milnā*). This religious experience, as Gangagiri often explains, signifies a *bhakti* equivalent of *mokṣ*—that is, the peace (*śanti*) sadhu devotees experience in their “hearts and minds” upon realization of divine power and presence. But, importantly, even Gangagiri’s understanding of the concept of *mokṣ* tends to foreground *bhakti* views of divine vision (*darśan*) and encounter (*yog*), implying relationship and, to this extent, duality between devotee and God—a guiding *bhakti* principle—rather than stress, as the male sadhus, the cessation of duality via devotees’ absolute identification with the divine, or *paramātmā*. Gangagiri uses the term “*vaikunṭh*,” which literally means “heaven” or “paradise” in a theistic sense of being in the heavenly abode of the deity Viṣṇu, to suggest such a *bhakti* experience of relationship and union with *bhagvān*. Most other female sadhus similarly emphasize the *bhakti* goal of “meeting” God more than the renouncer aim of *mokṣ* as the purpose of asceticism and renunciation.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ For discussions on the idea of duality and difference in *bhakti* teachings, see Sherma 2005; Lorenzen 1996; Dimock 1989. It is important to point out here that there were several male sadhus who also

In their signal studies of female asceticism in different regions of north India, Khandelwal (2004) and Lynn Teskey Denton (2004) have suggested, however, that “the singular aim” for the female sadhus whom they studied in Haridwar and Benares, respectively, was unequivocally *mokṣ* or *mukti*, a term which these female renouncers also used to mean religious liberation from the world (Khandelwal 2004, 26). On this issue, Teskey Denton elucidates,

...ascetics seek release from the bonds of *sansar*, release described in positive terms as the attainment of *moksha* or *mukti*...ascetic women uphold the primacy of *moksha* as a goal in life, arguing that when a woman has fulfilled her *dharm*, it is perfectly legitimate in middle-age or later to renounce it...asceticism and a life oriented toward *moksha* is consistent with their spiritual status throughout this current life. Women describe the state of salvation in different ways. Some say simply that they will achieve *moksha*, others describe it in more gnostic terms as knowledge of the Absolute. Theistic ascetics tend more often to describe *mukti* as a great vision of or union with the Supreme Being. Finally, there are some who, in delightfully abstract terms, speak simply of “arriving.”...And all ascetics see freedom from rebirth as the highest goal (Teskey Denton 2004, 59).

My research with the Rajasthani female renouncers, who also seek to release themselves from the gripping wheel of *sansār*, provides a significant counterpoint to the ethnographic findings of Khandelwal and Teskey Denton on two major counts. First, the Rajasthani female sadhus conceptualize and experience the goal of their asceticism primarily in the *bhakti* terms of “meeting God.” Second, in those instances in which they specifically use the term *mokṣ/mukti* to describe the aim of their asceticism, they, nevertheless, situate it within a broader *bhakti* framework so that *bhakti* visions of divine encounter and yogic discoveries of knowledge of the eternal and non-dual Absolute (i.e.,

described the ultimate goal of their path in the *bhakti* terms of “meeting God.” Like the female sadhus, these male sadhus neither used the term *mokṣ*, nor understood divine union (*yog*), an idea implied in their statements, to mean the dissolution of difference between deity and devotee. In their study of the sadhus of Bhubaneswar, Miller and Wertz (1976) devote a chapter of their work to a discussion of the lives four unusual male sadhus who conceptualized asceticism as devotion to God. Three of these sadhus were of the Vairāgi sect, that is, an ascetic sect associated with Vaiṣṇava traditions (Miller and Wertz suggest that these ascetics modeled their lives on the ideals promoted by the medieval Bengali Chaitanya movement), and the fourth was “a self-styled Shankara Brahmacarin,” i.e., a Daśanāmi ascetic (Miller and Wertz 1976, 43-60).

the *paramātmā*, or “Supreme Being”) are perceived by the sadhus not as contradictory, but rather as complementary *bhakti* experiences.

We observe these very kinds of distinctions in the discourses of the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with because they interpret their lives on the basis of a framework of devotional asceticism. These sadhus are not simply reinterpreting Brahmanical models of asceticism by emphasizing just the maternal values of love, compassion, kindness, and service, as Khandelwal, in particular, contends in her study of female asceticism (2004). Instead, the female sadhus I worked with are creating and expressing a new/devotional model of asceticism by selecting virtues and values that are constitutive of both renunciant and *bhakti* traditions. Coupled with narrative performances of female devotional asceticism and discursive representations of renunciation as devotion, the female sadhus’ constructions of sadhu identity as “beggars” and/or “spiritual warriors” of God integrate ascetic and *bhakti* values in an innovative way. But what are the personal and social implications of a devotional asceticism model for the female sadhus?

Performing Female Ascetic Lineage through Religious Narrative

This is a question of context. The sadhus construct devotional asceticism primarily in public performance contexts in which householders and, occasionally, other sadhus gather together at an ashram or temple for *satsang*. In her study of a Hyderbadi female Muslim healer Amma, Flueckiger discusses the multiple ways not only Amma, but also her husband, Abba, a Muslim *pīr*, or religious teacher, create individual religious authority and spiritual power through the means of their public narrative performances (Flueckiger 2006, 183-194). Flueckiger contends, “Narrative performances...help to

establish Amma and Abba's individual religious authority in terms that both Hindu and Muslim audiences would understand" (183). We observe a similar phenomenon with the narrative performances of the female sadhus. Through performance, the sadhus claim individual religious authority by situating their own devotional religiosities within a tradition of devotional asceticism exemplified by the legendary male and female *sants* depicted in their stories. Their religious narratives of the lives of the *sants* reveal and create the "ancient" historicity of devotional asceticism as a way of life, to which the female sadhus connect themselves through public performances. On many occasions, female sadhus like Gangagiri, for instance, keyed their narrative performances on devotional asceticism with the phrase, "this is an old story, a very old story." Narrative performance thus helps the female sadhus to establish themselves within a lineage of *sant* religiosity, through which they, in turn, receive and claim their own renunciatory authority and power (cf. Flueckiger 2006, 186).

Similarly, the female sadhus view female models such as Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai as pioneers in the construction and development of a lineage of female devotional asceticism in India. According to most female sadhus, due to the "grace" (*kripā*) of the Rajasthani female *sants* of the past, they have been able to become members of an ascetic lineage through whose spiritual power and authority they, too, receive power and religious authority as female sadhus. A conversation I had with Shiv Puri underscores this view:

[S]hiv [P]uri: A long time ago, during Lord Krishna's time, there lived Mira Bai...She was the daughter of a Rajput [and] the Rana's wife. She was the wife of the Rana of Chitoor. So after that [i.e., after Mira Bai's time], and by her grace, in our Rajput community 'ladies' have [been able to] become sadhus [like her].

[A]ntoinette: So, as far as you know, was Mira Bai the first Rajput woman to become a sadhu?

SP: Yes, Mira was the first [female] sadhu [to have emerged from the Rajput community]. The first [female] to become a *sant* in our Rajput clan was Mira Bai, o.k.

A: Alright, and after that?

SP: Because of her grace [*kripā*], we have a lot of lady sadhus...In our Rajasthan, there are at least two-hundred lady *sants*. There are two-hundred lady *sants* that are Rajput. [Repeats] At least two-hundred of them come from the Rajput clans. I counted them in the *Kumbh Melā*.

A: Do you know each other?

SP: Yes. We know each another... We all gather together at the *Kumbh Melā*. [This festival] happens every twelve years.

In this passage, Shiv Puri explicitly constructs and promotes the ancient historicity of female devotional asceticism in India, and more specifically in Rajasthan, by associating the phenomenon with Mira Bai, whom she believes existed “during Lord Krishna’s time.” Importantly, Shiv Puri considers Mira Bai to be “the first [female] sadhu” to have emerged from the Rajput community, and such, Mira’s example has provided the impetus for many other “Rajput ladies” to turn away from the traditional roles of wife and mother and take vows of renunciation. These female *sants* serve as contemporary sources of religious inspiration and guidance to the Rajput female sadhus I interviewed because of a shared gender and caste identity. Once again, my fieldwork data suggests the importance of caste identity to the Rajasthani female sadhus in constructions and interpretations of female sadhu identity and religiosity. But even if the female sadhus came from non-Rajput castes, as the majority of them did (66% of them were from other castes), they positioned themselves within the bounds of a general lineage of female devotional asceticism through the means of narrative performance. In this way, the examples of Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai offer the sadhus powerful, but *post facto*,¹⁶⁷ alternative female models of gender, and their popular narratives of the lives of

¹⁶⁷ I suggest that these models are *post facto* models of gender because it is not entirely clear to me from examining the life stories of the female sadhus that they regarded the female *sants* featured in their performed rhetoric as examples they sought to emulate throughout their lives, not just after taking

the *sants* offer them alternative models of asceticism with which to construct devotional asceticism.

How Alternative are Female Sadhus' Gendered Models of Devotional Asceticism?

But this observation leads us to a further question: Just how “alternative” are these female models of gender to the sadhus?¹⁶⁸ To what extent do the female sadhus consider these heroines “alternative” constructions of Indian womanhood? Certainly, insofar as Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai exemplify gender roles and identities other than the traditional ones of wife and mother, they constitute alternative models of gender to the female sadhus.¹⁶⁹ On the other hand, as the narrative performances examined in this chapter illustrate, the female sadhus consider the devotional lives of these female *sants* to be illustrative of “traditional” religio-moral values and virtues. For these female sadhus, their female models of gender do not appear to be examples of what Judith Okely refers to as “resistance to the conditions of subordination” engendered by normative patriarchal social structures and institutions, even though to scholars who interpret these models they would be examples of such resistance (Okely 1989, 3-22). Nevertheless—and Okely rightly contends this point in her illuminating discussion of

renunciation. Especially with respect to the female sadhus of Rajput castes, it is probably more likely that they did not grow up learning to want to be like Mira Bai, and so forth. The work of Lindsey Harlan provides a helpful reference here, because she discusses that even though the Rajput female householders with whom she worked respect Mira, considering her to be a *bhakt* of “limitless devotion,” they would not, however, want their own daughters to emulate her example (Harlan 1992). I also thank Joyce Flueckiger for pointing out this particular detail of Harlan’s research to me in a personal communication on November 07, 2007.

¹⁶⁸ I thank Laurie Patton for her trenchant observation that perhaps these female models of gender are not as “alternative” as scholars might think particularly when viewed from the perspective of the female sadhus. Personal communication, August 03, 2007.

¹⁶⁹ In her discussion of alternative models of femininity, Khandelwal makes a similar point by citing the examples of Gargi, Maitreyi, and Queen Chudala. Khandelwal also briefly discusses the female *bhakti* saints Mira Bai and Mahadeviyakka, as examples of alternative femininity in Indian history. She elaborates, “References to extraordinary women in scripture...do not constitute proof of the historical existence of such women, but they suggest that female asceticism was seen as legitimate, at least by some” (Khandelwal 2004, 42).

individual's "fragmented" and "momentary" resistance in cultures—even though the female sadhus do not emphasize resistance in their popular religious narratives does not mean that they themselves are unaware of the underlying reality of women's "fundamental subordination" in a patriarchal Indian society (Okely 1989, 6). Indeed, they are hyper-aware. Explicit and/or partially submerged critiques of the patriarchal structures and practices that subordinate women whose religious lives pose another possibility to normative life scripts for female gender appear in the form of a commentary integrated into the female sadhus' narrative performances of female devotional asceticism. After one narration of Mira's life, Gangagiri made this acerbic critique:

Mira isn't respected in this Mewar. There is an image [*mūrtī*] of Mira in Chittor, but no one considers it...All the people of Mewar lack faith...Mira Bai's country [Mewar] is like this; Maharana Pratap's country is like this. The people are lazy [*alasi*] and ignorant [*ajnāni*]. [My field assistant, Manvendra Singh, asks, "But, in Rajasthan, in Mewar, however many sadhus there are, they will certainly consider Mira, right?," to which Gangagiri responds:] If they have knowledge. But people don't know anything. They just eat and shit! And what else do they know? How to make babies. That's it. They don't know anything apart from this. This is hardly a big thing, isn't it? It's such a small thing. Even dogs produce babies! This is no big thing...Even birds make babies. There's nothing special in this. [But] people live in ignorance, in darkness.

By making this stinging critique of Mewari society which, in Gangagiri's view, remains submerged "in ignorance [and] darkness," she obliquely verbalizes poignant awareness of the patterns of women's subordination in a patriarchal culture. While not explicitly discussed in this passage, social castigation and approbation, as Gangagiri intimates, are just some of the destructive ways that Indian patriarchal structures and institutions attempt to dominate the minds and bodies of religious women dedicated to the divine—women like Mira Bai. More significantly, beyond individual recognition of the underlying social patterns of female subordination, the point Gangagiri seems to want to make by means of this particular critique is that Mira Bai receives little or no respect in

Mewar because “people” perceive her in the wrong way; that is, people do not perceive Mira Bai’s true status because all they can think about is procreation. Such people, as Gangagiri says, “are ignorant” and “don’t know anything.”

Gangagiri, as such, implies the oppression of patriarchy—though ‘patriarchy’ itself is not a term inherent to Gangagiri’s or other female sadhus’ conceptual apparatus—in thinking of women simply as reproducers. At the same time, however, Gangagiri and other female sadhus imply that they are resistant to the idea that they personally choose asceticism. Recall from the discussion in the last chapter, the female sadhus select the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion as “narrative strategies” with which they construct their interpretation of ascetic identity and asceticism. That is, the female sadhus do not consciously choose resistance. And yet, their becoming sadhus “in this birth” represents resistance to the normative roles of wife and mother.

On the day that Gangagiri voiced her critique of Mewari society as “ignorant,” she and Tulsigiri had already narrated a Mira birth narrative¹⁷⁰ in which the integration of these three themes into the story provided a traditional religious framework with which to comprehend and explain Mira’s devotional asceticism. In this way, though Gangagiri’s critique suggests an underlying awareness of aspects of women’s subordination in Indian culture, in its construction she uses this traditional framework embedded in the Mira birth narrative as a means to portray Mira as “traditional” rather than as subversive; as following her duty to God rather than as resisting *patīvratā* ideals. By means of multiple religious frameworks, Rajasthani sadhus not only interpret the varieties of female devotional asceticism in terms of ascetic virtues and *bhakti* values, but also represent

¹⁷⁰ This narrative appears in the Introduction to this chapter.

female models of gender as “traditional,” even though these “traditional” examples of womanhood still illuminate an alternative model of asceticism.

But why do the female sadhus put so much emphasis on “tradition” in constructions of devotional asceticism? It allows them to represent devotional asceticism as another traditional form of asceticism vis-à-vis Brahmanical asceticism. But there is more to this issue than just underlying intentions to ‘traditionalize’ their form of asceticism. Like the female Pentecostal preachers studied by Lawless whose emphases on the themes of sacrifice and salvation in their sermons are gender-specific, the traditional values the female sadhus emphasize in both narrative performances and renunciant discourses are similarly gender-related (cf. Lawless 1988, 111-143). More female sadhus than male sadhus underscore suffering, sacrifice, and love as foundational to their asceticism. Why is this? As I discussed in the last chapter, female sadhus are acutely aware that they constitute minorities in male-dominated traditions of renunciation. Even if the female sadhus do not interact on a daily basis with the male sadhus of their local renouncer community (and the majority of them do not), they often meet everyday with householder visitors, disciples, and devotees, who tend to perceive asceticism (and ascetics) via the lens of the Brahmanical textual model. For example, an elderly, male householder who accompanied me early on in my fieldwork journeys regularly told me (as if to warn me) that “real” (*sahi*) sadhus “should live alone [*ekānt*],” and preferably in the jungle; spend their days and nights absorbed in meditation (*dhyān*); and live simply off of “*dāl-rotī* [soup-bread].” Another male householder, a Brahmin I met in the colony where I resided south of Udaipur city similarly explained in our first meeting that, “sadhus do ‘*rām*’ [chant ‘*rām*,’ a name of God]; they ask for nothing and live on very

little; this is how they [ought to] live.” The female sadhus, too, remain aware of dominant perceptions of asceticism like these. Hence, negotiating their lives as female sadhus happens as much in the company of householders as with male sadhus.

The female sadhus’ emphases on traditional values and virtues in their constructions of devotional asceticism, and by extension, in their representations of female models of gender, function in a capacity similar to what Barbara Newman has coined in her study of female Christian asceticism as a “modesty formula” (Newman 1987, cited in Jantzen 1995, 170), by which means they express individual humility and self-effacement—religious notions that help them to negotiate their lives in male-dominated traditions of renunciation and, more generally, in a patriarchal Indian society. Even the female sadhus’ self-abnegating representations as the “beggars” and/or “peons” of God evident in renunciant discourse act as a type of modesty, or humility, strategy with which they construct themselves as humble and selfless devotees of the divine. As cited in Grace Jantzen’s study on the lives of female medieval Christian saints (1995), Newman discusses the various ways saints like Hildegard, who used humble self-descriptions such as “a poor little figure of a woman,” or Julian of Norwich, who apologetically described herself as “though I am a woman, ignorant, weak, and frail,” adopted modesty formulas in written discourse addressed to male ecclesiastical authorities as a means to claim spiritual authority in a religious tradition managed by men (Jantzen 1995, 170). In her interpretation of Newman’s “modesty” theory with respect to Hildegard’s life, Jantzen explains,

This and her other formulas of humble self-description were part of a necessary self-abasement, a ‘modesty formula’ obligatory on medieval women writers. But, as Newman points out, these were also ideas that made it possible to compare her with Mary, the humble handmaid of God who was exalted to be the mother of Christ. If it was the very fact of Mary’s humility that made her a suitable

recipient of God's favour, then, it is implied, perhaps it is precisely Hildegard's lowliness as a 'poor little figure of a woman' that allows her to be exalted by the divine gift of visions to a position of spiritual authority (Jantzen 1995, 170).

Similar self-representations of "lowliness," as well as emphases on the traditional values of suffering, sacrifice, and love, may also be obligatory on the female sadhus. However, the perhaps crucial difference between the female Christian saints studied by Newman and Jantzen and the Rajasthani female sadhus is that the latter do not refer to their female gender in statements implying female modesty and humility. Rather, their modesty strategies appear to be gender-neutral, even though use of these strategies is gender-related. And yet, like the female Christian saints, through the very means of modesty strategies, the female sadhus claim spiritual power and religious authority. By refracting individual humility and self-effacement through the means of narrative performances and renunciatory discourse, the sadhus situate devotional asceticism within the bounds of traditions of renunciation, and by so doing, guarantee their public positions of power. Their path, though an alternative to the Brahmanical model, neither subverts nor challenges the goals of orthodox asceticism. And while the different religious expressions of self-abnegation underpinning their rhetoric would seem to contravene the idea of the female sadhus as agents, the sadhus do nonetheless construct themselves as female agents of their religio-social worlds by means of such efficacious religious strategies. In their view, only as the "beggars of God," whose sufferings and sacrifices express their unconditional love for all beings and the divine, do the female sadhus realize the ideals of devotional asceticism, and thus, prepare themselves to "meet God" and, ultimately, "cross over" this ocean of existence.

Concluding Reflections: Devotional Asceticism as “Worldly” Asceticism

In this chapter, we have examined the renunciant performance genre and practice of popular religious narratives (*kahāniyān*) in order to understand Rajasthani female sadhus’ experiences and interpretations asceticism and ascetic identity. In these types of performances, female sadhus underscore not only the ascetic virtues of suffering, sacrifice, and struggle, but also the *bhakti* value of love in the construction of a model of devotional asceticism. Within this framework, the sadhus conceptualize their practices as a form of renunciant *sevā* and represent themselves as the “beggars” and/or “spiritual warriors” of God, who fight “on the battlefield of *bhakti*.” While narrative performance enables the sadhus to establish themselves in an “ancient” tradition of (*sant*) devotional asceticism, through performance of the stories of female *sants*, in particular, they directly claim individual renunciant authority and legitimacy as female sadhus by situating themselves in a lineage of female devotional asceticism. By the “grace” of legendary Rajasthani (or regional) female *sants* like Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai who “left everything” for the purpose of “remembering God,” the Rajasthani female sadhus have received the inspiration and the spiritual power to do the same. But “to leave everything and sing to God,” as the female sadhus suggest, hardly signifies subversion of and/or resistance to patriarchal social norms and institutions. Rather, as their narrative performances and everyday discourses similarly demonstrate, a life of devotional asceticism expresses, instead, duty and devotion to the divine.

Finally, the ascetic and *bhakti* values that the female sadhus emphasize function as effective “modesty” strategies through which means they promote individual humility as well as negotiate their individual lives as female ascetics. In this way, the female

sadhus represent not only themselves as “traditional” sadhus, but also devotional asceticism as another “traditional” type of asceticism vis-à-vis the more dominant traditions of orthodox asceticism. Though carefully positioned within the sphere of renunciation, the religious world of devotional asceticism constructed/performed by the female sadhus is not an “other-worldly” asceticism defined by the standard ideals of extreme penance, denial, and self-mortification illustrative of the classic Brahmanical textual model. Rather, consisting of “the virtuous” people, i.e., the sadhus and *sants*, who are gathered to remember God, it is a “worldly,” or engaged, asceticism undergirded by a sense of love and compassion for the world. In our next chapter on renunciant textual performances, we will explore in greater detail the female sadhus’ constructions of devotional asceticism as a worldly form of asceticism. At the levels of conceptualization and practice, then, devotional asceticism is, as the Rajasthani female sadhus often say, a tradition of *satsang* amongst sadhus and *sants*—a communal experience of fellowship and fierce devotion that is modeled on and defined by *sant bhakti* interpretations of suffering, sacrifice, and struggle.

Knowledge is slippery. You have to grab the texts. I grabbed the *Gītāji* and *Rāmāyan* tightly and never let go.

Gangagiri Maharaj

CHAPTER FIVE

“Write the Text in Your Heart”: Religious Authority and the Performance of Asceticism through Sacred Texts

Introduction

“Mother is your pilgrimage; father is your pilgrimage; and your elder brother is your pilgrimage,” Gangagiri says to Manvendra, my field assistant, who has informed her of his upcoming engagement to a Rajput girl from his maternal uncle’s village. Seated beside Manvendra is his mother, Shiv Kunwar, whose face glows with happiness at the thought of her son’s marriage to, as she emphasized, a “girl from a good Rajput family.”

Earlier, Manvendra bemoaned his engagement, telling Gangagiri that “Mummy is forcing me to marry.” “But you have to get married,” Gangagiri says sternly. Her expression is serious. Shiv Kunwar concurs: “One has to marry; and one should flourish through [his/her] children.”

Now, Gangagiri teaches Manvendra the importance of upholding his own duty as a son to his parents. “There should never be a mother like Bharat’s mother, Kaikeyi. There should never be a father like Hiranyakash who made [his son] Prahlad suffer. One should not have brothers like the Kauravas, because they made the Pandavas suffer. And one should never have a guru like Vishvamitra.”

“Because he was loose-tempered,” Shiv Kunwar interjects, attracting the attention of the audience. Gangagiri nods her head in agreement and finishes her discourse:

“One should not have a guru like Vishvamitra and one should never meet [with] an ascetic like Ravan. He came in the form of a sadhu and took Mother Sita away.” “All this,” Gangagiri explains, “is written in the *Rāmāyan*.”¹⁷¹

“You’re filled with knowledge, *māi rām*,” Shiv Kunwar announces. “Bapu [Manvendra] I feel like I am in the hut of Shabari [a female ascetic character in the *Rāmāyan* epic].”

“This is the hut of Shabari,” Gangagiri answers. “You don’t have to search for God. Just read *Rāmāyan*, read *Gītāji*. . . I know many verses [*caupāī*] from the *Rāmāyan*, many verses. I remember many *caupāī* from the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*. Shall I recite some?”

“Yes, please recite [*caupāī*],” Shiv Kunwar enthusiastically responds.

¹⁷¹ The Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with say “*Rāmāyan*” instead of *Rāmāyaṇa*. I follow their usage in this chapter.

[Gangagiri begins her recitation from memory of a verse from the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*]

“*sani bole raghuvaṅś kumārā vidhi kar likhā ko/
 “metan hārā kosales dasrath ke jāye//
 “ham pitu bacan māni ban āye/
 “nām rām lachiman dou bhāī//
 “saṅg nāri sukumāri suhāī/
 “ihāṅ harī nisicar vaidehī bipra phirahi ham khojat tehī//¹⁷²*

[My translation]:

The youth Ram of the Raghuvanś clan speaks [to Sugriva, the monkey-king of Kiṣkindhā]:

“Whatever is written in your destiny cannot be changed. I am born from Kausalya and Dasharath. Just to keep the word of my father, I have come to the jungle. Our names are Ram and Lakshman. We are brothers. I had my young wife with me, and her name is Vaidehi [Sita]. Some demon has taken her away. We have come here searching for her.”

[Gangagiri completes her recitation]

“I know many more *caupāī*... Tell me, to what standard did you study?”
 Gangagiri asks Shiv Kunwar.

“I only studied to the eighth standard,” Shiv Kunwar answers. Her voice is soft and low. Shiv Kunwar draws the edge of her *sari* over her, shielding her face from the hot, summer sun.

“Oh,” Gangagiri reflects. After a moment’s pause, she remarks, “But at least you studied to the eighth standard. I am only first class passed. I only studied to the first class. That’s it.”

“Your education is equivalent to a B.A. degree, then. You have so much knowledge,” Shiv Kunwar affirms.

“The *Rāmāyan* is filled with unlimited bliss [*atro ānand*]. You should read *Rāmāyan*. Do one or two *caupāīs* everyday,” Gangagiri emphasizes to her audience.

“If you read [*Rāmāyan*] once it’s good,” Shiv Kunwar comments.

“Not once,” Gangagiri quickly retorts. Raising her voice Gangagiri stresses, “Keep reading *Rāmāyan*. Once you finish, read [it] again and again. It doesn’t cost anything.”

¹⁷² Gangagiri’s recitation of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* is based on the Avadhi, a medieval, literary form of Hindi. My translation of these verses is based on the Hindi commentary of Hanuman Prasad Poddar, which appears in the Gita press publication of the Tulsidas’ *Rāmcaritmānas*. No date of publication is issued in the rendition I have; however, the place of publication is Gorakpur. I use the commentary of this particular publisher because Gangagiri uses the Gita press version, which has become the standard Tulsi *Rāmāyan* publication for many Hindus, renunciant and lay.

This conversation illustrates the ways in which Rajasthani female sadhus like Gangagiri incorporate sacred texts such as the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas (or Tulsī *Rāmāyan*) and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (or *Gītā*) into their renunciant discourses as well as construct a relationship to those textual traditions through their renunciant practices. In addition to singing *bhajans* and telling (personal/popular) stories, the female sadhus’ textual performances are another genre of their rhetoric of renunciation through which they create their authority, identity and asceticism.

In the example above, by referring to certain characters and/or to specific stories from the Tulsī *Rāmāyan* with which to teach the concept of duty, Gangagiri constructs herself as a “knower,” or religious specialist, before her audience. In doing so, she creates her authority as a female ascetic. Several times in the exchange, Shiv Kunwar comments on Gangagiri’s religious knowledge and even characterizes her as Shabari. An unassuming female ascetic who appears at the end of the Forest Book (*Aranya Kāṇḍ*), the third chapter of the *Rāmāyan* epic (3.70.13; cf. Lutgendorf 2000), Shabari is a disciple of the sage Matanga, and her *bhakti* to Ram, the epic’s hero, earns her recognition not only as a great devotee of the Lord, but also as an extraordinary ascetic amongst the more intellectually-minded male sadhus and sages whom she serves.

As with the *sant* Karma Bai, Shabari’s spiritual authority as a female ascetic stems from her *bhakti* to Ram, and like Shabari, Gangagiri’s own ascetic authority is inextricably tied to (the expression of) *bhakti* to *bhagvān*. At the same time, though, Gangagiri’s authority is rooted in her knowledge of sacred texts, with which she instructs her devotees, and which she considers to be a direct effect of “the power of [her] *bhakti*.” Despite her being only “first class passed [i.e., she has received no more than a first grade

education],” Gangagiri creates not only an intimate relationship with the textual tradition of Tulsidas through her memorized recitation of verses from the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*, the fourth chapter of the *Rāmāyan*, but also, as a result, her individual authority. Importantly, Gangagiri is semi-literate—she can read with some difficulty Gujarati (her ‘mother tongue’), Hindi, and Sanskrit, and with the exception of the latter language, she can comprehend what she reads. She cannot, however, write. In our meetings Gangagiri often says: “I know [how to read] the letters [*akṣar*], but I can’t remember how to write [them].”

Like Gangagiri, the majority of the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with are either non-literate or semi-literate (they can read and understand printed words, but they themselves cannot write words, including their names),¹⁷³ and yet, like Gangagiri, most of them performatively place themselves within the textual traditions of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* and/or the *Gītā* either through recitation of the written texts or performance of songs and stories identified with these traditions.¹⁷⁴ It is significant that the Rajasthani female sadhus invoke primarily these texts in their performances of asceticism, rather than the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, or the *Dharmaśāstras*. To these sadhus, the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* and the *Gītā* are “filled with” the qualities of bliss (*ānand*) and knowledge (*jnān*), respectively, and as such, illustrate through the actions of their respective key protagonists, Ram and Arjun, the path of *bhakti* to *bhagvān*. By performing these texts, the female sadhus create more than just their individual authority and identity; they also

¹⁷³ Several of the female sadhus with whom I worked had their birth names tattooed on their arms as children. This practice was done in order that the sadhus can show others (who can read/write) proof of identity.

¹⁷⁴ Some female sadhus like Sharda Puri also connect themselves to textual traditions such as the *Śiv Purāṇas* or the *Bhagavata Purāṇas*.

create asceticism as a path of *bhakti*, and by the same token, *bhakti* as the ascetic path *par excellence*—that is, the sadhus create their tradition of devotional asceticism.

There have been a number of academic studies on the oral, performance, and written textual traditions of the *Rāmāyan* (Lamb 2003, 1991; Flueckiger and Sears 1991; Richman 1991, 2000; Lutgendorf 1991a, 1991b; Hess 1988), and a growing number of religious and performance studies on the *Gītā* (cf. Patton 2007; cf. Patton forthcoming; Menon 2006). Much of the scholarship on the *Rāmāyan* examines the diversity of this narrative/textual tradition, including the variety of performance styles (and genres) through which it is expressed. Scholars Velcheru Narayana Rao (1991) and Joyce Flueckiger (1991b), for example, analyze women’s oral *Rāmāyan* song traditions in south and middle India, respectively, and their use of these performances to express gendered and caste-related concerns. Stuart Blackburn (1991) writes about *Rāmāyan* performances of the shadow puppet plays in Kerala and the shifts in and innovations of the written classic Tamil *Rāmāyan* text that emerge in these performances. Linda Hess (1984) and Philip Lutgendorf (1991a, 1991c) investigate the Ram Lila plays of north India and the commentarial function of these drama traditions in expanding on the written text of Tulsidas. In his book-length study of the tradition, Lutgendorf examines performances of the *Rāmcaritmānas* (*Mānas*) and the transformations performance creates on Tulsidas’ written text.

Ramdas Lamb (1991, 2003) further explores a form of *Rāmāyan* recitation practiced by low-caste Ramanandi householders in Chhattisgarh known as *rāmnām bhajan*. According to Lamb, *rāmnām bhajan* is a performance style in which Ramnamis intersperse the recitation of verses in *dohā* and *caupāī* meter of the *Rāmcaritmānas* with

the chanting of *rāmnām*, the movement's signal *mantra* (sacred formula). Lamb argues that the Ramnamis use *rāmnām bhajan* with which to articulate Ramanandi philosophy and, more specifically, to construct the text as a divinely-inspired (*śruti*), authoritative tradition that affirms the egalitarian social ideology of Ramanandi movement.

In their emphases on the diversity, hybridity, and fluidity of the Ram tradition as a song, story, text, commentary, play, film, and so forth, scholars demonstrate that there are many alternative *Rāmāyaṇas* to the dominant textual tradition that is often associated with the sage Valmiki, and thus, expand academic discourse on the *Rāmāyaṇ* beyond the Sanskrit tradition. The scholarship, however, does not conceptualize *Rāmāyaṇ* performance as a rhetorical strategy with which participants construct and enact identity, authority, and religious experience. And while a few scholars have discussed ascetics' devotional textual practices of the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇ* (cf. Gross 1991; van der Veer 1989) and the *Gītā* (cf. K. Menon 2006; cf. Bacchetta 2002), their work represents renunciant textual performance as an expression of divine worship, rather than as an efficacious communicative strategy with which sadhus create their traditions of asceticism.

In this chapter, I analyze the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Gītā* textual performances of non-literate and semi-literate Rajasthani female sadhus and their use of performance as a strategy with which they construct ascetic authority and devotional asceticism. Along with this, I examine the sadhus' strategic use of performance to create a relationship with textual traditions, which, in turn, creates their spiritual authority. I limit my focus to non- and semi-literate sadhus' practices for several reasons. First, almost all of the female sadhus with whom I worked fall within one of these two categories of literacy (I discuss this issue more below). Second, the performance of texts like the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇ* and/or

the *Gītā* in the construction of identity, authority, and asceticism is as important to these sadhus as it is to the literate sadhus I worked with. But how do female sadhus who are, to use Gangagiri's language, "first-class passed," that is, sadhus who have either no or minimal education, create a relationship with textual traditions? What are the contexts and processes by which they become "scriptural" in their performances of asceticism?

The Scripturality of Rajasthani Female Sadhus

My use of the term scriptural is based on that of history of religion scholar, William A. Graham (1987), who uses the words "scriptural," "scripturality," and "scripture-consciousness" to denote the phenomenon in which an individual and/or community intimately engages the *written* sacred text—i.e., scripture—and, in doing so, creates a relationship with the text. According to Graham, as a "relational phenomenon," scripturality arises "in the interaction of persons or groups of persons with a text or texts," to which they attribute claims of sacrality and ultimate transcendence and confirm "the boundaries of scripture" for specific faith communities (6). Graham additionally explores the oral dimensions of scripturality as most significant in the formation of an intimate relationship with a text: the "intensely personal engagement of a community with its sacred text" by means of hearing, singing, reciting, or chanting it creates scripturality (162). In this framework, scripturality, as Graham suggests, characterizes "men and women of faith" who know "scripture so intimately that it has passed into the fabric of their thinking and discourse and provided the conceptual matrix as well as the inner linguistic content of that thinking and discourse" (165). Since scripturality emerges in interactional contexts and via oral/aural practices, the lack of literacy does not exclude individuals from either becoming scriptural or from participating in textual traditions.

Like Graham, Jonathan Boyarin (1993) understands the practices of textual study and interpretation to be a relational phenomenon in which a group of persons decipher together the meanings of texts in particular historico-social contexts (Boyarin 1993, 222; cf. Long 1993). In his study of a yeshiva (traditional, all-male Jewish study group) in Manhattan's Lowest East Side, Boyarin discusses that participants collectively construct (the meanings of) given texts through a combination of textual strategies, such as phrase-by-phrase reading and translation of biblical verses and interrogation of the authoritative text. Coupled with these more traditional methods of textual study are innovative strategies like parody of biblical/midrashic verses, humor, juxtaposition of biblical images with images from American popular culture, and reflection on the interaction between text and everyday life. Boyarin argues that the shared experience of textual study creates "a nonauthoritarian intimacy" not only amongst yeshiva participants, but more significantly, also between readers and the text (221). Boyarin, moreover, suggests that the relationship individual participants foster with the text effect the formation of both Jewish identity and community (230).¹⁷⁵ Boyarin's work well illustrates that the written text and the social processes that underlie individual's interaction with and interpretation of their texts constitute a function of literacy (cf. Patton 2007; Sarris 1993; Heath 1982).

Graham's and Boyarin's model of scripturality provides a conceptual foundation with which to understand the means through which non-literate and semi-literate Rajasthani female sadhus construct relationships with their textual traditions. Most of their Tulsi *Rāmāyan* and *Gītā* performances occur in *satsang* contexts in which, like the

¹⁷⁵ Boyarin writes: "The task of Jewish study is to create community among Jews through time via language" (Boyarin 1993, 230). He further explains, "[T]he conduct of our class is...guided by a polyvocal ideal, which revives voices in the past, creates a voice for the present, and seeks faithfully to await a liberated, tradition-fitted future" (230).

male participants at the Jewish yeshiva Boyarin attended, the sadhus collectively interpret written texts through use of various textual strategies, which I describe below. While performance of the printed sacred text enables the sadhus I worked with to participate in textual traditions, it is not the only way they connect themselves to the literate traditions of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* and *Gītā*. Most female sadhus equate their oral/performed versions of the *Rāmāyan* with Tulsidas' written text (cf. Flueckiger 1991a). Although their performances are not scriptural in traditional (western) sense of the term, I consider the sadhus' oral/performed versions of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* to be scriptural performances, as these sadhus themselves identify their own traditions with the *written* text.

Rajsthani Sadhus' Idea of the Sacred Text

The female sadhus are able to create a relationship with scripture, and more broadly, with textual traditions by reconceptualizing *the idea of the text*. What is a text? Western concepts of the text almost exclusively assume the physical book to be representative of “what constitutes a text of any kind, secular or religious” (Graham 1987, 9; cf. Doniger 1991; Coburn 1984). Graham states: “In our minds, a book is a written or printed document of reasonable length to which the basic access is through an individual's private, silent reading and study. For most if not all of us, the fixed, visible page of print is the fundamental medium of both information and demonstration of proof” (1987, 9). Scholars of South Asian religions, however, argue that, in an Indian context, a text signifies more than just the written or printed holy book. Thomas Coburn explains that the text exists in both oral and written forms (Coburn 1984, 437). Coburn states, “holy words...have been oral/aural realities at least as much as they have been written ones” (1984, 437). Coburn and others additionally contend that the oral/aural text has

been the primary means for encountering and embodying sacred texts in an Indian context (cf. Graham 1987, 67-77; Doniger 1991). What is more, building on Coburn's and A.K. Ramanujan's insights, Wendy Doniger (1991) challenges the traditional Western notion of written texts as fixed and stable entities. She suggests that both oral and written texts have both "fluid" and "fixed" forms.

Furthermore, Flueckiger's and Laurie J. Sears' (1991) co-edited volume argues that the boundaries of the text in South and Southeast Asia extend beyond the written book.¹⁷⁶ The contributors to Flueckiger and Sears document and describe several oral/performance traditions of the *Rāmāyan* and the *Mahābhārata* and, more significantly, examine the relationship between those performances and the written text in which these epics are recorded in order to understand indigenous concepts of the text. For example, in her essay on the women's informal and temple *Rāmāyan mandalīs* (singing groups) in Chhattisgarh, Flueckiger states that the women of the informal *mandalī* groups, consisting primarily of non-literate participants, "place themselves...within the literate tradition of Tulsidas" by stretching the boundaries of the idea of the "*Rāmāyana*" (Flueckiger 1991b, 43-59). These women equate the *Rāmāyana bhajans* they sing with the written, Hindi *Rāmāyana* of Tulsidas. Flueckiger explains, "In their informal Ramayana *mandalī*, even if they do not sing from the written text or memorized portions of it, the women still claim, if asked, that they are singing Tulsī" (Flueckiger 1991a, 49).

In the renunciant performances examined here, we encounter a similar phenomenon, where the non-literate and semi-literate Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked construct a relationship with the literate traditions of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*

¹⁷⁶ In the Introduction, Flueckiger and Sears write: "We use the term 'text' in its broadest sense, as 'marked words,' making possible texts which exist in both written and oral forms" (Flueckiger and Sears 1991, 1-2).

and/or the *Gītā* by reconfiguring the idea of the text beyond the written word. To this extent, the sadhus' textual practices provide an alternative model of scripturality to Graham's model (1987), as their shared understanding of (the concept of) scripture not only includes the written text, but also "songs about God" and/or a "conversation" between deity and devotee. Although Graham's model emphasizes the oral and performative aspects of scriptural practice in the formation of scripturality, he does not address what performance itself "does" to the written text (cf. Flueckiger and Sears 1991), or how performance creates participants' relationship with textual traditions, i.e., their scripturality. Graham's model of scripturality further conflates the written text with a textual tradition. My data challenges this representation of scripturality. The female sadhus' practices indicate that their scripturality is neither founded on nor limited to the written text. Rather, it is based on what the text means to them. By reconceptualizing the parameters of the text, the female sadhus not only situate themselves (and their practices) within the bounds of broadly conceived textual traditions like the *Rāmāyan* and *Gītā*, but also construct themselves as scriptural in the process.

In what follows, I analyze a *Gītā* performance and two different genres of *Rāmāyan* performance. The first *Rāmāyan* performance is a group recitation (*pāṭha*) of the written Tulsī *Rāmāyan*, and the second is a *bhajan* that Tulsigiri, a non-literate sadhu, sang, which provides an oral version of the entire Ram story. For comparative purposes, I also analyze a *Rāmāyan bhajan* that was performed by a non-literate male sadhu, Baldevgiri. As we shall see, regardless of gender, the performance styles of the Rajasthani sadhus are similar, and their performances integrate a combination of textual strategies, such as translation, commentary, humor, and personalized storytelling, by

which means they create a personal relationship with their textual traditions as well as with their devotees/disciples. For both non- and semi-literate male and female sadhus, their authority is intimately tied to their participation in (written) textual traditions, and hence, their conceptualizations of the idea of the text are remarkably similar.

Despite the similarities in their performance styles and strategies, an important difference emerges in terms of what the male and female Rajasthani sadhus I worked with emphasize in their textual performances of asceticism. Whereas male sadhus construct asceticism as a path of detachment and knowledge, female sadhus construct it as selfless service, worldly engagement, and spiritual connection with others—divine, human, and animal. Most importantly, female sadhus create asceticism as a *bhakti* path. As I discuss below, in her *Gītā* performance, Gangagiri imagines asceticism as a *bhakti* path and, to that extent, challenges standard (analytic and/or textual) interpretations of asceticism and *bhakti* as distinct/opposed phenomena. The Rajasthani sadhus' textual performances, thus, bespeak not only gendered conceptualizations of asceticism, but also female ascetics' performative use of *bhakti* texts in the constitution of devotional asceticism as an alternative to the more dominant model of Brahmanical asceticism.

I. Devotion and *Satsang* as Sources of Female Sadhus' Scripturality

Most sadhus encounter the written versions of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* and the *Gītā* through hearing them read or recited in formal and/or informal religious contexts¹⁷⁷; some sing portions of these texts from memory; and still other sadhus themselves read and/or recite these texts from the printed books they have purchased in the local bazaars. The fact that all of the sadhus I worked with, regardless of gender, are scriptural in some

¹⁷⁷ I also observed that many sadhus listen to taped recordings of recitations of these texts; some of the sadhus have also heard professional storytellers and/or other sadhus read and/or recite these texts.

way may seem rather commonplace. However, the female sadhus' use of written sacred texts becomes a significant issue when we consider that the majority of them are either semi-literate or non-literate (cf. Patton 2007).

For example, of the twenty-one female sadhus who participated in my field study, only three are literate: two completed high school and one, Gita Puri, went to college and received a doctorate in Ayurvedic medicine; four are functionally literate, meaning that they have received no more than four years of primary school education and read texts with either no or some difficulty; and fourteen are non-literate—these sadhus, as they told me, “never even saw the school [*hamne school bhī nahī dekhā*].” In contrast, most of the male sadhus are functionally literate. Six out of the fifteen are not only literate but educated as well—all completed high school and three received college degrees. Of the nine sadhus remaining, five are semi-literate and four are non-literate; like the majority of the female sadhus, they, too, never attended school.

More significantly, almost all of the female sadhus who are either non- or semi-literate frame their song (*bhajan*), story (*kahānī*), and especially textual (*pāṭha*) performances by emphasizing their lack of education or literacy to their audience. For instance, Gangagiri often begins her textual performances with the following statement: “When I was a child, I only studied to the first class. Not a lot, just to the first class. I know ‘k, kh, g, gh [i.e., the alphabet].’ I remember the alphabet—k, kh, g, gh. However, I can read [the] *Gītājī* and [the] *Rāmāyan*. I read¹⁷⁸ [these texts] everyday.” Sometimes, when two or more female sadhus are gathered together, a lively discussion ensues on the

¹⁷⁸ The Hindi term that Gangagiri uses for “to read” is *bānchnā*, which has the double sense of “reading aloud” and silent reading in private (cf. McGregor 2004). I understand Gangagiri to be using *bānchnā* in both senses of the term, especially since I have witnessed her reciting texts aloud and reading them silently in the privacy of her hut.

topic of which of them is the *least* literate member of the group. A conversation between Tulsigiri and Gangagiri illustrates this point:

TG: I am an uneducated [*anpaḍ*] girl; I didn't study. Did you hear me sister [*dīdī*]? [She addresses Antoinette who is writing her words in a spiral notebook].

A: Yes, I heard, *Māi Rām* [term of respect for female sadhus, meaning "holy mother"].

TG: I haven't studied. I absolutely never went to school. But I am sitting at the feet of my guru [Tulsigiri here refers to Gangagiri, who is sitting beside her during this conversation and listening attentively, and whom she calls her "*dādā guru*," or "grandfather guru."].

GG: Hey, I only studied to the first standard.

TG: Yes, you studied to the first standard, but I didn't even see the school. I know nothing; but I am sitting at the feet of God; we [i.e., she and Gangagiri] are sitting at the feet of God and [we] have [thus] received His grace [*kripā*]. I have fallen into God's protection [*śaran*]. Do you understand, sister?

A: Uh huh.

GG: Yes, I, too, am in God's protection; we are all in [God's] protection.

By making these types of comments female sadhus like Tulsigiri and Gangagiri not only distinguish themselves from their literate (or more literate) male and female sadhu counterparts, but also construct themselves as special by virtue of their lack of secular education.

These types of conversations bring up two related questions: Why do the female sadhus underscore their lack of education in specifically contexts of textual performance? And, how do the sadhus (male or female) who are either non-literate or semi-literate create relationships with texts? Importantly, most of the female sadhus and a few of the male sadhus do not perceive their religious authority, spiritual knowledge, or even their performances of song, story, and text to be a function of their individual levels of literacy (or lack thereof).¹⁷⁹ On the contrary, for these sadhus, the capacity to read, recite,

¹⁷⁹ In her forthcoming monograph on women Sanskritists in Maharashtra and beyond, Laurie L. Patton discusses that some of these women's grandmothers who were non-literate taught them the *Gītā* "every morning." Importantly, Patton contends that the "Transmission of the Gita presumes neither literacy nor patriarchy; it is one of the few "elite" texts that has crossed this particular boundary." This quotation is taken specifically from the Introduction of Patton's translation on the *Gītā*, p. xxxi. She also Patton (2007)

memorize, or even discourse on the written textual traditions of the *Rāmāyan* and the *Gītā* stems not from any human power, but rather from a divine source—that is, their *bhakti* to *bhagvān*. In response to our first question, then, most of the female sadhus underscore their lack of education or literacy as a type of “disclaimer of performance,” through which they communicate obliquely the power of devotion to God, and by extension, their individual devotional and spiritual power as female sadhus (Bauman 1984, 22).¹⁸⁰

Two implications underlie the female sadhus’ use of this strategy. The first is a gendered one. As I discussed in Chapter Three, unlike most of the male sadhus I worked with, the female sadhus either downplay or resist direct claims to personal agency; rather, they attribute their life choices and inner courage to the power of *bhagvān*.¹⁸¹ A similar phenomenon occurs in the context of their textual performances. Most of the female sadhus heighten the audience’s attention to their individual knowledge, including textual knowledge, by initially discussing their own lack of formal education.¹⁸² In this way, the female sadhus demonstrate the quality of spiritual modesty, an indication of their religious development as renunciators, even as they enact gendered strategies for operating within patriarchal frameworks of femininity.

The second implication of this strategy is religious: in the views of the female sadhus (and some of the male sadhus), *bhakti* to *bhagvān* constitutes an underlying

in which she discusses that recitation of Sanskrit texts such as *Gītā* constitutes a function of literacy for women.

¹⁸⁰ Richard Bauman discusses that disclaimers of performance function as “concessions to standards of etiquette and decorum, where self-assertiveness is disvalued” (Bauman 1984, 22).

¹⁸¹ The female sadhus also attribute their choice to lead a renunciant life to the power of destiny (*bhāgya*), another important theme in their life stories. See chapter three.

¹⁸² Elaine Lawless makes a similar point about female Pentecostal preachers who emphasize that they are no one, and that this type of disclaimer functions as a cue that suggests these women are worth listening to (cf. Lawless 1988).

source of both their spiritual knowledge and scripturality—the phenomenon of encountering and embodying written textual traditions. In the passage above, despite the fact that she can recite portions of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* from memory, Tulsigiri explicitly states, “I know nothing,” by which she alludes to her non-literate status as a renouncer. And yet, Tulsigiri’s subsequent comment in the context of, “But we are sitting at the feet of God and have received God’s grace,” implies that her and Gangagiri’s devotion has “earned” them, as the “beggars of God,” divine blessings on account of which they have not only received salvific knowledge, but have even become scriptural in the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*.¹⁸³ Likewise, a few of the female sadhus also attribute their semi-literate status to the power of their devotion to God. Jamuna Bharti, for instance, told me that while she never learned how to read “books [*kitāben*]” because she never attended school (her parents did not allow her to go), she reads the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*. When I asked how she acquired this skill, she replied, “By the grace of God and my guru,” and when I inquired further if she could read only the *Rāmāyan* or any book, she took a pamphlet that was lying on her altar, namely the words (*vacan*) of her guru that have been published in standard Hindi—opened it, and read with some difficulty each and every word on the page. After approximately two minutes of reading Jamuna Bharti declared, “You see, all this is because of [my] *bhakti*” to God.

While devotion to God serves as a potent source of their scripturality, there is another equally significant source underlying this vital dimension of their devotional asceticism. In the same passage above Tulsigiri explains, “I haven’t studied. I absolutely never went to school. But I am sitting at the feet of my guru [i.e., Gangagiri].” The

¹⁸³ Here we could extend this thesis further. That is, Gangagiri’s devotion has empowered her to become scriptural in the both the *Rāmāyan* and the *Gītā*, that is, her devotion empowers her to create a relationship with these texts and participate in these literate textual traditions.

phrase, “sitting at the feet of my guru,” commonly used by the male and female sadhus, implies here not just the necessity of a teacher-student relationship for spiritual development on the renunciant path, but also a special socio-religious context of teaching and learning in which such spiritual relationships emerge. That context is *satsang*, i.e., the gathering of the *sants* for the purpose of remembering *bhagvān*.

As a *bhakti* context *par excellence*, *satsang* engenders the scripturality of male and female, literate and non-literate sadhus. Some sadhus describe *satsang* as a *bhakti* experience for the purpose of worship *and* as a social “occasion for engendering critical reflection [on texts] that has transformative potential for individuals and for the group as a whole” (Long 1993, 199). This view is evident in Nityananda Puri’s characterization of *satsang*:

That which we sadhus call *satsang* refers to a *community of truth*, to be in the company of those seeking truth. It means to think, to consult, and to exchange ideas [in a community of devotees] to discover what truth is. This is *satsang*, and through this alone do we [sadhus] receive and understand the knowledge of the *ātma* and of God, the *paramātmā*; that the *ātma* is of the same form as the *paramātmā* [italics mine].

As Nityananda Puri suggests, *satsang* represents what Shirley Brice Heath refers to as a “literacy event,” that is, an “occasion in which a piece of writing,” in this case the written sacred text, “is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (Heath 1982, 93; also cited in Flueckiger 1991b, 44-45). Since scripturality, as Graham contends, “arises...in the interaction of persons or groups of persons with a text or texts” (1987, 6), *satsang* constitutes a context in which, as literary theorist David Bleich says of “intersubjective reading” experiences, “a community of readers,” or in this case, a community of devotees, “make a text meaningful” (Bleich 1986, 402 & 401; cf. Boyarin 1993; Fish 1970). *Satsang* enables sadhus to become literate in textual traditions by exposing them visually, orally, and aurally to a stream of

associations, ideas, images, and sounds which evoke feelings of love and devotion for the divine, on the basis of which they develop a relationship with the written text.¹⁸⁴

As important as the written text is to most of the female sadhus I worked with, it does not determine their scripturality in the way Graham's model suggests. As I discuss below, female sadhus performatively rework the idea of the text as a strategy for situating themselves in literate textual traditions. However they conceive of the text, *satsang* serves as an everyday *bhakti* occasion in which sadhus encounter and engage oral, performed, and written versions of their textual traditions by means of hearing, reading, reciting, singing, and/or discussing texts. Through these practices the sadhus embody the text, or as they often say, “grab [*pakadnā*]” the text and “write it in [their] heart[s].” Gangagiri teaches that practice creates scripturality. In her words: “I only studied to the first class. Now what can a first class passed person remember? But I grabbed the *Gītājī* tightly; I grabbed the *Rāmāyan* tightly, too...I read [*bāchnā*] and recited [*pāṭha karnā*] the texts, and am still [reading and reciting] them to this day.” Her statement, made in the context of a *satsang* where she had just recited verses from the *Gītā*, reminds us that *satsang* serves as an underlying source of the female sadhus' scripturality. Below, I examine the various ways in which *satsang* fosters sadhus' relationship with written texts by focusing on one genre of their textual performances—namely *Rāmāyan* recitation.

¹⁸⁴ We might consider here that the function of scripture *satsangs* approximate that of Western reading groups which, as Elizabeth Long argues in her study of contemporary women's reading groups in Texas, “...not only offer occasions for explicitly collective textual interpretation, but encourages new forms of association, and nurtures new ideas that are developed in conversation with other people as well as with the books” (Long 1993, 194; cf. Long 1986, 591-612).

**II A. “The *Rāmāyan* is full of Bliss”:
A Recitation of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* by Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Jamuna Bharti**

Rāmāyan recitation is a devotional ascetic practice that the female sadhus I worked with categorize as *Rāmāyan pāṭha*. For most sadhus, their use of the word *Rāmāyan* refers specifically to the written text of the *Rāmcharitmānas*, an original, vernacular retelling of “the ancient tale of Prince Ram of Ayodhya,” which was composed by the sixteenth-century north Indian poet-saint, Tulsidas, in Avadhi, a literary dialect of Hindi (Lutgendorf 1991a, 3; Flueckiger 1991b, 45-48; Richman 1991). Known to them simply as the “Tulsi *Rāmāyan*,” many of the female sadhus consider this Hindi text to be one of the most important devotional scriptures ever written in India’s history, one “filled with,” as they say, “a lot of bliss [*ānand*].” They recite from a printed book or, as is more often the case, from memory either a specific chapter or specific verses (*dohā* or *caupāī*) of this text as part of their daily, individual practice of devotional asceticism.

Rāmāyan pāṭha also happens in *satsang* contexts where a small group of anywhere between two and five female sadhus meets during the middle-to-late afternoon to recite a chapter or so from the written text. These recitation events are informal and impromptu; there is no pre-scheduled or pre-determined day, time, or place for their occurrence in what is a very loosely-structured and widely-scattered “community” of Rajasthani sadhus. No single individual or group of individuals remains responsible for coordinating these events. Instead, the pattern for these performances is that whenever the female sadhus visit one another (and the reasons for these visits range from “business” to personal), one, or perhaps all, of them will announce to the group her “desire [*icchā*]” either to perform or to listen to a recitation of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*.

Gangagiri, for example, usually expresses her intention to the other members of the group by telling them, “Let’s chant a *pāṭha* of [the] *Rāmāyan*,” making explicit her desire to recite at least a single chapter of the text. Sometimes Tulsigiri, who regularly visits Gangagiri at her ashram, will announce her intention to hear the *Rāmāyan* by saying, “Hey, Maharaj [a title of respect that she uses to address Gangagiri], I haven’t heard [the] *Rāmāyan* today. Let’s recite *Rāmāyan*,” to which Gangagiri replies, “Yes. I’ll get my book.” Since the sadhus consider *Rāmāyan* recitation to be a seminal expression of *bhakti* to *bhagvān*, any wish to recite or hear *Rāmāyan* is immediately welcomed by the rest of the group, and responses often take the form of “*jai ho, jai ho!*,” which literally means, “may there be victory,” but in this context connotes, “o.k., o.k.,” i.e., acceptance of a *Rāmāyan* recitation request. Of the twenty-one female sadhus I worked with, eight of them live in Udaipur city, within a half a block to several miles of each other. Many of these sadhus visit one another somewhat regularly and perform the *Rāmāyan*. Based on these statistics, we might encounter a *satsang* of *Rāmāyan* recitation in any one of their ashrams two or three times a week, and sometimes, if the mood is elevated, twice in one day.

In most of the *Rāmāyan* recitations that I attended Gangagiri leads the performance. Many times, she is the only “literate” female sadhu in the group, and other female sadhus acknowledge her “educated” status by telling her, “Maharaj, unlike us, you are educated [*paḍī likhī*]; you know things,” implying that because she has the knowledge of “letters [*aḥṣar*],” she should lead the group. Even though she initially undermines her “first class passed” education by responding, “What do I know? All this is *bhagvān*’s doing,” Gangagiri runs the recitation. But even in cases where literate and well-educated

female sadhus like Gita Puri, the Ayurvedic doctor, participate in *Rāmāyan satsangs* with Gangagiri, she still assumes the leadership of the performance. Not only is Gangagiri the oldest living female sadhu in Mewar—she reached ninety-three years of age in 2006—her birthday also falls on the Hindu holy day of *Rām Nāvami*, the auspicious day on which Ram, the hero of the *Rāmāyan*, was born.¹⁸⁵ Due to the combination of the auspicious day of her birth; her advanced age, and her individually-developed reading knowledge, the other female sadhus usually and reverentially defer to Gangagiri in *Rāmāyan satsangs*, and let her determine the structure and content of these devotional performances.

The *Rāmāyan pāthas* of the female sadhus often follow a particular performance sequence. Before the recitation begins, Gangagiri closes her eyes to direct her focus and recites from memory a few Sanskrit invocations, *vandana*, to deities such as Ganesh, Parvati, and Mahadev, or Śiva. She may also sing a few Hindi *bhajans* to these and other deities, songs which beseech the divine for protection from the evil eye and evil doers.¹⁸⁶ These invocatory *mantras* (sacred formulas) and *bhajans*, though not part of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*, frame the recitation as a performance event, and the female sadhus themselves identify some of these *bhajans* with the written text.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, the melodic chanting of these songs helps to evoke feelings of devotion from the participants and to direct their

¹⁸⁵ In the context of narrating her life story, Gangagiri told me on several occasions that she was born on the day of *Rām Nāvami*. This detail is an important framework to Gangagiri's personal narrative of *bhagvān* and destiny as determinants her renunciant life and of the time of her birth as indicative of high spiritual status. This interpretive framework enables Gangagiri to construct herself as special in the eyes of God, legitimating not only her own public position of spiritual authority as a female sadhu but also her individual renunciant "life choice." At the same time, this detail makes her relationship to the *Rāmāyan* more special.

¹⁸⁶ I give an example of such a *bhajan* in the Appendix to the Dissertation.

¹⁸⁷ The framing of their *Rāmāyan* recitation with *bhajans* and *mantras* also illustrates one way in which the female sadhus expand the boundaries of the text. As Joyce Flueckiger (1991b) argues, women's informal *mandalī* groups in Chhattisgarh involve their use of *bhajans* with which they expand the boundaries of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* beyond the written text. Flueckiger explains that the women identify most of *bhajans* performed in the *mandalī* with Tulsidas' written text. See Flueckiger and Sears (1991).

attention to the text. If the other female sadhus are unfamiliar with a *mantra* or *bhajan*, they will listen as Gangagiri chants; but if they know a *mantra* or song, they too will sing along with her, but in a much softer voice. Often, though, Gangagiri alone recites the invocation, while the other sadhus prepare themselves for the recitation. At the conclusion of the invocation Gangagiri says, “*jai ho*,” including in this formula the names of the various deities invoked by the *bhajans* (i.e., “*jai ho, m̄hādev kī*”); the rest of the sadhus repeat these phrases with energized voices of excitement and anticipation.



A copy of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* is kept on a wooden stand near Gangagiri’s altar. The text is wrapped in an ochre-colored cloth. Photo by A. DeNapoli.

But the physical text itself determines the structure of the recitation. Once Gangagiri opens the *Rāmāyan* and announces to the group the specific chapter she wants to recite, the performance ensues with her chanting the Sanskrit *ślokas* [verses] that appear at the beginning of the chapter, and then the group recites the chapter, which comprises verses set to three different types of meters (*dohā*, *sorāṭhā*, and *caupāī*).¹⁸⁸ A full chapter recitation may take up to an hour and a half to finish. To mark the end of the

¹⁸⁸ I explain the metrical structures of these meters below in the discussion on the *samput*, or verses of prayer.

recitation, Gangagiri closes the text, brings it to her forehead, an act of reverence.

Through this act, she and the other sadhus who follow her lead acknowledge the text as an object of worship; then they sing some popular Hindi *bhajans* which praise not Ram, or even Krishna, but rather a formless and genderless *bhagvān*.¹⁸⁹

Most of the *Rāmāyan pāthas* of the female sadhus incorporate three integral (textual) performance strategies, namely those of translation (and/or commentary); the *samput*, or formulaic verses of praise; and various types of musical accompaniment provided by the means of cymbals (*majīrā*), drums (*dol*; *mrdang*), and/or the synchronized clapping of hands (*tāl*). While the *Rāmāyan satsang* itself provides a context in which the participants can interact with the physical text, these performance features, as I discuss below, variously contribute to the process by which the female sadhus participate in the literate tradition of Tulsidas.

Translation

In the *Rāmāyan* recitations in which she participates, Gangagiri acts as the translator of the text for the group, translating from the medieval Avadhi Hindi dialect in which the text is written into everyday contemporary Hindi or Mewari. Often without consulting the Hindi translation of the Avadhi included in the text from which she reads, Gangagiri provides her own glosses of primarily the *caupāī*, which consist of two lines of four equal parts, and occasionally the *dohā*, which consist of two lines of unequal parts (cf. Lutgendorf 1991, 15). She integrates these translations into the structure of the recitation in several ways. Either she recites the first half of the first line of a *caupāī* and provides a brief translation of that line before moving on to the next half of that line; or,

¹⁸⁹ One of these *bhajans*, entitled, “We worship you, *bhagvān*,” I include in Appendix B of the dissertation.

she recites a single line of *caupāī* and glosses the whole verse. More often, Gangagiri recites a full *caupāī* (i.e., two lines) and translates the whole unit, sometimes incorporating descriptions of events from the following *caupāī*. Here is an example of this dialectical process of recitation and translation from Gangagiri's performance of the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*, the fourth chapter of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*:

[Gangagiri starts recitation and the rest of the group then sings along with her; this pattern is repeated throughout the performance]:

as kahi peru caran akulāī/ nij tanu pragati prīti ur chhāī// [first line, 2.3]:

[Gangagiri's translation of the verse]:

Hanuman reverently touched [Ram and Lakshman's] feet...

*dekhi pavansut pati anukūlāī/hṛdayam haraṣ bīṭī sab sūlāī//
nāth sāl par kapīpati rahaī/so sugrīva dās tav ahaī //* [3.1]

[Sugriv's¹⁹⁰] distress disappeared [when he saw Hanuman welcome Ram and Lakshman into Kiṣkindhā town]...

*sakhā bacan suni haraṣe krpāsindhu balasīnva/
kāran kavan basahu ban mohī kahahu sugrīva// dohā 5*

[Gangagiri speaks in the voice of Ram who addresses Sugriv]

“Sugriv, why have you come to live in the forest? Tell me everything so I can understand what has happened [to you].”

[Speaking as herself]: O.k., now Sugriv is going to tell Ram what happened [to him].

nāth bālī aru main dvau bhāī/ prīti rahī kacchu barani na jāī// [first half of 5.1]

“Bali and I are brothers. We really loved each other.” Sugriv is telling this to Ram.

[Tulsigiri responds, “*hari om, prabhu.*” Gangagiri proceeds to recite the next line of the *caupāī* and the sadhus sing along with her.]

mayasut māyāvī tehi nāum/āvā so prabhu hamaren gāum// [second half of 5.1]

“Mayavi was a demon. One day, he came into our town [Kiṣkindhā].”

¹⁹⁰ In giving the English spelling of names like Sugriv, Ram, and so forth, I follow the sadhus' Hindi pronunciations.

[Tulsigiri: ‘*jai ho!*’]

ardh rāti pur dvār pukārā/bālī ripu bal sahai na pārā// [first half of 5.2]

“That demon arrived in the middle of the night and challenged my brother [to a fight].”

dhāvā bālī dekhi so bhāgā/ main puni gayu bandhu sang lāgā// [second half of 5.2]

“When that demon saw my brother, he got scared and ran away; my brother ran after him, and I followed right behind [Bali], running.”

[Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti together say, “*jai ho, jai ho.*”]

If I don’t explain this, you won’t understand.

[Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti repeat, “*jai ho.*”]

giribar guhān paith so jāi/tab bālīn mohi kahā bujhāi// [first half of 5.3]

“That demon entered a cave, and then my brother entered it.”

parikhesu mohi ek pakhavārā/nahi āvaun tab jānesu mārā// [second half of 5.3]

“Watch this place for fifteen days,’ Bali is telling this to Sugriv. “My brother told me, ‘Watch this place for fifteen days. If I don’t return, then you understand that the demon has killed me, and you run away from here.’ [Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti respond, “*jai ho.*”] “My brother told me to stay for fifteen days, but I waited there a whole month; I stood there for a month [waiting for him to come out of the cave].”

[Tulsigiri responds, “*hari om.*”]

Sugriv was telling all this to Ram. “I watched [the cave] carefully. There was so much blood that came out of there that I thought that demon had killed my brother. I thought, ‘Hey, if I go inside [the cave], he’ll kill me, too.’ So I left from there for Kiśkindhā.” Sugriv explained this to Ram...

mantrinha pur dekhā binu sān/ dīnheu mohi rāj bariān// [first half of 5.5]

“The ministers of the city [Tulsigiri responds, “*hare, hare, hare*”] saw that the throne was empty and they forced me to sit on the throne [and become the king of Kiśkindhā].”

bālī tāhi mārī grh āvā/ [first part of second half of 5.5]

“Bali returned [to Kiśkindhā]; he killed the demon and then returned [to the city].”

bālī tāhi mārī grh āvā /dekhi mohi jīyan bhed baḍāvā// [second half of 5.5]

*ripu sama mohi māresi ati bhārī/ hari līnhesi sarbasu aru nārī//
tāken bhay raghubīr krpālā/ sakal bhuvan main phireun bihālā// [5.6]*

“My brother beat me badly; he got angry [when he saw me on the throne] and beat me like anything. Then he took my wife [away from me].”

*ihān sāp bas āvat nāhīn/tadapi sabhīt rahaun man māhīn//
suni sevak dukh dīndayālā/pharaki ūthīn dvai bhujā bisālā// 5.7*

[Gangagiri speaks in her own voice]

Ram heard Sugriv’s distress and became enraged [with Bali].
[Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti reply, “*jai ho, jai oō, srī nāth, jai ho!*”]

As these instances illustrate, Gangagiri’s verse-by-verse translations follow the recorded text. Through the means of her literal translations, the audience learns that Sugriv had a brother by the name of Bali, whom he loved and served dutifully as his master and king. However, their relationship took a sour turn when a demon by the name of Mavayi arrived at the gates of Kīṣkindhā “at midnight” and challenged Bali to a fight. On seeing the formidable stature of Bali, the demon ran away, but Bali ran after him, and Sugriv, of course, followed behind him. Before entering the cave, though, Bali instructed his brother to remain there on the look-out for “fifteen days,” and if after such time he did not emerge, Sugriv should understand that the demon has killed him and “run away from” there. But Sugriv waited “a whole month” for Bali to come out, and only after he discovered blood gushing from the cave did he assume that the demon had killed Bali and therefore leave for Kīṣkindhā. Once he returned to the city, the chief ministers forced Sugriv to become king. In the meantime, Bali returned to the city and found Sugriv ruling what was once his kingdom. Consequently, Bali beat Sugriva, took away his wife, and exiled him from the city. In translating the final *caupāī* in this segment Gangagiri says that “Ram heard Sugriv’s distress and became enraged,” and thus alludes to Ram’s impending destruction of Bali.

To understand the ways translation enables the female sadhus to create a relationship with the written text of Tulsidas we need to examine more closely Gangagiri's translation style. Notice that in her gloss of the Avadhi, Gangagiri does not provide word-by-word translations. And, with the exception of the second line of the third *caupāī* of the fifth *dohā*, she moves rather rapidly through each of her glosses. The fact that neither Gangagiri (nor any of the other sadhus I worked with) was trained in the academic styles of translation accounts for her performance style. Apart from this fact, though, there are three other reasons for her translation practices. One is that most of the sadhus in this *satsang*, specifically Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Jamuna Bharti, have recited chapters from the *Rāmāyan* together many times before this particular event. And since Gangagiri integrates translation into the structure of most of her *Rāmāyan* performances, we can assume that these sadhus are already familiar not only with the general content of the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*, in particular, one of Gangagiri's favorite chapters which she especially likes to recite for *satsang*, but also with the content of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*, more broadly.

Another reason for Gangagiri's translation style is that Jamuna Bharti and Tulsigiri already have a deep familiarity with both the narrative content and structure of the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*. That is, they comprehend the written text as they recite its verses. After some *Rāmāyan* recitations, I asked female sadhus if they understand what they read, using the verb "*samajhnā*" in my questions. Almost always, the sadhus responded that they, indeed, understand the text, and to demonstrate so, some of them narrated parts of the story they had just recited from the text. *Samajhnā*, though, implies both comprehension and apprehension. To this extent, the female sadhus not only

comprehend, but also apprehend the written text through means of recognition of the names and epithets of the cast of characters that recur throughout the *Rāmāyan*.

In his examination of scriptural performances of the Quran in the village of Tidore in eastern Indonesia, James N. Baker distinguishes between the comprehension and apprehension of the text. Baker characterizes comprehension as “an activity in which one has subjective transformational control over that which has been offered (Baker 1993, 107).” He also explains that “Comprehension can be thought of as an activity by which one takes control of something by way of linguistic competence” (Baker 1993, 107). In contrast, Baker describes apprehension as “an activity...in which one confronts and takes hold of what there is to know and remember” (Baker 1993, 108). According to Baker, the various names of God (there are ninety-nine that are mentioned in the whole *Quran*) recited during Quranic performance function as “indexical” signs which “have essentially evocative meanings rather than denotative (semantic) ones” for the participants (Baker 1993, 128). “[T]here is a sense,” explains Baker, “that the uttering aloud of these words is revelatory, having the effect of not only evoking memories but also of impressing upon a collective memory an accepted order of things” (Baker 1993, 118).¹⁹¹

Baker’s theory helps us to understand the ways in which the “presence of the names” of the divine, including that of Ram, and the popular epithets for characters such

¹⁹¹In her study of the narrative performances of transnational Hindu families living in the greater Atlanta area of Georgia, Jennifer B. Saunders discusses that during *Sundarakānd kathā*, a religious narrative performance of the fifth chapter of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*, the participants apprehend rather than comprehend the literal content of the *Rāmāyan* because of recognition of the names and epithets of God that are repeated throughout the text (Saunders 2005, 234-36). Saunders, who also cites Baker’s work, argues that the apprehension of the names of God (or other characters of the text) in the *Sundarakānd* performance evokes feelings of devotion amongst the participants, which contributes to the creation of a religious community for the transnational Hindus with whom she worked. The particular spelling of the *Sundarakānd* here reflects Saunder’s usage.

as Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and Hanuman, for instance, enable the female sadhus to apprehend the *Rāmāyan* during recitation. How the sadhus might apprehend the text while chanting the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ* becomes evident through an analysis of the following *caupāī*: “*dekhi pavansut pati anukūlā/hṛdayam haraṣ bītī sab sūlā/nāth sāl par kapipati rahaī/so sugrīva dās tav ahaī* (3.1).” In this verse, besides the proper name, Sugriv, the female sadhus would recognize the epithet, “*pavansut*,” literally meaning, “The son of the wind [god],” which signifies the monkey god, Hanuman—Sugriv’s general and Ram’s devotee. Similarly, popular titles like “*pati*” and “*nāth*,” meaning “lord” and “master,” respectively, would easily come into the sadhus’ understandings, as these words are not only repeated throughout the text, but also refer to Ram.

Apart from proper names, epithets, and titles, this verse contains a number of verbs and nouns that would be immediately familiar to the female sadhus. In the case of verbs like “*dekhi*,” the Avadhi correlate of the Hindi verbal root, “*dekhnā*,” or “to see,” and the verbal form, “*bītī*,” the Avadhi parallel of the Hindi verb, “*bītnā*,” meaning “to pass” or “to come to pass,” even though they might not recognize the particular tenses of these verbal forms, the sadhus, nonetheless, understand the types of action these verbs communicate. Likewise, Avadhi nouns such as “*hṛdayam*,” “*dās*,” “*haraṣ*,” and “*sab*,” almost exactly parallel common Hindi words such as, “*hṛday*,” heart, “*dās*,” servant, “*haraṣ*,” happiness, and, finally, “*sab*,” everything. The Hindi forms of these nouns and verbs comprise part of the everyday language of the female sadhus, and to this extent, the recognition of their Avadhi correlates in the *Rāmāyan* allows them to grasp not only the evocative meanings of these terms, as Baker suggests for the names and epithets of the divine, but even the semantic meanings of other words during the recitation.

It is important to state here that the significance of *Rāmāyan* recitation to the Rajasthani female sadhus extends beyond its semantic value. They recite the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* (and the *Gītā*) for the spiritual benefits that the acts of recitation and listening to a recitation are thought to effect for participants. Also, in their statements about *Rāmāyan* recitation the female sadhus suggest that participants' comprehension and/or apprehension of the text (or lack thereof), does not affect the inherent spiritual efficacy of the recitation. That is, the recitation “does” something to and for participants whether or not they understand the text. According to the female sadhus, the recitation itself produces good “fruits [*phal*]” for performers and listeners. Once, after Gangagiri had recited from memory a few *caupāī* from the Tulsi text, she emphasized that a sick person could become well in three days of reciting the *Rāmāyan*. Her view suggests that the female sadhus perceive the words of the text to be intrinsically powerful. A few sadhus have characterized the *dohā* and/or *caupāī* of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* as *mantras*, whose efficacy and power lie in their verbalization. Lamb (1991) and Lutgendorf (1991a) also describe that for the religious communities in which they worked, recitation of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* is considered to be transformative, and the words of the text are thought to have transformative power.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Gangagiri's translation style must be viewed in light of the function with which the female sadhus perceive *Rāmāyan* recitation. For these sadhus the recitation represents an expression of devotion to God *par excellence*, a means to commune with and experience the divine through the vehicle of the written text. These recitations are unlike other male reading groups, such as the New York City yeshiva reading group discussed by Boyarin or even the *Rāmāyan* recitations

led by some male sadhus in south Rajasthan. The reasons for which the female sadhus gather “around the text” have less to do with the need to interrogate and analyze the written text as an object of consumption than with an intense, personal desire to communicate their love and devotion for *bhagvān* through the recitation of the text as an object of worship. From their shared perspectives, the function of *Rāmāyan* recitation is to evoke feelings of *bhakti* to *bhagvān*, and Gangagiri’s translation serves this purpose.

For instance, in translating the verses, Gangagiri more often speaks in the voices of the characters themselves. In this way, she expresses the particular emotions (*bhāv*) of both the verse and the characters, rather than simply speaks in the voice of an impersonal third person narrator.¹⁹² Illustrative of this method is her translation of verse 4.3 in the

Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ:

*rām rām hā rām pukārī/hamhi dekhi dīnheu pat dārī//
māgā rām turat tehin dīnha/pat ur lāī soch ati kīnhā//4.3*

In tears, Sugriv told Ram, “Hey Nath! Ravan has taken Sita; she was calling from the sky, [Gangagiri raises her voice] ‘Hey Ram, Hey Ram!’ [Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti respond, “hey Ram, hey Ram, oh Ram!”] Sita was calling out [to you], Ram. I myself saw all this happen.” [To this Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti reply, “*jāī* Sita Ram, *jāī* Sita Ram, *jāī* Sita Ram.”]

This translation strategy of speaking as the characters elicits from Tulsigiri and Jamuna Bharti a series of responses expressed in the vocative case such as, “hey Ram, oh Ram,” or responses of praise like, “*jāī* Sita Ram.” Although Gangagiri’s translations promote basic textual comprehension for the participants, these varied responses of the sadhus constitute more than just performative demonstrations to indicate that they understand the text (or its particular episodes); they are, more significantly, intense,

¹⁹² See also Flueckiger’s essay, “Literacy and the Changing Concept of the Text: Women’s Ramayana Mandali in Central India,” in which she discusses the ways some of the women in the temple *mandalī* groups, for instance, use commentary to develop the *bhāv* (emotions) of particular episodes in the Tulsi text.

personal expressions of love and devotion, to God *and* to the text. Thus, by arousing *bhakti* to: *bhagvān*; specific characters like Ram, Sita, or Hanumān; and/or the text, Gangagiri’s translations empower the sadhus to construct intimate relationships with the text—i.e., as Gangagiri likes to say, to “grab” the text and hold it “tightly” in their hearts and minds. But translation is not the only means through which the female sadhus experience the text. Other performance strategies such as the *samput* and musical accompaniment also create feelings of *bhakti*, and in doing so, create the scripturality of the Rajasthani female sadhus—that is, (1) their intense and personal relationship with the written text; (2) their participation in the literate textual tradition of Tulsidas; and (3) their internalization/embodiment of the text in such a manner that it becomes part of the fabric of their everyday renunciant discourse and practice.

The Samput and Musical Accompaniment

Every *Rāmāyan* recitation of the female sadhus follows a particular metric structure that arises from the specificity of the various verses, mostly *dohā* and *caupāī*.¹⁹³ In the recitation of these verses, *dohā*, which consist of two lines, receive thirteen beats for the first line and eleven beats for the second, while the *caupāī*, comprising two lines of four equal parts, receive thirty-two beats per line, or sixteen beats per quarter line (cf. Lutgendorf 1991, 14-15). In addition to the *dohā/caupāī* meters, the female sadhus recite the *samput* (verses of praise/adoration) as part of their *Rāmāyan* performances. Unlike standard *samput* which typically comprise a single line of praise to a pair or a panoply of deities (cf. Saunders 2005, 236; Flueckiger 1991b, 56), the *samput* which the Rajasthani

¹⁹³ In addition to *dohā* and *caupāī*, there are *sorāthā* meters. As Lutgendorf explains, “A *sorāthā* is a *dohā*’s mirror image: two lines each divided into eleven and thirteen beat segments...” (Lutgendorf 1991, 15).

female sadhus I worked with chant serve largely as a supplemental chorus verse and contain two separate components: a verse of praise to Ram and Sita which translates as, “Victory to the lotus feet of Ram and Sita, the source of all protection,” and two (or, in some cases, four) additional lines of prayer addressed specifically to Ram. These verses beseech him as the Lord of all creation for protection from disease and affliction, as well as for happiness and good fortune in one’s life. The following is an example of a *samput* that Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Jamuna Bharti sang in the context of a *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ* recitation:

sīyāramacandra pad jay śaranam/ [line of praise]

mangal bhavan amangal hārī/dravau so daśarath ajira bihārī // (1) [line of prayer]

dīn dayāl biridu sambhārī/haru nāth mama samkath bhārī// (2)

Victory to the lotus feet of Sita and Ram, the source of all protection.¹⁹⁴
May He who is the source of all happiness, the remover of all afflictions,
He who plays in the courtyard of Dasharatha, have mercy on me (1).

O Lord, who takes care of the poor and helpless all the time,
Heal and cure us of our afflictions, and take away our suffering. (2)

In the sadhus’ recitation of the *samput*, the first line of praise to Sita and Ram and the first line of prayer to Ram remain the same throughout the performance, but the next line(s) of prayer often vary. If the content of the prayer verses (i.e., lines 1 and 2), in particular, seem familiar, it is because these are *caupāī* which the female sadhus have taken from other chapters of the *Rāmāyan*. The first line represents the second *caupāī* of the one-hundred and eleventh *dohā* from the *Bāl Kāṇḍ* (1.111.2), the first chapter of the

¹⁹⁴ As I explained in an earlier footnote, my translations of the Avadhi are based on the Hindi commentary provided by Hanuman Prasad Poddar in the Gita press publication of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the same publication Gangagiri and other sadhus use for their *Rāmāyan* recitations.

text; the second line signifies the second *caupāī* of the twenty-sixth *dohā* from the *Sundar Kāṇḍ* (5.26.2), the fifth chapter.

During the performance, the sadhus recite the *samput* after every *dohā* and before the following *caupāī*. Whereas the praise component of the *samput* receives eleven beats, the prayer verses, as with *caupāī* in general, receive thirty-two beats per line. The *samput* not only signal for the sadhus the beginning of a new *dohā-caupāī* segment, but also connect each *dohā* to its constitutive *caupāī*. In doing so, the *samput* seamlessly joins two different metrical units. For example, the *samput* line, “Victory to . . . Sita and Ram,” wraps around the last line of a *dohā*, imitating its eleven-beat meter, while the next *samput* prayer verse, “May He who is the source of all happiness . . .,” plugs into the proceeding *caupāī* sequence by following its meter. In the recitation of a *dohā* and the accompanying initial verse of the *samput*, the performance moves quickly; but the verses of prayer and supplication, since they receive thirty-two beats, noticeably reduce the pace of the recitation. This *samput* feature allows the sadhus to return to the metric structure of the *caupāī*, while preparing them for the recitation of the next *caupāī* sequence. An example of how the sadhus perform the *samput* is given below (the *samput* are in italics):

dohā

O Hanuman, s/he alone whose mind never wavers [in the thought] that “I am the servant and this whole universe of [things] moving and unmoving is the form of my master, the Lord [Ram],” worships me. (4.3)

Victory to the lotus feet of Sita and Ram, the source of all protection.
[eleven beat *dohā* meter]

May He who is the source of all happiness, the remover of all afflictions,
[32 beat *caupāī* meter; continues for the rest of the *samput* verses]

He who plays in the courtyard of Dasharatha, have mercy on me.

O Lord, who takes care of the poor and helpless all the time,

Heal and cure us of our afflictions, and take away our suffering.

caupāī

When the son of the [god] of wind, Hanuman, discovered the kindness of his master, Lord Ram, happiness spread in his heart, and all his fears dissipated. “O Master, on this very mountain lives Sugriv, the ruler of the monkeys. He is your servant.” (4.3.1)

The *samputs* illustrate that the lexical text largely determines the form and content of the sadhus’ *Rāmāyan* recitations. While they integrate verses from other chapters in the construction of a chorus to supplement the core recitation of *dohā-caupāī* segments, their selection of materials for the *samput* still depends on the words of the written text itself. To this extent, the added chorus verses do not “reshape” the written text of Tulsidas, but rather, like Gangagiri’s translations, heighten the importance the sadhus performatively attribute to the literate tradition of the *Rāmāyan* (Flueckiger 1991b, 54). In this respect, the *Rāmāyan* performances of the female sadhus present a striking counterpoint to the women’s temple *Rāmāyan mandalī* performances discussed by Flueckiger, in which, “the written, ‘literate’ verses [of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*] are reshaped by the infusion of materials from an accompanying oral tradition” (1991b, 54).

In the female sadhus’ *Rāmāyan* recitations, a kind of spontaneity does emerge, though, in terms of what gets chosen to be recited as the *samput*. As I mentioned earlier, while the first line of praise and the first line of prayer remain relatively stable elements in every *samput* unit, no single *samput* unit dominates these performances. The female sadhus’ selection of the *samput* is rather arbitrary (i.e., any *caupāī* in the form of a prayer to Ram qualifies for inclusion in the *samput*), and happens while the participants are actively engaged in the recitation. To illustrate an instance of what I observed, following the recitation of a *dohā*, the sadhus then chant in unison the praise line and the initial

prayer verse, slowing down as they switch from one verse to the next, and thus, from *dohā* to *caupāī* meters. One of the sadhus then leads the chanting with another line of prayer, a verse chosen because it is what “came to [her] mind.” In these performances, Gangagiri randomly selects for the prayer component of the *samput caupāī* from the *Bāl Kāṇḍ*, *Sundar Kāṇḍ*, and so forth, whereas Jamuna Bharti chooses *caupāī* from the *Bāl Kāṇḍ*. Once a sadhu has selected a verse for inclusion in the *samput*, the others repeat it until someone else in the group decides what to recite for the next part of the chorus.

Significantly, the spontaneity that arises from the quasi-random construction of the *samput* by the female sadhus reveals the ways their memorization of the text plays a key role in the recitation and, more broadly, in their scripturality. All of the *samput* the female sadhus chant are based on what they have memorized of the text.

“Memorization,” as Graham explains, “is a particularly intimate appropriation of a text, and the capacity to quote or recite a text from memory [depicts] scriptural piety” (Graham 1987, 160). For the female sadhus, the recitation from memory of the written text creates their participation in the literate tradition of Tulsidas as well as demonstrates their internalization, or embodiment, of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*.¹⁹⁵ This, too, constitutes an aspect of their scripturality. During these performances, I realized that, due to their lack of reading knowledge, most of the female sadhus rely more on their memory of the verses in the written text than on the words (*akṣar*) printed on the page. This is certainly the case

¹⁹⁵ In the views of most of the female sadhus, memorization not only indicates whether or not devotees know a text “by heart,” but is also an expression of devotion. On one occasion, a female Rajput householder who had visited Gangagiri at her ashram for darśan claimed to know the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*, in response to which Gangagiri said, “Well, if you know it, sing it! Let’s see what you know.” The devotee instantly recited from memory the twenty-sixth *dohā* of the *Sundar Kāṇḍ*, and three of its accompanying *caupāī*, on the basis of which Gangagiri warmly recognized her as a “*jnāni*,” or knower. This was not, however, the end of the verbal performance of *Rāmāyan* for Gangagiri. To demonstrate her own knowledge of the text to the devotee, she, too, recited the first stanza of *sorāthā-caupāī* from the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ*, and the following first *dohā*, after which she maintained, “I remember [*yād*] many more [*dohā-caupāī*].”

for Tulsigiri who is non-literate, and therefore, cannot read the words of the text. But even for Jamuna Bharti, a semi-literate sadhu who claims to have received knowledge of the *akṣar* via the grace of both God and her guru, while she recited specific verses from the text in a *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍ* recitation I attended (usually on Gangagiri's command), she accomplished this task with some difficulty. Her participation, therefore, pivots primarily on her memory of the verses, and she looks at the book usually when she has forgotten the words of a verse.

The importance of memorization in their *Rāmāyan* performances suggests that affective performance features like the *samput* contribute to the larger performative process by which the female sadhus I worked with create their scripturality in *satsang*. Both the repetitive chanting of the *dohā* and the *caupāī*, and the repetition of the *samput*, evoke feelings of *bhakti* to *bhagvān* from the participants. At the same time, though, these performance features serve as mnemonic devices by which means the female sadhus learn and memorize, and as such, embody the written text. By hearing the different meters of the verses in the *Rāmāyan*, and more precisely, by constantly repeating the *samput in the company of others*, instead of reading the text alone and silently, the female sadhus individually and collectively bring the text into their hearts.

Along with *samput* recitation, the musical instruments the female sadhus play during the recitations, including their synchronized hand clapping, enhance the devotional mood of the participants and of the performance. As with the *samput*, the instrumental accompaniment integrated into the recitation, too, contributes to the overall scriptural process whereby the female sadhus create a relationship with the text. Tulsigiri, for instance, depending on what instruments are available, likes to play the drums and/or

the cymbals, while the other sadhus recite from the printed text. In doing so, she creates a steady rhythm of approximately three beats per second that undergirds the verbal performance. While sounding the instruments, Tulsigiri shuts her eyes and occasionally sways her body back and forth to the rhythm she creates with her instruments.

Sometimes, she drops the instruments and raises her hands in the air, chanting several times, “*jai ho, bhagvān kī.*” Despite being non-literate, Tulsigiri internalizes the *Rāmāyan* through means of musical accompaniment and the repetition of the *samput*. As with translation, these performance strategies arouse more than just devotion to a genderless and formless, *bhagvān*; they also elicit devotion to the written text. It is also important to emphasize that translation, the *samput*, and instrumental accompaniment constitute a form of textual study for the female sadhus I worked with. In sum, by the means of multiple performance features, the sadhus’ *Rāmāyan satsangs* become, to use Graham’s words, “a synaesthetic experience of communal worship” (1987, 163). Through performance, non-literate and semi-literate female sadhus not only create a relationship with the written text, but also situate themselves within the literate tradition of Tulsidas.

IIB. Beyond Graham’s Scriptural Model: A Tulsigiri’s *Rāmāyan bhajan* Performance

The Tulsi *Rāmāyan* tradition encompasses more than the written text for the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with. As I said earlier, the sadhus often frame their *Rāmāyan* recitations with the singing of *mantras* and *bhajans*, and many of these *bhajans* are equated with the written text of Tulsidas. Indeed, most female sadhus do not distinguish their oral and/or performed versions of the *Rāmāyan* from Tulsidas’ written text; to them, it’s simply the same “*Rāmāyan.*” The identification of their *bhajans* with

the written text represents, then, a strategy by which the female sadhus stretch the idea of the text beyond the written word (cf. Flueckiger and Sears 1991; Flueckiger 1991a).

Their practices challenge not only Graham's model of scripturality, but also traditional western ideas of scripture as the written word, for the sung and spoken word, too, constitute "texts" that the sadhus also perceive and experience as Tulsidas' written text.

Another event that made even more explicit to me how Rajasthani female sadhus conceptualize the idea of the text was Tulsigiri's *Rāmāyan bhajan* performance, which occurred on May 25, 2005. On the day that I recorded this performance Tulsigiri had been helping Mayanath prepare for her upcoming *bhaṇḍāra* (feasting festival for ascetics) in celebration of the *samādhi* of her late guru-brother, Shambhu Nath.¹⁹⁶ In the early afternoon, after we finished a meal of vegetables and bread that Mayanath's 'assistant,' Baldevgiri, had made for devotees assisting in the *bhaṇḍāra*'s preparations, Tulsigiri and I decided to take some respite from the day's activities and sat under the large mango tree that stands before Mayanath's ashram/temple. I thought this would be a good time to talk with Tulsigiri about her practices, so I took out my tape-recorder from my bag and placed it next to us. "Is it running," Tulsigiri asked. "Not yet, *māi rām*. Shall I turn it on?" I replied. "Yes. Turn it on. I have a *bhajan* for you," said Tulsigiri. I half-jokingly asked her, "Is this a *bhajan* about sadhus?" to which Tulsigiri responded, "Absolutely. It's about sadhus." This is the *bhajan* Tulsigiri sang under the mango tree:

[Ram speaks]: 'It's not your mistake, mother [Kaikeyi].'
'It's not your mistake, mother.'

[Ram speaks to Lakshman]: 'The one who has made the whole world
has written our destiny in this way, brother.'

¹⁹⁶ *Samādhi* is a common term in the renunciant discourses of the sadhus with whom I worked. In their use of the term, *samādhi* refers both to the (metaphysical) phenomenon in which the soul (*ātma*) of a holy person leaves his/her physical body—i.e., death—as well as the shrine in which his/her remains are kept in order that devotees are able to receive the sacred power of the interred holy person.

[Ram speaks to Kaikeyi]: 'It's not your mistake, mother.'
 'It's not your mistake, mother.'

[Ram speaks to Lakshman]: 'It's just the fruit of our *karm* [actions], beloved brother.'
 'It's just the fruit of our *karm*, beloved brother.'

[Ram speaks to Hanuman]: 'Go to Sita in Lanka.'
 'Go to Sita in Lanka.'

'Go to the place where Ravan rules.'
 'Go to the place where Ravan rules.'

'Go to Sita in Lanka.'
 'Go to Sita in Lanka.'

The three of them [Ram, Sita, and Laksman] left the palace
 The three of them left the palace

Ram is alone, Brother

[Ram says to Hanuman]: 'Go to Sita in Lanka.'
 'Go to the place where Ravan rules.'

Sita says: 'Ram and Lakshman are wandering in the forest.'
 'He hasn't found me yet';
 'I have no happiness without him.'

Ram is alone.

[Unclear]

Without her son, Mother Sumitra shall beat her head
 To the ground and die.

Both brothers are wandering alone in the forest.

Today, the brothers have fallen into trouble.

Ram and Lakshman are alone.

Ram is alone, brother.

[Ram says to Lakshman]: 'O beloved brother, I keep yelling for Sita.'
 'O beloved brother, I keep yelling for Sita.'

Ram takes permission from Kasaulya to leave [for the forest]

[Ram says]: 'My father has left his breath.'
 'O Lakshman, our father has left his breath.'

'Thanks, Mother Kaikeyi for having us sent to the forest.'
 'Mother Kaikeyi had us sent to the forest.'

‘It’s not your fault, Mother Kaikeyi.’
 ‘It’s not your fault, Mother’

[Ram says to Lakshman]: ‘It’s just the fruit of our *karm*, beloved brother.’
 ‘It’s just the fruit of our *karm*, beloved brother.’

After killing Ravan, Ram returned to the palace
 Ram returned to the palace
 Everyone has lit lamps [*dīpak*] in their homes [to welcome Ram]

After killing Ravan, Ram has returned to the palace
 Ram returned to the palace
 Everyone has lit lamps in their homes

Mother Kausalya offers *ārti* [worship] to Ram
 Mother Kausalya offers *ārti* to Ram

Tulsidas has sung this [story].¹⁹⁷

This *bhajan* narrates many events from the larger Ram story, and the signature line (*cāp*) at the end of the composition, that is, the line signifying (possible) authorship, indicates that this Ram story belongs to the Hindi tradition of Tulsidas. To Tulsigiri, however, this is not just a *bhajan* about the *Rāmāyan*, it is the *Rāmāyan*. The conversation Tulsigiri and I had after her performance illustrates her view that this *bhajan* is equivalent to Tulsidas’ written text:

[A]ntoinette: *Māī rām*, is this from the *Rāmāyan*?

[T]ulsi[G]iri: Yes. This is the *Rāmāyan*.

A: Is it a *dohā* or *bhajan*?

TG: It’s a *bhajan*. It’s what Tulsidasji himself wrote. Tulsidasji wrote the *Rāmāyan*, right? He wrote the whole *Rāmāyan*. He was uneducated [*anpaḍ*] when he wrote it. He was uneducated. Even though he was uneducated, Tulsidasji wrote the whole *Rāmāyan*.

A: Tulsidas was uneducated?

TG: Yes. He was uneducated like me.

A: Like you.

¹⁹⁷ The transcription of this *bhajan* appears in Appendix B.

TG: Yes. I am uneducated. But, through the grace of my guru, I have been able to learn things. So, the *Rāmāyan*, I mean, Tulsidasji wrote the *Rāmāyan* in seven months. He was not educated. He couldn't read; he couldn't write. But God made him learn. God transformed his mind [*prabhu dimāg baḍā huā uskā*].

A: Uh huh.

TG: So, Tulsidasji was able to write. And Valmiki, he was an Adivasi [tribal]. He, too, was uneducated. But Valmiki composed the whole *Rāmāyan*.

A: O.k., Valmiki was uneducated like Tulsidas.

TG: He was uneducated.

A: But [they] were able to write the *Rāmāyan* by the grace of God? Is that what you're saying, *māī rām*?

TG: Yes. Tulsidasji could read and write because of God's grace. Before this [happened], he was uneducated. Now he could read and write. There are lots of *sants* like me [i.e., who are uneducated but who learned by God's grace]. From the grace of God and of the guru, we have received knowledge.

A: Okay, and the *bhajan* you just sang, you're saying that

TG: It's the *Rāmāyan*. What Tulsidasji wrote, that became the *Rāmāyan*.



Tulsigiri Maharaj sings a *Rāmāyan bhajan* while bundling braches for the ashram's cows' feed. Photo by Antoinette DeNapoli.

This conversation depicts, as scholars have argued, that the *Rāmāyan* tradition is a heterogeneous narrative/textual tradition (cf. Richman 1991). Tulsigiri herself clearly identifies two different *Rāmāyan* traditions by invoking the names of Tulsidas and Valmiki, implying her understanding that each of these poet-saints (*sants*) composed his own version of the Ram story. The emphasis she places on the fact that Valmiki and Tulsidas “wrote” the *Rāmāyan* indicates that Tulsigiri perceives their texts as *written* textual traditions. At the same time, Tulsigiri associates her own *bhajan*, which she learned from her guru, with the text that Tulsidasji himself wrote. In this way, Tulsigiri pushes the boundaries of the text beyond the written word. And yet, it is with the written word that Tulsigiri equates her own performance. Notice that at the start of our conversation I ask Tulsigiri if this *bhajan* is “from” the *Rāmāyan*; she responds that it is the *Rāmāyan*, emphasizing that her song represents what Tulsidas himself wrote. Intrigued by the implicit association she makes between her performance and the written text, I further ask Tulsigiri for clarification if what she sang is a *bhajan* or a *dohā*. My question, however, reflects the fact that I, the analyst, distinguish between the performed and written versions of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*. This simply is not the case for Tulsigiri. After explaining that her performance constitutes a *bhajan* and not a *dohā*, Tulsigiri makes explicit several times throughout the course of our conversation that what she sings is, in fact, the same *Rāmāyan* that Tulsidasji wrote.

Tulsidas’ writing of the *Rāmāyan* is not the only detail Tulsigiri emphasizes in her discourse. She also underscores that Tulsidas and Valmiki were uneducated at the time that they composed their texts. How is it possible for two individuals who can neither read nor write to compose a literary text? According to Tulsigiri, the grace of God and

the guru enabled both Tulsidas and Valmiki to become literate, and thus, to compose their *Rāmāyans*. It is important to underscore this detail of Tulsigiri's narrative for several reasons. First, most of the female sadhus I worked with understand that Tulsidas, specifically, was non-literate; and second, Tulsidas' non-literacy is not part of the narrative(s) of Tulsidas' life that have been told in standard devotional hagiographies (cf. Lutgendorf 1991, 6). On this issue Philip Lutgendorf writes:

...It is thought that Tulsi himself...underwent a period of traditional Sanskrit training education, probably in Banares, and then returned to his native village to marry and live the life of a householder until a personal crisis caused him to renounce home and family. His subsequent wanderings took him to Ayodhya, Ram's birthplace and capital, and later to Banares, where he settled, composed most of his major works, and died at an advanced age—probably in 1623 (Lutgendorf 1991a, 6).

Why, then, is Tulsidas' and Valmiki's non-literacy significant to Tulsigiri's discussion about the *Rāmāyan*? Because, like them, she, too, is non-literate. As Tulsigiri tells me, "Tulsidasji was uneducated like me," and as with Tulsidas and Valmiki, Tulsigiri has been able, as she implies, to become "literate" in the (Tulsi) *Rāmāyan* by virtue of the grace of her guru. "From the grace of God," explains Tulsigiri, "we [non-literate sadhus and *sants*] have been able to receive knowledge," including "literate" knowledge, or knowledge of written sacred texts. Not only Tulsigiri, but other female sadhus also perform similar narratives of literacy, and occasionally invoke Tulsidas' example in doing so. As I explained earlier in the chapter, non- and semi-literate female sadhus like Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Jamuna Bharti understand that their "literacy" stems from the power of two primary sources: their *bhakti* to God and the grace of God/guru. Tulsigiri emphasizes these same themes in her narratives about Tulsidas' and Valmiki's development of literacy as well as in her own narrative of literacy that follows. By telling stories about Tulsidas' and Valmiki's *bhakti* journey to literacy, Tulsigiri, in effect,

constructs her own “literacy.” That is, she uses these *sants*’ lives as a model for the performance of her own narrative of literacy, and thus, creates both her identity and authority as a female ascetic. Moreover, Tulsigiri’s performance of a *bhajan* that she identifies with the written text of Tulsidas allows her to construct herself as “literate” in this *Rāmāyan* tradition.

The Construction of Devotional Asceticism through *Rāmāyan* Performance

But why does Tulsigiri perform this *Rāmāyan bhajan*? One reason is that *bhajan* singing provides a strategy for Tulsigiri to construct her tradition of devotional asceticism. In the same way, the sadhus’ *Rāmāyan* recitation analyzed earlier offers a strategic means for them to create their own form of asceticism. The Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with view singing and storytelling, as well as textual recitation, as a form of asceticism (*tapasya*). In this framework, through their *Rāmāyan* performances of oral/written texts, the female sadhus create and communicate their individual experiences and practices of asceticism as a path of *bhakti*.

Another reason Tulsigiri sings her *bhajan* is to teach me about the lives of sadhus. Tulsigiri’s statement that her *bhajan* represents a song about sadhus suggests that she considers the Ram story to be illustrative of asceticism in some way. To this extent, Tulsigiri’s *bhajan* not only narrates the story of Ram; it also expresses the concepts and values she associates with the path of asceticism. Following our conversation, Tulsigiri explains the *bhajan*’s meaning by narrating her understanding of the Ram story, which, to use Flueckiger’s words (1991b), follows the “narrative grammar” of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*. Tulsigiri emphasizes that after Ram, Sita, and Lakshman were “banished [*vanvās*]” from Ayodhya on account of the manipulations of Kaikeyi, Ram and Lakshman’s stepmother,

they went to live in the forest (*van*) amongst “the sadhus and *sants*.” While Tulsigiri does not say that Ram, Sita, and Lakshman lived as sadhus in the forest, her association of the Ram story with asceticism seems to indicate that their banishment from the palace to the forest marks the transition, albeit temporary, from householder to sadhu.¹⁹⁸ Not only that, the time Tulsigiri spends discussing Ram’s and Lakshman’s behaviors as forest-dwellers also suggests her underlying perception that their actions exemplify a life of asceticism.

For example, Tulsigiri stresses that Ram and Lakshman “served [*sevā karnā*]” the sadhus of the forest by destroying the demons (*rakṣas*), including Shurpanakha, Ravan’s sister, who tormented them night and day. Her narrative emphasis creates selfless service as an ascetic value. Importantly, Tulsigiri’s concentration on service indexes another concept integral to the female sadhus’ renunciator discourses—that of duty (*kartavya*). In Chapter Three, we explored duty as a salient narrative theme through which the female sadhus construct gendered experiences of asceticism. In these narratives, the female sadhus’ use of the term duty predominantly pivots on a sense of duty to God, on account of which they renounce their householder lives and take up a life of asceticism. Tulsigiri’s understanding of duty in the context of her *Rāmāyan* discourse, however, has a much wider connotation than simply duty to the divine. Here, duty also involves service to the world, which, the female sadhus consider as a manifestation of God.

Many female sadhus use the words service and duty interchangeably in their renunciator discourses and performances; they often speak about selfless service as a form of renunciator duty. Despite the fact that, in a Brahmanical framework, the term traditionally implies a sense of obligation, Tulsigiri teaches that duty *as selfless service* to

¹⁹⁸ In both Sanskrit and vernacular literary and oral texts, the forest often symbolizes the abode of ascetics, and by extension, a life of asceticism, whereas the home signifies householdership (cf. Narayan 1989; Olivelle 1992, 1995; Gold 1988, 1995).

the world should emerge out of a feeling of “pure love [*śuddh prem*]” for humankind, rather than from a sense of necessity and obligation. As Tulsigiri says, “My *sevā* to the world is a *sevā* of love. This is the *sevā* of the sadhus.” Through her performance Tulsigiri pushes the Brahminic concept of duty in a new *bhakti* framework of service and love, and as such, emphasizes duty as a renunciant value. To Tulsigiri, duty also implies other concepts which she uses in her discourses, such as devotion, love (*prem*), and faith (*śraddh*). These attitudes, along with duty, constitute the female sadhus’ vision of ascetic piety, or more broadly, the ascetic path. Ram’s, Lakshman’s and Sita’s service to the sadhus, thus, illustrates a duty to serve and love everyone and offers a model of ascetic piety for the Rajasthani female sadhus’ construction of devotional asceticism.

Like Tulsigiri, most of the Rajasthani female sadhus emphasize the tripartite concepts of duty, devotion, and, by extension, piety with respect to God, family, and society in their Tulsi *Rāmāyan* performances. Gangagiri, for example, frequently speaks about Ram’s duty both to his family and his kingdom, and in doing so, constructs him as a model or “ideal human [*puruṣottam manuṣ*],” and more specifically, as a model householder. Moreover, Ram’s duty, according to Gangagiri, is inextricably linked to his underlying devotion to his father, King Dasharatha. As Gangagiri explained in one *satsang*, “Out of love, Ram kept the word [*vacan*] of his father, leaving his kingdom, Ayodhya.” Furthermore, Gangagiri suggests that Ram’s duty *cum* his devotion create his piety, i.e., his virtuosity as a dutiful and devoted son, husband, brother, prince/king, and devotee of God. Gangagiri often uses the term *maryādā* (lit., custom, convention, and/or correct behavior)¹⁹⁹ in her representations of Ram to underscore his piety.

¹⁹⁹ See McGregor (1993, 796).

Significantly, Gangagiri often invokes this virtuous image of Ram *qua* householder in contexts where she instructs her devotees to follow their duty according to their caste and stage of life. Recall the vignette at the beginning of this chapter in which Gangagiri tells my assistant Manvendra that he must marry and become a householder. Her use of the imperative verbal form “to have to marry [*śādī karnā paḍtā hai*],” implying duty, has a double implication: through the act of marriage, as Gangagiri suggests, Manvendra not only upholds his duty to his family, including his ancestors, but also to the society. Manvendra’s mother, Shiv Kunwar, similarly suggests that marriage constitutes a socio-familial duty in her statement that “one should flourish through one’s children.” To explain her point further Gangagiri recites a popular Hindi proverb:

There should never be a mother like Bharat’s mother, Kaikeyi. There should never be a father like Hiranyakash who made [his son] Prahlad suffer. One should not have brothers like the Kauravas, because they made the Pandavas suffer. And one should never have a guru like Visvamitra.

Gangagiri’s performative use of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*, however, extends beyond her representation of Ram as a model householder. Like Tulsigiri, Gangagiri, too, performs oral and written versions of the *Rāmāyan* as a strategy for expressing her perception that Ram, Lakshman, and Sita were model *sadhus*. While she does not explicitly refer to them as ascetics, Gangagiri implies this notion in her emphasis that these three characters lived as *brahmacārīs*, that is, as celibate students, during their forest exile.²⁰⁰ In this way, she suggests that their celibate lifestyle approximates a lifestyle of (devotional) asceticism.

²⁰⁰ Philip Lutgendorf describes a community of devotees with whom he worked, who perform a counterpoint to the popular view that Ram lead a life of celibacy during his exile with Sita in the forest (Lutgendorf 1991b). According to Lutgendorf, in the *rasik sampradāy*, or “connoisseur tradition,” of the Ram devotees whose practices he discusses, their performances emphasize the sensual, and more specifically, sexual life of Ram and Sita in the forest. Lutgendorf writes: “Adherents of the ... *rasik sampradāy* viewed Rām not only as the supreme manifestation of divinity but also as the ultimate embodiment of erotic sentiment, and focused on his passionate union with his eternal feminine energy (*śakti*) in the form of Sita (Lutgendorf 1991b, 218).

But there is more. Gangagiri suggests that Ram's Sita's, and Lakshman's way of life represents (a form of) asceticism in her emphasis that sadhus should model their own lives upon that of Ram's. In her words: "Ram was a peon [*caprāsī*] of God; he served the world. Sadhus, too, should be like Ram."

For instance, Gangagiri often speaks about the ways in which Ram went to the aid of Sugriva, Kīṣkindhā's monkey-king.²⁰¹ Recall that in the *Rāmāyan* recitation discussed earlier, Gangagiri spends most of her time translating, commenting on, and explaining the episode that deals with Ram's and Sugriva's encounter, particularly the scene in which Ram promises to avenge Sugriva's pain and humiliation by killing his elder brother Bali, who kidnapped Sugriva's wife and outcasted him to the forest. In her narration of this event, Gangagiri usually underscores that Ram's assistance to Sugriva constitutes not only an act of mercy (*dāyā*) and love (*prem*), but also part of his duty to ease the pain and suffering of others. That is, Gangagiri understands that Ram's duty is to serve and protect others. This requisite hardly diminishes when Ram is exiled from Ayodhya to the forest. On the contrary, Ram's duty to serve and protect becomes heightened in the forest in his service to and protection of Sita, the sadhus, the monkey-king Sugriva (and his subjects), Vibhishan, Ravan's brother, and other divine and mortal beings.

Ram's duty, of course, must be understood in relation to his caste—he is a warrior (*kṣatriya*) and a prince, and thus, serving and protecting others is the traditional practice of warriors, and especially of warrior-kings whose duty is to serve and protect everyone in their kingdom. Caste is of no issue to Gangagiri, however. She frequently approximates sadhus to "brave warriors" who "fight on the battlefield of *bhakti*" (see chapter four). Not only this, on many occasions Gangagiri has said that "A sadhu is the

²⁰¹ In Hindi, Gangagiri says: "*rām sugrīv kī bahut sevā kī; uski madad kī.*"

king of all of India” or “Sadhus and kings have the same rights [*adhikār*],” implying that sadhus and warriors represent two different types of public servants. Female sadhus like Gangagiri express this view in their statements that “We are the beggars [*bhikārī*] of God, and our duty is to serve others as a form of God.”

Both sadhus and warriors involve themselves with world, but they do so in different ways. For Rajasthani female sadhus, worldly engagement is a spiritual duty and commitment, and hence, a fundamental renunciatory value.²⁰² Although there is no specific word the sadhus use to express worldly engagement, one term in their vocabulary that signifies this idea is a term we have already discussed—*sevā*. Service requires involvement with others and concern for their pain and suffering. Another term on which the female sadhus draw to describe Ram’s worldly engagement is “*milnā*,” (“meeting with others”). The female sadhus frequently emphasize that Ram “meets others” in the forest, suggesting that he became deeply involved in their lives. Gangagiri’s standard short-hand phrase for describing that Ram helped Sugriv win back his kingdom and his dignity is “Ram meets with Sugriv in the forest [*rām sugrīv se milte hain*].”

It is significant that in the *Rāmāyan* performances in which she participates, Gangagiri emphasizes the behavior of the warrior princes, Ram and Lakshman, rather than that of the sadhus/sages living in the forest (though she has equated herself with the female sadhu Shabari on several occasions). By invoking Ram as a model sadhu, Gangagiri challenges the more dominant Brahmanical representations of sadhus as withdrawn and aloof from the world. From a Brahmanical perspective, the reason sadhus, sages, ṛsis, and other holy people enter the forest is to escape from the world itself; the

²⁰² It is, however, necessary to point out that sadhus have participated in militaristic forms of social service. They have been recruited by kings to fight in wars, and they have formed their own militias to protect minority movements. See van der Veer (1988) and Gross (1991). See also chapter four of this dissertation.

forest represents a trope for the key Brahmanical values of withdrawal, detachment, and solitude. Yet, Gangagiri's performances create asceticism in an alternative way to the Brahmanical model as a path of spiritual worldly engagement.

Gangagiri's emphasis on Ram's worldly engagement signals another important value for the female sadhus' tradition of devotional asceticism—the formation of connections and relationships with others. In the period that Ram and Lakshman roamed the forest in search of Sita, they created many friendships and alliances with numerous divine, mortal, and animal beings and/or communities. Most of the Rajasthani female sadhus emphasize the connections and relationships Ram and Lakshman formed with others; they consider the involved practice of relationality to be relevant for their own ascetic lives. The sadhus use several different words in their expression of this concept such as “*samband karnā*,” (lit., “to make a relationship”), “*yog karnā*,” (“to make a connection”) and more often “*mitratā karnā*,” (“to make a friendship”). Female sadhus often say that “Ram made a friendship with Sugriv” or “Ram formed a partnership/alliance with Vibhisan.” Many female sadhus understand that asceticism involves, indeed requires, creating spiritual partnerships with others, particularly with disciples and devotees, and the sadhus themselves often mark these bonds by addressing those whom they serve and protect in the familial/kin terms of ‘brother,’ ‘sister,’ ‘aunty,’ and ‘child.’ The sadhus often addressed me as either a “sister [*dīdī*]” or a “daughter [*betī/betiyan*].” Through their *Rāmāyan* performances, then, the female sadhus construct asceticism as a path of spiritual connection with others, divine, human, or animal. The *bhakti* representation the sadhus create by means of their performances provides an

alternative discourse on asceticism to the Brahmanical textual model, which primarily emphasizes values such as separation and isolation.

The female sadhus' construction of asceticism as service, worldly engagement, and connection is evident not only in what they emphasize, but also in how they perform the *Rāmāyan*. The structure of their performances features a conceptual pattern of separation, engagement, and connection, a pattern that follows the structure of the written text. In their narrative and song performances, for instance, many female sadhus begin with the banishment episode. Tulsigiri's *bhajan* starts in such a manner. In the first line Ram speaks, "It's not your mistake, mother [Kaikeyi]; it's not your mistake," signaling the episode in which Kaikeyi has Ram, Sita, and Lakshman banished to the forest on the basis of her desire to make her own son, Bharat (Ram's half-brother), the king of Ayodhya. Ram voices a similar statement to his brother Lakshman in the next few lines. As the structure develops, the *bhajan* describes Ram's interaction and relationship with Hanuman, and by extension, with Sugriva's monkey-kingdom. He instructs Hanuman to "Go to Sita in Lanka...where Ravan rules." After some repetition of various episodes leading to the banishment scene, the *bhajan* finishes with Ram's destruction of Ravan and his return with Sita and Lakshman to the kingdom of Ayodhya. Thus, the structure of their performed and written versions of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* shapes and creates the ways in which female sadhus construct and experience devotional asceticism. That is, although the path traditionally symbolizes the breaking away from the world, the female sadhus reinterpret asceticism in a manner that allows them to foster relationships with others, while remaining detached (I speak more about this issue below in my analysis of Gangagiri's *Gītā* performance).

In sum, the Rajasthani female sadhus' *Rāmāyan* textual performances provide a rhetorical strategy for creating intimate relationships with their written sacred texts, and more broadly, with the literate Hindi tradition of Tulsidas. Despite their own literacy levels, these sadhus construct themselves as "literate" in this textual tradition through their reconceptualization of the idea of the text. The sadhus' practices demonstrate that scripturality depends not on the written text as Graham suggests, but rather on what they think the text means. Besides their scripturality, textual performance enables the female sadhus to construct asceticism as a *bhakti* path of selfless service, worldly engagement, and spiritual relationships. Is, however, the phenomenon by which these non- and semi-literate sadhus perform both their relationships to the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* tradition as well as their form of asceticism exclusive to female sadhus? How might non- and/or semi-literate male sadhus construct relationships with their texts and, in the process, asceticism?

III. "The world knows it as a book, but the *Rāmāyan* is really the bhajans of Tulsiji": An Evening of *Rāmāyan Satsang* with Baldevgiri

In this next section, I analyze the *Rāmāyan bhajan* performance of a non-literate sadhu, Baldevgiri. I focus on Baldevgiri's performance here because his example is typical of both non- and semi-literate male sadhus' conceptualization of the idea of the text as well as the ways the male sadhus I worked with construct asceticism as a path of detachment and knowledge. I recorded Baldevgiri's *bhajan* in March of 2005 at Mayanath's Gogunda ashram.

When Baldevgiri invited me and my field assistant Manvendra Singh to the Bholenath ashram he manages on behalf of Mayanath for an evening of *bhajan satsang*, I

did not know what to expect. Aware of my research interest in the practices of sadhus, Baldevgiri had made similar invitations for *bhajan satsang* to me a number of times before; these invitations, however, never materialized, as Baldevgiri was either engrossed in organizing Mayanath's upcoming *bhaṇḍāra*, or simply too busy serving devotees. The Gogunda ashram is a chaotic place. Located on the thoroughfare that connects Rajasthan to Delhi, and directly opposite a site where Udaipuri city-dwellers riding in government-operated buses arrive in Gogunda village daily, the ashram attracts fifty to one-hundred people every day (and twice as many during the holy days). These pilgrims come to take the *darśan* of Bholenath and a host of other deities in the adjoining temple, as well as to request personal religious services from Baldevgiri.

Under such circumstances, Baldevgiri cannot spend lengthy periods of time with any single individual, including me. On most days, after staying up to six hours at the ashram, during which time I observed Baldevgiri's schedule and interactions with the pilgrims and locals consisting of sadhus and householders who inundated the ashram, I left without having received from him the *bhajan* traditions (or religious teachings) I had come for. But at that evening of *bhajan satsang* to which Baldevgiri had invited me, he emphasized, "Few people will be here. We'll sing *bhajans*, lots of them. So come."

That evening of *satsang* was different from my earlier meetings with Baldevgiri. Three late-middle aged male villagers joined us for the occasion, one of whom came regularly to assist Baldevgiri with maintaining the grounds of the ashram. After the evening meal, which Baldevgiri had prepared, he began to speak about the importance of faith [*śraddhā*] for a religious life. "Faith," Baldevgiri said directly to me, "has brought you here to *jhamburiya kī nāl* [the name of the water source on which the ashram was

built]; faith that tonight we would have *satsang*. So, you have come here with faith in your heart.” Baldevgiri’s discussion on faith, however, quickly metamorphosed into a *Rāmāyan bhajan* performance, as the following statement he made to me foreshadows:

Because of faith you have come here [tonight]. This faith is about the *paramātma* [i.e., the God-self within every human being]. Look, just as Tulsiji who composed the *Rāmāyan*, he, too, had faith. You’ve heard of the *Rāmāyan*, right?... We Indians read [*bānchnā*] the *Rāmāyan* written by Tulsiji. Big scholars [*vidvān*], educated pandits, and educated people [read the *Rāmāyan*]. Like, at [some] ashrams, there are even those *kathāvācaks* who drive [i.e., explain] the meaning [of the text]. O.k., this whole *Rāmāyan* is a song [*gāthā*]; it’s a song about life—your life, his [motioning toward Manvendra Singh] life, my life, everyone’s [life]. [Baldevgiri then sings this “song about life.”]

Baldevgiri frames his teachings about faith by defining the concept in terms of that which he perceives Tulsidas to have had experienced in his own life. By mentioning the name of the legendary poet-saint, though, Baldevgiri immediately associates him with the text he composed, the *Rāmāyan*. In his description of the *Rāmāyan*, Baldevgiri explains that “big scholars, educated pandits, and educated people,” including the *kathāvācaks*, i.e., professional storytellers on the *Rāmāyan*, read and study the text. But he also states that “this whole *Rāmāyan* is a song...about...everyone’s life.” To Baldevgiri, the Tulsī *Rāmāyan* constitutes not only a literate text that is read by the educated and the elite, but also a song [*gāthā*] that is sung by “everyone,” including uneducated individuals like himself. In our conversations, Baldevgiri repeatedly characterized himself as an “unlettered” [*anparḍ*] man; he never went to school and learned how to read “books.” His representation of the *Rāmāyan* as both a “book” and a “song” composed by Tulsidas therefore is significant. Despite his being, like most of the female sadhus, non-literate, Baldevgiri carefully ties himself back to this textual tradition by singing the *bhajans* he understands “Tulsiji” to have written as a *bhakt* of *bhagvān*.

The *bhajans* Baldevgiri attributes to Tulsidas are not found in the written text. And even though its refrain contains the names of the text's central characters, Sita and Ram, the particular *bhajan* Baldevgiri sang for our evening *satsang* does not depict any of the stories or narrative episodes from Tulsi's text. Rather, it illustrates the series of events that led to Tulsi's composition of the *Rāmāyan*. In this respect, Baldevgiri's *bhajans* represent a kind of meta-*Rāmāyan*, that is, devotional songs that move beyond—or perhaps along with—the traditional *Rāmāyan* narrative. Composed in Hindi or Avadhi, these *Rāmāyan bhajans* derive from an oral tradition associated with the life story of “the almost mythical figure of Tulsidas” (Flueckiger 1991b, 49), which probably developed around the literate Hindi tradition of the *Rāmāyan*. Neither the oral origins of these *bhajans*, nor the fact that their themes extend well beyond the narrative grammar of Tulsi's written text, however, diminishes their “literary” status as *Rāmāyan* to Baldevgiri. From his perspective, these *bhajans* represent the same devotional songs which Tulsiji himself sang to God and later on composed in a “book” that “the world knows as [the] *Rāmāyan*.” Baldevgiri himself associates the *bhajans* Tulsi sang with the text he also wrote:

Tulsiji sang a lot of *bhajans* [to *bhagvān*]. He sang so many *bhajans*; he took the name of God a lot. So, the *Rāmāyan* was made by Tulsiji in this way. I mean, he sang so many, so many *bhajans*, wrote these songs about *bhagvān* down [that] he [eventually] composed a *śāstra* [authoritative text dealing with many topics], the *Rāmāyan*. He composed such a large book. It was such a large volume. Today the world calls [this book] the *Rāmāyan*.

Baldevgiri's concept of the *Rāmāyan* is much broader than the story of the adventures of Prince Ram of Ayodhya. For him, as for the Chhattisgarhi women of the informal *Rāmāyan mandalī* groups discussed by Flueckiger, the text functions as a “conceptual referent.” That is, it represents “a more loosely defined tradition,” and in

Baldevgiri's case, a tradition of *bhajans* composed Tulsidas (Flueckiger 1991b, 53 and 49). Although the *bhajan* Baldevgiri performed for *satsang* describes Tulsi's own personal journey toward the divine, it repeatedly alludes back to the literate tradition of Tulsidas via its refrain: "Tulsi says, speak [the names of] Sita and Ram and worship them." Through the means of the conceptual associations produced by the divine names of Sita and Ram, the *bhajan* evokes Tulsi's *Rāmāyan*. But what does a *bhajan* about Tulsi's life have to do with the topic that initially spawned this *Rāmāyan satsang*—that of faith?

In Baldevgiri's view, the pivotal theme of the *bhajan* is faith in God, a characteristic he attributes not only to Tulsidas, *bhagvān's bhakt*, but also to me, whom he perceived as a potential disciple (*cheli*). In his own words, "faith has brought [me]" to the ashram that evening for *satsang*, and by extension, to God, the remembrance of whom constitutes the undergirding purpose of the *satsangs* of all sadhus. Similarly, according to Baldevgiri, just as faith empowers me to meet with the sadhus and write a "book" about their lives and practices, it also empowered Tulsiji to sing *bhajans* to *bhagvān* and compose the *Rāmāyan*. But whether exemplified by a student or a saint, Baldevgiri understands faith in terms of a spiritual experience of journeying to the divine, and he sings the *bhajan* as a strategy with which to illustrate his understanding of the concept with respect to Tulsi's own spiritual movement from a state of disbelief to that of belief in God. Following is the *bhajan* that Baldevgiri performed for our *satsang*:

[Refrain]

Tulsi says, speak [the names of] Sita and Ram and worship them!

A corpse was floating in the rain-flooded river ahead, Oh my Rama.
Tulsi grabbed [the corpse] and reached the far bank [of the river].

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them!

Tulsi circumambulated all four sides of the palace [where his wife resided],
But he found no door anywhere; he found no door anywhere, Oh my Rama.

Tulsi grabbed the snake and entered [the palace].

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them!

“My Lord, why don’t you love God (*hari*) in the way that you love me,” [said
Tulsi’s wife].

[Tulsi’s wife said]: “Your life will improve, my Lord.”

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.

“Woman, you are the mother of *dharm* and have told me the truth today,” [said
Tulsi].

“Woman, you are the mother of *dharm* and have told me the truth today.”

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.²⁰³

How does this “*Rāmāyan*” *bhajan* illustrate the message of the power of faith in God? It begins with Tulsi’s infatuation with his wife, but ends with his faith in God. The popular legend about Tulsi’s life as a married householder, to which Baldevgiri’s *bhajan* refers, has been generally understood, as Lutgendorf notes, to be a story about his

²⁰³ The Hindi transcription is as follows:

sītā rām kaho nā re bhajo tulsī kahā (refrain)

*agam disā ek nadiyā bahat hai/
murdā jāt bahe mere rām/1*

*vāhe to pakaḍ tulsī/
pār to bhayo nā re//2*

*chautarphā phirhī bhavan ke darvāzo nahī pāyo rī/
vāhe to pakaḍ tulsī mel to padhārā re//3*

*jītnā het prabhu mose kinhā itnā hari se kyon nā kiyā/
tumhārā bhalā ho jātā//4*

*tū triyā merī dharm kī mātā/
tūne jnān batāyo rī/5*

infatuation with his wife (Lutgendorf 1991, 6). In framing his performance of the *bhajan*, Baldevgiri suggests this idea by telling the audience that Tulsi loved his wife “beyond the normal limit.” However, in his representation of Tulsi’s behavior, Baldevgiri emphasizes faith, not infatuation. He explains,

BDG: Look, Tulsiji who made the *Rāmāyan*, right, he had a wife. He loved her so much, beyond the [normal] limit, in fact [*had se zyādā*]. [Directs his comments to Antoinette] O.k., imagine your husband. Do you have a husband? [Audience begins to laugh]

A: No.

BDG: No? Where did he go? [More laughter from the audience]

A: Who, my husband?

BDG: Yes, your husband? Where did he go?

A: I don’t have a husband, Maharaj.

BDG: You haven’t made a husband yet? All right, you haven’t married and therefore you don’t have a husband [Antoinette confirms his statement with the response, “Yes.”] Well, Tulsiji made a wife...He married; he had so much faith in her that he thought, “Whatever happens, she is my wife.” Do you understand? Tulsi made a *bhajan* about this [experience].

Although he does not explicitly refer to Tulsi’s experience as one of infatuation, what Baldevgiri wants me and the rest of the audience to understand is that faith in God should be as powerful and all-consuming an experience as that of infatuation with one’s spouse; an experience of love (*prem*) “beyond the [normal] limit.” Infatuation in fallible mortals brings disappointment and, as the *bhajan* implies, disillusionment with the world itself.

Baldevgiri highlights the central message of the importance of faith in *bhagvān* through the combined use of performance strategies such as translation and commentary. His expository-like performance style compares to Gangagiri’s in her *Rāmāyan* recitations. In Baldevgiri’s case, he recites either a half or a full line of the *bhajan* and supplements the recitation with a prose translation of the verse, detailed commentary, and/or explanations. The following passage illustrates his method of translation and commentary:

BDG: Tulsiji said [sings the first line of the *bhajan* after the refrain],
agam disā ek nadiyā bahat hai/ murdā jāt bahe mere rām//

What does this mean? *Agam disā*—that is, like, here’s a temple, and there’s a river that flows in front of it. But when it rains a lot, then the river floods, right? O.k., so in that rain-flood river a corpse floating.

vāhe to pakadh tulsī/

He grabbed the dead body and sat on it. How did he sit on it? He sat on top of it. Why did he sit on top of the corpse? [In order to go to] His wife [who] went to her natal home [*pīhar*]. Where did she go?

Audience: To her natal home.

BDG: Yes. She went to the place where she took birth. O.k., Anita [the name by which Baldevgiri calls Antoinette], like, you are in America, but your husband is here [i.e., in India; audience members laugh and Baldevgiri laughs, too]. Just imagine that you have a husband, and he is here [in India]. So, your husband followed you [there to America]. Tulsī said,

agam disā ek nadiyā bahat hai/ murdā jāt bahe mere rām//
vāhe to pakadh tulsī/ pār to bhayo nā re//

O.k., so Tulsī was sitting atop the corpse floating in the rain-flooded river, and what happened? He reached the other side of its bank. [He repeats the refrain of the *bhajan*] “Tulsī says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.” Tulsī reached the other side and saw [his wife’s] palace. It was very big. Anita, imagine that your husband has followed you [Antoinette responds, “Alright”], and you are sitting in your house. Your husband has followed you because he has faith only in you; he thinks, “Whatever happens, she is my wife.” Tulsī thought like this and he said,

chautarphā phirhī bhavan ke darvāzo nahī pāyo rī/

What did he say? Tulsī said he circumambulated [*parikrama karnā*] all four sides of the house. But he didn’t find any door going inside. He couldn’t find any door.

darvāzo nahī pāyo rī/

A snake was hanging from the window [of the palace]... A snake was hanging from the window, but he thought it was a rope. It was a snake, but it looked like a rope to Tulsī. So, he grabbed it.

vāhe to pakadh tulsī mel to padhārā re//

[Repeats refrain], “Tulsī says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.”

What did Tulsī do? He grabbed the snake and entered into the palace... He wasn’t even afraid of the snake; he didn’t think, “Oh ho! This snake will bite me,” because he didn’t see a snake. He saw a rope. But Tulsī did all this because of the faith he had for his wife. He felt, “I have to see her.” His faith, his love [was so strong]. He thought, “She is my wife; I will go there [to the palace] and meet her.”... When his wife saw him, she said, “Oh ho ho! Thank you, husband. You have come at such a [late] time of the night and in a palace where there is no door to enter or to leave. But tell me, how did you come? How did you enter the palace? Tulsī said, “There was a rope hanging from the window. I grabbed the rope and came to you.” [His wife] replied, “But where is there any rope here?” Tulsī looked and saw that no rope was hanging from the window, only a snake. He thought the snake was a rope and entered the palace. What did that wife say to him? She said,

jitnā het prabhu mose kinhā itnā hari se kyon nā kiyā/

She said, “My Lord, why don’t love God [Baldevgiri substitutes “*paramātma*” here for God] in the way that you love me?” This means that Tulsī should have

loved the Lord [*bhagvān*] the way he loved his wife. “Why don’t you love God in the way that you love me?” So, then, Tulsi spoke,

tū triyā merī dharm kī mātā tūne jnān batāyo rī//

[He said], “Woman, you are the mother of *dharm*; you have given me knowledge [today].” What did she give him? Knowledge, I mean, she led Tulsiji on the path of *dharm*. She told him, “Why don’t you love the *paramātma* like you love me? If you love the *paramātma* [as you love me], you shall surely prosper.” She told him his life would be improved [*sudhar ho jānā*] by [worshipping] the feet of God. Look, all of us have come to this earth by wearing the form of a human body. But, before you can get a human body, you have to experience [*bhognā*] birth in 8, 400,000 (*ek lākh caurāsī*) vaginas [*yonī*]. [Baldevgiri’s meaning here is that the *ātma* has to take birth 8, 400,000 times before it reaches the *yonī* of a human female]. We have to take birth 8, 400,000 times before we can be born in the *yonī* of a woman. [Tulsi’s wife] understood [this teaching]. She said, “My Lord, why don’t you love God in the way that you love me.”

tumhārā bhalā ho jātā/

“Your life will improve,” [said Tulsi’s wife]. Tulsi said, “Woman, you are the mother of *dharm*. You have told me the truth [today].” [Baldevgiri repeats the refrain of the *bhajan*], “Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.”... We have to sing God’s [*bhagvān*] *bhajans*. *Bhagvān* is the *paramātma*; the *paramātma* is *bhagvān*.

Antoinette: And the *paramātma/bhagvān* comes in the form of Sita and Ram?
BDG: God comes in all forms. Whether you call it Shiv, Ram, or Krishna, everything is *bhagvān*; it’s all the same. O.k., listen, from that day, Tulsiji started to sing the *bhajans* of *bhagvān*. He sang so many *bhajans*; he took the name of God a lot. So, the *Rāmāyan* was made by Tulsiji in this way [i.e., by doing the *bhajans* of God]. He sang so many, so many *bhajans*, wrote these songs [*gāthāen*] about *bhagvān* down [that] he [eventually] composed a *śāstra*, the *Rāmāyan*.

As this excerpt illustrates, storytelling constitutes a definitive component of Baldevgiri’s performance style. After he recites a line of the *bhajan* text, Baldevgiri gives a brief prose translation; and as further examination of the performance reveals, every translation produces several dramatic moments of storytelling. Baldevgiri alternates *bhajan* recitation with narrative performance throughout the whole event. Despite the absence of musical accompaniment, this pattern of alternation still produces an underlying rhythm to his *satsang*. Moreover, Baldevgiri’s storytelling draws the audience

into the performance by engaging them with the characters, Tulsi and Ratnavali.²⁰⁴ While the story of Tulsi's faith in Ratnavali that Baldevgiri weaves into his *bhajan* performance is based on "[o]ne of the best known legends" from the hagiographical tradition, it is not the audience's *a priori* knowledge of this legend, but rather Baldevgiri's performance of it that transports them into the narrative world (Lutgendorf 1991, 6). Hence, though he calls himself "an uneducated man," through his use of storytelling Baldevgiri implicitly affiliates himself with the "educated" *kathāvācaks* with whom he associates *Rāmāyan* performance, i.e., the professional storytellers who represent Tulsi's *Rāmāyan* in new and innovative ways. As Lutgendorf explains:

The...audience's expectation of a certain constancy of subject matter does not rule out the possibility of artistry on the part of the performer...Certainly we can generalize that for the *kathā* tradition originality and artistry lie not in the story but in the manner of its telling; not in the ideas presented but in the feelings they convey, from the heart of the speaker to that of the listener, *within the community of satsang* (Lutgendorf 1991, 242; italics mine).

Like the *Rāmāyan* pandits with whom Lutgendorf worked, Baldevgiri also demonstrates his artistry as a performer "within the community of *satsang*" through use of two interrelated performance strategies. One is the technique of character personalization—that is, personalizing the characters in the narrative by associating them with members of the audience. For example, Baldevgiri attempts to personalize Tulsi and make his seemingly bewildering behavior understandable to the audience at two key points in his narration of the legend. The first is shortly after Baldevgiri explains that Tulsi "grabbed" a corpse floating in the river, and the second attempt takes place at the point in the story when Tulsi arrives at the palace of his wife's family and, unable to locate any

²⁰⁴ Although Ratnavali is not mentioned by her proper name in Baldevgiri's narrative performance, this is the name under which she is known in the hagiographical tradition associated with the life of Tulsidas. In keeping with the spirit of the hagiographical tradition, and in an attempt to personalize her character for my readers, I too shall refer to Ratnavali by her name, rather than as "Tulsi's wife," the way Baldevgiri refers to her.

entranceway into the building, “snatches” a snake in order to enter the window of her bedroom. Why would Tulsi grab corpses and snatch snakes? As Baldevgiri suggests, out of his intense faith in Ratnavali, whom he loved “beyond the limit.” Yet, a simple explanation of Tulsi’s behavior hardly suffices for Baldevgiri; his goal is for the participants to identify emotionally with the characters in order to engage them in the narrative events. To bring about this result, Baldevgiri personalizes Tulsi by associating him with the husband he asks me to imagine I have (I told him I was unmarried). Here is an example of the way Baldevgiri enacts his performance strategy of character personalization:

Anita...you are in America, but your husband is here [i.e., in India]. Just imagine that you have a husband, and he is here [in India]. So, [just as Tulsi followed his wife to her natal home] your husband followed you [to America].

But Tulsi is not the only character whom Baldevgiri personalizes in this performance; Baldevgiri similarly personalizes Ratnavali via his association of her character with me, intensifying the levels of character identification for me and the other participants. He says,

...Tulsi was sitting atop the corpse floating in the river, and what happened? He reached the other side of its bank...and saw [his wife’s family’s] palace. It was very big. Anita, imagine that [like Tulsi’s wife] you are sitting in your house [in America]. Your husband has followed you because he has so much faith in you; he thinks [to himself], “Whatever happens, she is my wife.” Well, Tulsi thought like this [about his wife].

From Baldevgiri’s standpoint, if I imagine my husband whose faith in me prompts him to go to extreme lengths to reach me at my natal home of America, Tulsi’s behavior then becomes culturally and personally meaningful to me on the basis of the empathy engendered by this process of character personalization. Through the strategy of personalization in narrative performance, Baldevgiri garners and maintains the attention

of his audience in order to take them on an imaginative journey into the narrative world. Baldevgiri's performance style recalls that used by the male sadhu with whom Kirin Narayan worked in Nasik, India (1989). Swamiji, too, integrates personalized storytelling into his performances as a strategy with which to transport his audience into the narrative and evoke empathy. And, as with Swamiji, the responses of laughter from the audience on account of Baldevgiri's personalization indicate his competency as a performer (i.e., his ability to assume responsibility to an audience).²⁰⁵

This particular example of Baldevgiri's personalization of the characters Tulsi and Ratnavali in the context of this *bhajan* performance might seem like a random occurrence; the result of my "foreign" presence affecting his performance style which, here, constitutes an attempt to make a Hindi *bhajan*, and by extension, a Hindi story understandable to a native English speaker. Why else would he have singled me out in this performance if not to engender cultural understanding on my part? While this may have been partially the case since, at the time in which I attended this *satsang*, I had known Baldevgiri only for a period of two months, throughout the course of our interactions at the Bholenath temple in Gogunda I observed Baldevgiri repeatedly personalize his religious performances in multiple ways.

For instance, one day while teaching a small group of householders who were gathered in the shade of the ashram's magnificent mango tree the importance of faith in God (*bhagvān*), Baldevgiri maintained, "We must always have faith [in God] because we never know when our *karm* [actions] will ripen [*pak ho jānā*], and then to whom will we cry for help?" He continued,

²⁰⁵ See Bauman 1977 and 1992.

O.k., like that day when these mangoes here fell on Kesar Bai's face; she was sleeping, and [suddenly] they fell on her face. Why? [Because of the ripening of her] *karm*. Who knows when our *karm* will also fall from the tree? So, [we must] worship the [form of the] guru and say the name of *bhagvān*."

The woman about whom Baldevgiri speaks, Kesar Bai, an elderly devotee of Mayanath who comes regularly for her *darśan* at the Bholenath temple, had been sitting in the audience listening to his teaching and chuckled in response to his statement, as if sorely embarrassed by the unexpected incident to which he refers. Many other members of the audience also laughed, because, like me, they too had witnessed some unripened green mangoes fall from the tree and strike a handful of devotees, including Kesar Bai, on the head. More significantly, their responses to Baldevgiri's anecdote arose as the result of his clever association of the "ripening of *karm*" with Kesar Bai's experience under the mango tree. In this way, Baldevgiri not only personalizes an abstract teaching on *karm* for the participants, but also enables them to understand its poignant message by promoting their identification with what had randomly happened to Kesar Bai. Thus, personalization constitutes one performative means through which Baldevgiri engages his audience either with the messages of religious teachings or, in the context of "*Rāmāyan*" *bhajan* performance, with the lives of characters such as Tulsi and Ratnavali.

Another strategy is Baldevgiri's extended commentaries on particular scenes and/or episodes illustrated by the *bhajan*. His commentaries provide a three-dimensional portrait of the characters by ascribing to them his interpretations of their thoughts, intentions, and motivations in order to make explicit for the audience the underlying the reasons for their actions. Through the means of commentary, Baldevgiri infuses layers of meaning and insight to the lives of the characters otherwise absent (or implicit) in the hagiographical materials (cf. Grierson 1893).

As an example, in his narrative reconstruction of Tulsi's journey to Ratnavali's natal home, Baldevgiri comments that Tulsi was so engrossed in the thought of meeting her that he perceived the poisonous snake hanging from her bedroom window to be simply an innocuous rope. Many members of the audience already know this detail of the legend. Their verbal responses of "Yes, that's right" or nods of the head suggest as much. Nevertheless, Baldevgiri's representation of Tulsi in his performance of this event reconstitutes an old legend in a new way for the participants. His retelling of the incident makes transparent the emotional world of Tulsi's mind by describing the content of his thoughts. Throughout the narrative performance, Baldevgiri repeatedly informs the audience of what Tulsi thinks and feels while he journeys to Ratnavali's palace. Recall the snake scene in which Baldevgiri comments, "[Tulsi] wasn't...afraid of the snake; he didn't think [to himself], 'Oh ho, this snake will bite me,' because he didn't see a snake. He saw a rope."²⁰⁶

Similarly, Baldevgiri carefully shapes the participants' understanding of the meaning of the narrative by telling them how to interpret Tulsi's actions toward Ratnavali. In the course of his narrative performance Baldevgiri consistently describes Tulsi's behavior not in terms of his infatuation for his wife, but rather in terms of his faith in and love for her. Again, commenting on Tulsi's behavior in the context of the snake scene Baldevgiri explains, "...Tulsiji did all this [i.e., maneuver a rain-flooded river by sitting on a floating corpse and scale a palace wall by climbing a snake] because of the

²⁰⁶ The question, of course, becomes, might Tulsi have experienced a similar optical illusion in the case of the corpse he grabbed to cross the river? After the *satsang*, in reviewing my notes on Baldevgiri's *bhajan* performance I wondered if, in his "faith-stricken" state of mind for Ratnavali, Tulsi had seen something other than a corpse floating down the river. When I put my question to Baldevgiri, he replied, "Yes, yes. Tulsi grabbed a corpse, but he saw a raft instead. It was a corpse, o.k., but to him it looked like a raft. His faith in his wife was so strong [that] he saw a raft, not a corpse."

faith he had for his wife. He felt, ‘I have to see her.’ His faith, his love [was so powerful]. He thought, ‘She is my wife; I will go there and meet her.’” With the assistance of Baldevgiri’s commentaries, the audience learns to perceive Tulsi’s story in a new light of faith, and to this extent, understands the story in terms of the spiritual journey Tulsi makes from a state of having faith in Ratnavali to that of having faith in *bhagvān*. Not only his narrative performance, but also Baldevgiri’s commentaries on Tulsi’s behavior, contribute to the vitality and development of the legend, and emotionally engage the participants in the imaginative world of the narrative.

In addition to his three-dimensional portrait of Tulsi, Baldevgiri similarly enlarges Ratnavali’s character through his commentaries and expands upon the image of her depicted in the hagiographical tradition. In his discussion of the various accounts of Tulsi’s life, Lutgendorf cites from this tradition a particular couplet “that has become proverbial” amongst Ram devotees. In this verse Ratnavali offers a “stinging rebuke” to her love-stricken husband:

This passion for my flesh-and-bone-filled body—
had you such for Lord Ram, you’d have no dread of death (Lutgendorf 1991, 6).

How does Baldevgiri interpret this episode as it appears in the *bhajan*? His translation of the verse approximates the meaning intended by the hagiographical tradition’s depiction of the event: “My Lord, why don’t you love God in the way that you love me?” To this translation he adds a brief commentary, “Tulsi should have loved the Lord like he did his own wife,” implying that faith in *bhagvān* is more powerful than faith in humans. However, his commentary that both precedes and follows this translation moves beyond the “stinging” representation of Ratnavali in the hagiographical tradition.

Baldevgiri not only portrays Ratnavali in a more positive light, but he also situates her actions toward Tulsi in a broader religious context.

For example, in his description of the scene in which Ratnavali initially encounters Tulsi, Baldevgiri develops the emotional complexity of her character by attributing various types of feelings to her, such as happiness, gratitude, and surprise. In Baldevgiri's own words:

When his wife saw him, she said, "Oh ho ho! Thank you, husband [for coming here to the palace to see me]. You have come at such a [late] time of the night and in a palace where there is no door to enter or to leave. But tell me, how did you come? How did you enter the palace? Tulsi said, "There was a rope hanging from the window. I grabbed the rope and came to you." She replied, "But where is there any rope here?" Tulsi looked and saw that no rope was hanging from the window, only a snake... What did his wife [then] say to him? She said, "My lord, why don't you love God in the way that you love me?"

In his description of her behavior toward Tulsi, Baldevgiri emphasizes that Ratnavali's speech came on account of her desire to help Tulsi improve his life; that is, Ratnavali wanted to show Tulsi "the path of *dharm*," and hence through the means of her own seemingly rough speech beseeched him to love God (*hari*; *paramātmā*; *bhagvān*) in the way that he loved her. To Baldevgiri, Ratnavali is a compassionate woman and a caring wife. As I said earlier, the hagiographical tradition implies that Ratnavali's caustic response to Tulsi comes as the result of her recognition of the impermanence of the body. For Baldevgiri, however, her actions mirror her realization of human life as a precious commodity in the cycle of existence, or *sansār*.

Toward the end of his commentary on the *bhajan*, Baldevgiri provides such an interpretation of Ratnavali's religious awareness. He explains that it takes 8, 400,000 births in the endless cycle of *sansār* before individuals can "wear" a human body. Baldevgiri contends,

Look, we have come to this earth by taking birth as humans. But, before you can wear [*dharan karnā*] the form of a human, you have to experience birth in 8, 400,000 *yonīs* ... We have to take birth [that many] times before we can be born in the *yonī* of a woman.

The implication of Baldevgiri's statement, as I learned from conversations with other male and female sadhus, is that *mokṣ* (or *mukti*), i.e., liberation from *sansār*, only occurs in a human body. Likewise, if an individual does not experience release from *sansār* in this birth, s/he remains "trapped [*phāns ho jāno*]" in the cycle and takes birth in all kinds of *yonīs*, until the time in which s/he receives another human body and experiences liberation from existence in that birth. Since, in this religious framework, birth in a human body is extremely difficult to procure, rather than waste it by having faith in other human beings, devotees ought to treasure their human births by having faith in *bhagvān* alone. Ratnavali, Baldevgiri mentions at the conclusion of his discussion on the cycle of existence, understood the precious value of a human birth. From his standpoint, Ratnavali realized that both she and Tulsi had to experience (or suffer) many millions of births in many millions of *yonīs* just to be able to wear their human bodies.

By making this statement about Ratnavali, Baldevgiri effectively endows her with the qualities of prescience and salvific knowledge, suggesting that she sought to transmit these spiritual teachings to Tulsi in order to set him on the path of *dharm*. Through the means of his commentaries, Baldevgiri constructs Ratnavali as an agent of Tulsi's religious transformation, which Tulsi himself acknowledges in the *bhajan* by addressing her as, "the mother of *dharm*." Additionally, Baldevgiri not only provides the audience access into Ratnavali's emotional world by making explicit her thoughts and motivations, but also frames her actions in terms of a larger religious context wherein faith and the worship of *bhagvān* define the purpose of human life.

The religious explanations Baldevgiri infuses into his *bhajan* performance allow him to create and communicate a nonsectarian vision of God that expands on the religious vision elaborated in the written text of Tulsidas. In its representation of Lord Ram²⁰⁷ as “the personification of the ultimate reality or ground of being,” the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* has often been considered to be a devotional text that bridges various sectarian and philosophical differences with respect to Hindu ideas of the divine. As Lutgendorf discusses, Tulsidas, in his composition of the text, sought to harmonize Advaita Vedanta (a non-dualist school of philosophy) and Vaiṣṇava (dualist) systems of thought in his representation of *Rām* as the divinity who doubly signifies the human incarnation of the “preserver-god Viṣṇu,” and the abstract “*brahman* of the Upanishads,” which lacks any qualities and characteristics (Lutgendorf 1991, 7). For many North Indian Hindus, “the word *Rām*,” Lutgendorf explains, “is the most commonly used nonsectarian designation for the Supreme Being” (Lutgendorf 1991, 4; cf. Lamb 2003; Hess 1982).

In his commentaries on the *bhajan*, Baldevgiri refers to the Supreme Being not as *Rām*, but rather as *bhagvān*, a generic term for God, or as the *paramātma*, a slightly more specialized term used in Advaita Vedanta traditions to denote the Supreme Spirit of the universe (i.e., *brahman*). Nonetheless, Baldevgiri, like many of the Rajasthani male and female sadhus whom I asked, considers Lord Ram to be both a particular manifestation (*rūp*) of *bhagvān* and *bhagvān* itself. Baldevgiri explains, “God comes in all forms. Whether you call [the form of God as] Śiva, Ram, or Kṛṣṇa, everything is *bhagvān*; it’s all the same.”

²⁰⁷ To indicate the Supreme Being of the universe, I italicize the word *Rām*. In this way, I make a distinction between the human incarnation, Ram, and the abstract “ground of being,” *Rām*.

And yet, that Baldevgiri does not conceptualize the Supreme Being specifically as *Rām* is significant. Notice that in his statement Baldevgiri does not say, “everything is *Rām*,” which, according to oral lore, Tulsi is thought to have expressed in his worship of divinity. Instead, Baldevgiri says, “everything is *bhagvān*.”²⁰⁸ In his consistent use of only abstract terms like *bhagvān* or the *paramātmā* to signify the Supreme Being, Baldevgiri implies that the use of proper names such as *Rām* to indicate an impersonal God might stimulate rather than neutralize sectarian understandings of God. A sadhu who serves Hindus of multiple theological persuasions,²⁰⁹ Baldevgiri obviates this possibility of religious exclusivism. He is careful not to associate the Supreme Being with any particular name or form of the divine, other than with *bhagvān* and the *paramātmā*, which he describes as, “the same.”

A telling example of this phenomenon occurs in the context of Baldevgiri’s explanation of the verse in which Ratnavali beseeches Tulsi to love God in the way he loves her. The word for God that appears in the *bhajan* is Hari, a common appellation for Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu (cf. McGregor 2004), and a popular name for Lord Ram in the Tusli *Rāmāyan*.²¹⁰ An “indexical sign,” Hari, therefore, specifically connotes *Rām* both as a personal and an abstract God.²¹¹ However, in his translation of this verse Baldevgiri substitutes *bhagvān* for the name Hari, and in his subsequent explanation uses the term

²⁰⁸ We note a similar occurrence in the context of Baldevgiri’s idea that the *Rāmāyan* represents the *bhajans* which Tulsi composed to *bhagvān*, the genderless and formless God, rather than to any specific form of deity.

²⁰⁹ Even though he was initiated in the Śaivaite tradition of Daśanāmi renunciators in which non-dual, or Advaita, persuasions are privileged, Baldevgiri, like most of the male and female sadhus, follow his own personal theology of God, rather than what the Daśanāmi institution itself propounds. See also Khandelwal’s (2004) discussion on *sannyāsa* as an institution, pp. 24-25. See my discussion in the Introduction to this dissertation.

²¹⁰ Hari, though, is also used as a name for other deities, such as Śiva. However, the Vaiṣṇava overtones of the name are certainly there. See McGregor (2004), p. 1061.

²¹¹ As cited in Lutgendorf, the verse from the hagiographical tradition uses the name *Rām*.

bhagvān in order to avoid representing God according to what are primarily Vaiṣṇava notions of the divine. That is, despite their connotations of the formless and eternal absolute, both Hari and *Rām* have sectarian overtones in their signification of the god Viṣṇu (or His incarnations Kṛṣṇa and Ram) as the Supreme Being of the universe, whereas the term *bhagvān*, which is used by Hindus across sectarian traditions, lacks any specific signification. As the historical evidence suggests, Tulsidas may have sought to establish a nonsectarian tradition of *Rām* devotion in north India through means of his representation of *Rām* as the ineffable *brahman*. However, his privileging of the use of the name *Rām*, or the nominal compound *Sītā Rām*, to signify the Supreme Being still reveals the underlying influence that the Vaiṣṇava traditions, and hence the Vaiṣṇava views of God, wielded over his own conceptualizations of divinity (cf. Klostermaier 1994; Lutgendorf 1991).²¹²

By emphasizing the use of the generic terms *bhagvān* and the *paramātmā* for God, Baldevgiri, I suggest, expresses a perception of God that expands beyond the (sectarian) vision of *Rām* as Supreme Being elaborated within Tulsi's written text. Baldevgiri's performance, thus, constructs an inclusive view of God for his audience. Baldevgiri is not alone in this respect. We witness a similar occurrence in the case of the *Rāmāyan pāṭhas* of the female sadhus. Unlike Baldevgiri who espouses inclusive views of divinity through his use of verbal commentary, in their version of *Rāmāyan satsang* the female sadhus underscore similar visions of God via their *bhajan* performances.

²¹² According to Klostermaier, Tulsi's devotion to Ram may have promoted not just an exclusive sectarian vision of God, but condemnation toward those who did not believe in God as Ram. Klostermaier states, "*Bhakti* means not only love for God, but also enmity toward those who do not love him in the same way. Even a saint like Tulsidas, whose verses generally exude a very humane form of religiosity, teaches Ram *bhaktas*: 'Avoid those who do not love Ram and Sita, as your bitter most enemies...'" (Klostermaier 1994, 228).

These *bhajans*, as I said earlier, which the female sadhus sing before and after the recitation, either extol the virtues of various divine manifestations (e.g., Śiva, Parvati, or Ganesh) or, more commonly, praise a formless, genderless, and nameless *bhagvān*. While features such as translation and the *samput* indicate that the female sadhus adhere to the lexical text, their *bhajans* illustrate the ways they, too, performatively create an inclusive religious vision and conceptualization of divinity, beyond that which we find in Tulsi's written text.

These variations in the performance styles of the sadhus, then, sensitize us to their individual perceptions of the differential functions of *Rāmāyan satsang*. For all the sadhus, male and female, *satsang*, constitutes a devotional context of fellowship in remembrance of the divine. And while this is clearly the purpose of the *Rāmāyan pāthas* for the female sadhus, we must at the same time, however, recognize that *Rāmāyan satsang* serves other equally significant purposes beyond strictly that of evoking *bhakti* to *bhagvān* in the sadhus. Both the female sadhus' and Baldevgiri's textual performances exemplify the multi-textured nature and purpose of *satsang*. Their integration of storytelling, translation, and commentary into the structure of their performances suggests that male and female sadhus consider *Rāmāyan satsang* as a context for both devotion and entertainment (*manoranjan*). Participants are gathered around a sadhu (or sadhus), who recites from the written version of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* or sings songs and/or tells stories that are identified with that tradition, for the purpose of hearing a story and enjoying themselves. For Baldevgiri's performance, factors such as the late evening time at which he began this *satsang*; the convivial ambience of the setting; and even the post-*satsang* comments that I heard several of the participants that night make along the lines

of, “I really enjoyed myself tonight [*bahut mazā āyā*],” suggest such a view of *Rāmāyan satsang*.

More significantly, though, Baldevgiri’s performance style demonstrates that he performs the *Rāmāyan* in much the same way that he conceptualizes the written text of Tulsidas. That is, he considers the *Rāmāyan* to be “a song about life.” The word I gloss here as “song” is *gāthā*, which also means “a narrative poem” (McGregor 2004, 263). Thus, like Tulsidas who, in Baldevgiri’s view, sang *bhajans* to God and wrote these songs down in the form of a narrative poem known as the *Rāmāyan*, he, too, sings these *bhajans* and reworks them into narrative form in *satsang*. Baldevgiri’s practices situate him within the textual tradition of Tulsidas. Although he is non-literate, Baldevgiri, like most of the non- and semi-literate female sadhus I worked with, reconceptualizes the *Rāmāyan* in terms of a song/story about God as a strategy for constructing himself as scriptural in the *Rāmāyan*, that is, as “literate” in the Hindi tradition of Tulsidas. Baldevgiri’s reconfiguration of the idea of the text enables him not only to create a personal relationship with the written text, but also to participate in an elite textual tradition. Furthermore, Baldevgiri’s relationship with the text creates his own spiritual authority as a sadhu.

Gendered Differences in Rajasthani Sadhus’ Textual Performances of Asceticism

Although their performance styles and views on the idea of the text are similar, the Rajasthani male and female sadhus with whom I worked perform asceticism in gendered ways. As I discussed earlier, the female sadhus’ performances create asceticism as a path of selfless service, worldly engagement, and spiritual relationships; these values, in part, define their tradition of devotional asceticism. Regardless of their

literacy levels, the male sadhus, however, perform asceticism as primarily a path of knowledge and detachment. Baldevgiri's *Rāmāyan bhajan* performance creates this gendered (male) vision of asceticism. Baldevgiri emphasizes faith in God as the central message of his performance. His emphasis is based on an underlying renunciant understanding of the nature of reality, or worldly existence (*sansār*). Baldevgiri, like many male sadhus, considers the world to be ultimately illusory and impermanent. Baldevgiri often says that "this whole world is *māyā* [i.e., an illusion]," comparing *sansār* to a dream. His statement implies that "reality," as humans experience it, is unreal simply because it is transitory, and that God as the permanent basis of an ultimately impermanent existence is the only true reality. Baldevgiri's discourse on the millions of births it takes just to acquire a human body, which he gave in the context of explaining Ratnavali's seemingly caustic behavior toward Tulsidas, obliquely signals this renunciant teaching. Both Baldevgiri's *bhajan* and his *bhajan* commentary make explicit that faith in an illusory/impermanent world produces endless suffering and pain, whereas faith in God effects everlasting happiness. This view is informed by Advaita Vedanta interpretations of the nature of reality, and is not exclusive to male sadhus.

What is gendered, however, is the way the male and female sadhus use this understanding of reality to construct their individual interpretations of asceticism. Baldevgiri represents Tulsidas' experience as a spiritual journey in which he moves from having faith in Ratnavali to having faith in God. The implication here is that Tulsi's spiritual experience signifies a journey not only from householding to asceticism, but also from (a state of) ignorance to knowledge. Baldevgiri himself says at the conclusion of his narrative/song performance that "this is the life story [*jivan kī kahānī*] of a sadhu,"

suggesting that Tulsidas renounced his life as a householder and became an ascetic. Vernacular language and Brahmanical literary/oral sources on asceticism often represent women as synonymous with the world, and by extension, with a life of suffering (cf. Olivelle 1992, 1995; Gold 1989, 1992). As in the larger hagiographical tradition associated with Tulsidas, in Baldevgiri's narrative, too, Ratnavali symbolizes what is ultimately unreal, and thus, represents (a life of) pain and suffering. Because Tulsi remains ignorant of the "real" nature of existence, he places faith in Ratnavali and suffers on account of his infatuation with her. Tulsi's confrontation with Ratnavali, however, enables him to receive salvific knowledge about the true nature of the world, which, in turn, alters his relationship not only to the world itself, but also to his wife. Baldevgiri indicates Tulsi's spiritual transformation from his state of ignorance to divine knowledge in his recitation of the last line of the *bhajan*: "Woman, you are the mother of *dharm* and have told me the truth today." Here, truth connotes the notions that God (*bhagvān* and/or *paramātmā*) is the true reality and faith in God leads to true happiness and peace.

But, as Baldevgiri's performance also suggests, happiness and peace are not the only states of mind that faith in God evokes. Baldevgiri's statement at the end of his performance in the context that Tulsidas became a sadhu after his verbal exchange with Ratnavali implies that faith in God also leads to a state of detachment from the world. Tulsidas' spiritual transformation from having faith in his wife to (having) faith in the divine; from a householder to an ascetic; from an ignorant man to a wise poet-saint, then, illustrates a journey from worldly engagement to otherworldly detachment. To this extent, his emphasis on the importance of faith in God provides a strategy with which Baldevgiri performs asceticism as a path of knowledge and detachment.

The structure of Baldevgiri's performance similarly creates this (androcentric) interpretation of asceticism. Baldevgiri's narrative/song exhibits a conceptual pattern that moves along a continuum of connection/relationship to detachment/separation. In the beginning of the *bhajan*, Tulsi, though physically separated from his wife, is so emotionally attached to Ratnavali that he has become infatuated with her "beyond the normal limit." Baldevgiri's performance signals this attachment through Tulsi's crossing of the river on a corpse and his scaling up the wall that leads to Ratnavali's room. The first half of the *bhajan* illustrates these events. The rest of the song narrates Tulsi's meeting with, and finally, separation from Ratnavali. His encounter with Ratnavali is fleeting and unsatisfactory; it lasts long enough for Tulsi to become enlightened by Ratnavali's words. In this light, Tulsi's relationship with Ratnavali spawns not only his detachment and separation from her, but more significantly, his world renunciation. The pattern evident in Baldevgiri's performance differs from the pattern of separation and connection illustrated in the *Rāmāyan* performances of the females sadhus. The structure of Baldevgiri's performance, thus, also creates asceticism as a path of knowledge and detachment.

Baldevgiri's performance of asceticism highlights values that recall those underscored by the dominant (textual) model of Brahmanical asceticism. A standard renunciant value, detachment constitutes the ultimate basis for a life of asceticism, and in the Brahmanical model, connotes both mental and physical separation from the world. Hence, aside from separation, detachment is believed to catalyze other classic renunciant values such as isolation, meditation, and peripateticism. These Brahmanic renunciant values sharply contrast with the *bhakti* values the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with emphasize in their textual performances. While female sadhus underscore detachment as

an important renunciatory value in their performances of asceticism, they emphasize that sadhus must act in the world *even while remaining detached from it*. This is exactly the interpretation of asceticism that Gangagiri highlights in the *Gītā* performance I analyze below. For most Rajasthani female sadhus, detachment does not contradict their duty to serve others “with love,” but rather complements it. In the framework of devotional asceticism, the Brahmanical (male) value of detachment coexists with the alternative *bhakti* (female) values of selfless service, worldly engagement, and connection.

IV. “Devotion and Renunciation are the same”: A *Gītā* Performance with Gangagiri

In this final section of the chapter, I analyze Gangagiri’s performative use of the *Gītā* as a strategy with which she constructs not only devotion and renunciation as the same *bhakti* path (*bhakti mārg*), but also action (*karm*), knowledge (*jnān*), and discipline (*yog*) as necessary conditions of that *path*. Gangagiri’s interpretations of the *Gītā*’s representations of both renunciation and devotion offer a counterpoint to standard scholarly interpretations of the *Gītā*. As I discuss later on, scholars of Hindu traditions frequently characterize the *Gītā* as a text that constructs devotion, knowledge, and action as three separate, yet parallel, religious paths to God (cf. Khandelwal 2004; Flood 1997; Klostermaier 1994; Zaehner 1969; Smith 1960). Moreover, scholars and commentators on the *Gītā* often argue that it primarily conceives of renunciation and devotion as distinct and opposed paths (cf. Sharma 1986; Stoler Miller 1986; Minor 1982).²¹³ Gangagiri’s

²¹³ Of course, it is not only scholars of Hinduism and of the *Gītā* that understand the text to be constructing a vision in which asceticism and devotion represent distinct and opposing paths. In December 2008, I was invited by the Religious Studies department at Siena College in Albany, New York to give a presentation on my research. I had explained the different genres of the sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation, and spent some time discussing their textual performances. After explaining Gangagiri’s use of the *Gītā* to construct

Gītā performance, however, challenges these understandings. She uses the *Gītā* to support her form of asceticism, and she does so by reconfiguring pivotal *Gītā* concepts.

Before we begin, it is important to explain what I mean by Gangagiri's *Gītā* performance. Gangagiri uses the *Gītā* in two different kinds of contexts: one with the physical text present and one without it. In the first context, Gangagiri recites from the written text twice a day as part of her daily renunciant practice. She characterizes her practice as *Gītā pathā* (lit., recitation). At ten o'clock in the morning and five o'clock in the evening, Gangagiri recites a chapter or so of the Sanskrit *Gītā* and then reads either silently or aloud the Hindi translation that follows the Sanskrit text.²¹⁴ Gangagiri told me that she reads the Hindi translation because she does not understand (*samajhnā*) the Sanskrit. Her recitation usually occurs after she performs *pūjā* (worship) and *ārti* (the ritual of waving of a lamp or light around an image of God) to the divine.

In the second context, Gangagiri teaches her devotees/disciples using *Gītā* examples that are separate from her daily recitation/reading of the printed text. She herself refers to this activity simply as *Gītā satsang*. Here, Gangagiri teaches and discusses the *Gītā without the written text* present. Because Gangagiri's recitation/reading and teaching acts are distinct devotional practices (she rarely teaches the text in recitation contexts), I distinguish between these two types of *Gītā* performances. The performance analyzed below, then, concerns Gangagiri's teaching in Hindi paraphrase from a *Gītā* text

asceticism as a path of *bhakti*, one faculty member said, "But doesn't the *Gītā* teach the exact opposite of what you say Gangagiri does." The faculty member then went on to explain his understanding that the *Gītā* teaches that it is not necessary to renounce the world in order to be devoted to God. Indeed, this interpretation, as many scholars have argued, is the message of the *Gītā*. Thus, this faculty member, like others in the group, was puzzled that Gangagiri uses this particular text to support her lifestyle of renunciation. And yet, as I argue, Gangagiri's use of the *Gītā* to construct asceticism is significant, because her performance challenges dominant interpretations of the *Gītā* as a text that supports devotion over asceticism.

²¹⁴ Gangagiri uses the Gita press version of the *Gītā*, which comes with a standard Hindi translation of the Sanskrit.

that she recites/reads on her own in other contexts, but that is physically absent in *satsang* contexts. While there is no physical text present in Gangagiri's *Gītā* discourses, her daily interaction with the written text influences her oral performances without the text. But why does Gangagiri teach the *Gītā* in the absence of the physical text?

Gangagiri's *satsang* practices directly relate to her idea of the *Gītā* as a text. She conceptualizes the *Gītā* as a conversation, or dialogue, between God and his devotee. Gangagiri explains, "In the *Gītā*, the language is beautiful...Lord Kṛṣṇa himself tells Arjun [what to do]; he makes Arjun listen...You see, *that's how the Gītā was made.*" Though she understands it to be a written text, in *satsang* Gangagiri also underscores that the *Gītā* was originally Kṛṣṇa speech, as well as Arjun's responses to that speech, which became, as she told me in another conversation, "published" (*chhāpnā*) as a book. By speaking what she views as the words Kṛṣṇa spoke to Arjun, and vice versa, Gangagiri orally recreates (parts of) the written text in *satsang* via her recreation of their conversation. At the same time, she connects herself back to the literate *Gītā* tradition, much like Tulsigiri and Baldevgiri connect themselves back to the literate tradition of Tulsidas by singing what they identify as Tulsi's *bhajans*. Indeed, the written text itself is an oral conversation, and this is what Gangagiri models in her teaching of the *Gītā*. Through her *Gītā* performance, Gangagiri creates an "oral scripture," and in doing so, pushes beyond traditional notions of scripture as a written physical text (cf. Graham 1987).



Gangagiri recites from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Photo by A. DeNapoli.

Aside from the intimate relationship she creates with the written text in *satsangs* where no physical text is present, Gangagiri performs the *Gītā* as a strategy for constructing her tradition of devotional asceticism. To illustrate this process, I offer an example of a typical *Gītā satsang* led by Gangagiri that occurred on November 16, 2005 at Tulsigiri's ashram/temple in Shyalpura village, Udaipur. Besides Tulsigiri, Manvendra Singh, and me, the rest of the *satsang* audience consisted of Manmohangiri, Tulsigiri's *gurubhāī* (spiritual brother) with whom she co-manages the ashram/temple, several elderly female householders, a young, unmarried male from Shyalpura, and an articulate devotee of Tulsigiri's visiting from a nearby village, Sukh Lalji. Gangagiri's *Gītā*

performance came on the heels of Sukh Lalji’s representation of himself as “the puppet” of *bhagvān*, a description he gave in response to my question about his name²¹⁵:

A: Sir, what is your name?

SL: My name? Your father’s and my father’s name are the same.

A: Okay.

SL: Our father is the same.

GG: Everyone’s father is the same.

SL: Yes. Everyone who’s sitting here today shares the same father. And His name is the *paramēśwar* [i.e., a title for God in the form of Viṣṇu or Śiva]; He is the *parampitā* [or Supreme Being].

A: All right, I understand.

SL: From a single portion of His body, this puppet was made, and the name of this puppet is Sukh Lal [the man, Sukh Lal, standing before everyone].

GG: This one is a knower [*jnānkārī*]!

A: Yes, it seems that way, *māi Rām* [title for female sadhus; literally means, “holy mother”]. Sukh Lalji is a knower.

GG: In the *Gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa says to Arjun,

A: Yes,

GG: He says, [Gangagiri paraphrases Kṛṣṇa’s words from her memory in Hindi] “The one who knows me in this world is dear [*priyā*] to me; I take care of him/her; the one who knows me is dear to me,” the Lord speaks this [in the *Gītā*]. [Lord Kṛṣṇa also says]: “*dhyān* [meditation] is better than *jnān* [knowledge].

M: *dhyān*?

GG: *dhyān* is better than *jnān*; *tyāg* [relinquishment] is better than *dhyān*.

A: *dhyān* is better than *jnān*,

GG: Yes. *dhyān* is better than *jnān*, and *tyāg* is better than *dhyān*. “We don’t need to do anything” and “We don’t need anything,” this is the meaning of *tyāg*: “We don’t need anything.” Look, [explains the meaning of *tyāg* further] it’s like this: “We don’t have to do anything,” [i.e.,] “We don’t have to make a house, and so forth,” this is *tyāg*.

A: Okay, *māi Rām*, so *tyāg* means,

GG: *tyāg* means, “We don’t need anything”; “we don’t have to do anything.”

A: This [meaning of *tyāg*] sounds a lot like [the meaning of] *sannyās* to me, *māi rām*.

GG: Yes.

TG: We have renounced everything, released everything [*sab kucch sannyās kar diyā ; tyāg diyā*].

GG: What?

TG: We have renounced everything; we have released everything.

GG: “We don’t have to do anything,” “We don’t need anything,” [and] “We don’t have to go anywhere,” [this is *tyāg*].

TG: We have renounced everything.

GG: This is *tyāg*. Lord Kṛṣṇa said to Arjun, “*jnān* is supreme [*sreṣṭ*]; [but] *dhyān* is better than *jnān*, and *tyāg* is better than *dhyān*. This is called *yog* [discipline]; this is called *yog*; *tyāg* is called *yog*.”

²¹⁵ In the passage below, A =Antoinette; SL=Sukh Lal; GG=Gangagiri; MS=Manvendra Singh; TG=Tulsigiri.

A: [Antoinette writes as Gangagiri speaks, but misses a word; asks for clarification of Gangagiri's statement] What is called *yog*?

GG: What is called *yog*? *tyāg* is called *yog*.

A: Okay, so *dhyān* is better than *jnān*; *tyāg* is better than *dhyān*; and *tyāg* is called *yog*, *māi Rām*?...

GG: Yes, *tyāg* is called *yog*. "Hey Arjun! You are a *yogī*" this is what Lord Kṛṣṇa said: "Hey Arjun! You are a *yogī*!"

M: Okay, *tyāg*, then, is to 'sacrifice.' *Sannyās* is higher than *tyāg*, but is not exactly *tyāg*?

A: *Māi Rām*, you said that *tyāg* means, "We don't need anything," right?

GG: Yes, "We don't need anything."

A: But can we also say that this is the meaning of *sannyās*?

GG: This is exactly *sannyās*. But even *yog* is better than *sannyās*. Even *yog* is better than *sannyās*.

SL: Look...householders must do both *karm* [action] and *yog*.

GG: Yes, they must do both.

SL: I am a householder, so I must do both *karm* and *yog*, otherwise I cannot achieve [the state of] *yog*.

GG: Yes, yes.

SL: But, as a sadhu [i.e., one who has abandoned desires] she [pointing to Gangagiri]²¹⁶ can achieve *yog*.

GG: The three *gunas* [qualities] of *sattva* [truth/purity], *rajas* [passion], and *tamas* [darkness/ignorance/inertia] are within everyone.

SL: Yes, these *gunas* are sporting within everyone's being...

GG: Yes.

SL: These are within everyone...But we have to let go of them [*sab kā tyāg karnā*] to reach *yog*.

GG: Excellent!...

A: So, *dhyān* is better than *jnān*; *tyāg* is better than *dhyān*; and *tyāg* is called *yog*.

GG: Correct. *tyāg* is called *yog* ... That's why I keep telling all of you to do a *pāṭha* of [the] *Gītājī* everyday. Inside of the *Gītājī* is that knowledge [the knowledge of *tyāg* as *yog*, and so forth]. Do a *pāṭha* of the *Gītājī* everyday [because] it contains the *ātma-jnān*...[Comments to Antoinette who is busy writing Gangagiri's words on the *Gītā* in a notebook]: Everything is already written in the *Gītā*. So, why are you writing it in there [the notebook]? You don't have to write all this [in your notebook]. Write it here [points to the heart]. Write it [in the heart] instead.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Even though Sukh Lal pointed directly to Gangagiri while making this statement, I am sure he also meant sadhus, in general, and thus his statement applies to Tulsigiri and Manmohangiri.

²¹⁷ In many *satsangs* Gangagiri told me to "write" her words, whether of sacred text, story, or song, in "the heart," implying that I would remember her teachings and knowledge only if I "wrote" them there. One time, though, after she had made a similar comment to me, Tulsigiri had explained to her that I needed to write their words in my notebook because my 'department' in the U.S. would not accept my work if it were solely written in my heart. As Tulsigiri said, "She writes to tell others. It's a training, right? Listen, if she writes [our words] in the heart, no one will consider her. OK, we'll accept it, but not her 'department.' So, she has to write everything there [in her book]. What she writes is for the world."

In this *Gītā satsang* the participants work as a group to interpret the meanings of the text, which Gangagiri paraphrases in Hindi from memory. In a new translation of the text, Laurie Patton describes the “conceptual richness” of the *Gītā*, on the basis of which she leaves untranslated words like *dharma*, *yoga*, and *guṇa*, in order to preserve the semantic complexity of these terms and illuminate “the multifaceted nature of the text” (Patton 2008). In my transcription of Gangagiri’s performance, however, I have provided standard definitions for words like *sannyās*, *tyāg yog*, and *karm* in order to show how Gangagiri and other participants performatively construct their meanings beyond these more standard (scholarly) interpretations.

In framing the performance, Gangagiri invokes the formulaic phrase, “In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa says to Arjun,” heightening the audience’s attention to her speech and to the invoked text, after which she quotes the words she understands Kṛṣṇa to have spoken and “breaks through into performance” (Hymes 1975). Prompted by Sukh Lal’s discussion on the *parampitā*, or the Eternal Father, through whom everyone shares the same spiritual lineage, Gangagiri speaks, ““The one who knows me in this world is dear to me; I take care of him/her. The one who knows me is dear to me.”” Based on the repetition of the clauses, “the one who” and “is dear to me,”²¹⁸ Gangagiri’s Hindi paraphrases represent an allusion to the twelfth verse of the twelfth chapter of the *Gītā* (12.12), a chapter that discourses on the path of devotion (*bhakti mārg*).

Scholars have traditionally argued that the *Gītā*’s twelfth chapter constructs *bhakti* as distinct from the paths of knowledge and action (cf. Stoler Miller 1986; Sharma 1986; Minor 1982; Klostermaier 1994), whereas others contend that the chapter represents the

²¹⁸ The clause, “is dear to me,” occurs five times in chapter twelve of the *Gītā*, in verses 14-17, and in verse 19.

practices of action, knowledge, and meditation (*dhyān*) as necessary conditions of devotion (cf. Hill as cited in Minor 1982, 371; cf. Patton trans., 2008). Most scholars, though, agree that the *Gītā*'s twelfth chapter marks a crucial turning point in the text in its representation of the *bhakti mārḡ* as the path to God *par excellence*. Robert N. Minor explains: “[T]he chapter clearly proclaims the centrality of devotion to Kṛṣṇa as no secondary, optional element, but as the key to liberation, and the *Gītā* declares that *jnāna*, *karma*, and *bhakti* are not alternative paths to the goal but three elements of the one and only path [i.e., devotion]” (Minor 1982, 372). In their analyses of the *Gītā*'s construction of the *bhakti mārḡ*, however, scholars often interpret *bhakti* and *sannyās* as separate and contradictory paths. Barbara Stoler Miller, for example, explains that the *Gītā* promotes *bhakti* over *sannyās* because “devotion allows for a resolution of the conflict between the worldly life of allotted duties and the life of renunciation” (Stoler Miller 1986, 9). Stoler Miller suggests that the *Gītā* understands devotion to be superior to renunciation on the grounds that, unlike the latter, *bhakti* requires (the practice of) renouncing the fruits of action (*tyāg*), rather than renouncing action itself (*sannyās*). Also, renouncing the fruit of action does not require abandoning the social world, as *sannyās* demands. Thus, Stoler Miller not only equates *bhakti* with *tyāg*, but interprets *bhakti qua tyāg* to be distinct from *sannyās*.²¹⁹

But how does Gangagiri interpret these concepts in her construction of the path of asceticism? Let's begin with *tyāg*, which is derived from the verbal root, *tyāj*, “to relinquish,” “to abandon,” or “to give up,” and, as such, typically denotes the idea of ‘relinquishment’ or ‘giving up.’ In her description of the meaning of the term, Gangagiri

²¹⁹ In his interpretation and analysis of the *Gītā*, Robert N. Minor disagrees with scholars' tendency to associate *bhakti* with *tyāg*. He argues: “There is no indication in 12.12 that the abandonment of the fruit of action [*tyāg*] is any more related to devotion than any other” (Minor 1982, 371).

makes two crucial statements: “We don’t have to do [*karnā*] anything,” and “We don’t need anything.” These comments suggest that she interprets *tyāg* to mean both the giving up of actions as well as the abandoning of desires. Notice, though, that in her comment about action (e.g., “We don’t have to do anything”), Gangagiri uses the compulsory form of the verb “to do” (i.e., “have to do”), which would seem to indicate that she understands *tyāg* to mean the giving up of *obligatory* or required actions.

There is another possibility, however, for Gangagiri’s interpretation of *tyāg*. The contiguity of her two comments, coupled with the fact that she verbalizes them in this order a total of four times throughout her performance suggest that to Gangagiri *tyāg* is neither the relinquishment of prescribed actions, nor the relinquishment of desires. Rather, it is abandoning actions *based on worldly desires*, like those of building a domicile, or even going to the market. Gangagiri states, “We don’t have to make a house; we don’t have to go anywhere. This is *tyāg*.” The statements Gangagiri has made about action and work in other contexts support the claim that *tyāg* hardly means simply giving up prescribed actions, because not only must everyone (i.e., sadhus and householders) act in the world, but action itself also constitutes, as she often says, “everyone’s duty [*kartavya*].” And “everyone’s duty” is to worship God. Gangagiri explains,

You have to worship [God]; you *have to do* it. This is everyone’s duty [*kartavya*]. This is the action [*karm*] of the body, that you have to worship [God]; [that] you have to concentrate [*dhyān laganā*] [on God]; and [that] you have to chant [*tap-jap karnā*] the name of God. This is the work [*kām*] of everyone. This is what everyone has to do [i.e., sadhus and householders]. If you leave it, what else will you do? If you leave [this work] what else will you do? Do you have any other work? This is your work. When I was a householder [*sansārī*], I did everything [i.e., both worldly and religious work]. But now, there’s only one activity for me [the worship of God]. Why should I leave this? Action [*karm*] and work [*kām*]—this is our duty [*kartavya*] [*italics mine*].

From Gangagiri’s perspective both householders and sadhus “have to worship God”; this is “the action [*karm*] of the body” and “the work [*kām*] of everyone.”

Likewise, the distinction Gangagiri intimates later on in the passage between the duties of householders, the “*sansārīs*,” or worldly ones, and the duty of sadhus reveals her perception that while no one ever stops acting in the world,²²⁰ renouncers do relinquish actions based on worldly desires and motives. But, giving up actions based on worldly desires is not synonymous with abandoning prescribed actions, because, more so than householders, renouncers are still required to remember and serve God. “There is only one work for me to do,” Gangagiri declares, implying that, as a sadhu, her only duty is to worship *bhagvān*. For Gangagiri, divine worship is the required work of ascetics.

What we notice, therefore, is that in performing her understanding of *tyāg*, Gangagiri obliquely challenges the more standard analytic interpretations of *sannyās* as the renunciation of *prescribed actions*. According to Gangagiri, *sannyās* refers specifically to the renunciation of *worldly* actions and desires, including those associated with householding. This is significant because Gangagiri’s interpretation of *sannyās* provides an alternative to how the *Gītā* itself primarily conceptualizes renunciation. The *Gītā* describes renunciation mostly as the path of non-action (see, for example, chapter five; cf. Patton’s discussion in the Introduction to her *Gītā* translation, 2008, xx). Moreover, the text occasionally criticizes renunciation as a way of life on the basis of this understanding. Gangagiri has never discussed with me the *Gītā*’s criticisms of *sannyās*; the statements she has made to me in other *satsangs* suggest that Gangagiri perceives the *Gītā* as supporting her own interpretation of renunciation. As I discuss later, though, Gangagiri’s understanding of *sannyās* significantly expands on the *Gītā*’s representations.

Although Gangagiri seems to suggest that *tyāg* and *sannyās* are the same, she does distinguish between the two terms. Her statement that, “but even *yog* is better than

²²⁰ This perspective is supported by the *Gītā*, as well.

sannyās,” indicates that she differentiates between *sannyās* and *tyāg*, because, as she says, “*tyāg* is called *yog*,” which means that *tyāg* is different from, and thus, “better than” *sannyās*. The *Gītā* also supports this idea of *tyāg* as better than *sannyās*, and some scholars have argued that this is, indeed, what the *Gītā* is all about.²²¹ Gangagiri’s association of *tyāg* with *yog*, though, differs from typical scholarly interpretations of *yog*. Gangagiri continues to reinforce the idea of *tyāg* as *yog* in her repeated recitation of the phrase: “*dhyān* is better than *jnān*; *tyāg* is better than *dhyān*; and *tyāg* is called *yog*.” She highlights this point further by paraphrasing another *Gītā* verse: “‘Hey Arjun! You are a *yogī*,’ this is what Lord Krishna said: ‘Hey Arjun! You are a *yogī*.’”²²²

To understand the distinctions Gangagiri perceives between *sannyās* and *tyāg*, we have to examine her interpretation of *yog*, a term often glossed as “discipline” or “spiritual path” (Patton 2008; cf. Stoler Miller 1986, 157).²²³ Unlike standard interpretations, Gangagiri herself equates *yog* not with the different spiritual paths (cf. Stoler Miller 1986), or even a philosophical system of thought (cf. Patton 2008), but instead with *tyāg*. To this extent, Gangagiri’s performance suggests her understanding of *tyāg* as the giving up of actions based on worldly desires, a meaning she equates with *sannyās*. However, by associating *tyāg* with *yog* Gangagiri not only differentiates *sannyās* from *tyāg*, but also suggests that *tyāg* means more than giving up desire-based actions; it is, more precisely, giving up (the desire for) the **fruits** (*phal*) of action. She

²²¹ I thank my co-advisor, Laurie Patton, for pointing this fact out to me. Personal conversation June 2008.

²²² Gangagiri does not say which verse from the *Gītā* she paraphrases in Hindi in her recitation of this verse. This verse occurs throughout the *Gītā*.

²²³ Based on the verbal root, *yuj*, “to yoke” or “to join,” in the *Gītā*, *yog*, Stoler Miller explains, refers to the idea of “...yoking...oneself to Krishna’s divine purpose, the spiritual and physical discipline that integrates aspects of reality” (Stoler Miller 1986, 157). Patton similarly discusses the importance of *yog* in terms of “yoking.” She explains, “The idea of ‘yoking’ has very important connotations: it is a very serious path, a mantle or harness taken on, as the concrete term ‘yoke’ implies” (Patton trans., 2008, xi).

does not make this connection explicit in this performance, but has in other contexts. Gangagiri has said on several occasions that people’s experiences of suffering and/or happiness relate particularly to their being attached to “the fruits of [their] actions [*karm kā phal*],”²²⁴ obliquely referring to the *Gītā*’s teachings on desire-filled actions (*kāma-karm*) as the cause for worldly suffering. Importantly, her statement implies that not simply action, but more significantly, the attachment to the results of actions affects people’s states of mind. Sometimes Gangagiri recites a popular Hindi proverb to explain this idea: “Live in the house; but don’t let the house live in you.” The implication of her statement is that only by renouncing the fruits of our actions, people transform their suffering into happiness. *Tyāg*, therefore, as Gangagiri suggests, means letting go of (the desire for) the results of action without abandoning action itself.

Gangagiri’s implied perception of *tyāg* as a discipline of “letting go” thereby accounts for the conceptual association she makes between *tyāg* and *yog* —i.e., disciplined action in which people release the fruits of their actions and attain a state of mind which she describes as, “peace in the heart,” i.e., freedom from suffering. Her description parallels Krishna’s own words in 12.12: “...From letting go [*tyāg*] peace soon comes.” At the end of her performance, Gangagiri emphasizes to participants, “That’s why I keep telling all of you to do a path of the *Gītājī* everyday...It has that knowledge,” meaning the salvific teachings on *tyāg* as *yog*, the practice of which ensures that devotees, as Gangagiri says, “will never suffer.” For Gangagiri, by reading, reciting, and/or hearing Kṛṣṇa’s words, devotees will learn about his teachings on *tyāg* and *yog* and will discover that in releasing the fruits of action to him as an expression of devotion, not only do they receive peace in the heart, but also “go to” him at the time of death.

²²⁴ Gangagiri expresses this idea in Hindi as follows: “*karm kā phal dukh hī banātā hai.*”

Kṛṣṇa stresses this point to Arjun toward the end of their dialogue, when he says in 18.65: “Devoted to Me, your mind intent on Me, give honor to Me, and sacrifice to Me. In this way, you will truly go to Me, I promise, for you are my beloved” (Patton translation, 2008, 201-202). Gangagiri’s discussion, therefore, suggests that both *tyāg* and *yog* are essential elements of the *bhakti* path.

But how does Gangagiri understand the *bhakti* path? While her understanding of *tyāg* and *yog* as necessary conditions of the *bhakti mārg* follows the *Gītā*’s teachings on these concepts (cf. Minor 1982, 361-376), Gangagiri’s interpretation of the *bhakti* path as **a form of *sannyās*** differs significantly from the *Gītā*’s representations of *bhakti* and *sannyās* as wholly separate paths/phenomena. As I said earlier, the *Gītā* constructs renunciation as a way of life where devotees “throw down” not only obligatory, but also all types of action in order to attain the divine, and thus, liberation. In contrast, the *bhakti mārg* is understood to be the path of *disciplined action (karm yog)* in which devotees “sacrifice [*tyāg*]” the fruits of their actions to God (or Kṛṣṇa) as an expression of love and devotion (cf. Stoler Miller 1986, 157).

Gangagiri, however, constructs renunciation not as a path distinct from, but rather as another kind of *bhakti mārg*. I reiterate here that Gangagiri’s construction of renunciation as a *bhakti mārg* provides a striking alternative to the *Gītā*’s primary view of renunciation as a path of non-action. According to Gangagiri, renunciation represents a path of dutiful action: sadhus must not only worship God; they must also serve their devotees/disciples as manifestations of God. For most other female sadhus, too, renunciation is both a path of *bhakti* to *bhagvān* as well as of dutiful action. One of the themes running throughout this dissertation has been the various ways in which the

Rajasthani female sadhus interpret their song, storytelling, and textual practices as a form of *sannyās*, through which they fulfill their renunciatory duty to God, and by extension, to the world. Recall Gangagiri's words from the last chapter: "Renunciation [*sannyās*] and devotion [*bhakti*] are the same thing. There's no difference." Though she does not speak these words in this *Gītā satsang*, the fact that Gangagiri views renunciation as devotion, and *vice versa*, is implied in the context of her performance. Simply having *satsang* represents a devotional act through which Gangagiri expresses her asceticism.

Aside from being a *bhakti* path, renunciation also involves the pursuit of the practices of *jnān*, *dhyān*, and *karm*. Notice here that Gangagiri's interpretation of renunciation approximates the *Gītā*'s representation of the *bhakti mārg*, in which these same practices are described as integral to the *bhakti* path (see chapter twelve of the *Gītā*). This similarity suggests that Gangagiri not only draws upon the *Gītā* in the construction of her own form of asceticism, but more importantly, stretches its vision of the *bhakti mārg* by recasting *bhakti* with respect to (her idea of) *sannyās*.

But this recasting brings up an important question: What about *tyāg*? Isn't this what makes the *bhakti mārg*, according to the *Gītā*, a path of disciplined action, and as such, what distinguishes the *bhakti mārg* from the path of *sannyās*, the path of non-action? How does Gangagiri deal with the concept of *tyāg* in her construction of renunciation, especially since, as she suggests in the performance, *tyāg* is "better than" *sannyās*? Although in the *Gītā* performance she speaks Kṛṣṇa's words to teach and legitimate the idea that "*tyāg* is better than *sannyās*," in other conversations Gangagiri has repeatedly discussed *sannyās* in terms of *tyāg*, and by doing so, promotes an interpretation of renunciation that supplements the *Gītā*'s.

For example, after the *Gītā satsang* we have been discussing, while travelling back to her hermitage, in a moment of reflection Gangagiri told me, “Look, what we sadhus do is *tyāg*; [but] everyone should practice *tyāg*, otherwise you never [learn to] experience detachment [*vairāg*] from the world. Householders, sadhus, everyone should practice *tyāg*.” Like the *Gītā*, Gangagiri stresses the importance of *tyāg* for householders as an efficacious strategy whereby they can negotiate a worldly life of dutiful actions with a life of (periodic) detachment from the world. But more than the *Gītā*, perhaps, she perceives *tyāg* to be not only as significant for sadhus, but also a *sine qua non* of the renunciant path.²²⁵ That is, without *tyāg*, sadhus cannot experience detachment (*vairāg*); and without that, as most of the sadhus have told me, release (*mukti*; *mokṣ*) from the world of existence, the goal of the path, becomes impossible for them in this life.

Furthermore, while the *Gītā* represents renunciation as “another form of action” (Patton 2008, xx), it, nonetheless, primarily conceives of the path as one in which practitioners turn themselves, and their actions, away from the world.²²⁶ For Gangagiri, however, *sannyās* requires sadhus to release the attachments and the fruits of their actions

²²⁵ In the *Gītā* we find verses that discuss renunciation (*sannyās*) as distinct from *yog* (i.e., discipline in action). As Kṛṣṇa says in 5.2: “Both renunciation and the Yoga of actions lead to the highest bliss. But of the two, the Yoga of action is better than renunciation” (Patton translation, 2008, p. 61). However, there are verses in which Kṛṣṇa also describes *sannyās* in terms of *yog*. For example, in verses 5.6 and 6.2 respectively, Kṛṣṇa says: “... Without Yoga, renunciation is indeed hard to achieve; the sage who is joined to Yoga reaches Brahman in no time”; “... know that which they call renunciation is Yoga; no one becomes a follower of Yoga without giving up purposeful intent” (Patton 2008, pp. 62 and 70).

²²⁶ While this idea of *sannyās* is present in the *Gītā*, the text, however, also sought to change this representation of renunciation as the abandoning of action and the turning away from the world. Robert N. Minor discusses that chapters five and eighteen describe “true renunciation” as the giving up of the attachments for the results of action. In this respect, the *Gītā*’s representation of *sannyās* parallels that of *tyāg*. Minor explains, “Both *sannyāsa* and *tyāga* probably mean the renunciation of the results of action, though *tyāga* is the preferred term in the *Gītā*, probably because of the negative connotations of *sannyāsa* in pre-*Gītā* usage” (1982, 462). The fact that the *Gītā* does, at times, conceive of *sannyās* as equivalent to *tyāg* helps to explain why Gangagiri herself understands that the *Gītā* supports her life of renunciation, and why she uses *this* text to construct her vision of asceticism as a path of *bhakti*. While I emphasize the ways in which Gangagiri’s performance challenges dominant interpretations of the *Gītā*, it is also important to point out that she draws on views that are expressed in the *Gītā* itself, but that represent alternative view to the more standard *Gītā* understanding of *sannyās* as a path of non-action and as distinct from *bhakti*.

without turning either themselves or their actions from the world. The challenge that *tyāg* poses to individuals, as Gangagiri understands, is this: whereas householders must remain detached from the world while acting in it, sadhus must act in the world as they remain detached from it. From Gangagiri's perspective, action in the form of teaching others the knowledge of God whereby individuals can change their lives constitutes a duty (*kartavya*) of the path of renunciation. "It is my duty to teach you and [to] make you understand," Gangagiri often asserts in our daily meetings. Along with this, she might say, "What other work do sadhus have?" And Gangagiri fulfills this duty by performing the rhetoric of renunciation for the benefit of others. In this light, we understand that the female sadhus' song, story, and textual performances constitute expressions of both *bhakti* and dutiful *karm* that enable them, as they say, to serve the world "with love." By representing the path in terms of selfless service (*sevā*) to the world,²²⁷ Gangagiri constructs renunciation as a devotional path of disciplined action (*tyāg/ yog*) in which sadhus offer not only the actions they perform on behalf of devotees, but even the fruits of those actions to *bhagvān* as a form of worship and love.

Although she expands upon the *Gītā*, Gangagiri's understanding of renunciation reveals the ways in which her own thinking, discourse, and devotional performances have become permeated by the text. Her capacity to "speak scripture" demonstrates that Gangagiri has taken the *Gītā* "to heart" to such an extent that she can teach the text in everyday conversations from her memory of God's sacred words (Graham 1987). And yet, Gangagiri's conceptualization of the *Gītā* as an *oral conversation* between Kṛṣṇa and Arjun enables her to expand beyond the boundaries of written text in her interpretation of *bhakti* and *sannyās* as the same path. Gangagiri's *Gītā* performance, then, provides a

²²⁷ See also Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes* (2004).

constructive strategy by which she transmits a literate textual tradition and makes it possible for her (primarily non-literate) audience to participate in the written textual tradition of the *Gītā* without their own literacy status posing an issue. Gangagiri further creates her individual ascetic authority as well. In this way, *Gītā satsang* becomes a place where, even in the absence of the physical book, participants can study the text, and more significantly, “write” it in their hearts and minds in order to transform their everyday worlds and lives. As Gangagiri emphasizes to me, “Everything is already written in the *Gītā*. So why are you writing it [in your notebook]? Write it in your heart, instead.”

Conclusions:

“Grab the Text and Never Let Go”: Text, Performance, Authority, and Asceticism

Renunciant Textual Performance as an Alternative Model of Scripturality

We have explored two types of textual performances in the Rajasthani female sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation: their (Tulsi) *Rāmāyan* and *Gītā* performances. More specifically, we have looked at different types of renunciant performance genres within each of these devotional textual traditions. Gangagiri’s *Gītā* performances consist of recitation and teaching genres. In the first case, she chants in Sanskrit from a written text in primarily *pūjā* contexts, a text that she reads in Hindi translation as part of her daily ascetic practice. In the second case, Gangagiri teaches without the written text present using Hindi paraphrases of *Gītā* verses that are separate from her regular reading/recitation of it. As with their *Gītā* performances, the sadhus’ *Rāmāyan* performances may be divided into recitation and song/narrative genres. For the recitation, the female sadhus chant from Tulsidas’ written text and use multiple strategies for creating a relationship with this textual tradition, i.e., their scripturality. Through textual

features such as translation, commentary, and storytelling; and performance features like the *samput* and musical accompaniment, both non- and semi-literate female sadhus not only internalize Tulsidas' written text in their hearts and minds, but they also participate in an elite textual tradition.

While their recitations largely follow the lexical text, the female sadhus understand the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* tradition to be broader than just the written text. In this respect, the *Rāmāyan* performances of the Rajasthani female sadhus push well beyond Graham's model of scripturality as the oral performance of the *written word*. Their practices offer an alternative model of scripturality as a sung or spoken text. For the Rajasthani female sadhus, the written text of Tulsidas represents only one dimension of a broadly conceived textual/narrative tradition. The sadhus identify many of the *bhajans* they sing before and after a recitation, and the discourses they give throughout a recitation, with Tulsidas' written text. Interestingly, the majority of their *bhajans* are about devotion to a nameless and formless *bhagvān*, rather than to Ram.

Another context in which female sadhus equate their performed versions of the *Rāmāyan* with Tulsidas' written text is their *Rāmāyan bhajan satsangs*. Tulsigiri understands the *bhajans* she sings in these contexts to be the same text that Tulsidas himself composed as a non-literate sadhu. Her conceptualization of the text beyond the written word provides a strategy by which Tulsigiri, in turn, connects herself back to the written textual tradition of Tulsidas. Even though she is non-literate (as she says, "I never even saw the school"), Tulsigiri creates herself as "literate" in the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* via her *bhajan* performances; and she understands that by the power of her *bhakti* to *bhagvān* as well as of the grace of guru, she receives textual knowledge.

But scripturality is as important to the non- and/or semi-literate male sadhus with whom I worked as it is to the female sadhus. Like many female sadhus, male sadhus, too, reconfigure the idea of the text beyond the written word in the construction of their individual scripturality. Baldevgiri, a non-literate male sadhu, creates a relationship with the literate *Rāmāyan* tradition through his identification of the *bhajans* he sings in *Rāmāyan satsang* with the songs that Tulsidas himself sang as he composed “the book everyone knows today as the *Rāmāyan*.” Not only that, Baldevgiri, like the female sadhus, incorporates the textual strategies of translation, commentary, and personalized storytelling into his textual performance, and in doing so, creates an engaging context that is simultaneously devotional as well as entertaining for his audience.

Although the performance strategies and styles of the male and female sadhus are similar, their constructions of asceticism through textual performance are gendered. Male sadhus like Baldevgiri construct asceticism primarily as a rigorous path of isolation, detachment, separation, and knowledge, whereas the female sadhus construct it as a path of selfless service, worldly engagement, and spiritual relationship. Hence, male sadhus’ textual performances of asceticism approximate the Brahmanical model, but those of female sadhus move beyond the dominant male model in the construction of an alternative (female) tradition of devotional asceticism.

Gangagiri’s *Gītā* performance exemplifies the ways in which female sadhus’ representations of asceticism differ markedly not only from the more standard analytic interpretations of asceticism in the *Gītā*, but more significantly, also from the view of asceticism the *Gītā* itself promotes. In both respects, asceticism is considered to be a lifestyle of non-action that is distinct from and opposed to the superlative path of *bhakti*.

Gangagiri, however, uses pivotal *Gītā* concepts such as *sannyās*, *tyāg*, and *yog* with which to construct asceticism in an alternative way as a devotional path of disciplined/dutiful action, in which sadhus serve both God and the world through means of their practices. At the same time, Gangagiri's *Gītā* performance creates devotion as a form of asceticism, and to that extent, *sannyās* and *bhakti* as "the same path." Gangagiri grounds her renunciant teaching in the written text; however, she crosses beyond the threshold of the *Gītā* on account of her idea of the text as an oral conversation between deity and devotee as well as her own gendered experience of asceticism as a path of love that enables her to assuage the suffering of those whom she serves on a daily basis.

Texts and Renunciant Female Authority

Apart from constructing their tradition of devotional asceticism, the Rajasthani female sadhus' textual performances also provide a strategy by which they create their individual religious authority as female ascetics in what is seen to be a male-dominated tradition. Their knowledge of oral, performed, and/or written versions of textual traditions allow the female sadhus to negotiate their public renunciant positions, as the following example demonstrates.

[S]harda [P]uri: [to audience] You should read the *Śiv Purāṇa*.²²⁸ It contains everything.
 [N]ityananda [P]uri: Yes, but you should make a guru first who will teach you the meaning of the text. Otherwise, you won't understand [what you read].
 SP: Whether or not you make a guru,
 NP: It [meaning, the teachings about how to make a guru] will come in the *Śiv Purāṇa*.
 SP: But whether or not you make a guru, the *Śiv Purāṇa* will tell you how to do this; it will tell you other things, too, like how to serve [him/her], and so on.
 NP: Yes, all this comes at the end of the text.
 SP: It doesn't come at the end; it comes at the beginning [of the text].
 NP: No, it comes in the sixth chapter. In the sixth chapter, [the text] will tell you that "I have to make such and such kind of guru."

²²⁸ The *Śiv Purāṇa* is considered to be one of the eighteen "*upa purāṇas*," or great *purāṇas*, and contains cosmogonic myths concerning the creation and destruction of the world/universe by the Hindu deity, Śiva.

SP: This [information] appears on the thirteenth page *dattā* [term of respect Sharda Puri uses for her guru, Nityananda Puri; literally means “generous one” or “benefactor.”].

NP: Yes, but it’s only discussed briefly [there]. The whole analysis comes later in the text.

SP: Look, [issues such as] on which day you should make a guru, all this is right here on the first page [shows Nityananda Puri the text].

NP: Yes, that’s correct. But it’s discussed here in an ordinary [*sadhāran*] way. The discussion [on how to make a guru] will come later [in the text] in a more detailed way, such as what kind of guru you need to have; what kind of behavior you should look for in the guru; what kind of character the guru should have, all this comes later in the text.

This conversation between Sharda Puri, a female sadhu with no more than a primary school education, and Nityananda Puri, a male sadhu who has a college education (a BSc in Agriculture) reveals the way female sadhus use their knowledge of texts as a strategy with which to legitimate their own ascetic authority. At issue here is not whether to make a guru, but rather where this information appears in the *Śiv Purāṇa*. Whereas Nityananda Puri understands these teachings to be discussed in the sixth chapter, Sharda Puri insists that this discussion occurs “at the beginning of the” *Śiv Purāṇa*. And, to prove her point, she shows Nityananda Puri the exact page (i.e., the thirteenth page) where the text expounds on when, where, and how to make a guru. While Nityananda Puri does not disagree with Sharda Puri, he distinguishes between the text’s introductory and detailed descriptions on the topic of the guru, and for this reason, explains that only the end of text contains “[t]he whole analysis.” And for Sharda Puri, the “part” analysis at the beginning is enough. The briefer passage at the beginning of the *Śiv Purāṇa* provides ample evidence with which to illustrate that the text also speaks about the importance of and procedures for making a guru. By showing her literate, male guru Nityananda Puri the text, Sharda Puri establishes her scriptural authority as well as her authority as a female ascetic. Most female sadhus, thus, use and interpret texts as a strategy to create themselves as “knowers” or religious experts.

The Communal Nature of Renunciant Textual Performances of Devotional Asceticism

Finally, the textual performances of the Rajasthani female (and male) sadhus occur in communal, devotional contexts of *satsang*. For all of the sadhus, regardless of gender, literacy, and education, *satsang* represents “a community of truth [*sat*]” where they gather in order to study texts, and hence, to remember and experience the divine through their performative interactions with the oral/written sacred word. *Satsang*, thus, serves as a potent *bhakti* source of the sadhus’ scripturality. Not only does *satsang* promote individual/group expression of *bhakti* to *bhagvān*, but *satsang* also empowers the sadhus to construct personal and transformative relationships with texts like the *Rāmāyan* and the *Gītā*. Furthermore, the interactional context of *satsang* may, indeed, create sadhus’ “literacy” in textual traditions. In all of the performances analyzed in this chapter, textual meaning is constructed amongst the participants, and the social construction of meaning, in turn, creates the sadhus’ comprehension and apprehension of their written sacred texts. In the *satsang* of the Rajasthani sadhus and *sants*, these *bhaktis* of *bhagvān*, as Gangagiri says, “grab the text[s] and never let go.” That is, the sadhus “write” their textual traditions *akṣar-by-akṣar* (letter-by-letter) in their hearts and in their minds to ensure that, at least in this life, they shall know peace and never suffer.

“My *bhajans* are my power.”
Gangagiri Maharaj

CHAPTER SIX

“*Leave Everything and Sing to God*”: Gender, Power, and the Performance of Devotional Asceticism through Song

Introduction

One July afternoon in 2003, I asked Tulsigiri and Gangagiri, who were teaching me how to shell dried green beans, to describe their understandings of renunciation. Both sadhus looked at each other for a moment and, after exchanging a few words, answered my question by singing a *bhajan* about sadhus and *sants* who are gathered in *satsang*, or devotional fellowship, singing *bhajans* to God.²²⁹ Following their performance Gangagiri asserted, “renunciation means to sing [*bhajans*] to God.” Like their personal and popular religious stories and textual recitations, *bhajans* constitute an important genre in the Rajasthani female sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation, enabling them to express love and devotion to God and to create everyday devotional practice as a form of renunciation in the construction of both ascetic identity and devotional asceticism.

A number of scholars have examined the ways individuals and/or communities in South Asia perform devotional songs as a strategy for the expression of identity, experiences, aspirations, and the concepts, values, and symbols illustrative of their lives and situations (cf. Flueckiger 2006, 1996; Raheja 2003; March 2003; Narayan 1995; Gold and Raheja 1994). Other scholars have explored the function of songs as a powerful

²²⁹ This *bhajan* and my translation of it are provided in the Introduction to the dissertation. See also Appendix B

medium for the expression of subaltern subjectivities that critique the social order (Martin 2007; Mukta 1997; Gold and Raheja 1994; Henry 1991). While much of this scholarship has focused on women's folk songs and how householder women, in particular, represent and empower themselves through song performance, a few scholars have also begun to examine the song traditions of renunciators (cf. Gross 1992; Henry 1988, 1991, 1995; Lorenzen 1996; Gold 1988, 1995). These studies, however, concentrate exclusively on the song performances of primarily itinerant male renunciators and are concerned with *bhajans* as a vehicle for the transmission of religious teachings and moral values and do not consider the ways in which *bhajans* serve as a strategy with which sadhus construct renouncer identity and, more broadly, renunciation. Thus, we ask: How does *bhajan* performance enable the female sadhus not only to create themselves and their devotional form of renunciation, but also to legitimate their own spiritual authority and power as female sadhus in male-dominant traditions of renunciation?

In this chapter, I discuss the female sadhus' understandings of the efficacy of *bhajan* singing as articulated in several of their conversational narratives. As the sound form of revelatory knowledge, or *śabd*, *bhajan* singing, according to the female sadhus, empowers and transforms them as ascetics; represents a symbolic currency of exchange between sadhus and householders; and serves as a form of *sevā* through which they serve God and the world. This chapter also examines the female sadhus' performative use of *bhajans* as an interpretive frame for the construction of ascetic identity. The *bhajans* to which the female sadhus attribute notions of power and efficacy, and which they emphasize sadhus should sing, are drawn from the *nirguṇī* poetry of the *sants*, the medieval *bhakti* poet-saints of north India. From the female sadhus' perspectives, *nirguṇī*

bhajan singing exemplifies *sant* asceticism, and by singing these *bhajans*, they construct and enact not only sadhu identity, but more specifically, sadhu identity as *sant* identity. Through *bhajan* performance, the Rajasthani female sadhus situate themselves in the *bhakti* tradition of *sant* asceticism as an alternative to Brahmanical asceticism, validating their spiritual authority as female sadhus in what is often seen as a male tradition of renunciation.

Finally, I analyze the female sadhus' performances of *nirguṇī bhajans* as resources by which means they construct devotional asceticism through emphasis on several key *nirguṇī sant* themes. Although the use of *nirguṇī bhajans* in the transmission of *sant* teachings is not unique to the Rajasthani female sadhus (Martin 2007; Shukla-Bhatt 2007; Schomer 1987; Lorenzen 1996; Mukta 1997; Henry 1988), their use of this poetry to construct and enact devotional asceticism illuminates a new context in which *sant* rhetoric becomes embedded in everyday renunciant devotional practice. Moreover, while both the male and the female sadhus with whom I worked sing *bhajans* in the expression of *bhakti* to God, the female sadhus, in particular, conceptualize *bhajan* singing as renunciation, and relatedly, *bhakti* as *tapas* or *tapasya*, i.e., asceticism. Furthermore, the female sadhus negotiate their individual public positions of renunciant power and authority by means of their *bhajan* performances. Singing *bhajans*, therefore, provides a means by which the female sadhus create and express their devotional asceticism as a path that coexists with and complements Brahmanical forms of Hindu asceticism.

I. “My *bhajans* are my power”: Performance and Power

For the majority of the female sadhus, *bhajan* singing (*bhajan karnā*) represents one of the most powerful devotional practices for both renunciators and householders. It is considered to be necessary in the time of the *Kālī Yūg*, the age of degeneration and darkness, which the sadhus, male or female, identify with the current world age.²³⁰

Gangagiri, like many of the female sadhus with whom I worked, often explains that in the *Satya Yūg*, the golden age of truth and enlightenment, the minds of humans were so pure (*suddh*) as to make religious practice unnecessary; in the *Kālī Yūg*, however, their minds have become so corrupted (*bhraṣṭ*) with lust, deception, and greed that humans must cling (*pakaḍnā*) to their *bhajans* as a means of protection from evil. Similarly, echoing the view of a few of the male sadhus I met, Mahant Mohan Anand, a sadhu in his early seventies who resides in an ashram in Udaipur City, told me that “in the *Kālī Yūg*, *bhajans* are the only truth [*satya*]. If you do any *sādhana* [spiritual practice], do *bhajans*, do *kīrtan* [i.e., individual and/or group singing of *bhajans*]; take the name of God [*bhagvān*].”

Whether they discuss *bhajan* or *kīrtan*, terms which the sadhus use interchangeably, the female sadhus more than the male sadhus I worked with consider *bhajan* singing to be a powerful practice because of the power it is believed to produce for them. A statement Gangagiri makes frequently in the context of our meetings supports this point: “My *bhajans* are my power [*śakti*].” Power, according to Gangagiri, can

²³⁰ Most of the sadhus have discussed the idea of the Four Yūgas, or ages, which consist of the Satya, Treta, Dwarpara, and Kālī Yūg. Whereas the Satya Yūg is considered to be the ideal age of perfection and wisdom, the Kālī Yūg is understood to be the age of evil and destruction. Many of the sadhus agree that while *bhakti* is difficult to practice in the Kālī Yūg, *bhajans* (and/or *kīrtan*) are one of the most productive and powerful *bhakti* practices for devotees in this age. For more information on the Four Ages as discussed in the *Purāṇas*, see Dimmitt and Van Buitenan (1978).

manifest as both devotional *and* ascetic power; even the mental power of insight or wisdom (*jnān*) is perceived as a direct effect of regular *bhajan* singing. Gangagiri implies her perception of *bhajan* singing not simply as devotional practice, but also as *ascetic* practice. Gangagiri's views on *bhajan* singing as efficacious ascetic practice have been similarly expressed by other Rajasthani female sadhus. Thus, not unlike their understandings of textual recitation as efficacious, the female sadhus' statements suggest an underlying ideology of the inherent efficacy of *bhajan* singing, a practice they consider to be equivalent to asceticism. Before analyzing their *bhajans* as resources for constructing devotional asceticism, below I examine five short conversational narratives of two female sadhus and one male sadhu in order to illustrate some general patterns in their gendered interpretations of this ideology and the central messages about *bhajan* singing (and asceticism) that it implies.

IA. *Bhajan* Singing as a Transformative Ascetic Practice

Gangagiri repeatedly discusses well-known local legends about a renowned Mewari sadhu, the late Bholenathji, whom she identifies as the “grandfather” (*dādā*) guru of Devi Nath, a female sadhu who manages an ashram right across from Gangagiri's hermitage at the Mahakaleshwar Temple in Udaipur city. According to Gangagiri's narratives of his life, besides living to an age of more than one-hundred and fifty years, a detail most of my sadhu and householder collaborators considered a fact, Bholenath could transform his female disciples into lionesses; talk to crows and send them on distant journeys in search of medicine (*jaḍī-bhūtī*) to heal his devotees of physical and mental diseases; and make troublesome gods or spirits behave by binding them with his

words.²³¹ In her commentaries on these legends, Gangagiri attributes Bholenath's unusual abilities to "the power of his *bhajans*." One of Gangagiri's narratives underscores *bhajan* singing as an empowering practice in its depiction of the relationship between Bholenath and his royal disciple, Fateh Singh (ca. 1884-1930), a *mahārāṇā* who, under the auspices of the Sisodiya dynasty, had ruled the region of Mewar (cf. Harlan 1992).²³² Here, Gangagiri speaks about Bholenathji to me and my assistant, Manvendra Singh:

GG: [Devi Nath's] *dādā* guru was a great *siddha* [lit., someone endowed with supernatural powers]. He only sang *bhajans*. His name was Bholenathji...He only sang *bhajans*. Have you seen his *āsan* [i.e., his seat] at the temple?

MS: Yes, I've seen it.

GG: Well, he used to sit on that wooden bed [his *āsan*] and receive visitors. This happened during the time of Fateh Singh. This was before [the time of] Bhopal Singh [Arvind Singh's grandfather]...He [Fateh Singh] used to come to the ashram to where Bholenath used to sit. That *āsan* is still kept there [at Devi Nath's ashram]. He [Fateh Singh] used to come and sit on the floor. And Bholenathji used to say, "Fatiya [an endearing way Bholenath addressed Fateh Singh], you are the king of Udaipur, but I'm the king of the world."

MS: No way, Maharaj [formal term of address Manvendra uses for Gangagiri]! Did he [Bholenath] really say that [to Fateh Singh]?

GG: Yes. He said, "Fatiya, you are the king of Udaipur, but I'm the king of the world. Fan me." He spoke like this to him [Fateh Singh]. So, Fateh Singh would say, "As you wish, *andattā* [lit., benevolent one]," and fanned him. [Emphasis] He used to fan Bholenathji [Gangagiri laughs].

Gangagiri's story begs the question, "Who is the sovereign and who is the servant?" In this narrative, not only the roles, but also the hierarchy between sadhu and king are reversed. Rather than Bholenath serving his king, Fateh Singh serves his sadhu, and as the legend implies, his guru, as a divine form. The fan, a symbol of royalty in

²³¹ I have included in the Appendix one of Gangagiri's narratives of Bholenath's turning his female disciples into lionesses and his sending a crow on a journey for medicine to cure one of his devotees of an unknown illness.

²³² The Maharana Fateh Singh was the great-grandfather of the current *mahārāṇā*—in title—Arvind Singh. Interestingly, Gangagiri begins many of her legends about Bholenathji by framing this as a conversation between the sadhu and Fateh Singh. In listening to Gangagiri's telling of these legends I was reminded of some of the Hindi legends about the relationship between the Moghul emperor Akbar and his famous court minister, Birbal.

classical Indian poetry,²³³ signifies Bholenath's royal and, thus, divine status vis-à-vis that of Fateh Singh's, who, in fanning Bholenath, expresses his own subservience to the sadhu. Even though he is the king of Udaipur, Gangagiri's narrative makes explicit the point that Fateh Singh's secular ranking falls below that of Bholenath's spiritual ranking, who, in this legend, describes himself to his humble Rajput disciple in an almost semi-divine manner as "the king of the world."

At the beginning of her narration, Gangagiri emphasizes that Bholenathji "only sang *bhajans*," making this statement twice in her oral performance. Hence, *bhajan* singing provides an overarching narrative frame within which Gangagiri constructs the rest of this popular legend. Her framing of the story helps to explain the reasoning behind the switched roles and hierarchy between Bholenath and Fateh Singh. Simply being a sadhu, or as many of the sadhus have told me, simply "wearing the ochre-robos [*bhagvā*]," hardly entitles Bholenath to a life of power and authority equivalent to (or greater than) that of a king. On the contrary, his authority, power, and status derive from what Gangagiri perceives to be his *ascetic* practice of *bhajan* singing. Thus, through this narrative performance Gangagiri communicates her understanding that sadhus who sing *bhajans* become as powerful as kings, or *mahārājās*. Through emphasis on *bhajan* singing Gangagiri not only constructs devotional practice *as* ascetic practice, but also devotional asceticism. Note the special way Manvendra Singh addresses Gangagiri: he respectfully calls her "*mahārāj*," and by doing so, carefully alludes to her own devotional *and* ascetic power as a sadhu, one who, in fact, identifies *bhajan*-singing with asceticism. We might further contrast here the way Manvendra, a Rajput, formally addresses

²³³ See, for instance, Kalidasa's, *Kumārasambhava*, a Sanskrit poem on the birth of Kumāra, where such fan imagery is plentiful.

Gangagiri with the informal manner in which Bholenath speaks to Fateh Singh, who refers to the king as “Fatiya,” which, as I was told, also means “*little* Fateh.” While *mahārāj* denotes “great king,” most of the householders whom I observed in *satsang* use this word as a title to address sadhus in general, regardless of gender,²³⁴ by which they implicate underlying cultural perceptions of sadhus as religious virtuosi.

Yet, as Gangagiri’s story also suggests, *bhajan* singing not only empowers sadhus, it also transforms them into divine beings. Gangagiri’s story illustrates that Bholenath’s *bhajans* transformed him from an ordinary to an extraordinary sadhu, that is, a *siddha*. This term connotes the idea of persons who, having developed supernatural powers and abilities on the basis of their spiritual practices, have become divine in their own right. In her use of the word *siddha* to describe Bholenath, Gangagiri implicitly associates both his remarkable ascetic power and spiritual transformation into a *siddha* with *bhajans*, suggesting *bhajans* function as agents of ascetic power and transformation.²³⁵ A few of the male sadhus with whom I worked discuss *bhajans* in a similar way. Baldevgiri, for example, explains that by singing *bhajans* sadhus can develop into *siddhas* and even increase their lifespan by up to “two-thousand years.”²³⁶ “From singing the *bhajans* of *bhagvān*,” Baldevgiri asserts, “anything can happen.”

Though his statements appear to imply an understanding of *bhajan* singing as a type of

²³⁴ It is important to state here that householders also address the female sadhus in a strictly feminine way by calling them “Mātājīs” or “Māīrām,” both of which mean “holy *mother*.” See Meena Khandelwal (2004) for a discussion of the ways the communities of female sadhus with whom she worked were also addressed as Mātājīs. What I want to draw attention to here is that householders’ use of the title, *mahārāj*, to refer to sadhus, whether directly or indirectly, captures the underlying associations they, too, make between sadhus and kings, and to this extent, the underlying perceptions of sadhus as class of powerful beings.

²³⁵ Gangagiri’s understanding of *bhajans* as agents of power and transformation approximates ancient Vedic commentarial understandings of *mantras* as “agents of transformation.” See Laurie Patton (1996).

²³⁶ This idea that *bhajans*, and more specifically, *bhajan* singing makes sadhus live longer was present in the female sadhus’ rhetoric as well. Gangagiri told me a story of how two sadhus lived through two *yūgas* just by doing “crores and lakhs” of *bhajans*. I provide her telling of this story in the Appendix.

ascetic practice, unlike most of the female sadhus, Baldevgiri does not himself equate devotion with renunciation.

IB. *Bhajan* Singing as Symbolic Form of Currency Exchange²³⁷

Through *bhajan* performance, as Gangagiri stresses, the extraordinary Bholenathji acquired everything, from inner power to outer material items, and gifts like money, gold, and food. Gangagiri understands that *bhajans* function as a type of symbolic currency, whose exchange enables sadhus to amass (sometimes inordinate amounts of) material wealth given by their householder patrons (cf. Patton 1996). This idea of *bhajans* as spiritual currency of exchange represents another motif embedded in the female sadhus' ideology of *bhajan* singing as efficacious, and appears in our next conversational narrative, wherein Gangagiri attributes the financial success of Devi Nath's ashram to the *bhajan* singing of her exemplary *dādā* guru, Bholenathji. This particular narrative emerged on account of an audience member, Nem Singh, an elderly male devotee of Gangagiri, who inquired as to how Devi Nath, a paraplegic at the time, "earns" (*kamāī karnā*) so much money for her ashram/temple. Like most of the sadhus with whom I worked, Devi Nath has no economic base, and as such, no independent income. And yet, as Nem Singh posed, "Her money must come from somewhere?" Some members volunteered that her earnings (*kamāī*) come from the donations of generous temple go-ers and disciples (*chelas*); others, though, thought the money/donations come directly from the Mahakaleshwar Temple trust.²³⁸ Gangagiri, however, refuted these claims. From her

²³⁷ I am indebted to Laurie Patton for conversations about *bhajans* as symbolic forms of currency, and owe my own thinking about the sadhus' understandings of *bhajans* to Patton's discussion about *mantras* as forms of currency of exchange, in her essay (1996), "Myth and Money: The Exchange of Words and Wealth in Vedic Commentary."

²³⁸ The Mahakaleshwar Temple trust provides for the economic support of its Nāth sadhus.

perspective, “the whole world gives money [to Devi Nath and her temple]” because of the “brilliance [*pratāp*] of Bholenath’s *bhajans*.” She explained:

GG: That’s why a lot of money and gifts still come [there], because of the brilliance of his [Bholenath’s] *bhajans*. Bholenath used to have a pair of shoes with a sword pin [attached to] them. That sword [on both shoes] was made of gold. The cover of the swords was made of gold. He used to tie a turban on his head. It was saffron-colored [*bhagvā*]. On the top of that turban was this big, gold broach. Have you seen his photo? Antoinette: Yes. I saw it last year [when I visited Devi Nath at the temple].²³⁹

GG: And he used to wear a long coat over his clothes, and not only was that coat gold-colored, it even had real gold buttons.

MS: You’re talking about Bholenathji?

GG: Yes, I’m discussing Bholenathji. One prostitute and drummer used to visit him all the time just to acquire all his wealth. They came [to the ashram] without being called. The prostitute used to dance at [the front] door, while the drummer used to play his drums at the back door. Bholenath didn’t come out [to greet them]. He used to call Jnan Nath [his female sadhu disciple]: “Jnan Nath, come here!” He used to say. He would sit on a high seat [*āsan*] in a meditative position and give gold coins [to Jnan Nath]. He told her, “Here, give this to the drummer; give this to the prostitute”... He would give a plate full of gold coins. He used to sit like a king; he sat high on his seat and distributed [to Jnan Nath] gold coins. He used to eat only one *pūrī* [i.e., deep-fried bread] everyday. He didn’t eat *rotī* [plain wheat bread]; he ate one *pūrī*. He didn’t eat vegetables; he ate only one *pūrī*.

A: Only one *pūrī*? That’s it?

GG: He ate only one *pūrī*; he didn’t eat any vegetables. In [a period of] twenty-four hours, he ate only one *pūrī*. That’s it.

A: Where did Bholenath’s power [*śakti*] come from?

GG: From his *bhajans*. Where else? There’s a lot of power in [singing] *bhajans*.

Though without an economic base, Bholenath, according to Gangagiri’s narrative, was not without economic support. He lived like a king, a view the legend itself underscores through symbols such as his “high seat”; the golden swords on his shoes; his turban’s “big” gold broach; his gold-colored coat with its “real” gold buttons; and, of course, the gold coins, which signal Bholenath’s disposable income. Each of these images signifies Bholenath’s royal status. Like a king, he had (and commanded) servants

²³⁹ Due to her extensive paralysis, Devi Nath’s son brought her to his home (2002), where he and his family could care for her. His home is located in a village thirty kilometers away from Udaipur. When I returned in 2004 to Udaipur, I learned that Devi Nath had moved back to her space at the Mahakaleshwar Temple.

in the form of disciples, including four female sadhus, to serve him day and night.²⁴⁰ Even Bholenath's daily diet of *pūrī* (fried breads) conveys his economic wealth and prestige. As I learned from conversations with sadhus and householders, *pūrīs* are usually served on special occasions, such as religious holidays, birthdays, and festivals. Since they require oil—a precious commodity in many Indian households—for their preparation, *pūrīs* not only cost more, but also take more time to make than *chappattīs* (unleavened wheat bread), for example, which are a staple food in most north Indian diets. But Bholenath only ate a single *pūrī* everyday. This detail supplies an important narrative frame that intimates his ascetic discipline and power. Nevertheless, Bholenath's subsistence on this particular luxury food item, rather than that of simply *chappattī* and/or *dāl* (lentil soup), attests to his material wealth.

How did Bholenath produce so much wealth? “From singing his *bhajans*,” Gangagiri states matter-of-factly. Where else could the power to create and sustain such wealth come from? But Gangagiri narrates this legend not to glorify material wealth, a perspective that would contradict the purpose of her own ascetic life. Rather, she tells this story in order to emphasize the inherent power and efficacy of *bhajan* performance: “There's a lot of power in *bhajans*,” Gangagiri affirms at the end of her narration. However, the story effectively illustrates the idea that *bhajans* are literally worth their weight in gold, and thus, constitute what Laurie Patton calls “a media of exchange” between sadhus and householders (Patton 1996, 208).

Gangagiri frequently teaches that “a single *nirguṇī bhajan* [song which praises a formless god] is worth a single one-hundred rupee note,” implying that Bholenath must

²⁴⁰ This narrative only mentions the female disciple, Jnan Nath. In the other legends Gangagiri told me, though, Bholenath has four female disciples: Jnan Nath, Durga Nath, Lehar Nath, and Jamuna Nath. See Appendix C: The Stories.

have sung just *nirguṇī bhajans*. Gangagiri suggests *nirguṇī bhajans* have monetary value greater than that of *saguṇī bhajans* (songs that praise the different manifestations of God). Their high value derives from the fact that *nirguṇī bhajans* are considered to be the sound vehicles of revelatory knowledge of the soul and of God (*ātma* and *brahma-jnān*). Once Gangagiri told me, “Look, I don’t talk about *bhajans*; I talk about knowledge...*Bhajans* have power [because] inside of them is divine knowledge. This [knowledge] is very expensive [*mahengā*].” As with her *nirguṇī bhajans*, Gangagiri also characterizes the *Gītā* as a text “worth a single one-rupee note,” implying that she perceives this text to be illustrative of the empowering and transformative *ātma/brahma-jnān*. Gangagiri, thus, situates *nirguṇī bhajans* within a similar conceptual framework of transformative speech. Like Kṛṣṇa’s divine speech, *bhajans* represent agents of power and transformation as they express liberating or, as she likes to say, “very expensive” knowledge. By virtue of their soteriological value, *bhajans* qualify as currency of exchange that bestows upon the sadhus who sing them magnificent, material wealth and spiritual status.

Gangagiri’s representations of *bhajans* as valuable symbolic currency parallel early and late Vedic textual depictions of divine speech as types of wealth and currency of exchange. In her examination of several narratives, or myths, about money,²⁴¹ Patton demonstrates that in the Vedic world *mantras* (sacred poetic verses) constituted precious forms of wealth and currency for brahmin priests, in particular, whose lives depended on the exchange of words for material wealth in the form of livestock (e.g., goats, horses, and cows), jewels, money, even wives (Patton 1996). As with Gangagiri’s understanding

²⁴¹ Patton works with some of the earliest texts in the Vedic corpus, such as the *R̥g* and *Athārva Veda*; she also examines later sources in terms of the Vedic commentaries, such as the *Bṛhaddevatā*.

of *bhajan* singing, in the Vedic world, too, as Patton discusses, *mantra* utterance, exemplary of knowledge and skill, confers prestige and status on its performers. In this light, *mantras*, contends Patton, not only “function as agents of transformation that affect the identity of the individual in the process of exchanging” (216), but also represent “a valuable commodity in the system of Vedic exchange” (214). Patton explains:

[*Mantras*'] value...was placed within a context of exchange, as the Vedic poets themselves tell us. We must take the language of *mantra* at face value, and realize that the very self-reflexivity of the work—the references to *mantra* and *sukta* (hymn) in Rg-Vedic verses themselves—are more often than not explicitly linked to the expected return for the offering of the constructed word. It would be needless to multiply the staggering number of possible examples here. Suffice it to say that one might read the simplest Rg-Vedic expression differently: “The man who honors you today, Agni and Soma, with this speech, bestow on him heroic strength, an increase of cows and noble steeds” (RV 1.93.2) can be seen as a statement of a transaction between two kinds of value, wherein one agent bestows the word and the other bestows the wealth (Patton 1996, 215).

Gangagiri’s statement about the monetary value of *nirgunī bhajans* has more spiritual than material connotations in terms of the lives of the sadhus. Nonetheless, if, as Patton argues with respect to the Vedic language of *mantras*, we take Gangagiri’s words at “face value,” she too suggests that right speech (here, *bhajans*), has material consequences for its speakers, and more importantly, that sadhus, like the Brahmins of the ancient Vedic world, earn or create their own wealth through the means of their words.

This theme of words as wealth and currency of exchange underlies Gangagiri’s Bholenath narrative. Implicit in this story is the notion that in exchange for his *bhajans*, or his religious teachings, Bholenath received valuable gifts of money, gold, jewels, clothing, food, and, according to one legend, a donkey (which he named Fateh Singh!). He did not purchase any of these items for himself; rather Bholenath’s devotees and disciples showered him with such donations as symbols of their gratitude and

appreciation. By singing his *bhajans*, Bholenath had given his listeners, including Fateh Singh, sacred words of power and transformation, which, in turn, enabled them to prosper in their own lives. He also provided an important religious service for his constituency, on account of which he acquired great material wealth. Bholenath's *bhajans*, therefore, have a double signification: they represent his spiritual assets and become the means by which he creates his own materials assets. *Bhajans* constitute a precious commodity in the system of sadhu-householder exchanges (cf. Narayan 1989; Gross 1992).

One of my earliest collaborators, an elderly male householder in his late seventies, who drove me from one field site to another, repeatedly told me to leave donations (*dakṣin*) for the sadhus in the form of cash/coin, food, or cloth, after meeting with them. However, he also cautioned that offerings should reflect the amount of learning, or knowledge, I had received from the sadhus. In this context, knowledge meant not simply the sadhus' personal information about when and why they had renounced the world, but more importantly their spiritual teachings, expressed through their "utterances" (*vāṇī*), such as their songs, stories, and proverbs, for example, which would help me to understand their ascetic worlds. Sadhus who gave "good utterances" should, according to my collaborator's estimation, receive between fifty-one and one-hundred and one rupees,²⁴² whereas sadhus who did not should get no more than eleven rupees. This collaborator, who frequently acknowledged the eloquence and value of Gangagiri's utterances, referring to her on several occasions as a "poet [*kavi*]," felt that I should offer her *at least* one-hundred and one rupees (an odd, rather than even, amount of money is

²⁴² Here, odd amounts like fifty-one or one-hundred one are auspicious numbers. My collaborator explained to me that it was my responsibility to decide if a sadhu's teachings were worth fifty-one or one-hundred and one rupees.

viewed as auspicious) for what he characterized as our “conversational exchanges” [*bārchīt*].²⁴³

I also heard many other householders, male and female, discuss in detail the legitimacy of several of the sadhus with whom I had established a working relationship on the basis of the quality of their utterances. For instance, one late-afternoon in December of 2005, while travelling in a car owned by a relative of my Brahmin host family, the subject of sadhus like Gangagiri, arose. Of the six members present, four of them agreed that she was a “true sadhu” because she sang “beautiful *bhajans*.”²⁴⁴ In fact, my host father, who knew many sadhus in Rajasthan and beyond, and who had described his personal interest in their way of life as a life-long hobby (*śauk*), introduced me to four sadhus,²⁴⁵ whose extraordinary reputations, I soon discovered, pivoted primarily on their devotional practices of *bhajan* singing and/or storytelling. With several of these sadhus, I observed a correlation between their utterances, the relative wealth of their ashrams, and their perceived religious status amongst their devotees and disciples.

To illustrate an example, from our very first meeting in October 2005, Barfani Baba, an elderly male sadhu²⁴⁶ with a gentle, child-like disposition, is always surrounded by people at his ashram, and for good reason.²⁴⁷ He shares his religious teachings with

²⁴³ Let me clarify here that this was my method in the beginning stages of my field research. However, when I returned in 2004, I showed my gratitude to Gangagiri by purchasing materials for her, such as buying vegetables, milk, and bags of grain. Sometimes, I would purchase materials for her daily *pūjā* rituals, such as incense, ghee, and so forth. This became my standard practice for meeting with all of the sadhus. I always showed up with something that they could use either for themselves or for their ashrams.

²⁴⁴ Only four of these householders agreed on this issue because the other two did not know Gangagiri. But, after listening to the other members extol her greatness as a sadhu, they became eager to meet her and asked my host father what types of materials they should bring her to show their respect.

²⁴⁵ Three were male and one was female.

²⁴⁶ Like many sadhus I met, Barfani Baba claimed to be one-hundred and eight year of age.

²⁴⁷ Barfani Baba resides at a Śiva temple/ashram located approximately twelve kilometers west of Udaipur. With the exception of me and my host sister, who, along with her father, accompanied me on my initial visit to the ashram, all the members of Barfani Baba’s audience were mostly middle-aged men who lived in the surrounding village.

his devotees, disciples, and visitors by singing *bhajans* and telling titillating tales of sadhus, *sants*, and wayward devotees (*bhakts*) of God. On account of his devotion to God, which he expresses through the means of song and story, Barfani Baba has become a well-known religious figure in Rajasthan. The state's Prime Minister, Vasundhara Raje Scindia,²⁴⁸ as Barfani Baba told me, had visited his ashram in order to have his *darśan* and receive his blessings. Some of the audience members, too, have travelled from as far as Madhya Pradesh to hear Barfani Baba speak. One individual, an articulate, male sadhu in his early twenties, told me he came from his ashram in Bombay at the command of his guru to be in the presence of Barfani Baba, whom he referred to as a “great saint.”²⁴⁹ This same disciple explained to me that if I wanted to ‘interview’ Barfani Baba, I would have to ask him questions. Otherwise, “Babaji” would just sing for the duration of the *satsang*, because, in the words of my acquaintance, “this is how [Barfani Baba] speaks.”

Apart from the throngs of people who flock to his side daily for *darśan*, Barfani Baba is surrounded by a lot of valuable, material things. These items, donations from his numerous and wealthy householder patrons, readily indicate that not only the wealth Barfani Baba has amassed, but also his prestige as a powerful, yet humble sadhu, are the results of his “beautiful” utterances. As with the depiction of Bholenath in popular Mewari lore, Barfani Baba's *bhajans* function as symbolic currency of exchange between him and his patrons. Almost everyone who enters his ashram brings him something useful. Some devotees, like my host father, bring milk and sugar for Barfani Baba's tea (*chai*); some bring him cigarettes (*bīdīs*); others bring him ochre-colored fabrics. More

²⁴⁸ While I was living in India between 2004 and 2006, Vasundara Raje was the Prime Minister of Rajasthan.

²⁴⁹ This disciple expressed this idea in English. This was one of the few instances in which the young male sadhu spoke to me in English.

wealthy disciples bequeath him expensive gifts in the form of a silver Rolex watch; gold jewelry (e.g., necklaces and bracelets); and even a round-trip ticket to Russia (the country of origin of one of his foreign disciples). Though surrounded by wealth, Barfani Baba explained to his enrapt audience that he has no use for such impermanent things. After narrating a tale about the four *yūgas*, Barfani Baba frankly discussed the topic of wealth. He said:

[B]arfani [B]aba: The *mahātmās* [here, sadhus and sants] of the *satya yūg* were such that they used to give, not take.

[J]agdish [S]anadhyia²⁵⁰: And, in the *kalyūg*, they only take.

BB: Yes, they take money...[But] before [i.e., in the *satya yūg*], the *sants* used to give.

JS: Yes.

BB: They [the *sants/sadhus*] had a lot. They were healthy, too. Today's *sants* don't have anything, and they're [physically] sick. They think, "We need to have wealth [*dhān*]. But I live like I'm in the *satya yūg*. I tell myself that I don't need wealth. I only need what God has given: shade, work, and sun. That's it. What else do I need? I only need what God himself has given: shade, work, and sun. I don't have any need for wealth. But [the accumulation of wealth] has become a hobby [for some sadhus]. That's why they wish for it. Otherwise, it has no meaning.

JS: That's right.

BB: I don't wish for anything. I don't wish for wealth, and if it shall come to me today, I'll chase it away.

JS: Yes.

BB: And then I can sleep [i.e., live without worries]... You see all these things [in the ashram], they have no meaning for me.

JS: Okay.

BB: What love can you have with these [material] things? Some things, some objects are very beautiful, right? [Some disciples tell me], "Wear this gold ring," or "wear this gold necklace." But if I wore all these things, I'd become heavy! These [things] are useless [to me].

JS: Right!

BB: If I don't wear them, I'll be very light, indeed.

JS: [laughs] Yes.

BB: "Wear this ring," "wear this necklace," they say. But this is a habit, isn't it? I don't need anything. People [i.e., devotees] have painted [these] walls [of the ashram]; they have given clothes, silver... Look how many holes they put in the walls [in order to hang pictures]? They've put so many holes in the wall. Hai Ram! I've become very upset [by all this]. I told myself that I need to remove everything [from the walls]. Now the holes are gone, and pictures are gone. So, I'm happy.

[Audience member]: You've become content, Babaji.

BB: ...I don't need anything. Now, he [Barfani Baba mentions the name of a Russian disciple who was not present in the audience] has brought me this big, gold bracelet. How can I wear this thing? How can I wear so much weight?

²⁵⁰JS refers to Jagdish Sanadhyia, my Brahmin host father.

JS: Yes.

BB: Where is it? [He searches for the bracelet]. I know it's here someplace. And look at this ring [that this disciple has brought me]. It has two-hundred fifty grams of gold. And how many necklaces he [the Russian disciple] brought! He has brought so many things, but I don't need them.

JS: Yes.

BB: I become unhappy with such uselessness [*khāmo-khām*]. What's the value of these things to me? Over there [points to a section of the ashram] are many precious things [given by devotees]...But I don't need any of it! I don't need anything. It's all right, because they [i.e., devotees] give these things with love [in their hearts]. You [the audience] have come, therefore I have everything. I have your love, so I have everything. I'm happy.

JS: Yes!

BB: What is my work here? I have to sing my *bhajans*. From [singing] *bhajans*, everything happens.

Barfani Baba's public denouncement of wealth (*dhān*) is significant. Notice, however, that he does not denounce wealth itself, but rather the sadhus and *sants* who have become attached to it. This narrative frame enables Barfani Baba to distinguish himself from the class of greedy sadhus whose obsession with money and material things has become, as he says, "a hobby." Barfani Baba is poignantly honest about the fact that he has acquired a lot of wealth at his ashram. He not only describes but even shows his audience the gold necklaces, the bracelets, and the rings that his Russian disciple offered him as a sign of his love for Barfani Baba. But Barfani Baba distinguishes himself from other sadhus who might also possess such seemingly valuable items in that these materials have absolutely no meaning for him. "What's the value of these things to me," he asks rhetorically, implying that sadhus, who have renounced the world, "don't need wealth." Throughout his performance, Barfani Baba states eight times that he does not "need anything," especially wealth. I have also observed several female sadhus make similar pronouncements in contexts where their devotees presented them with gifts.²⁵¹ In

²⁵¹ For instance, I observed Gangagiri make a similar performance of the uselessness of wealth at Jagdish's house. As she was leaving the family's home, my Brahmin host mother approached her in order to give her some money. Gangagiri, however, immediately said, "No, no. I don't need anything. I have your love. I

Barfani Baba's case, he maintains, "I don't wish for anything. I don't wish for wealth, and if it shall come to me today, I'll chase it away." Barfani Baba, of course, does not chase his wealth away, since, as he later notes, devotees give it "with love," and as such, "it's all right."

Nevertheless, by emphasizing that he does not need wealth, and that material goods lack both meaning and value for him, Barfani Baba implies a fundamental concept which repeatedly surfaces in the sadhus' rhetoric of renunciation—that of detachment (*vairāg*). Recall from the discussion in chapter three that detachment appears as an explicit narrative theme in the personal narratives of the male sadhus and as an implicit one in those of the female sadhus. In this conversational narrative, too, Barfani Baba constructs and performs his renunciatory identity by means of an implied notion of detachment, and in doing so, establishes his legitimacy as a sadhu, despite his being surrounded by wealth. Indeed, if Barfani Baba requires anything, it is simply his *bhajans* and the love (*prem*) of his devotees. "What is my work here?" asks Barfani Baba, "to sing [my] *bhajans*." He himself tells the audience that "by [singing] *bhajans*, everything happens." This statement is a mirror-image of the way Gangagiri describes *bhajans*. Like Gangagiri, Barfani Baba also views his *bhajans* and his love as "expensive" commodities. More significantly, he suggests that, unlike the sadhus whose wish for wealth attracts it into their lives, his *bhajans* themselves effect everything from his health to his material wealth. Barfani Baba further indicates that singing his *bhajans* allows him to offer treasures of spiritual wealth to devotees/disciples as a sign of his own love, an act

have the love of this family." Then, she accepted the money and placed in a blouse hidden beneath her ochre-colored shirt.

that, in turn, makes him a “giver” sadhu, rather than, as he points out, a “taker” sadhu, that is, a “*svādhu*.”²⁵²

IC. Bhajan Singing as Sadhus’ Sevā to Humanity

Barfani Baba’s representation of *bhajan*-singing as a selfless act of giving devotees his love and knowledge illuminates the third theme of *bhajan* singing as *sevā* to humanity. However, unlike the previous two themes we have examined, that of *bhajan* singing as *sevā*, and more broadly, of *bhajan* singing as asceticism, appears more in the female sadhus’ oral narratives than in the male sadhus’. This is not to say that the male sadhus I met do not discuss the concept of *sevā*; they do. They do not, however, associate *sevā* with *bhajan* singing, or the latter with renunciation. This difference illustrates the sadhus’ gendered understandings not only of the power of *bhajan* performance, but also of asceticism. While only two of the fifteen male sadhus I interviewed, namely Baldevgiri and Barfani Baba, make suggestions along the lines that *bhajan* singing functions as a form of *sevā* to humanity, neither of them explicitly define asceticism in terms of *bhajan* singing, or *bhakti* more globally. In contrast, most of the female sadhus, who equate *bhajan* singing with renunciation, describe *bhajans* as a type of blessing (*āśīrvād; duā*) that should be offered to everyone, regardless of gender, caste, economic status.²⁵³ In their views, the efficacy and thus power of *bhajan* singing stems in part not only from its function as a blessing for humanity, but also from the sharing that occurs between the female sadhus and their householder devotees in the process of singing. In

²⁵² I often heard householders and sadhus refer to greedy sadhus in a derogatory manner as “*svādhus*,” implying sadhus who think only of themselves instead of others. Most of my collaborators who used this term indicated their own perceptions that sadhus should (ideally) remain detached from material needs/concerns and serve others.

²⁵³ Barfani Baba also described *bhajans* as a type of blessing.

this way, singing *bhajans* for others' benefit is what makes this devotional practice an act of *sevā* to the world and to God.²⁵⁴ Tulsigiri explains:

Bhajans are blessings [*āśīrvād*], for you, for me, for everyone. Therefore, we [sadhus] sing *bhajans* for you, for the young and old people. If we don't do *bhajans*, we commit a sin. If you go see some Baba, [i.e., sadhu] and he's just sitting there, [then], he's wasting time. And if you sit with such a Baba, you'll waste time, too. Every moment something dies. Whenever you grind wheat, flour, or corn, some creature [*janwār*] dies; even if you bring water [from a well], a creature dies. [But] by singing *bhajans*, the sin [of killing creatures] is removed. [If sadhus don't sing *bhajans*], who will take this sin [away]? Someone has to take [away] the sin, right?

Although she does not explicitly mention the term, Tulsigiri suggests that *bhajan* singing represents a form of *sevā* in several ways. First, she equates *bhajans* with blessings and expresses her understanding that “babas,” or sadhus, who sing them, “for the young and [for] the old,” bless humanity, whereas those who do not “commit a sin.” Implicit in Tulsigiri's words is the idea that *bhajan* singing constitutes the duty (*kartavya*) of sadhus, a practice they must perform as the “beggars of God.” As with the female sadhus of Haridwar with whom Khandelwal worked, for most of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked, *sevā* to humanity also signifies an act of love for both God and the world (cf. Khandelwal 2004).

Second, Tulsigiri further reveals her perception of *bhajan* singing as *sevā* when she emphasizes that this practice enables sadhus to remove the sins of humanity. From her perspective, sadhus have a duty not just to God, but to the world as well. If, as Tulsigiri implies in the passage, sadhus do not sing *bhajans*, then, as she makes explicit toward the end of the discussion, “[w]ho will take [away] the sin[s]?” In this

²⁵⁴ The female sadhus' understandings of *bhajan* singing as *sevā* approximate the view of a female Baul sadhu with whom Kristin Hanssen worked. According to Hanssen, Tara Devi, a married Baul sadhu, seems to understand *bhajan* singing as a type of spiritual transaction through which means she exchanges her life (*prān*) in service to humanity. By doing so, she (hopes to) receive donations from patrons for economic support. For Tara Devi, singing *bhajans* enable her and her husband to earn a living (since sadhus do not work). See Hanssen 2006.

conversation we find associations between *bhajan* singing as *sevā*, and *sevā* as love for all the moving and unmoving, seen and unseen, “creatures” (*janwār*) of the world. Importantly, for Tulsigiri, sin is not simply intentional acts (e.g., murder or suicide), but also unintentional acts, such as eating food or drinking water, through which humans, in particular, take the lives of others so that they may continue to live on the planet. Though unintentional, these acts comprise the category of sin, for which some type of atonement (*prāyaścīt*) must occur. Tulsigiri explains: “Every moment something dies. Whether you grind wheat, flour, or corn, some creature dies. Even if you bring water [from a well] a creature dies... Someone *has* to take the sin [away], right?”²⁵⁵ Here, Tulsigiri refers to the creatures humans cannot readily see with the naked eye, those beings who sacrifice their lives in order that humans may live. Thus, for her, *bhajan* singing represents *sevā* because of its dual function: it serves as a blessing and a means for the atonement of sins; and by singing *bhajans* the female sadhus understand that they bless the living as well as honor the dead.

In this next conversation, Tulsigiri explicitly associates *bhajan* singing with *sevā*. Moreover, she describes this *bhakti* practice as a “*sevā* of connection [*dorī*”²⁵⁶],” whereby sadhus create a relationship with God and with the people (or creatures) whom they serve as manifestations of the divine, suggesting therefore an understanding of devotion as asceticism:

I sing *bhajans*. I mean, we [sadhus] do God’s *sevā* by singing *bhajans*. For the helpless people, we make them confident [and] we make their pain and suffering go away... It’s like this, through *sevā* we become connected with God. For us [sadhus], it’s not like *sevā* doesn’t happen until and unless we wash God’s *mūrtī* and spread [God’s] flowers. [Tulsigiri distinguishes between *pūjā* and *sevā* here]. That’s not *sevā* for us. Everyone does that kind of *sevā*; the world does that kind of *sevā*, [but] we don’t. Our *sevā* happens

²⁵⁵ Italics here are mine.

²⁵⁶ The word Tulsigiri uses for “connection,” *dorī*, is a Marwari word.

from above. It's a *sevā* of connection, the connection we make with God [by singing *bhajans*]... We [sadhus] are at the feet of God. We are the ones who do the *sevā* of God. But when [householders] do God's *sevā*, they give water, flowers, and so forth. Their *sevā* happens like this, but our *sevā* is different... This is how we understand *sevā*: [that] you are God for us [sadhus]. You are God for me. Even a child is God, and the old people, too... To us, everyone is the same. Everyone is God. This is *sevā*—the *sevā* of the sadhus.

In her description, Tulsigiri highlights some of the themes we have already discussed. She suggests the transformative power of *bhajans*, and that they work as vehicles of blessing and atonement in the context of her statement that, through *bhajan* singing “we [sadhus] make [the helpless people] confident and we make their pain and suffering go away.” But the time Tulsigiri spends differentiating *pūjā* from *sevā* reflects her perception of *bhajan* singing as a *bhakti* expression through which sadhus experience and enact their asceticism as *sevā*. *Bhakti*, a term derived from the Sanskrit root, *bhaj*, which means not only “to worship,” but also “to share,” denotes the love and devotion that devotees (householders and sadhus) share with the divine. This notion of *bhakti* as “sharing” undergirds Tulsigiri's understanding of *bhajan* singing as “a *sevā* of connection,” through which she shares her feelings of love and devotion with *bhagvān*. And yet, as Tulsigiri carefully points out, singing *bhajans* simultaneously allows sadhus to construct relationships with human beings, and thereby, to share their love and devotion, even, as Gangagiri contends, their “expensive” knowledge, with their devotees and disciples.

If *pūjā* and *sevā* both connote the idea of connection, of sharing love and devotion with the divine, why does Tulsigiri distinguish between these two terms, associating the former with householders and the latter with sadhus? Several times in her discussion Tulsigiri characterizes householder *pūjā* as *sevā*, indicating her understanding that householder *bhakti* similarly illustrates an act of loving service to God. So what, then,

makes householder *bhakti* different from sadhu *bhakti*? From Tulsigiri's perspective, the difference is that, in addition to serving God's *mūrtīs*, sadhus also serve humans *as they would serve God*. This is the *sevā* of the sadhus. In Tulsigiri's words: "It's not like *sevā* does not happen [for sadhus] until and unless we wash God's *mūrtī* and spread God's flowers... The *sevā* [of householders] happens like this, but our *sevā* is different." For Tulsigiri, *sevā* involves seeing everyone, despite gender, caste, age, and class distinctions, as "the same," and treating everyone as she would treat God's *mūrtīs*. "To us," Tulsigiri says, "everyone is God," and for this reason she sings *bhajans* in the expression of her own *sevā* to the world. Her words allude to what Gangagiri often teaches in *satsang*—that *bhajans* "are for everyone," not only for God. Tulsigiri's construction of *bhajan* singing as both *sevā* and asceticism is, therefore, gendered. Unlike several of the male sadhus I worked with who suggest that *bhajans* are transformative and function as symbolic currency of exchange between sadhus and householders, and who sing *bhajans* in the expression of devotion to God, the female sadhus tend to equate this practice, and as such, devotion on the whole with asceticism. For these female sadhus, singing *bhajans* qualifies simultaneously as *bhakti* and as *tapas*.

***Bhakti* and *Tapas*: The Interpretive Frameworks behind the Power of *Bhajan* Performance**

A broader interpretive framework of meaning informs the sadhus' ideology of *bhajan* singing as efficacious and powerful. One concept that some of the female sadhus themselves discuss in their renunciant discourses is *tapas* (Hindi: *tap*), or penance/ascetic practice (cf. Kaelber 1989; Klostermaier 1994). As explained in chapter four, *tapas* is an important concept in ascetic (and yogic) frameworks, to which the female sadhus allude

by means of emphasizing the ascetic themes of sacrifice, suffering, and struggle in their narrative performances of female devotional asceticism. Several of the female sadhus explicitly equate *bhajan* singing with *tapas*. Gangagiri, for instance, described travelling alone throughout India and “without a ticket” as a much younger female sadhu.²⁵⁷ When a female audience member in the group, the mother of Manvendra Singh, inquired how she was able to do this, Gangagiri matter-of-factly replied, “It’s all from the penance [*tap*] of my *bhajans*.” Similarly, on another *satsang* occasion, Gangagiri characterized the practice of speaking the truth as *tapas*. She explained,

There is no greater penance [*tap*] than [telling] the truth. So, tell the truth. People say, “Go to the jungle and practice penance.” [But I say] Why go to the jungle [to practice penance]? Sit here and speak the truth. This is penance. This is what [is called] asceticism [*tapasya*].

Gangagiri has also described *bhajans* as words (*śabd*) of power and truth, as they reveal liberating knowledge of the soul, of God, and of the nature of existence. Implied in this passage, then, is Gangagiri’s understanding that singing *bhajans* constitutes an act of speaking truth. Here, Gangagiri implicitly situates singing *bhajans* in the larger conceptual framework of *tapas*. More significantly, her statement, “Sit here and speak the truth,” implies *satsang*, which the female sadhus define in terms of a “community of truth” where the sadhus and the *sants*, i.e., those who speak truth, gather to remember and praise God. Sadhus and *sants* remember and praise God through the medium of their *bhajans*, their words of truth. Gangagiri’s statement suggests that she not only views *bhajan* singing as *tapas*, but also considers *satsang* as a ripe context for the practice of *tapas*. As Gangagiri remarks, why escape to the jungle to practice penance when one can do so in the company of saints? Penance, of course, means speaking the truth, or as

²⁵⁷ See the introduction to chapter three on the sadhus’ personal narrative performances for Gangagiri’s telling of this story.

Gangagiri implies, singing *bhajans*. “This,” contends Gangagiri, “is asceticism [*tapasya*].”

Several other female sadhus also equate *bhajan* singing with *satsang*. Tulsigiri, for example, told me that “*satsang* means to sing *bhajans*.” But whether the sadhus understand *bhajan* singing as renunciation or as *satsang*, their interpretations reveal another concept—that of *bhakti*. Most of the female sadhus define renunciation as *bhakti* (Gangagiri considers them to be “the same”), and *satsang* for the sadhus connotes a *bhakti* context for remembering God. Their understandings of *bhajan* singing as *bhakti*, and *bhajan* singing as *tapas* shed light on the relationship the female sadhus perceive between *bhajans*, or *bhakti*, and power (*śakti*).

For the female sadhus, devotion is the source of power behind their *bhajans*, infusing their *bhajans* with power and energy, making these songs both reservoirs and agents of power. Because *bhajan* singing is thought to emerge from and express feelings of *bhakti*, the female sadhus do not distinguish between *bhajans* and *bhakti* in their descriptions of power. The medium (*bhajan*) and the intense emotions (*bhakti*) expressed through that medium signify the same power source. This seems to be the idea Gangagiri expresses in her statement, “My *bhajans* are my power,” which reveals such a double signification. We could readily interpret these words to mean that Gangagiri’s devotion empowers her, and that her *bhajans* empower her as a female sadhu. Both meanings are possible because, for Gangagiri, *bhajans* and *bhakti* are “the same.”

But *bhajan* singing not only expresses *bhakti*; it is also a form of *tapas*, or ascetic practice. By equating *bhajan* singing with *tapas*, the female sadhus further suggest that the power of *bhajans* results from the singing itself, not only from the devotional fervor

out of which it arises. In this respect, *tapas* as *devotional practice* produces power. How is this so? In his study of asceticism in Vedic India, Walter Kaelber explains that, in the context of early Indian frameworks, *tapas* has a double meaning: the concept refers to practices of penance as well as to the “heat” (*tap*) that inevitably results from such practices (Kaelber 1989). He explains,

[T]*ap*as is both process and product. Through *tapas* one generates *tapas*. Through a “heated effort” (i.e., *tapas*) one generates heat (i.e., *tapas*)....The fact that *tapas* is both process and product is most evident when *tapas* assumes the form of ascetic activity. It refers then to the “heated effort” of such asceticism but also to the “magical heat” which that effort produces. Such “magical heat” is often perceived as a mobile commodity which can be not only generated but also lost and restored. It also has a sacred quality. It “saturates” the practitioner, elevating him above a strictly human or profane condition (Kaelber 1989, 2-3).

Tapas, according to Kaelber, “is conspicuously active and *creative* at every level of reality” (Kaelber 1989, 3; italics mine). Thus, *tapas* as the creative heat produced by ascetic practice acts an underlying source of power, a “sacred” substance that “saturates” and transforms its practitioners into “reservoir[s] of energy and power” (Kaelber 1989, 19).

While Kaelber’s descriptions of *tapas* are helpful in considering ascetic practice as ultimately creative and powerful, the female sadhus express alternative understandings of *tapas*, both in terms of “process” and “product,” in several important respects. Although they use the word *tapas* for ascetic practice in general and, more specifically, for *bhajan* singing, the female sadhus do not themselves describe the effects of *tapas* in terms of heat production, even though the term literally means “heat.” The language of heat represents a masculine interpretation or model of asceticism in Brahmanical textual discourse (cf. Khandelwal 2001, 157-179). Instead of heat, the female sadhus understand that *tapas* produces revelatory and liberating knowledge (*ātma/brahma-jñān*).

Knowledge, like devotion, represents another source of power for the female sadhus. Recall from our earlier discussion on symbolic currency that Gangagiri considers *bhajans* to be vehicles of knowledge. In her words: “*bhajans* have power [because] inside of them is knowledge.” Other female sadhus similarly discuss *bhajan* singing in terms knowledge production. For Santosh Puri, “from [singing] *bhajans*, you receive knowledge... Without *bhajans*, you cannot receive knowledge.” Without ruling out the possibility entirely, for the female sadhus, the correlation between *tapas* and power has less to do with heat production than with, as Santosh Puri says, “the blossoming of knowledge” in the heart/mind.

As both Kaelber (1989) and Klostermaier (1994) discuss, Vedic and/or Brahmanical discourse often highlights psycho-physical practices like fasting, breath-control (*prāṇayāma*), meditation, for instance, and oral practices like the recitation of the Vedas or *mantra* recitation as *tapas*. Physical practices involving various forms of voluntary self-torture also figure in Brahmanical frameworks of *tapas* (see also chapter four).²⁵⁸ Regardless of the nature of the practices performed by ascetics, the ideal setting for *tapas*, in the views of most Brahmanical texts, is a secluded one, such as jungles, forests, and/or caves (cf. Hartsuiker 1993; Olivelle 1992a & b; Kaelber 1989).

In contrast, although they do not exclude the practices of fasting, meditation, breath-control, and *mantra* recitation from their definitions of *tapas*, the female sadhus emphasize that *bhajan* singing, storytelling, and recitation of the *Gītā* and/or Tulsī *Ramāyan*, for example, also function as *tapas*. Not only are these *ascetic* practices as significant and as powerful as the forms of *tapas* often elucidated and praised in

²⁵⁸ Klostermaier enumerates some of these practices: “lying on a bed of thorns or nails, prolonged standing on one leg, lifting one arm for years until it is withered, looking straight into the glaring sun for long hours, and similar sportive feats” (Klostermaier 1994, 56)

Brahmanical textual discourse, they are, significantly, also expressions of *bhakti*. The female sadhus, therefore, seem to understand *bhakti* as *tapas* (and *vice versa*). And the ideal place for these *bhakti/tapas* practices is neither the secluded jungle/forest, nor the hidden cave. Rather, it is *satsang*, a *bhakti* setting *par excellence*.

Thus, while the Brahmanic concept of *tapas* informs their ideology of *bhajan* singing as powerful and efficacious, the female sadhus understand and experience *tapas* primarily in terms of *bhakti*. Gangagiri's statement, "Why practice *tapas* in the jungle? Sit [in *satsang*] and sing *bhajans* instead," reveals an alternative understanding not only of devotion as asceticism, or, as I suggest, devotional asceticism, but also of *bhakti* as *tapas*. Unlike the dominant Brahmanical model that often differentiates between these two concepts,²⁵⁹ in the devotional asceticism of the female sadhus, *bhakti* and *tapas*, as Gangagiri says, "are the same." Her understanding suggests that the power effected by *tapas* is devotion and, relatedly, love, since in her view *bhakti* represents devotees' love for God. In this framework, instead of considering heat to be the power source that "yields liberating knowledge of ultimate reality" (Kaelber 1989, 4), as is often thought in Vedic and Brahmanical frameworks, for the female sadhus, devotion acts as the ultimate source of the production of salvific knowledge and is itself produced by their devotional practices of singing, storytelling, and scriptural recitation, i.e., by their *tapas*.

Bhakti, Brahmacārya, and Power

The female sadhus' views of *tapas* as *bhakti* index another important perspective in Hindu renunciators' understandings of the relationship between *brahmacārya* (celibacy) and power. In her essay on the ways *brahmacārya* is gendered in Brahmanical textual

²⁵⁹ *Tapas*, as Kaelber notes in his examination of Vedic asceticism, is thought to produce devotional power. It is not, however, equated with or understood as devotion.

discourse, Khandelwal explains that this concept has been primarily understood as celibacy, and thus, associated with maleness and semen conservation (Khandelwal 2001, 157-179). For this reason, Khandelwal maintains, “celibacy has often been attributed with the purpose of obtaining ritual purity or magical power rather than moral goodness or virtue” (158). According to this masculine model of *brahmacārya*, “women are...said to be incapable of celibacy” (158). Yet, *brahmacārya* constitutes much more than “abstaining from sex” (157). Khandelwal explains,

brahmacarya...has a primary meaning of ‘lifestyle to obtain Brahma’ and is thus understood, at least when practiced by ascetics, as a means to spiritual liberation rather than an end in itself. Sexual abstinence is one essential aspect of an overall lifestyle that usually includes a strict vegetarian diet, the avoidance of most stimulants and intoxicants, and the practice of meditation or some other variety of spiritual discipline (Khandelwal 2001, 157).

In light of her work with female sadhus in Haridwar, Khandelwal moves beyond “the hydraulic model of semen retention” and proposes, instead, an alternative model that argues not only for a psychosocial, but also an ethical understanding of celibacy. Khandelwal observes, “...none of the women I interviewed suggested that women do not benefit from celibacy or that they are incapable of it” (159). She further explains, “In sannyasinis’ understandings of brahmacarya, celibacy refers not to a strictly physiological control of seed but to the control of passions, attachments, and appetite, which are metaphorically and metonymically related to bodily fluids” (169). In proposing an alternative model of *brahmacārya*, Khandelwal does not suggest that it is exclusive to women (167). Rather, in her view, this “less physiological and arguably less androcentric” model of *brahmacārya* illustrates that celibacy, at least for the sadhus with whom she worked, is not simply about the production of power, magical or ritual.

Khandelwal argues, “brahmacarya focuses on moral as well as ritual purity, a lifestyle of self-restraint, and emotional detachment” (173).

Although the female sadhus with whom I worked did not explicitly discuss *brahmacārya*, their understandings of *tapas* as *bhakti*, and more broadly, of renunciation as *bhakti* similarly contribute another alternative model of *brahmacārya* as a lifestyle of love and devotion expressed primarily through the means of oral *bhakti* performance. Because *brahmacārya*, in the context of renunciation, intimates a life of *tapas*, or penance (including celibacy), I consider the female sadhus’ discourse on *tapas* to be indicative of their implied views on *brahmacārya*. In this respect, I offer a devotional model of *brahmacārya* (as a lifestyle of *tapas*), wherein *bhajan* singing, storytelling, and scriptural recitation enable the female sadhus to express *bhakti* to *bhagvān* and to share that *bhakti* with their devotees/disciples whom they serve as *bhagvān*. Unlike the byproducts of heat and seminal fluid proposed by the dominant Brahmanical model, a devotional model of *brahmacārya* understands love/*bhakti* to be both the emotional and spiritual results of the female sadhus’ practices. And even though the female sadhus explicitly used the language of power rather than that of moral purity and emotional detachment in their discussions of *tapas*, a devotional model of *brahmacārya* still complements Khandelwal’s psychosocial and ethical model. For the female sadhus, “power” is viewed as *bhakti*/love, and *tapas* represents a form of *sevā* to humanity. Further, the female sadhus emphasize the importance of remaining detached even while serving others “with love” (see Chapter five). In these ways, a devotional model of *brahmacārya* also incorporates an ethical/moral vision and underscores emotional

detachment. But is a *bhakti* model of *brahmacārya*, and more specifically, a *bhakti* view of *tapas* gendered amongst the Rajasthani sadhus?

The paradigm of *tapas* as *bhakti* appears to be exclusive to the female sadhus with whom I worked. That is, while some of the male sadhus understand *bhajan* singing, storytelling, and textual recitation to be *bhakti* practices through which they worship the divine, they do not readily associate these practices with *tapas*. Likewise, unlike the female sadhus, the male sadhus who discuss *tapas*, with which they often equate fasting, temporary vows of silence, and, the silent repetition of the guru *mantra*, tend to perceive its effects in somatic terms of heat production, rather than in emotional/devotional terms of producing *bhakti* and love.²⁶⁰

On one occasion, Baldevgiri suggested that *bhajan* singing represents a form of *tapas*. Though he did not explicitly mention *tapas* in our conversation, through use of an analogy between “*bhajan* singing” and ‘matches,’ Baldevgiri obliquely associated *bhakti* with *tapas*. Moreover, he implied that the power (*śakti*) produced by *tapas* manifests in the form of an inner fire (*āg*), or heat, in the body. In a discourse about the methods sadhus use to create a cooking fire, which he considers as a necessary activity in light of his underlying perception of sadhus’ duty to feed others, Baldevgiri discussed that if sadhus cannot find matches “in any house,” they “automatically” can light a fire with the power of their own inner heat (*āg*). In his words:

BDG: We [sadhus] prepare *havans* [sacrificial fires] for cooking, and we need fire to do this right?

A: Yes. You need fire to make a *havan*.

BDG: But, if we [sadhus] can’t find matches in any house, we ourselves can light a fire from the power [*śakti*] within us. We can light the fire naturally from our own [inner]

²⁶⁰ Interestingly, I never heard the male sadhus discuss *tapas* through hydraulic models of semen retention. But see Alter 1997.

power. This is [the power] of *bhajans*—that the fire becomes revealed [*pragat honā*] automatically.

A: I don't understand.

BDG: Fire [*agni*], fire [*āg*], is revealed automatically.

A: Without using matches?

BDG: Yes, without [using] matches.

A: How does this happen?

BDG: It happens through good work [*karm*] and *bhajans*...

A: O.k., you're saying that just from singing *bhajans*, a fire can start?

BDG: Yes, just from singing *bhajans*...*Bhajans* manifest [*pragat karnā*] this thing [i.e., fire].

In Baldevgiri's view, *bhajans* are equivalent to matches, and singing them is equivalent to the lighting of a match.²⁶¹ Through means of both activities, "fire," Baldevgiri says, "becomes revealed automatically." His words themselves reveal a double signification of *bhajan* singing as *tapas*. This practice, which he associates with *karm*, or "good works," produces not only fire in the body, but also fire for the *havan*, that is, the sacrificial fire pit over which Baldevgiri prepares and offers food to the deities whom he worships and to the devotees whom he serves.²⁶² The external heat of the *havan* fire, as Baldevgiri suggests, signifies the internal heat within a sadhu's body, and *vice versa*. Both forms of heat, of course, are essentially the same power, and as such, linked to *bhajans*, the power source. As Baldevgiri explains, "[J]ust from singing *bhajans*, [sadhus] can [naturally] manifest fire" within and outside of themselves. For many Rajasthani female sadhus (and for a few *bhaki*-oriented male sadhus), then, *bhajan* singing enables them to experience God, a practice that empowers them as sadhus. At the same time, *bhajan* singing provides a means by which the female sadhus perform sadhu identity in a particular way.

²⁶¹ To explain further his point that *bhajans* produce power in the form of internal heat, Baldevgiri extended the analogy of *bhajan* singing to the act of starting a motorcycle. Based on his description, to do this, one needs a key with which to start the ignition. Once the motorcycle starts, it produces smoke from its motor, which indicates an internal process of heat production. In this way, Baldevgiri implicitly linked *bhajan* singing with heat production.

²⁶² Baldevgiri's understanding of the *havan* as the space for cooking suggests that he perceives food preparation to be a type of sacrificial activity of exchange between sadhus and householders.

II. Performance and Identity: Singing the Speech of the *Sants*

Singing *bhajans* to God exemplifies the cornerstone of both sadhu and *sant* identity for Rajasthani female sadhus. The emphases these sadhus place on this particular *bhakti* practice for sadhu/*sant* identity suggest that they understand that they, too, are following in the footsteps of the *sants*. Hence, the act of singing *bhajans* enables the female sadhus to represent themselves as *sants*. That is, not only by singing *bhajans*, but also by singing the *bhajans* the *sants* themselves are thought to have composed, the female sadhus perform sadhu identity as *sant* identity. Also, their performance of this identity in *satsang*, the *bhakti* context of *sant* asceticism, further pushes the female sadhus' ascetic identity and form of asceticism in a *sant* framework.

Several conversations I had with the female sadhus indicate that they view themselves as *sants*. Once, I had asked Tulsigiri to describe her daily routine [*dincārya*] as a sadhu, to which she replied, “Ours is the routine of the *sants*. We sing *bhajans* [to God]; we remember God in *satsang*. That’s it.” On another occasion when Tulsigiri was narrating her life story, she had made the comment that her husband, whom she referred to as “Swamiji,” had left her and their four children (three of whom came from another marriage) after fifteen years of marriage. Following a period of eight years, her husband returned to the village dressed as a sadhu to beg for food. While narrating this scene, Tulsigiri said, “My husband had become a *sant*,” implying that he became a sadhu. For clarification, I asked if she meant that he became a sadhu, to which she responded, “Yes. My husband became a *sant*, a sadhu.” Her response indicates that she considers sadhus to be *sants*. Gangagiri similarly says that, “We [sadhus] speak the speech [*vāṇī*] of the *sants*.” A few of the male sadhus, too, express this view in their construction of ascetic

identity. Without my prodding him, Barfani Baba explained to his audience that speaking the “speech [*vāñī*] of the *sants*” exemplifies his daily routine as a *sadhu*, or as he says,

“Babaji”:

BB: Some ask, “What is the daily routine of a babaji [i.e., a *sadhu*]?” “From morning until evening [what does the babaji do]?”

JS²⁶³: Yes...

BB: What is [the babaji’s] routine from the time [s/he] takes a bath in the morning? What does the babaji do from the [moment] sun rises until the sun sets? I myself keep speaking into the ‘tape recorder.’ [Laughter from audience]

JS: Yes, right.

BB: I keep speaking something or other [here, he means he keeps singing *bhajans* and telling stories]. Why do I speak like this?...One [reason] is this is the speech of the *sants*. The other [reason] is this is a blessing. And the third [reason] is this is *darśan*.

In this discourse, Barfani Baba explicitly constructs his identity as a *sant* by emphasizing that his daily routine as a babaji consists of speaking the “speech of the *sants*,” or *sant vāñī*. By speaking the *sant vāñī*, that is, by singing *bhajans* attributed to the *sants* and by telling stories²⁶⁴ about the *sants*’ lives, Barfani Baba performs his identity as a *sant* in *satsang*. Apart from following *sant* religiosity, Barfani Baba’s motivations for speaking the *sant vāñī* also relate to the blessings and the *darśan* of the *sants*, which, as his statement implies, he not only receives, but also shares with others in *satsang* through his acts of singing/storytelling. Thus, for some of the male *sadhus* and for most of the female *sadhus*, *bhajan* singing offers them a strategy for self-representation by which means they imagine and express themselves as *sants*.

Although the female *sadhus* sing *bhajans* as a strategy for constructing themselves as *sants*, the *sants* were not themselves *sadhus*.²⁶⁵ Though, according to

²⁶³ Jagdish Sanadhya, my Brahmin host father.

²⁶⁴ Right after he made these statements about *sant vāñī*, Barfani Baba told a story about the *sant*, Sukh Dev, whose speech Barfani Baba described as “sweet.”

²⁶⁵ But the *sants* were, of course, holy people, which is the general meaning of the term ‘*sadhu*.’ Vaudeville, in particular, writes: “The Sant is a ‘holy man’ of a somewhat special type, who cannot be accommodated in the traditional categories of Indian holy men... The Sant is not a renunciate... He has not necessarily received an initiation... He is not one of those wandering holy men known as ‘*sadhus*’ who go

hagiographical evidence, some of them had accepted human gurus during their lifetime, the *sants*, on the whole, neither took formal initiation into traditions of renunciation,²⁶⁶ nor spawned their own traditions of renunciation (cf. Schomer and McLeod 1987; Vaudeville 1987, 36-37; Hawley 1988, 2005; Lorenzen 1987, 1995, 1996; Martin 2007, 2000). Some of the *sant* rhetoric, in fact, exhibits a vehement distrust of sadhus, emphasizing above all their hypocrisy.²⁶⁷ A poem attributed to Kabir, a *sant* known for his “rough rhetoric,” readily illustrates this point (Hess 1987, 143-165; cf. Hess 2002):

You’ve become a sadhu: so what?
 You’ve put on four rows of beads...
 Your outer body is wrapped in ochre,
 but inside you’re full of garbage! (*Kabir Granthavali* 25.2, cited from Schomer 1987, 86).

In their descriptions about the lives of the *sants*, female sadhus like Gangagiri occasionally mentioned to me that Kabir and Gorakhnāth, a sadhu who is considered to be the founder of the Nāth tradition, had debated on the relative superiority of their own philosophical and moral teachings (cf. Schomer 1987, 71). Otherwise, most of the female sadhus did not discuss the fact that ideological tensions had developed between the *sant* traditions and the various traditions of renunciation in medieval India (cf. Schomer 1987; Lorenzen 1996). But whether or not they know about these tensions, the question remains: Why would the female sadhus construct themselves in the image of those who were not (nor wanted to be) sadhus?

about dressed in various attires, living on begging and actually making a show of holiness to earn their daily pittance” (Vaudeville 1987, 36). See also Schomer and McLeod, 1987.

²⁶⁶ There is some disagreement amongst scholars on this issue with respect to the legendary figure of Kabir. According to available hagiographical evidence on his life (e.g., the *Bhaktamāl*), Kabir is thought to have made Ramanand his guru and to have later formed the Kabir Panth, which is a popular movement in Rajasthan. Similarly, Mira Bai is understood to have made the low-caste leather-worker, Raidas, her guru. In their descriptions about her life, several of the female sadhus with whom I worked have represented Raidas as the guru through whom Mira received “*bheg*,” or the ochre-colored cloth symbolizing initiation into renunciation. For Mira Bai, see Mukta 1997.

²⁶⁷ This point also applies to swamis and yogis. See the essays in Schomer and McLeod 1987.

The absence of renunciant status amongst the *sants* hardly matters to the female sadhus; what matters, instead, is the devotion and love they understand the *sants* to have experienced and expressed in their worship of the divine. To the female sadhus, asceticism of the *sants* was one of intense love (*prem*) for God, which several scholars have referred to as the path of “*prema-bhakti*” (Schomer 1987, 71; Vaudeville 1987, 29). As Schomer explains,

The principal, and crucial difference between...the Sants and...the [Naths] is the presence of the new emotional element of bhakti. While, in their philosophical and moral teachings, the Sants have much in common with the Naths, as well as with their Buddhist and Jain predecessors, there is nothing in the works of these earlier traditions to compare with the Sant expression of loving devotion to their Lord and the pain of separation from that Lord (Schomer 1987, 71).

Thus, by virtue of their love for and devotion to *bhagvān*, the *sants* represent to the female sadhus the *bhakti* of *bhagvān par excellence*. By constructing themselves as *sants* in their rhetoric of renunciation, and by performing *sant* identity by the means of their *bhajans*, the female sadhus represent themselves as exemplary *bhakti* of *bhagvān*—that is, as *bhakti* sadhus.

Identity, Authority, and Practice: The Difference *Bhakti* Creates for the Female Sadhus

The female sadhus’ self-representation as *sants* has several other significant implications. One issue to consider is that all of the female sadhus with whom I worked have taken formal initiation (*dīkṣā*) into either one of two orthodox orders of renunciation, the Daśanāmi order, founded by Śankarācārya (ca. 9th century CE) and the Nāth (or Yogi) *panth*, founded by Gorakhnāth (ca. 11th/12th centuries CE).²⁶⁸ Both of these orders are ancient forms of Śaivaite asceticism and function as two types of ascetic

²⁶⁸ Ten of the twenty-one female sadhus with whom I worked were Nāths, eleven were Daśanāmis. Only two of the fifteen male sadhus were Nāths.

“sects,” or branches, within the larger tradition of (Śaivaite) asceticism in India (cf. Gross 1991, 47-75; Cenknner 1983; Briggs 1938).²⁶⁹

Nevertheless, though they are members of these renunciant sects, the female sadhus do not initially identify themselves as either Daśanāmi or Nāth. They, rather, more often characterize themselves as sadhus and/or as *sants*. Only when they were questioned about the specific traditions into which they took initiation did the female sadhus emphasize their individual sectarian affiliations. Remarkably, however, following such self-disclosure, several of the female sadhus undermined their sectarian identities by commenting that Daśanāmis and Nāths are like Śiva and Parvati, respectively,²⁷⁰ implying the popular idea of God as *Ardhanārīśwara* (i.e., God who is half male and half female). As such, the female sadhus suggest that these renunciant sects represent two different forms of a single divine source. Against this backdrop, their self-representation as *sants* is significant in its indication that, regardless of their own sectarian affiliations, the female sadhus perceive themselves to be non-sectarian *bhakti* sadhus like the *sants*. As several scholars have discussed, the *sants* were staunchly non-sectarian in their religious outlook (Vaudeville 1987, 22).²⁷¹ This strategy of self-representation does not appear to be gendered, as I have also observed several of the male sadhus similarly represent themselves as *sants* and/or sadhus first, and only as either—for the Daśanāmis—Giri, Bharati, Sarasvati, and Puri, or as Nāth, later on in our meetings. This manner of self-representation, however, has gendered implications for the female sadhus.

²⁶⁹ Of these two orders, the Nāth *panth* inherited esoteric Tantric traditions of Hindu and Buddhist Yoga (cf. Vaudeville 1987, 36), and as such, is considered to be more heterodox in its orientation vis-à-vis the Brahmanical Daśanāmi orders (Gross 1991, 56; cf. Cenknner 1983).

²⁷⁰ Female sadhus like Tulsigiri, Gangagiri, and Devi Nath narrated popular stories illustrating the idea of this common divine heritage between the Daśanāmis and Nāths.

²⁷¹ Vaudeville notes, “The Sants are non-sectarian and do not hold a body of doctrine in common” (Vaudeville 1987, 22).

The female sadhus' self-representation as *sants* enables them to create spiritual authority and power as female sadhus within the predominantly male traditions of renunciation in which they have taken renunciation. In orthodox renunciatory orders such as the Daśanāmi, in which most of the female sadhus are members, very rarely are women ever granted positions of *institutional* authority and power (cf. Khandelwal 2004; Falk 1995; King 1984). This is not to say, of course, that female sadhus in orthodox traditions of renunciation have not held such authority and power,²⁷² only that their gender more often than not excludes them from participating in public positions of power and authority at the institutional level.²⁷³

And yet, the power and authority they fail to experience at the institutional level, the female sadhus create for themselves at the *spiritual* level, by singing their *bhajans* to *bhagvān*. By singing the *bhajans*, the female sadhus not only perform *sant/sadhu* identity, but also situate themselves in a tradition of *sant* asceticism, in much the same way their narratives of devotional asceticism situate them within a general lineage of female *sants* (see chapter four). In *sant* frameworks, the power and authority of individuals stem neither from their knowledge, nor from their gender, but rather from their love and devotion to the divine. By singing the *bhajans* of the *sants*, the female sadhus express not only their individual *bhakti*, but also that of the *sants*, and effect for themselves the spiritual power/authority that such *bhakti* brings. Gangagiri's statement in the context of,

²⁷² Female sadhus such as Uma Bharati, a female sadhu in the Bharati branch of the Daśanāmi order, and Sadhvi Rithambara, both of whom have shaped the face of Hindu nationalism and identity in India, have exercised institutional power and authority in orthodox traditions of renunciation. See Cenker 1983; Bacchetta 2002; Menon 2006.

²⁷³ No female sadhu has ever been granted the position of *jagad-guru*, or "world teacher" of the Daśanāmi order, the most powerful and prestigious position of authority. The counterpoint here would be female-only monastic orders, such as Sharada Math, the sister organization to the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in which women hold positions of power and authority at all levels of the organization. See Wendy Sinclair-Bruhl 1997 and Nancy E. Falk, 1995. Another example of female-only monastic orders in which women receive full institutional power is the Brahma Kumaris. See Babb 1984.

“My *bhajans* are my power,” indexes a gendered dimension of meaning—that performance provides a means by which the female sadhus experience and perform their spiritual authority and power as female members of orthodox renouncer traditions.²⁷⁴

Finally, the female sadhus’ construction of their identities as *sants* suggests that they perceive their form of asceticism to be different from Brahmanical asceticism. While *sants* shared many common values and concepts with ascetic traditions like the Nāth *panth*, they promoted a new *bhakti* vision that differentiated them from their religious interlocutors. In the Nāth traditions, as Gross explains, there is a “relative lack of emphasis...on the more popular *bhakti* devotional aspects of religious expression” (Gross 1991, 56). Even in the Daśanāmi tradition, whose founder, Śankarācārya, developed Advaita Vedanta (the philosophical system of non-dualism),²⁷⁵ asceticism is often conceptualized in terms of Vedanta (Cenkner 1983). The contemporary Śankarācāryas,²⁷⁶ or world teachers, who, as William Cenkner discusses, advocate the importance of *bhakti* for their followers, themselves follow the path of knowledge (Cenkner 1983, 140).

Cenkner elaborates:

Bhakti is selected as the principal *sādhana* at this moment of history because it is easy to cultivate; but it is not the final goal. The gurus speak of it as a discipline preliminary to knowledge... *Yet bhakti... [is] still taught within a Vedanta context.* The gurus urge

²⁷⁴ The spiritual connection the female sadhus construct with the *sant* tradition as a gendered strategy in their creation and negotiation of spiritual power/authority parallels the spiritual “life strategies” of the Pentecostal women preachers and pastors with whom Lawless worked (1988). Lawless explains, “In general, women are not granted equality in authority in the Pentecostal religion, but the weight of the call of God to preach is profound, especially as it stems from the most critical prerogative of the feminine nature—her relationship with the spiritual” (Lawless 1988, 163). For the sadhus and the Pentecostal preachers/pastors, constructing their religious identities in a manner that exemplifies their spiritual connection with and devotion to God enables them to have spiritual power and authority as females in male-headed institutions.

²⁷⁵ In Advaita Vedanta, a philosophical vision based on Upaniṣadic understandings of the *ātma* and *brahman*, non-dualism refers to the idea that the identity of the *brahman* and the *ātma* are the same, and that the realization of this truth leads devotees to an experience of liberation, or *moks*, from the world of existence.

²⁷⁶ There are currently five reigning Śankarācāryas who reside in the holy places of Sringeri, Kanchi, Dwarka, Puri, and Badrinath. See Cenkner 1983, pp. 109-134.

concentrated devotion, a single-minded devotion, devotion which becomes internal and rational. Such vocabulary hints at the greater Vedanta context heard consistently in their public addresses. Devotion is a preliminary discipline directed to and aiding in the discrimination of Self and non-self. It culminates in mental discipline while developing a desire for Brahman knowledge. The Sankaracaryas thus stand in the Advaita tradition that intellectualizes *bhakti* and views it as the context for higher knowledge (Cenkner 1983, 141; italics mine).

In contrast, most of the female sadhus, whether their affiliation is with the Daśanāmi or with the Nāth orders, understand and express renunciation through the frame of *sant bhakti*, instead of through the lens of Vedanta (or *bhakti* forms of Vedanta) or, in the case of the Nāth *panth*, esoteric Tantric yoga. As Gangagiri often remarks in her teachings, “renunciation and *bhakti* are the same.” For the female sadhus, *bhakti* is not simply a stepping stone, or a “preliminary discipline,” in asceticism; rather, it *is* asceticism, expressed through their devotional practices of singing, storytelling, and scriptural recitation. As we saw in the last chapter, in her *Gītā* performances, Gangagiri constructs asceticism as a *bhakti mārg*, where knowledge (*jnān*), action (*karm*), and discipline (*yog*) constitute the essential conditions of this path. In her view, devotion is a function of knowledge, not the other way around as Cenkner implies in the context of the teachings of the Śankarācaryas. Thus, by constructing themselves as *sants* the female sadhus construct their form of asceticism as *the asceticism of the sants*. In the framework of devotional asceticism, then, *bhakti* signifies the *sine qua non* of asceticism not because it is “easy to cultivate,” but rather because, as a path of love/devotion, it is, as the female sadhus say, “the most expensive thing” to cultivate, and as such, the most “difficult” path to follow.

III. *Bhajans* as Resources for Female Sadhus' Performance of Devotional Asceticism

The *bhajans* comprise significant religious sources for the female sadhus' performance of devotional asceticism. They frequently describe asceticism (*tapasya*) and/or renunciation (*sannyās*) through use of popular *bhajan* motifs such as 'crossing one's boat over the ocean of existence,' 'keeping the precious diamond,' or 'holding *bhakti/bhajans* tightly.' Even the notion that *bhakti* is either 'expensive' or 'difficult,' common *bhajan* themes, surfaces repeatedly in the female sadhus' renunciatory discourses. The *bhakti* envisioned in most of the sadhus' *bhajans* reflect *sant* teachings, or *sant mat* (cf. Vaudeville 1987; Schomer 1987). The *sant* teachings, expressed via their poetic utterances (e.g., *dohā* or *pad*²⁷⁷), *sant vāṇī*, supply the conceptual *bhakti* frameworks with which the female sadhus construct and express devotional asceticism.

"Nirguṇī bhajans are a One-Hundred Rupee Note": Nirguṇī Bhakti and Asceticism

For the female sadhus, the *bhajans* they attribute to the *sants* are synonymous with what they characterize as *nirguṇī bhakti*, that is, love and devotion to a formless, nameless, and genderless God, *bhagvān* (cf. Schomer 1987, 3; Vaudeville 1987, 26; Lorenzen 1996). But as we shall soon discover, to the female sadhus, *nirguṇī bhakti* connotes more than simply devotion to a nameless/formless God; it also implies a way of life, i.e., devotional asceticism, and *sant bhajans* constitute superlative sources of *nirguṇī* knowledge. As discussed earlier, Gangagiri describes the spiritual value of *nirguṇī*

²⁷⁷ The *sant vāṇī* were expressed through two different genres. One genre was the recited *dohā*, a short, rhymed poem with a refrain, and the other was the sung lyric known as the *pad/śabd*. Most of the female sadhus' *bhajans* consist of *pads*, that is, *sant* poems set to a particular melody, or *rāg*. For a discussion on the *sant dohā* (and *pads*) as vehicles for the transmission of *nirguṇī* teachings, see Karine Schomer 1987, pp. 61-90.

bhajans through use of metaphors of money. In her words: “One *nirguṇī bhajan* is worth a single one-hundred rupee note; everything else is small change.” Aside from its connotations of material exchange, Gangagiri’s statement implies that *nirguṇī bhajans* are better than *saguṇī bhajans*, because the *nirguṇī* songs contain what she understands to be revelatory/liberating knowledge (*ātma/brahma-jnān*). From her perspective, whereas *saguṇī* knowledge causes temporary feelings of “bliss” (*ānand*) in the heart/mind, only *nirguṇī* knowledge produces “peace [*śānti*] in the heart.” Thus, while they sing both types of *bhajans*, most of the female sadhus agree that ascetics should sing and contemplate the *nirguṇī bhajans*. As Gangagiri asserts, “Sadhus should sing [*nirguṇī*] *bhajans*; they should make the practice of knowledge. Without knowledge, you never receive peace in your heart.” For the female sadhus, these songs provide models of devotional asceticism as well as illustrate essential *nirguṇī* teachings. Because their *nirguṇī bhajans* are the key sources for the sadhus’ performance of devotional asceticism, I limit my examination and analysis to these particular songs.²⁷⁸

But what comprises “*nirguṇī* knowledge” and *nirguṇī bhakti* for the female sadhus? What are the *nirguṇī (sant)* themes they emphasize in their renunciant performances? In constructing devotional asceticism, the female sadhus underscore seven major *nirguṇī* themes: (1) devotion to a nameless and formless *bhagvān*; (2) union with the divine; (3) *bhakti* as priceless for asceticism; (4) *bhakti* as difficult or “expensive”; (5) complete surrender to and dependence on God for everything; (6) repetition of the divine name for inner transformation; (7) and devotion to the word (*śabd*) as the guru.²⁷⁹ Apart

²⁷⁸ I include, however, some of the female sadhus’ *saguṇī bhajans* in the Appendix.

²⁷⁹ Based on her examination of the standard collections of *sant* poetry attributed to Kabir, Dadu and Rajjab (also known as the Dadu-panthi texts), Schomer identifies ten major themes in *sant* teachings: (1) the greatness of the *sadguru*; (2) separation; (3) the greatness of the *sants*; (4) *satsang*, the companionship of

from these themes, the sadhus also stress that asceticism is above all a path of knowledge, action and/or effort, and, most importantly, love (*prem*).

While I collected over fifty songs from the sadhus (male and female),²⁸⁰ I examine and analyze only eight *nirgunī bhajans*, but offer a more extensive collection of these types of songs in Appendix B.²⁸¹ These eight *bhajans* well demonstrate both the *nirgunī sant* themes and the broader asceticism themes the female sadhus emphasize and/or discuss in their performances; these *bhajans* also tend to be the ones the female sadhus sang the most from their large repertoire of songs. All of these *bhajans* arose in *satsang* contexts, and therefore, I discuss these *bhakti* contexts as well as the sadhus' interpretations of their songs that emerged in these contexts.

Before we move to the *bhajans*, I want to clarify an important point. Though they construct their way of life through the *bhakti* frame of *sant* asceticism, the devotional asceticism of the female sadhus is, nevertheless, different from that of the *sants* in two crucial respects. First, the *sants*, as Schomer discusses, were “a non-conformist ‘counter-tradition’ that transcended established religious categories” (Schomer 1987, 8). The rhetoric of (some of) the *sants* is explicitly subversive; they challenged both the legitimacy and superiority of orthodox (Hindu and Muslim) religious traditions, especially that of Brahmanical orthodoxy. In doing so, the *sants* constructed themselves as heterodox. Vaudeville writes, “Sant poetry as a whole has strong anti-Brahmanical overtones. . . . the Sants appear more or less heterodox. In so far as orthodoxy, in a Hindu

the *sants*; (5) supplication; (6) heroism; (7) admonition; (8) *māyā*, illusion; (9) *man*, the mind; and (10) faith. These themes appeared not only in the three standard collections of the Dadu-panthi texts, but also in popular versions of these collections. See Schomer 1987, 76-77.

²⁸⁰ Here, I mean the songs that have been translated and transcribed. There are many other *bhajans* that have yet to be transcribed. I am saving this work for my larger book project.

²⁸¹ I will provide translations of thirty *nirgunī* songs in the Appendix.

context, may be defined in terms of acceptance of the authority of the Veda and the Brahmanical traditions as a whole, the Sants appear as some kind of ‘heretics’” (Vaudeville 1987, 23). Likewise, the *sants*, Vaudeville further explains, “consider meaningless the Brahmans’ pretensions to superior knowledge... They scoff at the Brahman in his role as performer of Hindu rites (*karamiyā*) and even more as *pūjārī*” (Vaudeville 198, 24). A poem attributed to Kabir poignantly expresses this point: “the Brahman of this Kali age is a buffoon” (*Kabir Granthavali* 21.20, cited from Vaudeville 1987, 24).

Although the female sadhus draw on *sant* teachings, their rhetoric of renunciation is not subversive vis-à-vis Brahmanical traditions of Hinduism, more broadly, or Brahmanical asceticism in particular. They neither scoff at Brahmanical sacrifices and Brahmanical rites, nor denounce idol worship (cf. Vaudeville 1987, 24).²⁸² Some of the male and female sadhus perform *pūjā* daily to a plethora of deities (as well as to pictures of their human gurus) installed in their ashrams and temples. In fact, many female and male sadhus even represent themselves in their renunciant discourses as Brahmins either by referring to their birth as Brahmins or by grouping Brahmins and sadhus together as individuals who are worthy of respect,²⁸³ entitled to receiving alms, and endowed with religious knowledge and authority. This pro-Brahmanical (and pro-Brahmin) discourse is significant in its indication that the female sadhus perceive themselves and their renunciant practice in a traditional way, not as heterodox or non-conformist. More

²⁸² Though, recall from our earlier discussion that female sadhus like Tulsigiri makes explicit in her discourses that *sevā* in the form of idol worship is not the way sadhus practice their *sevā* to God. But in making this statement, Tulsigiri’s intention is not to deplore or criticize idol worship, but rather to distinguish between the ways she perceives householders and sadhus to worship and serve the divine.

²⁸³ In some of our conversations, Gangagiri has said that both sadhus and Brahmins have the right (*adhikār*) to sit on a lion/tiger’s skin.

significant, in their discussions about the lives of the *sants*, or in their performance of *sant vāṇī*, none of the Rajasthani female sadhus ever mentioned or suggested to me their awareness of the anti-Brahmanical stance of the *sants*. Their use of *sant* rhetoric to construct devotional asceticism communicates, I suggest, an alternative model of asceticism to the Brahmanical one. The sadhus' devotional asceticism, however, co-exists with and complements Brahmanical asceticism.

Second, the *sants* vehemently rejected the authority of scripture as holy writ (Vaudeville 1987, 23). As Vaudeville discusses, the *sants* not only deny “the value and prestige of ‘the Book’, which, in Hinduism, remains the privilege of the Brahmin pandit,” but also “hold that man has no need of ‘holy books’ to attain salvation, nay that such books are an obstacle in the spiritual path” (Vaudeville 1987, 23). In stark contrast, as discussed in the last chapter, though they stretch the boundaries of the concept of the text beyond simply that of the ‘written book’ in their textual performances, the female sadhus still accord much spiritual value and meaning to the text *as the written holy book*.²⁸⁴ Most of the female sadhus describe the *Rāmāyan* of Tulsidas as a “book of bliss,” and Gangagiri herself often extols the virtues of the *Gītā* as a written text by equating it with a “single, one-hundred rupee note.” More importantly, the female sadhus recite from memory or from the printed book itself verses from the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* and/or the *Gītā* as part of their daily devotional practice. Unlike the *sants* who were “detached from scriptural authority” (Vaudeville 1987, 24), the female sadhus recognize the authority of the written text and participate in *satsang* in order to encounter and experience the holy *book*.

²⁸⁴ The same observation is applicable to the male sadhus.

While these differences distinguish the female sadhus' devotional asceticism from *sant* asceticism, both groups of holy people share an egalitarian vision of *bhakti*. Just as “the Sants...advocate[d] a path to ‘holiness’, and ultimately to salvation, open to all creatures,” the female sadhus advocate that *bhakti* is for everyone. Not only this, *bhajans* are for everyone. As Gangagiri teaches, “Anyone can sing *bhajans*; [the] learned or unlearned; [the] young or old; [the] rich or poor, anyone can sing *bhajans*; *bhajans* are for everyone.” Let’s turn now to the *bhajans* and examine them as resources for the sadhus’ performance of devotional asceticism.

“Prabhu, you have a thousand names”: God as Nameless and Formless

In most *satsangs*, the female sadhus describe their understandings of the divine through use of *nirguṇī sant* teachings of God as nameless and formless. For instance, in one *bhajan satsang* Tulsigiri and Gangagiri discussed their perceptions of God in this very manner. Tulsigiri said that while our parents “give birth to us...there is only one [God] who creates [everything in the universe].” She further explained that God, though a single creator (*ek hai*), has many names, such as Iswar, Prabhu, and Gajananad (a name for Ganesh). In her words: “You can call [God] by any name, but God [*bhagvān*] is one.” In response Gangagiri said, “God is one and formless [*nirākār*].” Then she commented, “We say it like this,” and sang the following *nirguṇī bhajan*:

Prabhu, you have a thousand names.
 Say the names Lakvi and Kankotri.
 Hari, you have a thousand names.
 Some call you Ram,
 Some call you Radhesyam.
 Some call you Ram,
 Some call you Radhesyam.
 Some call you Kishor of Nand.
 Prabhu, you have a thousand names.
 Say the names Lakvi and Kankotri.

In Mathura, you are called Mohan.
 In Gokul, you are called Gualiyō.
 In Dwarka, you are called Raja Ranchor.
 Say the names Lakvi and Kankotri.
 Prabhu, you have a thousand names.

In this *satsang*, Gangagiri “keys” her performance with the statement, “We say it like this,” a statement she often makes immediately before she sings her *bhajans* (Bauman 1977, 15-24). By doing so, she provides an important performance frame that illustrates her use of *bhajans* as, to use Abrahams’ words, “a tool for persuasion” that enables her to explain the concept of God as nameless/formless (Abrahams 1968, 146, cited from Narayan 1995, 258). Although the *bhajan* communicates the opposite of Gangagiri’s and Tulsigiri’s renunciant teaching—that God has many names and, thus, many forms—the context of their performance infuses the song with the underlying *nirguṇī* message that God is ultimately one and thus nameless and formless. Both of the female sadhus continue to make this idea explicit by means of their commentaries following the performance. As Gangagiri asserts, “In this way God is nameless [*anāmi*].”

But why do Gangagiri and Tulsigiri sing a *bhajan* with Vaiṣṇava overtones to explain a *nirguṇī sant* conception of the divine? If we examine the names discussed in the *bhajan*, most of them either explicitly mention or allude to God in the forms of Ram and Kṛṣṇa, two of the most popular incarnations of Viṣṇu. And yet, the *sants* (particularly the northern group)²⁸⁵ did not worship Vaiṣṇava forms of divinity, but rather understood God in terms of the ineffable and all-pervading Absolute (cf. Vaudeville 1987, 26). Also, neither Gangagiri nor Tulsigiri ever explicitly mention the *sants* in their commentary, and, unlike the *bhajans* we examine below, this song has no “stamp” or *cāp* (the signature line in which the name of the *sant* thought to have composed the *bhajan*

²⁸⁵ See the Introduction for a description of the northern and southern groups of *sants*.

appears at the end of the poem) that would legitimize it as a *sant* teaching. How do we know, then, that *sant* views underlie these sadhus' interpretations and experiences of the divine as nameless/formless, and by extension, their construction of devotional asceticism?

In the discussion preceding the singing of the *bhajan*, apart from using the general term, *bhagvān*, Tulsigiri refers to God as Ishwar, Prabhu and Hari, the first of which is a general term meaning 'Lord,' and the other two of which represent names for Viṣṇu. As we shall see in some of the *nirguṇī bhajans* below, these are some of the same divine names that appear consistently in the poetry of the *sants*. The *sants* themselves, then, according to several scholars, imagine and express *nirguṇī* notions of the divine by borrowing both their poetic imagery and their God-language from the wellspring of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions. Vaudeville observes, "The Sants...cling exclusively to the Vaiṣṇava names of God such as Ram, Hari, Govinda, Mukunda, Madhava, Murari, Sarangapani—with a special emphasis on the name of 'Ram' (Vaudeville 1987, 32). However, despite their use of such names, the *sants* neither conceptualize nor experience the divine in the anthropomorphic manner implied by Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions (Vaudeville 1987, 32; Lorenzen 1996). As Hess explains in relation to Kabir's poetry,

Kabir's poetry is full of exhortations to recite the name of Ram, to devote oneself to Ram, to drop everything except Ram. It should be emphasized that this Ram is not the deity of popular Hindu mythology, incarnation of Vishnu and hero of the Ramayana epic. Though he sometimes addresses King Ram, Lord, or Hari (a name of Vishnu) in the songs, many references to Ram...indicate that his Ram is primarily a sound, a mantra consisting of the long and short syllables, Ra-ma (Hess 1982, 3-4).

In their use of the names of Prabhu, Hari, and Ram to represent *nirguṇī* concepts of the divine, Gangagiri and Tulsigiri not only allude to *sant* interpretations about the nature of God, but also understand and explain these concepts much like the *sants*

understood and explained them in their songs. Like the *sants*, the female sadhus, too, teach that God is one and nameless and formless by singing *bhajans* that praise the various Vaiṣṇava divine names.

In praising Vaiṣṇava notions for the divine name, though, the female sadhus, again, like the *sants*, further express a particular type of *nirguṇī* interpretation of God. While *sant*-constructed *nirguṇī* conceptualizations of the divine suggest that God is simultaneously impersonal and ineffable,²⁸⁶ both the *sants* and the female sadhus understand and relate to a nameless/formless God in an intensely personal way. In this *satsang*, Tulsigiri and Gangagiri suggest that a *nirguṇī*-conceived God (*bhagvān*), though nameless and formless, also has the (spiritual) qualities of love and compassion that make a *bhakti*-driven relationship between deity and devotee possible. In their commentary on the *bhajan*, Gangagiri and Tulsigiri explain that

GG: When devotees have difficulty [*kaṣṭ*], so many evil [*duṣṭ*] things are spread [in the universe]. There are many reasons [for why difficulty/evil spreads]. There is not only one reason, but many [reasons]. For many reasons, then, God [*bhagvān*] incarnates [as a particular form]. When [God] incarnates s/he take a name...

TG: So, if *bhakt*s are in difficulty, Prabhu incarnates, I mean God takes birth [in some form].

GG: For this reason God has a name.

TG: Right. When God takes birth, he takes a name.

GG: [After he incarnates in a form] God kills the evil [ones] and crosses his devotees over the ocean of existence.

TG: And, like this, he gets a name.

Both Tulsigiri and Gangagiri's explanations about the reasons for which God receives a name illustrate their perceptions that God incarnates in the world or, as Tulsigiri says, "takes birth," in order to rescue His devotees from the difficulties and evil that spread in the world as a result of the lack (or the decline of) righteousness (*dharma*)

²⁸⁶ *Sant* conceptualizations of God as *nirguṇī* coincide with the Upaniṣadic notions of *brahman* as *ātma*, and with Advaita Vedānta interpretations that the individual *ātma* dissolves into the Supreme *brahman* at the moment of realization. See Vaudeville 1987, 26.

in the universe. Their commentary indexes Purāṇic *bhakti* views of divine incarnation (e.g., those found in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇas*)²⁸⁷ as well as implies the *sant* view that God's actions in the world derive from his love and compassion for devotees.²⁸⁸ Though not explicitly stated in this *satsang*, I have heard many female sadhus describe God as love. "Love is what God is," Gangagiri repeatedly asserts in our conversations. Hence, from Tulsigiri and Gangagiri's perspectives, a *bhakt-bhagvān* relationship is entirely possible because God still loves and cares for those who love and remember him.

The sadhus' commentary, however, suggests more than just the possibility of having a *bhakti* relationship with the divine; it also indicates their perceptions of *bhakt-bhagvān* duality. This particular interpretation of the divine-human relationship supports a *bhakti*-centered approach to God. As Vaudeville notes, "without some distinction between the Lord (Bhagvan) and the devotee (bhakta), the very notion of 'nirguṇa bhakti'... would bring about the abolition of bhakti itself" (1987, 27). More significantly, the female sadhus' implied perceptions of *bhakt-bhagvān* duality reflect the *sant* teachings about the divine-human relationship. *Sant*-conceived *nirguṇī* notions of God as nameless/formless coincide with Advaita Vedanta interpretations, "which den[y] any real distinction between the soul and God and urges man to recognize within himself his true divine nature" (Vaudeville 1987, 26). Nevertheless, as Vaudeville explains, the *sants* described their religious experiences in terms of "union with" God rather than in Vedantic terms of the absolute dissolution of all distinctions between deity and devotee,

²⁸⁷ According to the "Four Ages" text from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, whenever *dharma* declines (due to the loss of truth/wisdom in the universe), Viṣṇu incarnates in the world in a particular form (e.g., Kṛṣṇa, Ram, the boar, the fish, and so forth) in order to destroy evil and restore righteousness. Many of the texts from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* make this claim. See *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*, Dimmitt and Van Buitenen, ed. and trans., 1978.

²⁸⁸ In the composition of their poetry, the *sants* also borrowed heavily imagery and concepts from the *Purāṇas*. See Lorenzen 1995, 1996.

and thus, obliquely expressed an underlying perception of divine-human duality in the construction of *nirguṇī bhakti*, and more broadly, *sant* asceticism. Likewise, in constructing devotional asceticism, most of the female sadhus use the *sant* language of “meeting God” or “melting into God” (by which they mean divine union) often featured in their *bhajans* to express their understanding of the *bhakt-bhagvān* relationship as an encounter of love, devotion, and duality.

“Melting Into God”: Divine Union

Another *nirguṇī sant* theme the Rajasthani female sadhus emphasize in their performances of devotional asceticism is “melting into [*līn ho jānā*] God,” or union with God (*bhagvān se milnā*). For many of these sadhus, perhaps no *sant* or *bhakt* epitomizes union with God better than Mira Bai. To the female sadhus, Mira Bai represents a paragon of (a life of) devotional asceticism. On one occasion, three female sadhus, namely Tulsigiri, Gangagiri, and Jnan Nath, gathered at Tulsigiri’s ashram for a *bhajan* performance and sang a number of Mira *bhajans*. Before their group singing session started, Gangagiri contextualized the meanings of the songs by telling a popular legend about Mira’s melting into the god Kṛṣṇa at Dwarka²⁸⁹:

Kṛṣṇa and Mira used to talk to each other like we are talking to each other. God came to Mira. When Lord Kṛṣṇa left for Dwarka, she followed him from Vrindāvan²⁹⁰ to Dwarka. She entered into his body. Only the corner of her *sari* remained...No one has ever had devotion like Mira’s.

The three sadhus then sang this Mira *bhajan* after Gangagiri’s narration:

If I do not see you,
I shall not live till tomorrow.

²⁸⁹ Dwarka is a popular pilgrimage city in the north Indian state of Gujarat, Jamnagar district. It is considered to be one of Kṛṣṇa’s dwelling places, and thus, where Mira united with God/Kṛṣṇa.

²⁹⁰ Vrindāvan is also a popular pilgrimage town in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Mathura district. It is considered to be the birth place of Kṛṣṇa as well as the place where, up until the time she left for Dwarka, Mira resided while she was living as a sadhu.

My heart knows this.

If I do not see you,
I shall not live till tomorrow.

My heart knows this.

I climb higher and higher,
And I see your path.

I climb higher and higher,
And I see your path.

The whole night I spend crying [for you].
You are my partner through life and death.

The whole night I spend crying for you.
You are my partner through life and death.

I shall not remain another day and night separated from you.
You are my partner through the ages.

The whole world is false.
All the families are false.

The whole world is false.
All the families are false.

I request of you to listen to me.
You are my partner through life and death.
I shall not remain another day and night separated from you.

You are my partner through the ages.
You are my partner through the ages.

This mind of mine is wicked,
Like a drunken elephant.
This mind of mine is wicked,
Like a drunken elephant.

You are my partner through life and death.
I shall not remain another day and night separated from you.

You are my partner through the ages.

I keep seeing your form each and every moment.
In seeing you, I find happiness.

I keep seeing your form each and every moment.
In seeing you, I find happiness.

Hey friend, Mira says: “Prabhu Girdhar Nagar.”
I shall always remain at your feet.

Following their *bhajan* performance, Gangagiri remarked, “Mira was great [*mahān*]. She was so elevated [*aparam*] that no one could understand her... Her *bhajans* are full of devotion and knowledge.”²⁹¹ In their commentary, the female sadhus use the popular *bhakti* metaphor with monistic Vedanta overtones of ‘the light dissolving into the light’ (*jyoti men jyoti milnā*), to represent Mira’s *bhakti* experience of divine union, implying that Mira, illustrative of the individual soul (*ātma*), merged with Kṛṣṇa/God, the Supreme Soul (*brahman*). Since they perceive Mira’s religiosity to be consistent with their view of *nirguṇī bhakti*, the female sadhus’ use of her model to illustrate *nirguṇī* light metaphors is not a logical contradiction. The following discussion amongst Gangagiri (GG), Tulsigiri (TG), and Jnan Nath (JN) demonstrates this point:

GG: Mira entered into God [*bhagvān*].

TG: She, well, the light dissolved into the light.

GG: Only the edge of her sari was left. Otherwise, she completely dissolved into God. People saw the edge of her sari and knew by looking at it that Mira had entered into God.

JN: Yes, the light dissolved into the light.

This commentary, including the narrative Gangagiri shared prior to the sadhus’ performance, suggest that the theme of union with God underpins Mira’s *bhajans*. This *bhajan* depicts Mira’s intense desire for union with Kṛṣṇa, whom she addresses here as the Mountain Lord (Prabhu Girdhar Nagar). The lines “You are my partner through life and death,” “You are my partner through the ages,” and “I keep seeing your form each and every minute,” each allude to this implied *bhakti* theme of (the desire for) divine union. Mira’s desire to dissolve into her beloved Kṛṣṇa reflects the emotional

²⁹¹ Whenever I asked the female sadhus if they perceived themselves as contemporary Mira Bais, almost all of them responded along the lines of: “Mira was Mira. No one can be like her.” Nancy Martin discusses a contemporary group of holy women who identify themselves as Mira Bai and who are identified as Mira by their families who are coming to terms with their choices. See Martin 2007; and personal communication with Martin on February 20, 2009.

intoxication, indeed, the passion, she experienced at the very thought of God. She says, “This mind of mine is wicked, like a drunken elephant.” The sadhus themselves glossed Mira’s intoxication as intense love for and devotion to God. To this extent, Gangagiri not only comments that “Mira really loved God,” but also emphasizes in her narrative performance that “no one has ever had devotion like Mira’s.”

The female sadhus’ use of the model of Mira Bai to construct devotional asceticism suggests that they perceive the experience of divine union in a holistic way. That is, not only their metaphors of ‘the light dissolving into the light,’ but also their emphasis that Mira’s *whole being* merged into that of Kṛṣṇa’s supports a view of soul-body holism. Both Mira’s soul and her *female* body “entered into” the Kṛṣṇa’s divine form. “Only the edge of her sari was left,” Gangagiri stresses. While their understandings of soul-body unification in the *bhakti* experience of divine union resonate with the Advaita Vedanta philosophy often emphasized in the Brahmanic textual tradition of renunciation, the female sadhus’ positive valuation of the body, and by extension, the female body, significantly contrasts with dominant renunciant perspectives on the body. Orthodox literary sources on Brahmanical asceticism are replete with images that both devalue the human body and construct the female body, in particular, as the locus of sexuality, suffering, and the illusory world of existence, or *māyā* (cf. Olivelle 1992; 1996).

Despite the ideological misogynism of some Brahmanic texts, their representation of divine union as an intimate and direct experience of (soul-body) wholeness enables the Rajasthani sadhus to exert agency and power as female ascetics, as issue I have discussed elsewhere in the dissertation (see chapters three and four). Their

agency is additionally evident in the fact that, unlike male hagiographers who often eroticize the religiosity of female Hindu saints,²⁹² the sadhus refuse to use gender as a reason to eroticize their own or Mira's asceticism. At the same time, they use Mira's female gender as a strategy with which to construct a tradition of female asceticism in Rajasthan (see chapter four). Apart from the implications of agency their commentary evokes, Gangagiri's, Jnan Nath's, and Tulsigiri's performance indicates that the divine union that produces soul-body holism makes *bhakti* a "priceless" religious experience.

"Keep the Precious Diamond": Bhakti as Priceless

In the next song, Gangagiri emphasizes the *nirgunī sant* theme of *bhakti* as priceless (*anmol*). Frequently, she tells her audience that "[b]hakti is expensive [mahengī]," and then sings a *bhajan* to illustrate her understanding of this teaching. For example, Gangagiri sang the following *bhajan* that she attributed to Kabir in order to underscore a point she had made earlier in this *satsang* that *bhakti* comprises an invaluable aspect of a life of devotional asceticism:

Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond [hīrā]. Keep [the diamond] safe.
 Listen my crazy [bāvlā] mind,
 Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond. Keep it safe.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond. Keep it safe.
 In this story, immortal *rasas* [juices] are filled.
 Don't let your heart get attached with [worldly] things.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 In this story, immortal *rasas* are filled.
 Don't let your heart get attached to [worldly] things.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond. Keep it safe.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 In this story, there is a quarry of diamonds.
 Don't mix pebbles with the diamonds.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 In this story, there is a quarry of diamonds.

²⁹² See A.K. Ramanujan 1999, 270; see also Ramaswamy 1997 and Kinsey 1981.

Don't mix pebbles with the diamonds.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond. Keep it safe.
 In this story, unlimited water is filled.
 Don't wash your clothes in mud.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond. Keep it safe.
 Kabir says: 'Listen brother sadhus.'
 Kabir says: 'Listen brother sadhus.'
 It's only the *sants* who string one diamond after another.
 Kabir says: 'Listen brother sadhus!'
 It's only the *sants* who string one diamond after another.
 Listen my crazy mind,
 Without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond. Keep it safe.

Gangagiri often describes the value of both *bhakti* and *bhajans* by referring directly to precious gems like diamonds (*hīrā*) and pearls (*motī*), sometimes including in this category precious metals such as gold (*sonā*) and silver (*chāndī*). Gangagiri's use of gem imagery to communicate her view that *bhakti* is the *sine qua non* of devotional asceticism (she often says, "*bhakti* is the only expensive thing") parallels the views expressed in *sant* rhetoric that *bhakti* serves as the means through which devotees experience union with the divine. Jewels are common symbols in *nirguṇī sant* literature (cf. Hess 1982; Lorenzen 1996). Kabir, for instance, frequently speaks of precious jewels in his poetry, and in one poem he says, "A diamond fell in the market/lay in the trash/Many busy fools passed buy/A tester took it away" (Bijak, Hess trans., 1982, 109). Another of Kabir's poems reads, "You don't find: diamonds in storerooms/sandal trees in rows/lions in flocks/holy men in herds" (Hess 1982, 109). For most of the female sadhus, too, the diamond is a poetically apropos symbol with which they imagine and express the value of a life of devotional asceticism because of what it signifies to them.

Several scholars have discussed and analyzed the meanings of polyvalent symbols like the precious diamond and gems in *nirguṇī sant* poetry. For instance, in his examination of three different versions of a *nirguṇī bhajan* attributed to Kabir entitled

“Precious Gem,” the refrains of which resonate with that of Gangagiri’s *nirguṇī bhajan*, and which were performed by three different Jogi²⁹³ mendicants of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Edward O. Henry glosses the diamond as “life itself, which here is seen as an opportunity to earn salvation or release (*mukti*), through devotion” (Henry 1991, 234). Similarly, in his analysis of one version of the ‘Precious Gem’ *bhajan*, David Lorenzen identifies the diamond as “a symbol both of the difficult to achieve human birth, and of mystic illumination” (Lorenzen 1996, 218).²⁹⁴

In her interpretation of these symbols, however, Gangagiri emphasizes that the diamond and other precious gems symbolize the virtue of knowledge (*jnān*). While she does not explain the *bhajan*’s meaning in this *satsang* performance, Gangagiri discusses the meanings of diamonds/gems in other *satsangs* and, in these contexts, almost always interprets such imagery in terms of knowledge. In her use of the word ‘knowledge,’ Gangagiri means precisely the revelatory/liberating knowledge that releases devotees from the chains of their own worldly illusions. According to Gangagiri, “this whole world is an illusion [*māyā*]; it’s [like] a dream,” implying that the world of existence, which appears to be ‘real,’ is only illusory, and that knowledge enables devotees to awaken from their delusions and realize that their happiness and well-being lay with God, not with the world, which Gangagiri herself calls as *māyā*. As she says, “the foundation

²⁹³ According to Henry, the Jogi mendicants from whom he collected his *nirguṇī bhajans* were householders, and not ascetics as many of the villagers had assumed (the villagers thought that since their repertoires had consisted of purely *nirguṇī* and philosophical *bhajans*, that the singers themselves had been wandering ascetics). The Jogi caste is a community of weavers from Uttar Pradesh and is believed to be descended from the Nāth panthis. For this reason, many wandering Jogis sing the *bhajans* of Kabir and the Naths. Interestingly, the Jogis whom Henry interviewed seemed to have appropriated both householder and sadhu identities. See Henry 1988 and 1991.

²⁹⁴ Lorenzen uses the text as sung by Abul Hassan, one of Henry’s collaborators, and which appears in Henry’s monograph, *Chant the Names of God* (1988).

of my well-being [*kalyān*] is not the world; it's knowledge." I use, then, the explanations Gangagiri shared with me in various other *satsangs* to analyze this *bhajan*.

Gangagiri often distinguishes between knowledge (*jnān*) and ignorance (*ajnān*). Notice that a similar distinction also occurs in Gangagiri's *nirguṇī bhajan* on the precious diamond. The *bhajan* differentiates knowledge from ignorance through use of three different poetic images. Addressing the "crazy mind," the first section the *bhajan* via the legitimizing voice of Kabir cautions, "Don't let your heart become attached to worldly things"; the second half similarly warns, "Don't mix pebbles with diamonds"; and finally, the third part of the *bhajan* declares, "Don't wash your clothes in the mud." Since Gangagiri understands the diamond to signify knowledge, pebbles would represent here the antithesis of knowledge, or ignorance. Relatedly, water represents knowledge, whereas mud symbolizes ignorance. Notice, though, that the contrast between diamonds and pebbles illustrated in the *bhajan* implies further a distinction between light and darkness, respectively. Even the contrast between water and mud hints at an implied distinction between light and darkness. Gangagiri herself speaks of knowledge and ignorance in terms of light and darkness. In one *satsang* she explained that

Ignorance is darkness. But knowledge is light [*prakāś*]...Knowledge is light. Even if there are only stars and planets in the sky there will be light. Why? The stars and planets [*sang*] so many *bhajans*, so their light shines [*in the sky*]...Knowledge is priceless; it's hardly lying in the road.

While the association between knowledge and light and ignorance and darkness appears often in Sanskrit texts like the *Upaniṣads*, Gangagiri expresses her understanding of this ancient idea through use of *sant* imagery and language. But what makes knowledge priceless for Gangagiri is her perception that it enables devotees to free themselves from what she calls "the ocean of existence [*bhavsāgar*]." A common trope in

sant poetry, the ocean of existence connotes the illusory world. At the same time, attachment to the illusory world reflects a state of ignorance or darkness. Gangagiri's *bhajan* makes explicit this idea: "Don't let your heart get attached to worldly things" and, as the song implies, drown in ignorance or darkness. Gangagiri understands that knowledge enables devotees to cross over the ocean of existence, and release themselves not simply from the illusory world, but rather from the emotional attachments that keep them trapped in *sansār*. Knowledge signifies light because, according to Gangagiri, it effects understanding of the illusory/impermanent nature of existence within devotees' hearts/minds. Knowledge also leads toward spiritual awakening, an experience Gangagiri describes as acquiring "peace [*śānti*] in the heart," and as *mukti* or *mokṣ*, terms she uses to mean liberation from both ignorance as well as the cycle of existence (*sansār*). She explained:

Until people understand [the nature of existence], they remain fools [*mūrkh*]... When you understand you receive peace in your heart. Peace will come... If you understand the knowledge, you shall receive peace... Knowledge doesn't happen in one day; it takes the whole life.

Implicit in Gangagiri's description is the related idea that, in producing mental states such as peace or *mukti*, knowledge effects new life for the devotees of God; that is, knowledge provides a means through which devotees awaken to a life of devotion to God. Therefore, the distinctions Gangagiri's *nirguṇī bhajan* poses between knowledge and ignorance signify poetic contrasts not merely between light and darkness, but more significantly, between life and death. Like the precious diamond, the virtue of knowledge is priceless and/or expensive because it brings about feelings of *bhakti*, and in doing so, leads devotees to God, the path of life. But let's not forget that, for Gangagiri, *bhakti*, too, is priceless. The *bhajan*'s refrain, "without *bhajans*, you lose the diamond," suggests that

knowledge results from the *bhakti* practice of singing *bhajans*. Recall from Gangagiri's discussion of knowledge as light her understanding that the stars and planets themselves produced their own light by means of singing *bhajans*. Her comment makes explicit that *bhakti/bhajans* serves as the ultimate basis of revelatory knowledge, which, in turn, brings about a life of *bhakti*. In this framework, devotion is more than just a bridge to liberating knowledge; it is a function of knowledge, and hence, both the goal and the purpose of asceticism. Singing this *nirguṇī bhajan* enables Gangagiri to construct devotional asceticism not only as a *bhakti* path of liberating knowledge, but also as a path of life. And, because it leads to immortality, *bhakti*, as the female sadhus say, "is a difficult path."

“Rāmrās is sweet, my brother”: *Bhakti* as Difficult and Asceticism as a Heroic Path

Another related *nirguṇī bhajan* theme that Gangagiri emphasizes in *satsang* is that *bhakti* is difficult (*muśkil*). One of her *bhajans* illustrates this motif well:

O my brother, *Rāmrās* [Ram nectar] is sweet.
 If you drink it you shall become immortal [*amar honā*].
Rāmrās is sweet, my brother.
 The whole world drinks sweet, sweet things.
 No one drinks the bitter [things].
 The whole world drinks sweet, sweet things.
 No one drinks the bitter [things].
 The one who shall drink the bitter will become the sweetest.
 O my brother, *Rāmrās* is sweet.
 If you drink it you shall become immortal.
Rāmrās is like this, my brother.
 The whole world moves up,
 Nobody comes down.
 The whole world moves up,
 Nobody comes down
 Whoever comes down shall go the highest.
 O my brother, *Rāmrās* is sweet.
 Drink the knowledge and become immortal.
Rāmrās is like this, my brother.
 Dhruv drank it, Prahlad drank it,
 And Sadankasai drank it.

Kabir drank it fully.
 Kabir drank it fully.
 And they still have the desire to drink more.
 Hey, *Rāmras* is sweet, my brother.
 Whoever drinks it shall become immortal.
Rāmras is like this, my brother.

In addition to the phrase, “*bhakti* is difficult,” Gangagiri often asserts that “the name of God is difficult. You have to take care with the name [of God]. It is something which is [as if] round and slippery [*gol-mol*], and there’s no place to hold it. The name of God is like this.”²⁹⁵ *Rāmras* refers to the name of God, envisioned in this text as Ram, the Supreme Being. The song underscores that *bhakti* consists of taking God’s name, which is metaphorically depicted in terms of “drinking,” through either *bhajan* singing or (silent) repetitive chanting (*japa*). However, as the *bhajan* suggests, taking God’s name is difficult.

Two specific images in the text convey this *bhakti* message. According to the *bhajan*, “The whole world drinks sweet, sweet things/No one drinks the bitter [things].” Similarly, “The whole world moves up/[but] Nobody comes down.” Each of these images poignantly suggests what Gangagiri teaches in *satsang*—that devotion to God involves sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. Indeed, it is a heroic path meant for the brave of heart. Recall from our discussion in chapter four that in their descriptions of the lives of the male and female *sants*, the female sadhus emphasize these three *bhakti* virtues, implying that the *sants* sacrificed or “left everything” in order to dedicate themselves to praising the name of God through song and *satsang*. Similarly, in her renunciant discourses, Gangagiri often characterizes *bhakti* as a path for the brave, for those who are ready to sacrifice themselves (i.e., their egos and their illusions) to God on the battlefield of

²⁹⁵ The bowling ball, without its holes, of course, would be an appropriate image for Gangagiri’s understanding of God’s name as “round and slippery.”

bhakti. Through personal sacrifice, suffering, and struggle, devotees express their love for God. The *bhajan* implies such an understanding about the *sants*' lives. The text enumerates the mythological characters Dhruv,²⁹⁶ Prahlad,²⁹⁷ and Sadankasai,²⁹⁸ and the legendary *sant* Kabir who drank *Rāmrās*, that is, who courageously sacrificed themselves and their illusions at God's feet for the purpose of singing the divine name. In this *satsang* Gangagiri did not discuss these characters, as most of the audience members knew the stories of their lives.²⁹⁹

While the *bhajan* lacks a signature line (e.g., "Kabir says"), the list of devotees at the end of the composition legitimates the *bhajan*'s message. The *bhajan* expresses that the knowledge acquired through *bhakti* not only transforms devotees; it also makes them immortal, as it made Dhruv, Prahlad, Sadankasai, and Kabir immortal. By singing this *bhajan* Gangagiri legitimates her own perception not only that *bhakti* is difficult, but also that taking God's name, as she says, "is the best thing" because of the knowledge and immortality devotees receive as a result. "Why do I sing so loudly," Gangagiri once remarked to me, "because I have the power of God's name...I have the power of knowledge." But Gangagiri also expresses the idea that asceticism, as a *bhakti* path, is ultimately a heroic path, in which sadhus sacrifice themselves and live as *bhakti* warriors

²⁹⁶ Dhruv, a mythological character, was an exemplary devotee of Viṣṇu from the pre-*Kālī Yūg*. See Lorenzen 1996, p.265.

²⁹⁷ Prahlad's story is well-known throughout India, and is found in multiple Puranic sources, including the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which contains one of the most popular textual renderings of his life. Prahlad was the son of the evil King Hiranyakashipu, who rebelled against his father when he realized that Viṣṇu was the ultimate truth. Hiranyakashipu tried to kill Prahlad on several occasions; however, the last time he tried to end Prahlad's life, Viṣṇu, in the form of the man-lion, Narsingh, appeared and destroyed the evil king. See Lorenzen 1996, p. 268.

²⁹⁸ Sadankasai was a butcher who unknowingly weighed the meat he sold using the *śālagrām* stones, in which Viṣṇu is considered to be incarnate. Despite this, Viṣṇu was pleased with Sadan because of his devotion for the Lord. See Lorenzen 1996, p. 268.

²⁹⁹ Gangagiri has narrated many of these stories to her devotees and disciples in *satsang*.

for God. Apart from sacrificing everything to/for God, the difficulty of *bhakti* also relates to the act of surrendering to God, to live as “God wants his devotees to live.”

“Live as God wants you to”: Devotional Asceticism as a Path of Surrender and Dependence

Most of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked characterize themselves as “beggars of God.” The use of this motif indexes the sadhus’ shared perception that their lives are based on an attitude of complete dependence on the divine. As Gangagiri says, “I only have God and no one else. God is my support, so why should I fear [anything]?” When Gangagiri talks about her life as a path of surrender and dependence, she often sings the following *bhajan* which she attributes to Mira Bai. This is one of the few *nirguṇī bhajans* whose signature line appears at the beginning instead of at the end of the composition:

Mira says: O Ranaji, live as God keeps you.
 Some days there is *halva* [sweet dish] and *pūrī* [fried bread] to eat;
 Some days you have to go hungry.
 O Ranaji, live as God keeps you.
 Some days you have a pillow and mattress to sleep on,
 Some days you have to sleep on the ground.
 O Ranaji, live as God keeps you.

[Gangagiri interjects this commentary into her performance]

Whether [God] keeps us happy or unhappy, everything happens through [God’s] support [*ādhār*]. This idea that, “I will do this, I will do that, I did this, I did that,” is false. Nobody can do anything [without God’s support]. Whatever God wants shall happen.
 [Returns to the *bhajan*]

Some days you have gardens to wander in.
 Some days you have to live in the jungles.
 O Ranaji, live as God keeps you.

Gangagiri’s understanding that *bhakti* involves an attitude of letting go of personal desires and living as God decides, “whether [God] keeps us happy or unhappy,” is not an idea exclusive to *sant* teachings. As I explained in chapter five, Gangagiri

defines asceticism through use of pivotal *Gītā* concepts such as *tyāg*, or the releasing of individual desires/attachments to the divine. However, unlike the *Gītā*, Gangagiri interprets asceticism à la *sant* understandings—as a *bhakti* path through which sadhus abandon their own ego-based notions such as, “I do this and I do that,” and instead, live in the manner that God keeps them. We notice, then, that both *Gītā* and *sant bhakti* frameworks converge in Gangagiri’s performance of devotional asceticism.

Although Gangagiri does not use the terms ‘surrender’ and ‘dependence’ in this *satsang*, she implies these concepts in her commentary. More than three-quarters of the way into her performance she explains, “Everything happens through God’s support... Whatever God wants [for his devotees] shall happen.” The word Gangagiri uses for what I translate as ‘support’ is *ādhār*, which has corollary meanings of “base,” “foundation,” and “basis.” Her use of this term reflects that she perceives her life in terms of her dependence (*adhīntā*) on God. In other *satsangs*, Gangagiri explicitly described both her form of asceticism and that of the *sants* through use of the concept of dependence. She asserted that “*bhakt*s are dependent on God,”³⁰⁰ implying in this statement what she makes explicit in her Mira *bhajan* performance—that God is the only real foundation, and thus, supplier of everything in the universe. Gangagiri’s view that everything in life happens as God wills it to be approximates her understanding that her becoming a sadhu in this birth represents, in part, the influence of destiny (*bhāgya*; *kismet*), that is, a divine directive. This concept indexes many Rajasthani female sadhus’ understanding of devotional asceticism a path of surrender and dependence.

³⁰⁰ Of course, Gangagiri also teaches that God is dependent on (the love and devotion of) the devotee. The phrase she uses in Hindi is, “*bhakt ke adhīn hai bhagvān*.” In Appendix C, I include Gangagiri’s narrative performance of the Prahlad story, in which she emphasizes this theme of “God depends on his devotees.”

Whenever Gangagiri discusses the importance of dependence for devotional asceticism she almost always performs a song or story about Mira Bai. In doing so, she expresses that Mira Bai, too, represents a beggar of God, a *bhakt* who sacrificed everything in order to live not as the Ranaji³⁰¹ wanted for her, but rather as God desired for her. The Mira *bhajan* illustrates the idea of *bhakti* as surrender to/dependence on the divine through three different sets of images, each of which contrasts material bounty with material lack. One image contrasts eating *halva* and *pūrī*, foods symbolic of material wealth, with having nothing at all to eat; another distinguishes between sleeping on a comfortable pillow and mattress and sleeping on the ground; and the third image differentiates between residing amongst beautiful gardens and living in the jungle. All of these images represent popular tropes in *nirguṇī sant* literature (cf. Lorenzen 1996), and Gangagiri seems to understand them as promoting not only a *bhakti* attitude of dependence on God, but also an ascetic attitude of detachment (*vairāg*) from material things (e.g., food, beds, pillows, gardens), and more broadly, from the illusory and impermanent material world itself. In the discussion preceding her *bhajan* performance, Gangagiri reflected,

Nothing lasts forever. Sometimes there's no oil; sometimes there's no ghee; [and] sometimes there's no flour. Even if you wanted [these materials] to last, they wouldn't. This is what happens [in life]. Like, these big businesses start, but they, too, don't last. Even the billionaires lose their money some day. Everything [in the world] comes to an end.

Again, like the concepts surrender and dependence, Gangagiri does not explicitly mention detachment. Nevertheless, this concept remains embedded in her discussion on the impermanence of material world, and Gangagiri obliquely invokes it in her statement

³⁰¹ As discussed in chapter four, Gangagiri identifies the Ranaji in Mira's *bhajans* as her brother-in-law, Rana Kumbha. See also my discussion of Gangagiri's Mira Bai narrative performance in chapter four.

that “[n]othing lasts forever...Everything comes to an end.” But she makes this comment not so much to teach that the material world is illusory and impermanent as to express that, whether a king or a pauper, devotees never know what God has planned for them in this life. “Whatever God wants shall happen,” Gangagiri asserts.

“Live as God Keeps You”: Barfani Baba’s Version

I recorded another version of this *bhajan* from Barfani Baba. While they share the same refrain, the contents of the song texts are quite different, and unlike Gangagiri’s version, Barfani Baba’s *bhajan* lacks a signature line, and he himself did not attribute the composition to any *sant*. Nonetheless, Barfani Baba’s performance of this *bhajan*, like Gangagiri’s, underscores the *nirgunī bhakti* theme of surrender/dependence:

Live as God keeps you
 Say the name of Ram from your mouth and serve the Lord.
 You are never alone,
 The beloved Ram is always with you.
 Whatever [Ram] has written [in your destiny],
 Whether it be meditation, loss, or profit,
 Endure everything.
 Live as God keeps you.
 Live as Ram wishes, and leave all your wishes behind.
 Keep the relationship with Ram,
 And break all other relationships.
 Keep doing the *satsang* of Ram with the sadhus,
 And put the colors of Ram over each and every limb of your body.
 Live as God keeps you.
 If you shall be proud, you’ll not find your honor.
 If you shall be proud, you’ll not find your honor.
 It shall be however Ram likes.
 Let go [*tyāg*] of all the fruits [*phalyā*] and take Ram’s name from morning till
 night.
 Live as Ram keeps you.

This is one of the only *nirgunī bhajans* I recorded from the sadhus (male and female) that has the word *tyāg* in the text, a concept to which Gangagiri implicitly refers in her Mira *bhajan* performance. Before he sang this *bhajan*, Barfani Baba had been

obliquely discussing the concepts of surrender/dependence by speaking about the personality differences between children and adults. He suggested that whereas children depend on others for their happiness and well-being, adults seek to control every aspect of their lives through their individual actions. Barfani Baba put the issue this way: “Their work gives them *rotīs* [lit., “bread,” but meaning, more broadly, food/shelter], but it takes them further from God.” As Barfani Baba indicates, the problem with thinking, to use Gangagiri’s phrase, “I do this, I do that,” is that no one controls anything. Rather, God controls everything. The solution is for devotees to become like children (in their attitudes) and surrender to God’s wishes, despite whatever God decides as the outcome of their lives.³⁰² “As long as we remain [like] children, God [*bhagvān*] will keep us as [he] pleases,” Barfani Baba reflected. The *bhajan* reiterates what Barfani Baba had been teaching his devotees in *satsang*—to depend on God for everything. Although neither he nor his *bhajan* explicitly mentions ‘surrender’ or ‘dependence,’ the context of both his discourse and his oral performance makes it clear that Barfani Baba, like Gangagiri, sings this *bhajan* in order to emphasize that these virtues are essential for a *bhakti* life, and more specifically, for asceticism.

“Chant Prabhu’s Name and whatever is spoiled shall be improved”: Devotion to God’s Name as Transformative

A sixth *nirgunī* theme the female sadhus highlight in their performances of devotional asceticism is the repetition of God’s name as powerful and transformative. Gangagiri sang the following *bhajan* that she attributes to Kabir in order to emphasize this view:

³⁰² The idea that adults should become like children before God is a popular idea in *nirgunī sant* literature. See Schomer 1987.

Whatever of yours is spoiled [*bigaḍā huā*] shall be improved [*sudhārnā*].
 Meditate on Hari, my friend.
 Whatever of yours is spoiled shall be improved.
 Chant the names of Prabhu, my friend.
 Anka³⁰³ crossed over, Banka crossed over, Mira Bai crossed over,
 And the butcher, Sadankasai, crossed over.
 Anka crossed over, Banka crossed over, Sadankasai crossed over,
 The prostitute [*gaṇikā*] who taught the parrot [to say ‘Ram Ram’] crossed over.
 And Mira Bai crossed over.
 Meditate on Hari, my friend.
 Mira Bai crossed over.
 Meditate on Hari, my friend.
 Whatever of yours is spoiled shall be improved.
 Chant the names of Prabhu, my friend.
 Wealth, the world, treasures, and the bullock cart,
 Time shall steal these away.
 Wealth, the world, treasures and the bullock cart,
 Time shall steal these away.
 One never knows when Time shall sound his drum.
 Meditate on Hari, my friend.
 Whatever of yours is spoiled shall be improved.
 Chant the names of Prabhu, my friend.
 Do such a *bhakti* in your heart.
 Serve [the Lord] and cultivate dependence [*adhīntā*] on him,
 And you shall meet Raghurai [Ram].
 Meditate on Hari, my friend.
 Whatever of yours is spoiled shall be improved.
 Chant the names of Prabhu, my friend.
 Kabir said: “Listen sadhus.”
 The sadguru has told us the truth.
 Kabir said: “Listen sadhus.”
 The sadguru has told us the truth.
 The world lasts only four days.
 Take the name of Ram.
 Meditate on Hari, my friend.
 Whatever of yours is spoiled shall be improved.
 Chant the names of Prabhu, my friend.

After Gangagiri performed this *bhajan*, one of her devotees, an elderly man by the name of Sohanlal, who accompanied me on this visit to Gangagiri’s hermitage (and who felt it necessary to gloss Ganagagiri’s performances for my benefit), began to explain his understanding of the *bhajan*’s meaning: that the song’s message is that devotees who take the divine name “will never suffer.” While she did not disagree with his response, it

³⁰³ In some of the *nirgunī bhajans* Lorenzen discusses, this name appears as Ranka instead of as Anka. See Lorenzen 1996.

became clear from the verbal exchange which soon followed Sohanlal's explanation that Gangagiri's purpose in singing this *bhajan* was to communicate another message. Here is my transcription of their conversation:

SL: When you take the name of God, you will never suffer and your work [*kām*] will never be spoiled.

GG: Whatever is spoiled becomes improved.

SL: O.k., and even if something of yours is spoiled [e.g., your actions], it will turn out good. This is the meaning of the *bhajan*...

GG: But you have to take God's [*bhagvān*] name with love. Take God's name with love.

SL: [Pointing to his heart] From here, from the *ātma* [soul], take the name of God with love. Do your work with love. God is watching from above. So, then, your work will turn out well.

GG: And whatever of yours is spoiled will be improved.

This brief exchange illustrates that Gangagiri understands the *bhakti* practice of singing and/or chanting the divine name, whether as Hari or Prabhu, as a powerful form of transformation. It not only protects devotees from suffering, as Sohanlal suggests, but also transforms them, as Gangagiri implies, by purifying their minds and, hence, their actions. The word Gangagiri uses to express this idea is *sudhārnā*, which means “to be improved,” “to be set right,” or “to be corrected.” Implicit in her usage of the term is the related meaning ‘to be purified’ of negative thoughts and actions. The line in the *bhajan* about the prostitute (*gaṇikā*) who taught the parrot to say “Ram Ram,” a popular story Gangagiri has told in other *satsangs*, and the line about the butcher, Sadankasai, indicate that simply singing/repeating the divine name results in the practitioner “crossing over.”³⁰⁴ Both of these devotees earned their livelihoods by engaging in types of work (i.e., the prostitute exchanged sex for money and the butcher killed animals) that “spoiled” or negatively affected them. Yet, by singing the divine name they were able to improve “whatever of theirs was spoiled” (e.g., their minds, bodies, or their work).

³⁰⁴ For brief discussions on the Prostitute and Sadankasai see Lorenzen (1996) “A Glossary of Devotees.”

Gangagiri's perception about the potential of even mechanical repetition of the divine name to transform devotees intimates, as discussed earlier, an underlying ideology of *bhajan* singing (and repetitive chanting or *japa*) as an efficacious *bhakti* practice in its own right. In both *Gītā* and *sant* frameworks, action (*karm*) is thought to influence the mental/emotional and physical make-up of individuals. Depending on its nature, actions both contain and transmit qualities/properties, or *guṇas*, such as wisdom (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*), and ignorance (*tamas*) to their actors (cf. Marriott 1990). Accordingly, (primarily) wisdom-based actions bring about (the qualities of) wisdom/understanding; passion-based actions effect passion; and ignorance-based actions produce ignorance/darkness, in the minds and bodies of individuals. Just as devotees “spoil” themselves through their negative actions, they also improve themselves through their positive actions. In these *bhakti* frameworks, along with meditation on the divine (*dhyān*), repeating the divine name (e.g., Ram, Hari, and Prabhu) is also considered as one of the most powerful actions by which devotees transform their psycho-physical defects.³⁰⁵

Devotees (like the prostitute and the butcher) can change not only themselves, but even a difficult situation by repeating/chanting the name of God “with love” from the heart. Mira Bai's *bhakti* empowered her to emerge unharmed from the Rana's death plots. Recall from Gangagiri's narrative telling in which the King had sent via a servant girl a bowl of poison disguised as milk for Mira to drink. Even though she drank the

³⁰⁵ Gangagiri's understanding of *bhajan* singing as powerful and transformative approximates female householder understandings of *bhakti* rituals such as *vrats* as transformative, that is, as rituals by which means participants can transform their lives and destinies. See Susan Wadley (1983), “Vrats: Transformers of Destiny.”

³⁰⁵ Barfani Baba similarly explained that by taking the name of God devotees ensure that their work will turn out well. His statement in Hindi was: *Hari kā guṇ gāte raho, āpkā kāṁ āte raho* (“keep singing the name of God and your work will turn out well”).

milk, as Gangagiri emphasizes, “absolutely nothing happened to her,” because Mira’s *bhakti* to Kṛṣṇa, which she expressed by singing her *bhajans* and holding *satsang* with *sadhus* and *sants* “from every caste,” enabled her to escape from the multiple hardships that she experienced at the Rana’s hands.

But the *bhakti* practice of repeating the divine name with love affects more than personal transformation; most importantly, it also enables devotees to “cross over” the ocean of existence, or *sansār*. Gangagiri often says that by grasping (*pakaḍnā*) the divine name devotees cross their “boats,” or souls (*ātma*), over the world of existence (*bhavsāgar*) and, in effect, “meet” God, an experience she characterizes as *mukti* or *mokṣ* (implying union with, rather than dissolution into, the divine). As Gangagiri explains, “if you hold the name tightly [in your heart], you will cross over. But if you let it go, your boat will drown.” We notice here that Gangagiri’s *bhakti* language again approximates the *sant* rhetoric as expressed in her *nirguṇī bhajans*, songs which, like this *bhajan*, often legitimate the idea of the power of the divine name by listing the devotees (e.g., Anka, Banka, Mira, and so forth) who encountered God through such means.³⁰⁶

By singing this *bhajan* Gangagiri not only legitimates her own view of the transformative power of (chanting) the divine name, but also teaches her devotees that God is the only permanent reality and truth behind the ever-changing *sansār*. The world, despite its appearance, is merely illusory/impermanent, a view Gangagiri often verbalizes in *satsang*. The *bhajan*, too, expresses this idea in the lines, “[w]ealth, the world,

³⁰⁶ David Lorenzen makes a similar observation about the ways *nirguṇī bhajans* legitimize their *bhakti* claims by listing famous historical *sants*, such as Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, and Mira Bai, and mythological devotees, like Prahlad, the butcher, and the prostitute, who also achieved liberation from the world through the means of their *bhakti*. He states, “When the authors of hagiographical songs [i.e., songs that praise the *bhakti* accomplishments of earlier *sants* and devotees] make an appeal to the examples of these and other saints, they are grounding their texts on the historical authority and witness of those who discovered the Truth for themselves” (Lorenzen 1996, 156).

treasures, and the bullock cart, Time shall steal away.” Time, as Gangagiri notes, is Yamraj, or the Lord of Death. Whereas anything that is of the material world belongs to Death, the *ātma* belongs to God. Consider Gangagiri’s teaching that the world is simply *māyā*, or an illusion, and thus, “nothing lasts forever,” because the world itself is impermanent. The *bhajan* further attests to this point in two of its verses: “One never knows when Time shall sound his drum” and “The world lasts only four days.”³⁰⁷ Gangagiri also suggests that the divine name functions as the guru in the form of the word (*śabd*).

“My Guru is the blackbee”: Devotion to the Word as the Guru

Gangagiri often tells me that had she not met her guru, Gaurigiriji, she would have remained as a fool (*mūrkh*) in this life. Like Gangagiri, most of the female sadhus express the importance of devotion to the guru by praising their (male) teachers who not only initiated them into renunciation, but also gave them the word, or *śabd*. For the female sadhus, the *śabd* signifies more than the powerful *guru-mantra*, or the sacred poetic verses the guru whispers into the disciple’s ear at the time of initiation into renunciation; it is also the speech (*vāṇī*) by which means devotees become transformed from ignorant individuals to awakened *bhakts* of *bhagvān*. The *śabd* may be spoken by the guru or by any other devotee who has experienced religious truth. For this reason, the speech of the *sants*—who are believed to have experienced divine truth—also represents the *śabd*, that is, the direct embodiment of religious knowledge and truth (cf. Lorenzen

³⁰⁷ In his examination of ten *nirguṇī bhajans* performed by different wandering male Jogis, Edward O. Henry suggests that the recurrent motif of “four days” represents the four *āśramas*, or life stages, of the student (*brahmacārin*), the householder (*grhasth*), the forest-dweller (*vanaprasth*), and the renunciant (*sannyāsin*). See Henry 1995.

1996, 156; Schomer 1987, 82-83).³⁰⁸ While they sing *bhajans* that teach the importance of devotion to the (human) guru, the female sadhus also perform these songs in order to emphasize the importance of devotion to the guru in the form of the *śabd*. Here, I focus on one such performance through which Gangagiri communicates the message of the greatness of the *śabd* as guru, rather than simply that of the greatness of the human guru. Below, Gangagiri expresses her understanding of the *śabd* as guru through use of a *nirgunī* poem that she has attributed to Kabir³⁰⁹; she recites rather than sings this poem:

Without a guru, who will cut the inauspicious *karm*?
 Who will make your auspicious *karm* worthy?
 Even if you have led a bad life [*būrā jīvan*], who will give you the water of love?

Who will make the fountain [of knowledge] come out of the earth?
 Who will make the fountain [of knowledge] come out of the earth?

Even if you have led a bad life, who will give you the water of love?
 My true guru is like the bumblebee who takes [the fragrance] of the flowers.
 My true guru is like the bumblebee who takes [the fragrance] of the flowers.
 O my true guru, you are the bumblebee which brings the insect.
 O my true guru, you are the bumblebee which brings the insect.
 You give the word in the ear and turn that insect into a bee.
 The bee shall fly again.
 You give the word in the ear and turn that insect into a bee.
 The bee shall fly again.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Of course, *sant* poetry, too, makes frequent reference to the power of the *śabd*, the word which constitutes, as Vaudeville points out, “the highest form of revelation” (Vaudeville 1987, 33). As several scholars have discussed, their use of the word ‘*śabd*’ in their poetry reflects the influence of the Nāth Yogis on *sant* understandings of the guru. In contrast to the Naths, the *sants* do not usually speak of a human guru, and do not divinize the human guru as the Supreme Being. See Vaudeville 1987, 21-40.

³⁰⁹ Gangagiri did not share this information with me in the context of this particular *satsang*; however, on another later occasion, I asked Gangagiri whom she thought composed the poem, and she replied that Kabir was the author.

³¹⁰ In Doniger’s edited volume, *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, Daniel Gold presents a *nirgunī* poem attributed to Kabir that is similar to the poem Gangagiri recited for me. The version of the poem given by Gold is as follows (Tellingly, the poem is grouped under the thematic heading of ‘devotion’):

The true guru’s the true hero/just one arrow he shot. / But how it struck! A wide wound in my heart, / I hit the ground.
 The satguru, with steady grip, / put an arrow in his bow, then let it go. /And I, exposed, was hit.
 My body/ like a forest burst in flames.
 The guru is the same as Govind: / the rest is all his forms./ To see him truly, worship Hari/ and destroy your self.
 He picks up dice of love, / and makes a game-board of his body. / The guru’s taught him how to throw: / Kabir, the servant, plays.

Without the guru, who will give you the water of love?

Gangagiri identifies the bumblebee (*bhamar*) with the guru and the insect (*kīḍa*) with the “ignorant human.”³¹¹ The fragrance which the bee takes from the flowers and gives to the insect further represents to Gangagiri the revelatory knowledge by which means the insect becomes transformed into a bumblebee. Likewise, Gangagiri understands the reference to “the water of love” (*prem-jal*) in the poem as symbolic of liberating knowledge. The bee transmits this knowledge to the insect through the medium of sound (*ghunjār*),³¹² which Gangagiri herself equates with the *śabd*. Using the bee imagery she explained,

GG: The bee takes the fragrance of all the flowers and turns the insect into a bee... The bee turns that insect into a bee.

A: How does this happen, Mai Ram?

GG: The bee makes a bee sound [*ghunjār*]; he causes that insect to listen to this sound.

MS: O.k., so the bee turns that insect into a bee like itself.

GG: Yes... [She points to the wasp nest attached to the wall above the door of her hermitage]. There are these wasps here, right? They make their houses with water and mud... So, [the wasp] takes the insect in its mouth and makes it listen to that sound [*ghunjār*] two to four times a day, for two to four days... He [the wasp] keeps giving the sound [makes the sound of a bee/wasp here]. The bee causes the insect to listen to the sound. To what? To the word [*śabd*]. The bee makes the insect hear the *śabd*. Like, I’m speaking to you, this is the *śabd*. And [through this *śabd*] the bee turns that insect into a bee... That sound of the bee is like the guru’s speech [*vānī*]. The *śabd* is the guru. The *śabd* is the guru. If you will grasp the *śabd*, then you will cross your boat over [the ocean of existence]. But if you release it, you’ll drown. Grab the *śabd* and cross yourself over [the ocean of existence].

The guru had been pleased with me, / and told me something true. / The cloud of love then burst, / and soaked me through and through.

I’ll burn my body to ashes: with smoke/rising from the pyre; /perhaps Ram will show mercy, showering/

Rain to drown the fire.

Though his guru’s in Banaras/ and he lives by the sea, / if he’s made of worthy stuff/ they never will forget each other.

See Doniger (ed.), 1988, p. 142.

³¹¹ The word she uses here is “*ajñānī manuś*.” In her analysis of *nirguṇī Nāth bhajans*, Ann Gold postulates that the bee represents the chaotic, or as she says, “the futilely busy mind” (Gold 1988, 116-117, foot note). Henry also discusses the symbol of the bee in some of the *nirguṇī bhajans* he analyzes as illustrative of the chaotic mind. See Henry 1988, 1991. In his brief discussion of another version of this poem, Daniel Gold also glosses the bee and insect as the guru/disciple respectively.

³¹² When Gangagiri speaks of the “buzzing sound” the bumblebee makes she uses the term “*gunjār*,” which comes from the Hindi root, ‘*gunjnā*,’ meaning “to buzz.” See McGregor 1993, p. 273.

Gangagiri understands that the sacred speech bestowed by the guru on his/her disciples and devotees represents the divine word, the *śabd*, through which means they receive liberating knowledge. Thus, from her perspective, the *śabd* itself enables devotees/disciples to experience liberation, or *mukti*, from the illusory and impermanent world. Through her repeated use of the poetic *sant* phrase, “crossing over the ocean of existence,” Gangagiri herself implies that liberation from *sansār* results from hearing and understanding the *śabd*. Gangagiri’s statement suggests that she views the songs, the stories, and the scriptural recitations/readings that she teaches in *satsang* as illustrative of (different forms of) the *śabd*. Hence, whether she sings her *nirguṇī bhajans* or recites from the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* or the *Gītā*, Gangagiri’s words not only signify the speech of enlightened persons (e.g., the *sants*), but also that of God himself (e.g., Ram or Krishna). By singing, reciting, and/or speaking the *śabd* Gangagiri claims the spiritual authority of the *sants* and God, and as such, constructs herself as an enlightened person, that is, as the “true guru” (*sadguru*) who transmits revelatory knowledge in the hope that her own disciples/devotees, like the insect, shall become transformed, or awakened, by the *śabd*.

Gangagiri’s representation of her own religious teachings as the *śabd* implies that she perceives the relationship between her and me in terms of guru and disciple. But she invokes this poem to express more than just the message of the importance of devotion to the guru for the difficult *bhakti* path. In the context of this *satsang*, Gangagiri’s purpose in speaking this poem is also to emphasize that the *śabd* itself is the guru. As she explains at the end of her performance, “This *bhajan* is the *śabd*. You have to understand this. The *śabd* is the guru. The *śabd* is the guru.” Gangagiri understands that the guru manifests in both human and verbal forms. Her interpretation of the *śabd* as guru, though, expands on

sant understandings of the guru. Although they represent the guru who transmits the *śabd* as the Supreme Being (i.e., the divine guru), the *sants* do not usually equate the *śabd* with the (divine or human) guru (Vaudeville 1987, 33-34).

Gangagiri's emphasis on the *śabd* as the guru illuminates the importance she attributes to her devotional performances of song, story, and scripture for her own asceticism. Singing *bhajans*, telling stories, and reciting (or reading) scripture not only enable Gangagiri to experience the *śabd*, but also to express love and devotion to *the śabd as the guru*. And though she had a human guru whom she loves and respects,³¹³ for Gangagiri, the *śabd* is also her teacher, through which she, like the *sants*, shall experience liberation (or *mukti/mokṣ*) from the cycle of existence and union with the divine. To this extent, we might consider that Gangagiri worships the *śabd* much like she worships her human guru and God because she understands that, through the word, she, like the "ignorant" insect, shall die to her own illusions and, as a result, awaken to a new life of devotion to God. Implicit in the poem is the idea that the insect dies to its own insect nature, i.e., the lower self, before it transforms into the magnificent bumblebee, the higher or awakened self. For Gangagiri, the awakened self connotes the enlightened devotee who experiences or, as she says, "knows" peace in his/her heart and mind. In sum, though she sings *nirguṇī bhajans* in order to teach the importance of devotion to the guru, through this particular performance Gangagiri communicates another message about the guru—that the *śabd* itself functions as a teacher and, as such, is powerful and transformative. In doing so, Gangagiri obliquely emphasizes that she expresses asceticism via her daily practices of song, story, and sacred text through which she

³¹³ I use the present tense here because Gangagiri still talks about Gaurigiriji, even though he has passed away in the physical body.

empowers and transforms herself in order that she may cross her own boat over the ocean of existence and meet *bhagvān* on the other side of the shore.

Conclusions

Performance and Devotional Asceticism: The Power of Renunciant Singing

Why do the sadhus sing *bhajans* to God? There are many reasons. Most Rajasthani male and female sadhus sing *bhajans* because they perceive this *bhakti* practice as efficacious for the *Kālī Yūg*. Their descriptions of *bhajan* singing reveal an underlying ideology of its efficacy, in which are embedded three related motifs: *bhajans* are considered to be powerful and transformative; they represent a symbolic currency of exchange between sadhus and householders; and they serve as a form of *sevā*, to humanity and the divine. Through the *bhakti* act of *bhajan* singing, the female sadhus, in particular, understand that they create relationships with God and with the devotees and disciples whom they serve on a daily basis.

Another reason they sing *bhajans* is that this practice exemplifies renunciant identity for many female and male sadhus. According to female sadhus like Gangagiri, “real sadhus sing to God.” But, more so than the male sadhus, the female sadhus also understand that *bhajan* singing illustrates the nature and purpose of *sant* asceticism. From their shared perspectives, the *sants* represent *bhaktis* who “left everything,” such as family, material comforts, economic security, and social/familial obligations, in order to sing (and compose) *bhajans* as an expression of love and devotion to God. *Bhajan* singing, then, provides an interpretive frame through which the female sadhus construct sadhu identity as *sant* identity. This strategy of self-representation enables the female sadhus to represent themselves as non-sectarian, *bhakti* sadhus who have sought

membership in male-dominated traditions of renunciation as well as to legitimate their own spiritual (rather than institutional) authority as female sadhus in these orthodox traditions.

Finally, the female sadhus define not only ascetic identity but also asceticism itself in terms of singing *bhajans* to God. As Gangagiri often remarks, “renunciation means to sing to God.” The *bhajans* the female sadhus sing are drawn from the *nirgunī* poetry of the *sants*. Thus, through use of *sant* frameworks the female sadhus perform their own form of asceticism as the asceticism of the *sants*. In the process of singing their *nirgunī sant bhajans*, the female sadhus emphasize particular *nirgunī bhakti* themes illustrative of devotional asceticism, such as: devotion to a nameless/formless God; union with God; an understanding of *bhakti*/asceticism as both a priceless and difficult path; a child-like attitude of dependence on God; the practice of singing God’s name with love as a means to experience transformation; and devotion to the *śabd* as the guru, in the effort to achieve liberation from the world and union with God. By performing their *bhajans*, the female sadhus not only continue to transmit and invigorate *sant* teachings via renunciant discourse and performance, but also create devotional asceticism as an alternative to Brahmanical asceticism that co-exists with and complements dominant ideologies and practices.



Female sadhu Pratap Puri sings *bhajans* at her temple in Udaipur. Behind her is an image of the goddess, Durga Māi. Photo by Antoinette DeNapoli.

Meeting is good, but parting is painful.
Gangagiri Maharaj

CHAPTER SEVEN

Concluding Reflections: Devotional Asceticism as a Model of Hindu Renunciation

“Love is what God is,” reflects Gangagiri during one of our meetings. She continues, “A love that is unselfish is God.” Gangagiri pauses for a moment, watching the rays of the setting sun slowly disappear from the magenta-like sky. The day has turned into evening, and the bells at Mahakaleshwar Temple ring, signaling that the evening *pūjā* is about to begin. Two male devotees politely excuse themselves from the *satsang* and make their way down the narrow, dirt path that leads to the back of the temple. “Here, take this,” Gangagiri says to the men. She hands them small bags of sugar candy, which the devotees accept as *prasād*. After a full day of singing and storytelling Gangagiri seems ready to retire to her hut for rest. “Are you tired? Do you want to stop,” I ask. She responds: “No, no. I’m just remembering a *bhajan*. There’s a *bhajan* about love. Shall I sing it?” Gangagiri then shares the following song:

Love remains in the heart.
Whoever understands a piece of love,
That sweet love shall [always] remain in her heart.

Only a cub can drink a tigress’ milk.
You can pour the [tigress’] milk in any vessel,
But it shall remain only in a bowl of gold.

Love remains in the heart.
Whoever understands a piece of love,
That sweet love shall remain in her heart.

Do anything in anyway,
But do it with love,

And God will never show his back to you.
 If you love God,
 God will never turn his back on you.

Love remains in the heart.
 Whoever understands a piece of love,
 That sweet love shall remain in the heart.

Afterwards, Gangagiri comments to the few remaining members of her audience, “Meeting is good, but parting is painful. We have met in this life because there was love between us [in the last life]. We have come together because of love. Even when we part, if there is love [in our hearts], then we shall meet again. Understand that there is only love. There is only love.”

This dissertation has sought to answer the question “What kind of asceticism might female sadhus in Rajasthan construct and experience through their renunciant practices of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation?” by means of a devotional model of asceticism. Brahmanical textual models depict a particular kind of asceticism that has often determined what counts as Hindu asceticism in academic discourse. While Brahmanical asceticism is a legitimate and valid model, indeed, one through which means the majority of the male sadhus I worked with construct themselves, as Gangagiri’s *bhajan* performance shows, the female sadhus with whom I also worked use their renunciant devotional practices as a strategy with which to create a different and equally valid kind of asceticism that calls for developing a model of asceticism beyond the dominant, Brahmanical textual model. By emphasizing, among other *bhakti* values, love, Gangagiri imagines and expresses what I have classified in terms of devotional asceticism as an alternative to orthodox asceticism. Moreover, like many of the Rajasthani female sadhus, through her performances Gangagiri herself defines and

controls not only what counts as asceticism but also who counts as a sadhu. As she says, “Real sadhus sing to God.”

Though there are analytical models that represent asceticism through the gendered lens of a maternal ethos (Khandelwal 2004), the model of devotional asceticism demonstrated in this dissertation shifts the discourse on asceticism beyond dominant Brahmanical models in a new way. It is time to review the prominent features, concepts, and themes that identify devotional asceticism as both an alternative to Brahmanical representations of asceticism as well as a gendered model of Hindu asceticism. What can the Rajasthani female sadhus’ performances of asceticism tell us, more broadly, about female asceticism and about female ascetics’ experiences of devotion, agency, and power? How does the classification of devotional asceticism stretch the parameters of asceticism as a heuristic category? This study gives rise to a number of insights that contribute a new understanding to the dominant portrait of Hindu asceticism that has been told and shaped through Brahmanical texts and scholarly discourse. It also shines new light on the developing (academic) portrait of female asceticism in South Asia.

I. Devotional Asceticism as an Alternative to Brahmanical Asceticism

I have argued that devotion and renunciation are not mutually exclusive social categories, but rather, in the *bhakti* practices of female sadhus in Rajasthan, combine in a new configuration of what I have characterized as devotional asceticism. Recent anthropological and ethnographic studies on asceticism have contended that *bhakti* is important to Hindu asceticism, particularly to the Vaiṣṇava sects (cf. Khandelwal 2004; Gross 1992; van der Veer 1988; Miller and Wertz 1976; for Jainism, see Valley 2002, 171-221). A few scholars have even suggested that asceticism is practiced as a devotional

path by some male and female sadhus (Gross 1991; Vallely 2002). While some of these scholars have carefully distinguished ideal representations of asceticism that are often featured in texts from its everyday practice, this scholarship does not theorize devotion (or devotional practice) as a form of asceticism, *bhakti* as *tapasya*. Nor does the literature suggest that (Hindu or Jain) devotional forms of asceticism constitute a *different*, and thus, an alternative kind of asceticism to the dominant, or standard, textual model(s). Furthermore, some of these studies implicitly assume that devotional forms of asceticism signify “everyday” reproductions of the ideal Brahmanical model (cf. Gross 1991; van der Veer 1988).

In contrast, this dissertation contends that, in the context of Hindu asceticism, devotional asceticism is not simply illustrative of a *bhakti*-oriented, “phenomenological” reality vis-à-vis its Advaita-oriented, “discursive” depictions (terms in quotation marks are borrowed from Vallely 2002). On the contrary, devotional asceticism reveals a new as well as an alternative model of asceticism to Brahmanical asceticism that, at the same time, both coexists with and complements the dominant textual model. Because almost all of the Rajasthani female sadhus I worked with experience devotion as renunciation, their practices suggest a whole new analytical possibility.

I demonstrate this new model of devotional asceticism via examination of the female sadhus’ rhetoric of renunciation, or their devotional singing, storytelling, and textual performances. These practices have been underrepresented in scholarly studies of “what counts” as asceticism and renunciation in South Asia, and therefore, enlarge the dominant portrait of (Hindu) asceticism beyond the practices of fasting, meditation, prayer, and bodily mortification. Others have persuasively argued that renunciation looks

different when we consider women's experiences (Hausner and Khandelwal 2006, 27). This dissertation has taken this argument a step further in its contention that renunciation looks different when we also consider female renunciants' oral devotional practices as a fruitful and creative context for the performative construction of asceticism. Below, Table 1 summarizes the dominant features, themes, and symbols of textual models of Brahmanical asceticism³¹⁴ and of devotional asceticism, illustrating their similarities and differences. Apart from its main emphasis on *bhakti* and love, a model of devotional asceticism as constructed by the female sadhus is founded on three key *bhakti* pillars: spiritual fellowship and community (*satsang*), spiritual relationships, and a this-worldly spiritual orientation of engagement that is focused on the welfare and happiness of others.

Table 1 Features of Brahmanical Asceticism and Devotional Asceticism

Features	Brahmanical Asceticism	Devotional Asceticism
Primary Place of Practice	Forests, jungles, mountains, caves—that is, the wilderness. The wilderness theme underscores importance of isolation and solitude	<i>Satsang</i> , devotional communities. The <i>satsang</i> theme underscores importance of communal gatherings for remembering and experiencing God.
Primary Types of Practice	Bodily and/or mental penance, such as meditation/contemplation, fasting, deep breathing (<i>pranayāma</i>), and scriptural recitation. Envisions these as <i>tapas</i> (i.e., as heat and 'heated' practice).	Devotional performance: singing <i>bhajans</i> (or the names of God); telling stories; reciting sacred texts. Envisions these as <i>tapas</i> ; however, in terms of what is produced, defines <i>tapas</i> not as 'heat' but the devotion and knowledge that are created through devotional practice.
Dominant Motifs	(a) Dying to one's ego and to the world; (b)	(a) Dying to one's ego and ego-based illusions—not to

³¹⁴ The features, themes, and symbols of orthodox renunciation that I have outlined here are based on well-known Brahmanical textual sources on asceticism, such as the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* (see Olivelle trans., 1992); the *Upaniṣads* (see Olivelle trans., 1996); and the *Laws of Manu* (see Doniger and Smith, trans., 1991).

Purpose/Objective	detachment; (c) action; and (d) effort; (e) God as nameless and formless; (f) isolation; (g) solitude; (h) peripateticism. (a) Liberation (<i>mokṣ</i>) from the world of existence (<i>sansār</i>), either while still in the body or after the body's death; (b) to become God, <i>paramātma</i> , <i>brahman</i> , the "I am God" paradigm.	the world—and awakening to <i>bhakti</i> ; (b) suffering, (c) sacrifice; (d) service; (e) love/devotion; (f) God as nameless and formless (a) Liberation from worldly illusions (<i>māyā</i>); (b) acquiring both wisdom in the mind and peace in the heart; (c) service to God and to the world as the form of God; (d) to experience God, <i>bhagvān</i> , the "meeting God" (<i>sant</i>) paradigm.
Dominant Philosophical/Theological Frameworks	(For Daśanāmi <i>sadhus</i>): Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism or pure monism); based on philosophical teachings of the <i>Upaniṣads</i> ; (For Nāth <i>sadhus</i>): Yogic and/or Tantric paradigms.	Multiple <i>bhakti</i> frameworks, such as <i>sant</i> and <i>Gītā</i> teachings; ascetic frameworks informed by Advaita Vedānta, but these, too, are recast in a <i>bhakti</i> idiom
Position of Authority/Power	Knowledge-based and experiential	Devotion-based and experiential
Symbolic Themes	(a) <i>Disruption</i> from male social experiences; (b) wandering and itinerancy; (c) withdrawal from society (other-worldly oriented)	(a) <i>Continuity</i> with female social experiences; (b) staying in place; (c) worldly engagement and concern for others' spiritual welfare

Fellowship and community are two innovative features of the female *sadhus*' devotional asceticism. Whereas Brahmanical/orthodox renunciation requires a life of solitude and isolation for individual spiritual practice and development—preferably in the wilderness—devotional asceticism emphasizes a *bhakti* life of *satsang*, or fellowship "with the good people," as a means to remember and experience God. As Gangagiri says, "Why go to the forest to practice asceticism when you can sing *bhajans* here [in *satsang*]. This is asceticism [*tapasya*]." The devotional asceticism of the female *sadhus* emerges and takes shape in *satsang*, and thus, represents an intensely communal religiosity. Most of the female *sadhus* I met waxed eloquent on the spiritual benefits of solitude (*ekānt*) in

the wilderness for renunciation. However, the fact of the matter is that these sadhus are neither retreating to the forests, caves, and jungles to be alone, nor are they avoiding social interaction and contact. Further, when the topic of solitude arose in our conversations, many of the sadhus stressed that this practice is necessary particularly at the beginning stages of renunciation. Meena Khandelwal is right in her observation that scholars must carefully distinguish between what female sadhus say and what they do in order to determine how women themselves move beyond male-defined boundaries and ideals (Khandelwal 2004; cf. Khandelwal and Hausner 2006, 23). The Rajasthani female sadhus themselves rework orthodox renunciation's ideals of (the necessity of) solitude and isolation in the wilderness by holding daily, weekly, and/or monthly *satsangs* in their ashrams/temples, both with other sadhus and householders. What is more, these sadhus redefine Brahmanical notions of penance, or *tapas*, as the *bhajan* singing, storytelling, and textual recitation that occur during *satsang* also constitute forms of penance through which sadhus meet God. At the same time, in *satsang* the female sadhus build spiritual relationships with God and with their devotees.



From left to right: Devi Nath, Tulsigiri, and Gangagiri sing in a *bhajan satsang*. Photo by A. DeNapoli.

Relationships, then, constitute another innovative feature of the female sadhus' devotional asceticism. To the sadhus, their relationship with God is one of the most important aspects of their ascetic lives. "God is my only support. I have God and no one else," says Gangagiri, a statement that has been echoed by almost all of the female sadhus I worked with. Through their daily *satsang bhakti* performances the sadhus engender a personal relationship with God (and with the Goddess). These Rajasthani sadhus are dependent on this relationship: not only does it provide the *raison d'être* behind their asceticism; it also enables them to negotiate their individual public positions of spiritual authority as female ascetics in male-dominated traditions of renunciation. But the spiritual relationships the female sadhus create with their religious constituency in *satsang*, and the forms of reciprocity constituted therein, are, as they suggested, as significant to their devotional asceticism as is their relationship with God.

Unlike (most) Brahmanical textual perspectives on renunciation that consider relationships with others as the quintessential obstacle to individual spiritual development, the female sadhus perceive their spiritual relationships with others to be an effective means through which they "meet," or experience, God in their lives. From a material standpoint, the female sadhus also depend on their ascetic-householder relationships, through which they economically sustain themselves. Without the continued generosity of their devotees, who offer gifts of cash, cloth, and food in exchange for spiritual blessings and teachings, the sadhus would have to take up the classical renunciant lifestyle of begging in order to survive on the path, a practice that most of the female sadhus with whom I worked vehemently rejected for their own form of asceticism.

Perhaps the value of relationships to the devotional asceticism of the sadhus is nowhere more apparent than in the connections they form with their own families. Instead of severing all ties with their relatives (natal and/or conjugal) after taking renunciation, as prescribed by textual models and as the majority of the male sadhus I met did, the female sadhus developed spiritual relationships with their families and interacted with them as a guru relates to her disciples and devotees. By doing so, the female sadhus received from their families the respect usually accorded to a guru. Several of the Rajasthani female sadhus took the spiritualization of kin relationships to a whole new level by residing with their families (but in separate dwellings), usually their children and grandchildren. Here, too, the sadhus referred to their family members as “disciples” and explicitly equated their joint-family lifestyle with ashram or temple living.



Gangagiri, her daughter, Lakshmi Bai, and great granddaughter, Maya. Photo by A. DeNapoli.

This particular type of spiritual living arrangement, though unusual even for the female sadhus with whom I worked, coupled with the more common pattern of spiritualizing kin connections, illustrate the sadhus’ underlying perception that relationships, whether with kin or non-kin, allow them to serve God in the form of humanity. For these sadhus, selfless service, or *sevā*, to humanity represents more than

just an act of love; it is also the duty (*kartavya*) of renunciators. Thus, by singing *bhajans*, telling stories, and reciting texts, the sadhus serve others “with love,” fulfilling their duty to God. To them, because their renunciator performances contain the potentially transformative qualities of knowledge, *bhakti*, and love, they are essential to sadhus’ ability to form and maintain relationships with others. In Tulsigiri words: “We sadhus are the beggars of God, and we sing to make the people happy and their suffering go away... You [householders] are God for us, and we serve God by singing [for you].” And God, according to the sadhus, not only exists within all creation, but also is love. “Love is what God is,” teaches Gangagiri. Hence, through their spiritual relationships, the female sadhus experience the love fostered both in and by those human connections *as God*, and they do so while living *in* the world. Their asceticism is focused not on leaving the world and its attendant suffering, but rather on remaining in it in order to alleviate the pain and suffering of those whom they serve.

The last innovative feature of the female sadhus’ devotional asceticism is its spiritual orientation toward the world. In both scholarly and Brahmanical literature on the subject, asceticism has often been portrayed as an other-worldly focused path; its touted goals of liberation (*mokṣ*; *mukti*) effectively underscore the idea that sadhus renounce, or “cast off,” the world in order to release themselves once and for all from the cycle of existence (*sansār*) and to become God. In this framework, liberation and worldly involvement represent not merely opposite ends of a religious spectrum, but also contradictory religious goals/values for sadhus.

For the female sadhus I met, however, liberation and worldly engagement are very much co-existing and complementary spiritual goals, and are foundational to the

ethics of their asceticism. Using both the terms *mokṣ* and *mukti*, most of the female sadhus talked about liberation, but not in the sense of leaving the world of existence, on account of the fact that they view God as simultaneously immanent in and transcendent of the world. As Gangagiri asserts, “God [*bhagvān*] is everywhere you look. In you, in me, in the trees, in the animals—God is everywhere. What’s *vaikuṇṭh* [heaven]? To speak kind words and to treat others with love.” In the alternative framework of devotional asceticism, liberation signifies an experience in which one acquires, as the sadhus told me, “peace in the heart” and “wisdom in the mind.” It means to cast off the destructive, worldly illusion that humans are separate from each other and from other forms of existence. Liberation, therefore, is the realization, as Gangagiri emphasizes, that “God is everywhere you look.”

A corollary to their *bhakti* views on liberation is that the ultimate goal of asceticism is to *experience* God, not to become God, for these sadhus. This difference is subtle, but significant. It implies a perception of duality between deity and devotee, and that even the highest spiritual experience of asceticism occurs through relationship with, instead of, as orthodox teachings on renunciation postulate, dissolution into, God. Because an ethics of love undergirds their asceticism, the female sadhus remain focused not just on experiencing God, as many of the male sadhus I met expressed, but also on assisting others to achieve peace, wisdom, and happiness, knowing that by doing so they, too, in effect, experience God, and by extension, liberation.

II. *Devotional Asceticism as a Gendered Model of Hindu Asceticism*

In comparison to the (dominant) Brahmanical model of asceticism, devotional asceticism is both an alternative and a gendered model of asceticism. It is important to

state, however, that although Brahmanical asceticism illustrates predominantly a male model, not all male sadhus simply reflect and express this model. As this dissertation has shown, Rajasthani male sadhus like Barfani Baba, Baldevgiri and, to a lesser extent, Nityananda Puri represent exceptions to the dominant textual model. These sadhus are, indeed, devotional in their expression of asceticism.

Male Sadhus and Devotion: The Difference between Male and Female Asceticism

For Barfani Baba and Baldevgiri, *bhajan* singing, religious storytelling and, for Baldevgiri in particular, recitation of the Tulsi “*Ramāyan*” constitute means through which they express devotion and experience union with *bhagvān*. Like the female sadhus, these male sadhus, too, emphasize in their devotional performances *bhakti* themes such as faith in God, surrender and dependence on the divine, and God as the ultimate controller of one’s destiny. In his performance of his personal narrative, for example, while he does not underscore to the extent that the female sadhus underscore in their narrative performances the theme of destiny in his becoming a sadhu “in this life,” Baldevgiri nonetheless allows this category to emerge as a natural and implicit part of his narrative construction of both his renunciant identity and renunciation. In his life story, his birth in a Hanuman temple (to the male and female I worked with, Hanuman symbolizes a life of celibacy and asceticism), his childhood illness, and a mysteriously appearing baba to whom Baldevgiri’s mother offers him as a sign of her gratitude for his miraculous healing, become symbols through which Baldevgiri constructs his asceticism as the fated result of, as the female sadhus would say, being called by God to renunciation.

Similarly, in his *Rāmāyān* performance, Baldevgiri makes explicit throughout his performance the idea of the underlying power of *bhakti* and of faith, *śraddhā*, in

overcoming the ever-present temptations of worldly illusions and, thus, in leading a life of single-minded worship, which he envisions, in part, as daily *bhajan* singing, to God. In this way, as with the female sadhus in their popular religious narrative performances, Baldevgiri also suggests that asceticism, constitutive of a combination of faith and devotion to God, involves the *bhakti* and ascetic virtues of sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. Not only Baldevgiri, but even Barfani Baba, in his *nirgunī bhajan* performance, emphasizes that devotees, especially sadhus whom, like most of the female sadhus, he refers to as *sants*, ought to become “like children” before *bhagvān*. Thus, Barfani Baba, too, underscores some of the same *bhakti* themes as Gangagiri underscores in her *bhajan* performances, and in doing so, communicates the importance of surrender and dependence for his own asceticism. Finally, in his definitions of renunciation, Nityananda Puri highlights what female sadhus like Gangagiri and Tulsigiri similarly discuss in their *Gītā* performances—that sadhus’ duty, or *kartavya*, to God consists in teaching and serving others.



Male sadhus gather around the *dhūnī* (sacred fire pit) for conversation. Photo by A. DeNapoli.

Despite the thematic similarities between the devotional performances of these male sadhus and that of the majority of the female sadhus, and despite the fact that male

asceticism is, as the oral practices of these male sadhus indicate, devotional, there are striking differences between the asceticism of the Rajasthani male and female sadhus with whom I worked. While my access to and contact with male sadhus was much more limited than it was with the female sadhus, the research I conducted with the thirteen male sadhus suggests that devotion means something different to male sadhus than it does to female sadhus.³¹⁵ Several of the male sadhus openly acknowledge and discuss the importance of *bhakti* for their asceticism. To this extent, these sadhus explain that without *bhakti*, asceticism is “difficult,” because *bhakti* teaches them ways in which to approach, and therefore, to experience God both within and as themselves.³¹⁶ However, to these male sadhus, *bhakti* represents more of a means, a tool, through which they experience the ultimate goal of self-realization, and as such liberation, than an end in itself; that is, *bhakti* functions as a stepping stone on the ascetic path, rather than asceticism.

To take as an example, in his renunciant discourses, Devendra Saraswati stresses that devotion and service are the best methods of worshiping God for householders, while detachment and knowledge are best for sadhus. Though, after I question him on the

³¹⁵ Elaine Lawless (1988) makes a similar claim about Pentecostal male preachers and female preachers. Though she worked primarily with Caucasian, female Pentecostal preachers and pastors, Lawless compares the sermons of the women she met with published accounts of the sermons of African-American male preachers and finds that men and women not only highlight different themes in their sermons, but, when they do emphasize similar themes, they also understand them in different and gendered ways. See Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord*, pp. 111-143.

³¹⁶ I emphasize here that the views expressed by these male sadhus on the importance of *bhakti* for their asceticism were atypical in comparison to most of the male sadhus who discussed their lives and practices with me. The few *bhakti*-oriented male sadhus I met suggested that the purpose of their asceticism was to experience themselves in constant relationship with the divine. In contrast, the majority of the male sadhus understood the goal of their asceticism in terms of absorption of the individual soul, *ātma*, into the *paramātma* (*ātma paramātma se līn ho jānā*), and of the dissolution of all superficial distinctions between the *ātma* and *paramātma*. This shared view parallels dominant Brahmanical renunciant visions, according to which the nature and purpose of asceticism is to become absorbed into Brahman, the substratum of existence. Since the ultimate purpose of their asceticism is to become God, rather than to experience oneself in relation to God, most of the male sadhus do not emphasize the importance devotion for their asceticism, an approach that implicitly pivots on seeing oneself in relationship to the divine.

matter, he explains that everyone, including sadhus, benefits from the practice of *bhakti* (*bhakti se phaydā hai*), Devendra Saraswati suggests in his answer that while *bhakti*, as he implies, is the goal for householders, it is meant only to assist sadhus in their acquisition of salvific knowledge, by virtue of which they experience liberation from the world. For Devendra Saraswati, *bhakti* seems to be a partial—perhaps even a peripheral—condition of asceticism, not its goal. Moreover, embedded in his teaching is an understanding that asceticism and *bhakti* are two distinct paths.

But, as this dissertation has shown, for the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked, asceticism and *bhakti* constitute the same path, and thus, the same phenomenon. Indeed, for these female sadhus, *bhakti* is asceticism. Thus, while some of the male sadhus I worked with speak about the significance of *bhakti* for their asceticism, they do not conceptualize and experience, as the female sadhus I worked with conceptualize and experience, *bhakti* as central to, or definitive of, their asceticism. Unlike the female sadhus, then, the male sadhus neither define *bhakti* as renunciation nor are they devotional to the extent of the female sadhus.

In her study of Jain female asceticism in Rajasthan, Anne Vallely similarly discusses that, while she had more contact with the nuns than with the monks, it was conspicuous to her that “not only do monks display their devotion to a lesser degree, they narrate their lives less in terms of *bhakti* than do the nuns” (2002, 214). Vallely explains, “Their language is not saturated with idioms of surrender and devotion to the same degree [as the nuns’ language]...Although all ascetics are encouraged to interpret their lives through a framework of *nivṛtti marg* [asceticism]...the nuns juxtapose the framework of *bhakti* alongside that of *nivṛtti* to a much greater degree than do the

monks” (214). Valley further states that “[t]he monks freely admit that devotion forms an important part of their ascetic lives, but they did not provide it the same centrality as did the nuns in their ‘public’ narrative accounts to me” (2002, 281, ft. note 17).

Apart from their gendered understandings of *bhakti*, while the *bhakti*-oriented male sadhus recognize and refer to *bhajan* singing, storytelling, and textual recitation as *bhakti* practices, the male sadhus neither describe these particular practices as ascetic practices, or *tapas*, nor do they equate them with asceticism, or *tapasya*. For the female sadhus, however, these *bhakti* practices not only constitute ascetic practices *par excellence*, through which they simultaneously connect with God and serve others “with love,” but also are as powerful as those ascetic practices that have become illustrative of Brahmanical renunciation, such as fasting and meditation. At the same time, when the male sadhus speak about penance, *tapas*, they often imply the Brahmanical male model of the concept in that, to them, *tapas* primarily has to do with ascetic practices that effect the production of heat (*āg*) in the body/mind, which, in turn, manifests in the form of extraordinary spiritual powers, or *siddhīs*. In contrast, the female sadhus view their devotional practices as *tapas* that enable them to produce *bhakti*, knowledge and wisdom, instead of heat, in the body and in the mind. On the whole, my research with the Rajasthani sadhus demonstrates that devotional asceticism is a gendered model of Hindu renunciation because female sadhus predominantly conceive devotion as asceticism and equate devotional practice with ascetic practice. Whether we compare the female sadhus’ asceticism to general textual images of (male) ascetics or to that of the male sadhus I met, the broader implication of this dissertation is that female asceticism is more devotional than male asceticism.

Female Sadhus' Performative Construction of Devotional Asceticism: Ideology and Practice

The devotional pattern of female asceticism is readily evident at the levels of ideology and practice. In the first case, almost all of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked interpret their asceticism through *bhakti* frameworks; they explicitly equate renunciation (*sannyās*) with devotion. As Gangagiri says, “renunciation is *bhakti*. There is no difference.” One context where the female sadhus equate renunciation with *bhakti* is their textual performances. In Gangagiri’s textual performance of the *Gītā*, for instance, although the text itself distinguishes between *sannyās* and *bhakti*, she clearly emphasizes that renunciation is a *bhakti* path, and that knowledge (*jnān*), discipline (*yog*), and action (*karm*) constitute functions of *bhakti*. Even in their textual performances of the *Tulsi Rāmāyan*, Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Jamuna Bharti indicate that asceticism, symbolized through its characters Ram and Hanuman, for example, is a path of *bhakti* to God. To these sadhus, Ram represents the virtue of duty, and Hanuman, the quintessential *bhakt*, signifies love, surrender, and devotion to the divine. Though technically a prince/warrior, Ram, along with Sita and his brother Lakshman, while banished to the forest, adopts an ascetic lifestyle, and in doing so, reveals the ways asceticism is expressed through means of dutiful service to others. Hanuman, too, who leads a life of celibacy, mirrors the path of asceticism in terms of his *bhakti* to God. In narrating the tales of these characters, as told in the *Tulsi Ramayān*, then, the female sadhus not only, broadly speaking, construct *bhakti* as a path of asceticism, but also teach that asceticism involves a combination of duty to and love for both God and, more importantly, the world, whom the female sadhus consider as a manifestation of *bhagvān*.

Female sadhus like Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, and Jamuna Bharti regularly perform this text because they consider it to be, as they say, “filled with bliss,” that is, illustrative of the nature and purpose of *bhakti*, which, to them, represents the *sine qua non* of asceticism. Since they equate *bhakti* with asceticism, recitation of the Tulsī *Ramayān* enables the female sadhus to perform asceticism as *bhakti*, and *vice versa*. Future studies on female asceticism will hopefully address if the conceptual assimilation of *bhakti* to asceticism is a phenomenon particular to the Rajasthani female sadhus or representative of female renunciators in general.

Besides their association of renunciation with *bhakti*, the female sadhus with whom I worked also emphasize *bhakti* concepts, themes, and values in their renunciator performances. For example, in performing asceticism through personal narrative, whereas the male sadhus primarily underscore the themes of detachment, work, effort, and practice, which are consistent with classic (male) leitmotifs in the Brahmanical discourse on renunciation, the female sadhus highlight the *bhakti* themes of duty, destiny, and devotion. I shall say more about the gendered implications of these life story themes below. Similarly, in their *bhajan* performances, the female sadhus construct asceticism through the *bhakti* ideals of love, selfless service (*sevā*), dependence and/or surrender (*adhīntā*) on God, and devotion to God’s name, described as the empowered word (*śabd*). Further, in their popular narrative performances, the female sadhus spend more time than the male sadhus discussing sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. Even when they underscore these virtues, which are considered to be representative of asceticism in most Brahmanical texts, the female sadhus recast them in a *bhakti* idiom so that suffering, for instance, is no longer about practicing extreme forms of *tapas* (e.g., physical

mortification) in order to purify the mind/body. Rather, it is about enduring, as did the male *bhakt* Sughanmal or the female *bhaktis* Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai, the physical, emotional, and spiritual hardships that result simply on account of being God's devotee as a personal sacrifice to God. As Gangagiri says, sadhus are spiritual warriors who sacrifice themselves "on the battlefield of *bhakti*."

If emphasis on *bhakti* values/concepts indicates the devotional nature of Rajasthani female asceticism, then the sadhus' renunciant practices clearly suggest that female ascetic religiosity is continuous with *bhakti* religiosity. Gangagiri frequently says that "sadhus sing to God." So did the *bhaktis* and *sants* of medieval India.³¹⁷ The female sadhus understand that their devotional practices exemplify in particular *sant bhakti*, that is, *nirgunī bhakti*. By modeling their practices on *sant nirgunī bhakti* practices, the female sadhus construct not only devotional asceticism as an extension of *sant* asceticism, but also renunciant identity as *sant* identity. Tulsigiri frequently describes sadhus as *sants*: "We sadhus are the *sants* who gather in *satsang* to remember God." But why do the female sadhus envision their ascetic lives through *sant bhakti* paradigms and practices? Why is *bhakti* so important to them? Unlike Brahmanical asceticism, *bhakti*, despite the Brahmanical hegemony, has enabled women and from low-castes and non-Hindu religions (Kabir is a good example) to empower themselves in their religiosity.

To this extent, devotion gives female sadhus, who are structurally disadvantaged both as minorities in male-dominated renunciant traditions and as women who live alone and are thus vulnerable to male sexual violence, power and courage to persevere in a

³¹⁷ Of course, the *bhakti* movement began many centuries before the medieval *sants*' popularization of it in South India (ca. 4th-6th century CE) and worked its way up to the northern regions of the subcontinent by the thirteenth century of the Common Era. I, however, emphasize the medieval *bhakti* movements because the female sadhus construct themselves in relation to the discourses produced by these particular *bhakti* traditions.

patriarchal society because it connects them to the highest power of all creation—God. The Rajasthani sadhus understand that the relationship they create with God through their *bhakti* empowers them as female sadhus and protects them from physical/spiritual danger. Gangagiri often says that her “*bhakti* is [her] power,” implying that devotion provides a means by which she carves a space for herself as a female ascetic. It is also worth noting that of the few Rajasthani male sadhus who also constructed their asceticism and identity through *sant bhakti* discourse and practice, most of them were structurally disadvantaged, but in terms of being either the newest member of a communal sadhu setting or a recent initiate into renunciation.

For instance, though, as he performs his life story, Baldevgiri became a sadhu while he was just a child, he is, nevertheless, a junior member of Mayanath’s Gogunda Bholenath ashram where has been living since 2004. In fact, Baldevgiri, not Mayanath, is responsible for preparing meals (both for himself, Mayanath, and guests), for cleaning and maintaining the ashram, and for purchasing food and ritual items, which he is able to do through ashram donations.³¹⁸ It is unclear whether Mayanath has delegated these tasks to him in exchange for living at her ashram, or whether Baldevgiri himself chooses to do them. What is clear is that these activities provide ways through which Baldevgiri creates and negotiates his own renunciant position. Baldevgiri’s daily negotiations, however, have more to do with his junior position/status than with his gender, which, as I discuss below, the female sadhus constantly have to negotiate as ascetics. Baldevgiri’s use of

³¹⁸ Whether or not they constructed themselves through *bhakti* frameworks and practices, the male sadhus with whom I worked, who were junior members of an ashram community, usually were responsible for “domestic” tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In one particular ashram consisting of five sadhus (four males and one female), the most junior member of the group, a male sadhu who had, incidentally, been a sadhu for almost as many years as some of the other male sadhus in that ashram, was responsible for the cooking and cleaning. These same domestic activities earned him the constant praise and respect of his guru and ashram mates.

bhakti, though, is not irrelevant to the structural issues of hierarchy and status surrounding his renunciant position.

Devotion as a source of (female) power and protection appears as a salient motif in both the female sadhus' personal narrative and religious narrative performances. Gangagiri's story of Karma Bai, for example, makes explicit this idea. Karma Bai's *bhakti* empowered her to challenge the authority of the male sadhus who doubted her sincerity and to demand that God himself redeem and protect her reputation by bringing his whole family to her home in order to eat the *khichadī* she herself had prepared. At the end of her ordeal, not only were the male sadhus convinced of their shameful mistake, but had also declared Karma Bai to be a "better sadhu" than they were. That is, Karma Bai's *bhakti* to *bhagvān* enabled her to become not just 'a sadhu' but rather 'the sadhu' *par excellence*, and as such, to experience power and authority. Karma Bai's story is instructive in its illustration of female asceticism as more devotional than male asceticism and, as such, its implication that *bhakti* makes female asceticism powerful. More broadly, Karma Bai's story obliquely suggests that envisioning asceticism (i.e., a tradition that has excluded women from power and authority via its ideologies and practices) as devotion, a tradition where women themselves define and control their religiosity, allows female ascetics to experience individual spiritual power and authority. At the same time, they also experience protection, as female ascetics' *bhakti* ensures that God will protect them from danger and harm.

Apart from *bhakti* religiosity, the female sadhus' renunciant practices, however, are also consistent with female religiosity. The devotional practices of singing, storytelling, and textual recitation through which the female sadhus construct devotional

asceticism are not exclusively renunciatory practices. Rather, they are common to women in general. Other scholars have also concurred that female asceticism demonstrates continuity (rather than liminality) with female gender roles and practices (Khandelwal 2004; Valley 2002; Bartholomeusz 1994). Khandelwal, for example, has suggested that the virtues of love, compassion, and service emphasized by the renunciators with whom she worked reflect an underlying “maternal ethos,” and that their renunciatory practices of feeding, nurturing, and even scolding their disciples/devotees are continuous with women’s roles as mothers (Khandelwal 2004, 186). Khandelwal explains,

Sannyasinis clearly emphasize maternal qualities in their actual behavior as well as in their understanding of what it means to be a renouncer. Social intimacy and accessibility, feeding and scolding are related to an attitude of love that all women are thought to embody. It is in the higher forms of love (*prem, karuna*) that the ideals of renunciation and motherhood come together (Khandelwal 2004, 188).

And:

The sannyasinis I met seem to retain many female, specifically motherly, values, and these relate primarily to intimacy, food, scolding, and compassionate love. Moreover, maternal values are viewed by these women not only as entirely consistent with the goals of renunciation but as actually facilitating their fulfillment (Khandelwal 2004, 189).

Likewise, Anne Valley contends that the values emphasized by the female ascetics of Rajasthan with whom she worked, such as sexual purity and self-restraint, illustrate “the same ideological patterns that define lay women” (Valley 2002, 229), and that Jain asceticism is “modeled after female religiosity” (233). Valley explicates:

Lay and ascetic women are constructed as moral beings through renunciatory practices: both lay and ascetic women fast in order to demonstrate, with their bodies, their piety and honour... In the religious imagination, the connection between female religiosity and the *pativrata* (faithful wife and mother) is so intimate that even when female religiosity reaches its acme—in the form of renunciation—the connection is not severed; it is enlarged (229)... Ideal ascetic behavior corresponds with standard feminine virtues... female renunciation is perceived as more of a continuation rather than a renunciation of lay religiosity (Valley 2002, 233).

Similarly, for the Rajasthani female sadhus, devotional asceticism constitutes more of a continuation rather than a renunciation of female (householder) religiosity. In contrast, I do not recall the male sadhus discussing their devotional/religious practices as householders. This, of course, does not mean that the male sadhus were not religious as householders, only perhaps that religiosity itself was not coded as a distinctive marker of their householder identity, as it had been for the female sadhus when they were householders. Why is this so? In India, it is often thought that women are “naturally” more religious than men at all stages of their lives, and that males concentrate on religious matters either in the retirement stage (*vanaprastha āśrama*), i.e., when their socio-familial obligations have become drastically reduced, or as renunciators, the final life stage.³¹⁹ In this gendered religious framework, the devotional practices of the male sadhus I worked with are illustrative of a symbolic disjuncture or rupture from their gendered male roles as householders. For most of the female sadhus, however, they said that they had been “reading *Rāmāyan*” or “singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān*” before they ever took formal initiation into renunciation. Some of the female sadhus also claimed that their *bhakti* practices started as early as childhood. Here is what Gangagiri had to say about her renunciant practices:

I’ve been singing since my childhood... When I was pregnant, even then I used to do the *pūjā-pāṭha* [i.e., worship and textual recitation], I used to do everything exactly like I do now. I used to read *Rāmāyan*, *Gītājī*. When I was pregnant, I didn’t get time in the day, so I used to read [the texts] at night, by the light of a kerosene lamp... I sang *bhajans* as a householder, too. When my relatives used to come, they used to listen [to me sing]. I would sing *bhajans* for them, sometimes through the night. Even as a householder I would sing. I’ve had [these practices] since childhood.

³¹⁹ In classical textual formulations on the concept, *sannyās* is considered to be the last life stage, in which initiates prepare to leave the cycle of existence for good. See Olivelle (1992).

While studies on female asceticism have focused on women's social and bodily practices as mediums for the expression of gender continuity, this dissertation has demonstrated the significance of *oral* devotional practice as another vehicle through which female sadhus perform continuity, and more broadly, the phenomenon of devotional asceticism. Whether or not other female ascetics from other religious traditions view their oral devotional practices as renunciation is an issue I hope future studies on female asceticism shall address.³²⁰

III. Renunciant Practice, Female Agency, and Religious Power

Devotional performance is as an efficacious strategy through which the Rajasthani sadhus exert agency and negotiate their own public positions of religious authority as female renouncers. By taking seriously Khandelwal's argument that renunciation is not equivalent to Brahmanical orthodoxy, and that female renunciation constitutes 'a site of undetermination' where "agencies slip through the structures," I have shown that the Rajasthani female sadhus' use of devotional performance to construct themselves and their asceticism exemplifies individual (female) creativity, agency, and power in renunciation (Khandelwal 2004, 197). While I do not deny that female sadhus transgress social norms and ideals by opting out of domesticity (cf. Khandelwal 2004; see the Introduction in Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold 2006; but cf. Vallely 2002), this dissertation has nevertheless pushed the issue of agency and power in female asceticism

³²⁰ Anne Vallely states that the Rajasthani Jain nuns she worked with view their ascetic practices, particularly fasting, as devotional practices through which means they also worship their guru and purify their *karmas*. Though she does not discuss oral devotional practices, the implication of Vallely's research is that, for the nuns in her field study, devotional practice, broadly conceived, is considered to be ascetic practice, and hence, asceticism. As with my research with the Rajasthani female sadhus, Vallely's work provides compelling evidence that female asceticism is more devotional than male asceticism, and that female ascetics across religious traditions in South Asia envision asceticism and devotion as "two sides of the same coin" (Vallely 2002, 198).

beyond the “transgressive” act of becoming a sadhu. By grounding agency in devotional practice, I have contended that the female sadhus’ performances enable them to neutralize societal perceptions of their asceticism as transgressive. More significantly, my work has nuanced the gendered nature of agency in female asceticism. For most of the Rajasthani female sadhus, agency involves three distinct features: disclaimers of personal agency, the use of female models and experiences as an alternative to normative (male) renunciant paradigms, and representing themselves as traditional.

In their personal narratives performances, the female sadhus disclaim personal agency in their becoming sadhus by constructing their asceticism as the result of God’s decision. This narrative strategy enables these female sadhus to legitimate their unusual lives and to make it difficult for those who might otherwise object to their asceticism and the autonomy it brings to argue with them, as only a fool would challenge God’s authority. Although their becoming sadhus exemplifies agency, the female sadhus’ use of agency disclaimers at once helps them to work within the structures (and constraints) of a patriarchal cultural system that undermines, and at the extreme, denies female agency and to push back at that system, without completely subverting normative gender paradigms or compromising their agency (Ortner 1996). By conceptualizing (and performing) their asceticism through such disclaimers, the female sadhus empower themselves to negotiate the gendered ambiguities and contradictions of their public renunciant positions and, in effect, to exercise agency and power.

By the same token, the male sadhus I worked with who represent their asceticism in the opposite way as a personal choice similarly operate within dominant (male) constructions of gender, and therefore of agency, emphasizing themes such as effort

(*prayās*), work (*karm*), and practice (*abhyās*) in a way that empowers them as male sadhus. Significantly, this dissertation has illuminated that embedded in the personal narratives of male sadhus, too, are strategies by which they legitimate their renunciant lives. All too often scholars of Hindu asceticism exclude issues of how, and to what extent, male sadhus also negotiate gender in renunciation, assuming that their gender “naturally” and unquestionably grants them privileges in a patriarchal society (but cf. Gross 1992). To be sure, asceticism is considered to be the more acceptable alternative to householding for men than it is for women; but it is nonetheless an alternative way of life. Both the male and female sadhus I worked with negotiate gender and power, though in different ways, and stretch the meanings of normative gender constructions and roles as they do so.

Another strategy through which the Rajasthani female sadhus exercise agency is through their use of female models of devotional asceticism as an alternative to orthodox male renouncer paradigms, such as Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai. In their popular narrative performances, the female sadhus often concentrate on the extraordinary *bhakti* lives of regional female *sants* and *bhaktis*. Through emphasis on female *sants*, the sadhus model themselves on the legendary females Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai, whose examples provide well-known (if not controversial), alternatives to dominant (male) constructions of female gender. Others have discussed the importance of alternative female images as models of resistance to normative gendered paradigms for female asceticism (cf. Khandelwal 2004; Teskey Denton 2004). This dissertation, however, has questioned just how alternative the Rajasthani female sadhus’ alternative gender models are. They do not consciously use their female models of devotional asceticism to resist or

to subvert dominant gender constructions, but rather to represent themselves and their asceticism as traditional. To recapitulate my argument, their use of gendered models of devotional asceticism helps these female sadhus to support their individual claims that both God and devotion direct and determine their lives and work. The Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai narratives performed by the female sadhus not only feature these motifs, but also depict *bhakti* as the underlying source of female asceticism, and thus, of female religious power.

But there is more. Through their use of *Rajasthani* female *sants* and *bhakts* the female sadhus themselves construct a genealogy of female asceticism in Rajasthan, and more broadly, in northern India. Most of Rajasthani female sadhus, regardless of the castes they were born into, explicitly trace the phenomenon of female asceticism in Rajasthan to the Rajasthani princess-turned-*sant* Mira Bai. Not only this, the majority of the female sadhus place themselves in Mira's lineage, explaining that 'lady' sadhus have been able to renounce precisely because of her "grace [*kripā*]." Even as these and similar statements testify in part to the myriad institutional, social, and familial difficulties women face in becoming a sadhu, they also imply that Mira Bai herself posthumously initiates Rajasthani female sadhus into renunciation. To the female sadhus, Mira's example and influence authorize female asceticism. Significantly, though they did not use the model of Mira Bai (or that of any other female *bhakt* for that matter) to represent their asceticism, some of the male sadhus I met extolled Mira's devotion (and bravery) and even attributed the contemporary phenomenon of female asceticism in Rajasthan to her.

Their gendered genealogy of devotional asceticism thus enables the sadhus with whom I worked to claim spiritual authority and exercise agency and power as female

renouncers. Their example, however, inevitably beckons the question: Might other female sadhus use alternative gender models to craft genealogies of female asceticism through which means they exercise power and authority? This important issue has yet to be discussed in the literature on female asceticism. Nevertheless, this dissertation's implications are that female gender models provide a means with which female ascetics imagine and express their own (female) ascetic traditions as an alternative to orthodox asceticism, and that they legitimate their authority via those models.

Finally, this dissertation has argued that female agency and power in renunciation are intertwined with the female sadhus' self-representations as traditional. Apart from their gendered narrative themes and use of female models, the female sadhus construct themselves as traditional through their Tulsī *Rāmāyaṇ* textual performances and their *sant* story and *bhajan* performances, by which means they situate their devotional asceticism in the tradition of *sant bhakti*, more broadly. The female sadhus' use of *sant* paradigms is significant in its illustration that ascetics construct themselves in relation to discourses that lie beyond the parameters of renunciation. While it is generally accepted amongst scholars that Brahmanical traditions regarded the *sant* movements as heretical on account of their vehement refutation of (the importance of) gender, caste, and class in the worship of God,³²¹ the Rajasthani female sadhus do not perceive *sant bhakti* as anti-Brahmanical or as anti-traditional. For sure, modeling their asceticism on what may have been perceived to be the heterodox *bhakti* religiosity of the *sants* distinguishes the female sadhus as unorthodox by Brahmanical standards. To these female sadhus, however, *sant bhakti* is consistent with orthodox asceticism: though their ideals and values differ, both

³²¹ In contemporary India, as others have observed, *sant* rhetoric continues, to some extent, to be perceived as heterodox, and has been a source of power by which disadvantaged groups and/or communities incite change and development in the subcontinent. See Lorenzen (1995) and Mukta (1997).

sant and renunciant traditions envision spiritual freedom from the destructive grip of ignorance, from the fear of death, and therefore, from the endless cycle of existence through experience of, or identification with, the divine. Both traditions further view a nameless/formless God as the ultimate and most important goal, even though they disagree on how to get there.

In their use of *sant* paradigms and practices, then, the female sadhus neither subvert nor challenge the ideals and values of orthodox asceticism. Rather, they not only construct themselves as traditional, but also represent their devotional asceticism as complementary to, rather than subversive of, orthodox asceticism. Furthermore, there is no reason to suppose that their self-representations as traditional constitute simply a rhetorical attempt to avoid being perceived as heretical or non-traditional by their male counterparts, or more generally, by a patriarchal society that, nonetheless, both suspects and respects its female renouncers.³²² It goes without saying, however, that none of the Rajasthani female sadhus I met wants to be seen (or known) as heretical either by other sadhus or by householders in their local and translocal communities. For these female sadhus, their (positive) reputation and as such their renunciant status are inexorably linked to their being perceived as traditional. So, by constructing themselves and their devotional asceticism as relatively consistent with orthodox asceticism, the Rajasthani female sadhus make a tradition and an institution that has brought power, authority, status, and liberation predominantly, if not exclusively, to men fully their own, and more importantly, that they do so by means of conceptualizing renunciation as *bhakti*.

³²² Grace Jantzen makes a similar observation about Christian female mystics of medieval Europe. See Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (1997).

IV. The Polythetic Nature of Devotional Asceticism

This ethnographic performative study of the devotional practices of female sadhus in Rajasthan thus shifts the discourse on asceticism beyond Brahmanical textual models through its contribution of a model of devotional asceticism. In effect, textual models of Brahmanical asceticism and even analytical models that represent asceticism through means of a gendered, maternal ethos have been supplemented with a new model of devotional asceticism. On the basis of a devotional asceticism model, this dissertation has argued that asceticism is not only an intellectual (or contemplative) path but also a devotional path;³²³ and that medieval, north Indian devotional *sant* paradigms and discourse provide a viable, alternative framework to Brahmanical models through which female sadhus construct themselves and their asceticism.

Furthermore, with the use of the lens of devotional asceticism, this dissertation has suggested that religious studies on asceticism in South Asia reconsider both the category and the phenomenon of asceticism. Although in their distinction between discursive and phenomenological asceticism scholars of religion have developed an important theoretical framework within which to understand asceticism, devotional performative expressions and/or traditions have been relatively neglected topics in academic discourse on asceticism and renunciation.³²⁴ Indeed, when it comes to theorizing what asceticism is “really about,” devotion, if it is discussed at all, is often characterized as a peripheral rather than as constitutive of asceticism. What might be

³²³ Although Gross discusses that the Ramanandi sadhus with whom he worked practice asceticism as a devotional path, he distinguishes their asceticism as “emotional” from the “intellectual” forms of asceticism that emphasize knowledge as the culmination of the path (Gross 1991, 269).

³²⁴ The exception would be ethnographic and anthropological studies on Vaiṣṇava-based, ascetic traditions (i.e., the Vairāgis), e.g., the Rāmanāndi traditions of asceticism, the largest group of Vaiṣṇava ascetics in India. (cf. Gross 1992; van der Veer 1988; Miller and Wertz 1976). Importantly, while these studies often discuss the *bhakti* orientation of individual ascetics or individual ascetic orders, they do not provide a devotional framework within which to theorize asceticism as a category and phenomenon.

termed an “orthodox bias” in (most of) the scholarship results from several related issues. First, scholars tend to overlook ways in which sadhus might construct themselves in relation to discourses and/or paradigms that are located outside of not only dominant Brahmanical renunciant frameworks, but also renunciant frameworks altogether. Second, most textual and analytical constructions of the category are built on the implicit assumption that, regardless of gender, individualism, self-denial, social withdrawal, world-transcendence, penance, and contemplation constitute the *sine qua non* of asceticism. But, as this dissertation shows (and reminds us), these features represent a particular kind of asceticism (i.e., a Brahmanical asceticism), which has been the dominant model. Such “monothetic” categorization thus determines how asceticism is observed “on the ground” and as such analyzed as a religio-cultural phenomenon in scholarly discourse (J. Z. Smith 1982).

The Rajasthani female sadhus’ renunciant *bhakti* practices, however, illustrate another kind of asceticism, one that involves more than just solitary escape to the quiet wilderness, perpetual wandering, emotional detachment, knowledge, and strict mental/physical disciplines whose underlying aim lies in spiritual and/or bodily purification. Founded on *sant* paradigms, the female sadhus’ devotional asceticism pivots on devotional *satsang* gatherings, cultivating human and divine relationships, and worldly engagement and selfless service in God’s name. As the vignette of Gangagiri’s *bhajan* performance depicts, asceticism is a path of love and devotion to God; of “leaving everything” and worshipping God through song, story, and sacred text in part to quell the world’s suffering and pain. These practices, too, according to the female sadhus, bear the desired (renunciant) fruits of knowledge, wisdom, peace, union with God, and liberation.

Above all, this dissertation has contended that the innovative *bhakti* features and *bhakti* practices that define the female sadhus' devotional asceticism are not marginal to the larger phenomenon of Hindu asceticism, but rather participate in and constitute its polymorphous nature and texture.

The gendered model of devotional asceticism as I have documented through the female sadhus' renunciant devotional practices thereby widens the parameters of asceticism as a heuristic category of scholarly analysis. To use Jonathan Z. Smith's language, a "polythetic," or multi-textured, classification, devotional asceticism neutralizes the problematic conceptual distinctions between, among others, renunciation and devotion, intellect and emotion (or pathos), detachment and engagement, soul and body, and this-worldly and other-worldly.³²⁵ Devotional asceticism, as this dissertation illustrates, consists in the blending of all these seemingly dichotomous, yet individually pivotal, concepts in the constitution of a new model/possibility.



Far right: Lehar Nath leads a *bhajan satsang* with devotees from the village. Photo by A. DeNapoli.

But the model of devotional asceticism developed in this dissertation derives directly from the ideas and experiences that are evoked through the female sadhus'

³²⁵ In documenting the devotional orientation of three male (Vaiṣṇava) ascetics in Bhubaneshwar (Orissa), India, Miller and Wertz (1976) classify their asceticism as "non-intellectual," implying that devotion makes their asceticism 'emotional' and thus non-intellectual.

renunciant practices in (*satsang*) performance contexts. At every juncture in this dissertation, the female sadhus themselves have taught us that reciting the Tulsī *Rāmāyan* from memory is at once a devotional and an intellectual experience, or, as is Gangagiri's practice, that intellectual group discussion on the *Gītā* concepts of *yog*, *tyāg*, and *sannyās* constitutes the worship of *bhagvān*; that singing a *bhajan* to God provides a means for serving humanity with love *and* detachment; that *satsang* symbolizes the threshold between God's world and that of humans, where sadhus foster and nurture human-divine connections; and that liberation does not require either denial of or release from the body, but occurs as "peace" in one's heart/mind. To this extent, their renunciant performances enable the female sadhus with whom I worked to experience and enact devotion as asceticism and *vice versa*. Moreover, when cast as *bhakti*, renunciation allows these Rajasthani female sadhus to experience agency both as and through their renunciant practices. The conceptual assimilation of renunciation and *bhakti* and other categorical binaries at the level of everyday female renunciant practice by female sadhus in Rajasthan therefore makes devotional asceticism a particularly powerful locus for the expression of agency, power, and authority.

The portrait of female devotional asceticism painted in the pages of this dissertation through the lives and work of—just to name several female sadhus—Gangagiri, Tulsigiri, Kesar Giri, Shiv Puri, Santosh Puri, Sharda Puri, Pratap Puri, Jnan Nath (2),³²⁶ Mayanath, and Devi Nath reveals women who are warm, thoughtful, and determined; who love and are loved by their disciples and devotees—familial and non-familial, Indian and foreign; who immerse themselves in their devotional practices out of a passionate love for God and an intense concern for the world; who carefully negotiate

³²⁶ The number two in parenthetical marks means that I knew two female sadhus by the name of Jnan Nath.

gender and authority as female ascetics in male-dominated traditions of renunciation; and whose devotional asceticism complements and co-exists with orthodox traditions. Like their female models Mira Bai, Rupa Rani, and Karma Bai, these female sadhus experience devotion as empowering and thus their conceptualizations of renunciation as devotion in turn enable them to experience power in a tradition that was created by and for elite men. In conceiving renunciation as *bhakti*, the female sadhus construct not only devotional asceticism as an alternative to Brahmanical asceticism, but also a female ascetic tradition. Further, renunciant devotional practices provide a powerful strategy by which these female sadhus construct asceticism and ascetic identity without subverting orthodox ideals and values.

V. Future Research Trajectories

Asceticism is just one social category that, as this dissertation shows, women performatively construct and experience in a different way from Brahmanical models. How might other social categories become (re)defined through the means of women's devotional performances? One category that comes to mind is widowhood, which, like asceticism, has often been constructed in Brahmanical sources in androcentric and delimiting ways.³²⁷ What, however, is the relationship between asceticism and widowhood? Widows are often represented in Brahmanical, academic, and popular sources as leading lives comparable to asceticism. It is, perhaps, not irrelevant that some of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked referred to some locally-known

³²⁷ Sarah Lamb's work with widows in West Bengal provides an excellent example of the ways widows' personal stories illuminate an alternative discourse to dominant analytical models of older women as either the revered older mother or domineering mother-in-law (Lamb 2003, 54-75). According to Lamb, the widows with whom she worked emphasize themes such as powerlessness, lack of reciprocity between mother and (male) children, and the beggared mother. In contrast to Lamb's work, I am proposing an exploration of the performative ways widows construct alternative interpretations to dominant, Brahmanical models of widowhood as a life of dependence and of solitary religious penance and practice.

widows as “white-clad sadhus.”³²⁸ The dominant model of widowhood featured in (most) Brahmanical texts, for example, represents widows as dependent on male kin and widowhood as a solitary and sequestered life of strict religious penance and practice (Leslie 1991). In this framework, with the exception of solitary wandering, widows (ought to) become like ascetics in many ways, rejecting not only social norms/ideals, but also the world itself. But are widows solely constituted by Brahmanical models of widowhood? How might they stretch the parameters of this category, and thus, offer an alternative discourse on widowhood?

The conclusions drawn from this performative study of female asceticism indicate that devotional practice may also provide an empowering strategy through which widows construct and express a different interpretation of widowhood than that depicted by the dominant models. Significantly, the fact that some of female sadhus I met perceive some widows as sadhus suggests that widows are using alternative models of widowhood with which to construct their individual identities and religiosity. Another implication is that devotional asceticism may be a category through which widows experience and represent widowhood. The questions, though, are: Do widows construct widowhood as *bhakti* through devotional performances, and if so, how does this association allow them to manipulate dominant portrayals of widowhood? Further, how might widows’ performative self-constructions reflect the changing roles of widows in India?

The model of devotional asceticism demonstrated in this dissertation provides a new framework for pursuing this line of research and, more specifically, for examining widowhood as a path of spiritual leadership and religious power. The devotional

³²⁸ The widows to whom the female sadhus were referring neither took renunciation into any specific tradition nor represented themselves as sadhus.

asceticism of the female sadhus represents an example of the specificity of female asceticism in a Rajasthani context. Scholarship on contemporary female ascetics in South Asia is sprouting in innovative ways, and my work with the Rajasthani female sadhus contributes another important yet distinct voice to the discussion. More important, my model of devotional asceticism expands as well as challenges notions of what ‘really’ counts as Hindu asceticism in academic discourse.

Do not fear Death. Everything must die. Take the knowledge and cross over the ocean of existence.

Gangagiri Maharaj January 2006

EPILOGUE

The times I spent with the female sadhus before I returned to the United States in 2006 were almost always filled with questions such as “When will you come back?” or “When will we see you again?” These moments of research were, perhaps, the most difficult for me, not because I did not receive any new data or meet any new sadhus, but rather because I, and the sadhus, too, knew that our meetings would soon come to an end. On account of our interactions, we had learned from one another, and as a result, my life and theirs had changed. When the anticipated moment to say our goodbyes had arrived, the sadhus simply told me, “Come back soon” and “We’ll be waiting for you,” trusting that we would, indeed, meet again on Indian soil. One sadhu, Shiv Puri, asserted as I waved goodbye to her and her disciples (i.e., her son and his children) from a moving vehicle, “We’ll meet again in [your] dreams.” Of all the goodbyes, the most unusual was the exchange between Gangagiri and me. In response to her question, “When will you return [to Udaipur],” I said, “Maybe after two years.” But her answer that followed troubled me: “I won’t be alive after two more years. You have to come sooner,” pleaded Gangagiri. After a whole lot of persuading on my part, Gangagiri finally said, “O.k. I’ll not die. I’ll wait for you.” We laughed, and I left her (and India) with a sense of peace in my heart.

Gangagiri kept her promise. She lived for more than two years since that goodbye exchange, but not long enough for me to see her face-to-face again. Gangagiri died on

July 26, 2008. She was ninety-three years old. Her *samādhi* (resting place) was established in Kiriṭ, a small, predominantly Brahmin village near Gujarat, on the property of her Brahmin daughter, Lakshmi Bai, and a *bhaṇḍāra* was held in Gangagiri's honor. In May, just a few months before her passing, I had a vivid dream about Gangagiri. She had come to me in order to say goodbye. She was smiling like she did during the times when we had joked together; her face was radiant, beaming with joy. In person, we always looked at each other, and then I touched her feet. That was our standard goodbye ritual. In the dream, however, we hugged, and I recalled myself holding her very tightly. The next day, I phoned my field assistant, Manvendra Singh, and explained him the dream. He knew I was upset. A few hours later, Manvendra called me from his cell phone from Gangagiri's hut, and within minutes, I was talking with her again. Though her voice seemed softer than usual, Gangagiri was full of energy; she even sang one of her favorite Kabir *bhajans* about crossing over the ocean of existence. Without telling her the contents of the dream, I only said that I had received Gangagiri's *darśan* in my sleep. She ended our conversation with the words, "Ours is a love that goes back lifetimes. I am always with you."

Gangagiri's death has brought to light some of the issues facing the female sadhus, particularly those concerning the transmission of spiritual lineage and/or teaching tradition, and by extension, the future of female asceticism in South Asia. Gangagiri is not the only female sadhu who has died since the start of my research project in 2001. One sadhu, Lehar Nath, died less than four weeks before my arrival in Udaipur in 2005, and Pratap Puri died approximately six weeks before my departure in 2006. Their deaths, according to collaborators, were due to health complications wrought by the sadhus'

advanced age. Though unfortunate, these statistics are not surprising. More than sixty-six percent of the female sadhus with whom I worked are over the age of sixty, and forty-eight percent of them are eighty years or older. More importantly, none of the female sadhus who have died, including Gangagiri, had designated any successor (male or female; renunciant or householder) to their teaching traditions or had formed a spiritual lineage. Even while alive, Gangagiri suggested to me that she was neither particularly interested in finding a successor nor in creating her own lineage, though she did mention having made a male sadhu disciple to whom she had transmitted her teachings. This disciple, as Gangagiri had told me, has since died, however. Further, most of the female sadhus sixty years old and above whom I asked also do not seem especially concerned about issues of successorship and lineage. For these sadhus, singing *bhajans*, telling stories, and reciting texts with other sadhus and householders in *satsang* approximates the transmission of their religious knowledge/teachings.

The situation seems different for the female sadhus who are younger than sixty years old. For example, Shiv Puri and Mayanath, both of whom are in their late fifties (2005), repeatedly discussed issues of lineage and successorship. Shiv Puri told me that she is transmitting her teachings to her son/disciple, Shankar, and his wife, who co-manage Shiv Puri's ashram/temple and whose official titles are *pūjārī* and *pūjārīṇī*, respectively. Mayanath similarly expressed her desire to pass on her spiritual teachings, but only to someone (male or female) whom she herself has initiated as a sadhu in the Nāth tradition.³²⁹ Unlike most of their older female sadhu counterparts, sadhus like Shiv

³²⁹ In the Nāth tradition, female sadhus can initiate both men and women. In 2005, Mayanath told me that she had initiated only one female Nāth disciple, i.e., her mother, who has since then died. Unlike the Nāth tradition, in the Daśanāmi orders, initiation into renunciation is a same-sex/gender event. Here, only women gurus can initiate women disciples and men gurus initiate men disciples.

Puri and Mayanath maintain large ashrams and temples, sometimes several ashrams (Mayanath, for instance, has two ashrams, one in Udaipur and one in Gogunda village) and are constantly engaged in fund-raising activities and projects either to develop their current ashrams/properties or to build/acquire new ones. Because of donations she receives from her householder devotees in Rajasthan and beyond, in 2005 Shiv Puri, along with Shankar, began overseeing the construction of a new five room *dharmaśāla* (residential quarters for guests) on a piece of property adjoining that on which sits the main ashram and temple. Likewise, as of 2006, with the help of Baldevgiri, Mayanath is making plans for the acquisition of a small piece of land outside of Udaipur district (in Pipara) in order to build a modest-sized Hanuman temple. These female sadhus' concern with spiritual successors and the transmission of lineage, therefore, reveals an underlying concern to have disciples, renunciant and/or lay, continue both their religious teachings and their religious estates after their passing.

But these sadhus' development efforts bespeak more than just a desire for succession and continuity of lineage; they also evidence a pattern toward institutionalization in the context of their renunciation. Whereas the older female sadhus implicitly reject institutionalization, perhaps because they neither possess the constituency base, the funds, nor the sheer physical energy required for such an endeavor (which would entail a lot of traveling on the sadhus' part for the solicitation of monetary donations), the actions of Shiv Puri and Mayanath indicate that they embrace this possibility for the development of their own teaching traditions, spiritual lineages, and religious power. While the anti-institutional structure of renunciation has enabled female sadhus to exert their individual power, it goes without saying that institutionalization and

its concomitant efforts also signify power, and thus, bring greater prestige for sadhus. It may, thus, provide a means by which these two female sadhus increase their status within their local and translocal renouncer communities. Only a longitudinal study with the younger generation of Rajasthani female sadhus I met will help me to determine to what extent they institutionalize themselves (and their teachings) and the effects such actions have on their religious status.

The younger generation with whom I worked, however, comprises approximately a third of my population sample of female sadhus, several of whom took renunciation within the last two decades or so. What can we say, then, about the future of female asceticism in South Asia. In the Introduction to their edited volume, Khandelwal and Hausner, citing the work of the volume's contributors and that of other scholars as evidence, speak positively about the rising numbers of Buddhist, Baul, Jain, and Hindu female ascetics, despite the increasing modernization and globalization of South Asian cultures (Hausner and Khandelwal 2006, 25). My research also corroborates Hausner and Khandelwal's predictions. In the five years spanning my fieldwork with the Rajasthani female sadhus (2001-2006), I encountered five neophytes, namely Tulsigiri (2001), Gitananda Puri (2003), Ganesh Nath (2005), Saraswati Nath (2005), and Harbhangi Nath (2005).³³⁰ All of these sadhus had received their initiations within a year or two of our initial meeting, and three of them, who were between the ages of twenty and thirty-five when I met them, had never married. In the context of Mewar, at least, these statistics amount to a total of one woman per year becoming a sadhu. Though the numbers are small, they are not insignificant. Even amidst the growing social and educational opportunities in Rajasthan (a state with one of the lowest literacy rates in the country),

³³⁰ The year in parentheses marks the year in which I met these sadhus.

women continue to dedicate themselves to God through renunciation. The future of female asceticism, thus, bodes well.

Whether or not they chose (or will choose) successors to carry on their spiritual lineages, and whether or not they shall formalize their traditions through long-term building efforts, for the moments that I sat at their feet and recorded their words in *satsang*, the female sadhus shared with me their teachings in order that others may benefit from the knowledge and, in the process, understand the religious worlds of female ascetics in Rajasthan and beyond. As Gangagiri says, “Write my words on every page if [the knowledge] helps others. Knowledge is to share.” Thus, I leave my readers with the words Gangagiri spoke to a group of devotees during an evening *satsang* in March 2005, and with the hope that this dissertation has fulfilled these goals:

We are all sitting here [in *satsang*]. This is a *melā* [carnival]. We are different from each other, right? But we are different only by bodies. Otherwise, we are all the same. We are all the same... We met in the last birth, and that’s why we have met again. Today we have met, and we’ll definitely meet again... Remember that this [world] of ours is not our country at all. This is not our country. We came here to be in a *melā*; we took birth in order to come to this *melā* of existence. But we have to leave [this *melā*], too, because this [world] is not our home. No, our home is with God... Remember the knowledge I have taught you. Learn it, and you shall cross your boats over the ocean of existence.



Gangagiri and Antoinette pose for a photo in January 2006 in front of the *dhūnī* at Gangagiri's hermitage. Photo by Kalpana Sanadhya.

APPENDIX A

The Sadhus

The Women	Age	Year
Gangagiri Maharaj	93	2008 (died July 26, 2008)
Tulsigiri	63	2006
Santosh Puri	88	2006
Jnan Nath	89	2005
Jnan Nath	70ish	2005
Pratap Puri	85	2006 (died January 6, 2006)
Lehar Nath	65ish	2004 (died December 2004)
Prem Nath	83	2003
Kesar Giri	83	2005
Jamuna Bharati	59	2005
Uma Saraswati	78	2006
Devi Nath	90	2006
Gita Puri	38	2003
Ganesh Nath	30	2005
Mayanath	60	2005
Shiv Puri	61	2005
Harbhangi Nath	45	2005
Saraswati Nath	20	2005
Sharda Puri	87	2005
Chetananda Dandi Swami	50ish	2005

Champa Nath	77	2003
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The Men

Ithwar Nath	98	2005
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Devendra Digambara Saraswati	95	2005
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Surendra Saraswati	70ish	2005
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Gauri Shankar Bharati	52	2005
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Gaḍbhaḍ Bharati	40ish	2005
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Sumir Puri	25	2005
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Baldevgiri	65	2005
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Devgiri	84	2005
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Turanthnath	97	2005
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Manmohan Giri	35	2005
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Barfani Baba	98	2005
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Shankar Baba	90ish	2005
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Nityananda Puri	99	2005
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Mahant Mohan Anand	76	2005
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Shiv Nath	83	2003
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APPENDIX B

The Songs**Collected and Translated by:****Antoinette E. DeNapoli and Manvendra A. Singh and/or Kalpana C. Sanadhya****November 17th 2005****Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj****Place: Dugleshwar Mahadev Mandir, Shyalpura Village****Bhajan Title: *Bhajan to Gajanandji* (Sung before any auspicious occasion)**

Dhundhālā dukh bhanjnā sadā na bālā ves	Oh, the one who takes all suffering away and wears Beautiful clothes.
Paratham pelā sumariye to gaurī nand ganeś	First of all, worship the son of Gauri, Ganesh.
Sarasvatī sur dījiye Ganpati dījiye jñān Mahāmāyā pad dījiye	Oh Sarasvati, give me a good voice. Ganpati, give me knowledge. Oh Mahamaya, give me padas [verses] to sing.
Rākhe saran men nām	The name itself keeps [us] in your protection.
Gavrā rā nandan khelo mārā bandhan Mahar karo mahārāj ho jī Gavrā rā nandan khelo mārā bandhan Mahar karo mahārāj ho jī	Oh son of Gauri, open my ties [blockages]. Bless me, Oh Maharaja. Oh son of Gauri, open my ties [blockages]. Bless me, Oh Maharaja.
Riddhi-Siddhi le āvo anandātā bhar dījo bhañdār	Bring your wives, Riddhi & Siddhi, and fill all our storage places.
Bāvji nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo jī	Oh Bavji [Lord], keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away.
Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo Mere dātā vacan gurājī rā pālajo jī	Keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away. Oh, my Lord, [help us to] keep the promise of the Guruji.
Bherunāth bhalī kar bābā kāsīnā kotvāl ho jī	Oh Bherunath, the kotwal [chief] of Kashi, do good to us.
Bherunāth bhalī kar bābā kāsīnā kotvāl ho jī	Oh Bherunath, the kotwal of Kashi, Do good to us.
Pakar bhālo duśman ne	Grab the spear and destroy the enemy.

Māro bāndho ghūnghar māla bāvjī	Wear the bells on the feet and the mala on the neck.
Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo jī Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo	Oh Bavji, keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away. Keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away.
Mere dātā vacan gurājī rā pālajo jī	Oh, my Lord, keep the promise of the Guruji.
Hanumān anjanī rā joddā mābalī balvān ho jī	Oh Hanuman, the one born of Anjani. You are very strong and capable.
Hanumān anjanī rā jāyā mābalī balvān ho jī	Oh Hanuman, the one born of Anjani. You are very strong and capable.
Le biralo lankā gad cariyā Le lalkār bāvjī	He attached Lanka with his mace, Oh Lord, he challenged (Ravana).
Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo jī Śakti sanśay meto Sant rā barā hingalāj ho jī Singh care āvo mā gharnī Bolo jay jay kār bāvjī Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo jī	Oh Bavji keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away. Remove all of our doubts, You are the greatest one, Oh ji... Oh Goddess, sit on the lion and come. Oh Lord, We say 'jay-jay' [to the deities]. Oh Bavji, keep the evil eyes of the bad ones Away.
Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo Rāmāpīr meto kalpanā	Keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away. Oh Rama Pir (Ram Devji), remove all of our [unclear].
Kesriyā mahārāj ho jī	Oh Maharaj, he's known as the one who wears ochre-colored [robes].
Rāmāpīr meto kalpanā Kesriyā mahārāj ho jī	Oh Rama Pir (Ram Devji), remove all of our [unclear]. Oh Maharaj, he's known as the one who wears ochre-colored [robes].
Nazar harāmiyān rī tālyo jī Gajanand Mahārāj kī jay ho	Oh Bavji, keep the evil eyes of the bad ones away. Let there be victory to Lord Gajanand (Ganeshji).

November 17th 2005

Performers: Gangagiri Maharaj & Tulsigiri Maharaj

Place: Dukleshwar Mahadev Mandir (and Ashram), Shyalpura Village

Bhajan: Ode to Ganesh, remover of obstacles

Ganeśnāth pakaron hāth prasan vījo pārvatī	Oh Ganeśji! Hold my hand [and] may Parvati be happy.
Ganeśnāth pakaron hāth prasan vījo pārvatī	Oh Ganeśji! Hold my hand [and] may Parvati be happy.
Riddhi-Siddhi nārī thāe sang men birāje	Both of your women, Riddhi and Siddhi, sit

Riddhi-Siddhi nārī thāe sang men birāje	next to you. Both of your women, Riddhi and Siddhi, sit next to you.
Mangalmay murti sundālā ne sumariye	Worship the image of one who has a trunk and who blesses You.
Dātā namo garvā Ganpati	Oh data, we are proud to bow to Ganpati.
Sundālā ne sumariye re	Worship the one with the trunk.
Dātā namo garvā Ganpati	Oh data, we are proud to bow to Ganpati.
Dekhatā ī dare pranām kare Māhāvīkrāl murti Dekhatā ī dare pranām kare Māhāvīkrāl mūrtī Ek danto dayāvanto Ek danto dayāvanto Ghanī karūn vinatī	As you look at him, you get scared. It's a very fierce image. As you look at him, you get scared. It's a very fierce image. The Merciful One which has one tooth, The Merciful One which has one tooth, I'm making a lot of requests [of you].
Sundālā ne sumariye re	Worship the one with the trunk.
Dātā namo garvā Ganpati	Oh Lord, we are proud to bow to Ganpati.
Sundālā ne sumariye re Dātā namo garvā Ganpati	Worship the one with the trunk. Oh data, we are proud to bow to Ganpati.

July 10, 2005

Singer/Performer: Santosh Puri Maharaj

***Bhajan* Title: "Hey Old Woman, Come to Satsang for Two Minutes."**

Translated with Kalpana C. Sanadhya

The following song's style is a conversation between God (*bhagvān*) and an old woman

[<i>bhagvān</i>]: kai socho buḍiyā paḍī paḍī	Hey Old Woman, what are you thinking while sitting there?
kai socho buḍiyā paḍī paḍī	Hey Old Woman, what are you thinking while sitting there?
satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in satsang for two minutes
kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes

[Old woman]: satsang men kaise aū satsang men kaise aū	How can I come to satsang? How can I come to satsang?
māre betā men māro jiv ghaṇo māre betā men māro jiv ghaṇo	My life is buried in my son My life is buried in my son
[b]: thāre betā ne naukarī pahunchai de thāre betā ne naukarī pahunchai de	Send your son to work Send your son to work
satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes
kai socho buḍiyā paḍī paḍī kai socho buḍiyā paḍī paḍī	Hey Old Woman, what are you thinking while sitting there? Hey Old Woman, what are you thinking while sitting there?
satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in satsang for two minutes
[o]: māre bahuvā men māro jiv ghaṇo māre bahuvā men māro jiv ghaṇo	My life is buried in my daughter-in-law My life is buried in my daughter-in-law
[b]: thāre bahuvā ne rasode baithai de thāre bahuvā ne rasode baithai de	Send you daughter-in-law to the kitchen Send you daughter-in-law to the kitchen
satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in satsang for two minutes
kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes
[o]: māre potā men māro jiv ghaṇo māre potā men māro jiv ghaṇo	My life is buried in my grandson My life is buried in my grandson
[b]: thāre potā ne pālāne ponai de thāre potā ne pālāne ponai de	Put your grandson to sleep on the swing Put your grandson to sleep on the swing
satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in satsang for two minutes
kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes

[o]: satsang men kaise aū satsang men kaise aū	How can I come to satsang? How can I come to satsang?
māre beṭiyā men māro jiv ghaṇo māre beṭiyā men māro jiv ghaṇo	My life is buried in my daughter My life is buried in my daughter
[b]: thāre beṭiyā ne sāsare pahunchai de thāre beṭiyā ne sāsare pahunchai de	Send your daughter to her in-laws Send you daughter to her in-laws
satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī satsang men ai jā doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in satsang for two minutes Come and sit in satsang for two minutes
kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī kirtan men ai ja doye ghaḍī	Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes Come and sit in kirtan for two minutes

July 10th 2005

Singer/Performer: Santosh Puri Maharaj

Bhajan Title: “Wake up traveler, Morning has come.”

Translated with Kalpana C. Sanadhya

Jāg musāfir bhor bhai Ab ren bhai tu sovatu hai	Wake up, traveler, morning has come It’s morning now. Nevertheless, [the traveler] still sleeps.
Jāg musāfir bhor bhai	Wake up, traveler, morning has come.
Jo sovatu hai jo khovatu hai Jo sovatu hai jo khovatu hai	The one who sleeps [is] the one who loses everything. The one who sleeps [is] the one who loses everything.
Jo jāgat hai vo pāvatu hai Jo jāgat hai vo pāvatu hai	The one who remains awake, he gets everything. The one who remains awake, he gets everything.
Satsang binā vivek nahin Satsang binā vivek nahin	Without satsang, there is no discrimination. Without satsang, there is no discrimination.
Tu jnān kahān se pāvātu hai Tu jnān kahān se pāvātu hai	From where will you find knowledge? From where will you find knowledge?
Jāg musāfir bhor bhai	Wake Up traveler, morning has come.

July 10th 2005

Khas Aodhi Ashram, Udaipur

Performer: Santosh Puri Maharaj

Bhajan Title: “Yashoda Mother, You have both a Palace and a Big Building.”

Translated with Kalpana C. Sanadhya

Tere to Jashodā Maiyā mahal nā māliyā	Yashoda Mother, you have both a palace and [big] building.
Tere to Jashodā Maiyā mahal nā māliyā	Yashoda Mother, you have both a palace and building.
Tere to Jashodā Maiyā mahal nā māliyā	Yashoda Mother, you have both a palace and building.
Gujarī kī jhoparī lage lā pyārī lage lā pyārī	But I also like the small huts of the Gopis.
Tere to Jashodā maiyā lāddū nā pedā	Yashoda, Mother, at your place I get ladu and mava.
Tere to Jashodā maiyā lāddū nā pedā	Yashoda Mother, at your place I get ladu and mava.
Gujarī kī rābari lage lā pyārī re lage lā pyārī.	But I like the rabari [sweet desert] of the Gopis.
Lage lā pyārī re lage lā pyārī	I like it, I really like it.
Thāre to Jashodā maiyā rādhā nā rūkmanī	Yashoda Mother, in your place are Radha and Rukmani.
Thāre to Jashodā maiyā rādhā nā rūkmanī	Yashoda Mother, in your place are Radha and Rukmani.
Māne to gujarī kī chokarī lage lā pyārī re lage lā pyārī.	But I like the Small hut of the Gopis.
Thāre to Yashodā Maiyā shāl dushālā	Yashoda Mother, you have a shawl and a blanket.
Thāre to Yashodā Maiyā shāl dushālā	Yashoda Mother, you have a shawl and a blanket.
Gujarī kī godarī lage lā pyārī re lage lā pyārī.	But I also like the tattered sheets of the Gopis.

July 10th 2005

Khas Aodhi Ashram, Udaipur

Performer: Santosh Puri Maharaj

Bhajan Title: “How Shall I describe the [Qualities of] the Guru.”

Translated with Kalpana C. Sanadhya

Mārā sat-guru din dayāl	My true guru is merciful
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe [the

	qualities] of my guru?
Āpre mukut rā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your crown?
Āpre mukut rā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your crown?
Āpke mukut pe sūraj kī kiran jarī	On your crown, the beams of the sun are joined.
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?
Mārā sat-guru din dayāl	My true guru is merciful
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe [the qualities] of my guru?
Sadguru māyā sāyar hai	The true guru is my poet.
Te mai galiyā kī nīr	And, I am the water of the street.
Sadguru māyā sāyar hai	The true guru is my poet.
Te mai galiyā kī nīr	And, I am the water of the street.
Ek bund sāgar men pade	If one drop of [of the guru's goodness] shall fall in the Ocean,
Gai kachan ho yā sharīr	The whole body shall become pure.
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?
Mārā sadguru din dayāl	My true guru is merciful.
Āprā ākhyā kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the eyes of the guru?
Āpre ākhiyā men jyoti prakaś	In your eyes is the shining light.
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?
Āpre mukhrā kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your face?
Āpre mukhrā men gītā kā pāth	On your face is the reading of the <i>Gītā</i> .
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?
Āpre mukhrā men gītā kā pāth	On your face is the reading of the <i>Gītā</i> .
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?
Āpre hāthā ko varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your hands?
Āpre hāthā ko varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your hands?

Āpre hāthā men dayā kā dān	In your hands is the wealth of mercy.
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?
Āpre pairā ro varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your feet?
Āpre pairā ro varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe your feet?
Āpre pairā men cāro hi dhām	At your feet are the four pilgrimage places.
Guru kā varnan kaise karu	How shall I describe the guru?

July 10th 2005

Khas Aodhi Ashram, Udaipur

Performer: Santosh Puri Maharaj

Bhajan Title: “Nadeshwar Mahadev Bhajan.”

Translated with Kalpana Sanadhya

Nādeśvar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Nādeśvar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone your feet.
In parvat, pahār, majāro	In the middle of these mountains,
In parvat, pahār, majāro	In the middle of these mountains,
Jismen śankar vās tumhāro	Is where you reside
Jismen śankar vās tumhāro	Is where you reside.
Kanchan bhom bharosā garī	The devotees are living on this earth and traveling on the vehicle of truth.
Kanchan bhom bharosā garī	The devotees are living on this earth and traveling on the vehicle of truth.
Dubat tāran vālā	He crosses them over who are about to drown.
Nādeśvar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Ubeśvar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Ubeśwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Nirmal nīr gangā ko	The Ganga has pure water.
Chāle nirmal nīr gangā ko	The pure water of the Ganga keeps flowing.
Chāle pyāu kare ek paśu pakheru	The road-side watering place keeps

	flowing [and] The seagulls keep drinking [from there].
Mūrakh khoyo jamāro	The fool has wasted his life [without doing good works].
Nādeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Ubeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Ubeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Chokar kund baniyo ati bhārī Chokar kund baniyo ati bhārī	The four corners of the pit are very deep. The four corners of the pit are very deep.
Kund ke upar ghāt taiyārī Kund ke upar ghāt taiyārī	Atop of the basin, the ghats [for bathing] are ready Atop of the basin, the ghats are ready.
Nāyā kā pāp nivāro Nāyā kā pāp nivāro	The one who bathes at the basin, his sin is washed away The one who bathes at the basin, his sin is washed away.
Nādeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Ubeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Ubeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Chope mandir baniyo ati bhārī Chope mandir baniyo ati bhārī	Besides this, in the mandir that is made, Besides this, in the mandir that is made,
Mandir āge nan taiyārī Mandir āge nan taiyārī	[The <i>mūrtī</i>] of Nand is ready. [The <i>mūrtī</i>] of Nand is ready.
Nan ke upar jhūl taiyārī Nan ke upar jhūl taiyārī	The decoration is also atop of Nand The decoration is also atop of Nand.
Kaku kesar tilak birāje Kaku kesar tilak birāje	The kumkum and kesar are ready to be put on the forehead. The kumkum and kesar are ready to be put on the forehead.
Jaṭā bhriguti ramāi Jaṭā bhriguti ramāi	The <i>jaṭā</i> [hair knot] and <i>vibhūṭī</i> [sacred ash] are on the self. The <i>jaṭā</i> and <i>vibhūṭī</i> are on the self.
Nādeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at

	your feet.
Ubeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Ubeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Lakshman Nāth yū pharmāve	Lakshman Nath says it like this.
Lakshman Nāth yū pharmāve	Lakshman Nath says it like this.
Hāth jord kar araj sunāve	He is joining hands and expressing,
Hāth jord kar araj sunāve	He is joining hands and expressing.
Bhavā-Bhavā rā pāp nivāro	Wash my sins of every birth..
Bhavā-Bhavā rā pāp nivāro	Wash my sins of every birth.
Nādeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Nadeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.
Ubeśwar bābā charanā men rākhan vālā	O Ubeshwar Mahadev, you keep everyone at your feet.

April 11th 2005

**Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj
Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur**

***Bhajan* Title: “The Urge of *Bhajans* has Taken Possession [Over Me]”**

Bhajan dhun khūb lāgī ho jī re	The Urge of Bhajans has really taken possession [over me.]
Param guru hari māre hriday re māy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Hā re śabad dhun khūb lāgī ho jī re	Yes, the great words have taken possession [over me].
Param guru hari māre hriday re māy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Hā re sabad dhun khūb lāgī ho jī re	Oh, yes, great words have taken possession [over me].
Param guru hari māre hriday re māy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Lāgī lāgī sab kahat hain	Everybody is saying it has taken possession.
Na lāgī kisī ko nāy jī	And, nobody is saying it has not.
Lāgī lāgī sab kahat hain	Everybody is saying it has taken possession.
Na lāgī kisī ko nāy jī	And, nobody is saying it has not.
Jñānī puruṣ ko to aisī lāgī	But when it has taken possession of a knowing man,
Tan kī śuddh bisarāī	He even forgot [completely] about his body.

Param guru hari märe hrday re mãy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Hā re bhajan dhun khūb lāgī ho jī re	Yes, the urge of bhajans has really taken possession [of me].
Pram guru hari märe hrday re mãy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Dhruv ko lāgī Prahād ko lāgī Na lāgī sadan kasāī jī	It took possession over Dhruva, It took possession over Prahlad, And it took over the butcher.
Dhruv ko lāgī Prahād ko lāgī Na lāgī adham Gunakāī Ganikā bāī Mira ko to aisī lāgī bāī Chhodya rāj-pāt sukhdayī	It took possession over Dhruva It took possession over Prahlad And it took over the Prostitute, Who was not having qualities. It possessed Mira Bai in such a way [that] She left the comforts of the palace.
Param guru hari märe hrday re mãy jī	The Supreme Guru is inside of my heart.
Rām ko lāgī Lakshman ko lāgī Na lāgī sītā māī jī Hanumān jī ko to aisī lāgī Bhai kūd pade jal māī	It possessed Rama It possessed Lakshman It possessed mother, Sita. It possessed Hanuman in such a way [that] He jumped into the water.
Param guru hari märe hrday re mãy jī	The Supreme Guru is inside of my heart.
Jatī ko lāgī Satī ko lāgī Na lāgī sahastra athiyāsī jī Athiyāsī izār sādhuon ko lāgī	The Jatis were possessed. It took over the Satis. And, it took over 88,000 sadhus. And it took over several thousands of sadhus.
Jatī ko lāgī Satī ko lāgī Na lāgī sahastra athiyāsī jī	It took over the Jatis, It possessed the Satis, And it possessed many thousands of Sadhus.
Vrj vanitā ko to aisī lāgī Tan kī suddh buddh nāhī	But it possessed Vanita from Braj in such a way [that] She forgot her body [that is, everything].
Param guru hari märe hrday re mãy jī Are bhajan dhun khūb lāgī ho jī re	The Supreme Hari is inside of my heart. The urge of bhajans has really possessed [me].
Param guru hari märe hrday re mãy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Bharatsari kūm aisī lāgī	It possessed Bharatsari in such a way [that]

Chhodiya rājpāt sukhadāyī jī Solā tajī rājā gopīchand re	He left the comforts of the palace. And Gopichand left sixteen [wives].
Param guru hari māre hrday re māy jī	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.
Dhannā, pīpā ravidās pumbā lāgī Senvā nāī [lāgī]	It possessed Dhanna, Pipa, Ravidas, and Pumba. And, it possessed the barber, Senva.
Dhannā, pīpā ravidās, pumbā, lāgī Senvā nāī [lāgī].	It possessed Dhanna, Pipa, Ravidas, and Pumba. And, it possessed Senva.
Param guru, hari, māre hrday re māy jī.	The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

March 13, 2005

***Bhajan* sung as part of the story of Chelayo**

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj,

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

Title: ‘O, Chelayo, don’t leave truth.’

Bhāgūn to māri bhūkā lāje Bhāgūn to māri bhūkā lāje	If I run, my motherland will feel ashamed. If I run, my motherland will feel ashamed.
Merū sarīkhā dolvā lāge Ākās men ā dharm Mera maṇu mā jān moke Chelayo, sat nā chūke	The mountains will start shaking, My religion is like the sky, And my life is in that. O Chelayo, don’t leave truth.
Moradhvaj, jo rājā e ang verātyūn dīdhā karne dān, Jo rājā e ang verātyūn dīdhā karne dān	King Mordhvaj also donated his body. King Mordhvaj who donated all of his limbs.
Sivi rājā e jāngh ne kāṭī tyāre maliyā Bhagvān	Sivi Raja, he cut his thigh, And, at that time, he met bhagvān.
Mera maṇu mā jān moke Chelayo, sat nā chūke	My life is in that. O, Chelayo, don’t leave truth.
Sīs male paṇ samay male nahīn, sādhu chhe mehmān Sīs male paṇ samay male nahīn,	Earlier, we were ready to give our heads. But it wasn’t the time.

Sādhu chhe mehmān	Today, the sadhu is our guest.
Āve avasar pāchhā na padiye Kāyā thāre kurbān	This opportunity will not come back. Sacrifice your body.
Chelayo sat nā chūke. Mera maṇu mā jān moke.	My life is in that. O, Chelayo, don't leave truth.

March 28th 2005

Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

***Bhajan*: 'You have crossed the Ship Over.'**

(Note: Gangagiri says that this *bhajan* is addressed to the Rajasthani folk hero, Baba Ram Dev)

Puccho vīramdev jī, 'sunon bhai' Rāmā ho jī, thārā ang rā vāgā Kathe bhīnjya	Viramdevji is asking, 'Listen Brother,' 'Listen Brother, Rama, how did your clothes become wet?
Ho mārājā araj karūn Ajmal jī rā, rāmā ho jī	'Oh, Maharaja, I am respectfully speaking,' 'Oh, Rama, the son of Ajmalji.'
Rām dev jī kei riyā Ugtā sūraj rā pade tāvara Oh jī Māre ang rā pasīnā sūn	Ram dev ji is saying, 'The sun is rising and [its light is] very bright.' [rhythmic end of bhajan line] 'My clothes are wet because I'm sweating.'
Bhījyo re mārājā araj karūn main Ajmal jī rā kanvarā ho jī	'Oh Maharaj, I am asking respectfully,' 'Oh, son of Ajmalji, this is how it became wet?'
Pace vīramdev jī kei riyā Jhūtorā Rāmdev jī Jhūtā kānī bolo jī	Viramdevji is asking again, 'You are lying, Ramdevji,' 'You are a liar, Ramdevji.'
Thān samandar men lī jāe tārī Oh Mārājā araj karūn main Ajmal jī rā kanvarā ho	'You have crossed over a ship in the ocean.' 'I am saying this respectfully, Oh, Maharaja.' 'Oh, son of Ajmalji.'

March 28th 2005

Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

***Bhajan*: 'Oh Ram of Runecha, Hear my Pleas [for help].'**

(Another song addressed to the folk hero Ram Dev)

He helo m̄aro s̄avalo r̄unencā r̄ā r̄ām V̄iramdev r̄ā v̄ir r̄ān̄in netal n̄ā bhartār	Oh, Ram of Runecha, Listen to my Pleas. The brother of Viramdev and husband of Queen Netal, Oh, Listen to my pleas [for help].
M̄aro helo s̄avalo oh,	
He v̄āniyo na v̄āniyāni j̄atarā jaiye	The merchant and his wife are going for pilgrimage.
Māl dekhī na chor P̄acchal jaiye M̄aro helo s̄avalo ho	The thieves have seen the luggage, And they want to steal it Listen to my pleas.
He jaiye jaiye jh̄āreyon ne kyamā cche vāt V̄āniya ne thayo s̄āth M̄aro helo s̄āmalo ho	We are going into the jungle, And [the thieves] are waiting for us. Listen to my pleas.
He helo m̄aro s̄āmalo r̄unencā n̄ā r̄ām V̄iram dev n̄ā v̄ir, r̄ān̄in netal n̄ā bhartār	Oh, Ram of Runecha, Please hear my Pleas. The brother of Viramdev and husband of Queen Netal, Listen to my pleas Queen Netal's husband, Please listen to my Pleas.
M̄aro helo s̄āmalo oh jī R̄ān̄in netal n̄ā bhartār M̄aro helo s̄āmalo oh jī	
He ūncā- ūncā d̄ungakh ne Bol rayā mor-mārī nāk̄yo V̄āniyā ne māl lei giyā chor	There are tall mountains, And the peacocks and peahens are singing, The thieves have killed my husband and stolen our stuff, Listen to my pleas...Hey...
M̄aro helo s̄āmalo ho jī... he	
Ūbī-ūbī v̄āniyān kare re pukār, Shyamtā malyo Avāz m̄aro helo s̄āmalo oh jī... he	The female baniya is standing And calling for help. Listen to the sound of my pleas...Hey...
Līloro ghorō, līloro ghorō	His [Ram of Runecha's] horse is green, His horse is green.
Ne hāth mām cche tīr v̄āniyā Ne vāre cariyā rāmo pīr mārā	He's having arrows in his hand and And there goes my Rama-Pir to help the merchant.
M̄aro helo s̄āmalo ho jī... he Helo m̄aro s̄āmalo r̄unencā n̄ā r̄ām	Listen to my pleas, Oh, Rama...hey... Oh, Rama of Runecha, Hear my Pleas
V̄iramdev n̄ā v̄ir netal n̄ā bhartār	The brother of Viramdev and husband of Queen Netal, Listen to my Pleas.
M̄aro helo s̄āmalo ho jī.	
He bole daulo v̄āniyo	The baniya is saying that

Bhalī rākhī tek rūnencā sahar men
Vāniyo perī lido bhek

[Baba] Ram Dev kept his word.
And [the merchant] took Bhag [ochre-robles] in
Runecha.

Māro helo sāmalo.

Hear my Pleas.

March 28th 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

Bhajan: Ram dev kā Bhajan, ‘Oh Rama, Today You Must Fulfill My Wish,’ (Har ji bhāt kā bhajan).

Āj kīdā re rāmā amar morī āsā rāmā ‘Oh Rama, today you have to fulfill my wish.’

(Gangagiri’s commentary: *bhunvārā men kar kiyō bhajan*; that is, Har ji Bhat, a devotee of God, is singing this *bhajan* from inside a jail).

Āj kīdā re rāmā amar morī āsā rāmā ‘Oh Rama, today you have to fulfill my wish.’

Samal lo na
Mārā garīb nivāj vājo
Thāro pakarū main
Pār lagāvo rāmā

Won’t you listen to me?
Please listen to me, the one who cares for the poor.
I only have your hand,
Oh Rama, cross me over to the other side.

Sasuro to cāle rāmā
Singh ke rī cāl cāle
(Gangagiri’s commentary: sasuro kanane ke khargūs ne: sasuro means khargūs, or rabbit).

Oh Rama, the rabbit is moving,
[the rabbit] is moving, moving like a lion

Sasuro to cāle rāmā
Singh ke rī cāl cāle

Oh Rama, the rabbit is moving,
[the rabbit] is moving, moving like a lion.

Sasuro palar rāmā
Singh kab hoy vāgo
Thāro pakarū main
Pār lagāvo rāmā

How can a rabbit, Oh Rama,
Turn into a lion?
I am grasping your hand,
Rama, Cross me over to the other side.

Hīrā rā palārā rāmā sonā
Rī sīngat rāmā,
Lālā rā palārā rāmā

Rama, you sleep in a cradle of diamonds,

Carle ghorīle mhārī madad padhāro rāmā

Rama, sit on the horse and come to my aid!

Bhālo pakar rāmā
Duśman ne
Māro māro samal lo na mārā din dayāl

Oh Rama, hold your spear and
Kill the enemy.
Listen to me, Oh Merciful One.

Kunsī kholyā men jaine karāngā pukār Kaljug dekhī rāmā jorā mat ājo rāmā	Where else shall I go and call for help? This is the Kal Yug, Rama, don't be late.
Har saranām men bhātī harī nand bolo hole Morā ghorā rā mām to sakhardār	I, Har ji Bhati, am in your protection. Oh rider of Horses, don't be late in coming.
Har saranām men bhātī harī nand bolo hole Morā ghorā rā mām to sakhardār	I, Har ji Bhati, am in your protection. Oh rider of horses, don't be late in coming.
Vāgo thāro pakarūn main Pārā lagāvo rāmā	I am holding your hand, Rama, cross me over to the other side.

March 30, 2005

**Performers: Gangagiri Maharaj, along with Tulsi Giri
Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur
Title: The Thousand Names of Prabhu**

Prabhu, Thārā nām chhe hazār, Kahiye nām Lakhvī, Kankotrī, Hari, Thārā nām chhe hazār Kahiye nām Lakhvī, Kankotrī Koi thane Rām kahe, koi Radheśyām kahe, Koi kahe Nand ko Kishor, Kai ye nām Lakhvī, Kankotrī. Kankotri	O Lord, You have a thousand names. Say the name of Lakhvi, Kankotri, Hari. You have a thousand names. Say the names of Lakhvi, Kankotri. Some call you Ram, some Radheshyam, Some call you the Kishor of Nand. There are several names [of God], Lakhvi,
Mathurā mā Mohan jī, Gokul mā gvāliyo, Dvārkā mā rājā Ranchhor, Ranchor. Kahiye nām Lakhvī, Kankotrī.	In Mathura, you are called Mohanji In Gokul you are called Gvaliyo, In Dwarka you are called the King Say the names of Lakhvi, Kankotri.

March 30, 2005

**Performers: Gangagiri Maharaj, along with Tulsigiri
Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur
The Evening Ārti performance of Gangagiri.
Title: 'Jay Dev, Guru Dev.'**

Jay dev guru dev, Māyā, moh binā, sukh Jiv bahe sāre, Jñān jahāj bithākar guru Pal men tāre, Jay dev guru dev.	Victory to God, Victory to the Guru. All creatures without illusion, attachment, and happiness All of them will flow [in the ship of knowledge]. The Guru will let them sit in the ship of knowledge, And carry them over in a moment. Victory to God, Victory to the Guru.
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Nānā panth jagat men, Nij-nij, guṇ gāve Sabkā sār batākar, Guru māraj lāve Jay dev guru dev. Kam, krodh, mad, matsar, chor, Bade bhore	There are many communities in the world. And they all sing of the qualities of their communities. The guru tells the essence of everything And brings one on the path [of God]. Victory to God, Victory to the Guru. Lust, anger, intoxication, theft, All of these are heavy things.
Jñān khadag de kar men Guru sab sañhāre Jay dev guru dev.	The Guru gives the sword of knowledge in your hands. and destroys all of these things. Victory to God, Victory to the Guru.
Charanāmṛt nirmal, Sab pātak hāri Vacan sunat Tam nāśo Sab sansay hāri, Jay dev guru dev.	The nectar from the Guru's feet is pure. The ones who receive it. And when they listen to the speech of the Guru, It spoils the darkness And they lose all those doubts. Victory to God, Victory to the Guru.
Tan, man, dhan, Sab arpan guru cāranan kīje Brahmanand, paramapad, Mokṣa gati līje Jay dev guru dev.	The body, mind, and wealth Offer all these things to the feet of the Guru. Take Brahmanand, the highest place. And liberation at the feet of the Guru. Victory to God, Victory to the Guru.
Jay dev guru dev Dayānidhi, dīnan, hitakāri, Jay-Jay moh vināśak Bhav vandhan hārī Jay dev guru dev Guru Maharaj kī Jay!	The One who gives mercy and who cares for the poor, Victory to the destroyer of Illusion/Attachment Who releases us from the grips of Bhav [i.e., sansār] Victory to God, Victory to the Guru. [Final Salutation to Guru-Maharaj and conclusion of <i>ārti</i>].

March 30, 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

Title: Daśanāmi *bhajan* sung addressed to Guru Dattatreya, the patron sadhu of the Daśanāmi order. The female sadhus sing this *bhajan* in the context of *ārti*, after *pūjā*.

Sri guru dev datta avadhūt Māraj siddha chorāsī Tapasyā kare Śrī bheg kī	The great, accomplished guru-God, Dattatreya, has won over the 84 million births, And he's doing the tapasya of bheg [of sannyasa or
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	Renunciation]
Ot ma Śambhu ṭek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	Dattatreya is in the protection of Shambhu [Shiva], Guruji [Dattatreya] is doing tapasya on the peak of a mountain.
Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare Alakhji morgad rāj kare Śiv Śankar ji kailās men dhyān dhare	Śrī Guru Dattatreya is doing japa in Girnaar. And Alakh is ruling at morgar Lord Śiv Shankarji is doing meditation at Kailash;
Hari Om guruji Bichhi hai jājam lagā hai takiyā	Hari Om Guruji, The big [red] carpet is spread and the pillow is set.
Nām niranjan sādhu Vo jape śrī bheg kī	The names of the sadhus is pure/ultimate They are making the japa [chanting] of the Bheg.
O Śambhu ṭek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	Oh, Shambhu, keep the promise. Guru Dattatreya is doing tapasya on the mountain.
Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare Alakhji morgad rāj kare Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare	Dattatreya is chanting in [the mountain of] Girnār. Alakh is ruling at Morgard Śiv Shankarji is meditating in Kailash
Hari Om Guruji Pīraj hokar gādi jo baithe Tāzā toranj ho satī Vo chade	Hari Om, Guruji, He is a holy seat, sitting in his place He's sitting in a fresh way and he is raising Truth.
Śrī bheg kiyo Śambhu tek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	He took the ochre-robos [bheg]. Shambhu will support [me] Guru Dattatreya is doing tapasya on the mountain.
Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare Alakh ji morgad rāj kare Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare	Dattatreya is chanting at Girnaar Alakhji is ruling at Morgad Śiv Shankarji is meditating in Kailash
Hari Om guruji Pandit hokar ved jo Vānche dhandhā upādhi se nyārā rahe	Hari Om Guruji, The pandit who reads Veda And who keeps himself away from business and posts,
Śrī bheg kīyo Śambhu tek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	Dattatreya took the bheg [ochre-robos of Renunciation]. Shambhu supports [Dattatreya] Guruji is doing tapasya on the peak of the

Śrī guru dattatreya girinār men jap kare Alakh ji morgad rāj kare Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare	mountain. Dattatreya is chanting in Girnar mountain Alakh is ruling at Morgad. Śiv Shankarji is meditating in Kailash.
Śrī bheg kiyo Śambhu tek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare the mountain Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare Alakh ji morgad rāj kare Śiv Śankar ji kailās men dhyān dhare	He took the ochre-robos of renunciation Shambhu protects/supports [Dattatreya] Guruji Dattatreya is doing penance at the peak of Dattatreya is chanting in Girnaar Alakh is ruling at Morgad Śiv Shankarji is meditating in Kailash.
Hari Om guruji, Rūkhad-sūkhad Dhūp jo kheve Nāgā nirvānī tapasyā kare Śrī bheg kiyo	Hari Om, Guruji [The guru] who can eat anything, Who stands in the sun, Who stands naked and who does tapasya Sri Dattatreya has taken ochre-robos
Śambhu ṭek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	Shambhu supports Dattatreya Guruji is doing penance at the peak of a mountain.
Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare Alakhji morgad rāj kare Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare	Guru Dattatreya is chanting in Girnaar Alakhji is ruling at Morgad Śiv Shankarji is meditating at Kailash
Hari Om Guruji, Koyak lākhī guru Koyak, khākhī vankrandī Van men tapasyā kare	Hari Om, Guruji Nobody looks at him Nobody, the one who lives in the jungle He is doing penance in the jungle.
Śrī bheg kiyo Śambhu ṭek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	He [Dattatreya] took the ochre-robos Shambhu supports guru Dattatreya Guruji is doing penance at the peak of a mountain.
Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare Alakhji morgar rāj kare Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare	Dattatreya is chanting at Girnaar Alakh is ruling at Morgad Śiv Shankarji is meditating at Kailash
Hari Om Guruji, Ābū jo gad girnār vāsā Mahūrgad bhikhsā kare Bheg kiyo Śambhu ṭek kāran Guruji śikhar par tap kare	Hari Om, Guruji Dattatreya lives on the mountains of Abu and Girnar. He takes alms in Morgad, He took the ochre-robos [of renunciation] Shambhu supports Dattatreya Guruji is doing penance at the peak of the

Śrī guru dattatreya girnār men jap kare
Alakhji morgad rāj kare
Śiv Śankarji kailās mein dhyān dhare

Hari Om Guruji
Japat brahmaguru

Japat viṣṇu, ādi dev maheśwaram

Śrī ri bheg kiyo
Śambhu ṭek kāran
Guruji śikhar par tap kare

Śrī Guru Dattatreya girnār men jap kare
Alakhji morgad rāj kare
Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare

Hari Om guruji,
Candā jo sūraj navalakh tārā
Guruji tumhārī parikramā kare

Śrī bheg kiyo
Śambhu ṭek kāran
Guruji śikar par tap kare

Śrī guru Dattatreya girnār men jap kare
Alakhji morgad rāj kare
Śiv Śankarji kailās men dhyān dhare

Hari Om Guruji
Daś nām bheg guru

Śīl sanyāsī sarvadev rakṣā kare

Śrī bheg kiyo
Śambhu ṭek kāran

Guruji śikhar par tap kare

mountain.
Dattatreya is chanting at Girnaar
Alakh is ruling at Morgad
Śiv Shankarji is meditating at Kailash.

Hari Om Guruji,
He [Dattatreya] is chanting the names of
Brahmaguru.
He is chanting [the names] of Vishnu and the
first Shiva.

He took the ochre-robos
Shambhu supports Dattatreya
Guruji is doing penance at the peak of the
mountain.

Dattatreya is chanting at Girnaar
Alakh is ruling at Morgad
Śiv Shankarji is meditating at Kailash

Hari Om, Guruji
The moon, sun, and nine lakhs of stars
They are doing your revolutions, O,
Guruji.

He took the ochre-robos [of
renunciation].
Shambhu supports Dattatreya
Guruji is doing penance at the peak of
the mountain.
Dattatreya is chanting at the mountain
of Girnar.
Alakhji is ruling at Morgad
Śiv Shankarji is meditating at
Kailash.

Hari Om, Guruji
The ochre-robos is the guru and
name of the Dashanamis.
May all the gods protect the
Dashanamis, the ones
With patience and renunciation.
He took the ochre-robos,
Shambhu supports Dattatreya.

Guruji is doing penance at the peak
of the mountain.

Śrī gurudattatreya girnār men jap kare

Dattatreya is chanting at Girnar.

End of *Bhajan*.

March 29, 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

Title: *Rāmāyan Bhajan*, ‘Ram, Giver of Happiness.’

Bhajman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind/heart, [praise] the feet of Ram/God, giving of happiness.
Bhajman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, [praise] the feet of God, giving of happiness
Jī charanan se nikasī Surasarī Śankar jaṭā samā	The feet from which Ganga has come And entered into the matted locks of Shankar/Shiva
Jī charanan se nikasī Surasarī Śankar jaṭā samā	The feet from which Ganga has come And entered into the matted locks of Shankar
Jaṭā Śankar nām padīyo hai Tribhuvan tāran ā	On that day, Shankar got the name of ‘jataa sankar’. And, the Ganga came over to bring [water] to the three lands.
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.
Jī charanan kī charan pādukā Bharat rayā lav lāyī	The feet whose wooden sandals Were brought by Bharat .
Jī charanan kī charan pādukā Bharat rayā lav lāyī	The feet whose wooden sandals Were brought by Bharat .
Soī charan kevat dhoī līne Tab hī ja nāv chalā	The boatman washed those very feet Then he started his boat.
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.
Sohī charan santan jan	Those very feet are being worshipped by holy people.
Sevat sadā rahat sukhadāyī	And it keeps giving them happiness forever.
Sohī charan santan jan	Those very feet are being worshipped by holy

Sevat sadā rahat sukhadāyī	people. And it keeps giving them happiness forever.
Sohī charan gautam rūsī nārī Parasad lankā pāī Parsīpal men pad pāī	Those very feet made Shurpanakha angry And after that, He [Ram] got Lanka. In that very moment, he got the post [won victory in battle].
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O heart, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness. O heart, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.
Dandak van prabhu pāvan kīnho Ṛṣiyā no trās mitāī	He spent fourteen years in the Dandaka forest and made it sacred. And he quenched the thirst of the Rshis [in the Dandaka forest].
Dandak van prabhu pāvan kīnho Ṛṣiyā no trās mitāī	He spent fourteen years in the Dandaka forest and made it sacred. He quenched the thirst of the Rshis
Sohī krpālū prabhu antaryāmī Kankaprabhā saṅg dhāyī	That very Lord/Prabhu is merciful and all knowing, That very Lord is with Sita
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness
Kapī sugrīva bandhu bhayā vyākul confused Injay chhatra phirāī Sugriva Kapī sugrīva bandhu bhayā vyākul confused Injay chhatra phirāī	The monkey Sugriva's brother became very And then Ram gave the rule in the hands of Sugriva The monkey Sugriva's brother became very Then Ram gave the rule in the hands of Sugriva
Rāvan anuja vibhīṣan Nīśicar prasiddh Lankā pāī	Ravan's younger brother, Vibhishan Who was a famous demon He got Lanka
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness
Śiv sankādik ādi brahmādik Nigam netī asagāī	Shiva, et cetera, Brahma, et cetera, and many other gods. Are singing [his praises]
Śiv sankādik ādi brahmādik	Shiva, et cetera, Brahma, et cetera, and many other gods.

Nigam netī asagāī	Are singing [his praises].
Tulsīdās prabhu mārūt sut kī Nig mukh karat badāī	O Lord, Tulsidas is always praising The son of the wind(s), Hanuman.
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.
Bhajaman rām charan sukhadāyī	O mind, praise the feet of Ram, giving of happiness.

March 29th 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj
Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur
Dohā/Bhajan about God/Rama
Title (No title)

Dekhat-dekhat nain thakiyā Sunat-sunat doī kān	After seeing [you, Lord] so much, my eyes are tired. After listening so much [about you, Lord] my two ears are tired.
Suniyo jī man Guru apnā hī se jñān	O heart of mine, Listen To the guru inside yourself and receive knowledge [from that].
Pad pāya nirmān	And find the place of peace.

March 29th 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj
Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur
Bhajan Title: 'Love is like a Lioness' Milk.' Or, 'The juice of love shall stay in the heart.

Jo koi prem so avatare Prem ras te nā ur mā thare Joi koi prem so avatare Prem ras te nā ur mā thare Sinhan kerū dudhoy te Sinhan sut ne jare Sinhan kerū dudhoy te Sinhan sut ne jare	The one who understands love, The juice of love shall stay in the heart The one who understands love, The juice of love shall stay in the heart Only a lion cub Can drink a lioness' milk Only a lion cub Can drink a lioness' milk
Avar pātra phodine Nisare kanak pātra mā thare	And [the milk] will pour from every vessel But it will only stay in a metal of Gold.
Prem ras te nā ur mā thare	The juice of love shall stay in the heart

Jo koi prem anś avatare Prem ras te nā ur mā thare	Whoever understands a piece of love The sweet juice of love shall stay in the heart
Sakarkhor nū sākārī Jīvan khar nā prāṅ hare Sakarkhor nū sākārī Jīvan khar nā prāṅ hare	Sugar is always sweet, If the donkey will eat [sugar], he will die. Sugar is always sweet, If the donkey will eat [it] he will die.
Kharā sāyar nū māchal (?)mīthā jal mā mare	The fish who are used to salty water If they drink sweet water, they will perish.
Prem ras te nā ur mā thare Jo koi prem anś avatare Prem ras te nā ur mā thare	The juice of love shall stay in the heart. Whoever understands a piece of love The sweet juice of love shall stay in the heart
Samvalī ras śuddh pān Chhe Brahman hoth te kare Samvalī ras śuddh pān Chhe Brahman hoth te kare	The Samvali text is purely Sung by the Brahmins only. The Samvali text is purely Sung by the Brahmins only
Vagarvañśii ne vaman karāve Vedvānī ucchare Vedas).	But if you turn other castes into Brahmins They shall chant the Vedvani (the language of the
Prem ras te nā ur mā thare Jo koi prem añś avatare Prem ras te nā ur mā thare	The juice of love shall stay in the heart Whoever understands a piece of love The juice of love shall stay in the heart
Uttam vastu adhikār bin male Tadapi arth na sare Uttam vastu adhikār bin male Tadapi arth na sare	If you get the best thing without the right to it Then there is no meaning (or use) to it. If you get the best thing without the right to it Then there is no meaning to it.
Machbhogī bagulo Muktāphal dekhī chañch nahī vare	Cranes who eat fish, When he sees a pearl, he will never take it.
Prem ras te nā ur mā thare Jo koi prem añś avatare Prem ras te nā ur mā thare	The juice of love shall stay in the heart Whoever understands a piece of love The juice of love shall stay in the heart
Kim koti sādhan Prem binā puruśottam pūth na phare	Do anything by any means But do it with love and God will never show His back to you.
Kim koti sādhan Prem binā puruśottam pūth na phare	Do anything by any means But do it with love and God will never show His back to you.

Dayā prītam Śri govardhan dhare It was mercy in the heart of Krishna (Pritam) that
He lifted the mountain Govardhan.
Prem bhakti ye vare Because of love and devotion

Prem ras te nā ur mā thare The juice of love shall stay in the heart
Jo koi prem añś avatare Whoever shall understand a piece of love
Prem ras te nā ur mā thare The juice of love shall stay in the heart
Jo koi prem añś avatare Whoever shall understand a piece of love
Prem ras te nā ur mā thare The juice of love shall stay in the heart.

March 30, 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

Title of *Bhajan*: ‘Rāmrās is Sweet, My brother.’

[?] Bhog lagāyo I offer food before [you, O Lord].
Bhūlyo ghamghar I forgot my house.
Mevā tyāgyā I sacrificed good food,
Bājī vidhur thar pāyo And Vidhur got his home.

Raghu kaise gaj ko kand chhudāyo How did Raghu steal the gajgophand?
Nāth kaise gaj ko kand chhudāyo How did the Naths steal the gajgophand?

Ai mārā bhāī O, my brother,
Tene piyā amar ho jāī If you drink you will become immortal.
Rām ras mīthā re merā bhāī The ‘juice’ of Ram is sweet, my brother.

Mīthā-mīthā sab jag pīye The whole world drinks sweet things.
Kadvā piye na koi No one drinks bitter things.
Mīthā-mīthā sab jag pīye The whole world drinks sweet things.
Kadvā piye na koi No one drinks bitter things.

Kadvā-kadvā jo koi pīye The ones who will drink the bitter things.
Kadvā-kadvā jo koi pīye The ones who will drink the bitter things.

Sabse mīthā hoī They shall become the sweetest.
Rāmrās mīthā re merā bhāī The juice of Ram is sweet, my brother.

Yāne piyā amar ho jāī If you drink this, you will become immortal.
Rāmrās aisā re merā bhāī The juice of Ram is like this, my brother.

Ūñchā-Ūñchā sab jag chāle The whole world goes up,
Nīchā chāle nā koi Nobody goes down.
Ūñchā-Ūñchā sab jag chāle The whole world goes up,

Nīchā chāle nā koi

Nobody goes down.

Nīchā-nīchā jo koi chāle
Nīchā-nīchā jo koi chāle
Sabse ūñchā hoī
Rāmras mīthā re merā bhaī
Jñān piyā amar ho jāī
Rāmras aisā re merā bhaī

The one who goes down
The one who goes down
S/He shall become the highest
The juice of Ram is sweet, my brother.
Drink the knowledge and become immortal.
The juice of Ram is like this, my brother

Dhruv ne piyā
Prahād ne piyā
Piyā sadanakasāī

Dhruv drank it [Rāmras]
Prahlad drank it
The butcher drank it

Dhruv ne piyā
Prahād ne piyā
Piyā sadanakasāī

Dhruv drank it
Prahlad drank it
The butcher drank it

Dās kabīrā ne bhar-bhar piyā
Dās kabīrā ne bhar-bhar piyā

The servant, Kabir, drank it fully
The servant, Kabir, drank it fully.

Aur pīvan kī
Rāmras mīthā re merā bhaī
Jāne piyā amar ho jāī
Rāmras aisā re merā bhaī

And they still have the desire of drinking more
The juice of Ram is sweet, my brother
Whoever drinks shall become immortal
The juice of Rāmras is like this.

Performer: Tulsigiri Maharaj

March 25, 2005

Bhajan: Rāmāyan bhajan

Performed at Jhamburiya ki Nal Bholenath Temple (Mayanath's temple), Gogunda Village

nahīn doṣiya mātā
nahīn doṣiya mātā

ya to likhiya lekh vidhātā
re ab jagad pyāre bhai

nahīn doṣiya janaṇī
nahīn doṣiya janaṇī

vōh to apnī apnī
karāṇī jagad pyāre bhai

sītā śuddhi lanka jā jo
sītā śuddhi lanka jā jo

jā jo rāvana thārō rājā jī

sītā śuddhi lanka jā jo

jā jo rāvana thāro rājā jī

gar se nikalā tīn jana

gar se nikalā tīn jana

bhayā rāma akelā ho gayā

sītā śuddhi lanka jā jo

jā jo rāvana thāro rājā jī

voh kahe sītā

voh kahe sītā van van bhat ke rāma bhai

nahīn voh milī milī sītā patanī

nahīn milā merā sukhā esā hī

O rāma akelā ho gayā

[unclear]

mātā sumitrā pat pat mārjā si putrahīn

van van bhat ke dono bhai

āj āj esi bipatha aiyī

lakṣman rāma akelā hai

bhayā, voh rāma akelā a hai

jor jor main chilaun

ra vīrā jagad pyāre bhai

mātā kasauliyā ājnā re dī [unclear]

pita merā prāntajā

lakṣmana pita ne prāntajā

dhan mārī mātā kaikeyī ne

man men mujh ko

vanvās diyā

dhan mārī mātā kaikeyī ne

man men mujh ko

vanvās diyā

nahīn doṣiya mātā kaikeyī
mātā kaikeyī nahīn voh janaṇī hai

apnī apnī karāṇī re lā lā
jagad pyāre bhai

oh rāvane mārya
rām gar hī āyā
gar gar dipak esā jorḍa hai

rāvan mārya
rām gar hī āyā
gar gar dipak esā jorḍa hai

mātā kasauliyā ārtī utāre
mātā kasauliyā ārtī utāre

tulsidās gāyā hai

[Ram speaks]: ‘It’s not your mistake, mother [Kaikeyi].’
‘It’s not your mistake, mother.’

[Ram speaks to Lakshman]: ‘The one who has made the whole world
has written our destiny in this way, brother.’

[Ram speaks to Kaikeyi]: ‘It’s not your mistake, mother.’
‘It’s not your mistake, mother.’

[Ram speaks to Lakshman]: ‘It’s just the fruit of our *karmas* [actions], beloved brother.’
‘It’s just the fruit of our *karmas*, beloved brother.’

[Ram speaks to Hanuman]: ‘Go to Sita in Lanka.’
‘Go to Sita in Lanka.’

‘Go to the place where Ravan rules.’
‘Go to the place where Ravan rules.’
‘Go to Sita in Lanka.’
‘Go to Sita in Lanka.’

The three of them [Ram, Sita, and Laksman] left the palace
The three of them left the palace

Ram is alone, Brother

[Ram says to Hanuman]: ‘Go to Sita in Lanka.’
 ‘Go the place where Ravan rules.’

Sita says: ‘Ram and Lakshman are wandering in the forest.’
 ‘He hasn’t found me yet’;
 ‘I have no happiness without him.’

Ram is alone.

[Unclear]

Without her son, Mother Sumitra shall beat her head
 To the ground and die.

Both brothers are wandering alone in the forest.

Today, the brothers have fallen into trouble.

Ram and Lakshman are alone.

Ram is alone, brother.

[Ram says to Lakshman]: ‘O beloved brother, I keep yelling for Sita.’
 ‘O beloved brother, I keep yelling for Sita.’

Ram takes permission from Kausalya to leave [for the forest]

[Ram says]: ‘My father has left his breath.’
 ‘O Lakshman, our father has left his breath.’

‘Thanks, Mother Kaikeyi for having us sent to the forest.’
 ‘Mother Kaikeyi had us sent to the forest.’

‘It’s not your fault, Mother Kaikeyi.’
 ‘It’s not your fault, Mother’

[Ram says to Lakshman]: ‘It’s just the fruit of our *karmas*, beloved brother.’
 ‘It’s just the fruit of our *karmas*, beloved brother.’

After killing Ravan, Ram returned to the palace
 Ram returned to the palace
 Everyone has lit lamps [*dīpak*] in their homes [to welcome Ram]

After killing Ravan, Ram has returned to the palace
 Ram returned to the palace
 Everyone has lit lamps in their homes

Mother Kausalya offers *ār̥ti* [worship] to Ram

Mother Kausalya offers *ārti* to Ram

Tulsidas has sung this [story].

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

February 18, 2005

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

***Bhajan* Title: ‘Vālu-Veś,’ or ‘The Ochre-Robes of Renunciation.’**

Nat-nat lījo alakh jī rā nām

Sāheb jī rā nām

Nat rā namo Ganeś ne

Take the name of Alakh [or God] daily

[Take] the name of the Master daily

Daily chant to Ganesh

Are rām-rām nat-nat lījo alakh jī rā nām

Sāheb jī rā nām

Hey! Take the name of Alakh daily

Take the name of the Master daily

Hil-mil hālo

Alakh jī re des

Hendā jī re des

Together let’s go

To the country of Alakh

Let’s go to the country of someone well-known.

Hil mil hālo

Alakh jī re des

Together let’s go

To the country of Alakh

Sāheb jī re des

Olū āve hendā des rī

[Let’s go to] The Master’s country

The memory comes of our well-known country.

Are rām-rām mare nī

[Rām-Rām] janame nī

[Rām-Rām] būdā hoy

Hey! [the name] Ram-Ram does not die

Ram-Ram does not take birth

Ram-Ram does not become old.

Phakīrī lījo re vālu veś rī

Are rām-rām ghorle mānd lījo

Jī asvār bole umed rā

Take renunciation, take the ochre-robles.

Imagine, settle on the horse,

And, tie the saddle of hope

Are rām-rām mare nī

[Rām-rām] janame nī

[Rām-rām] būdā hoy

Hey, Ram-Ram does not die

Ram-Ram doesn’t take birth

Ram-Ram does not become old

Phakīrī lījo vālū veś rī

Hil-mil hālo

Alakh jī re des

Sāheb jī re des

Olū āve re ūdā des rī

Take renunciation, take the ochre-robles.

Together let’s go

To the country of Alakh

[Let’s go to] the Master’s country

The memory of our well-known country comes

Are rām-rām mare nī
 [Rām-Rām] janame nī
 [Rām-Rām] būdā hoy
 Phakīrī lījo vālū veś rī
 Hil-mil hālo
 Alakh jī re des
 Sāheb jī re des
 Olūrī āve re ūdā des ro

Hey! [the name] Ram-Ram does not die
 Ram-Ram does not take birth
 Ram-Ram does not become old.
 Take renunciation, take the ochre-robos.
 Together let's go
 To the country of Alakh
 [Let's go to] the Master's country
 The memory comes of
 the well-known country.

Bolyā bolyā dās kabīr
 Bolyā bolyā dās kabīr
 Ye sadāyo mane lākhīnon

The servant Kabir says,
 The servant Kabir says
 'You have treated us very well.'

Are rām-rām bolyā bolyā dās kabīr
 Dās kabīr
 Ye sadāyo mane lākhīnon

Hey, the servant, Kabir, says
 The servant Kabir [says]
 'You have treated us very well.'

February 18th 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

***Bhajan* title: 'The Bliss of being with Sadhus.'**

Ānand āve re	Happiness comes
Māne saṅtā ro	to us who are together with Sadhus
Samāgam man bhāve	The heart enjoys
Māne sādhu ro	being with the Sadhus
Samāgam man bhāve	The heart enjoys

Ai gangājī jāūn	When I go to the sacred Ganga
To jamnā bī āve	So, the Jamuna shall come [there], too
Ai gangājī jāūn	When I go to the sacred Ganga
To jamnā bī āve	So, the Jamuna shall come [there], too.

Māne sādhu ro	For us, to be with the Sadhus
Samāgam man bhāve	Is what [we] heartily enjoy.

February 18th 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

***Bhajan* Title: 'Live as God keeps you.'**

Jaise rakhe vaise rahnā
 Rāṇa ko keti mīrā bāi

Live as God keeps you
 Mira Bai would say to the King

Mīrā bāī ke rāñājī ne
Rām rākhe tem rahiye
O rāñā jī rām rākhe tem rahiye

Mira Bai said [to the King, her brother-in-law]
Live as Lord Rama keeps you.
'O, King, Live as Rama keeps you.'

Koi dīn jīmvā ne sīrā ne pūrī
Koi dīn bhukhā rahiye
O rāñājī rām rākhe tem rahiye

Some days there is halva and puri to eat.
[And] some days you have to go hungry.
'O, King, live as Rama keeps you.'

Koi dīn sūvā men gādī ne takiyā
Koi dīn bhoen par suniye
floor.
O rāñājī rām rākhe tem rahiye

Some days you have a pillow and mattress
[And] some days you have to sleep on the
floor.
'O, King, live as Rama keeps you.'

Koi dīn pharvā ne bāg-bagīchā
Koi dīn jangal rahiye
jungle.
O rāñā jī rām rākhe tem rahiye

Some days you have gardens to wander in.
[And] some days you have to live in the
jungle.
'O, King, live as Rama keeps you.'

February 18th, 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

Bhajan Title: 'Kanuro [Kṛṣṇa] Doesn't Know my Affection.'

Kānuro sūn jāge mārī prīt
oh, mai kanvārā re

Kanuro [Kṛṣṇa] doesn't know my affection. Bai,
O Sister, we are bachelorettes,

Kānuro sūn jāge, mārī prīt

Kanuro doesn't know my [our] affection

Bai oh, mai bāl kanvārā re,

O Sister, we are bachelorettes

Jal re Jamunā men nīr bhakhā ne ātā re,

We use to come to bring water from the
Jamuna river.

Jal re Jamunā men nīr bhakhā ne ātā re,

We use to come to bring water from the
Jamuna river.

Jal re Jamunā men nīr bhakhā ne ātā re,

We use to come to bring water from the
Jamuna river.

Kānure urāyā

Kanuro caused our pots to fall down,

Jal nīr uriyā phar ra ra ra re

And then he made the birds fly [makes sounds of
birds flying].

Kānuro sūn jāge mārī prīt

Kanuro doesn't know my affection.

O, mai kanvārā re

O Sister, we are bachelorettes,

Kānuro sūn jāge, mārī prīt

Kanuro doesn't know my [our] affection

O mai baal kanvārā re,	O Sister, we are bachelorettes
Vaj rā to van men kāno dhenu carāve	In the middle of the day, Kanuro grazes cows in the forest.
Vaj rā to van men kāno dhenu carāve	In the middle of the day, Kanuro grazes cows in the forest.
Vāsunrī vājī ne	[And] he played the flute.
Bhāgya dor, bhāgya dar ra ra ra re	He made the cows fun [makes sound of cows running].
Kānuro sūn jāge mārī prīt	Kanuro doesn't know my affection.
O, mai kanvārā re	O Sister, we are bachelorettes,
Vaj ra to van men	In the middle of the day,
Vālo ras rachāve	He plays a game of love
Sens gopinā kīnchyā chīr,	With the rest of the gopis, pulling
Phatyā phar ra ra ra re	Their clothes like this [sound of pulling clothes]
Kānuro sūn jāge mārī prīt	Kanuro doesn't know my affection.
O, mai kanvārā re	O Sister, we are bachelorettes, [rest forgotten].

February 18th 2005

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj

Near Mahakaleshwar Temple, Udaipur

***Bhajan* Title: 'Your Wish Shall be Made.'**

Composed by Kabir (as said in the *cāp*).

Terī bigarī bāt ban jāye	Your wish shall be fulfilled.
Hari kā dhyān dharo re bhai	O, brother, meditate on Hari [God].
Terī bigarī bāt ban jāye	Your wish shall be made.
Prabhu ka jāp japo re bhai	O, brother, chant the names of Prabhu [God].
Ankā tāro,	Anka [name of a devotee] was uplifted,
Bankā tāro	Banka [name of devotee] was uplifted
Tāro, sadan kasai	The butcher, Sadan, was uplifted.

Ankā tāro, Bankā tāro, Tāro sadan kasai	Anka was uplifted, Banka was uplifted, The butcher, Sadan, was uplifted.
Suvo padāvat ganikā tārī, Tārī mīrā bāī Hari kā dhyān dharo re bhai Tārī mīrā bāī Hari kā dhyān dharo re bhai	A Prostitute who crossed over taught a parrot to say, ‘Ram-Ram.’ Mira Bai was uplifted, O, brother, meditate on Hari. Mira Bai was uplifted, O, brother, meditate on Hari.
Terī bigarī bāt ban jāye .Prabhu kā jāp japo re bhai	Your wish shall be fulfilled O, brother, chant the [names] of Prabhu.
Daulat, duniyā, māl-khajnā, Bandiyā, bel, curāī Daulat, duniyā, māl-khajnā Bandiyā, bel, curāī	Wealth, the world, treasures, and the bullock, [Time] shall steal [these things]. Wealth, the world, treasures, and the bullock, [Time] shall steal [them].
Jabhin kāl kā dankā bājo Jabhin kāal kā dankā bājo Khoj-khabar nahin pāye	When Time shall sound his drums, When Time shall sound his drums, One never knows when [this will happen].
Hari kā dhyān dharo bhai Terī bigarī bāt ban jāye Prabhu kā jāp japo re bhai	O, brother, meditate on Hari. Your wish shall be fulfilled. O, brother, chant the names of Prabhu.
Aisi bhagati karo Ghat bhītar	Do such devotion In your heart.
Chal, kapat, caturāī	Cheating, flirting, and cunningness [rest of verse unclear].

Aisi bhagati karo, Ghat bhītar	Do such devotion In your heart.
Chal, kapat, chaturāī Sevā banagī āur adhīntā sāj mile raghurai	Cheating, flirting, and cunningness Do such a service and cultivate such a dependence [on God].
Hari kā dhyān dharo re bhai Terī bigarī bāt ban jāye Prabhu kā jāp japo re bhai	O, brother, meditate on Hari. Your wish shall be fulfilled. O, brother, chant the names of God.
Kaho kabīrā Suno Sādhu Sadguru bāt batāye	[The saint] Kabir said, 'Listen Sadhus!' The Sadguru has said.
Kaho kabīrā, Suno Sādhu Sadguru bāt batāye Ye duniyā din chār dahāra se Nām lo lāi	Kabir said, 'Listen Sadhus!' The Sadguru has said, 'This world is only for four days.' [So] Take the name [of God].
Hari kā dhyān dharo re bhai Terī bigarī bāt ban jāye Prabhu kā jāp japo re bhai Prabhu kā dhyān dharo re bhai.	O, brother, meditate on Hari. Your wish shall be fulfilled. O, brother, chant the names of Prabhu. O brother, meditate on Prabhu.

Performers: Gangagiri Maharaj, Tulsigiri Maharaj, Jamuna Bharati Maharaj, and Gita Puri Maharaj

Devali village

July 16, 2003

***Rāmāyan bhajan*: "Lord, you've made magnificent temples for worshipping you."**

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for
worshipping you.

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

kisne jānī terī māyā Who knows the extent of your wondrous power?
kisne jānī terī māyā Who knows the extent of your wondrous power?

kisne bhed tumhārā pāyā Who has discovered your secret mysteries?
kisne bhed tumhārā pāyā Who has discovered your secret mysteries?

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

hare ṛṣi muni kare dhyān Every sage and sadhu shall meditate upon you,
Lord.

hare ṛṣi muni kare dhyān Every sage and sadhu shall meditate upon you,
Lord.

tū hī jal men, tū hī thal men You are in the water, you are in the earth
tū hī jal men, tū hī thal men You are in the water, you are in the earth

tū hī man men, tū hī tan men You are in the mind, you are in the body
tū hī man men, tū hī tan men You are in the mind, you are in the body

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

terā rūp anūp mahān Your form is great and incomparable
terā rūp anūp mahān Your form is great and incomparable

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

tū hī har kul men, tū bal bul men Lord, you are in every community, you are in every leader.

tū hī har kul men, tū bal bul men Lord, you are in every community, you are in every leader.

tū har ḍāl ke pātan men Lord, you are in the leaves of every branch
tū har ḍāl ke pātan men Lord, you are in the leaves of every branch

tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān Lord, you made magnificent temples for

	worshipping you.
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
tū har dil men, tū har mūrtīmān men	Lord, you are in every heart and in every form.
tū har dil men, tū har mūrtīmān men	Lord, you are in every heart and in every form.
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
tūne rāja rank banāye	Lord, you made both kings and paupers
tūne rāja rank banāye	Lord, you made both kings and paupers
tūne hī sukh raj bithāye	You have created a happy kingdom
tūne hī sukh raj bithāye	You have created a happy kingdom
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
terī līlā esī mahān	Lord, your play is unfathomable
terī līlā esī mahān	Lord, your play is unfathomable
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
jhūte jag kī jhūṭī māyā	The illusory power of every false place
jhūte jag kī jhūṭī māyā	The illusory power of every false place
murakh ismen kyon bharmāyā	Why do you make idiots confused by these things?
murakh ismen kyon bharmāyā	Why do you make idiots confused by these things?
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.
tere pūjan ko bhagvān banā man mandir ālīsān	Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

APPENDIX C

The Stories

Bholenath Narrative #1

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj; audience: Manvendra Singh; Antoinette DeNapoli; Nem Singh; Sohan Lal; and a few devotees from the Mahakaleshwar Temple.

GG: There was a sadhu [named] Bholenath. He had four female disciples [*chelis*]. One was Durganath; another was Jhumnath; the third was Leharnath; and the fourth was Gyannath. Bholenath had four *chelis*. Once, Fateh Singh [*mahārānā* of Udaipur in early twentieth century] said as a joke, “Datta, you are a *fakkar* [one who is detached from the world; synonym for sadhu]. So why do you keep four chelis? It’s not fair.” Bholenath said, “Okay, okay. Jnannath, come here.” That Jnannath always used to stand near him; she was from your [Manvendra’s Rajput] community. Her whole community used to live around here [near Mahakaleshwar Temple]. Her whole community came to fight with Bholenath [because he initiated her as a sadhu]. Her brothers, uncles, everyone came. When everything [the fighting] was finished, the whole community settled in another village. Her whole clan settled somewhere else. So, Bholenath called, “Jnanath,” and she said, “What is the matter, datta?” He said, “Call Lerharki [i.e., Leharnath], Jhumki [Jhumnath], and Durki [Durganath].” So she called them and said, “Come quickly, *datta* is waiting.” Bholenath said, “All four of you, grasp my bag and keep standing.” They were all holding the bag and turned into lionesses. Then he said, “Fatiya, are these *chelis* or lionesses?” Fateh Singh replied, “They are lionesses, *datta*.” “Now, will you ever ask [this question] again?” said Bholenath. “No, I will not ask this again, datta,” responded Fateh Singh. Then Bholenath said to his four disciples, “Leave the bag and go back to your work.” Everybody left [from the scene] and returned to their work. Bholenath used to ask crows to bring healing herb [*bhūti*] from the mountain.

MS: Really?

GG: Yes. There was an old man. His hands and legs were very thin, but he had a big, swollen stomach. The disease is called *jalandar*. He couldn’t do any work. His family didn’t take care of him; they didn’t feed him. He managed to come here [to Bholenath’s ashram]. ..One day, in the room in front of the swing where the kids play, the sick man went there and bowed [before Bholenath]. His stomach was getting bigger. Bholenath asked him, “What do you want?” He said, “Datta, when will I die?” The old man said, “Datta, when will I die?” Bholenath said, “Jnanath, come here.” He said this at the same time that I am speaking now, and the day was a day like today [sunny and cool]. Bholenath said, “Jnanath, come here. There is a crow outside. Give him some bread.” She said, “Okay, datta.” And then Bholenath mentioned the medicine to Jnanath. He told her, “Ask the crow to bring this [medicine]. He will find it in the hills of Mt. Abu [hill station north of Udaipur]. Bring the bread and give it to the crow.” Bholenathji broke the bread into small pieces, and gave it to the crow. He said, “Go and bring this medicine [*jadi*]

bhūtī] from the hills of Abu. Go and bring it.” The crow flew away and brought the medicine in seven hours.

A: He brought the medicine in only seven hours?

GG: He brought it after only seven hours. He started doing “kak, kak” [noise that crows make] outside [to get Bholenath’s attention]. He was holding the medicine in his claws. Everybody said, “The crow has returned.” Bholenath asked Jnanath to see whether the crow brought back the medicine or not. He said, “If he has brought the medicine, give him one more piece of bread.” She said, “Yes, datta. He has brought the medicine.” Bholenath said, “Show it to me. How is it? Okay, this is the one. Yes, this is the one. Grind the medicine on the stone and give it to the man for seven days.” After grinding the medicine on a stone, Jnanath gave it to the man for seven days. His stomach became normal after that. The stomach became fine. He lived for fifteen more years. Now tell me, can crows bring back medicine? Yes, they can. That Bholenath was a *siddha*...he was a great sadhu...That’s why so many gifts come to [Devi Nath’s] ashram. It’s all the brilliance of Bholenath’s *bhajans*.

Bholenath Narrative # 2

Performer: Gangagiri Maharaj; Audience: Antoinette DeNapoli; Manvendra Singh; Jagdish Sanadhya; Kalpana Sanadhya; and a few local villagers.

GG: A sadhu is the king of all India. A king is only a king of a town. But a sadhu is the king of all India. Sadhus are like that. They live as they wish. Even kings go to touch sadhus and touch their feet. A king sits below a sadhu and says, “guruji, guruji.” There was a sadhu by the name of Bholenath who used to live here. He had four *chelis*. The maharana of Udaipur, Fateh Singh, used to come here, and [Bholenath’s] four disciples would serve him. The king said to Bholenath, “Why do you keep for female disciples?” Bholenath called all four of them. He called them, and each of them turned into lionesses. Bholenath said, “Tell me, are these women or are these lionesses?” The king said, “Forgive me. I touch my ears [a sign by which individuals express that they are sorry].” Bholenath said, “After today don’t ask who they are. They are simply lionesses.”

The Story of Celiya

Performer: Gangagiri

Performed at the home of a devotee in Sajjan Ghar Colony

Gangagiri (G); Manvendra Singh (MS); Nem Singh (N); Sohan Lal (SL); Antoinette

G: In Kathiyavar, there is a village by the name of Bilkha. Over there lived a merchant by the name of Saga-sa, his wife Cangavati, and their young son, Celiya. They had a house outside the village, near a well in the middle of the fields. They worshipped Lord Krishna; they were Desai merchants.

M: Desai?

G: Desai, the ones who worship Krishna. So, It had been a long time since a sadhu had come to them. The merchant said to his wife, 'It has been a long time since a sadhu has come to our home.' He said to the servant, 'Go and search for a sadhu. Bring him home so we can feed him. Then we will eat.'

They took a vow that they [would not eat] food [nor drink] water. [speaking as the merchant] 'We'll feed the sadhu and then we'll eat.' They took a vow [of not drinking] water, too, the merchant and his wife. Saga-sa was the merchant; Cangavati was his wife; and Celiya was their young son. The three of them took a vow that 'We will feed a sadhu, then we ourselves will eat.' They took such a vow. The servant went searching for a sadhu. He didn't find one. Two days passed; four days passed; ten days passed. Ten days had passed. A month passed; six months passed. They didn't find a sadhu. [The servant] walked ten kilometers; twenty kilometers, but still he couldn't find a sadhu. Then God [*bhagvān*] made himself into a sadhu having leprosy and sat inside a hollow, banyan tree.

[pointing to her body] There were wounds here; [pointing to another part of her body] There were wounds here. There were wounds of blood and pus, dripping and smelling very bad. God made such a body like this and sat inside the tree. The two servants went there [where the sadhu was sitting]. One servant kept standing there; the other returned home and told the merchant, 'We found a sadhu, but he has leprosy.' The merchant said, 'Even though he is a leper, the leprosy is on his body.' 'How does it affect us?' '[maybe speaking to his wife] Prepare the home so that I can bring him home to feed him.' 'We have to feed him. Let's go.' The merchant arrived [where the sadhu was]. As soon as the merchant saw [the sadhu], he knew that 'This is God. This is not a man. It's God.' 'After six months, today God has given [his] *darśan*. This is God.'

So, in the Kathiyavar language, sadhus are called 'Bapu.' Over there, the merchant said, 'Hello Bapu. Come to my home.' This is the language of Kathiyavar. So, the sadhu said, 'I will come, but how will I come?' 'My body is spoiled.' So, the merchant said, 'I'll bring you home while carrying you on my back.' [The sadhu] said, 'I will not come in this way.' So, the merchant said, 'How will you come?' [The sadhu] said, 'Have your wife come'; 'Have her put a basket on her head and bring it so that I can come.' The merchant understood that this is God, and thought, 'If I leave him, then he will vanish.'

The merchant sent the servant to tell the wife, 'You bathe; put on new clothes; put a basket on your head; and bring a bed.' 'Bring these and come. We have to pick Maharaj up and carry him with us.' 'For the last six months, after searching and searching, I have found a sadhu today.' The servant told this to the wife that 'God has come in the clothes of a sadhu having leprosy.' 'Bathe; wear new clothes; and put a basket and a new bed on your head.' 'You will have to carry him in the basket on your head from there.' The wife said, 'Yes.' She quickly bathed; wore new clothes; and brought a basket and a new bed. She came. It was the month of the monsoon. The water was falling, [makes the sound of falling rain] 'Jham, Jham.' The [ground] clay there is very soft. I have walked on that clay. I have walked on that clay. I myself have walked [on that clay]. The shoes go in [the mud]. It's such a soft clay. The soil is fine, fine.

Then, [the merchant] lifted the Maharaj and put him inside the basket that was on the wife's head. They raised the basket on her head. The merchant said to his wife, 'Look, don't shake!' Then she said, 'Okay.' [The merchant] said, 'We have found such a sadhu after so long.' So she said, 'Alright.' [speaking as the merchant] 'Don't get upset about [the sadhu's] leprosy.' She said, 'I won't.' God was stinking like anything. The blood and pus were pouring out from the bed and basket and dripping on the wife, all over her forehead. It was pouring down. Even then she didn't shake. The wife was in front; the merchant was behind her. They brought him there [to the house] and made a bed of wood. They put a seat for the Maharaj. The merchant understood that 'This is God incarnate. Now if I abandon him, he will surely disappear.'

He said to the wife, 'Bathe, put on other clothes, make some food, and bring it.' The wife made some food and brought it. The sadhu said, 'I don't like this kind of food. I am an Aghor Baba. I need meat.' So, the merchant sent the servant to get goat meat. The wife had never prepared meat, but she had to make it. She made the goat meat and brought it. The Maharaj said, 'This is the meat of an animal. I am a human. I need the flesh of a human.' [speaking as the merchant] 'But the bodies [of dead humans] are burned.' 'How can we bring the flesh [of a human]?' The Maharaj said, 'If you cannot feed me, then take me back under the Banyan tree.' 'Take me back! Why the hell did you bring me from that banyan tree?' 'I have been hungry for so many days. Take me back there! You cannot feed me.' The merchant said to the wife, 'Our bodies are impermanent. When it will die, people will burn it.' 'We have brought Maharaj to our home to feed him. We cannot let him go hungry.' 'We have to feed him whatever he wants to eat.' Then he said to the wife, 'Take this sword. Take it and kill me. Feed me to the Maharaj.' Quite close to the bed, not far, the wife lifted the sword to kill him. But the Maharaj said, 'Stop! Stop! He's your husband. He's your Lord [*parames'war*].' 'If you kill him, you'll become a widow. I'll not eat from the hands of a widow.' So, the wife put the sword in the hands of the merchant and said, 'Kill me and feed me to the Maharaj.' The merchant took the sword. He started to kill the wife [but] the Maharaj said, 'Stop! Stop! The flesh of a cow and the flesh of a woman are the same.' 'I don't eat the flesh of women.' [The merchant and his wife thought] 'Now what to do?' 'From where shall we bring the flesh of a human?'

The child had gone to school to study. The child had gone to school to study. The merchant said to the wife, 'Even if we are without children in this world,' the sadhu has come to our house. He should not go hungry.' 'Whatever he asks for, [we have to] feed him that. You go and call Celiya.' 'We'll kill our child and feed him [to the sadhu] so he'll not go hungry.' 'Yes,' the wife agreed. [the merchant] said, 'We'll kill our child and feed the Maharaj.' So, she said, 'Yes.' [speaking about the merchant's wife] She's talking here [in the story]. God was sitting on the bed. He made another form of the Brahmin of the village and reached the child's school. There he said to the child, 'A fake sadhu has come to your home. This sadhu kills people and eats them.' 'Your mother is coming to call you.' '[Your parents] will kill you and feed [the sadhu] your flesh.' 'You go in the village and run. Run [away] now. Go to the village and hide.' So the child gave the answer, The child thought he is the Brahmin of the village. He didn't know that he's God. [speaking as the child who sings his reply]

Bhajan:

‘If I run my motherland will feel ashamed.’

‘This will not be accepted by anyone.’ If I run, my motherland [*bhūmikā*] will feel ashamed.’ ‘This will not be accepted.’ ‘The mountains will start shaking.’

‘My duty [*dharmā*] is like the sky and my life is in that [his religion].’ ‘Celiya, don’t pass up this chance: don’t leave Truth.’

‘Hey Celiya, don’t pass up this opportunity: don’t leave Truth.’ ‘Earlier we were ready to give our heads,’ ‘But it wasn’t the time.’ ‘Today the sadhu is our guest.’

‘Earlier we were ready to give our heads.’ ‘But it wasn’t the time.’ ‘Today the sadhu is our guest.’ ‘This opportunity will not return.’

‘Sacrifice your body’... Celiya, don’t pass up this chance: don’t leave Truth.’

Then the child took permission from the school master to leave the school. The child said to the master, ‘A sadhu has come to my home; we have been fasting without food and water for six months.’

N: [adds to the story in Celiya’s voice] and my parents are hungry.

G: Yes. [speaking in Celiya’s voice] ‘And I’m hungry, too. Let me go [home].’

‘I will go home.’ Now the child went home; his mother was coming to call him. He asked his mother, ‘What sadhu has come to our home? I know [about this].’ [speaking as the merchant’s wife] ‘Son, how do you know?’ [Celiya] said, ‘The Brahmin of our village told me.’ [His mother] said, ‘The Brahmin of the village lives in the village. [But] we live in the fields.’ ‘How can he know what is happening in our house?’ Then she thought, ‘He must have been listening while standing somewhere.’ ‘Okay, let’s go home.’ When they went home, [the family] worshipped Krishna. I have seen [the image of Krishna they worshipped]. The god is made out of bronze, but [he] looks like he’s made out of gold. All three of them bathed, worshipped God, and bowed before [the image of God]. The merchant took the sword into his hand and said to his child, ‘Bow your head three times. I’m going to kill you.’ [Celiya] said, ‘Alright, kill me. It’s great for me from both sides.’ ‘My fast will be broken and Maharaj will eat. It’s great for me from both sides.’

Then he bowed his head twice. The third time, the sword struck his body and his head fell off. The head fell on one side; the body fell close to the merchant’s wife. It was the heart of a mother. She kept crying and prepared the meat. She put it on a plate and brought it to the Maharaj. He said, ‘This is spoiled. Take it back! It’s useless!’ [The merchant] said, ‘How is it spoiled?’ [speaking as the sadhu] ‘Ask your wife what she did in the kitchen.’

N: She cried [while preparing the meat].

G: She said, ‘I was sad.’ [The merchant] said, ‘Why were you sad?’ She kept pouring her tears into the meat while making it. So it became contaminated. She kept thinking of her son. [speaking as the sadhu] ‘It’s useless. Your son died, and both of you [shall] die.’

‘I don’t care. I don’t want to eat.’ [speaking as the merchant] ‘The child has died; Maharaj is not eating. What a time this is!’

N: It was a test of suffering.

G: The merchant said to his wife, 'We killed our son for Maharaj. Now he isn't eating. We've committed a sin.' 'If Maharaj will eat, we will not suffer the sin. Now don't cry.' 'Don't let your tears fall into the meat. Do you understand?'

N: Then [the merchant and his wife] took the other part of the body to cook.

G: The head. They took the head, the head. The bed [on which the sadhu sat] and the grinder, and stick [used to grind Celiya's head] are still there.

N: So they put the head in that and ground it.

G: [The sadhu] said, 'Both of you should grind the head of the child together.' 'You should do it for one and a half hours.' 'If one tear falls into it, I will not eat it.' 'Grind it in front of me.' So they started grinding [Celiya's head] slowly. It was the head of their child. But [the sadhu] said, 'Grind it quickly! Grind it quickly.' Then they did it fast. They did it fast. They started grinding it fast. Now the merchant's wife understood. The merchant said, 'We have killed our child by our own hands. We will suffer the sin for sure.' 'If Maharaj will not eat, then we'll suffer the sin.' 'But if he'll eat [the meat], we'll not suffer.' 'If you cry, he won't eat it. So don't cry.' [The wife] said, 'Okay. I'll not cry.' Then she became strong and didn't let any tears fall [into the meat]. So she cooked the meat and brought it. The Maharaj said to the merchant, 'You will also eat the flesh of your son.' He said, 'Yes.' [The Maharaj] said to the merchant's wife, 'You will also eat.' She said, 'Yes.' [Maharaj] said, 'Good. Bring the plates. Bring a plate for the Maharaj.' 'Bring one for the merchant; one for his wife; and one more.' They said, 'For whom?' [Maharaj] said, 'For Celiya.' At that moment, the merchant's wife became angry. She began beating her head and chest. She started cursing the Maharaj. [But] the merchant understood. He said, 'Don't curse the Maharaj. Do what he asks. Bring the plate for Celiya.' So she cried and brought the plate for Celiya. She cried hard. Then Maharaj said, 'Go and call Celiya. Call Celiya.' The floor [of their home] was made of clay; the gate was made of clay. Now it turned into a palace. It has been many months since I went there [where the merchant and his wife lived]. She went near the gate and saw the child coming from the school. He was jumping. And the meat, it turned into five dishes.

N: Everybody's work was done; they all got the blessings [of God].

G: Yes. This thing happened two thousand years ago. Now [the place] is locked. That bed, the grinder, the stick are still kept over there [in Kathiyavar]. The doors are transparent, but they're locked. If anybody goes there you can see. If anybody goes there, you can see. When you go there, you'll feel as if your own child has died. You cannot move even a finger. You become [like] paralyzed. The one who conducts the worship [temple priest], only he can enter inside. If people like us were to go inside, we'd be finished.

N: Now, where are people like [the merchant, his wife, and Celiya] in the world?'

G: It's still there!

N: What?

G: It's still there. The bed, grinder; it's all there.

N: Now, where are those kinds of people?

G: Nowhere! No one feeds sadhus. People don't take care of sadhus. They don't offer themselves or their children. [They think] 'to hell with sadhus!'

N: Now, people are like, 'If you're not there [in plain view], I'll steal your *mālā*.' People are like this now.

G: That's right. People will steal [others'] *mālās*.

The Story of King Karan (Karna)

Performer: Gangagiri

Gangagiri (G); Manvendra Singh (M); Antoinette (A)

G: The body must suffer the *karm*, the good and the bad *karm*. The body suffers both. King Karan used to donate fifty kilos of gold everyday and then he used to brush his teeth. The brahmins, sadhus, brahmins, carans, bhats, everyone used to come. He used to donate fifty kilos of gold and then he brushed his teeth. This was what his rule was. Once, five, twenty-five sadhus came [to him]. They all had to eat. They were hungry. [Gangagiri shifts out of the story frame and asks a question] What is this?

M: This is the *prasād* you gave?

G: [to Antoinette] You didn't eat it?

A: I'll eat it later... Can I keep it here for now?

G: No, no. You must eat it.

A: Alright. But not so much. [Antoinette munches on one *laddu* while Gangagiri speaks]

G: Whether a little or a lot, you must eat something. [She switches back to the story frame]

So, the sadhus came and they needed to eat. All of them arrived after the gold was distributed. Then the King told them, 'Today's gold has been distributed already. You should return tomorrow.' So, those sadhus said, 'We don't need gold. We need food.' [The King] said, 'But I don't feed anybody. I never give food to anybody. I only donate gold.' The sadhus went hungry from there. Then the King's time was up, and he died.

So, Dharm-Raj [King of Dharma, but here the meaning is ‘Yamraj’] asked him, ‘Okay, do you want to suffer the sinful or virtuous *karm* first?’ (Gangagiri returns to King Karan’s speech to the sadhus) ‘But I have donated today’s gold already. You should come back later.’ [The sadhus] said, ‘We don’t need gold. We need food.’ [The King] said, ‘I don’t feed anybody.’ So the sadhus went hungry from there. In the course of time, [the King] died. Who died? King Karan. So Dharm-Raj said, ‘Do you want to suffer the virtuous or sinful *karm* first?’ [The King] said, ‘I want to suffer the virtuous and the sinful both together.’ So, a palace of gold and diamonds was made, and he was given this to live in. But there was nothing to eat. The King said, ‘There’s nothing to eat!’ [Yamraj] said, ‘Have you ever fed anybody? You have donated gold. So you got a palace of gold to live in.’ ‘But, have you ever fed anybody?’ [The King] said, ‘No.’ By that time, [the King’s] body still wasn’t burned [for cremation]. He said [to Yamraj], ‘Give me a leave of twenty days. I’ll go back.’ Then he returned [to his body]. And, within fifteen to twenty days, he fed many sadhus and brahmins.

A: (repeating) He fed many [sadhus and brahmins].

G: (speaking to Antoinette who is writing Gangagiri’s story in a notebook). Therefore, like you are writing [my words] here [in a book], the *karm* is being written there [in the book that sits in God’s “office.”]

The Stores of Suganmal and Prahlad

Performer: Gangagiri

Gangagiri (G); Manvendra Singh (M); and Antoinette (A)

G: If you believe, [God] walks along with [you] If you believe in him [God]; [if] you devote [yourself] to him, then [God] walks with [you]. There was a devotee by the name of Suganmal. Hansketu was the king. This is a very old story. This is a very old story. [Hansketu] said, ‘Idiot, what do you know?’ [Suganmal] said, ‘nothing.’ [Hansketu] said, ‘for whom do you do this mala?’ [Suganmal] said, ‘for God.’ [Hansketu] said ‘Where is your God?’ [Suganmal] said, ‘God is in every single place.’ [Hansketu] said, ‘Okay. I will fill a pot with oil and boil it’; you have to go inside [it] and come out. Go!’ If your God is true, then prove it.’ [Suganmal] thought, ‘I have to die anyways; I will die after some time anyways. So, I’ll die in the pot of oil.’ The oil was boiling, making the sound, ‘khal, khal,’ He removed his clothes and jumped inside [the pot of oil]. [But] the oil became cold. He took a bath and came out [from the pot of oil] The oil was boiling, but he found it cold. The wood was burning. The oil was boiling in the pot, but he found it cold.

[Manvendra interjects here after Gangagiri pauses]: Look, the story of Prahlad is similar.

G: What?

M: The devotee, Prahlad.

G: Yes, Yes, Prahlad.

M: That story, too, is the same.

G: It has [the same] feeling [as the Sughanmal story].

Prahlad, so, [he] was the son of Hiranakash. Hiranakash was the king.

M: (softly) That's true.

G: [Hiranakash] was a sovereign king. He was the king of the earth. He did the penance of Brahmaji and asked for a boon. He was the sovereign [following word inaudible] king, the king of the whole earth. So, [Hiranakash] used to say, 'Who is God?' 'I am God.' Hiranakash, say, Hiranakash! 'Don't say [the name of] Lord Ram.' Say, Hiranakash.' So, he taught everyone like this. [speaking as Hiranakash] 'Say my name, God is nothing.' So, another boy and Prahlad used to keep a vigil in the night. [Prahlad said] 'Whoever in the night takes the name of Ram, then grind those idiots in the flourmill.

M: Uh huh.

G: So, there was a potter woman by the name of Sariya and her husband, Maknoji. They were devotees of God. They used to make the pots. Those who make the pots are [called] potters. A cat lived in their house. She kept her kittens in an unfired pot.

All the pots were made. So, the potters fired them in the stove [and they] kept saying, 'Ram Ram.' They didn't realize those poor kittens were in the pots. They forgot. They didn't know. Afterwards, the fire was started. The cat went outside and returned [in the house]. So, she didn't find her kittens, She started crying, 'meow, meow.' [The potters] said, 'the cat is crying, where are the kittens?' 'In the pots?' 'Where are the pots?' 'In the stove!' 'Now, the kittens will die.' 'It will be a terrible sin!' They didn't have any children. [The potters] said, 'In the last birth we committed a sin, and have no children.' 'Now these kittens will die, and it will be a big sin [on us].' [Gangagiri asks] This sin is for what? For [injuring] squirrels, squirrels and cats. If you break [even] one hair of them, you have to make [an image of them] in gold and offer in the temple.

M: That's true.

G: It's a great sin. Now, [The potters said], 'What to do?' The stove was lit. Both of them, husband and wife, took a *mālā* [and] went to the stove. They began to remember [the name of] Ram. Prahlad and the other, the other boy came. [Prahlad] said, 'what are you doing?' [The potters] said, 'We're saying, Ram Ram.' [Prahlad] said, 'Don't say Ram! 'Say my father's name.' Prahlad is saying this [to the potters]. [The potters] said, 'Your father's [name] won't work.' ' [inaudible] won't work.' 'Only Ram's [name] will work.' [Prahlad said], '[undecipherable] can do anything!' [The potters] said, 'The kittens are in the stove.' [Prahlad said], 'You won't get them back!' [The potters said], 'They won't die.' [Prahlad] didn't know. Did he know? He didn't know [that the kittens would live]. [Because] It was [the potters'] faith. Faith is a big thing. So, the stove was opened at its [right] time. But, it was cold. [The potters] said it was time [to open the stove].

Prahlad came. He opened the stove. All the pots were fired; [and] the cat's kittens, right, that cat's kittens were playing [in the pot]. Right? All this is the faith of God, which should be there. Afterwards, Prahlad was saying, 'My father is a liar; Ram is the truth.' 'Take the name of Ram.' [Prahlad] began to tell the people he met, 'My father is a liar; Ram is the truth.' 'Take the name of Ram.' So, he used to take the name of Ram. It happened between the father and son [they fought each other].

M: That's true.

G: [Hiranyakash] said, 'He is not my son; kill him! Finish [him]!' Right? So, they took [Prahlad] on top of a mountain [and] pushed him [off]. They pushed him off, but he didn't get hurt.

M: That's absolutely true.

G: Okay. Hiranyakash had a sister. Holka was her name.

M: Holka.

G: She did the penance of Brahmaji.

M: Holka.

G: Holka. She did the penance of Brahmaji. So, she requested a boon from Brahmaji. [Holka] said, 'I, 'once in a whole year, I shall take a bath of fire and not burn.' Brahmaji gave [her] the boon. She, 'I shall take a bath of fire.' She used to light the fire and sit. She didn't burn. That day came. Since then, it is Holi [the festival Holi is celebrated].

M: Uh huh.

G: So, Hiranyakash said to his sister, 'Prahlad doesn't listen [to me].' 'He doesn't accept what I say.' 'You don't burn [in the fire].' 'You take him in your lap and sit.' 'He will burn.' Okay. [Holka] was his aunty.

M: Yes.

G: She took her nephew in her lap and sat [down]. So, she burned. Nothing happened to Prahlad. Absolutely nothing. God's name is like this. God's name is like this. Even then [Prahlad] didn't die. Even his sister who used to burn, burned! They wanted to burn [Prahlad], but he didn't burn... Then, Hiranyakash became worried. His sister burned. [But] nothing happened to Prahlad, so what could he do? He had a pillar of iron heated. Then, [Hiranyakash] started to say, 'if Ram is the truth, then sit on the pillar.' He said this to Prahlad. He was only a child. A red ant started climbing the pillar. [Hiranyakash] saw it. It appeared to him.

M: And, no one else could see [the red ant].

G: Yes. No one else could see. [The pillar] was cold. It was very cold. Then, [Hiranyakash] says, ‘Call your Ram.’ He didn’t burn, Prahlad. Even then his father said, ‘Call your Ram.’ ‘Where is your Ram?’ ‘In you, in me, in everything, wherever you look, God is there.’ Hiranyakash had a boon. He did penance. He said to Brahma, ‘Neither by man, nor by beast,’ ‘shall I die.’ ‘Neither in the night, nor in the day shall I die.’
M: ‘Neither by hand nor by weapon.’

G: Yes. ‘Neither by iron, nor by wood,’ ‘Shall I die.’ ‘I shall neither die in [a] house, nor outside.’ He asked for this boon. So God, [pointing to her lower body] From here God was a man, [pointing to her upper body] and From here a lion. The pillar broke. God’s incarnation appeared. [pointing to her lower body] From here [God] had the body of a man. [pointing to her upper body] From here, a lion. Then [God] grabbed [Hiranyakash]. [speaks as Hiranyakash] ‘Neither on land, nor on water’ ‘shall I die.’ [God] placed him on his lap. Then he said, ‘Who am I?’ [Hiranyakash] said, ‘Neither man nor lion.’ ‘So, on what are you [sitting]?’ ‘On water or on land?’ [speaking as Hiranyakash], ‘I am neither on water nor land.’ [speaking in Hiranyakash’s voice], ‘Neither by iron nor by wood shall I die.’ [God’s] nails were like a sword. [speaking in God’s voice], ‘What weapon is this?’ [in Hiranyakash’s voice], ‘Neither iron nor wood.’ Then, mercy came to Prahlad. He said, ‘Don’t kill my father.’ [speaking in God’s voice], ‘But, how much suffering did he give you?’ [speaking as Prahlad], ‘He’s my father!’ So, [speaking as God] ‘His end, his death, has come. ‘Let me finish him. I shall finish him,’ [God] said. God is like this. God [*bhagvān*] depends on his devotees.

M: God depends on his devotees.

G: God depends on his devotees.

The Story of Sadhus Singing Crores of Bhajans **Performer: Gangagiri**

The following narrative is told by Gangagiri. It is about two sadhus who were discovered in a cave by government workers who were building a road in a Rajasthan village in the early twentieth century. Gangagiri’s story itself suggests that the sadhus had been living in the cave for more than three world-eras (*yūgas*), that is, for a period of approximately three-million years.

Gangagiri [GG]: King Mordhvaj’s reign occurred before that of Ramchandraji [Lord Ram, who is one of the central characters of the *Rāmāyan* epic, and who is thought to have ruled the kingdom of Ayodhya in the *Treta Yūg*, or second world-era]. Lord Ram came afterwards. There were some laborers working in Limva [a village in south Rajasthan, near Banswara district] and [while digging the road] found the cave of [two] sadhus. They dug the cave this much [makes a sign with her hands indicating distance] and [saw] a holy flame [*jot*] burning bright. [Near the flame] sat two sadhus. Those sadhus were sitting next to each other...they had scary faces and their eyes were closed. They didn’t open their eyes. So, when the

laborers dug the cave, the sadhus asked, “Is it the reign of Mordhvaj or that of Ramchandra?”... Those sadhus were waiting for the reign of Ram to come. That’s why they were asking, “Is it Mordhvaj’s *rāj* [rule] or Ram’s *rāj*?” Seeing this, the laborers immediately ran from there. They went to their ‘officer’ and told him what had happened. [They said]: “We dug the cave and saw these sadhus with scary faces.” The officer wearing long boots came [to see the sadhus] for himself. The sadhus’ voices were so loud; they kept asking, “Is it the reign of Mordhvaj or of Ram?” [The officer replied]: “It is the reign of the one’s who wear the hats; it’s the reign of Congress” [meaning that it is the fourth and last world-age, the *Kali Yūg*]. So, those sadhus said, “Okay; now run from here, or you’ll be finished.” The laborers made the road from the other side [of the cave], and closed the cave of those sadhus. They made the road from somewhere else. This happened during my lifetime, when I was not too old.

[Audience member]: Those sadhus were ancient.

GG: Those sadhus became ancient. They sat in the cave during Mordhvaj’s time and sang *bhajans*. While singing *bhajans*, the time just passed. Millions [*crores*] of years were spent [by the sadhus] singing *bhajans*. *Bhajan* singing is such a [powerful] thing. There are many qualities in the name of God... Never leave the name of God. Do every [kind of] work [*kām*]—farm, start a business, do anything. But keep singing the name [of God].

APPENDIX D

Karma Bai narrative and *bhajan* Performance**Performer: Shiv Puri****July 18th 2005****Ghora Ghati village, Munchaleshwar Temple****Bhajan title: “Karma Bai’s *kitchari*****SP (Shiv Puri); A (Antoinette)***Story:*

SP: There was a girl from the Jat [farming] community. Her name was Karma Bai. Her father used to go to the temple to offer food to God. She knew this. She knew that, “my father goes everyday to offer food to God. So, God must eat directly in front of him.” What did that girl think? “God must eat directly in front of him.” One day Karma Bai’s father went as a guest to another village. He said, “Feed God today.” That girl ground the flour very fine; then she added ghee [clarified butter], sugar; and then she went [to the temple] to offer God the food. She thought to herself, “How will God eat?” Karma Bai hung a curtain. “I’ll hang a curtain and God will eat.” But how will God eat? The image was a stone; it doesn’t eat. She Karma Bai didn’t know this. She only knew that “my father feeds God everyday.” It was like this. Then, on the day she went to offer the food, God didn’t eat. She said, “God, please eat! I have a lot of work to do [back home]. The cows and buffaloes have not eaten.” Do you understand what I’m saying?

A: Yes, very much.

SP: “Look, I have a lot of work to do. I have to feed the cows; I have to feed the buffaloes.”

A: Uh huh.

SP: “I have to go. So, God, please eat!” Then Karma Bai remembered, “My father said, ‘hang a curtain [before the Lord].’” But she left that curtain at home. So, what did that girl do? She tore her own skirt and made a curtain so that God would eat. She took a small part of her skirt, you know the part that women wear over their faces? She took that part [of her skirt], tore it off, and made a curtain so that God would eat. “Eat God!” But God wouldn’t eat. So, what did that girl say? She spoke like this: “I’ll beat you! I’ll beat you.” She realized that at her home the cows, buffaloes, and goats are dying from hunger. “All the animals are hungry. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Lord. Everyone else is starving, and you won’t even eat. I’m going to take this stick lying here and beat you with it. I will shatter your *mūrti* into pieces!” Karma Bai spoke like this because God wouldn’t eat. God came, and well, he had to eat, right? There is a *bhajan* about this. Let me remember the *bhajan* for a moment. This is Karma Bai’s *bhajan*.

A: What’s the name of the *bhajan*?

SP: Karma Bai's sweet dishes

Bhajan:

Today I've made a sweet dish of rice;
 Today I've made a sweet dish of wheat;
 Today I've made a sweet dish of corn;
 I've made different sweet dishes and have sent them with my father for *bhagvān*.

Story:

SP: Karma Bai's father used to go to feed God everyday.

A: Karma Bai's?

SP: Yes. Karma Bai was a little girl; she made everything and gave it. She was just a little girl. Her father used to go to feed God in the temple. It was a temple like [my temple]. He went in a temple like [this one] to feed God. So, while her father was gone, Karma Bai thought:

Bhajan:

Maybe God doesn't like to eat wheat everyday?
 So, today, I've made different sweet dishes:
 I've made a sweet dish of corn;
 I've made a sweet dish of millet.
 I cooked the rice separately.
 I didn't add salt [to the food].
 Only ghee, sugar, and milk;
 Then I boiled all the food.

I only made [the food] like this;
 I added ghee, sugar, and milk.
 Then I boiled it.
 I didn't add salt.
 I added only ghee, sugar, and milk.
 Then I boiled it.

Story

SP: Karma Bai's father went [to the temple] to feed God. [Her father] ate the food, then returned home. But that girl [Karma Bai] believed that God eats the food. One day her father was called as a guest to another village. He went to visit a friend and said to Karma Bai, "You feed Kana [Kṛṣṇa]." She was alone in the house. There were cows, buffaloes, animals. She left them and made the food. Then she went to the temple to bring God the food.

A: Okay.

SP: Her father said, “How shall you feed God? Apply the curtain [*pardā*].” She that girl left the curtain home. Now she made the food and went to feed God.

Bhajan:

The sweet dishes of Karma Bai;
The sweet dishes of Karma Bai.

Karma Bai made a sweet dish of wheat, ghee, and sugar from her own hands.
Karma Bai made a sweet dish of wheat, ghee, and sugar from her own hands.

She made different kinds of sweet dishes.
She made different kinds of sweet dishes.

The father went to another village.
“Karma Bai, make the sweet dishes and take them to the temple.”

Karma Bai made the sweet dishes and brought them to the temple.
Karma made the sweet dishes and brought them to the temple.
“Eat my dark-skinned Lord.”
“Eat my dark-skinned Lord.”

The daughter [Karma Bai] was a Jat.
“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you, Lord.”
“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you, Lord.”

The father went to another village.
The father went to another village.

She didn’t know when he would return.
She didn’t know when he would return.

[Karma Bai]:
“My father trusts me, so Shyam [Kṛṣṇa] must be very hungry.”
“My father trusts me, so Shyam must be very hungry.”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord.”
“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord.”
“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord.”
“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“I made these sweet dishes with my heart and brought them.”

“I made these sweet dishes with my heart and brought them.”

“If something is missing [in the food], then tell me, O Shyam.”

“If something is missing [in the food], then tell me, O Shyam.”

“Now eat my Lord Shyam.”

“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

Karma Bai thought,

“Lord, what’s the matter?”

“Are you feeling shy about eating in front of everyone?”

“Lord what’s the matter?”

“Are you feeling shy about eating in front of everyone?”

“What did my father say?”

‘You have to hang a curtain.’

“O Shyam, I forgot that curtain.”

“O Shyam, I forgot that curtain.”

“My father told me to hang a curtain.”

But I forgot it.”

Karma Bai unfolded [a portion of] her sari and opened it.

Karma Bai unfolded [a portion of] her sari and opened it.

She turned her sari inside-out;

She turned her sari inside-out;

She cut off a small piece;

She cut off a small piece;

Then she made a curtain.

Then she made a curtain.

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord Shyam.”

“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord Shyam.”

“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“If you don’t eat Lord, my father will think you’ve died of hunger.”

“If you don’t eat Lord, my father will think you’ve died of hunger.”

“Who knows when my father will return from the village.”

“Who knows when my father will return from the village.”

“If you don’t eat Lord, my father will think you’ve died of hunger.”

“If you don’t eat Lord, my father will think you’ve died of hunger.”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord Shyam.”

“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“I cleaned the grains;”

“I cooked the dishes.”

“I cleaned the grains;”

“I cooked the dishes.”

“I put ghee in the food.”

“I put ghee in the food.”

“Then I put sugar cane in it.”

“I put ghee in the food;”

“Then I put sugar cane in it.”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord Shyam.”

“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

From behind the curtain, Karma Bai watches if Kana eats or not.

From behind the curtain, Karma Bai watches if Kana eats or not.

Kana doesn’t eat.

Kana doesn’t eat.

When God didn’t eat, Karma Bai became angry.

When God didn’t eat, Karma Bai became angry.

She took the stick and went to beat God.

She took the stick and went to beat God.

When God didn’t eat, Karma Bai became angry.

When God didn’t eat, Karma Bai became angry.

She took the stick and went to beat God.

She took the stick and went to beat God.

[Karma Bai says]:

“At home the cows are dying of hunger”;

“The buffaloes are dying of hunger.”

“At home the cows are dying of hunger”;

“The buffaloes are dying of hunger.”

“And you’re not eating!”

“What kind of Lord are you that you show no mercy?”

“Eat my dark-skinned Lord Shyam.”

“Your Jat’s daughter is feeding you.”

“My father thinks you’re hungry.”

“My father thinks you’re hungry.”

“My father has gone to the village.”

“Who knows when he’ll return home.”

“My father has gone to the village.”

“Who knows when he’ll return home.”

“My father thinks you’re hungry.”

“My father thinks you’re hungry.”

“He’s gone to the village.”

“Who knows when he’ll return home.”

End of performance

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