



## “By the Sweetness of the Tongue”

### Duty, Destiny, and Devotion in the Oral Life Narratives of Female *Sādhvis* in Rajasthan

This essay examines the narrative themes that Rajasthani, female Hindu *sādhvis*, or renunciators, emphasize in the construction of their personal narratives and analyzes the meanings they attribute to those themes in the interpretation of their lives as *sādhvis*. Embedded in the female *sādhvis*' narratives are three life story themes: duty (*kartavya*), destiny (*bhāgya*), and devotion (*bhakti*). Through the oral performance of these themes, the *sādhvis* express a gendered discourse on female agency in renunciation. At the same time, they promote a perception of difference, neutralize widespread societal views of female asceticism as transgressive, and validate their identity as female *sādhvis* in what is seen to be a male-dominated tradition of renunciation. While Rajasthani female *sādhvis* invoke the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion to resist the notion of personal agency in their becoming *sādhvis* (that is, to deny they have chosen asceticism), these narrative strategies function as rhetorical disclaimers with which these *sādhvis* not only exert (female) agency, but also create an alternative (female) tradition of devotional asceticism to the more dominant (male) tradition of Brahmanical asceticism by drawing on models of regional female *bhakti* saints as well as a more generalized *bhakti* discourse.

KEYWORDS: *sādhvis*—female Hindu asceticism—Rajasthani  
folklore—oral life stories—narrative performance

THE scholarship on Hindu renunciation mostly suggests that *sannyāsa*, a radical form of Indian asceticism, requires both male and female initiates to “die” to their past socio-religious lives and personal, gendered experiences (cf. DUMONT 1960; HEESTERMAN 1988; OLIVELLE 1975, 1992; GROSS 2001). Dead to, or at the very least detached from, their past identities and/or sense of self, renunciators, who seemingly exist on the margins of society, presumably have no life story to tell. And to share such narratives, as some scholars have intimated, might breach an implicit and supposedly shared code of renunciator ethics (cf. KHANDELWAL, HAUSNER, and GOLD 2006, 23).<sup>1</sup> However, the male and female renunciators, or *sādhus*, with whom I worked in the north Indian state of Rajasthan, though they have formally renounced family, work, and the religio-social obligations that once defined and determined the contours of their everyday worlds, reflect on and discuss at length their lives both before and after initiation. These *sādhus* tell their life stories with a mixture of verve and sensitivity as a strategy of self-representation.

The questions scholars of religion must ask are: what are the contexts in which it is appropriate for *sādhus* to perform their life stories, and how are *sādhus*’ narratives shaped by performance contexts? Many of the female *sādhus* I met spoke about their personal experiences in the context of singing *bhajans*, telling popular stories about the lives of legendary *bhakti* poet-saints (*bhaktas*), notably the Rajasthani female devotee Mira Bai, or reciting sacred texts like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and/or the sixteenth-century Hindi vernacular of the *Rāmāyana* epic, Tulsidas’ *Rāmcaritmānas*. Moreover, the *sādhus*’ life stories were frequently embedded in conversational contexts. Everyday “talk” between female *sādhus* and their devotees served as the springboard from which they narrated the events of their lives. A conversation about the soaring prices of ghee, the failing health of a family member; train travel, food preparation, the weather, and so forth often triggered associations and/or memories for the female *sādhus*, and thus such contexts provide renunciators occasions for personal storytelling. In contexts where two or more of the *sādhus* I worked with were present, if one recounted her life others were more likely to do the same. Depending on the setting and the topic of the conversation, these storytelling events occasionally transformed into lively and entertaining competitions between *sādhus*, with each *sādhu* performing her life in a manner that upstaged the performance of another *sādhu*.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while Rajasthani female (and male) *sādhus* tell their life stories, I empha-

size that they do so not with the intention of giving me, the researcher, or their disciples/devotees, their “life story,” but rather for illustrating specific points (for example, the power of *bhakti*) and, most importantly, for creating relationships with their spiritual constituency.<sup>3</sup> The Rajasthani *sādhus*’ life story performances, like their devotional song (*bhajan*), popular religious story (*kahānī*), and sacred text (*pāṭha*) performances, constitute an important genre in what I characterize as their “rhetoric of renunciation,” through which they construct renunciatory identity and practice. Due to space limitations, in this essay I focus on the personal narratives of Rajasthani female *sādhus*.<sup>4</sup>

PERFORMING ASCETICISM THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE:  
A VIGNETTE OF ONE FEMALE SĀDHU

One afternoon, while sitting in the courtyard of her hermitage, Gangagiri Maharaj, a ninety-three-year-old female *sādhū*, described an occasion in which she got on a bus, and there was no seat available.<sup>5</sup> According to her account, weary from a day’s traveling in the Kumbh Melā festival,<sup>6</sup> and barely enduring the weight of a heavy bag of cloth 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 *sādhus*], 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 *sādhū*’s status, power, and authority, as carried by the ochre-colored *sādhū* garb (*bhagvā*). Whether the story reflects what Gangagiri actually said to the policemen or what she wished she had said to them is less relevant to this examination than it is as an indication of her self-representation. What is significant in this narrative representation of her life is Gangagiri’s use of specific symbols like the ochre cloth to get what she wants: a seat on an overcrowded bus. In this way, the story expresses an underlying cultural value that Gangagiri assumes *sādhus*, policemen, and others in Indian society share.

If, as several scholars have argued (LAWLESS 1988, 1993; ETTER-LEWIS 1991; ABU-LUGHOD 1993; YAMANE 2000; FLUECKIGER 2006; and PRASAD 2007), oral narratives reflect and constitute “a shared understanding of the world” (LAWLESS 1988, 67; cf. RAHEJA 2003) and represent “a primary linguistic vehicle” by which individuals make their everyday religious, social, and cultural worlds meaningful (YAMANE 2000, 183), then it behooves us to ask what themes female *sādhus*’ personal narratives illuminate in the expression and interpretation of their own religious and gendered experiences. My inquiry stems from the observation that Rajasthani female *sādhus*, by virtue of their prestigious and public religious position as renunciators, occupy an ambiguous social status. Meena KHANDELWAL (2004)

concur that in Indian society renunciation and womanhood signify mutually exclusive categories. Khandelwal explains: “[renunciation] is a tradition that was created by and for elite [Brahmin] men” (5). Consequently, women who pursue renunciation as an alternative path, regardless of their age, caste, and class status, are perceived as “anomalies”; and while, as Khandelwal further elucidates, these women “are respected by ordinary and even conservative people as sources of both spiritual power and everyday morality,” female *sādhvis* are more often suspected than are male *sādhvis* for their transgression of gender norms (KHANDELWAL 2004, 6). In this vein, Khandelwal rightly argues that female *sādhvis* “transgress social norms [...] but construct themselves as exceptions” (21).

Although a few religious and anthropological studies on renunciation in South Asia have demonstrated the complexities of male and female *sādhvis*’ everyday worlds by describing the contents of their life stories (cf. KHANDELWAL, HAUSNER, and GOLD 2006; KHANDELWAL 1997 and 2004; GROSS 2001; MILLER and WERTZ 1996), these studies do not consider the life story as what folklorist Elaine Lawless calls an “alternative narrative strateg[y]” in an individual’s narrative self-representations (LAWLESS 1988). Similarly, rarely do scholars ask how *sādhvis* construct their narratives in gendered ways and how those constructions communicate gendered “narrative strategies” (LAWLESS 1988, 66–67; cf. PRASAD 2004, 170) in the negotiation of renunciant status, power, and authority in Indian society. Personal narrative performance, I suggest, enables the female *sādhvis* I worked with to create and express devotion to God in much the same way that they do through their other rhetorical practices. Likewise, telling their own stories functions as an occasion in which female *sādhvis* testify to the ways in which the divine acts in their everyday worlds—they attribute their life trajectories to God (and/or to the Goddess). Personal storytelling, therefore, not only allows female *sādhvis* to remember and thus to connect with God, but it also serves as a *bhakti* testimonial to God’s power and presence in their lives. The Rajasthani female *sādhvis*’ personal narratives represent, as Lawless contends for the female Pentecostal preachers with whom she worked, “spiritual” life stories (LAWLESS 1988, 60).

In what follows, I discuss how the oral performance of personal narratives provides a strategy through which Rajasthani female *sādhvis* represent themselves not just as exceptions to gender norms, but also as *sādhvis* who experience agency and authority in a gendered way. Based on nearly two years of fieldwork conducted in several districts of Mewar, south Rajasthan<sup>7</sup> with twenty-two female *sādhvis* who were initiated either in the Dashanami or the Nath renunciant orders,<sup>8</sup> this essay examines the themes that these *sādhvis* emphasize in the construction of their personal narratives and analyzes the meanings they attribute to those narrative themes in the interpretation of their lives as *sādhvis*. Embedded in the female *sādhvis*’ personal narratives are three shared themes: duty (*kartavya*), destiny (*bhāgya*), and devotion (*bhakti*). Through performance of these themes the *sādhvis* communicate a gendered discourse on female agency in the tradition of renunciation. At the same time, they also promote a perception of difference; neutralize widespread societal views of their ascetic lives as transgressive; and validate their own renunciant

identity. While Rajasthani female *sādhus* invoke the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion to resist the notion of personal agency in their becoming *sādhus* (that is, to deny they have *chosen* their path of asceticism), these narrative strategies function as rhetorical “disclaimers of intent” (LAWLESS 1988) with which these *sādhus* not only assert (female) agency, but also create an alternative (female) tradition of devotional asceticism to the more dominant (male) tradition of Brahmanical asceticism by drawing on regional models of female devotionalism as well as a more generalized *bhakti* discourse. Through analysis of these interrelated themes, we understand some of the ways in which the Rajasthani female *sādhus* I worked with imagine and articulate their spiritual authority and agency in an institution in which they are clearly minorities.<sup>9</sup>

“DOING GOD’S WORK”: DUTY (*KARTAVYA*)

In their personal narratives, the theme of duty, or *kartavya*, appeared consistently and provided a conceptual frame out of which many Rajasthani female *sādhus* weaved the content and structure of their stories. Almost all of the female *sādhus* understood *kartavya* to mean their duty and responsibility to God (*bhagvān*) and/or to the Goddess (*devī*), with whom they had developed an intensely personal relationship or “connection [*yog; sambandh*]” since their childhood. Their perceived connection with the divine was not only the most significant relationship in these women’s lives, but it also singularly determined how they lived as *sādhus*.

To take as an example, Shiv Puri carefully described her intimate relationship with God and with the Goddess and their direct influence over her life, from the everyday “business” decisions she makes about running the ashram (*dharmaśāla*) to the “spiritual” decisions she makes about her religious practices (*sādhanā*). Shiv Puri is a *sādhu* 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. For six months out of the year, she stays at her ashram and temple, and the rest of the time she travels to Bombay, visiting devotees and collecting donations for her growing 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 explained, as that of a guru and her disciples, implying it is not one of mother/son. As the resident *pujārī* and *pujārini*, Shankar and his wife perform the worship rituals to the different deities in the temple, including rituals to the goddess Kālī Mā, and manage the temple grounds in Shiv Puri’s absence. In May 2005, right before the monsoon season, both Shiv Puri and Shankar were overseeing the construction of another, larger ashram on her temple property, the purpose of which was to accommodate more guests at the site. One afternoon that summer, while holding her youngest “disciple,” or granddaughter, in her lap, Shiv Puri discussed at length her relationship with both God and the Goddess as one of duty. On his breaks from construction work, Shankar would stop by and listen to his guru’s telling of her life story.

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

SP [Shiv Puri]: How?

A: In maintaining the ashram.

SP: Actually, it's like this: Bholenāth [lit., "innocent Lord;" a regional form of the god Shiva that is popular in Rajasthan] and Dūrgā Māī [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.... Before I was a *sādhu*, I lived as a householder. I used to see so many *sants* [lit., "good people"] and *sādhus* that whenever they would visit [my home] I thought [that] I am seeing God [in seeing their form]. When I became a *sādhu*, I also traveled a lot in India; I traveled a lot with *sādhus*, but I didn't see God anymore [in their form].... I neither have the interest [*rūcī*] to live amongst other *sādhus*, 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.... Therefore, my only interest is to do God's work, and [God] will do the rest.<sup>10</sup>

This passage implicitly illustrates the notion of *kartavya* as a determinative force in Shiv Puri's religious life through her 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Māī order 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 renunciatory life, carefully constructing her religious and/or social actions as an obligatory part of what she perceives to be a mutually dependent (*āpas men; paraspar*) relationship with both God and the Goddess.<sup>12</sup> In this framework, Shiv Puri's every action and every decision is singularly 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 female *sādhus* referred 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 told me while we sat in the ashram of her guru, whom she was visiting for the upcoming religious holiday of Guru Pūrṇimā,<sup>13</sup> that "we *sādhus* are the beggars of God

[*bhagvān ke bhikārī*], and our duty [*kartavya*] is to serve you as a form of God.” For the female *sādhus*, 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 Tulsigiri,<sup>14</sup> explained to me, “love is what God is.” These modes of religiosity are not only constitutive of the female *sādhus*’ duty par excellence, but also qualify as different ways of doing “God’s work,” who, as they told me, exists in everything and in everyone (*sab ke andar hai bhagvān*).<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps most significant to this analysis of the narrative theme of *kartavya* is that the female *sādhus*’ duty to God not only stems from their being his devotees, but also from their being chosen by God to become *sādhus* in this birth, for the sole purpose of serving him (or the Goddess) in that capacity. In her study of Pentecostal women preachers of Missouri, Elaine LAWLESS observes that these women’s “spiritual life stories”<sup>16</sup> 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 (1988, 76–80). In the *sādhus*’ personal narratives, as well, we find the use of a similar “narrative strategy.” Shiv Puri’s statement above in the context of, “God has directly released me from this ocean of existence and made me happier. So, I have to do his work,” indicates her perception that her religious life as a *sādhū* represents God’s decision, not her own, with which she is clearly, as she states, “happier” as a result. Likewise, Shiv Puri suggests that, though chosen by God, she, too, has to make a disciplined effort to live the life that God has decided for 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 the female *sādhū* I worked with, a renunciant life constitutes the actualization of a divine directive. Additionally, not unlike the meanings that the women preachers with whom Lawless worked attributed to their public religious position of authority, the extent to which the *sādhū* succeed in their path itself serves as ever-present proof of God’s power over their lives (LAWLESS 1988, 76).<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, the female *sādhū* exert agency by taking 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 society, the female *sādhū*’ agency is carefully couched in terms of being the unintentional result of a divine source. Interpreting their lives in this way allows them 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. To this extent, the female *sādhū*’ emphasis on duty functions as a narrative strategy by which they deny or disclaim personal intention in their becoming *sādhū*.<sup>18</sup> By disclaiming individual agency the *sādhū* actually assert agency as female ascetics, as this rhetorical strategy allows them to work within normative androcentric frameworks of femininity. But how did the *sādhū* know they were chosen by God? What were the signs that led them to such an interpretation of their lives?

“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 *sādhū* I talked to interpreted 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 (*dīkṣā*) into renunciation as the result of destiny or fate (*kismet*). Along with this, the everyday realities of existence like caste (*jātī*), class status, disease and/or health, the type of food eaten on a specific day, and so forth were illustrative to the female *sādhūs* of the ripening of their *bhāgya*. Included in this framework was my own relationship with the female *sādhūs*, who addressed me either as their sister, friend, or disciple, and regularly told me that my meeting *sādhūs* in India happened “because it was written in my destiny.”

An example of the way the female *sādhūs* understood their asceticism as the result of destiny is the personal narrative of Gangagiri, who shared many stories about her experiences of meeting her guru, Gauri Giriji, in Kashi.<sup>19</sup> On the day that Gangagiri narrated the story of how she first met her guru, a young, male Rajput devotee was also present. In her words:

GG [Gangagiri]: My guru was at the Sri Mahant Akhara [place of assembly for Dashanami *sādhūs*] in Kashi. He gave me *dīkṣā* [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 *akhara* [ascetic order] for forty years.

[Male devotee]: He gave you *dīkṣā* [initiation]?

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.

[Male devotee]: Gauri Giriji?

A: Okay, 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 Chittoor at the Kālī Mātā temple [a Kālī temple located within the Chittoorgarh 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 [ca. 1884–1930; the great grandfather of Udaipur’s current Maharana, Arvind Singh].... It’s been many years.

[Male devotee]: How many years have passed since then? Sixty, seventy?

GG: Yes. It was during the time of Fateh Singh. He stayed [at the Kālī Mātā temple] for twenty years, and then left [for Kashi]. He knew the language of this place [that is, Rajasthan].

[Male devotee]: 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.

[Male devotee]: 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* [that is to say, an exogamous subdivision of a caste group]? Are you a Goswami [which is, actually, Gangagiri’s *gotra*]? Did you make the *darśan* [a sacred viewing] 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<sup>20</sup> 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 *akhara*] to bring bread.... It’s a small place, our *akhara*. 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 [that is, took over the *akhara*]. He used to care for that small place; he used to come to the *akhara* 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 [that is, some *sādhus* she had seen at the temple where she originally heard her guru’s voice] told me, “He’s our very old *mahant* [that is, institutional head of the ashram]. Go with him [to the *akhara*].”... I thought if he walks ahead of me, I’ll go in another gully and leave. But he made me walk first. He said, “You go first.” I asked myself, “Is this destiny? What’s happening to me?”

[Male devotee]: 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 had narrated this story about Gauri Giriji, Gangagiri had mentioned a number of times that she had “found” her guru in Kashi “because of 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 one phrases the construction, the sentence can convey either the idea of agency, as in the speaker intended to meet someone, or it can convey passivity, that the encounter happened “by accident” or “by chance.” In this case, a correct translation for *milnā* would also be “to find,” as in “to come upon by chance.”<sup>21</sup> Gangagiri’s wording of the sentence communicates the latter sense of the term—her encounter with the guru was “by chance,” an encounter she had not intentionally planned. In her narrative,

too, she specifically interprets her experience of meeting Gauri Giriji as one of chance, emphasizing the narrative theme of destiny (*bhāgya*) at three different points and telling her audience 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 did she not know she would find her guru in Kashi, but she also did not know that she would “come to wear the ochre robes,” or become a *sādhvī*, by going to Kashi; everything that happened to her there was unplanned. Once she arrived in Kashi, Gauri Giriji, as Gangagiri tells the story, seemed 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 *sādhvī*. In the end, however, Gangagiri becomes Gauri Giri’s disciple and takes renunciation, because it was 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 female *sādhvīs* told me, by God’s attendant, the goddess Vidhātā Mātā, in a book that is kept, as the *sādhvīs* say, “in God’s office [*daftar*].” According to the *sādhvīs*, at the time of our death God “reads [*bāncḥnā*]” what has been written in the book and, therewith, pronounces our fate, which cannot be changed. Of course, in their descriptions of *bhāgya* the *sādhvīs* emphasized 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 (our *karm*) affects and thus plots the course of a future birth.

Another female *sādhvī*, Mayanath, who runs a popular Bholenāth temple with an adjoining ashram approximately twenty-five kilometers outside of Udaipur city, narrated a local idiom that effectively highlights the impact 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.”<sup>22</sup> Gangagiri also gave me an elaborate explication of how she perceives the interface between *bhāgya* and *karm*. In her view,

Whatever we say, whatever we think, automatically becomes written in [God’s] book. It gets written in our future [*bhāgya*]. This is our destiny. Our actions [*karm*] turn into letters [*akṣar*].... Every thought will turn into a letter.... If you curse [*gāṭī 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*, the Rajasthani female *sādhvīs* expressed “opposed and complementary” notions of agency in their

taking of renunciation (BABB 1983, 173). Citing the research of Sheryl B. Daniel and E. Valentine Daniel, who discuss the availability of two alternative theories of fate, namely “headwriting” and *karm* in Tamilnāḍu, 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. (BABB 1983, 173)

Babb’s thesis is helpful for analyzing the female *sādhūs*’ use of the life story themes of destiny and *karm* as narrative strategies with which they negotiate their own ambiguous public position as ascetics. Interpreting their lives through the framework of destiny, the *sādhūs* not only invoke a higher moral order, which no one can judge, to validate their religious lives as ascetics, but also assert their individual agency as female *sādhūs* in a patriarchal society and male-dominated religious path. By emphasizing destiny as the original source of their asceticism, the *sādhūs* suggest 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 *sādhūs* (As Gangagiri told me, “Who could stop me [from becoming a *sādhū*]?”). As with duty, the *sādhūs*’ invoking of destiny in the interpretation of their asceticism constitutes a strategic disclaimer for asserting female renunciatory agency, rather than an excuse for passivity (cf. COURTRIGHT 2009).<sup>23</sup> Perceiving their lives through this traditional lens enables female *sādhūs* to take control of their own lives and, by extension, their destinies.<sup>24</sup> The idea of destiny promotes the agency of the female *sādhūs*, motivating them to act and to manifest the life they believe God has chosen for them in this birth. Evidence that destiny creates agency in renunciation is underscored by the fact that most Rajasthani female *sādhūs* juxtapose destiny with *karm*, implying that individual action works in conjunction with destiny. Thus, while destiny operates as a shared cultural framework for many Indians—Hindu, Muslim, or Christian—the female *sādhūs* refer to this concept in the interpretation and construction of their lives as a strategy for legitimating their own asceticism.

The integration of the combined narrative themes of *bhāgya* and *karm* provides a performative narrative strategy with which Rajasthani female *sādhūs* communicate 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 *sādhūs* 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 for the female *sādhvī* with whom I worked. And while destiny may put them on the path of asceticism, the female *sādhvī* understand that they still have to make a “good” effort to manifest their destiny. As Sharda Puri, a *sādhvī* from Losingh village in Udaipur district, explained: “Just as the lines of destiny can be increased by good works, so they can be erased, too, by bad works.” From their shared perspectives, *bhāgya* and *karm* mysteriously interface and intertwine in the actualization of what they believe is a divine directive, which the female *sādhvī* feel in their souls (*ātma*)—that inner, secret place where God and the Goddess speak to them.

Since it is impossible to prove, empirically at least, that one’s religious life represents the fated fruit (*phal*) of the good works (*karm*) from a past life, the female *sādhvī* understand their lives more globally as the product of “God’s will [*bhāgyān 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 Rajasthani female *sādhvī*’ oral performances of their personal narratives.

For instance, parts of Shiv Puri’s life story underscored 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 Shiva Rātri, a festival honoring the god Shiva; due to the auspicious day of her birth, Shiv Puri’s parents named her Shivā. Three days after her birth, however, her mother went mad (*pāgal*) for eighty days. After relating these events to the family astrologer, Shiv Puri’s father learned that his daughter would become a *sādhvī* by the age of thirty-two. As she told me, “that 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 *sādhvī*. It’s final, fixed.’ This happened when I was only three.” Two more events, namely a vision or appearance (*dr̥ṣṭānt*; *darśan*) of the deities Bholenāth and Durgā Māī, who told her that she would become a *sādhvī* exactly two years after the birth of her third child, a son, and a powerful prophecy made by her mother, Indra Kunwār, that she would “sit on the throne of a *sādhvī*, and people would come from all over India to pay her their respects,” revealed to Shiv Puri her alternative life path.

In response to my question: “How did you know that you would become a *sādhvī* in this life,” Shiv Puri vividly recounted her experience of having received the *darśan* of Bholenāth and Durgā Māī, suggesting that this vision provided proof of her destiny. With her “disciple,” Shankar, sitting by her side, this is how Shiv Puri told me and others present 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 *sādhu*] for two more years.” [In the vision] I could see myself with a young son, and I had placed him on my shoulders.

[Male audience member]<sup>25</sup>: 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 Shivji temple over there.

A: Okay.

SP: It was a Shivji temple, but inside I couldn’t find Shivji. 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], “Maharāj [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 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.” Nandi [the cow who appears with Shiva] was seated [in the temple].... My son grabbed his feet, and then Shivji appeared. Shivji appeared in this form [points to the poster on a nearby wall that depicts an ash-covered Shiva 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: Okay, in the form of an ascetic.... And when Shivji appeared before you [Shiv Puri finishes the thought]

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

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

SP: No, not a dream.

[Male audience member]: 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 [*jāgrt*] state.

[Male audience member]: Meaning, when God gives *darśan*, he himself comes directly to you.

A: Okay.

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

A: Okay.

SP: The light was so strong that my eyes closed suddenly. Then God [*bhagvān*] spoke the *guru mantra* [that is, the sacred poetic verses the guru whispers into the disciple's ear at the time of initiation] from his very mouth [*mukhāvind*]. I learned it.

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

SP: I studied that *mantra*. Shivji gave the *guru mantra*, right? Then Mother [referring to Durgā Māī] was standing nearby him [to Shivji]. 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*]. Shivji 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 Shiva'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 happen to her while she remains in "an awakened state." More significantly, to sanction her view that destiny played a role in her becoming a *sādhvī* in this birth, Shiv Puri's narrative construction of her visionary experience pivots on her receiving the *guru mantra* from Shiva, those sacred syllables the guru whispers into the disciple's ear at the time of initiation (*dīkṣā*) into renunciation. The ascetic form in which Shiva appears to Shiv Puri in her vision is also especially significant, as it symbolically portends her fate to become a *sādhvī*.

Through her performance Shiv Puri not only constructs herself as the disciple of Shiva and Durgā Māī, but also communicates her perception that God initiated her as a *sādhvī*. 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 *sādhvī*, not as a householder. Her narrative reconstruction of the vision in which she sees herself carrying a boy 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 Shiva and Durgā Māi send to her womb a disciple who will help her to run her ashram so that she can serve them as a *sādhvī* later on in her life. That is, from the narrative's point of view, that the child in Shiv Puri's vision is the same person who helps her to manage her expanding ashram today is hardly coincidental—Bholenāth and Durgā Māi 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 *sādhvī*.

In other conversations, I learned that Shiv Puri does, in fact, have a mortal guru; however, she only recognizes Shiva and Durgā Māi 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; but I didn't learn from anyone. Shivji gave me the guru mantra [directly].” To be sure, by attributing her initiation into asceticism to Shiva and Durgā Māi, Shiv Puri validates her spiritual 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 *sādhvīs'* stories. Lacking these signs, how did the *sādhvīs* know that destiny played a crucial role in the unfolding of their lives?

“I FOUND TRUTH IN... SINGING BHAJANS TO GOD”: DEVOTION (*BHAKTI*)

Like the narrative themes of duty and destiny, devotion (*bhakti*) also appeared as a defining theme in the narratives of the female *sādhvīs*. Their descriptions of devotion strengthened claims of having an intimate relationship with the divine and, thus, refracted the larger frame of duty in which their story constructions emerged and took shape. They conceptualized *bhakti* as an intense feeling of love, respect, and devotion to God and expressed it in their daily lives through private and/or communal devotional singing (*bhajan satsang*), prayer and meditation, scriptural recitation, and deity worship in temples or other sacred places.

In all of the stories of *sādhvīs* interviewed, devotion arose “automatically” in their childhood. For the *sādhvīs*, the immediate and unexplained arising of devotion at a time in their lives when they should have been “jumping and playing” like other children their age signaled the ripening of their destiny and the beginning of a life dedicated to God. Gangagiri explained:

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 narrative construct of *kartavya* above, in this passage, too, Gangagiri does not explicitly use the word *bhakti* to express what might strike the reader as an unusual childhood religiosity. However, embedded in her statement is the idea that the act 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 trope signifying Gangagiri's singing experience as *bhakti* to *bhagvān*. Through daily conversations with the female *sādhvis* I realized that their repeated use of the phrase "singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān*" acted like a shared code, or symbolic language, alluding to an internal and spontaneous devotional experience of the divine.

Moreover, this statement connoted a particular vision of their life path. During extended interviews, when asked to define renunciation,<sup>26</sup> the female *sādhvis* consistently expressed their ideas of the concept through the interpretive lens of the *bhakti* practice of singing *bhajans*. As Gangagiri remarked, "renunciation means to sing to God."<sup>27</sup> Making the association that singing *bhajans* to *bhagvān* qualified both as *bhakti* and as renunciation, I queried the female *sādhvis* further to discover whether or not they understood their renunciation of the world to be *bhakti* as well. Without exception, they replied that renunciation of the world and devotion to God are "the same thing." Gangagiri, for instance, explained that "[r]enunciation is simply *bhakti*; there is no difference between them." In this light, whether explicit or implicit in the female *sādhvis*' life 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 renunciation. In the view of the female *sādhvis*, a life of renunciation exemplifies *bhakti* par excellence, because it allows them to dedicate their lives completely to God, and in doing so, to fulfill the destiny for which they were born.

Concomitant with their experiences of *bhakti* to *bhagvān* were also feelings of detachment (*vairāgy*) from family members, school and home responsibilities, and especially the pressing societal expectations of marriage and householding. Tulsigiri described that, "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 explained, "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 *sādhvis* detached, it also made them brave.<sup>28</sup> A common pattern in their stories was rebellion against parental



(or anyone else's) attempts to thwart their devotional, and by extension, their early renunciant lives. A vignette from Gangagiri's story expresses this 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 *abbisānī*." I said, "What is *abbisānī*?" He said, "it means you'll become a *sādhū*." I used to say [to him], "I will sing *bhajans* and become a *sādhū*." I must have said this ten times, at least.

Here, Gangagiri suggests that becoming a *sādhū* in adulthood seems to be "continuous" with her childhood experiences of devotion to God and detachment from the world (cf. BYNUM 1992; see also KHANDELWAL 2004, 181–84 and VALLELY 2002). While the ceremony of taking initiation into renunciation may formalize the women's identities as *sādhūs*, the ritual itself does not signify a cognitive disjunction or rupture from the perception they have always maintained of themselves in both their childhood and adulthood—that of a *sādhū*. RAMANUJAN (1999), BYNUM (1987), BARTHOLOMEUSZ (1996), and KHANDELWAL (2004) have argued that women's renunciation and, more precisely, the symbols and categories they use to express their experiences of it, 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 and RAHEJA 1994, 151). As Bynum explains,

Women'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 *sādhūs'* case, the 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. Moreover, as with duty and destiny, the female *sādhūs'* emphasis on devotion signals a gendered disclaimer of intention with which they strategically create individual agency. How is this possible? Agency implies conscious intention. In the context of female asceticism, it also, and more significantly, implies conscious resistance to the normative female gender roles of wife and mother. However, if devotion, and therefore a life of asceticism, emerge spontaneously, or on account of duty and/or destiny, female ascetics are not consciously defying societal expectations for their gender. Rather, they are following divine commands. Asceticism constructed in this way is less likely to be perceived as socially transgressive. The continuity that Rajasthani female *sādhūs* like Gangagiri establishes between her childhood and adulthood religiosity, then, empowers her to take control of her life, because even though others might disagree with her alternative path, no one, at least theoretically, can challenge what is ultimately understood to be a divine order. The motifs of duty, destiny, and devotion, however, more than

justify Rajasthani female *sādhūs*' asceticism and affirm their agency; they also situate the *sādhūs* in a pan-Indian framework of legendary female devotional religiosity.

Through their emphasis on duty, destiny, and devotion, the female *sādhūs* 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 *bhakti* saints, such as the Kannada saint, Mahadeviyakka, the Tamil Alvar Antal, Bahinabai of Maharashtra, Mira Bai of Rajasthan, and Lall-eshwari of Kashmir (RAMANUJAN 1999). In fact, the personal narratives of the Rajasthani *sādhūs* mirror their performed narratives of the life of Mira Bai, in which duty, destiny, and devotion as well as rebellion toward authority similarly appear as salient themes.<sup>29</sup> In his study of the unusual lives of female *bhakti* saints, 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 *sādhūs*' narratives feature all of these life story themes. Such thematic correspondences, first of all, strongly suggest these female *sādhūs*' familiarity with the structure and content of the narratives of popular female *bhaktis*, particularly, in this case, those of the Rajasthani *bhakti* saint Mira Bai—and their use of such narratives as possible models of gender, *post factum*, for constructing and interpreting their own lives. To this extent, the female *sādhūs* not only perform their personal narratives on the basis of popular (local) understandings of Mira's life, but also attribute their own asceticism to Mira's grace (*krpā*). As Shiv Puri told me, "It is by Mira's grace [*krpā*] that 'lady' *sādhūs* have been able to take renunciation in Rajasthan." In this way, their personal narrative performances allow the female *sādhūs* to construct a genealogy of female asceticism in Rajasthan and to create a Rajasthani tradition of female devotional asceticism by way of Mira's example, and thus, through her spiritual lineage.

Second, their invocation of duty, destiny, and devotion suggest that the female *sādhūs* use (alternative) regional models of gender to construct their own form of asceticism—a tradition I have called devotional asceticism—as an alternative to the more dominant (male) tradition of Brahmanical asceticism. These narrative patterns, along with defiance of social norms, bespeak the gendered religious experiences of women, illustrating, as BYNUM (1987) and LAWLESS (1988) 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 implications of the *sādhūs*' themes of duty, destiny, and devotion? And what do they suggest about female agency in renunciation?

#### CONCLUSIONS: GENDERED IMPLICATIONS OF THE FEMALE *SĀDHŪS*' NARRATIVE THEMES

Immediately evident is that the narrative strategies of emphasizing duty, destiny, and devotion function to communicate the Rajasthani female *sādhūs*' "perception of difference"<sup>30</sup> vis-à-vis three distinct groups of persons: all householders, women in general, and most male *sādhūs* who have been initiated in the Dashanami

or the Nath orders. More specifically, their destiny to become *sādhus* makes them, as people, different from all householders, because, in their world view, we are what our fate would have us be. Destiny not only assigns group membership, it also draws boundaries of difference between groups—in this case, between householders and *sādhus*. But even this proposition has to be carefully nuanced, because for the female *sādhus* in this renouncer community difference exists not just amongst people of the same gender, but amongst people of the same group (householders or renunciants). Apart from their destiny, what else informs the female *sādhus*' perception of difference from women in general?

A consistent sub-theme in the female *sādhus*' stories was the characteristic of fearlessness, when dealing either with family, strangers, divine or demonic beings, wild animals, or with the realities of traveling alone as a female *sādhū* in cities, towns, and jungles. For example, at the age of eleven, Shiv Puri enjoyed going alone to the jungle and did so regularly throughout her childhood and early adulthood. On one of her excursions Shiv Puri encountered a tiger. What she saw, however, was not a tiger. She explained:

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 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, described a fearless attitude when she was approached by the ticket-taker. In her own words she said, "I [used to] travel alone on trains, without a ticket. When the ticket-taker came, I showed him my eyes.... All this was the power of my *bhajans* [that is, the power of her *bhakti*]."

Both narratives construct the female *sādhus* as fearless. But Gangagiri's story makes explicit the idea that this characteristic is not a "natural" component of her gender; rather, it stems from the "power of [her] *bhajans*." The female *sādhus*' fearless attitude stems from the power evoked by their *bhakti*, and by extension, by their devotional asceticism. To the female *sādhus*, 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).<sup>31</sup> Let me emphasize, however, that many householder women would not construct themselves, either in their personal stories or in specific statements about their lives, as weak, passive, or dependent. As several scholars have argued, throughout the Indian subcontinent women's oral traditions, whether story, song, or ritual tale (*vrāt kathā*), describe the inner powers of women, which often are similarly attributed to their devotional practices, and which provide alternative images of femininity to dominant Brahmanical textual understandings (GOLD and RAHEJA 1994; NARAYAN 1997; RAHEJA 2003; GOLD 2003; LAMB 2003). By constructing themselves as brave in

their narratives, the female *sādhvis* not only challenge orthodox notions of femininity, but also “traditionalize,” and thus legitimate, their unusual bravery by situating it in the broader framework of female religious/ritual practice.

For the *sādhvis* to resist 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.<sup>32</sup> Shiv Puri’s story of her vision above, in which she received blessings from Shiva and Durgā Māi, may express an underlying perception of gender androgyny in her embodiment of the power of both deities. From a comparative perspective, the female *sādhvis*’ 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 ethnography on gender and “vernacular” Islam in South Asia (2006; cf. FLUECKIGER 2003). As Flueckiger observes from an examination of Amma’s statements and life narratives and testimonials, Amma attributes healing power to her inner courage (*himmat*), which arises from her devotion to God, or Allah (94), and which she feels distinguishes her from other women. Like the female *sādhvis*, Amma also “on many levels [...] identifies” with her “caste” as a woman but, unlike the *sādhvis*, she understands her life path “[...] to be outside the bounds and possibilities of her gender” (78).

While their religious role accords them status, the female *sādhvis* believe their connection to God endows them with the power and authority to control their own lives. However, only by disclaiming personal agency do the female *sādhvis* actually create and exert their agency, and thus, their (renunciant) status, power, and authority. To use Lawless’s words, as “disclaimers of intent (LAWLESS 1988, 76),” duty, destiny, and devotion constitute narrative strategies through which means Rajasthani female *sādhvis* neutralize widely-held, societal perceptions of their lives as transgressive and construct themselves as unusual, yet “traditional” women who act by divine order. At the same time, through employment of these strategies, the *sādhvis* rhetorically resist as well as transcend normative patriarchal representations of womanhood and assert female agency.

Importantly, their use of such narrative disclaimers distinguishes the female *sādhvis* I worked with from the male *sādhvis* with whom I also worked.<sup>33</sup> As I discuss elsewhere (DENAPOLI 2009), in their personal narratives, Rajasthani male *sādhvis* typically underscore detachment (*vairāg*), work (*karm*), effort (*prayās*), and practice (*abhyās*) in constructing their understandings and experiences of asceticism.<sup>34</sup> The patterned use of the normative themes of practice, effort, and work by many Rajasthani male *sādhvis* reproduces dominant (male) constructions of Indian masculinity and of renunciation. The men’s perception of these themes as necessary constituents of renunciation indicates male *sādhvis*’ internalization and acceptance of the behavioral norms attributed to their gender, which are often expressed via the notion that men choose their worlds, and by doing so, create their destinies. As one male *sādhvi* told me, “our own two hands create our destinies.” “[T]aken-

for-granted assumptions” about gender, therefore, underlie and shape Rajasthani male *sādhus*’ interpretations of their religiosity, producing, as such, gendered narratives of renunciation (LORBER 1994, 13).<sup>35</sup> For the male *sādhus* with whom I worked, the very idea of destiny “disrupts” normative expectations of masculinity by questioning the role of male agency (LORBER 1994). So, can we conclude that the themes which the Rajasthani female *sādhus* emphasize in their narrative performances are intrinsic to women’s life stories?

Even though the female *sādhus*’ personal narratives are, I suggest, gendered constructions in comparison to those of the male *sādhus* of the same orders with whom I worked, duty, destiny, and devotion represent themes that are emphasized in *bhakti* traditions more broadly, rather than only in the narratives and rhetoric of female *bhakti* saints. These concepts are usually underscored, for instance, in the hagiographies of mostly male Vaishnava *bhakta* saints in Nabadasa’s *Bhaktamāla*.<sup>36</sup> Here, we find destiny and devotion, in particular, as interpretive frameworks through which to understand the lives and practices of both male and female *bhakts*. Therefore, in addition to regional models of female devotionism, Rajasthani female *sādhus* rely on a more generalized *bhakti* discourse with which not only to distinguish their tradition of devotional asceticism from the more dominant (and male) Brahmanical forms of renunciation, but also to situate their form of asceticism in *bhakti* tradition(s).<sup>37</sup> The continuity that these female *sādhus* performatively create between their own lives and those of popular *bhakti* saints, including Mira Bai, enable them to cross beyond the standard threshold of orthodox renunciant frameworks and to construct themselves as *bhakts*, or as *bhakti sādhus*.

Finally, the female *sādhus*’ interpretation of their lives through the narrative themes of duty, destiny, and devotion allows them to validate their renunciant identity.<sup>38</sup> As these *sādhus* often said in the context of our everyday conversations, “we are the *sādhus* of India,” stressing the significance of this identity for their own self-perceptions and religiosity. This renouncer identity, though it signifies an alternative to the normative roles of wife, mother, and widow, nonetheless identifies the *sādhus* as women who experience renunciation in a gendered way. By carefully walking the path of God, the female *sādhus* negotiate through the performance of personal stories their everyday realities as women and as renouncers, and gain through their humility, creativity, and emotional strength the status, power, and authority evoked by their public religious position. Gangagiri’s story about her encounter with the two policemen that I described at the beginning of this chapter illustrates this view. Not only does this narrative depict the nature and process of female *sādhus*’ daily negotiations of their ascetic religiosity, 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 *sādhus*, vividly offers its listeners (and readers) a strategy for enacting specifically female agency in a patriarchal society and religious life path. That is, despite the many obstacles involved, the worlds of female *sādhus* are possible and hence flourish by “the sweetness of [their] tongue[s].”

## NOTES

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1. KHANDELWAL, HAUSNER, and GOLD 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).

2. A conversation about her extensive knowledge of the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇā*, a Hindi devotional text that Rajasthani female *sādhvis* 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 *Rāmāyaṇā*. Can you imagine? A woman who made it to only the first grade reading [the] *Rāmāyaṇā*.” In response, Tulsigiri exclaimed, “Hey, at least you went to school, *māī rām* [lit., “holy mother”]. I myself never even saw the school.”

3. The female *sādhvis*’ personal experience narratives, therefore, are not “life stories” in the sense in which the term has traditionally been understood in fields 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).

4. For a comparative discussion, see DENAPOLI (2009).

5. Gangagiri passed away on 26 July 2008. She was ninety-three years old.

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

7. I conducted fieldwork in the three districts of Udaipur, Jaisamand, and Rajsamand. My primary research site was Udaipur city itself, located in Udaipur district, the former capital of the region of Mewar in southwest Rajasthan. I conducted preliminary dissertation fieldwork in Rajasthan between 2002 and 2003; and formal dissertation research in Rajasthan between 2004 and 2006.

8. There are many different types of Hindu traditions of renunciation in India. The Dashanami and Nath orders of renunciation, for example, are part of the Shaivite (that is, orders of renouncers who are descended from the male god Shiva) traditions of asceticism in India. Other orders are affiliated with Vaishnava traditions, such as the Ramanandis or Tyagis. More specifically, the Dashanami order was started by the Hindu philosopher-theologian, Adi Shankaracarya (ca. eighth CE), and the Nath order is understood to have been created by the medieval saint, Gorakhnath (ca. eleventh/twelfth CE), who is thought to be an incarnation of the god Shiva. For more information on traditions of renunciation in India see GROSS (2001), CENKNER (1983), TIWARI (1977), and MILLER and WERTZ (1996).

9. According to citations of census data by both GROSS (2001) and KHANDELWAL (2004), female Hindu *sādhus* comprise approximately ten to fifteen percent of the ascetic population in the Indian subcontinent.

10. The Hindi for the English translation is “*isliye mere ko rūcī hai jo bhagvān kā kām bākī voh karnā.*”

11. My translation of *kartavya* is based on the meanings attributed by the female *sādhus* whom I interviewed. A standard definition of the term can also be found in MCGREGOR (1993).

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

13. *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 visited Tulsigiri at her guru’s ashram, several hundred devotees had already started setting up their tents and food kitchens (*bhandār*) for the upcoming holiday.

14. While Tulsigiri recognizes someone else as her guru, that is to say, the teacher who gave her initiation into renunciation, she always remarked that Gangagiri was also her guru, by which she meant the teacher who did 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 spiritual “brother” to Gangagiri, which makes her, in a spiritual sense, Tulsigiri’s spiritual grandparent.

15. Even the ochre-clothing that all *sādhus* 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 *sādhū* is the peon [*caparāsī*] 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 present at the start of this essay about Gangagiri’s encounter with the two policemen on the bus emerged directly from this conversation.

16. 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. As LAWLESS explains, “History will be modified, melded, pushed, and molded to create a ‘fiction’ that is based on truth, but is, in fact, a created story” (1988, 65).

17. I can give an example of the life of a woman with whom I worked, who perceived and called herself a *sādhū*, yet whom others perceived as a householder. This particular female “*sādhū*” 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 *sādhus* with whom I worked, even though they appreciated this “*sādhū*’s” effort at trying to live as a *sādhū*, they were, nonetheless, convinced that God had not chosen her to become a *sādhū* in this life. On the contrary, as they explained to me, her destiny in this birth was to

live as a householder (*grhasth*), and this explains, in the views of the female *sādhvī*, at least, why this particular female “*sādhvī*” could not successfully renounce her marriage and family obligations. The *sādhvīs* were, however, equally convinced that, after all the effort she made in this birth, this woman would surely become destined to live as a *sādhvī* in her next birth (*aglā janam*).

18. Lawless similarly discusses that the female Pentecostal preachers with whom she worked disclaim their individual agency by attributing their own public position of power and authority to God himself. As Lawless argues, the narrative theme of God calling a woman to become a pastor constitutes what she calls a “ritual disclaimer” by which they, in turn, exert spiritual authority. See LAWLESS (1988, 76).

19. Kashi, also known as Varanasi and/or Benares, is one of the oldest and most renowned cities in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Besides being considered by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains as one of the holiest cities in India, Kashi is located on the banks of the sacred Ganges (Ganga) river. *Sādhvīs* often make pilgrimages to the city as a form of penance in order to purify themselves in this river. Some *sādhvīs* also settle permanently in Kashi and establish ashrams and other institutions as centers of religious learning and practice.

20. The word “tiffin” is commonly used in Indian English and, in this context, means the (usually stainless steel) container in which individuals pack their lunch or dinner. In Gangagiri’s description, her guru, Gauri Giriji, stores large amounts of food for the disciples at his ashram. The three-tiered tiffin here signifies the idea that different types of food were stored in different parts of the tiffin. For instance, rice, vegetables, and mixed-lentil soup (*dāl*) would be stored in different compartments of the tiffin to prevent the food from mixing together.

21. See MCGREGOR (1993). I am using the definition provided in the *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edition, for the English term “to find.”

22. The Marwari form of this idiom is: “*āp karo chāne chāne, mūn likhū pāne pāne*.” This is a popular idiom in Rajasthan and is not only expressed by *sādhvīs*, but also by householders.

23. 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 successful film that 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 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 *sādhvīs* with whom I worked. Their understanding of their becoming *sādhvīs* enables their agency, not passivity. That is, by interpreting their asceticism through means of the traditional category of destiny, the female *sādhvīs* situate their lives in a religious framework that enables them to exercise agency and authority as female *sādhvīs*. See COURTRIGHT (2009). I thank Dr. Courtright for recommending this informative web-blog to me. (Email communication, 21 February 2009.)

24. See BARTHOLOMEUSZ (1996) for a comparison with Theravadin Buddhist renunciants.

25. The male audience member was a young Rajput man who was a devotee of Shiv Puri and a good friend of Shankar.

26. In stating my questions to the *sādhvī*, I used the term *sannyās* for renunciation. This was the term I heard the female *sādhvīs* use the most in their descriptions of their own renunciant lives.

27. As she said to me, “*sannyās kā matlab, bhagvān ka bhajan bolnā*.”

28. My suggestion about the power of the female *sādhvīs*’ devotion, or *bhakti*, to God stems from LAWLESS’s 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 *sādhus*, for whom devotion to God makes them brave.

29. I discuss in detail Rajasthani female *sādhus*' performed narratives of the life of Mira Bai, and their emphasis on the themes of duty, destiny, and devotion in my larger dissertation project. See DENAPOLI, 2009.

30. I borrow this phrase from LAWLESS (1988). The female *sādhus*' 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 (LAWLESS 1988, 69–72).

31. 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 *sādhū*, like her mother. Her response was, "I don't have the courage [*himmat*] to be a *sādhū*." Most of the householder women I spoke with, whether devotees or family members of the *sādhus*, agreed that one must be "strong" in order to renounce the world. It is for reasons such as these that female *sādhus* in Rajasthan and beyond are respected in their society.

32. Ethnographic studies on women's renunciation in South Asia have emphasized more the similarities than the differences between the everyday worlds of female *sādhus* and householders (cf. KHANDELWAL, HAUSNER, and GOLD 2006; KHANDELWAL 2004; TESKEY DENTON 2004; GUTSCHOW 2001; BARTHOLOMEUSZ 1996; but cf. VALLELY 2002). Following the insights of BYNUM's thesis (1987, 1992), many of these scholars contend that female *sādhus*' religious roles reflect continuity with their biological and social roles. By pointing out the ways the female *sādhus* 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 *sādhus* and householders continue to perform similar social roles in terms of food preparation and living either with or close to their families, whom the *sādhus* regard as "disciples," the *sādhus*, nevertheless, understand that their renouncing the world in order to dedicate themselves to God makes them different from "ordinary" women, with whom they happen to share the same gender.

33. For comparative purposes, I also worked with fifteen male (Dashanami and/or Nath) *sādhus* in the various districts of Mewar in which I conducted research with Rajasthani female *sādhus*.

34. See chapter three of DENAPOLI 2009.

35. Although BYNUM represents male religiosity as an experience of gender reversal (1986, 1987, and 1992), my data suggest that while the male *sādhus* 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.

36. Thanks are due to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out this important detail.

37. It is important to note that *bhakti* traditions are usually seen as promoting more "feminine" attitudes than the Dashanami and Nath traditions in which the Rajasthani female *sādhus* I worked with were initiated. The female *sādhus* use of duty, destiny, and devotion are gendered narrative strategies to the extent that, in *bhakti* frameworks, they promote a "sweeter," feminine attitude toward the divine. Again, I thank the same anonymous reviewer for discussing this aspect of the gendering of female *sādhus*' personal narratives in her/his comments.

38. As a number of anthropologists and folklorists have emphasized in their work with indigenous populations, I understand that the identity validated in the female *sādhus*' personal narratives more than likely reflects the identity that I, as the ethnographer, was looking for them to validate. After all, the reason for my interviewing them was because they were *sādhus*, a fact they understood—even if I never explicitly verbalized this—from the very beginning of our meetings. Moreover, I recognize that their "*sādhū*" identity may not be the most impor-

tant 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 *sādhu* identity was what the *sādhus* (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 *sādhus*. 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 (1989), GLUCK and PATAI (1991), BORLAND (1991), and BEHAR (1993).

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