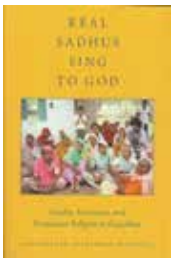

Antoinette Elizabeth DeNapoli, *Real Sadhus Sing to God: Gender, Asceticism, and Vernacular Religion in Rajasthan*

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The image of the ascetic, or sadhu, in India is most commonly a male one. From texts of the past, folk stories, and reminders from grandmothers to children to beware the wandering monk, the trope of the renouncer rests on an image of a male, who in service of his quest for knowing the divine, abandons worldly ties and lives outside the rules of society. This potentially threatening yet possibly enlightened male is noticeably disconnected from family and community, and lives outside normative expectations for behaviour. In *Real Sadhus Sing to God*, Antoinette DeNapoli provides a thoughtful portrait of sadhus whose quest to "melt into God" (285) is shaped by motivations, desires, and means that are tied to their very femaleness. The ascetics focused on in *Real Sadhus* are female and their daily lives and devotional practices offer a contrast to what DeNapoli terms the "dominant" and "Brahmanical" ideals of the male renouncer. DeNapoli argues that female sadhus embody and practice a "devotional asceticism" that legitimates their decision to live nonconventional lives as Rajasthani Hindu renouncers. Through "singing, storytelling, and sacred text performances" (4), DeNapoli's interlocutors demonstrate their keen attachment to God as well as their willingness to serve others who seek the same. These oral performances, or metaphorically, "singing *bhajan*s," play a crucial role in establishing female sadhus' religious authority. Though singing devotional songs is not usually considered to be an emblematic sign of renunciation, it is precisely singing that allows female sadhus to sustain their minority religious identity whilst living within their communities and maintaining ties with members of their families, followers, and other sadhus. The sadhus' "rhetoric of renunciation," DeNapoli observes, does not disrupt male models of *sannyās* (renunciation) or the "predominantly patriarchal system" in which the women live (307). Yet, the women, as DeNapoli repeatedly demonstrates, are not without power in their local and regional contexts. Ethnographically, *Real Sadhus* reflects a deep interest in the quotidian and relational dimensions of social life and directs attention to the knowledge production that arises from tracing these relations in the everyday. In her sensitive listening to her interlocutors, she has produced an ethnography that does not reduce all female sadhus into one type. Rather, she successfully argues that a gendered model for *sannyās* anchors female ascetics firmly into their local, social, and religious landscape while simultaneously making "vernacular asceticism a powerful and emergent space for constituting female agency, power, and authority in their everyday worlds and lives" (310).

The strength of *Real Sadhus* as an ethnographic account of female sadhus rests in DeNapoli's rapport with her interlocutors who are rurally situated, mostly nonliterate, and have taken initiation in Shaiva orders. Conducted over a ten-year period

from 2001 to 2011, the research involved thirty-nine sadhus, twenty-four of whom are female sadhus from the Mewar region of Rajasthan. Though mostly upper caste, two chapters in *Real Sadhus* focus respectively on a sadhu from a tribal community and another from the Khatik (butcher) caste. As she shares the sadhus' narratives, from informal conversations to segments of oral performances, she interweaves relevant cultural, historical, and linguistic material to illuminate the sadhus' choice of words, images, personages, and incidents. Understanding the vernacular narratives as they unfold demands a familiarity with the poet saints associated with the North Indian saint tradition and with Mewari regional and cultural ethos. DiNapoli offers accessible material on these as well as detailed observations on the contours of the Rajput and Brahmin caste ideals in Rajasthan and the tensions between these two dominant caste groups. She also connects the overwhelming salience of the Rajasthani poet saint, Mira Bai, to female sadhus' personal biographies, and draws the connection, as evidenced by the sadhus' *bhajan*s, that invoking Mira Bai gives them validation to a perceived lineage of women whose singing is equivalent to *sannyās*. Given too the close focus on the words, images, and antecedent sources of the sadhus' *bhajan*s, DiNapoli offers insights into the semantic valences for Sanskrit and other terms that female sadhus refer to in their narrative practices. Terms such as devotion (*bhakti*), service (*sevā*), extreme self-sacrifice/heat (*tapas*), suffering (*duhkh*, *tap*), and struggle (*kaṣṭ*) appear in sadhus' narratives. (n.b. there is no glossary and only a minimal index with Sanskrit and Hindi words.) She carefully traces their meanings in relation to each sadhu's personal history and her (the sadhu's) efforts to affirm a relationship to the texts or songs being performed. DeNapoli is not, it seems, motivated to probe her interlocutors for inconsistencies in their commentaries or narratives; neither does she appear to ask critically pointed questions that might demand a re-thinking from her informants. DeNapoli's presence in her research remains clearly that of the student scholar: she is there to learn about the sadhus' equation of *bhajan*s with *sannyās*, and she makes an admirable effort to learn to sing *bhajan*s and thereby quell any critique of her sincerity to learn.

Perhaps an area of tension in *Real Sadhus* arises from DeNapoli's desire to faithfully present the sadhus' lives and "lived religion" on their own terms. These terms are carefully transcribed and presented but some readers may feel a discrepancy between the sadhus' performance (as transcribed), DeNapoli's guidance in understanding the performance, and the ethnographic lacunae that cannot be captured by a single researcher. DeNapoli places enormous weight on allowing the sadhus to share their lives and experiences from within their own "rhetoric of renunciation," but as she also recognizes, this rhetoric is tied to discourses which themselves are not disconnected from other discursive arenas—of history, place, existing dominant texts, and other sites of authority. One area where this tension can be seen is the discussion of whether or not sadhus, as subordinate women, are transgressive women who, despite their cultural location, are exerting their agency to act as independent selves. According to DeNapoli, the sadhus in her study are explicit about not having autonomy in their decision to become ascetics or determining the dimensions of their devotional practice. Foremost for the sadhus, it is not individual will that has prompted the path of *sannyās*; rather, theirs is a lifestyle that is motivated and guided by God, their

understanding of their self (*ātmā*) in relation to God, and their intense wish to connect to the divine through singing. The sadhus are emphatically not intending to subvert their social order or work to improve their status as women in rural Rajasthan. The riches of ethnographic material in *Real Sadhus*, however, invite other interpretations for sadhus' vernacular asceticism as much as they also confirm that female ascetics participate in a gendered arena of devotional practice (singing *bhajan*s) because it allows them to act as atypical women who are not actually contesting the social order.

DeNapoli is consistent throughout *Real Sadhus* in describing her sadhu interlocutors as creative, compassionate, innovative, fearless, and clever. These characterizations are marshalled to highlight the need for female sadhus to represent themselves as exemplary women—pure, exceptional, and highly intelligent—in order to stake their legitimacy as women who are not living the usual householder lifestyle. DeNapoli alerts readers that the sadhus do not themselves announce their cleverness but rather their narratives guide their audience to this conclusion. Any apparent assertions of a willful self are not to be interpreted as acts of agency or resistance to social expectations but as rhetorical strategies to consolidate the ongoing crafting of an ascetic female self. There will be readers for whom this conclusion may not be sufficient. For example, in the following scenario: if a female sadhu, as happened in DeNapoli's research, declares that she has never had to pay for a bus or train fare, this is, for DeNapoli, not an instance of unethical behaviour or the imposition of power by a female sadhu who assumes that others can see her ochre robes and allow her a free ride. Instead, DeNapoli notes that the sadhu's ability to travel like this points to her specialness, one that confirms that only someone of extraordinary qualities could endure the life of the female renouncer. DeNapoli's research does indeed confirm the need for female ascetics to rhetorically emphasize their exceptionalism owing to their marginal position within the popular outlines of *sannyās.* But, readers and others might see the sadhu's actions as a display of agency not tied to a relationship with the divine but more motivated by material realities or even intentionally "pushing the boundaries" to see if the ticket collector would acknowledge that the sadhu stands outside of the usual rules. The analytical tension that becomes exposed here is how to appreciate interlocutors and the everyday lives they have struggled to make for themselves and how to balance this inside perspective with the material pressures, social demands, and other forces that arise and interrupt the ambiguous and gendered position the sadhus are singing to clarify.?

Real Sadhus is a welcome addition to the fine ethnographic works (see the book's bibliography) on women ascetics of India as well as studies on South Asian religious practices that seek to complement a textual focus with "thick" ethnography. And, while scholars of gendered asceticism in India can appreciate DeNapoli's suggestion of "singing *bhajan*s" as an analytic paradigm to explore *sannyās*, a broader implication of her sensitive ethnography is the necessity to appreciate the innovative discursive strategies that gendered selves create from within the spaces, ideologies, and cultural circumstances in which they live. The sadhus demonstrate flexibility and creativity in their efforts to ensure their legitimate place as female ascetics and readers are fortunate to find them in DeNapoli's book.

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