

Relationality in Female Hindu Renunciation as told through the Life Story of Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī

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Walking into the āshram, I was able to escape from the chaos of Vārānasī, India. Nestled against the banks of the Ganges, the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram and *Kanyapīth* (a religious school established by Mā Ānandamayī for young girls) glowed orange from the light of the rising sun on the opposite bank of the river. The terrace by which I entered the āshram was vacant. For the past two weeks, I had been visiting this āshram intermittently to discover the inner-workings of the lives of the children who had taken a vow of celibacy to become *brahmacāriṇīs* (celibate female students). Day after day, I persisted to have a presence at the āshram in hopes that with each subsequent visit the protective veil over the *Kanyapīth* would be lifted. On this particular morning, I waited on the steps with my one-subject composition notebook tucked safely in the crease of my left arm as the young *brahmacāriṇīs* peered curiously at me from the safety of their rooms on the second floor. A pen rested between the fingers of my right hand as I drifted the ballpoint tip across the blank page of my notebook, noting any new observations in fresh black ink.

Just across from the steps stood a small, rectangular building, known as a *yajnyashālā*, where two men performed a special *pūjā* (devotional worship). The fiery nature of the offering caused smoke to billow out of the building's four barred windows. From behind the smoke, emerged an elderly woman, a *sannyāsī* (Hindu renunciant), who I would come to know as Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī, or more intimately, Dādī Mā, the Hindi translation of grandmother. Dressed differently than the other *sādhus* (holy persons) at the āshram, Dādī Mā's robe, rather than white, was saffron orange and strands of *rudrākṣa mālās* (Hindu rosaries made up of dried brown berries) hung from around her neck. It was the first time that I had seen her; however, it was clear that she had been

involved with the āshram for some time based on the ease with which she moved within the space. Her steps were short—the balls of her bare feet brushed the smooth stone ground with grace. She bent at the waist and picked up the small white flowers that had been released from the grips of the tree’s branches above and delicately placed them in the metal bowl between her palms. Just before removing another flower from the cobblestone, she paused, lifting her gaze two inches above the rim of her round, metal glasses and directing it toward me. Carefully assessing me, she released a laugh silent to my distant ears. The creases reaching out from the corners of her eyes deepened as she smiled and warmly acknowledged my presence.

As she approached me, she remained silent. I had neither an idea of her given position within the āshram, where she lived, nor the role she played in the ascetic community; however, I surrendered to her will as she softly spoke, “Come,” and turned to walk in the opposite direction with a confidence that I would follow. Awakening that morning, I had the intention of observing the *brahmacāriṇīs* during their daily rituals as part of my research for an independent study under the auspices of the University of Wisconsin at Madison study abroad program. Feeling a sense of inexplicable trust in Dādī Mā, I chose to instead follow her, allowing my research to proceed down an alternate course, which only later, once I returned from India, expanded into this thesis. Before meeting Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī, I was formally introduced to female *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs* through well-respected individuals in the city of Banāras (the colloquial term for Vārānasī). Even with a personal connection and formal introduction, I still faced challenges in being accepted and trusted by women within the ascetic community. As a female researcher, I was able to gain more access than a male for *sādhus* are generally

more receptive to members of their own sex, since those of the opposite sex are considered distractive from their main objectives of celibacy and worldly separation; however, over the course of several visits to the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram, I was unable to move past an unspoken, but very noticeable, barrier upheld by the majority of female ascetics.

The community within Mātā Ānandamayī āshram is characteristically closed off to outsiders due to the strict Brahmanical rules which the institution follows; this reserved nature is characteristic of *sādhus* and Indian women more generally, so when combined, the result is amplified. The women of this ascetic community shield themselves from interviews, especially those of personal nature. If asked a question about their life as an ascetic, they would visibly withdraw from the conversation and foist me on another informant, from whom I was then passed off, and so on. By the end, my efforts landed me at a website which the *sādhus* claimed would give me all of the information I needed to know. This was the nature of my research until I met Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī. The way in which Dādī Mā approached me and took me under her wing stood in stark contrast to my interactions with other female informants. In our collaboration, I was the one being led through the research. Dādī Mā directed our conversations, establishing herself as an active participant in the retelling of her life story and songs. Not only did Dādī Mā consent to the research, but she also reminded me to record our conversations; if I happened to miss any verses of a song she would cue me to record and start again from the beginning. In the few hours following our introduction, Dādī Mā led me through the streets of Vārānaśī. Just as my own grandmother had protected me when I was young, Dādī Mā firmly held my hand to ensure my safety as we crossed the busy streets. Each

time we entered a new space, she would present me to others with a sense of assurance; as if we had known each other for years, she introduced me using the word *meri*, a possessive pronoun in Hindi meaning "my." Dādī Mā further regarded me as granddaughter, ascribing to me a filial relation that mirrors her relations to the Hindu gods as children and her female guru as mother, a particularly gendered characteristic of female renunciants. The closeness of our relationship surpassed the familiarity of rapport, allowing me the access to personal information that was greatly withheld by other informants.

Over the course of two months, I came to know Dādī Mā through informal meetings in which I would sit at her feet and listen to her stories and songs. Dādī Mā was eighty years old when I first met her and had been living in Vārānasī as a *sannyāsī* for twelve years. She was born in Bengal and moved to Allahabad at the age of thirty-two when she was forced into an unwanted marriage. Enduring the abuses of the family into which she wed, Dādī Mā remained a devoted wife, undergoing the initiation for asceticism only after her husband's death. *Sannyāsīs* are theoretically detached from gender norms due to the ideological separation of the spirit from the human body; however, due to the fact that India is a patriarchal society and *sannyāsīs* embody either a male or female form, female *sannyāsīs* are unique from their male counterparts. First and foremost, female *sannyāsīs* and *sādhus* are absent from the public sphere. It is more typical for male *sannyāsīs* to take on the role of the wanderer, whereas women more often take up residence in a communal space, such as an āshram. Dādī Mā began her journey as a *sannyāsī* more in line with the life of males, wandering the streets and begging for food; however, this was short-lived as she transitioned to live amongst a

community of women within an āshram. Dādī Mā challenged and embraced her role as a woman in Indian society—she challenged it by becoming a *sannyāsī* rather than living the rest of her life defined by mourning her husband’s death and she embraced her role through the exemplification of female characteristics of her devotion.

Though my experiential research narrowly focuses on the life of one informant, Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī, broader claims may be made about female renunciants. Instead of focusing on breadth of research, I emphasize depth, which allows me to become familiarized with the general concept of renunciation through an intimate understanding of the journey of one female renunciant. For a period of two and a half months, I met with Dādī Mā once or twice every week, totaling over thirty hours of ethnographic research. As I spent time with Dādī Mā, I learned that her delayed asceticism is one aspect of her life that reflects that of women *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs* more generally. Additionally, Dādī Mā’s relationship with both her guru, Mā Ānandamayī, and the Hindu gods with whom she interacts daily in rites of veneration, reflects the nurturing female characteristics naturally imbued in filial relationships. This holistic retelling of Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī’s life story as a poignant exemplar of female renunciation in Hinduism complicates the binary view which separates *sannyāsīs* from their householder counterpart. Through careful attention to the details of Dādī Mā’s life story, I argue that due to the challenges of living in a patriarchal society, female *sannyāsīs* retain gendered characteristics after their initiation, thus increasing their relation to and decreasing their separation from the material world.

Scholarly and traditional literary accounts of renunciation, both from within and outside of Hinduism, tend to oversimplify its complex nature by discounting the

individual life story; we risk losing the specificity of gendered renunciation unless we attend to the details of lived religion and everyday practices. As a way to highlight this point, I have chosen to clearly include my own interactions with and impressions of Dādī Mā, rather than remain an “invisible” presence or “omniscient” narrator that the researcher can never be. The method of ethnography is relational at its basis and all knowledge is situated, thus taking myself out of the paper would be illusory. Much of the information presented in this honors thesis was gathered through my active participation with informants, so my writing style in which I make myself visible more accurately illustrates the lens through which my data is filtered.

This paper is organized into two major parts: an academic literature review and a narrative style ethnography. To provide context for my ethnographic findings, I will begin with a brief overview that introduces both the city of Vārānasī in which I completed my study as well as the terminology used in discussing Hindu asceticism. In the literature review, the findings of other academics will be discussed as well as the tensions between lived renunciation versus its textual ideals. The second part which is composed of my ethnographic findings shall be divided into three sections: 1) Mā Ānandamayī as Mother; 2) Dādī Mā’s Delayed Asceticism; 3) The Hindu Gods as Children. Organizing this thesis in this way will allow me to contextualize the phenomena of renunciation in Hinduism, review the scholarly debates on this topic, and then add my own original contribution to the scholarship based on my experiential research in the fall of 2014.

Kāshī: The City of Light

Though I traveled throughout northern India during my stay, the majority of my research was done in Vārānasī, a Hindu rich city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. The fervent religious nature of Vārānasī overwhelms the senses. Ascetics wander through the city, wrapped from head to toe in orange cloth. This same cloth also covers their coarse wooden staff, a religious ornament that symbolizes their renunciation and thus becomes an essential part of their everyday dress. Cycle rickshaws carrying householders and ascetics alike, auto rickshaws adorned with *aum* and swastika stickers, and the free-roaming holy cows reside in the streets of Vārānasī, all of them swerving in and out of one another's path in a seemingly rehearsed dance. Smoke of sandalwood incense rises from the shrines and lingers in the thick air. Bells ring from homes and hymns sound from the loudspeakers along the *ghāṭs* to summon the sun each morning. On their return home from the riverbanks, Hindus meander through the characteristic narrow *galīs* of Vārānasī, holding a small metal brass vase filled with the holy water from the Ganges. Over the four-month period in which I resided in this city, these were some of the images through which I came know and understand Vārānasī—through its religious nature.

The city is widely known by different names—Kāshī, Banāras and Vārānasī. Vārānasī became the official name of the city after India's independence, however the name by which it is most commonly referred is Banāras or Benares in its Anglicized form. Vārānasī lies in the state of Uttar Pradesh in Northern India; its name is said to derive from the two rivers that define its east and west boundaries, Varanā and Asī, respectively. These rivers not only create a physical boundary by which Vārānasī is defined but also mark this enclosed space as a sacred zone and act as a barrier for

entering evils in Hindu mythology (Eck 27). Chandramouli, the author of *Luminous Kashi to Vibrant Varanasi*, also suggests that these rivers are represented as internal rivers of the subtle body; Vārānasī is, therefore, located between the Varanā (eyebrows) and Nāsī (nose) (9). This esoteric interpretation of Vārānasī makes it homologous to the place of the third-eye center or the center of highest wisdom. Though its names can be used interchangeably and all refer to the same physical location, each particular name of this city carries its own weight. Government officials and politicians commonly refer to the city as Vārānasī when discussing policy. Similarly, foreigners will generally only know the city by this official name now that the colonial legacy of British rule has faded and foreign travelers have adopted vernacular usage. However, many of the local people call their home or birthplace (*janmasthan*) Banāras, thus its residents are known as *banārasis*.

Its third name, Kāshī, means the “luminous one” or “city of light”. As noted by Chandramouli, “...the *Skanda Purana* explains that Kāshī lights up the path of *mokṣa*” or liberation through its radiance (5). As a scholar of religious studies, Diana Eck attempts to generate an accurate representation of the city through the eyes of a Hindu in her book *Banāras: City of Light*:

Kāshī is the whole world, they say. Everything on earth that is powerful and auspicious is here, in this microcosm. All of the sacred places of India and all of her sacred waters are here. All of the gods reside here, attracted by the brilliance of the City of Light. (23)

The sacredness of Kāshī is “derived from sets of triads,” states Chandramouli, including “the trinity of Lord Śiva, Ma Ganga and the Mukti Kshetra Kāshī” and “the trinity of

Varuna, Asi and Kāshī” (3). Similarly, Eck quotes from the Kāshī Khanda to exemplify the powerful nature of the congruence of “the city of Kāshī, the Lord Śiva Vishveshvara, and the River Ganges: *This we know for certain: Where the River of Heaven / Flows in the Forest of Bliss of Śiva, / There is mokṣa guaranteed*” (212). *Mokṣa* as mentioned here is the Hindi translation of liberation or the escape from *saṃsāra*, the continuous cycle of death and rebirth. Thought of as the center of the universe, Kāshī is one of the most important places for Hindu pilgrimage in all of India. While Kāshī is the center of the world, it is thought to reside above this earth, atop the mythological trident of Śiva. It is regarded as the city of Lord Śiva, the god of destruction. Though he is thought to reside everywhere and within everything, he is said to especially reside within the boundaries of the City of Light.

The sacrality of the land is further amplified by its proximity to the Ganges River, from which flights of long, steep steps emerge, known as *ghāṭs*, reaching towards the center of the city. The *ghāṭs* are filled with life; boatmen line the walkways, awaiting new customers, washer men (*dhobī-wale*) do their work ankle-deep in the water, men gather around Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ for chai as they watch the human cremations below, young boys grab the attention of tourists with their games of cricket, and women perform *pūjā* for their family’s prosperity at the edge of the water. The Ganges is no ordinary river; its waters, originating from the River of Heaven, are believed to purify and heal both the physical and spiritual ailments of those with whom it comes in contact.

Additionally, Kāshī is regarded as a crossroads between this worldly life on earth and that of the transcendent *Brahman*. It is said that if one dies within its boundaries, between Assī Ghāṭ and Rāj Ghāṭ, then one is automatically released from the cycle of

saṃsāra, the circle of life and death in which all beings who have not yet attained *mokṣa* reside. Hindus make pilgrimage here both during their lifetime to receive the blessings of the city and at the time of death to be ceremoniously cremated and led to *mokṣa*, as one's ashes are dispersed in the waters of the Ganges River. This fervent religious nature eased my efforts in meeting holy women, especially when directed to the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram. While Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī lived adjacent to the āshram, her life was not bound up in the everyday workings of it, thus I ended up performing most of my research outside of the āshram and in the city of Banāras itself.

Terminology

This paper aims to complicate the definition of lived renunciation and its relation to gender; however, to do so, I must first define its terminology. Asceticism is defined by abstention from worldly pleasures, often in pursuit of a spiritual goal. Though this accurately represents Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī, it also can describe male and female householders, for many female householders in the city of Banāras undergo frequent ritual fasts for Hindu festivals, during which they undergo temporary asceticism—abstaining from the worldly indulgences of food in hopes of increasing good karma, generally for their husband or their family. That said, an ascetic (m. *sādhu*; f. *sādvhī*) is a more clearly defined term for holy persons in India. “Renunciation (*sannyās*) is a specific type of asceticism and its initiates (m. *sannyāsī*; f. *sannyāsīnī*)” have renounced worldly pleasures as a permanent and central aspect of their religious vocation (Khandelwal 2).

Sannyāsīs are distinguished from the more general *sādhu* through their *dīkṣā* (initiation) into a specific line of gurus, representing the death of their former householder life.

Though there are female terms for both a holy person (*sādhvī*) and a renunciant (*sannyāsīnī*), I found that most female ascetics, including Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī, would refer to themselves and other female ascetics using male-centric terms (*sādhu* and *sannyāsī*). Similarly, most persons outside the religious community would often refer to female ascetics by terms traditionally reserved for men (*sādhu* and *sannyāsī*). The term *sādhvī* (a female *sādhu*) was only used by academic scholars or field assistants who wanted to remain politically correct. The use of *sādhvī* posed an issue, for it refers to both a female ascetic as well as the wife of a male *sādhu* (Khandelwal 7). In acknowledgement of this ambiguity, many of the female ascetics within this community used the terms *sādhu*, occasionally marking it with the word ‘female’ or ‘lady’ to distinguish gender.

The process of creating a clear distinction between *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs* was particularly difficult considering that many of the informants with whom I spoke made no such distinction. They used the terms interchangeably, for Dādī Mā considered herself both a *sannyāsī* as well as a *sādhu*. Additionally, there were many women who had an outer appearance of either a *sādhu* or a *sannyāsī* but fit into neither category; they identified as widow, one who lived an ascetic life similar to a *sādhu* after her husband’s death but did not necessarily have the aim of spiritual advancement. In order to formulate a clearer understanding of my informants and their community, I had to understand the aforementioned traditional and textbook definitions as well as grasp the titles and definitions that the informants themselves used. Within this thesis, I have opted to represent the informants as authentically as possible, thus I have chosen to refer to the

female ascetics using the same terminology by which they refer to themselves. This includes using the terms *sādhu* and *sannyāsī* for female ascetics regardless of their traditional identification for holy men or renunciants.

Lived Representations of Renunciation Versus Textual Ideals

The *Laws of Manu*, an ancient and well-studied text that outlines the laws of Hinduism, provides an exemplary description of the ideal life-style of a renouncer:

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

Based on textual accounts like this, which emphasize the isolated nature of *sannyāsīs*, early Indologists like the twentieth century French structuralist Louis Dumont conceived of *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs* as lonesome wanderers. Dumont defines renunciants as individuals who pursue salvation rather than an “explicitly societal aim” (Hausner 190).

Dumont further emphasizes renunciation as a separation from the world rather than a new mode of relationality within it. By determining that renunciants ideally live

outside of structured society, thus separating themselves from the hierarchies of caste and worldly concerns, his findings reflect the textual ideals within the *Upanishads*. He discusses *sādhus* based upon their oppositional or dualistic relationships with Hindu society. In his essay “World Renunciation in Indian Religions,” he proposes a simple binary relationship that split Hindu thought and practice into two opposing categories: this-worldly householder and otherworldly renouncer (Hausner 196). Such a framework proves to be overly simplistic and static to accurately represent Hindu society, thus many succeeding scholars have challenged his work. Though the lived nature of Hindu practice is more complex than Dumont’s proposed model of dualism, it is not, as Sondra Hausner mentions, a completely foreign concept to renunciators themselves and remains relevant in cultural anthropological studies today.

Dumont’s oppositional model of renunciation has recently been corrected with a more social integrative model that takes into account interactions and relations that *sādhus* have with householders as well as with their own itinerant communities. In Hausner’s research on how “...space, time, and matter are constructed, experienced, and understood by *sādhus*,” she complicates Dumont’s dualistic model of this-worldly householder and otherworldly renouncer (2). Hausner instead views social and bodily practices through a religious lens, finding that “renunciators insist upon the split between soul and body because it is a powerful metaphor for the split they enact from householder society” (183). Thus, she claims, “...the ideological relationship that [Dumont] posited between householders and renunciators is consistent with renunciators’ own views of their social relations” (197). Upon initiation, renunciators align themselves with the space and time of the divine, therefore inhabiting a position of marginality outside of the normative

but in alignment with a transcendental realm. Hausner discusses tangible social advantages of such an alignment—transcendence of householder society ideally allows those of low status to translate their social weakness into social power by a physical and ideological separation from Brahmanical hegemony (184). Hausner reinforces aspects of religious dualism as related to the gross body by stating that transcendence of the body acts as a “symbol of separation” between the “social, material world” inhabited by householders and the “transcendent plane” experienced by *sādhus* (187). Renunciants actually ascribe to dualism themselves upon their initiation, *dīkṣā*, into *sādhuhood* through the symbolic death of their “this-worldly” life and body. Ascribing such an idealistic model of dualism to renunciation still fails to holistically define it.

Such textual ideals of solitude may disregard the communal aspects of ascetic life and are understood as more of an anomaly than a consistent reflection of ethnographic realities. Hausner asserts that renunciants, even those of wandering nature or in isolation, form a sense of community and that “renouncer life is actually a social experience;” induction into a populated lineage through the commitment to a guru and shared ideological views of *saṃsāra* as illusory are but two examples that shape renunciants into a “cultural unit” (190). This relational aspect of renunciation extends beyond the *sādhu* community and infiltrates that of householder society, such that the relationship between *sādhus* and householders has been pinned as one of mutual dependency. From her research on an individual holy man, whom she referred to as *Swamiji*, Kirin Narayan claimed that “the act of renunciation may in fact push an ascetic into more extensive social involvement than if he or she remained a layperson” (79). This is particularly true in the case of female *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs* who have voluntarily left the role of female

householder, which, due to social norms, is mainly lived within the private sphere. Based on the observations of *Swamiji* as a storyteller, Narayan gathered that a *sādhu*'s attributes “emerge” through his or her own interaction with other characters (232). A story acts as a roundabout medium for the transmission of a moral and allows the listener to become caught up in its believability, thus it endows meaning to the listener's experience and creates a greater impact on his or her life (243). This not only required, but also invited social interaction between renunciants and householders.

Narayan's research on *Swamiji* as a prominent guru helps to shape our understanding of the relationship between a guru and a disciple. A guru is an enlightened being who “acts as a mediator between the world of illusions and the ultimate reality” for his or her disciples and, in return, disciples pay respect to their guru as they would to an image in a temple (Narayan 82). Though viewed as divine by his or her disciples, a guru is not a fully perfected being; as quoted by Narayan, *Swamiji* says, “As long as a person eats, there are imperfections” (85). *Swamiji*, though a highly praised guru, remained inadvertently bound up in the material world through the retention of purity rituals from his earlier life as a Brahmin. Concerned with the cultural impurities associated with menstruation, he created a physical separation between women and himself, his food, and his altar.

In *The Graceful Guru*, Lisa Hallstrom, a leading scholar on the life and teachings of Mā Ānandamayī, discusses gender issues surrounding renunciation in terms of social behavior and guru-disciple relations. Through her investigation of Mā Ānandamayī's role as a female guru, Hallstrom found that Mā Ānandamayī's female devotees felt a greater sense of intimacy and closeness with Mā Ānandamayī than their male counterparts (92).

Though this exclusion of men lies in contrast to Narayan’s research on the life of the male guru *Swamiji* in which women are pushed to the periphery, both are based upon the same cultural prohibitions that govern the relations between unrelated men and women in India. Gender, in and of itself, is a socially constructed concept, thus the issue of gender limitations within renunciation should be regarded in terms of relationality. Conceived as an avatar or perfected being, Mā Ānandamayī provided her female devotees with the opportunity “to swim with God, to sleep next to God, to feed God, or to comb God’s hair” (Hallstrom 93). Such physical closeness and interaction with a guru instilled a great sense of empowerment and spiritual equality in Hallstrom’s female informants.

In similar terms, DeNapoli insists on the importance of recognizing the gendered construction of female *sādhus*’ narratives as an alternative to the textual traditional of their male counterparts. In her research on female *sādhus* in Rajasthan, DeNapoli illustrates elements of *bhakti*, “duty, destiny and devotion,” as central to female *sādhus*’ expression of *sannyās*. She claims that female *sādhus* both legitimize their practice of devotional asceticism and stand against the patriarchy of Brahmanical asceticism by aligning their practices with the larger, well-established lineage of *bhakti*, or “the sweeter mode of *sannyās*” (DeNapoli 17). She states that in the performance of *bhajans*, or devotional song, “*sādhus* take the Brahmanical renunciant values of suffering, sacrifice, and struggle and selectively adjust their meanings in light of multifaceted *bhakti* frameworks to craft vernacular asceticism in Rajasthan,” a life of singing that “enacts a divine call of duty and devotion to God, to one’s spiritual community, or to one’s guru” (DeNapoli, 34). In *Real Sadhus Sing to God*, DeNapoli states that “singing *bhajans*

establishes a female way of being a *sādhū* in the world” and proposes this as a new model through which we can view and analyze Hindu renunciation in Northern India (2).

Findings from my experiential research with Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī similarly establish a particularly female way of being a *sannyāsī* within a highly patriarchal Indian society. I argue that female *sannyāsīs* retain gendered characteristics from their former householder life which are expressed through the relationships they form during renunciation. Renunciation, in general, is relational and expands beyond the binary model proposed by Dumont; however, this relationality is greatly magnified for female *sannyāsīs*. Leaving a society ruled by men and entering into a mode of renunciation defined for men, female *sannyāsīs* are a social anomaly in their minority as well as in their rebellion against the traditional female role as wife. As a way of justifying and authenticating their new role as *sannyāsī*, female ascetics center themselves within a supportive web of spiritual relationships that include female gurus, other female ascetics and Hindu gods.

Mā Ānandamayī as Mother

Upon her initiation into asceticism, Dādī Mā took up residence at the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram in Vārānasī, India, devoting herself entirely to her female guru, Mā Ānandamayī. Due to their roles as avatar and sannyāsī which are ideologically separated from gender, neither Mā Ānandamayī nor Dādī Mā, respectively, identified as female; however, both remained within a female body. Embodiment becomes a pivotal element in defining the relationship between guru and disciple. Due to the social constructs of gender and its related regulations, as devotees, women cannot achieve a closeness to male gurus as their male counterparts are able. The reverse is true when the guru is a woman. Thus, the intimacy with which Dādī Mā was capable of relating to Mā Ānandamayī as both mother and guru illustrates an female mode of renunciation.

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As a female devotee, Dādī Mā achieved intimacies with and received both emotional and spiritual support from her female guru Mā Ānandamayī. Mā Ānandamayī, or Mother of Bliss, was born into a poor Brahmin family in Kheora, Bengal (Hallstrom, 86). At birth, she was given the name Nirmālā Sundari, meaning “the taintlessly beautiful one,” a name that devotees later claimed to be well suited (Mukerji, 8). From a young age, even as a small baby, Nirmālā was recognized as having divine-like characteristics and, according to the many biographies written about her, she engaged in behaviors that were considered odd for a child such as sitting and meditating for hours on end. Nirmālā

was married at the age of twelve, however she did not adopt the traditional role of a housewife; instead of attending to her assigned household obligations, she continued to spend the majority of her time meditating and residing within a state of *samādhi* (Mukerji 46).

Those who knew Nirmālā, or Mā (Mother) as she came to be addressed by her devotees, were struck by her luminous spiritual state and, in a gesture of great humility, would bow their heads and bodies in respect (Mukerji 48). Lisa Hallstrom reflects on the power of Mā Ānandamayī's presence in *The Graceful Guru*, stating that her devotees would commonly report "...that one glance from Mā [Ānandamayī] awakened in them a spiritual energy so powerful as to redirect their entire life" (86). My yoga guru in Vārānasī, Smritī Singh, who married into the family of Mā Ānandamayī, spoke of her as a saint, "My grandmother was very high. Mā Ānandamayī was a great soul, divine soul. That kind of soul is very few now in India, one who lives within their heart center and has full realization of it."

Though Mā Ānandamayī was born a woman, she was not subject to the social regulations by which many other Indian women are oppressed. She articulated this transcendence of gender roles through the rejection of her "dharma, or sacred duty, as a Hindu wife", which although it initially bewildered her husband, was later accepted by him due to the recognition of Nirmālā as an avatar, or manifestation of a Hindu god. Thus, Mā Ānandamayī was neither attributed gendered characteristics nor was she thought of as a saint or a guru; instead, she was recognized as an avatar, "as God who came in the form of a woman for the sake of her devotees" (Hallstrom 86). Hallstrom clarifies devotees' claim of Mā Ānandamayī as God, "There is a multiplicity of concepts

reflected in that assertion: Ma is the incarnation of formless *Brahman*... Ma is the avatar of Vishnu, or simply Ma is my *ishta devata*, my chosen deity” (112). Mā Ānandamayī was worshipped by her devotees as a perfected human being, one who had already attained spiritual liberation upon birth. Still, due to her rebirth in the form of a female body, physical closeness to Mā Ānandamayī—and therefore, to *Brahmān*—was more accessible to women.

This privileged access to Mā Ānandamayī offered female devotees the spiritual opportunity to have a close relationship with *Brahmān*: however, Hallstrom notes that the act of caring for and being cared for by Mā Ānandamayī also offered them an emotional opportunity. Mā Ānandamayī fulfilled a motherly role that was lacking for married devotees. Hallstrom explains that when Hindu and Bengali women are married off and separated from their birth mothers, they are left to receive motherly attention from their mother-in-law, which may be little or none (95). Many of Hallstrom’s informants mentioned that “the kind of intimacy that they enjoyed with Mā [Ānandamayī] mirrored their relationship with their biological Mā” (96). The level of emotional support that Mā Ānandamayī offered these women could even be regarded as higher than the nourishment they received from their own birth mothers and also reflects the gendered value of the guru-disciple relationship. Such was the case with Dādī Mā.

Over the course of my time with Dādī Mā, I came to know her life through her stories and, even more so, through her songs. From interviews with other female *sādhus*, I had had become accustomed to not using a voice recorder so I followed suit during my initial visits with Dādī Mā. Since my Hindi was only conversational and Dādī Mā carried on garrulously, leaving neither time for translation nor space for questions, I determined

that my research would be nearly impossible without a recorder. While seated in her room one day—she, on her blanketed plywood bed and I, at her feet on the floor—she interrupted herself mid-thought and broke into a devotional song about her yearning for Mā Ānandamayī which I recorded. Dadi Ma used the time during which I visited her as an opportunity to share her life story through the songs she had once written. Upon completion of one of her Bengali songs, she related her passion for singing back to her birth mother, “My mother sang very well. She knew singing and whenever I sang in front of her, she didn’t like it and would tell me that I sing very badly. But Mā [Ānandamayī] liked my singing. She thought that I had my own voice and didn’t copy anyone.”

Dādī Mā spoke often and only highly of Mā Ānandamayī, however from all of our conversations, this was one of the few times she ever mentioned her birth mother, and it was in a negative light. Her sullen tone was overcome by a beaming pride when she told us of Mā Ānandamayī’s approval of her singing; in her eyes, the only approval that mattered was that of Mā Ānandamayī. Any discouragement Dādī Mā felt from the judgment of her birthmother was outweighed by Mā Ānandamayī’s encouraging and loving words. This filial relation to Mā Ānandamayī is common of many female devotees, as is mentioned in Hallstrom’s research on devotees’ relation to Mā Ānandamayī during her lifetime.

Though my findings concentrated on Dādī Mā’s relation to Mā Ānandamayī after her passing, Hallstrom’s findings are still pertinent. In fact, the emotional support that Mā Ānandamayī provided for her female devotees becomes even more important following her death. Here, translated to English from Dādī Mā’s Hindi translation, is one of Dādī Mā’s Bengali songs in which the role of mother was clearly assigned to Mā Ānandamayī:

I want Mā, just like a small child always wants to be with his mom, I want to be with Mā all the time. There is nothing else that I yearn for.

In this verse, Dādī Mā likens herself to a “small child” and, in doing so reveals a clear dependency on Mā Ānandamayī. It is not that she yearns for this emotional connection out of desire, but rather out of need. Dādī Mā’s connection with Mā Ānandamayī is a living example of the intimacies that women often achieve with their female gurus. She had, in fact, redirected her life so that Mā Ānandamayī had become, not only an integral part of her life, but, the central driving force of her identity and religious practices. As a deceased guru, Mā Ānandamayī represented both a motherly figure as well as *Vaikuntha*. As exemplified below, many of Dādī Mā’s conversations and devotional songs often led back to her persistent yearning to be reunited with Mā Ānandamayī in this spiritual realm outside of *saṃsāra*:

*I feel turmoil inside my heart
remembering your name (mother)
As much as I say to my mind not to cry,
Not to hurt, mother.
My heart does not listen to any words
It keeps on saying that thing
Keeps on wanting mother.*

I cannot spare a day without mother.

I cannot spare a night too without you mother.

I feel turmoil inside my heart

remembering your name (mother)

As much as I say to my mind not to cry,

Not to hurt, mother.

My heart does not listen to any words

It keeps on saying that thing

Keeps on wanting mother.

Who else has a beautiful smile like her?

Who else has a beautiful speech like her?

Who else has eyes full of love except her?

I feel turmoil inside my heart

remembering your name (mother)

As much as I say to my mind not to cry,

Not to hurt, mother.

My heart does not listen to any words

It keeps on saying that thing

Keeps on wanting mother.

I don't feel like this worldly game anymore.

I don't feel like this worldly game anymore.

“When I am singing these songs, I start crying,” she told me. Dādī Mā explained that she does not necessarily cry out of a sadness, but instead, out of deep devotion. In this song, she expresses her deep love for Mā Ānandamayī, putting her above all else. Regardless of how Dādī Mā tries to resist her yearning for Mā Ānandamayī, her mind and her heart are not strong enough. “So I yearn for that Mā [Ānandamayī] all the time. I can't stay without her for even a bit. Who wants to play the games of this materialistic world? I don't want to be here. I would like to go to *Vaikuntha* to be with my Mā [Ānandamayī]. Definitely, definitely, definitely. It fills my eyes with tears when I think of my Mā [Ānandamayī]. I just keep praying for her to take me from here, to her.”

Aforementioned, Mā Ānandamayī does not only represent a motherly figure who provides love and comfort but is also a passageway to *Vaikuntha* (the home or realm within which Vishnu resides). Thus, over all desires, Dādī Mā yearns to be free and be reunited with Mā Ānandamayī outside of *saṃsāra*, the realm of death and rebirth.

Dādī Mā's fervent devotion to Mā Ānandamayī was regularly revealed to me during our visits together. One morning, as I sat with Dādī Mā and Pragya, my translator, our conversation was interrupted by a rustling in the stack of cardboard boxes lining the back wall of her room. I had become accustomed to hearing the chirps and squeals of mice during our visits, however I had not yet seen one. That morning, though, a small mouse managed to make its way onto a thin clothesline that spanned the width of the

room. Dangling from the middle of the string just above my head, the mouse struggled to maintain its balance as it swayed side-to-side with the momentum of the wire. Pragma let out a shriek. Dādī Mā quickly but calmly lifted herself to her feet to loosen the mouse’s tight hold from the wire. As if consoling a small infant, she murmured to the mouse and cradled it to safety.

As the mouse scurried back to its hiding place, Dādī Mā motioned toward the half-eaten bowl of rice on the floor and explained, “I get five *rotī* and some rice and I eat only two *rotī*. I keep the rest for my children, for my mice.” Living within the confines of an āshram, Dādī Mā neither had the means to buy herself food nor the space to prepare meals, so she received all of her meals from the resident cook of the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram. The food consumed by her mice, or children as she called them, was actually left as *prasād*, a religious offering of food, for Mā Ānandamayī. From each meal Dādī Mā was given, she left at least half of its contents as *prasād* for Mā Ānandamayī; however, Dādī Mā complained of the quality of the food as it was not up to her standards as this religious offering, “*Sādhūs* and *sannyāsīs* are not supposed to eat too much spice or salt. How am I supposed to eat this? How is my Mā [Ānandamayī] supposed to eat this?”

As is demonstrated through her actions and words, Dādī Mā prioritizes Mā Ānandamayī above all else, including herself. The quality of the food does not have significance for her own consumption but only as *prasād* for Mā Ānandamayī. Dādī Mā’s tendency to address Mā Ānandamayī as “my” also exhibits an emotional and spiritual connection that extends beyond the typical relations between a guru and disciple. This expressed closeness to Mā Ānandamayī is characteristic of female devotees to their female gurus.

Her consistent offering of *prasād* legitimizes her role as a *sannyāsī*. The *dāl* and *rotī* left as *prasād* is not actually consumed by Mā Ānandamayī, thus it invites a community of mice to fill her home. The way in which Dādī Mā kindly welcomes and regards the mice also speaks to her authenticity as a *sannyāsī*, “These mice, they rule over my house. It is their kingdom. They play around and eat and play around without fearing anyone else in my room. Yesterday, I had this *dāl* and the mice just ran over it. Their little feet may be dirty but I still ate the *dāl*. I didn’t mind because they are like my children. This is how my heart is.” Mā Ānandamayī taught that “to see yourself in everyone and to realize that everyone is in you is the supreme aim of spiritual knowledge” (Mukerji 43). Dādī Mā acknowledges Mā Ānandamayī within herself as well as within the mice, thus her embrace of the mice demonstrates her “supreme” attainment of spiritual knowledge in regards to Mā Ānandamayī’s teachings.

During one of our impromptu visits, Dādī Mā introduced me to her *jāp* practice, to which she is so dedicated that she was referred to as *Jāpmālā* by the other *sādhūs* at the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram. It was late in the morning when Sundarji and I met outside of her room. Though we had made plans to meet with Dādī Mā, there was no assurance that she would actually be there as she followed no one’s schedule but her own. We found signs that she was home for the door was slightly ajar and the exterior padlock unlocked, but the window remained closed and the room was dark. Sundarji knocked on the door, “Dādī Mā? Dādī Mā? It’s Sundar and Morgan. We are here to see you.”

We heard the rustling of fabric and a distant groan from behind the splintered wooden door, “One minute. I am coming.” Dādī Mā had been out very early that morning and, exhausted from the morning activities, fell into a mid-morning slumber upon her

arrival home. We were catching her at the tail end of her nap. She fabricated the saffron cloth above her head into a hood to cover her salt and pepper hair as she pushed open the screen door and greeted us with a warm smile. I was happy to see her; however, feeling disconcerted for disrupting Dādī Mā's rest, Sundarji murmured an apology on our behalf. "Do not apologize," she interjected, waving her hands in the air in contempt. "It was a great thing that you came here, otherwise I could have slept the entire day. How am I supposed to do my spiritual duties if I am sleeping?" Sundarji and I took our respective seats as Dādī Mā accustomed herself with her awakened state. Instead of sitting on her bed, she sat on the short wooden stool that resembled something more like a crate and reached within her robe to reveal the three sets of *rudrākṣa mālās* that hung around her neck. She explained to us that she must perform her *jāp* every time she wakes to rid herself of the evil spirits that may have visited during her unconscious state and asked for our forgiveness for the delay. Before performing *jāp*, Dādī Mā completed a purification ritual to cleanse both her *mālās* and herself—she dipped her fingers in the holy water from the Ganges river, flicked the droplets over her head and poured a small amount into her mouth after completely immersing each *mālā* in the purifying waters.

Dādī Mā lifted one of the *mālās* over her head and placed it in a piece of cloth into which she also slipped her right hand. She explained that while performing *jāp*, the *mālā* should always be hidden from sight due to the belief that surrounding spirits might appropriate the blessings from mantra recitation if they can see the *mālā* itself.

Additionally, neither the forefinger nor the nails of your fingers should come in contact with the beads, for it takes away from the blessings that can be culminated through such a meditation. The method of physically moving the beads was very particular and Dādī Mā

demonstrated how each should be moved between the thumb, middle and ring finger only.

Dādī Mā performed one round of *jāp* for each of her three *mālās* around her neck. A single knot disjointed the configuration of the 108 beads, signifying its beginning and end and, thus, the completion of one round of mantra meditation. Using the beads as a placeholder for one repetition of a mantra, Dādī Mā recited, silently, each of her three mantras 108 times. The mantras she was internally chanting were kept to herself due to the secretive nature of a received mantra from a guru. Her movements were quick and rehearsed, yet intentional. Her eyelids remained soft and heavy, lifting only slightly to guide her hands to her small container of holy water. She designated only one mantra per *mālā* so for each round of *jāp*, she changed *mālās*. During this time, she would also slowly and deliberately roll out her neck and shoulders, both clockwise and counterclockwise. She explained that this physical movement created a clear break between each *mantra*, allowing her the opportunity to reset her intentions as well as maintain an upright and straight posture.

“I always sit straight while doing *jāp* or meditation in the name of Mā [Ānandamayī]. The Lord *Sushumnā Nādi*, the center channel within your body, must be kept straight in order to allow the *Māhā Vāyu* or *amrit* (nectar) to flow freely. While doing *jāp* or *dhyānā* (meditation), the nectar flows through your forehead and into your body. When you do *jāp* with single-minded concentration, the nectar flows through your body from your forehead, feeding the *kundalini* (energy) around around the *sushumnā*. What is that energy in the form of physically? It is in the form of *vāyu* (air). When the soul leaves the body, it reaches heaven through this *vāyu*.” Dādī Mā performed *jāp*

everyday, multiple times a day, rising as early as two o'clock in the morning to perform her daily rituals with the single-minded concentration on Mā Ānandamayī. Such rituals consisted of *jāp* (mantra recitation with *mālās*), meditation and devotional singing in the name of Mā Ānandamayī.

Mā Ānandamayī not only provides the emotional support for Dādī Mā to persist on her spiritual journey, she *is* the purpose of her journey. Mā Ānandamayī represents the escape from *saṃsāra*, a *sannyāsī*'s ultimate goal, as well as the role of mother. This is reflected in Dādī Mā's everyday life through her devotional songs, offerings and praise of Mā Ānandamayī. The intimacy that Dādī Mā shared with Mā Ānandamayī transcended the relationship of Mā Ānandamayī as a guru or a motherly figure—she so closely identified with Mā Ānandamayī that her identity became intimately bound up in her guru's identity.

* * *

Due to Mā Ānandamayī's rebirth as a woman, Dādī Mā was given the spiritual opportunity to have an intimate relationship with the gods, or Brahmān, that would not have been accessible to her with a male guru. Female gurus are less common than male gurus in India today; however, as is mentioned in The Graceful Guru, they have recently emerged from the private sphere into that which is more public. Dādī Mā's devotion to her female guru only grew stronger following Mā Ānandamayī's death, for she represented Vaikuntha. Such devotion was expressed through Dādī Mā's daily repetition of mantras, offerings, and songs all in the name of Mā Ānandamayī. Dādī Mā's persistent

*yearning to be reunited with Mā Ānandamayī as mother within a transcendent realm
speaks to a dependency that is illustrative of female devotees to their female gurus.*

Dādī Mā's Delayed Asceticism

From childhood, Swāmī Āmrītanandā Gīdī yearned to be close to the Hindu gods. Realizing that dedicated meditation was the only sustainable method by which she could reach this goal, Dādī Mā decided at a young age that she wanted to embark on the path of asceticism. This desire to become a renunciant was disregarded by Dādī Mā's Bengali family. Instead, they insisted upon her obligations as an Indian woman and eventually forced her into an arranged marriage. Thus, Dādī Mā's marital ties restrained her from becoming a sannyāsī until later in life by steering her through the stages of householder.

* * *

“I always wanted to become a *sannyāsī*. I loved the color of saffron that the *sādhūs* wear,” Dādī Mā reflected. “My father didn't have a son that could become a *sannyāsī*, but he used to treat me like one, as I had big feet and legs. He would call me Arūn rather than Arūnā.” Dādī Mā's father called her a boy's name, Arūn, rather than that of a girl, Arūnā. She further explained that in the old tradition, one member of each generation in the family, generally a male, was chosen to become a *sādhū*, thus, influenced by her father's regard for her as Arūn, she decided she was best fit. Dādī Mā explained that one must bear a physical resemblance to the Hindu gods to become a *sannyāsī*, thus her small, button-like nose and her desire to become a *sannyāsī* made her the ideal candidate.

Dādī Mā's desire to become a *sannyāsī* persisted from her childhood through her marriage. She was not wed until the age of thirty-two, late within Indian standards, indicating that she intentionally put off the arrangement. Succumbing to family pressures to marry, Dādī Mā became a wholly dedicated wife, eventually loving her husband. Thus, it was not until her husband passed that she was able to embark on the path of renunciation. Both Dādī Mā and her husband were spiritually driven. They prayed and performed *jāp* together with the desire to attain *mokṣa* (liberation); however, since they were living as a couple, they remained as lay persons and householders. Unable to further pursue their spirituality due to their togetherness, Dādī Mā and her husband agreed that only once one of them passed would the survivor transition into the life of renunciation. Dādī Mā reasoned that her husband's large nose, in comparison to her small nose that resembled the Hindu gods, would have been a big hindrance to his asceticism. Also, since Dādī Mā's husband was fourteen years older, she felt she was the best fit to become a *sannyāsī*. When Dādī Mā proposed that she should be the one to embark on the path of asceticism, her husband was initially bewildered because the role of renunciant is traditionally embraced by men; however, once she framed her asceticism for the liberation of them *both*, he consented.

“After my husband's death, I was so sad. He loved me so much,” Dādī Mā recounted to me one day as she slowly sipped the steaming chai from her metal cup, careful not to burn her lips and tongue. “That is why I became a *sannyāsī* after he passed.” As the steam from her chai reached around and caressed the edges of her face, she acknowledged her former life as a householder and reflected on the events that had brought her to the present. She revisited her past without becoming engulfed by her

thoughts and emotions, maintaining the remoteness with which one scans the hazy horizon of the Ganges, where water and sky mingle into oneness. She spoke of grief, yet her disposition conveyed a calmness that reflected an acceptance of her husband's death, "Someone once told me that you should ask Mā [Ānandamayī] for your husband to always be with you and to have a long life. I told them, 'No. Why would I want to do that?' I want my husband to die before me because I want him to attain *mokṣa*. I put a garland on him when I married him. How could I put a noose around his neck now? I want him to be free. I want him to leave this world forever. He was not feeling very well. I would rather him leave and attain *mokṣa*."

By putting a garland around her husband's neck at their wedding, Dādī Mā made the decision to delay her asceticism and instead align herself with the social obligations of a female Indian householder. Following the textual ideals of *stridharma* (religious codification of women's duties), Indian women are conditioned to view their husband as a living Hindu god, "...taught that by worshipping their husbands they are fulfilling their duty toward the gods" (Gatwood 96). It is expected women ensure the well-being of their husbands and children, rather than pursue any personal religious endeavors. Dādī Mā succumbed to the expectations of a female householder through her devotion to her husband, for, even despite physical abuse, she refused to question her husband's motives. Rather than denying her husband's abuse, Dādī Mā redefined it, "I used to tell people that my husband would beat me up, not with a stick or anything, but with *love*." Instead of withdrawing from the relationship, she somehow endured the emotional and physical pains and persisted in her unwavering devotion to her husband even after his death.

Dādī Mā's decision to become a *sannyāsī* was not one of pure personal aim but due to the wifely obligations that emerged from her forced marriage, she also renounced for the liberation of her husband. This aspect of her renunciation is particularly gendered, for male renunciants have the opportunity, and can often be encouraged, to follow a lone spiritual path at a young age. Instead, Dādī Mā's renunciation was delayed by marriage, her wifely obligations carrying over past her husband's death. Traditionally, to help the deceased reach *pitṛloka*, the abode of the ancestors or "world of the fathers," the eldest son must perform funeral rites and help with the cremation. If one has no son, the duty is then passed to the grandson. With neither a son nor a grandson, Dādī Mā took this responsibility upon herself. With overwhelming strength, she maintained her composure, withholding all of her tears until the twelfth day after her husband's death—the moment when all of the rituals are commenced and her husband's soul is no longer lingering on this earth. It was at this moment, only, that she allowed herself to break down.

Though this was a past episode in her life, she spoke of it in the present, which emoted its lingering significance to her. "If I cry, then his soul would feel for me and he would wander back to this life. So to free him from all of the worldly ties, *sansarik bandhan*, I cannot show any affection. I cannot cry. If he came back into this world, then I would also have to come back in this life again to be his wife." The strength that Dādī Mā was capable of manifesting at such a vulnerable moment in her life struck me as nothing less than remarkable, especially in contrast to the many funerals I had observed while living in Vārānasī.

There are two main *ghāṭs* on which funeral rites are typically performed in Vārānasī and out of the two, Maṅikarṇikā is the most frequently visited. Without pause,

all through the night and day, men construct piles of wood onto which the recently deceased are placed and then cremated. It was not the putridity of burning flesh or the solid walls of smoke that rose from the pyres, slugging me with such force that I crumpled at the waist, breathless, and began tearing up uncontrollably, but the hysterics of the women at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ that was so emotionally striking. As processions marched through the narrow *galīs*, each member chanting the name of Rām in the hopes that it would further carry the soul of the deceased out of this world, shrieks bounced off the brick walls of the buildings and echoed into the city. I hardly noticed the composure of the men at the scene of the funeral as I walked past them along the top step of the *ghāṭ*, fifteen feet removed. As my feet moved forward, my head, tied to the scene by a string of curiosity, jerked back. I caught one final glimpse: a woman of small stature collapsed into the arms of another woman, relying entirely upon her strength. Her grief over her late husband was readily visible as she convulsed in synch with her sobs.

Like the woman I observed at Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ, Dādī Mā grieved over her husband after his death, but only briefly and only after he reached *pitṛloka*. Her desire to attain *mukti* was so strong that she made valiant efforts to rid herself of all emotional ties. “After my husband’s death, I was so sad. Sometimes when I would meditate for Mā [Ānandamayī], he would appear in front of her. I would ask Mā [Ānandamayī] to remove him from there, because if I think about my husband, I will not get *mukti* (salvation) and in the next life I will be born as a man. Whoever you think about at the time of death is who you become in your next life. I don’t want to be back in this world. I have to go back to my Lord Kṛṣṇa.”

By renouncing after her husband's death, Dādī Mā actually adhered to the life stages of a female householder; however, her acquired status as a *sannyāsī* distinguished her from other Indian widows. She reiterated her contentment as a *sannyāsī*, “Now I don't want anything. No ornaments, no long hair. I don't want anyone to see my physical beauty. There is no need. I am happier this way because I am with *Brahman* now and he is with me too. If I didn't tell people, no one would know that I was married. People would call me a widow and have pity on me. Why should they call me a widow? I'd rather be known as a *sannyāsī*.” As textually prescribed, women are not given an identity of their own and are only identified in relation to their husband, so when their husband passes, they are viewed as pitiful and alone (Leslie 194). Though Dādī Mā prescribed to *stridharma* during her marriage, she diverged from most widows by choosing the path of *sannyāsī*, one with the aim of liberation through religious practices, rather than that of a grieving widow.

Shortly after her husband's death, Dādī Mā underwent the transformation to become a *sannyāsī*, receiving her *dīkṣā* (initiation) from a male guru. “Becoming a *sannyāsī* is very difficult,” she told me as she adjusted her saffron hood, pulling it forward and folding it with a fluency developed from repetition; I had seen her go through this motion of redressing her head already countless times. “I started by wearing a white robe for one year. Then I had to go to Kankhal to become a complete *sannyāsī*. This is where my guru, Swami Giridhar Narayan Puri Ji Maharaj, lived. He was the head of the Māhā Nirvani Akhara at the time.” Dādī Mā exchanged her white robe for that of an ochre color, signifying her change in status from an ascetic widow to a *sannyāsī*; however, it was unclear into which order of renunciation Dādī Mā was initiated, a

perception that was further convoluted through her variegated acts of piety. The monastic tradition of Shaiva, founded by Śaṅkara, worships Śiva, the destroyer, whereas Vaishnava is known for its worship of Vishnu, the preserver, or one of his incarnations such as Ram or Kṛṣṇa (Narayan 68). Dādī Mā's self-identification as a *sannyāsī* and the ochre-colored robes with which she was adorned during initiation indicate her Shaiva renunciation, for Vaishnava ascetics will commonly identify as “*bairagi*” or “*tyagi*” and wear yellow or white robes (Khandelwal 28). Similarly, Dādī Mā wore three strands of *rudrākṣa mālās*; mantra repetition with *rudrākṣa*, meaning, literally, the “Eye of Śiva,” situates Dādī Mā's ritual repetition of *jāp* within a Shaivite context (Eck 376). Conversely, Dādī Mā lived within the unaffiliated Mātā Ānandamayī āshram and was a clear devotee of Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Vishnu, thus her relation to the Hindu gods represented a divergence from Shaiva devotionism. Highlighting that *sannyāsa* does not necessarily lie within the confines of monastic order, Khandelwal suggests that “*sannyāsa* as is practiced outside the monastic structures is an eclectic and dynamic contemporary practice” (28). Thus, Dādī Mā's mode of renunciation does not cleanly fit within the parameters of either Vaishnava or Shaiva.

Dādī Mā's inhabitation within an āshram does, however, align her with other female renunciants, illustrating the well-defined segregation of men and women within religious-centric Indian cities—like Banāras. Traveling to Banāras from Calcutta, a cosmopolitan city, I noticed a drastic decline in the visibility of women in the public sphere. In Calcutta, women moved as freely as men in the streets—the couple with which I was staying were professional salsa dancers and when I was with them I felt comfortable in leaving the house wearing a shirt that revealed my shoulders, something I

had never done while living in Banāras. This sense of freedom was but an illusion back in Banāras—I returned to wearing three-quarter length sleeve *kurtīs* and wrapping my head in a thin scarf, regardless of the stifling heat. Even fully clothed, I received unwanted attention from every angle; much of this is likely because I was a white foreigner, but the sexual attention I received from strange men was also due to my gender. Every time I stepped out of my homestay or the study abroad program house, I felt myself, a female alone in the public sphere, inadvertently become the center of attention. Every man’s gaze burned my skin with the strength of the sun beneath a magnifying glass.

Such attention is not limited to foreigners or householders, for Dādī Mā’s initial struggle in becoming a *sannyāsī* reflects the challenges that come with renunciation while still living in a female body. Reflecting on her initiation in Kankhal, she explained that she had to stand naked in front of everyone at her initiation into *sādhuhood* and wait patiently to receive her saffron *sannyāsī* garments, “At the time when it happened to me, I joined my hands and remembered Ma and thought, ‘Who made this body? Mā [Ānandamayī] only. So Mā [Ānandamayī], I am not ashamed. It is your body and all the shame I owe to you. I just have to follow my guru and have to go naked.’” In a society in which women are draped in clothing and protected from the male gaze, such an incident of vulnerability is imaginably unbearable. In order to stand it, Dādī Mā drew strength from her intentions to become a *sannyāsī*—to renounce this worldly life along with its pleasures and possessions, including the human body. She explained that during initiation, there is a sacrificial fire that represents the sacrifice of the body and that from that moment onwards, *sannyāsīs* recognize themselves as only the five elements from which they believe everything is created: earth, air, fire, water and space. Though Dādī

Mā could not physically renounce or sacrifice her body without actually dying, she did so by attributing the ownership of her body to Mā Ānandamayī, her guru who had already passed away and resided outside of *samsāra*.

The more frequently my translator, Sundarji, and I visited Dādī Mā, the more firmly he believed that she was a real *sannyāsī*, authentic and pure, and it was after she recounted such stories that I came to understand why it was so rare to come across such a person. Furthering this, one of my informants discussed how there are many *sannyāsīs* nowadays, but not all of them follow the life of a *sādhu*—one of an entirely complacent nature, according to her. Initiation into asceticism is a symbolic death of one’s human existence; however, it is common for a *sannyāsī* to endure the initiation yet still not be fully transformed due to their actual embodiment. Such paradoxical elements of Hindu renunciation are illuminated through Hausner’s research in *Wandering with Sadhus*.

Hindu renunciants are bound up in the material world due to their emergence from and interaction with the community of householders. As defined by Hauser, the body acts as “both a tool of practice and a trap of worldliness” and goes on to state, “in ideal terms, being a renouncer mediates between these two poles; the renouncer’s body is the link between the spatial-historical plane of social and material process and the transcendent, unified plane of knowledge” (188). Thus, it is understood that renunciants must remain both embedded in this spatial plane of social process as well as confined to an embodied experience regardless of their departure from social life or their efforts to transcend the constraints of the physical body.

Dādī Mā’s eventual integration into the community at the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram illustrates a gendered aspect of Hindu asceticism. At first, Dādī Mā lived in line

with textual ideals, wandering the streets and begging for food, but was quickly urged to move to Banāras to be with Mā Ānandamayī. Dādī Mā's return to Banāras was never fully explained, but it can be inferred that her guru suggested the move for the sake of her personal safety due to the dangers of being a lone female ascetic. India, Banāras especially, is full of wandering *sādhus*, but nearly all of them are men. Many banārasīs related to me that they had never even seen a lady *sādhu*; they had come in contact with many male *sādhus*, but never a female. I encountered a female *sādhu* in Banāras only once, kneeling on the *ghāṭs* outside of Kedār temple, performing a *pūjā*. The majority of female *sādhus* instead reside within the confines of an āshram—an enclosed space where, like at the Mātā Ānandamayī āshram, they are served warm meals, receive spiritual support from other women and are better shielded from the vulnerabilities of living as a woman in a patriarchal society. From within the āshram, female *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs* both interact with one another as well as with the householder community outside of the āshram.

This relation of *sannyāsīs* with what is assumed as a former householder life, is both intrinsic through embodiment and social through interaction; however, the authenticity of a *sannyāsī* is not dependent on his or her physical separation because renunciation is both lived and relational. Such social aspects of ascetic life can be found in other related ethnographies: female devotees find spiritual empowerment through their relations with Mā Ānandamayī in Lisa Hallstrom's chapter in *The Graceful Guru*, Kirin Narayan's key informant uses storytelling as a way to communicate morals to his disciples, and in Antoine Elizabeth's *Real Sadhus Sing to God*, female Rajasthani engage

in *bhakti* through singing *bhajans* amongst their spiritual community. Thus, authenticity is derived from a *sannyāsī*'s personal motives and internal perceptions.

As someone who never wanted to wed and dreamt of becoming a *sannyāsī* from a young age, Dādī Mā conditioned herself for the arduous process of initiation. She refused the sexual attention she received from her initiation, inhibiting it from infiltrating her thoughts and altering her deeply rooted intentions to transcend *samsāra*, “I felt bad for a second when I saw some of the boys nearby staring, but in another second I was fine. When I was naked, I thought to look over myself but then a thought came into my mind, ‘This very body that is standing is dead. Why would a dead body be ashamed of anything?’” Though initially challenged, Dādī Mā was unhindered by the mentioned difficulties of living in a patriarchal society because she already viewed herself as removed from the material world—her body was dead to her and her human form only temporary. This notion of death and the human body as illusory was reiterated during one of our visits, “Whenever I look at myself in the mirror, it’s not me. This face, this belongs to this body but it’s not mine. If it was me then why does the face change every time I look in the mirror? Sometimes I look completely black and I have a beautiful nose and big, beautiful eyes. And now look at me. I have such a small nose and such small eyes. Sometimes I become a girl. Sometimes I become a boy. Sometimes I become a cow. So, it changes. Why does it change? Why do I change forms every time I look in the mirror? Because it’s not me. My face is something completely different from what I see in the mirror. My real face is very beautiful. That is me. That is me. This is not me.” Such a declaration does not illustrate insanity or refusal to acknowledge her physical body, for Dādī Mā consciously coped with a swollen, injured knee about which she told me.

Instead, Dādī Mā is emphasizing the significance of her inner self over her physical body. *Sannyāsīs* regard the physical body as dead following their initiation into *sādhuhood*, thus all that ideally remains is the ethereal, spiritual body, what she remarks as her “real” and “beautiful” self.

As Dādī Mā has already undergone the funeral rites during her initiation into *sannyāsa* and considers herself dead, she explains that she will not be burned at Maṅikarṇikā Ghāṭ, “A *sannyāsī*, like me, will be tied to a big stone after a shower and an orange-colored cloth will be put over me. I will be tied on a boat. All of my *rudrākṣa mālās* will be kept on me. People will take me on a boat to the middle of the Ganges and they will just throw me in the water. When a normal human being dies, if he is a Brahmin, then on the eleventh day and if he is not a Brahmin, then on the thirteenth day, *sādhus* are invited for *bhaṇḍāra* (religious feast). After one year of death, a ritual is then performed in Gaya. These people attain *mokṣa* only after this, but we *sannyāsīs* attain *mokṣa* just sixteen days after death when *bhaṇḍāra* is organized for *sādhus*. That’s it. I’ll leave this earth forever. There is nothing else to be done.”

Death was a topic about which Dādī Mā spoke freely and frequently, for it represented not the end, but liberation, a freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth. Many of her devotional songs to Lord Kṛṣṇa linked back to this yearning to attain *mokṣa*:

How much further do I have to go, Lord?

I want to get to you.

How much further do I have to go, Lord?

I want to get to you.

You are full of bliss.

You are full of bliss.

You are not only bliss, oh Madhavam,

You are supreme bliss

Everywhere is just you.

In this song, Dādī Mā calls out to Mādhavām (the sweet one), or Lord Kṛṣṇa in this case, in a representative manner of Vaishnava devotionalism as propagated by Caitanya. Thought to have developed in correspondence with the *bhakti* movement, Vaishnava asceticism emphasizes connection to a personal deity (Narayan 69). Furthering this, Caitanya, who was thought to be an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa himself, initiated the cultivation of emotional devotion through the “fervent singing of songs about the love of Kṛṣṇa” (Bhandarkar 83). As illustrated above, and in the following section, Dādī Mā equates Lord Kṛṣṇa to *Brahman* (“ultimate Reality which is the source of all being and knowing”) (Eck 370). *Brahman* abides everywhere, without attributes or form, just as everywhere is Lord Kṛṣṇa in the above song (Khandelwal 27).

This song also speaks to Dādī Mā’s yearning to escape the realm of *saṃsāra* and be reunited with the Lord Kṛṣṇa and Mā Ānandamayī in *vaikuntha*. “We don’t want to live in this world anymore. We want Mā [Ānandamayī] to take us back,” Dādī Mā summarized. She addressed the act of dying as going *back*, as if returning to a familiar place, such as home. When regarding the Hindu gods as *Brahman*, Dādī Mā can then be defined in terms of *atma* (individual soul) which resides within each person—“...[*atma*] originates from and, eventually (at the time of liberation), merges back into *Brahman* as a

drop of water merges into an ocean” (Khandelwal 27). When Dādī Mā refers to her return to Lord Kṛṣṇa, she refers to this reemerging of *atma* with *Brahman*.

After the passing of her husband, Dādī Mā wanted to show her affection to no one other than Lord Kṛṣṇa, Mā Ānandamayī and other Hindu gods, for any other worldly connections would hinder her attainment of *mokṣa*. Since her life as a *sannyāsī* was still interwoven with that of householders, Dādī Mā redefined her relationships by claiming that she was disliked by other *sādhus*. “It’s better that people don’t like me, because it makes it easier for me to leave this world, never to come back. If people loved me then it would become difficult. Their love would keep pulling me back into this world, but I want to run away from everyone and all worldly ties and to never come back again.” Though I never observed Dādī Mā with other *sannyāsīs*, it’s unclear whether or not she was actually disliked. Regardless, Dādī Mā’s perception of her relationships with other *sādhus* remains significant for it illustrates her active effort to remain engaged with *sannyāsī* values.

Retrospectively, Dādī Mā restructured her decisions from her former householder life to align with her renunciation. “I chose this life because I never liked cooking and never wanted to do it. When my husband died, people told me to go and cook food in the Annapurna temple for the rest of my life. I thought, ‘What am I to do? I don’t know how to cook!’ Liking plays an important role in your actions and I didn’t like cooking, so how could I cook in the temple? I didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t like to socialize. That is why I chose the life of a *sannyāsī*.” Dādī Mā’s decision to renunciate was one that challenged the traditional role of women in Indian society, (*stridharma*), thus Dādī Mā retrospectively rewrote her life in terms of renunciation in an effort to validate her

identity as a *sannyāsī*. In addition to aligning her dispositions with renunciant values, Dādī Mā further validated her decision to renunciate by attributing it to the well-being of both her father and her husband. She explains, “I’m happy that I became a *sādhu* for my father since he didn’t have a son who could become one.” Khandelwal states that “both Hindu sacred literature and scholarly studies typically defined women in relation with men, as daughters, wives, sisters, mothers, and widows,” thus Dādī Mā’s decision to renunciate was also an act of shedding these terms, pushing her to the periphery of social norms for women in India. Dādī Mā’s marriage to her husband inherently delayed her asceticism; however, in her eyes, it also authenticated it because she was still able to fulfill her obligations as wife by taking *sannyāsa* for both her liberation as well as her husband’s.

* * *

Dādī Mā’s path to asceticism was one of deferral, such is the case of many female sannyāsīs who were forced to fulfill the traditional female role as wife. Since women are typically defined in relation to men, the act of female renunciation is seen as a defiance, by both society at large and the sannyāsīs themselves. Learned social behaviors and societal norms are not entirely forgotten with the initiation into asceticism, thus Dādī Mā’s role as wife and daughter as well as their respective obligations were not left behind when she became a sannyāsī. Though Dādī Mā was delayed in her asceticism due to her role as wife, she still attributed her decision to do so to both her father and her husband as a way of continuing the fulfillment of her householder roles. Such an

integration of roles is not necessary for male sannyāsīs, as their decision to renunciate is not only welcomed but often encouraged.

The Hindu Gods as Children

In choosing to renunciate, Dādī Mā relinquished her ties to the material world, including familial relations. She verbally confirmed her disinterest in relating to others while she was still physically living on this earth, for it would act as an impediment to achieving mokṣa. Instead, Dādī Mā filled the void of filial relations by imagining herself within a spiritual family of Hindu gods.

* * *

Entering Dādī Mā's room was akin to visiting a shrine. Within a Hindu temple, the stimulation can seem overwhelming: the ringing of a bell reverberates within the space, denoting the entrance of another worshiper; hints of pollen, rich incense smoke and body odor waft together to form an offensive yet oddly sweet and comforting aroma; garlands draped over images of Hindu gods diminish petal by petal as time endures. While Dādī Mā's room lacked crowds and noise, it was rich in visual stimulation. Torn cardboard boxes covered in quilted blankets and broken vases lined the back wall of her room. Above which an amalgamation of Hindu images formed a three-dimensional installation, the ripped edges of the incense-tinted pages curling in on themselves like the ends of a young fern. Having been exposed to Hinduism over my past few months in Vāranāsī, I was able to identify most of the sacred images—Hanumān the monkey god, Rām and Sītā, the elephant-headed Gaṇeśa, and the many armed goddess Durgā.

This confluence of sacred images in Dādī Mā's room condoned *darśana* with the gods, thus reinforcing her pursuit of *mokṣa*. *Darśana*, the receiving of blessings through sight, means, in a religious sense, "beholding the divine image and standing in the presence of God" as defined by Diana Eck in *Banāras: City of Light* (20). Eck's mention of "God" refers to *Bhāgvan* (the supreme transcendent and formless one) "who manifests

in the myriad forms" of Hindu deities, a pantheon made up of 330 million gods (Narayan 32). Eck further explains that, "for Hindus, the image is not an object at which one's vision halts, but rather a lens through which one's vision is directed" (20), thus Dādī Mā's taking of *darśana* is not just the physical act of seeing a deity, but the receiving of blessings which fuel her spiritual path of asceticism.

One of the first times I entered her room, Dādī Mā caught me in a state of awe, my gaze swimming in the sea of colors. As I sat on a small stool just behind the door, eating biscuits and sipping on Indian *masālā chai* from a stainless steel cup, she took the opportunity to further introduce me to her carefully curated exhibit. "This is *my* Mā [Ānandamayī]," she said, smiling. As she lifted a picture frame from the left side of her bed, a cloud of dust fell into the stream of sunlight pouring into the center of the room. Dādī Mā swept her fingers across the photograph as a blind person traces the textured surface of brail. Raising the photograph, she pressed it against her forehead, the place of the third-eye center, and then, while making a long, drawn-out kissing noise, she brought it to meet her lips. She went through these same emotional gestures with each deity she introduced, kissing her fingertips and then extending her hand to touch the figure if it was out of reach.

Just in front of the framed photograph of Mā Ānandamayī was a small mound of fabric. Peeling the worn, sun-bleached blankets back revealed what appeared to be a child’s collection of tattered stuffed animals. “See Mā [Ānandamayī] is the master of the universe so she must have a *hāthi* (elephant). Somebody just threw it outside,” she



Dādī Mā only let me photograph her once. Here she is pictured wearing her finest orange shawl, worn especially for this photograph, sitting on her bed amongst Mā Ānandamayī and other framed Hindu gods and deities.

explained, regarding the small toy elephant in her hand. “The stuffing from it had come out but it was still intact, so I brought it home and put it next to Mā [Ānandamayī]’s photo. Now it is one of my children.” Sounding like a proud mother of a new-born child, Dādī Mā ushered us over to have a look at her “children,” “Come have a *darśana* of them. They are inside the blanket sleeping. I will bring them out, love them a little bit.” Dādī Mā does not merely observe the deities thought to reside within her stuffed animals, the elephant-headed Gaṇeśa in this case, but interacts quite intimately with them. Cynthia Packert, the author of *The Art of Loving Kṛṣṇa*, regards the act of *darśana* as dynamic, in which the receiver of the blessing becomes part of a theatrical platform: “...the ritual stage is set, and the gods as both subject and object becomes a device for focusing devotion and emotion” (11). Through the accumulation of sacred images and objects, Dādī Mā transformed her room into a ritual stage, in which she actively engaged with and expressed loving, motherly devotion for the Hindu gods.

Disregarding our presence in the room, Dādī Mā greeted her stuffed animal Gaṇeśa. She cooed and expressed her affection through a showering of kisses. Giving Gaṇeśa one final nuzzle, she pulled him in for a tight squeeze and let out a small yelp of joy, “Oh my dear children, it has been such a long time since you have slept. I am so sorry that your mom has kept you up for so long,” she admitted regretfully. “Will you look at the time? It’s nearly two o’clock, way past your bedtime.” Dādī Mā then placed Gaṇeśa beside her bed and wrapped him in her cozy blankets and sweaters, as she regarded them, covering his face from the light to assure he would rest through the night. Simulating temple worship in which a Hindu god is considered an honored guest, Dādī Mā takes on the role of host and enacts rituals to welcome and enliven Gaṇeśa. Packert

describes this ritual attention, *sevā* (service), to Hindu deities within a *mandir* (temple) as the “caring, feeding, ongoing maintenance, and adornment of the deity and his temple environment” (11). Thus, as an act of *sevā*, Dādī Mā lays a *rudrākṣa mālā* and a lotus flower atop each of her stuffed animals to protect them from the evil spirits during their slumber. Furthering the intimacy between deity and devotee, Dādī Mā takes on the protective role of mother, “I don’t let anybody else touch them. They are my little children.” Folding her hands in prayer to meet her forehead, she says, “After playing with them a little bit, I’ll pay my respects, because they are actually Hindu gods.”

Dādī Mā not only introduced the gods with a level of familiarity, but actually claimed a familial relation to them. Introducing me to her children, Dādī Mā said, “See, I have Gaṇeśa, the son of Śiva Pārvatī, who is the mother of all creatures. A Mā [Ānandamayī] and a Makradhwāja, who is the son of the monkey god Hanumān, my brother. So, Makradhwāja is my nephew.” Gaṇeśa and Makradhwāja were her two stuffed animals—Gaṇeśa, the elephant, and Makradhwāja, the monkey. Both Hanumān and Mā Ānandamayī were represented here in framed photographs on her wall and next to her bed, respectively. With Gaṇeśa as her child, Hanumān, her brother and Makradhwāja, her nephew, Dādī Mā positioned herself in the otherworldly family tree of the Hindu gods, filling the void of an existing human family. With the death of her husband, she no longer had any familial obligations and was free to pursue the lone path of asceticism. Dādī Mā spoke to me of her brother and sister who also lived in Banāras but, just as she held the significance of Mā Ānandamayī over her own birth mother, she regarded the Hindu gods as a more intimate part of her family than her blood siblings. This directly relates to Dādī Mā’s pursuit of *mokṣa*, for she has no interest in relating to

other householders, even her birth family, as such a relation would hinder her renunciation, whereas a connection to a spiritual family comprised of Hanumān, Mā Ānandamayī, Makaradhvaj and Gaṇeśa supports such an ascetic life.

Dādī Mā spoke of Hanumān with the regard with which a sister idolizes her elder brother. “He is so powerful that he just gobbled up the sun, thinking it to be a ripe mango. Imagine putting the sun in your mouth; we can’t go out when it becomes too hot and he took the sun in his *mouth!* The whole universe became dark. All of the gods pleaded him to take the sun out of his mouth, so he finally opened his mouth and released it. Imagine what powers he must have to keep the sun in his mouth for some time. That’s why his mouth looks so swollen and red like a monkey. Imagine how powerful *Māhāvir* (Hanumān) is. Hanumān is a god who helps to keep evil spirits away. Whenever I feel fear, I call out to my brother.” The evil spirits mentioned here are not defined; however, it can be inferred that they carry the potential to steer Dādī Mā away from her spiritual path. Thus, through the retelling of this Hindu tale, Dādī Mā accentuates Hanumān’s powerful nature, ensuring that through her filial connection to Hanumān she will remain on the path of asceticism and be safely led to *mokṣa*.

Dādī Mā further explained Hanumān’s relation to *mokṣa*, introducing him as *vāyūputrā*, the son of *vāyu* (air). “When the soul leaves the body, it reaches *mokṣa* through *vāyū*, so only Hanumān is capable of reaching close to the Hindu gods. He, Hanumān, is with us and is responsible for bringing our soul to the Hindu gods. I pray to him, but I just pray to him as my brother.” Hanumān’s capability to reach the gods is a direct reference to the Rāmāyana, the Indian epic of Rām; when Sītā is held captive by Rāvana, Hanumān is the only one who is able to find and retrieve her safely. Dādī Mā

calls upon Hanumān for spiritual guidance just as she does with Mā Ānandamayī; however, she does so as a brother rather than a mother. As a female devotee of a male Hindu god, Dādī Mā does not relate to Hanumān as intimately as she does with Mā Ānandamayī due to social gender norms. Instead, she relies on Hanumān to safely reunite her with Mā Ānandamayī in *vaikuntha*.

Reflecting on Dādī Mā’s relation to the gods, Sundarji asked, “Have the Hindu gods appeared in front of you, ever?”

“Yes, so many times,” She replied, her eyes lighting up. “Only for a moment and then he (Kṛṣṇa) would vanish. I wanted to see Kṛṣṇa ever since I was a child. I would pray to Kṛṣṇa to give me *darśana*. I would often cry for him. People would say that I would grow up, get married and forget him, but why would I ever leave Kṛṣṇa for anything? When I was in the second grade, I saw a boy enacting Kṛṣṇa on stage in a drama. I started crying, hiding my face in my little frock. ‘Oh, he is my Kṛṣṇa. How do I touch him? How do I touch his feet?’ I thought. Then, when I was thirty years old, one of my aunts brought me to Vārānasī to fix a match for me. I just happened to hear a Kṛṣṇa *kirtan* and I started crying, ‘Oh my Kṛṣṇa, where is he? I want to see him. I have no one in this world—no father, no mother, nobody apart from Kṛṣṇa. Why doesn’t he give me *darśana*?’ I cried so hard that the women singing this song looked at me. My aunt told me that these women were probably thinking badly of me, that they would think nasty things about me, like I’ve born a child out of wedlock and that’s why I was crying. I told her I didn’t care. I would cry for Kṛṣṇa, to see him, to find him,” Dādī Mā explained, illustrating the unquenchable yearning that came from just one glimpse of Lord Kṛṣṇa, the young *bansuri* (flute) player. Dādī Mā’s yearning for Kṛṣṇa was so strong that it

persisted from childhood and became a significant factor in her decision to become a *sannyāsī*, for her desire for liberation was seamlessly interwoven with her devotion for Kṛṣṇa. “The thirst for him would not quench and the whole body would feel on fire without him. So, I started meditating. I realized this was the only way to be close to Lord Kṛṣṇa.” Dādī Mā’s devotional practices fall within the parameters of Vaishnava devotionalism exhibited through her desire to have a personal connection with Lord Kṛṣṇa. Picking up the small book beside her, Dādī Mā leafed through it to find the song she had written about this feeling regarding Kṛṣṇa. Finding it, she cleared her throat, lifted her chin and sang, her eyes fluttering and her expression morphing as the emotion of the song surfaced from her heart.

Where have you hidden after giving darśana for a moment?

Lord, where have you hidden after giving darśana for a moment?

The thirst refuses to be quenched and the fire refuses to be doused.

It keeps growing with each passing day

The thirst refuses to be quenched and the fire refuses to be doused.

It keeps growing with each passing day.

Lord, please appear before me and take me in your embrace.

Lord, please appear before me and take me in your embrace.

Quench our thirst.

Lord, please quench our thirst.

Where have you hidden after giving darśana for a moment?

Lord, where have you hidden after giving darśana for a moment?

Dādī Mā exhibits a similar yearning to have a *darśana* of Kṛṣṇa as she does to be reunited with Mā Ānandamayī, one that extends beyond the act of wanting and into that of necessity. She explains her need to connect with Lord Kṛṣṇa and express her devotion to him is as pertinent to her ascetic path as water is to life. As a sannyāsī, she has liberated herself from her ties to the material world, thus the only embrace in which she can engage is with the divine, those outside of *saṃsāra*. Dādī Mā’s relation to the male Kṛṣṇa stands in contrast to her relation with Hanumān, another male Hindu god, for she yearns to achieve an intimacy with Kṛṣṇa that mirrors that of Mā Ānandamayī. Though Kṛṣṇa is a Hindu god, the social constructs that separate gender still apply, for he can be revered in ways considered unacceptable for married or widowed women. Kṛṣṇa is illustrated as very humanistic, as Packer explains he “is not a multi-armed, weapon-laden, goddess-partnered figure like Vishnu, but a chubby, playful, naughty baby who matures into a sexy adolescent and who literally and figuratively woos both male and female alike: no one is immune to his appeal” (8). Dādī Mā chooses to direct her devotion toward Kṛṣṇa as a “chubby baby” rather than a “sexy adolescent,” and she does so through the act of *bhakti* (emotional devotion). *Bhakti* as related to Kṛṣṇa by Richard Davis in Packert’s *The Art of Loving Krishna*, “a way of participating or sharing in divine being, however that is understood, of tasting and enjoying a god’s presence, of serving and worshipping him, or being as intimate as possible, of being attached to him above all

else” (7). Thus, Dādī Mā’s fervent desire for an intimate and personal relationship with Kṛṣṇa is illustrative of his devotees in general.

From the *bhakti* movement rose the theory of *bhaktirasa* (sentiments of devotion) in which Rūpa Gosvāmī, a disciple of Caitanya, “delineates five primary modes (*bhāvas*) through which the devotee may relate to Kṛṣṇa: *sānta*, contemplative adoration of the transcendent Lord; *dāsyā*, humble servitude to the divine master; *sakhya*, intimate companionship with the beloved friend; *vātsalya*, parental affection for the adorable child; and *mādhurya*, passionate love for the supreme lover” (Hawley and Wulff 28). Dādī Mā related that her husband was jealous of her unrelenting devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa, concerned that she was engaging in *mādhurya* (erotic devotion) with Him. “I would never call my husband with loving words, like *priyatam* (most beloved, dearest). This is how I would call Kṛṣṇa. My husband felt so jealous that I never called him by these names.” She explained that her devotion to Kṛṣṇa was that of *vātsalya* (parental affection), “I am not seeking a young, marriageable Kṛṣṇa, but a child Kṛṣṇa. When my husband found out that I actually worshipped the child Kṛṣṇa, he felt better.” The child Kṛṣṇa, to whom Dādī Mā devoted herself through *vātsalya*, is known as Gopal, or Gopal-ji as Dādī Mā referred to Him—the ending *-ji* reflecting a sign of respect. “Gopal is the form of Kṛṣṇa as a baby (Bal Kṛṣṇa), crawling on his hands and knees with one hand uplifted, playfully grasping the characteristic ball of butter” (Packert 178). To exemplify this devotion to Gopal-ji, the young version of Kṛṣṇa, Dādī Mā recited another song, this time from memory.

Oh my little son

My little sweetheart

Showing yourself from time to time

Where are you hiding?

You have a very beautiful way of walking

The way you talk is just as beautiful.

I feel pain inside my heart

For you my Lord.

My eyes cry endlessly for you Hari.

How would I express my feelings through songs

When you see me constantly without shutting your eyes?

Oh my small boy, master of my heart,

Where do you hide after appearing in front of me briefly?

Dādī Mā's devotion to Kṛṣṇa as a young boy rather than a promising partner, reflects the gendered standards by which women are confined in their devotion to the Hindu gods. As both a wife and a widow, Dādī Mā is regulated in her devotion, for she is expected to view her husband above all else, as the ultimate "supreme;" in order to be regarded as ideal, she is expected to relate to the spiritual realm for the well-being of her

household, her husband in this case, not for herself (Khandelwal 7). Dādī Mā pushes the boundaries of acceptability by freely expressing her devotion to Kṛṣṇa as personal rather than shared—in the above song, she speaks directly to Kṛṣṇa, asking where he has hidden from her and makes no mention of her husband. Dādī Mā explains that this devotion to Kṛṣṇa as a child abated her husband’s jealousies, “This song brought a smile to my husband’s face. A small boy is the master of your heart, he is the master of everyone’s heart, so it’s not the marriageable Kṛṣṇa you yearn for, it is a child. I am not Rukmini or Satyabhama, Kṛṣṇa’s wives, who seek him as a husband; I seek him as a little boy.” Through her reference to Kṛṣṇa as her “small boy,” her “little son,” and “little sweetheart,” Dādī Mā establishes her purity and devotion to her husband by fulfilling the natural role of mother rather than desiring another male.

Sannyāsa is an act of separation from the mundane householder activities; however, Dādī Mā assumed the role of nurturer for the Gods by relating to them as mother and devotee, thus assimilating herself both within the physical world as well within that of the spiritual. Dādī Mā’s life is inconsistent with that of most Indian women not only because she chose the path of asceticism toward the end of her life but also because she wed at the late age of thirty-two and never bore children. Since she did not have any children of her own, she was not able to fulfill the societal expectation of the Indian woman as mother, thus her nurturing devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Gaṇeśa, and other Hindu gods simulates the role of mother and fills this void.

In light of her desire to become a *sannyāsī*, Dādī Mā claimed that she never wanted to have children; however, it was not by her own choice that she did not have offspring—instead, it was due to the actions and ill-intentions of Dādī Mā’s step-

daughter. Dādī Mā's step-daughter, from her husband's first marriage, did everything within her realm of capabilities to prevent their family from growing. She would sleep between Dādī Mā and Dādī Mā's husband most nights, acting as a physical barrier to their copulation. Such behavior was learned from Dādī Mā's sister-in-law, who poisoned Dādī Mā's husband's first wife due to her fertility. In patriarchal India, property is inherited by the male, thus Dādī Mā and her husband's first wife both posed as a threat to the family due to their inherent capability of giving birth to a boy. Regardless of the step-daughter's attempts, Dādī Mā became pregnant. Furious and desperate to remain as the heir to the family property, Dādī Mā's step-daughter jumped on her stomach, viciously aborting Dādī Mā's child. Dādī Mā reflects on her step-daughter's role in this tragic event in her life, "She was very conscious of the possibility of having a sibling. She didn't want to have a brother because she knew that if she had a brother then he would take all of the property from her. This is why she jumped on my stomach and aborted the child."

Dādī Mā spoke of the loss of her child in the same manner that she regarded the funeral of her husband, removed and complacent. As a way to cope with the emotional implications of this tragedy, she retrospectively redefined the meaning of this event in terms of her ascetic life. "See, it is Mā [Ānandamayī]'s blessings that this child didn't come into this world, because I always wanted to become a *sādhu*. I never really wanted to be married, so I view this as a blessing from Mā [Ānandamayī]." Here, Dādī Mā implies that if she had given birth to any children, she would have retained the responsibility of being a mother after her husband's death, thus she would have been likely to remain within the life of a householder rather than transition into that of a *sannyāsī*. By reframing the loss of her child as a "blessing" from Mā Ānandamayī, Dādī

Mā gives a holistic meaning to a gruesome event that must have been devastating to her at the time.

The retelling of her life story as harmonious with an ideal *sannyāsī* is Dādī Mā's attempt to disregard the details of her former householder life that are incongruent to renunciation. Though Dādī Mā retrospectively situated the loss of her child in her path to asceticism, I would argue that the emotional ramifications spilled over from Dādī Mā's life as a householder into her life as a *sannyāsī*. Kirin Narayan similarly points out, "the indoctrination of upbringing does not altogether fade with initiation," thus a *sannyāsī*'s life as a renunciant is highly interwoven with elements, such as caste hierarchies and gender inequalities, of their former householder life (77). The tragic event of losing a child is interwoven into Dādī Mā's life as a *sannyāsī*, causing her to assume the nurturing role of mother to the Hindu gods, as is evident from the loving, nature with which she handled her stuffed animals, her children, and yearned for baby Lord Kṛṣṇa.

* * *

Having severed her familial ties upon renunciation, Dādī Mā creates a new spiritual family made up of Hindu gods. Such a connection and adoration for the gods within this spiritual family is deemed acceptable for it does not trap her within the material world as normal relationships do but actually supports Dādī Mā's pursuit of mokṣa. The way in which Dādī Mā relates to the gods as nurturing mother is distinctive of female ascetics; however, her personal relation to the gods is unique in that their role as children functions as substitute for the child that was taken from her.

Conclusion

Relationality is deemed as a hindrance to a *sannyāsī*'s goal of *mokṣa* as defined within by ancient Hindu texts as well as externally by the perceptions of foreign Indologists, such as Dumont's binary model of religiosity in which Indian religious practices are defined as either householder and otherworldly. However, in the field of anthropology and religious studies, it has been amply demonstrated that lived renunciation does not actually fall within the textual ideal definition of isolated, lone, male and wandering. Through participant observation of and intimate engagement with *sannyāsīs*, the complexities of lived renunciation are revealed. Though *sannyāsīs* ideologically separate themselves from their body upon their initiation, regarding it as dead, they still remain embodied in the human form. This physical embodiment involves relationality as a fundamental aspect of lived renunciation, a characteristic which becomes further magnified with regards to female ascetics. Leaving a society ruled by men and entering into a traditionally male-centric mode of religiosity, female *sannyāsīs* become a social anomaly within the householder community as well as within the ascetic community. Within the householder community, female *sannyāsīs* are distinct in that they have left behind their traditional female roles of mother and wife as they are related to men and have embarked upon a spiritual path demarcated by personal liberation rather than the well-being of their husband and family. Within the ascetic community, female *sannyāsīs* stand out as a gendered minority thus many situate themselves in a community of women within the confines of an āshram [diacritic] through which they are provided spiritual and emotional support. Since female ascetics do not neatly fit within the traditional modes of renunciation, they create their own unique ways of expressing

devotion to the gods. Dādī Mā exemplifies a female way of living in the world as a *sannyāsī* through both her relation to her guru, Mā Ānandamayī, as mother and her nurturing devotion of the Hindu gods. While it is common for a female guru to be regarded as mother by disciples, Dādī Mā's relationship with the gods as children and her spiritual practice on behalf of her husband expands our understanding of relationality in female Hindu asceticism. Though Dādī Mā challenged her socially constructed role as a woman in Indian society by embarking on a path of asceticism, her lived devotional practices reveal that she retained female characteristics from her householder life. Dādī Mā situates herself within a religious family of transcendental beings through her relation to the Hindu gods as children and defines her motives of asceticism as shared, enabling her to authenticate her renunciation and justify her divergence from the traditional roles of Indian women. Such findings from my research of Swāmī Āmritanandā Gīdī cannot be assumed as typical for female *sannyāsīs*; however, with further research on the relationality of female renunciants, more generalized claims may be made.

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