

**Married Life Will Not Bring Me Happiness: Religious
Renunciation as an Alternative to Marriage for Women in
Traditional Hindu Areas of India**

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Abstract

I became interested in the topic of religious renunciation in Hindu India while taking Dr. Biernacki's class about Hinduism. The pictures she showed our class of *sadhus* (Hindu renunciators) and her descriptions of their incredible feats of devotion, such as holding an arm up until the muscles atrophy, intrigued me. Doing research for a class project, I came across Lynn Tesky Denton's book, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, about female *sadhus* in India. Prior to reading it, I assumed that the reason people chose to take *sannyasa* (renunciation) in Hindu India was that they were deeply religious and wanted to devote their lives to religious practice. Denton's book, however, explains that many female *sadhus* take *sannyasa* for social reasons such as being physically or mentally handicapped, being a widow, or being unable to marry for a variety of reasons and that many of these women were not particularly religious before choosing to renounce.

While Denton examined the reasons women who are unable to marry or women who are widowed choose to take *sannyasa*, I decided to focus on a different population of women in an effort to expand the research that has been done regarding female *sadhus* in general and the social reasons women choose to take *sannyasa* in particular. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the reasons Hindu Indian women would not want to marry or stay married and the way that renunciation can allow women agency and power over their own lives that they would not otherwise have as householders. I argue that most of the women who choose to take *sannyasa* are poor, rural, low-caste women and that this demographic of women is usually held to traditional Hindu Indian gender roles that make marriage undesirable or completely unacceptable for some women. I then go on to argue that although women choose *sannyasa* in order to escape marriage, once they have renounced, they find that there are many advantages to renunciation, besides the fact that it is not a marriage.

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Introduction

“All [*sadhus*] enter through a ritual process [*sannyasa*] which emphasizes the disjunction between ordinary life and a life oriented toward spiritual liberation, and all signify a major change in ritual status. For women, the change in identity and status following initiation is particularly dramatic, since unlike men, women are unequivocally identified with householdership, home, and family. The society into which a woman enters differs radically from the society in which she lived as a householder.”¹

This quote from Lynn Teskey Denton describes the profound difference between being a *sadhu* (Hindu ascetic) and being a *grhin* (householder) in Hindu Indian society. It also points out that a woman’s choice to become a *sadhu* is a radical one that involves rejecting the role of *grhini* (female householder), the dominant life paradigm expected of women in traditional Hindu Indian society. Very few Indian Hindu women choose to become *sadhhus* and because their numbers are small, there has been minimal scholarship written about them. These women, however, are important for understanding both a woman’s place as a householder in traditional Indian Hindu society as well as understanding the way that religion in general and *sannyasa* (renunciation) in particular can subvert the traditional patriarchal power structures present in traditional Hindu Indian society. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the reasons Hindu Indian women would not want to marry or stay married and the way that renunciation can allow women agency and power over their own lives that they would not otherwise have as householders.

In the first chapter, “The Difficulties of Married Life in Some Traditional Hindu Families and a Lack of Options: Why Women Turn to *Sannyasa*,” I argue that most of the women who choose to take *sannyasa* are poor, rural, low-caste women and that this demographic of women is usually held to traditional Hindu Indian gender roles that make marriage undesirable or

¹ Lynn Teskey Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 105.

completely unacceptable for some women. There are many reasons this is the case. First, traditional gender roles dictate that women will have their marriage arranged for them, often at a young age and usually to a poor, low-caste man who has few prospects for a decent job. Next, women are ranked below men according to a strict gender hierarchy, which leads to a lack of freedom and decision-making, the idea that a wife is the property of her husband, and a belief that women should suppress their own wants and needs to take care of their husbands' wants and needs. Lastly, this traditional way of thinking about women typically denies women an education because it is believed it will hurt a woman's chance to find a husband.

In the second chapter, "The Freedom of *Sannyasa*: What Becoming a *Sadhu* Has to Offer Women," I argue that although women choose *sannyasa* in order to escape marriage, once they have renounced, they find that there are many advantages to renunciation, besides the fact that it is not a marriage. These advantages include the fact that *sannyasa* offers women high levels of agency, independence, power and respect that would be very difficult, if not impossible, for rural, poor, low-caste Hindu Indian women to achieve if married. Taking *sannyasa* also allows women a chance to become highly educated as well as to escape a life of poverty: opportunities that women would likely not have had as householders. By looking at both the undesirable traits of householdership and the desirable aspects of renunciation concomitantly, I hope to combine studies that have been done regarding both of these subjects in a way they have not been combined before.

This work fits into a larger body of scholarship about renunciation in Hindu Indian and the lives of women in traditional Indian Hindu society. Although female *sadhhus* have been around for centuries, anthropologists did not recognize these women in academic literature until

about thirty years ago.² I will be drawing upon the five ethnographies that have been written regarding female *sadhus* as the ethnographic core of my work. These are Wendy Sinclair-Brull's *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity in an Indian Religious Movement*, Lynn Teskey Denton's *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, Meena Khandelwal's *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation*, Sondra L. Hausner's *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*, and Antoinette DeNapoli's doctoral dissertation "'Leave Everything and Sing to God': The Performance of Devotional Asceticism by Female Sadhus of Rajasthan."

Each of these ethnographies focuses on different aspects of Hindu female renunciation. Sinclair-Brull's focus is the way purity and hierarchy play a role in the lives of the women who have taken *sannyasa* at the Trichur Mandiram in the southern Indian region of Kerala. Sinclair-Brull argues that although *sadhus* are supposed to have renounced all notions of caste as well as all notions of purity and impurity, the reality is that the concepts of hierarchy and purity are the main foci of the women who reside there. Thus, she argues, renunciation is not, at least at the Trichur Branch, a complete break with householder life, as it ideally should be and has been portrayed to be in various previous scholarly studies on *sadhus*.³

Both Khandelwal and DeNapoli argue that female *sadhus* practice renunciation in

² Catherine Clementin-Ojha was the first to identify female Hindu renouncers in a scholarly capacity in her 1981 article "Feminine Asceticism in Hinduism: Its Tradition and Present Condition." Although she notes that women can take *sannyasa*, and that three female heads of ashrams in Varanasi have renounced, most of the women she discusses are not actually *sadhus*, because they have not been initiated. Her article, instead, looks at women who carry out some ascetic practices but have not renounced the life of a householder. Thus, her research regarding ascetic women mostly does not pertain to my work. Catherine Clementin-Ojha, "Feminine Asceticism in Hinduism: Its Tradition and Present Condition," *Man in India* 61, No. 3 (September 1981): 256, 271, 277.

³ Wendy Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity in an Indian Religious Movement* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2007) 242-243, ch.10. This work examines a monastic community known as Sri Sarada Mandiram, specifically the Trichur Sri Sarada Math. The Sri Sarada Mandiram is a "completely autonomous monastic organization, run by the Ramakrishna Order of Sannyasinis...a well structured monastic Order run by and for women exclusively." *Ibid.*, 3.

fundamentally different ways than male *sadhus*.⁴ While male *sadhus* tend to focus on religious practices that isolate them from the world, female renunciators tend to practice in ways that involve the wider householder community. Female *sadhus* use a concept of *seva* that usually involves taking care of householder children along with feeding, counseling, and cleaning for the communities in which they live.

Hausner argues in her work that despite anthropologists' earlier arguments that Hindu *sadhus* live lives that are the opposite of householders in the sense that they leave families and communities to seek spiritual liberation by themselves, this is not the case. She argues that *sadhus* form their own communities and family structures through initiation and *guru* lineages. Thus, while *sadhus* are not part of householder society, they are very much a part of an alternative, ascetic community that is devoted to religion.⁵

My thesis, "Married Life Will Not Bring Me Happiness," is most closely related to Denton's *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* in that it focuses on how women usually choose to take *sannyasa* due to what Denton considers "social reasons," not primarily because they are looking to achieve *moksha* in this life time, although female *sadhus* certainly pursue this goal once they renounce.⁶ Denton argues that renunciation offers a "good social option" to various groups of women who are considered unfit for marriage, such as those who have physical and mental disabilities, and women who no longer have husbands, such as widows.⁷ This is because it provides these women with food, shelter, and financial security while also offering an opportunity to lead a life that is considered respectable by traditional Hindu Indian standards.⁸

I have, however, chosen to look at a different population of female *sadhus* than Denton.

⁴ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 32-36 and DeNapoli, "Leave Everything and Sing to God," 2.

⁵ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 3, 189.

⁶ Denton, *Female Ascetics*, 41-42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

While she looked at women who could not be married or who were no longer married because of circumstances beyond their control, a population she calls women “involuntarily without husbands,” I have chosen to look at women who deliberately choose not to marry or have decided to leave their marriage.⁹ This approach, then, is meant to give a fuller picture of the social reasons that drive Hindu Indian women to choose renunciation. Indeed, female *sadhus*, although they are a very small minority of *sadhus* and an even smaller population of Indian Hindu women, can play a large part in informing us about the way in which women’s lives are affected by traditional Hindu society.

While my work is most closely related to Denton’s, I have drawn heavily from the other four works as they provide a wealth of information about the reasons women choose renunciation as well as what women’s lives are like after they renounce. The works of DeNapoli, Khandelwal, Hausner, and Sinclair-Brull, however, stress the continuity between the lives of householder women and female *sadhus*. Although I agree that there is much continuity between female *sadhus* and *grhinis*, such as the fact that women continue to take charge of the cooking, cleaning, and feeding when they are *sadhus* just as they would have as householders, and the fact that female *sadhus* must continue to focus on purity and impurity, particularly as it pertains to menstruation, just as they did as householders, there are some very apparent differences between the life of a female householder and the life of a female *sadhu*. It is these differences that I will highlight in the second chapter order to gain a more complete understanding of the similarities and differences in the lives of female *sadhus* and *grhinis*.

⁹ Ibid., 50.

In Hindu society, a *sadhu* is a person who has renounced the life of a *grhasthin*. A *grhasthin*, the common term for a lay Hindu, is concerned with getting married, having children, earning money, running a household, and generally following the rules of *dharma* (religious or moral duty) as defined “according to social class, stage of life, and gender.”¹⁰ It is believed that a householder who follows his or her *dharma* accrues good *karma* (actions that determine future modes of an individual’s existence) and thus a favorable rebirth. A favorable rebirth is the main spiritual goal of a *grhasthin*.¹¹

On the other hand, the main spiritual goal of a *sadhu* is to achieve *moksha* (release from *samsara* or the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth) in this lifetime. Those Hindus who choose *sannyasa* (renunciation of the life of a householder) to pursue *moksha* are no longer concerned with following a householder’s *dharma*, and are therefore supposed to completely give up the interests and goals of a householder.¹² To become a *sadhu*, one must go through a formal initiation (*diksa*) where the initiate ritually rejects the life of a *grhasthin* and his or her previous “householder,” or lay, identity. This ritual usually involves the initiate symbolically throwing himself or herself on a “funeral pyre” to demonstrate “an explicit, intentional, and fundamental break from domestic householder life and the social and material laws of Hinduism.”¹³ A symbolic rebirth into a *sadhu* lineage follows, with the initiate receiving a new *sadhu* name and a personal *mantra* (a sacred verbal formula repeated in prayer or meditation). This symbolic death and rebirth “renders oneself dead to one’s previous social and civil identity,” making the

¹⁰ Meena Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (New York: University of New York Press, 2004) 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24

¹² Sondra L. Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

decision to take *sannyasa* irreversible.¹⁴

Sannyasa takes on countless forms due to the fact that each sect of *sadhus* has different values, spiritual practices, rules, living situations, and dress. Typically, *sadhus* will choose a main god to which to devote themselves, either Shiva or Vishnu, or in rarer cases the Goddess.¹⁵ There are also those that Denton describes as independent or non-sectarian orders comprised of “devotees of charismatic and nonsectarian *gurus* (teachers).”¹⁶ *Sadhus* might live alone in a cave or together in a group in a well-appointed ashram funded by wealthy lay devotees. Dress ranges from going completely nude to wearing ochre-colored, red, or white robes. Spiritual devotions vary widely as well, with some *sadhus* choosing to meditate hours on end and others choosing *seva* (service or charity), such as feeding the poor or taking care of the sick.¹⁷ The one idea all *sadhus* have in common is that they have renounced their householder lives in order to pursue *moksha*. It is because of this goal and the intense practice it takes to reach it that Hindus consider *sannyasa* to be “the most intense and the highest of religious paths.”¹⁸

In Hinduism, both men and women can renounce the life of a householder and become *sadhus*. Women are accepted into all but the most orthodox Brahmanical *sadhu* sects and pursue *moksha* full time just like their male counterparts.¹⁹ It is estimated that there are approximately two million Hindu renouncers in Southern Asia, with approximately ten to fifteen percent of these being women.²⁰

Female *sadhus*, like their male counterparts, have been present in India since ancient

¹⁴ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 1.

¹⁵ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 108.

¹⁶ Ibid, 108.

¹⁷ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 35.

¹⁸ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 24.

¹⁹ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 20.

²⁰ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 19, 24; Antoinette E. DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God: The Performance of Devotional Asceticism by Female Sadhus of Rajasthan,” (Doctoral Dissertation: Emory University, 2009) 81.

times. For instance, many *sadhus*, particularly female ones, and some scholars argue that two such women appear in the first Upanishad, the Brihadaranyaka.²¹ The Upanishads are ancient texts that Hindus consider part of their sacred scriptures and they describe important concepts to the Hindu religion such as *atman*, a “personal spark of divinity,” and *brahman*, the “vast divine force.” When the *atman* reunites with the *brahman moksa* is achieved.²² It is generally thought that the first of these texts were composed around 500-400 BCE.²³

There have also been some well known modern female *sadhus* such as Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara. Both women belong to the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad, “a branch of the Hindu nationalist movement [*Hindutva*] in India whose membership is limited to Hindu female renouncers (*sadhvis*).”²⁴ These women are some of the most prominent leaders of the movement and combine their religious knowledge with the political agendas of Hindu nationalism.²⁵

A variety of different terms can be used to refer to a Hindu woman who has renounced the life of a *grhini* (female householder), including *sadhu*, *sadhvi*, *sannyasini*, and *bairagini*. Female renouncers usually refer to themselves as *sadhus*, the masculine form of the Hindi word for ascetic. This is likely because the feminine form, *sadhvi*, can also mean a virtuous wife, the

²¹ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 39. Indeed, while lay women tend to look to Sita and Drupadi as models of femininity, female *sadhus* often cite the two women from the Brihadaranyaka, Gargi and Maitreyi, as models of femininity. The latter women are praised in the Upanishads for their intellect, spiritual knowledge, and ascetic practices. See Ibid., 39-40 for more information. Another prominent women from ancient Hindu texts is Kakshivati Ghosa, a philosopher and seer from the Vedic period who composed two hymns in the *Rigveda*. Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009) 125-126.

²² Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 36. For a history of renunciation in the Upanishads, see Doniger, *The Hindus*, chapter 7.

²³ Ibid., 164.

²⁴ Meena Khandelwal, Sondra L. Hausner, and Ann Grodzins Gold., eds. *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) 142.

²⁵ Ibid., 145. These women have also become controversial figures and have been accused of inciting anti-Muslim violence. Perhaps one of their most infamous moments was a time they told a large crowd of Hindus to destroy a mosque and kill Muslims. Ibid., 145. Also see Ibid., chapter 6 for more information on these women.

wife of a guru, or a woman who is possessed by a god/goddess. The fact that there are so many different ways one could refer to these women has led to some debate among scholars who study Hindu female renouncers over what term should be used.²⁶ After reading the arguments for using each term, I agree with DeNapoli's argument that scholars should refer to woman the way they refer to themselves. She notes that it is Western scholars who have imposed the terms *sadhvi* and *sannyasini* on these women, since they almost never refer to themselves by these names.²⁷ Therefore, I have chosen to refer to female renouncers as "female *sadhus*" to retain the term they call themselves while also clarifying they are female in order to separate them from male *sadhus*.

Before moving on, it is important to discuss the genre of ethnographies, since these constitute all of the core sources regarding female *sadhus* that I have discussed above as well as some of my other sources. In the past three decades, an entire sub-genre dedicated to the critique of ethnographies has emerged with a heavy focus on the way in which ethnographies are biased texts. At this time, most anthropologists subscribe to the postmodernist view that anthropology is a form of subjective interpretation. As Margery Wolf explains, ethnography is an account of

“...what I thought I saw and heard...described as accurately as possible...[T]hese meanings can be contested, as anthropologists can only convey their own understandings of their observations of another culture in their ethnographies.”²⁸

²⁶For an in-depth discussion of the different terms see Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 70-75 as well as Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 7.

²⁷ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 3, 5.

²⁸ Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1992) 4-5.

With this acknowledgment has come an understanding that while these texts are subjective, a “good” ethnographer will try to lessen the extent to which personal biases and viewpoints affect his or her work. There are three main ways to do this. First, a researcher must first acknowledge and understand his or her own biases and then be willing to discuss these openly as a means of understanding how these biases might affect the researcher’s work. This is usually referred to by the term “reflexivity,” which can be defined as taking the time in one’s work to “direct attention back upon the conditions of knowledge of the individual ethnographer.”²⁹ The researchers for the five core ethnographies described above are very careful to reveal autobiographical details that they believe could have or did affect their research, including such details as their choice to have sexual relations or remain celibate, as well as political affiliations, particularly to the feminist movement.³⁰

Second, an anthropologist must openly address the power imbalances between himself or herself and his or her subjects. Anthropologists must reveal these power imbalances and try to understand how they affect his or her work and conclusions.³¹ The ethnographers I mention above reveal these power imbalances in their texts. All of the women note that financial imbalances were the most apparent between themselves and their informants. DeNapoli, for example, explains that she believes the small gifts and sums of money she was able to give her informants helped foster the *guru-disciple* relationship. She writes,

²⁹ George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 14.

³⁰ See, for example, Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 16-17. Khandelwal explains how her allegiance to the feminist movement colored her research. DeNapoli offers another example of reflexivity, as she takes several pages to discuss her choice to refrain from sexual intercourse during her fieldwork. She reveals that she felt closely connected to her female *sadhu* informants because she too had recently chosen to be celibate following a particularly painful divorce. In doing so, she wonders if this created a false sense of closeness and intimacy between herself and her informants. DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 123.

³¹ Sally Cole and Lynne Phillips, eds., *Ethnographic Feminisms: Essays in Anthropology* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996) 23.

“Some might object to my research practices...claiming that I bought my data; but I prefer to frame what I did in the field in terms of practicing *sadhu*-devotee reciprocity- the *sadhus* gave me the data I needed to conduct my research...I gave them the material they needed to survive.”³²

This method, however, was not without problems. DeNapoli notes that in some cases, she felt the interviewee was telling her what she wanted to hear in order to gain her favor along with more money or gifts, or possibly even a connection to wealthy American disciples. In these cases, she did not use these informants’ words in her work, as she felt that they were not genuine.³³

Lastly, another way to minimize subjectivity in an ethnographic work, according to di Leonardo, “is to make writing a polyvocal and dialogic production in which the ethnographer lets the people speak and ethnographic facts are shown to be jointly produced by ethnographer and informant.”³⁴ This can be accomplished in several ways, including the ethnographer reading his or her notes back to the informant or allowing the informant to read over these notes, having the informant listen to audio recordings to confirm the information the ethnographer has recorded, and including dialogues in one’s written work so as to show the context within which an informant gave information.³⁵

The five ethnographers of my core sources use these techniques to create polyvocal texts. DeNapoli, for example, includes whole conversations in her work so readers can understand the answers she received in the context of the questions she asked.³⁶ Hausner asked informants to look over her notes on their conversations and inform her of any changes they wanted made.

³² DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁴ Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 190.

³⁵ Paul Stoller, “Ethnographies as Texts/Ethnographies as Griots,” *American Ethnologist* 21, No. 2 (May, 1994): 354.

³⁶ See, for example, DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 137-138.

She notes that this was a “useful fact-checking exercise,” as her representations of what her informants told her were often slightly incorrect and in need of revision, particularly when it came to explanations of complicated philosophical concepts. Her informants were happy to do so and make changes as they saw fit.³⁷

Critics rightly note that ethnography is an imperfect form that has subjectivity and biases from social differences and power imbalances built into it. Despite these flaws, Clifford argues ethnographies “can still be truthful, realistic accounts,” even though they can never provide a whole picture of the culture they are written about.³⁸ This is important because it means ethnography is still a valuable way to learn about other cultures.

³⁷ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 70-71.

³⁸ James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 25.

Chapter 1: The Difficulties of Married Life in Some Traditional Hindu Families and a Lack of Options: Why Women Turn to *Sannyasa*

“Because the domain of *sadhu* life is so clearly situated away from householder worlds, renouncer society offers a place of refuge from dominant caste society. This is particularly clear in the biographies of women renunciators, who explicitly use the institution of renunciation to escape from emotionally untenable lives as householder women.”³⁹

Ethnographers studying both male and female *sadhus* ask common questions so as to learn the life stories of their informants. One typical question is something along the lines of, “Why did you choose *sannyasa*?” Male *sadhus* and female *sadhus* tend to have very different answers to this question. A majority of male *sadhus* state a religious reason; specifically, the desire to achieve *moksha* in this lifetime. The remaining men state that they renounced for what can be termed “social reasons,” such as being orphaned as a young child, a desire to receive an education that otherwise would have been unattainable, or some other problem such as drug use or prior criminal activity that does not allow them to fit in with what ethnographer Robert Gross terms “normative household society.”⁴⁰

Conversely, female *sadhus* almost always cite social reasons for renunciation. The social reasons female *sadhus* cite, however, are different from those of men because they almost always involve marriage in some way. Female *sadhus* state that they took *sannyasa* because they did not want to marry, because they did not want to continue living with their husbands, because they were unsuitable for marriage, or because they were no longer married, either because they had been widowed or because their husbands had abandoned them. I should state

³⁹ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 43.

⁴⁰ Robert Lewis Gross, *The Sadhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1992) 415. DeNapoli agrees that most of the male *sadhus* she encountered renounced because of a “desire in their hearts to achieve [spiritual liberation].” DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 182.

here that there are women who choose to take *sannyasa* for religious reasons or other reasons besides not wanting to marry or not wanting to remain married. For example, one of Sinclair-Brull's few female *sadhu* informants from a well-to-do family renounced expressly to achieve *moksha* in this lifetime. This woman informed Sinclair-Brull that she had always been religious and had intended to take *sannyasa* from a very young age.⁴¹ Baiji, an informant of Khandelwal's, was a Brahmin by birth and lived a comfortable middle-class life prior to taking *sannyasa*. She had been raised in a religious family and even as a young child she woke up early to meditate, recite mantras and perform fire sacrifice. She told Khandelwal that "religious discipline was so engrained in her personality" that when it came time to choose a life path, she chose *sannyasa*. Her father, recognizing her religious devotion and aptitude encouraged her to do so.⁴²

The fact that it is rare for a woman to answer that she decided to renounce for religious reasons comes as a surprise because Indian women are considered to be more religious than men.⁴³ Women are thought to be especially well suited to religion since they have a greater capacity for suffering, self-sacrifice, and self-discipline. It is their position to men in Indian Hindu society that makes this so according to Gold. She states, "Since women stand in a relationship of servitude to men, they suffer more than men do, and due to their excessive hardships, they gain powers known as *sakti*."⁴⁴ These factors combine to make women more empathetic, devoted, and loving and to have a "greater capacity for feeling," in general as compared to men.⁴⁵ This allows women to be more devoted to God and religion.

⁴¹ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 114.

⁴² Khandelwal, et al., *Women's Renunciation in South Asia*, 42 -43

⁴³ Tracy Pintchman, ed., *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2007) 5.

⁴⁴ Khandelwal, et al., *Women's Renunciation in South Asia*, 115.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

Additionally, female householders are typically the ones who are most involved with religious rituals and there is a “common perception among Indian Hindus that women have a special aptitude for ritual performance.”⁴⁶ Women are the ones who usually perform daily *puja* (worship) of household deities as well as a certain kind of ritual austerity, *vrats* (vows).⁴⁷ *Vrats* “play an important role in the religious lives of Hindu women.”⁴⁸ Most *vrats* involve fasting and they have been “linked to ideals of wifeliness; *vrat* rituals tend to demarcate domestic space as women’s space and give this space a religious orientation in the promotion of health and prosperity for the family.”⁴⁹ Vows are typically undertaken for the welfare of a woman’s family, particularly to assure good fortune for her husband and sons, or for the community to stop something like a famine or flood. On occasion, a woman might undertake a *vrat* for her own purposes, such as after a traumatic pregnancy or to find a good husband, but for the most part women perform these rituals for the benefit of those other than herself.⁵⁰

Denton has already examined some of the “social- structural pressures and processes” that lead women who have been widowed or who are unable to marry through something beyond their control, such as a physical deformity or mental illness, to take *sannyasa*.⁵¹ Here, I will examine the social pressures and processes that cause women to either not want to marry or

⁴⁶ Pintchman, ed., *Women’s Lives Women’s Rituals*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁸ Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young, *Women and Religious Traditions* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2015) 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15. This is not to downplay the way in which *vrats* help women cope with their own lives. They can bring comfort and strengthen morale. As Sita Anantha Raman notes, these “female rites have sustained [women] emotionally in a largely male dominated society.” Sita Anantha Raman, *Women in India Volume I* (Denver: ABC –CLIO, 2009) 145.

⁵¹ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 41-55.

want to leave their marriage. Indeed, the majority of female *sadhus* Denton, Sinclair-Brull, DeNapoli, Hausner, and Khandelwal interviewed answered the question “Why did you take *sannyasa?*,” or one similar to it with a statement concerning not wanting to marry or in order to escape a marriage. For example, of Sinclair-Brull’s twenty-eight female *sadhu* informants at the Trichur Sri Sarada Mandiram, twenty-six gave not wanting to marry or escaping a marriage as the reason they chose to take *sannyasa*.⁵² Denton similarly notes that in Varanasi, the location of the largest settled population of female *sadhus* in India, two-thirds of the 134 female *sadhus* she had contact with during her fieldwork were under the age of forty and had never been married, whether because they did not want to be or because they were unable to marry.⁵³ This is especially surprising as Varanasi is a very popular place of residence for widows who choose renunciation and therefore one would expect a much higher proportion of women who renounced because of the social pressures put on widows.⁵⁴ That women who have not married make up a large proportion of the female *sadhu* population in that city tells us that not wanting to marry is an influential social factor in causing women to take *sannyasa*. Below, I will argue several reasons why married life might be undesirable for rural, female Hindu Indian women.

I argue that there are a variety of traditional Indian Hindu socio-religious values and practices that make marriage undesirable for some poor, rural women. These values and practices include arranged marriage, usually to a poor man at a young age, and a strict gender hierarchy that results in men controlling their wives, a lack of freedom for women, and wives being treated as the property of their husbands. Lastly, these traditional values and practices

⁵² The other two women gave “religious” reasons. Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 117.

⁵³ Denton, *Female Ascetics*, 123. She does not specify the numerical breakdown of those that choose not to marry and those that cannot marry, except to say that taking *sannyasa* is a common step for women who do not want to marry.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

lead to women being denied an education because it is believed to hurt their chances of finding a husband.

First, it is important to make clear the demographics of women who become *sadhus*. The vast majority of female *sadhus* with whom ethnographers have had contact have been from poor, low-caste, rural families. As Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold state in the introduction to *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*, their edited volume on female renouncers from several religions in South Asia, "Many (although not all) women renouncers come from rural villages, lower castes or disadvantaged social groups and have experienced severe poverty."⁵⁵ One of Denton's middle-class householder informants confirms this, saying, "Such girls [who take renunciation] are surely not from good families because a well-to-do family would never send their girls away from them for so long outside of when [the girls] are married."⁵⁶

Women from wealthy or middle-class high-caste families are not choosing to renounce the life of a householder. Sinclair-Brull explains why this is:

"Girls with poor education and life prospects seek refuge [as *sadhus*], while the better educated and well-placed will not be attracted but will seek employment and a good marriage match as they do now.... Daughters of good families usually have the best marriage prospects: they have the necessary fairness of complexion, family name, education and culture to attract a doctor, engineer, or other professional spouse... To these young women, [the life of a renunciant] holds little appeal."⁵⁷

Furthermore, Hindu Indian girls from well-to-do, high-caste urban families tend to have

⁵⁵ Khandelwal, et al., *Women's Renunciation in South Asia*, 5.

⁵⁶ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 133.

⁵⁷ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 125.

more flexibility in terms of gender roles and have more opportunities for education and employment. These young women are usually not opposed to marriage, as they are able to have a well-educated spouse with a good career, as Sinclair-Brull notes above. Those urban women from these less traditional Hindu families who do not want to marry, however, are usually not stigmatized for wanting to live on their own and support themselves.⁵⁸ It is precisely because these women do not have to adhere to the patriarchal ideas of traditional Hindu society that the life of a householder is appealing to these women.

On the other hand, poor, rural, low-caste Hindu Indian families tend to be more traditional, with accompanying traditional attitudes toward gender roles.⁵⁹ According to Jacobson and Wadley, these include a devaluation of women, an enforcement of traditional Indian gender roles, a concern with restraining women's actions and movements, and a separation of the sexes.⁶⁰ These attitudes often place restrictions on a woman's freedom, as well as a woman's ability to receive an education, live by herself, or seek employment as a single woman. For these traditional families, marriage is viewed as the life paradigm in which a woman should flourish both socially and spiritually.⁶¹

I will now turn to why some Hindu women from poor, rural families find marriage undesirable. Then, in the next chapter, I will argue that *sannyasa* can offer women agency, independence, power, and other opportunities that marriage cannot and it is for these reasons that it can be viewed as advantageous over the life of a householder for women from poor, rural families.

One reason women from traditionally-oriented Hindu Indian families would not want to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁹ Doranne Jacobson and Susan S. Wadley, *Women in India: Two Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999) 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1, 18.

⁶¹ Denton, *Female Ascetics*, 49.

be married or stay married is that marriages are still arranged for most children of families from rural villages. According to the traditional Hindu view, marriage is seen as a way to strengthen ties between families and maintain, or ideally gain, familial honor and respect. As Harlan and Courtright note,

“Through a marriage a family’s status may be maintained, strengthened, or weakened. Because a marriage affects the status of the entire family and its lineage, it is deemed too important a decision to leave to the persons actually getting married. Rather, the decision rests with the heads of the extended family units. Consequently, arranged marriages are the norm and love marriages are looked upon as deviant, even dangerous.”⁶²

The result of an arranged marriage is that, as Mala Sen argues, a woman is often “bartered and sold [through the dowry system] to a man she does not love for the sake of ‘respectability’ and preserving her ‘family’s sense of honor.”⁶³ It is typical that a woman is married to a man she has only met a few times and while the bride and groom’s family might find it to be an advantageous match, the man and woman being married might not be compatible, much less have any feelings of affection for each other.

Many female *sadhus* cited escaping an arranged marriage as their reason for renunciation. For example, one of Sinclair-Brull’s informants from the Trichur Sri Sarada Mandiram said that she took *sannyasa* because “her marriage was being arranged to a man she did not like.”⁶⁴ This case is a poignant example of how social factors related to marriage directly cause women to renounce, because the young woman goes on to say that she was not opposed to marriage in general. Indeed, this girl would have very likely married if her parents allowed her to have a

⁶² Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright, eds., *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 5.

⁶³ Mala Sen, *Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry Death, and Female Infanticide in Modern India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 72.

⁶⁴ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 112.

“love marriage,” as she was in love with a boy from a caste lower than her own low-caste family. This is considered unacceptable according to Hindu traditional marriage norms, as the caste of a man is supposed to be of higher or equal to the caste of the woman he is marrying. Instead, Sinclair-Brull’s informant asked to take *sannyasa* rather than marry the man of her parents’ choosing, and after some arguing, her parents allowed her to do so because not having to pay her dowry would save them a significant amount of money.⁶⁵

Additionally, for a poor, uneducated, low-caste rural woman, an arranged marriage likely means being wed to a man who is low-caste, uneducated, and poor himself. This is typically the result of a woman’s family’s inability to pay a decent dowry or because the woman’s caste, education, or looks are not acceptable to “good” families looking to marry their sons. Indeed, a combination of these problems are typical for poor, rural, uneducated Hindu Indian girls, making their marriage prospects dismal. A woman whose family is unable to arrange a good marriage for her basically assures that she will be living in poverty, and married to a man whose prospects for employment outside of low-paying, unsteady manual labor jobs are not good. For example, Sinclair-Brull describes typical living conditions for low-or scheduled caste (Harijan) Hindus living in the rural villages of the Kerala region, where many of her informants come from:

“They live in small huts, on small plots of land. Walls are of unplastered laterite, though very poor families live in huts of plaited palm branches. Roofs are of coconut thatch and floor of mud mixed with charcoal. A typical hut is a single room...a palm leaf extension may provide a kitchen, and there are no bathing facilities. Inside, the hut would contain some old rolled up bedding in one corner, and a rickety chair or stool. Few have a table, and many not even these basic possessions. An extra set of clothing is typically hung on a clothes line, inside or outside...and may be used by whoever needs it at the time. A typical meal consists of a small amount of rice, and possibly a little fish or vegetables.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 96-97.

She notes that it is these types of homes that the women coming to the Trichur Mandiram would have been married into if they had chosen to be married and that many of her informants confided that they wished to escape “problems of poverty” when they took *sannyasa*. According to Sinclair-Brull, “These women [all poor, rural, and uneducated] decided not to marry into poverty, and *sought* [emphasis hers] an institution where they could live and be taken care of...”⁶⁷

Furthermore, women from lower-caste, poor, rural families will typically be married at a young age. Although the Indian legislature passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1978 which states that the legal age of marriage is eighteen years for women and twenty-one years for men, this is a largely unenforced, and unenforceable, law. The current median age of marriage for Hindu women living in rural areas of India is 16.7 years.⁶⁸ A deep concern for the chastity of a family’s women, on which a family’s honor largely hinges, means that women are typically married when they young. As Allen and Mukherjee explain,

“The purity of the caste is a direct function of the purity of its womenfolk. The male members of the caste are in large measure dependent for their status rating on the purity of their women, primarily on that of their sisters and daughters whom they give in marriage, and secondarily as the women they take as wives... [A] wayward girl can ruin the status aspirations of her male kinsmen.”⁶⁹

Thus, a girl’s family is “anxious that there should be no room whatsoever even for the possibility of any reports arising or reflecting upon the character of its maidens” and ensures

⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁸ Manoranjan Pal, Premananda Bharati, Bholanath Ghosh, and T.S. Vasulu, eds., *Gender and Discrimination: Health, Nutritional Status, and Role of Women in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 82.

⁶⁹ Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee, *Women in India and Nepal* (New York: Sterling Publishers, 1982) 6.

this by marrying a daughter at a young age.⁷⁰

The deep concern for the sexual purity of daughters can be seen from Sriya Iyer's survey of rural villager mothers living near the town of Ramanagara in Southern India. According to the researcher's results, forty-eight per cent of the mothers polled stated that they have kept their daughters home from school at the age of menarche in order to find them a suitable husband. As Iyer notes, many of the mothers explained that it was "not right to deprive their girls of an education," but having them outside the house as they matured could lead to either real or imagined relationships with boys that would severely hinder the girl's, and her family's, reputation and therefore her ability to find a husband.⁷¹

Some female *sadhuis* reported that they chose to renounce due to the stress of being married at a young age. In an extreme example of a young marriage, one of Sinclair-Brull's informants, a young woman from a rural area of Kerala, was married and moved into her husband's home when she was just eight years old, although the marriage remained unconsummated. This girl ran away from her husband's home a few months after marriage with the help of the Trichur Sri Sarada Mandiram, citing the fact that she feared that her fourteen-year-old husband would forcefully try to consummate their marriage and that her in-laws did not seem particularly concerned to try to protect her.⁷²

Another reason Hindu Indian women from rural, poor, low-caste families would not want to be married or stay married is that they are from families that follow traditional Hindu socio-religious gender roles and will likely be married into a family that believes in these same roles. As Pal notes, these traditional Hindu Indian gender roles "...perpetuate the century-old biases

⁷⁰ Sambodh Goswami, *Female Infanticide and Child Marriage* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2007) 25.

⁷¹ Pal, et al., *Gender and Discrimination*, 88.

⁷² Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 73.

that generally maintain women in subordinate positions compared to men in Indian society...”⁷³

The two most prominent reasons for this subordination are perceptions of female impurity and women’s perceived inability to control themselves. According to traditional Hindu thought, women are believed to be impure because of menstruation and childbirth, both of which involve blood, a substance that orthodox Hindu texts consider to be extreme polluting. Essentially, this impurity makes women on the level of *sudras* (the lowest, servile caste), no matter what caste into which they were actual born. Touching a woman while she is menstruating or within a period of time after childbirth is highly ritually polluting and would necessitate bathing immediately. A man, no matter what polluting activity he partakes in, will never be as impure as a woman and thus in a society that is ranked largely on notions of purity, women are ranked at the bottom.⁷⁴

Additionally, women are considered to have very weak self-control. This is especially important as it relates to sexual purity, as women are supposed to remain chaste in order to, as we have seen, preserve familial honor. It is thought, however, to be hard for them to do so because women are believed to have great amounts of *sakti*, universal or cosmic energy or power that is conceptualized as feminine and is considered both creative and destructive.⁷⁵ *Sakti*

⁷³ Pal, et al., *Gender and Discrimination*, xii.

⁷⁴ Allen and Mukherjee, *Women in India and Nepal*, 76-77. Although, it should be noted that this is the dominant orthodox male perspective of female impurity. Women actually often see menstruation and childbirth as cleansing because it rids the body of old, and thus more polluted, blood. Ibid., 83.

⁷⁵ Ironically, many women believe that it is because men control them that they are able to cultivate great amounts of *sakti*. One of Anne Mackenzie Pearson’s informants told her, “Everyone has some *sakti*, but women have more of it because they do more rituals and fasts. Women also gain *sakti* because of their place in the family. Husbands and fathers control women’s wills. We must always be lower than men. You must control your own desires, too. You must have perfect fidelity to your husband even in thought. When women have children, they bear pain and suppress their own desires for the children. That brings *sakti* too.” Anne Mackenzie Pearson, *Because it Gives Me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 216. DeNapoli also notes that women believe that their place in life brings them *sakti*. DeNapoli, “Leave Everything

is thought to be a very wild energy that is too powerful for women to control by themselves.⁷⁶

To explain this concept, Hindus often use the example of Kali, the “Black One.”⁷⁷ Kali is usually portrayed as a form of Parvati, the wife of Siva. After a fight where Siva calls Parvati “Black One” because of her dark skin, Parvati leaves in order to generate *tapas* to obtain a fair golden skin. The god Brahma eventually grants Parvati’s wish and she sheds from her body “a dark woman, named the goddess Kali,” to reveal her golden inner form, Gauri, “The Golden.”⁷⁸ Gauri returns to Siva and their son Viraka and acts as a quintessential “goddess of the breast,” a wife who is subservient to her husband, and a loving mother. In this role, her *sakti* is reigned in by her husband or at least appropriately channeled for the good of her husband and son, even though it is clear she is powerful enough to generate enough heat to have Brahma grant her a boon.⁷⁹

Kali on the other hand is the quintessential example of a “tooth goddess.”⁸⁰ She is unmarried, fierce, and her *sakti* is out of control because she does not have a husband to take control of this power. One story of Kali, recorded in the “Glorification of the Goddess” from the Puranas, depicts Kali defeating an antigod named Raktabija (Blood Seed). As Doniger explains:

“From every drop of [Raktabija’s] blood (or, if you prefer, semen) a new antigod appeared. To conquer him, Chandika created the goddess Kali and instructed her to open wide her mouth and drink the blood as well as the constantly appearing progeny of Blood Seed; then Chandika killed him. [Kali’s mouth] is the upward

and Sing to God,” 217. In a way, then, this is a never-ending cycle in which men control women, which causes women to cultivate great amounts of energy that, subsequently, requires men to reign it in.

⁷⁶ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 217. This is sometimes called the “feminine principle.” *Sakti* can be understood as both a fertile and creative power, which women have a lot of because of their potential to give birth or it can be understood as an extremely potent sexual power, “the efficacy of impurity, women’s uniquely dangerous power.” Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 38. For an in-depth explanation of *sakti*, see Jacobson and Wadley, *Women in India*, ch. 2.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that this is the dominant male perspective.

⁷⁸ Doniger, *The Hindus*, 397-398.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 390.

displacement of her excessive vaginas, a grotesque nightmare image of the devouring sexual woman, her mouth a second sexual organ.”⁸¹

In this story, Kali, by virtue of her *sakti*, is powerful enough to help defeat an antigod, but she is also portrayed as having wildly out of control sexuality. The moral of these stories about the goddess Kali is that women can be extremely powerful, but men need to control this power or it can lead to destruction or other undesirable outcomes such as an out-of-control sex drive that makes women unable to control their sexual actions.⁸²

The belief that women are less pure than men and that they are weak, particularly when it comes to sexual control, has resulted in a very strict gender hierarchy where women are subordinated to men and are not supposed to be independent, whether as daughters or wives. The *Laws of Manu* are frequently cited to show the ideal position for women in traditional Hindu Indian culture:

“By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them, she would make her family contemptible.”⁸³

The idea that men must control women at all times has the effect of severely curtailing many of a woman’s freedoms. One of the most visible ways women have their freedom curtailed is that they typically have very limited freedom of mobility. According to the World Bank, “...restrictions on women’s mobility in South Asia remains high, especially for women of lower castes.”⁸⁴ This is especially true for rural Hindu women, whom men usually escort wherever they need to travel. Women are typically expected to stay in or near the home except

⁸¹ Ibid., 425-426.

⁸² Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma, eds., *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 221.

⁸³ Doniger, *The Hindus*, 325-326.

⁸⁴ Khandelwal, et al., *Women’s Renunciation in South Asia*, 10.

to go to work or run errands and even then they are usually accompanied. Many women are not even allowed to go to the next village, visit a friend, or visit a health center alone.⁸⁵ One of Steve Derne's rural, Hindu Indian male householder informants explained this as follows:

“It is the tradition of our place that women here are not left independent. Women here are not free. They are under control. But they can roam around with my desire. If I give my permission, she can go to the cinema- but not alone... Even this is according to her age. If she is young, then she will not be allowed to go anywhere.”⁸⁶

As this man implies, women do gain some autonomy as they grow older, but they will never be completely independent.

Additionally, women typically have decision-making power over almost no aspect of their lives. As one of Wadley's female householder informants reported, “In our [district], the woman does not have any value, so most of the decisions are made by men only.”⁸⁷ For example, a husband will control his wife's body and other personal matters. He will tell her when and if she can use birth control, when the couple will have sexual relations, where a woman will give birth, which embryos a woman will carry to term, and if she will be able to visit a doctor when she has any sort of medical issue. Indeed, a husband often makes the decision to withhold medical treatment from his wife, deeming it too far to travel or too costly.⁸⁸

Several of the female *sadhus* I examined chose not to marry or left a marriage because they could not live with a husband who controlled much of their lives. One of Hausner's informants, Mukta Giri, stated that taking *sannyasa* allowed her “spatial mobility [and] some

⁸⁵ Tracy Pintchman, ed., *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸⁶ Steve Derne, “Hindu Men Talk About Controlling Women: Cultural Ideas as a Tool of the Powerful,” *Sociological Perspectives* 37, No. 2 (Summer, 1994): 208.

⁸⁷ Jacobson and Wadley, *Women in India*, 73.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

measure of social freedom” that she otherwise would not have had as a wife.⁸⁹ Likewise, the husband of Khandelwal’s informant, Anand Mata, tried to pressure her into having children (although not through violence or physical means). It was at this time that she realized she was “not suited to the environment in which she lived,” because she did not want children and did not like her husband telling her what to do with her body, so she left her husband and took *sannyasa*.⁹⁰

These traditional gender roles that subordinate women to men also contribute to the idea that a woman is the property of her husband and is to be submissive to her husband at all times. This can lead to domestic violence, of both a physical and sexual nature. As Himanshu Sekar Rout and Prasant Kumar Panda explain,

“...domestic violence arises from patriarchal notion of ownership over women’s bodies, sexuality, labor, reproductive rights, mobility, and level of autonomy. Deep rooted ideas about male superiority enable men to freely exercise unlimited power over women’s lives and effectively legitimize it. Violence is thus a tool that men use constantly to control women as a result of highly internalized patriarchal conditioning which accords men the right to beat their wives and thus ostensibly perform the duty of chastising them.”⁹¹

Domestic violence is common in India and is greatly exacerbated by poverty, making it especially prevalent in poverty-stricken rural areas where traditional gender roles are still the norm. In fact, domestic violence in these areas is considered typical, and is so commonly accepted and expected that police will rarely go after even the most violent husbands, including those who have clearly murdered their wives. As Vinson S. Sutlive and Tomoko Hamada note, “Many officers think that it is the prerogative of husbands to beat their wives. Instead of taking

⁸⁹ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 108.

⁹⁰ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 49.

⁹¹ Himanshu Sekhar Rout and Prasant Kumar Panda, eds., *Gender and Development in India: Dimensions and Strategies* (New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2008) 206-207.

action against the husbands, they ridicule the complaining women and do not choose to register the case...”⁹² Generally, many people in the community also feel that the woman must have brought the violence upon herself and therefore have little sympathy for her.⁹³

Abuse can often begin on the night the marriage is consummated, in what is known as the *gauna*. For example, one of Jacobson’s informants, Kamladevi, was a young girl of thirteen who had not started menstruating when she was married to a man in his later teens. The young woman described to Jacobson the first night of her marriage, saying:

“I hadn’t started bathing yet [that is, she had not started taking the ritual baths women must take when they menstruate]. I was really frightened. ... [Her husband’s cousin’s wife] took me into the house and told me to sleep there. She said he [the young girl’s new husband] would be coming in shortly. She spread the blankets on the bed, and then she went out and locked the door from outside. I was really scared; I cowered near the door. I didn’t know it, but he [her husband] had gone in before and hidden in the dark near the hearth. He came out then and grabbed hold of me. I let him do whatever he wanted to do; I just clenched my *sari* between my teeth so I wouldn’t cry out. But I cried a lot anyway, and there was lots of blood. In the morning, I changed my *sari* before I came out of the room, and bundled the dirty *sari* up and hid it from everyone.”⁹⁴

The young girl was thus subjected to a brutal rape on her wedding night that her new family allowed and, furthermore, assisted.

After their first night together, husbands continue to physically and sexually abuse their wives. The research of Rob Stephenson, Michael A. Koenig and Saifuddin Ahmed indicates that somewhere around sixty percent of rural Hindu women in northern India have experienced some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime.⁹⁵ Much of this abuse comes when women refuse to have sex. A wife is expected to have sexual intercourse whenever her husband wants as she is

⁹² Vinson H. Sutlive and Tomoko Hamada, *Women in India: Studies in Third World Societies* (Williamsburg, College of William and Mary, 1996) 128.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁹⁴ Jacobson and Wadley, *Women in India*, 54.

⁹⁵ Rob Stephenson, Michael A. Koenig and Saifuddin Ahmed, “Domestic Violence and Symptoms of Gynecologic Morbidity,” *International Family Planning Perspectives* 32, No. 4 (December 2006): 202.

his property and is there to fulfill his needs. For example, one female householder informant reported to ethnographers, “He forces me for sex often. We have sex three to four days a week. In one month, he has coerced sex four to five days. I do not feel like having sex, it becomes painful, but he does not stop.”⁹⁶ Furthermore, wives are often subjected to verbal, physical and emotional abuse for other reasons. According to A. Vinayak Reddy’s study on domestic violence of rural Hindu women in Andhra Pradesh, the reasons his female informants stated that their husbands beat them were: the wife’s ill treatment of her in-laws, not procuring money and gifts from her parents, going out without permission from her husband, food preparations not to the satisfaction of her husband, neglecting household duties and children, for questioning their husbands about why they did not go to work, and for not providing money for liquor.⁹⁷

Many female *sadhus* cited domestic violence, especially that they observed in their household as children, as their main reason for not wanting to marry and taking *sannyasa*. One of Sinclair-Brull’s informants told her that she chose to become a *sadhu* because, “Married life is so terrible, my mother suffered so much.”⁹⁸ She then went on to say that “married life would not bring her happiness.”⁹⁹ This woman witnessed her father, who was an alcoholic, beating her mother over the course of the female *sadhu*’s young life. Sinclair-Brull explains, “She had a highly negative view of married life based on her mother’s bitter experience.” In fact, this female *sadhu*’s mother, unusually, had encouraged her daughter to take *sannyasa* instead of marrying, telling Sinclair-Brull, “No, I am not sorry that my daughter joined [Sri Sarada

⁹⁶ K.G. Santhya, Nicole Haberland, F. Ram, R.K. Sinha and S.K. Mohanty, “Consent and Coercion: Examining Unwanted Sex Among Married Young Women in India,” *International Family Planning Perspectives* 33, No. 3 (September 2007): 125.

⁹⁷ Sen, *Death by Fire*, 215.

⁹⁸ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 114.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

Mandiram].”¹⁰⁰

Lastly, women from low-caste, impoverished rural families often do not receive an education. In India, girls’ participation in secondary education, which would prepare them to take the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) exam, was around 39.9 per cent in 2001.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, it is estimated that a full forty percent of Indian women are functionally illiterate, with some poor rural populations approaching sixty percent female illiteracy.¹⁰² There are many factors that lead to women from poor rural families not being educated and many of these relate to marriage. One of these is that, as mentioned earlier, the movement of girls is restricted at a young age. As the mothers of girls noted, they were willing to keep their daughters home at the age of menarche so as to prevent any dishonor to the family because of questions of the daughter’s chastity. In turn, the belief is that this will help the girl’s marriage prospects. Thus, the education of young girls is commonly cut short so as not to potentially hurt her marriage prospects.

Additionally, many parents feel that educating girls will only lead them to be dissatisfied with their lives when they are forced into a traditional marriage later. Since becoming a wife is the dominant paradigm for women in Hindu tradition, parents are wary of doing anything that might draw their daughters down a different life path. Education is commonly withheld so that girls do not become discontent with their domestic duties. There is a common belief among parents that

“...education spoils the character of their daughters and that if their daughters go to college, they will refuse to enter a kitchen; in other words, she will not be able to prove herself to be a modest daughter-in-law. They argue that their daughter need not earn, so

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰¹ V.S. Ganesamurthy, ed., *Women in the Indian Economy* (New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2008) 56.

¹⁰² “Adult Literacy Rate, Population 15+ Years, Both Sexes,” World Bank Website, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS>, (April 7, 2017).

what is the need of higher education?”¹⁰³

In urban areas where there is less of a focus on traditional Hindu gender roles, a woman's education can make her a more attractive marriage prospect and a good education can often be used to replace a dowry or substituted for caste or complexion considerations in marriage negotiations. For this reason, upper-caste and well-to-do urban families place an emphasis on educating their daughters. These families send their daughters to be educated at English-language schools beginning when the girls are relatively young. These girls are then sent to college and even post-graduate school to complete their education.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, in rural, more traditional areas, an education is seen as a detriment to a woman finding a husband. A rural woman who wants to pursue an education will often have to choose between that education and marriage.¹⁰⁵ This is because a woman is not supposed to be more educated than her husband, according to tradition. Since men in rural areas do not receive a lot of schooling, this means a woman should receive even less.

Many women who decided to take *sannyasa* state that they did so in order to pursue an education. Girls who are serious about studying often find themselves taking *sannyasa* because it is the only way they will receive an education. Denton notes that a “small, but significant proportion” of her young, female *sadhu* informants had refused marriage to “pursue academic studies, preferring education to marriage.”¹⁰⁶

In summation, women who take *sannyasa* are typically from low-caste, poor, rural

¹⁰³ Rameshwari Pandya, *Women in India: Issues, Perspectives, and Solutions* (New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2007) 316.

¹⁰⁴ Sutlive and Hamada, *Women in India*, ix.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰⁶ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 124.

families, making these women “victims of poor life prospects.”¹⁰⁷ These women tend to have negative views of marriage which causes them to either not want to marry in the first place, or leave a marriage. I have argued here that women from this population have a negative view of marriage because they are held to traditional gender roles, values, and standards. These include having a marriage arranged, typically at a young age to a man who has little chance of providing a decent life; the idea that a wife should be under her husband’s control at all times, resulting in little freedom and decision-making for wives as well as domestic violence; the idea that a woman should constantly practice self-denial in order to take care of her husband; and the idea that a young woman should be denied an education so as not to spoil her chaste reputation or that it would somehow make her more rebellious when she marries. While the vast majority of low-caste, poor, rural women do marry, a small minority find the gender roles associated with marriage completely unacceptable and refuse to marry.

A woman from this highly traditional population who does not want to be married or stay married, however, poses a problem in traditional Indian Hindu society. Not only does an unmarried woman raise suspicions of sexual impropriety, but traditional gender roles state that “a woman’s place is in the home, and her life is, ideally, governed by the body of religious law known as *stridharma*, the way of life (*dharma*) appropriate to a woman (*stri*).”¹⁰⁸ As such, householdership is assumed to be the only mode of life for a woman: to be a proper woman is to be a housewife.¹⁰⁹ The pressure to marry is intense, and women from this traditional Indian Hindu family background are not shown other options besides marriage. Women who do not want to live a householder’s life do have another option, although it is rarely chosen, and that is to become a *sadhu*. In the next section, I will argue that *sannyasa* provides a respectable role for

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁸ Pal, et al., *Gender and Discrimination*, 83.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 83.

women outside of being a householder and well as argue that *sannyasa* offers women many advantages over householdership.

Chapter II: The Freedom of *Sannyasa*: What Becoming a *Sadhu* Has to Offer Women

As I have argued, there is a variety of reasons why a Hindu Indian woman from a poor, rural, traditional family would either find marriage undesirable or wish to leave her marriage. As those in urban areas have become less bound to traditional Hindu norms, it has become acceptable for women to be highly educated, take well-paying, secure employment, and live on their own. This is not an option, however, for rural, poor women who have little to no money or education on which to fall back. Indeed, for these women reared in highly traditional, rural areas, there are very few other options besides marriage. As Harlan and Courtright explain:

“...[R]ural women are expected to marry, to bear children, to aid in household production, and to become mothers-in-law. Given the lack of alternatives, women benefit by adhering to the norms defined by the male-dominated society.”¹¹⁰

Although most women do choose to adhere to this norm of becoming a wife and mother, there is one other option for rural women and that is to take *sannyasa*. All but the most orthodox Brahminical sects of Hindu renouncers and adherents accept that women can become *sadhus*.¹¹¹ A widespread *laukik* (popular, in contrast to orthodox) belief in the Hindu philosophy of *Advaita* (non-duality) makes this possible. *Advaita* promises the possibility of transcending all dualities and distinctions, so that the soul (*atma*) can merge with *Brahman* (the all-encompassing spirit of which the entire universe is made). *Advaita* philosophy “proclaims absolute freedom of the Spirit including the transcendence of all finite human institutions.”¹¹² Ironically, *Advaita* is an orthodox theory espoused in classical Brahminical Hindu texts, and yet,

¹¹⁰ Harlan and Courtright, *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage*, 99.

¹¹¹ These orthodox sects hold the *Dharmasastrik* viewpoint (that is, one taken from the orthodox Brahmin Hindu text the *Dharmasastras*) that women are inherently sinful due to their pollution from childbirth and menstruation. This impurity makes it impossible for women to be able to reach *moksha* in this lifetime and therefore they are unfit for *sannyasa*. From this view, the way for women to reach *moksha* is to continue to accrue good *karma* and go through multiple rebirths until they can be reborn as high-caste men. Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 6.

¹¹² Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 44.

within this idea is the very ability to transcend the very strict gender and class hierarchies that Brahmins have attempted to keep in place. Most laypeople as well as many male *sadhus*, including many of those who consider themselves orthodox and high-caste, believe in the idea that male and female are categories that only apply to the physical body and are able to be transcended. These people believe that men and women can both be initiated into *sannyasa* and try to achieve *moksha* in this lifetime.¹¹³

Although women rarely choose to take *sannyasa* and families rarely encourage it for their daughters, it is considered a respectable alternative for uneducated Hindu Indian women who do not want to become wives or no longer wish to live with their husbands.¹¹⁴ It is a life path that largely conforms to traditional Indian Hindu gender restrictions and thus it is seen as a gender-appropriate path for women. The main reason for this is Hindu asceticism focuses heavily on celibacy and is therefore perceived as protecting a woman's sexual purity, a main concern of Hindu Indian society.¹¹⁵

The male model of renunciation has been tied to the idea of semen retention, and therefore celibacy, since ancient times.¹¹⁶ Female renouncers, however, emphasize celibacy in their practice as well. Female *sadhus* understand renunciation as a focus “on moral as well as ritual

¹¹³ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 7.

¹¹⁴ The fact that families do not encourage taking *sannyasa* shows just how deeply engrained the idea that women should become wives and mothers is. It would save families large amounts of money and time because of dowry payments and the time that it takes to secure a daughter's marriage. There is a long tradition of Indian Christians giving at least one of their daughters to “God” to become nuns, so this idea is not unknown in India. Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 117. It is considered a respectable option for educated women too, but these women have other options that they are choosing over renunciation.

¹¹⁵ Robert P. Goldman, “Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, No. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1993): 376. Also see Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 97-99.

¹¹⁶ Losing semen is seen to be spiritually debilitating, which is why celibacy is stressed. DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 75.

purity, a lifestyle of self-restraint and emotional detachment.”¹¹⁷ For women, abstaining from sex is just one of the many ways they can control what one of Khandelwal’s female renunciant informants refers to as “seeds of passion.”¹¹⁸ Celibacy, female renunciants argue, is also important because it is one of the most prominent ways *sadhus* separate themselves from householders. As one of DeNapoli’s female *sadhu* informants noted, “What kind of *bhakti* [religious devotion] can be done when *sadhus* live like householders [that is, engage in sexual activity]?”¹¹⁹ In her opinion, sexual activity only distracts the mind from its focus on achieving *moksha* and therefore has no place in a renouncer’s life.

This section will address the question of what advantages renunciation offers to women over the life of a householder. While Hausner, DeNapoli, Khandelwal, and Sinclair-Brull have focused on the many similarities between the life of a female householder and female *sadhu*, I will argue that there are also many differences between the life of a female *sadhu* and the life of a female householder and that these differences give renunciation benefits over householdership. These benefits include agency, freedom, a chance to have an education, a chance to earn respect and power, and a chance to escape a life of poverty — all things that likely would not have been possible for most rural, poor, low-caste householder women.

First, and most generally, *sannyasa* gives women a level of agency that they would not otherwise have had as householders. DeNapoli point out why this is, stating,

¹¹⁷ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 173.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹¹⁹ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 138.

“A woman’s entry into the world of renunciation enables female *sadhus* to participate in an alternative role to the normative one of wife, mother, and caretaker. Hindu renunciation, although institutional in a broad sense, does not have specific doctrines, practices, social organization, and spiritual leadership. Because of this, renunciation constitutes a “site of undetermination that allows *sadhus* to practice how they choose, which essentially means controlling most aspects of their practice and therefore their own lives.”¹²⁰

DeNapoli’s informant Gangagiri explains how her life differs from the life of by saying, “I no longer have to do the *karm* (work) of women.” DeNapoli comments that this statement “implies not that she perceives herself as a man, but rather that asceticism provides the means by which she transcends the culturally-determined roles and norms for women.”¹²¹

One example of the agency *sannyasa* provides women is the celibacy that largely characterizes Hindu renunciation. Men basically control householder women’s sexuality, as I argued earlier, by constant surveillance and restricting women’s activities and movements in order to ensure there is no sexual activity outside of marriage for their daughters or wives. The chastity of wives and daughters is one of the main ways a family can maintain or increase its honor or prestige. Maintaining daughters’ virginity leads to better marriage matches which in turn can make the family more powerful and a family whose women are unquestionably chaste will gain honor in the community. In this way, women’s sexual activity or lack thereof is used to cultivate power for men, who are the main beneficiaries of increased familial honor and power. Conversely, a woman who engages in extramarital sex or loses her virginity before marriage can lead to poor marriage prospects and a loss of honor in the eyes of the community. The importance of female sexual purity to a woman’s male relatives leads to men imposing chastity on women so female sexuality will not bring dishonor to the family name. In other words, men force women to refrain from sex outside of marriage instead of allowing women to

¹²⁰ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 45.

¹²¹ Ibid., 50.

make this choice on their own.

On the other hand, female *sadhus* take control of their own sexuality by making the choice to practice celibacy. As Vallely writes about Jain nuns, “Abstinence in the name of chastity sexualized the female body according to patriarchal discourse, but religious celibacy is rather a reappropriation of power and strength.”¹²² This applies equally to Hindu women who have taken *sannyasa*.

Instead of cultivating power for men, a female renouncer can cultivate spiritual power for herself through celibacy. Sexual activity is said to drain power, in the form of *tapas* (the inner heat created by religious practice), from a person. Being celibate, as well as other spiritual practices such as singing *bhajans*, reciting *mantras*, meditating, and serving others (*seva*), allows women to build *tapas*.¹²³ Hindus believe that this heat, when accumulated, is used to destroy impurity, bringing a *sadhu* closer and closer to the purest state of merging her *atma* with *Brahma*, thus achieving *moksha*.¹²⁴ As one builds up *tapas*, it is believed he or she can gain spiritual powers, such as the ability to speak to the gods or goddesses, have prescient visions, and even control another person’s thoughts or actions.

For example, in an instance Khandelwal discusses, her informant, Baiji, became very ill with glaucoma and is said to have gone blind. Baiji “came up with her own medication through meditation,” because of all of the *tapas* she had built up. This medicine, Baiji claims, cured her blindness.¹²⁵ Here, we are able to see how female *sadhus* are able to use their bodies and their spiritual power to benefit themselves instead of men.

Second, women have much more freedom as renouncers than they otherwise likely would

¹²² Khandelwal, et al., *Women’s Renunciation in South Asia*, 15.

¹²³ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 406.

¹²⁴ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 172.

¹²⁵ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 136.

have had as married women. This is one of the reasons that renunciation is thought to be inappropriate to women in the traditional, orthodox texts such as the *Dharmashastra* literature. As Khandelwal notes, “That renunciation implied freedom and independence would in itself render it inappropriate for women.”¹²⁶ One of the ways this freedom manifests itself is that female renunciators’ travel and movements are much less restricted. Indeed, it is believed that there should be a phase in a renouncer’s spiritual journey where a *sadhu* must travel extensively, usually for many years, with very few possessions, visiting various pilgrimage sites. The point of this is so that the *sadhu* learns detachment to both places and objects, as well as to not get too comfortable in one place. This is typically done when a renouncer is younger, as that is when one’s physical body can stand to move around a lot and travel long distances.¹²⁷

Although female *sadhuis* usually travel in a group or with a male *sadhu* because of the threat of sexual assault, women are able to choose where they want to go and how long they want to stay. This is clearly a liberating opportunity for a woman who was likely told when she could leave the house, where she could go, and for how long she could stay as a householder. For more mundane tasks, female renunciators typically have much more freedom of mobility as well. They are able to do many things that they would not be allowed to do as householders, such as run errands and visit a doctor, distant temple or other place of worship by themselves.¹²⁸

Third, women who renounce have the chance to receive an education that they likely would not have been able to receive as householders. As I mentioned in the last section, women who want an education often take *sannyasa* so they are able to attain an education. Very few women from rural areas have the opportunity to receive an extensive education as they are kept home because of fears of a ruined reputation or that the girl will then be unhappy in a marriage

¹²⁶ Ibid., 37.

¹²⁷ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 101-103.

¹²⁸ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 89.

where she must be submissive to her husband and in-laws. Therefore, *sannyasa* is often the only possible way for a girl from a traditional family to receive an education. This education can be either formal, through an established school or university, or informal, through one's *guru* or others in the person's *sadhu* lineage.

In terms of formal education, many of the *mandirs* (a temple complex with living quarters for ascetics attached) or *maths* (a monastery) established for female renunciants are quite focused on education for women. One example of this is the Sri Sarada Mandiram, the Trichur branch of which was the subject of Sinclair-Brull's study. Vivekananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna Order, established the Sri Sarada Mandiram in large part because he was of the opinion that "without female education, India would not be able to regain its national vigor. Women should be able enabled to improve their life conditions for themselves."¹²⁹ His inspiration to educate women came from his early twentieth-century visits to the United States on lecture tours, where he saw women being educated and leading independent, productive lives.¹³⁰

Girls and young women who come to be inmates at any of the branches of Sri Sarada Mandiram are absolutely required to be educated beyond a Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) equivalent education, equal to five years of primary school and five years of secondary school. Women at the various branches of the Mandiram are sent away to receive their bachelor's, master's, and even doctoral degrees.¹³¹ The institution pays for the woman's tuition, room and board, books, school supplies, and a small stipend for spending money. Sinclair-Brull gives an example of one female *sadhu* who came to Trichur Sri Sarada Mandiram to escape an arranged marriage. This woman was able to attain her SSLC at the Mandiram and

¹²⁹ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 61.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

then the institution sent her to the city of Trichur to get her bachelor's degree in fine arts.¹³²

If women who come to Sri Sarada Mandiram choose not to attend a university to receive at least a bachelor's degree, candidates must qualify in secretarial work, needlework, or another vocationally-oriented diploma.¹³³ The women coming to the Mandiram are required to become "highly educated" during their time there because as the Trichur branch's president explained to Sinclair-Brull,

"In rural India, if a boy is sent home or leaves [from monastic life] he can take any job or stay in a hostel if his family won't have him back. Girls in India can't do that. If they get training, they can stand on their own feet if sent back or if they leave."¹³⁴

When women return from university or vocational classes, the Mandiram offers high-level Sanskrit, philosophy, grammar, logic, English, and typing classes to help inmates continue their educations and acquire new skills. These classes give women the chance to earn extra education certificates in certain subjects. Women from the Trichur branch, for instance, are able to sit for four levels of Sanskrit examinations in Bombay, just as they would be if they were learning at a university.¹³⁵

Even if a woman does not go into one of these renunciant orders, there are still ample opportunities for education that rural householder women would be unlikely to receive. Oftentimes, classes are taught at ashrams or *mandirs* or women can sit with young pupils being taught at the schools attached to these places.¹³⁶ It is common for ashrams to teach Sanskrit, as it is seen as especially important for understanding Hindu scripture, culture, and religion.

Women in rural areas have little chance to learn Sanskrit and therefore learn a very important

¹³² Ibid., 120.

¹³³ Ibid., 111-112.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 111. It is not only the Ramakrishna Order that places a heavy emphasis on female education. Other Hindu renunciation orders such as the Arya Samaj also have a focus on educating female *sadhvis* with the belief that educating women will help advance India. Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 38.

¹³⁵ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 106-107.

¹³⁶ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 129.

part of the Hindu tradition.¹³⁷ Female *sadhus*, like their male counterparts, often learn Sanskrit and then use this knowledge to teach their disciples or others who ask for religious teachings. Indeed, having an in-depth knowledge of Sanskrit is one way that *sadhus* construct themselves as religious experts.¹³⁸

Less formally, it is common for *gurus* or *sadhu*-brothers or sisters (that is, men and women initiated by the same *guru*) to teach others in their lineage how to read and write, believing that it will help them on their path to *moksha*. For example, DeNapoli's informant Jamuna Bharti explains, "...that while she never learned to read books because her parents did not allow her to go school, she is able to read the Tulsi *Ramayan*." When DeNapoli asked her how she acquired this skill, Jamuna Bharti replied, "By the grace of God and my *guru*."¹³⁹ Her *guru* had painstakingly taken the time to teach her to read and write, because he believed that the best way for her to attain *moksha* was to read the *Ramayana* over and over.

A fourth reason becoming a *sadhu* has an advantage over the life of a householder for women is that female *sadhus* are often greatly respected as compared to *grhinis*. While householder women are considered lower than men in basically every respect, female *sadhus* are considered both spiritually adept and powerful. According to the Hindu notion of *purusartha* (the goal to which a person devotes his or her life), renunciation is considered the highest end or goal (*artha*) to which a human being (*purusa*) can devote himself or herself.¹⁴⁰ Because of this, female *sadhus*, although they lead unconventional lives, "are highly respected by ordinary and even conservative people as sources of spiritual power and everyday

¹³⁷ Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women in Indian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 31.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 31.

¹³⁹ DeNapoli, "Leave Everything and Sing to God," 291

¹⁴⁰ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 3.

morality.”¹⁴¹ By becoming a renouncer, a woman acquires a previously unattainable social and ritual status. This is because the woman is now formally considered under the tutelage of a *guru* and will later be able to initiate and teach her own disciples if she so chooses.

Importantly, female and male *sadhus* are usually equally as respected for their knowledge of, and connection to, the divine.¹⁴² For example, in DeNapoli’s study of female *sadhus* whose primary form of practice was “devotional asceticism,” DeNapoli notes the way that her informant Gangagiri garnered great respect:

“By referring to certain characters and/or to specific stories from the Tulsi *Ramayan* with which to teach the concept of duty, Gangagiri constructs herself as a knower, or religious specialist, before her audience. In doing so, she creates her authority as a female ascetic. Several times during the informal lecture, female householders [who had gathered to listen] comment on Gangagiri’s religious knowledge and even characterize her as Shabari. An unassuming female ascetic who appears at the end of the Forest Book (*Aranya Kand*), the third chapter of the *Ramayan* epic, Shabari is a disciple of the sage Matanga, and her *bhakti* to Ram, the epic’s hero, earns her the recognition not only as a great devotee of the Lord, but also as an extraordinary ascetic amongst the more intellectually-minded male *sadhus* and sages whom she serves.”¹⁴³

Householders, those who wish to be initiated as *sadhus*, and *sadhus* wishing to learn from a more experienced religious practitioner will come to well-known and respected female *sadhus* to be initiated as lay devotees or *sadhu* disciples, making the woman who performs these initiations a *guru*.¹⁴⁴ The sacred speech a *guru* bestows on his/her disciples and devotees represents

“...the *sabd* (divine words), through which means they receive liberating

¹⁴¹ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 6.

¹⁴² Not everyone accepts female ascetics to be equals in spiritual power to their male counterparts, but most people understand both male and female *sadhus* to have some amount of spiritual power and to be more spiritually powerful than householders. Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 20, 60; Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 53.

¹⁴³ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 279.

¹⁴⁴ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 49.

knowledge. Thus, the *sabd* itself enables devotees/disciples to experience liberation, or *moksha*, from the illusory and impermanent world... By singing, reciting, and/or speaking the *sabd*, a *sadhu* claims the spiritual authority of the *sants* and God, and as such, constructs herself or himself as an enlightened person, that is, as the “true *guru*” who transmits revelatory knowledge in the hope that her or his own disciples/devotees...shall be transformed or awakened by the *sabd*.”¹⁴⁵

In this way, female gurus are looked upon as powerful for the knowledge they are able to transmit. Being a female guru offers a chance for women to teach men and therefore be more powerful than men in a way that householdership does not. Many of the female *sadhus* anthropologists have examined have a number of disciples and devotees. For instance, one of Khandelwal’s informants, Baiji, had four *sadhus* that she had formally initiated. She also had over forty very devoted lay disciples who often asked her to give lectures and conduct religious classes and retreats.¹⁴⁶ Through these activities, Baiji’s role as a religious specialist is both recognized and enhanced.

Additionally, female *sadhus* are shown respect in a myriad of other ways. It is quite common for disciples of *sadhus*, whether lay or initiated, to perform *seva* (service) to show respect. So, for example, a disciple will take on the task of making tea, serving refreshments to his or her guru and the guru’s guests, and cleaning up afterwards. These are considered appropriate ways to show respect for a *sadhu*.¹⁴⁷ Cooking food on the sacred open fire pit (*dhuni*), washing dishes for a *sadhu*, and massaging the *sadhu*’s feet and legs are considered other forms of *seva*. This is believed to accrue good *karma* for the householder, thus bringing blessings not only in this lifetime, but also in subsequent ones.¹⁴⁸ These actions showing respect for a *sadhu* offer an especially poignant role reversal for female *sadhus*. As householders,

¹⁴⁵ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 450.

¹⁴⁶ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 83, 96.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴⁸ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 27. Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 57.

women would likely be the ones making tea, serving refreshments, cooking, washing dishes, and rubbing her husband's legs and feet. However, in her powerful position as a *sadhu*, she is the one receiving these services.

Renunciation also brings a certain amount of respect from householders who are not lay disciples of a *sadhu* or do not know a *sadhu* personally.¹⁴⁹ As Hausner explains:

“Because *sadhus* are meant to be engaged in religious activity all the time, performing rituals of daily ablution, spending hours in private meditation or study, or even devoting one's whole life to continued service or charity (*seva*), they are presumed to be authoritative teachers of Hindu texts and traditions...” and are therefore respected.¹⁵⁰

For many householders, it is the *sadhu*'s choice to be celibate as part of their spiritual practice that is highly respected. This is especially true of women who commit to celibacy through renunciation because women are thought to be largely unable to control their sexuality. So, a woman who willingly takes on what is considered the monumental task of controlling her sexuality is seen as something rare and very respectable. As Denton notes, the young women, typically in their late teens or early twenties, who choose to renounce in Varanasi, are referred to as a source of pride in their neighborhoods, with their neighbors bragging about them because of their choice to remain sexual pure and engage in constant religious practice.¹⁵¹

Additionally, men, both lay and *sadhu*, tend to give female *sadhus* much more respect than they would usually afford a female householder. This is one of the best examples of the ways in which becoming a female *sadhu* can subvert traditional, patriarchal gender roles. For

¹⁴⁹ *Sadhus* tend to have clothing and/or other markings that clearly identify them as *sadhus*. Most female *sadhus* wear billowy, ochre-colored or white robes to visually signify that they are *sadhus*. These stand in stark contrast to the tight, colorful saris that lay women typically wear. Thus, the public is usually aware a *sadhu* is in their presence without the *sadhu* having said anything. Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 89-90.

¹⁵⁰ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 35.

¹⁵¹ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 74.

example, Mehraji, Khandelwal's distant male relative who accompanied her in her research, showed Khandelwal's informant Anand Mata great respect despite the fact that he was a man who was ten years older than she was. He did this by calling her *Mataji* (respected mother), instead of *Behnji* (sister) as he called other older women.¹⁵² Similarly, Manvendra Singh, DeNapoli's male field assistant, addressed DeNapoli's informant Gangagiri as "*maharaj*." In doing so, DeNapoli explains,

"...he alludes to her devotional and ascetic power as a *sadhu*. While *maharaj* denotes "great king," most of the householders whom [DeNapoli] observed...use this word as a title to address *sadhus* in general, regardless of gender, by which they implicate underlying cultural perceptions of *sadhus* as religious virtuosi.¹⁵³

Another example of the respect men show to female *sadhus* comes, once again, from DeNapoli's informant Gangagiri. She explains how she was able to procure a seat on a crowded bus, saying,

"I couldn't keep standing like that; I had to sit... Nearby sat two policemen. Slowly, I approached them and said, "You may wear the uniform of the government, but I wear the uniform of God [the ochre robes of a *sadhu*]." One of those poor fellows got up and said, "*Datta* [a term of endearment for *sadhus*], please, you sit." I couldn't just say, "Hey, you stand up and I'll sit"... Like this, I have completed my life, with the sweetness of my tongue."¹⁵⁴

Thus, female *sadhus* carry a certain amount of status and authority in Indian Hindu society. It is unlikely that the man would have moved for a householder woman, instead seeing himself as her superior and therefore more entitled to the seat. Although Gangagiri attributes the policeman's moving to the "sweetness of her tongue," it is more likely that her power as a female *sadhu* was the reason she got to sit down.

¹⁵² Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 52.

¹⁵³ DeNapoli, "Leave Everything and Sing to God," 381-382.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

Fifth, female *sadhus* are able to hold much more power than they would have as rural, poor, low-caste householders. Indeed, female householders have little power in their lives over their households or even their own bodies. In contrast, female *sadhus* have power over both people and property. First, some female *sadhus* run their own ashrams or *mandirs*. Running one of these establishments is an opportunity to control a large amount of property, money, and people. For instance, Shiv Puri, a female *sadhu* informant of DeNapoli's, heads a large ashram outside of the city of Udaipur. She stays at the ashram for six months of the year and the rest of the time she travels to Bombay, where she visits devotees and collects donations for her ashram. When DeNapoli met her, Shiv Puri was in the process of having a larger ashram constructed to accommodate all the guests who wished to visit her site. This female *sadhu* was in charge of budgeting and paying for all of the construction of the new building, as well as interacting with the male contractor to dictate what amenities she wanted for the new ashram.¹⁵⁵

Other female *sadhus* also run ashrams or hold high positions at them where they are in charge of many employees and have both hiring and firing powers as well as control of large sums of money.¹⁵⁶ Women who head ashrams "occupy the highest status in their respective establishments, taking charge of the spiritual and economic welfare of the mainly non-ascetic inhabitants."¹⁵⁷ Khandelwal's informant Baiji, for example, makes all decisions regarding food, finances, medical treatment, ritual protocol and interpretation of scripture at the Rishi Ashram which she heads. The ashram ran a small Ayurvedic clinic, offered sewing classes to village girls, and founded clinics and schools in remote mountain villages. To do these things, Baiji must take on many responsibilities that householder women would typically never be involved

¹⁵⁵ DeNapoli, "Leave Everything and Sing to God," 137. Denton also notes that some women who join well-established *sadhu* orders can become economically powerful as a *mahantini*, the abbess or prioress of an ashram. Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 53.

¹⁵⁶ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 94-95.

¹⁵⁷ Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 111.

in, such as negotiating with male merchants for cheap cloth for the sewing school, hiring teachers and doctors, and taking care of the accounting.¹⁵⁸ In this way, taking *sannyasa* gave Baiji the power to be equal to men and take on what are usually jobs reserved for men only.

The Sri Sarada Mandiram is a particularly good example of the way renunciation can give women power. The Ramakrishna Order of *sannyasinis*, which runs the various branches of Sri Sarada Mandiram, is

“...unique, as it is the very first monastic order up to now run only by women, completely independent of men. It is the only ascetic women’s order existing so far, where women take all the decisions regarding their order completely independent of male priests or monks, and this includes their religious life in its entirety.”¹⁵⁹

The President of Sarada Mandiram not only gives *sannyasa* initiation to every female candidate of the Ramakrishna Order of *sannyasinis*, but also devises the exact ritual that will be used for the initiation.¹⁶⁰ Branch Presidents, Heads of Centre, as well as Secretaries and Treasurers, are all selected from among the female *sadhus* at the Sri Sarada Mandiram, which has five branches located in different parts of India. These women control the day-to-day operations of their respective locations as well as work on budgets, order supplies, contract for work that needs to be done, hire and fire employees, solicit donations, and run schools and hostels that are attached to the *mandirs* or located nearby.¹⁶¹

Choosing to renounce often also allows a woman to become more powerful within her own family. Although becoming a *sadhu* is often believed to be a renunciation of all previous relationships, including family and friends, many female *sadhus* retain relationships with their families. In this way, becoming a *sadhu* allows a woman to essentially subvert the usual power

¹⁵⁸ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 83.

¹⁵⁹ Anthony Copley, ed., *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender, and Sampraday* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 144.

¹⁶⁰ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 75.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

imbalance between men and women in Indian Hindu society, as she becomes the member of the family her relatives respect the most. For example, Shiv Puri, an informant of DeNapoli's, has altered her relationship with her son so that she is now his guru and he, along with his wife and children, are her *chelas* (householder followers or disciples). He is the caretaker for the large ashram she heads as well, so she is also his boss in a secular sense.¹⁶²

Lastly, women who would have had to continue living in abject poverty if they were to marry or stay married are often able to live in relative comfort once they renounce.

Renunciation in a monastic setting guarantees girls the security they would not have had in a poor village with a poor husband.¹⁶³ Although many male *sadhus* live on their own, women who choose renunciation typically live in a *math*, *mandir* or ashram that has many resources.¹⁶⁴ For those living in large monastic settings that have wealthy patrons, the *sadhus* will have electricity, high quality food and milk, multiple sets of clothes, beds, ceiling fans and indoor toilets.¹⁶⁵

Even for those who live in a dwelling with non-wealthy patrons, the conditions are usually much more comfortable than what they women could expect if they were married. Sinclair-Brull notes that the female *sadhus* at the Trichur Sri Sarada Mandiram live in luxury compared to the families they came from or would have married in to as *grhinis*. Each female *sadhu* has a wooden bed, mattress, and bathrooms located inside the building, as well as a desk for studying and shelves where they are able to keep their belongings. Indeed, Sinclair-Brull notes that the Mandiram exudes a positively “middle-class feel.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 137.

¹⁶³ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 181.

¹⁶⁴ This is usually because of the dangers of a female *sadhu* living alone. I will address this danger in the conclusion.

¹⁶⁵ Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics: Hierarchy and Purity*, 195.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

In conclusion, renunciation allows women to respectably operate outside of the traditional Hindu role of wife and mother. It is clear that *sannyasa* offers a variety of real benefits to women over householdership, including agency, independence, power, respect, education, and improved living conditions. Women who choose to take *sannyasa* are able to lead lives that allow them to determine their own actions and garner authority and respect on their own terms, instead of through the men they are connected to. It is for these reasons that *female* sadhus who choose *sannyasa* over marriage are, as Shiv Puri, DeNapoli's informant states, "much happier because of it."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ DeNapoli, "Leave Everything and Sing to God," 140.

Conclusion

This thesis has looked at female *sadhus* in India and asked two main questions. The first is why do female *sadhus* cite marriage as a reason for choosing renunciation. In answer to this question, I have argued that most of the women who are choosing to take *sannyasa* are poor, rural, low-caste women and that this demographic of women is usually held to traditional Hindu Indian values regarding gender roles and marriage that make marriage undesirable or completely unacceptable for some women. These values typically include being married young in an arranged marriage, living within a gender hierarchy that subordinates wives to their husbands and result in restrictions on women's freedoms, men controlling wives and treating them as property, a belief that a woman should have no other wants and desires than those of their husband's, and a belief that an education will hurt a woman's chances of marriage. It is these social factors that make marriage undesirable for some women and push these women to take *sannyasa*.

In the next section, I argued, along the lines of Denton, that *sannyasa* offers women who actively choose not to marry or not to stay married a viable, although nontraditional, life paradigm that is respectable according to traditional Hindu Indian gender roles and the emphasis these place on female chastity. I go on to argue that *sannyasa* offers women many tangible advantages over householdership. This leads to the second question I have answered in this paper, which is what the advantages are that renunciation offers to women over householdership. I go on to argue that *sannyasa* offers women a chance to transcend traditional Hindu Indian gender restrictions and roles in many ways, including allowing women to have agency in their lives, as well as allowing women to be independent, well-respected, and powerful in their communities and families. Other advantages that *sannyasa* offers poor, rural, low-caste women over householdership include the chance to receive an education and the chance to leave a life of poverty.

Thus, while ethnographers who have studied female *sadhus*, including Khandelwal,

Hausner, DeNapoli, and Sinclair-Brull have correctly noted that there are many similarities between female householders and female *sadhus*, it is also correct that there are many differences. Renunciation both allows women to break out of traditional gender roles as well as continue acting in accord with these gender roles. Researchers who have studied medieval female Hindu saints, such as Mira Bai, have concluded that these women were both rebels and conformists to traditional Hindu gender roles.¹⁶⁸

I would argue that this is the same for female *sadhus* today. Women do tend to continue many “domestic” activities such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare after they renounce just as they would have as householders, as Khandelwal, Hausner, and DeNapoli argue. Female *sadhus* also continue to be concerned with ritual purity, particularly as it relates to menstruation, as they would have been as householders, as Sinclair-Brull notes. On the other hand, female *sadhus* very much rebel against traditional gender roles that state women should not be independent and that men should continuously control women’s lives. I think understanding that a woman can both conform to and defy these traditional roles is very important so as to get a fuller understanding of female *sadhus*’ lives.

Here, it is important to understand that *sannyasa* does not completely erase the negative effects of being a woman in a restrictive patriarchal society. I feel that this is especially important because I am well aware of the critiques of Western scholars that we tend to overdetermine the lives of third-world women.¹⁶⁹ By arguing that poor rural women gain many benefits from taking *sannyasa* instead of marrying and that women rebel against traditional gender roles, I do not want to make it seem like women’s lives become perfect once they take *sannyasa*. In other words, I do not want to overdetermine female *sadhus* lives by only showing the benefits of *sannyasa*.

Although many things change for women when they renounce, some do not. One of these

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, Doniger, *The Hindus*, 568-570.

¹⁶⁹ See for example, Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 4.

is that women often continue to be sexually abused, assaulted or objectified even after they renounce their lives as householders. Sexual harassment is relatively common among female *sadhus*.¹⁷⁰ This sexual harassment comes from both male *sadhus* and householders. Santosh Puri, a female *sadhu* informant of DeNapoli's, states about male *sadhus*:

“Now, the men are very bad....I don't let [male] *sadhus* near me, nor do I allow them to come to me. I don't go to them either. I don't let them sit in the temple. If they come, I give them chai, I feed them roti [a kind of bread] and I give him a gift. Afterwards, I tell them to go. It needs to be like this. What if I'm sleeping and he opens the door [DeNapoli here notes that Santosh Puri is implying she would be sexually assaulted]?”¹⁷¹

Thus, female *sadhus* must continually be aware of how they look, where they are and who is around. This limits some of the women's choices in their practice. For example, many male *sadhus* choose to shed their clothes and live in the nude as part of their ascetic practice. Female *sadhus* almost never do this since it would only invite unwanted sexual advances. They will typically always wear large, billowy robes that hide their breasts and other curves, thus disguising as best they can their bodies as a safeguard against sexual harassment and violence.¹⁷² These threats of sexual harassment or violence will often limit a female *sadhu*'s choice of where to live. While many male *sadhus* choose to live alone, many female *sadhus* do not feel secure enough to do so. Most female *sadhus* choose to live in ashrams with a group of *sadhus* as another means of protecting themselves against sexually aggressive men.¹⁷³

Additionally, in ashrams where male and female *sadhus* live together, there is often a gendered hierarchy. Although, as noted in Chapter II, some women run these places or

¹⁷⁰ Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 191.

¹⁷¹ DeNapoli, “Leave Everything and Sing to God,” 51.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 50 and Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 200-202.

¹⁷³ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 183. This choice, however, solves one problem but creates another for female *sadhus*. Many householders and *sadhus* who travel or “wander” charge those *sadhus* who stay in ashrams with leading easy, luxurious lives. One householder informant told Hausner, “I don't like these ashram *sadhus*- they are cheaters, big cheaters. Nowadays, lots of people become *sadhus* because the *sadhu* life is very easy. They have big ashrams and lots of facilities-they wouldn't get all those facilities at home.” Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 118.

otherwise hold high positions in them; oftentimes, female *sadhus* are still subordinate to male *sadhus*. One example of this comes from Uma Saraswati, one of DeNapoli's female *sadhu* informants, lived in an *ashram* with her male guru, several "guru brothers" (men who her guru also initiated) and many male and female lay followers. While her guru brothers were given privileges such as handling the ashram's money, she was not. She was also forced to do much of the cleaning and cooking for her guru and guru brothers and she would eat after them, too.¹⁷⁴ It is typical for female householders to wait to eat until all the males in their household have eaten.¹⁷⁵

Although female *sadhus* make up a very small minority of Hindu Indian women in general, I agree with Khandelwal's argument that their importance far outweighs their number in the population.¹⁷⁶ Female *sadhus* allow us to see that householdership is not the only option for rural Hindu women. In doing so, we can gain a better understanding of the way in which even what seems like a very rigid gender hierarchy has some flexibility in it to allow women more than one life possibility. This is also a way of "destabilizing Western truth claims" that Hindu Indian women do not have choice in their lives.¹⁷⁷ This work as well as those of DeNapoli, Sinclair-Brull, Denton, Khandelwal, and Hausner go at least a small way in showing that poor, rural Hindu women in India do have some choices in their lives and that these women can, and do, lead lives of independence and power. Furthermore, as this thesis has shown, female *sadhus* can help us better understand why marriage is undesirable for some women.

For these reasons, I hope that scholars continue to study female *sadhus*. Indeed, the

¹⁷⁴ DeNapoli, "Leave Everything and Sing to God," 21.

¹⁷⁵ Shireen J. Jejeebhoy, "Associations Between Wife-Beating and Fetal and Infant Death: Impressions from a Survey in Rural India," *Studies in Family Planning* 29, No. 3 (Sept., 1998): 306.

¹⁷⁶ Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 45.

¹⁷⁷ Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds. *Women Writing Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995) 353.

biggest limitation to this study is the paucity of ethnographic studies regarding female *sadhus*. Because of the few texts that have been written on this subject, the information I had to work with was limited. With more ethnographic research will come a better understanding of not only the ways in which female *sadhus* differ from householders, but also ways in which these two groups are alike. These can help us better understand why women choose to renounce as well as why renunciation is not considered a good fit for the vast majority of women. I hope that, as more information becomes available, more scholars will take up this topic, as I believe that it is an important one that shows many of the common restrictions placed on women who are held to traditional Hindu Indian socio-religious gender roles as well as showing how renunciation can allow women to subvert these gender roles, even if they retain many of their feminine traits and activities after they have renounced.

Glossary of Terms

Advaita - the philosophy of non-duality

atma- the soul

bhajan - hymn

bhakti - religious devotion

Brahma - the all-encompassing spirit of which the entire universe is made

cheli- householder follower or disciple of a *guru*

dharmā- religious or moral duty

dhuni - sacred open fire pit

diksa- formal initiation into a lineage of renunciators

gauna - the ceremony that marks the day the wife officially comes to live at her husband's home and the marriage is consummated

grhasthin - householder

grhin (f. *grhini*) - male/female householder

guru- a religious teacher

karm - work

karma- good or bad actions that determine the future modes of an individual's existence

laukik - popular, in contrast to orthodox

mandir - a temple complex with living quarters for ascetics attached

mantra - a sacred verbal formula repeated in prayer or meditation

math - a monastery

moksha- spiritual liberation which ends the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth

pativrata - the ideal wife who takes a vow of dedicating her life solely to the well-being of her husband

purusartha- the goal to which a person devotes his or her life

sabd- divine words

sadhu (f. *sadhvi*)- ascetic; masculine form, may also refer to female ascetics

sakti - universal or cosmic energy or power that is conceptualized as feminine and is considered both creative and destructive

samsara- the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth that continues until one achieves spiritual liberation

sannyasa- renunciation of the life of a householder

sat - capacities of dharmic perfection

seva - social service

stridharma - the way of life appropriate to a woman

sudra -the lowest, servile caste

tapas - the inner heat created by religious practice

vrata- a vow that typically involves fasting

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