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"Our own two hands create our destiny": Narrative patterns and strategies in male sādhus' personal stories

Antoinette E. DeNapoli

This article describes and analyses the personal narrative performances of male Hindu renouncers (sādhus) in the north Indian state of Rajasthan. Based on 10 years of ethnographic research with sādhus in three districts of Mewar, south Rajasthan, it considers the telling of life stories as a 'narrative strategy' through which male sādhus not only interpret and experience their lives, but also give voice to the complexity of asceticism as practiced in north India. To that extent, this article addresses the narrative strategies that male sādhus draw on in the telling of their life stories and the ways in which those rhetorical strategies are gendered. On the basis of the data presented, the article examines sādhus' emphasis on the interrelated themes of action, effort and practice as central to men's experiences of renunciation. It further analyses sādhus' use of illness and healing as complementary narrative motifs with which they construct their renunciant authenticity and challenge common perceptions of sādhus as social vagabonds.

Keywords: sādhus, Hinduism, narrative performance, Rajasthan, oral traditions

I

Introduction

This article describes and analyses the personal narrative performances of the male Hindu renouncers (sādhus) with whom I worked in the north Indian state of Rajasthan in the years spanning 2001–11. These sādhus received initiation (dikṣā) into one of the two Shaiva-based traditions of renunciation (sannyās), namely the Shankaracarya Dashanami and Gorakhnath Kanphata (Nath) orders, came from different caste communities,
and had been living as sādhus for an average of five decades. In theory, sannyās, as constructed in the authoritative classical Sanskrit texts such as the upaniṣads, the sannyāsa upaniṣads and dharmaśāstras represents a radical way of life in South Asia. It typically requires sādhus to renounce or ‘throw down’ normative societal obligations like marriage, family, householding and the ritual commitments that structure a person’s life (Olivelle 1975, 1992, 1996). The antinomy nature of sannyās has promoted and reinforced representations of sādhus in the popular and academic discourse on the subject as ‘dead’ to the world and as ‘individuals’ who exist as penumbras on the margins of Indian society (Dumont 1960; Heesterman 1964; Madan 1988 [1982]). The image conveyed in such literature has to do with that of sādhus who need nothing and no one. This radical and often extreme portrayal of sādhus eclipses the humanity of the ‘real’ people, the men and the women, who have left behind everything in order to dedicate themselves to the worship of the divine, in the effort to attain liberation (mokṣa) from the endless cycle of existence (samsār).

To that extent, this article emphasises the humanity of sannyās and of the sādhus who have renounced the world by calling attention to their personal narratives and, more precisely, to the ways that sādhus construct sannyās in gendered ways as they tell those life stories. While the excellent work of Meena Khandelwal (2004), Ramdas Lamb (2002), Robert Lewis Gross (2001 [1992]) and Kirin Narayan (1989) has provided a compelling corrective to the mainstream imagination of sannyās as world-denying, this scholarship does not consider the telling of the life story as a means through which sādhus construct sannyās, and through those tellings, gendered worlds.

This article analyses the sādhus’ telling of their life stories, to use folklorist Elaine Lawless’s (1988) words, as a ‘narrative strategy’ through which they interpret and experience their lives and, in doing so, give voice to the complexity of asceticism as practiced in north India. Specifically, it offers a companion to my extensive research with female sādhus in Rajasthan by bringing to light the narrative strategies that male sādhus draw on in the telling of their life stories and the ways that those strategies are gendered. It highlights the sādhus’ use of personal storytelling to emphasise the themes of action, effort and practice as central to men’s experiences of sannyās. The analyses are based on the conversations, interviews and participant observation I conducted with, as well as on the ritual and narrative performances I documented from 15 male sādhus living in ashrams located in three different districts of Mewar, Rajasthan. This article suggests that unlike the female sādhus whom I describe in my recent ethnography on female renunciation in north India (DeNapoli 2014), who disclaim agency in their narrative constructions as a gendered strategy for establishing their authenticity as sādhus, the male sādhus described here claim it. For all but one of the male sādhus interviewed, detachment (vairāgya), practice (abhīṣa), personal effort (prayās) and good works (kārya) surfaced as pivotal themes around which they weaved their stories. Through the interplay of these themes, the male sādhus not only strengthened their self-image as agents of their lives, but also legitimated their arguments for becoming sādhus in the first place. That is, they became sādhus not simply because they could, but rather because they wanted to become sādhus. The article further considers the sādhus’ use of the motifs of illness and healing as complementary strategies to underscore their authenticity and challenge common perceptions of sādhus as social vagabonds.

II

‘Water doesn’t stay on a slippery pot’: Detachment

As an example of a male sādhu’s personal narrative, I offer two vignettes of a larger story that sādhu Nityananda Puri told me and my assistant in the presence of his female sādhu disciple, Sharda Puri, while the four of us, using the burlap coverings of empty rice bags as our cushions, sat on the floor around the dhānī (fire pit) in the main room of the ashram that he and Sharda Puri managed together. Nityananda Puri’s narrative is typical of the stories I collected from the male sādhus whom I interviewed in its integration of themes, symbols and images. My initial meeting with Nityananda Puri and Sharda Puri happened in the summer of 2001, during a day-trip to a popular Vaishnav (Shri Nath or Krishna) temple in Nathdwara, Udaipur district. Both sādhus had come to the temple for its monthly distribution of essential food items, such as spices, wheat, corn and vegetables, which, as sādhus, they receive at no cost to them. While Nityananda Puri and Sharda Puri waited for their supplies, I purchased a meal for them. They then invited me to come to their ashram in Losingh village, Udaipur district. Three and a half years

1 Because of space limitations, I am unable to provide Nityananda Puri’s full-length life narratives.

later in May 2005, I encountered the sâdhus again at a bhândâra (feasting festival) sponsored by a well-known female sâdhu at her Bholenath ashram in Gogunda, to commemorate the samâdhi of her guru-bhâãi (spiritual-brother) Shankar Nathji. At this event, which was teeming with all types of sâdhus who came from all over the region and from different parts of north India, Nityananda Puri not only remembered me but also reminded me of his invitation to come to his ashram. I recorded the story below on my third visit to his ashram in August 2005.

In this meeting, Nityananda said that it was common for people—men and women—to renounce the world after they finished their householding duties. Then he told me this story:

I was married; I also worked in the army before I renounced. It was before Independence, in the year 1942, during the Second World War. I was stationed in Singapore. At that time, I got injured in Singapore and was sent to Japan. My hands and feet, everything became useless. Then I came back home [place unstated, probably Delhi] and I learned that the programme of my first death anniversary was going on .... Everyone thought I was dead. Someone said, ‘You didn’t die! Your first death anniversary is going on. Brother, it’s happening right now. What will you do after going home? If you have “died”, a dead person can’t go home’. So, I stayed at the well near my home in the village for two years. I had one boy and one girl. I arranged their weddings. I joined the army for some family reason. I did my BSc [Bachelors of Science degree] in Agriculture in 1927, and then I joined the army. I renounced in 1944. Since then, I have heard a lot, seen a lot, and understood a lot. Some people kept saying something or other and even now they say. But, why should this affect me? We have an idiom in India: ‘Water doesn’t stay on a slippery pot’. Sâdhus should be like this. Let the world say what it wants to say. We sâdhus have to do what we have to do. We don’t have anything to do with the world.

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

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

According to Olivelle, the texts vary on the issue of the age at which an individual ought to enter an āśrama and the number of years he can remain in it; yet, with respect to renunciation in particular, a consensus does emerge amongst some of the medieval sources that ‘a man can become a renouncer sometime after he is 70 years old, depending on his age at his vedic initiation’ (1992: 133). The majority of the male sâdhus invoked the dominant discourse of renunciation from the dharmasastras, either citing specific texts or, as more often the case, using the generalised phrase ‘in the dharmasastras’ to explain authoritative precepts on the āśrama of renunciation, to legitimate their own way of life.

Nityananda Puri, for example, is more than familiar with Śātric injunctions (niyam) on the specificities, including the exceptions, of all the āśramas, and quoted a number of ślokas to me, even from the Brahma Śûtras, in response to my questions about the nature and meaning of renunciation. Likewise, Devendra Digambara Sarasvati invokes Manu (an authoritative classical Sanskrit text on Hindu duty), citing by means of his meticulous and indefatigable memory several ślokas to support standard understandings of renunciation as an āśrama dedicated for individuals in their old age, for whom there was nothing more to do (or see) except worship God in the desire to achieve liberation (moks). Prior to his citation of the scriptural precepts on renunciation, I had assumed Digambara Sarasvati was already a full sannyâsi but, as he informed me, he had taken formal vows of renunciation just six months before our meeting (in 2005), classifying the pre-renunciant period of his life as celibate studentship or brahmaçârya. ‘One should only renounce when the senses [indriya] no longer function; this is the rule’, Digambara Sarasvati explained. On the surface, my male sâdhu collaborators seemed to be exemplars of such
orthodox scriptural views, as most of the sadhus who quoted from the classical texts had already surpassed 70 years of age—Nityananda Puri himself told me he was over 90 years old (ibid: 63–79). Digambara Sarasvati, too, was almost 90 years in the summer I interviewed him (August 2005). However, once male sadhus started sharing their personal stories with me, I realised that their lives are not simply living testaments to the texts of which they have intimate knowledge. On the contrary, their stories illuminate another pattern in men’s experiences of renunciation—that of a break with Brahmanical discourses on renunciation.

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

Remarkably, Nityananda Puri’s decision to renounce occurs on account of an accidental assumption by his family—they thought he had died in the war. Thus, upon his return home, Nityananda Puri discovers that his first death anniversary rites are taking place. In itself, this detail of his ‘death’ is symbolic of the turn his life would take, as a part of the initiation procedure for renouncers consists of a death ceremony in which they perform their own śraddhā rituals that signify the end of who they once were, cutting themselves off, symbolically at least, from the social world that defined and shaped them as individuals. In accordance with Brahmanical cosmological understandings, for renouncers, death is also symbolic of a new beginning, a rebirth as a sadhu. But Nityananda Puri’s renunciation does not occur for another two years, until which time he exists as a ‘liminal’ being, that is, ‘betwixt and between’ the two ritual worlds of householding and renunciation. In short, by virtue of his unexpected ‘death’, he has no identity in the world, because of which he lives as if he were a disembodied spirit (bhūt-pret) on the margins of his household and his society, by the village well, where his ‘presence [continues to] affect the living’ (Gold 1988: 63). Even the well where he stays for two years before leaving his family—which appears in the regional folklore that I have recorded from many of the sadhus as a recurrent symbol for the ambiguous space that either familial or non-familial spirits occupy—signifies his, albeit temporary, ghost-like existence on earth until the time he takes initiation into renunciation (ibid.: 63–79).

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

The association of the āśramas with distinct periods of life produced another consequence: as one is unable to return to an earlier age, so one is not permitted to assume an earlier āśrama... A verse ascribed to Dakṣa states this principle clearly: ‘In the case of the three (āśramas), it is possible to proceed only with and never against the grain. A man who goes against the grain becomes thereby the vilest of sinners’ (1992: 133–34).

Nityananda Puri’s narrative pivots on the theme of illness, by which means he negotiates precepts with, albeit unexpected, quotidian life experiences, such as injury and death, in order to construct and validate his own renunciation as normative. As Leela Prasad aptly observes, ‘oral narrations index interpretations of existential predicaments that challenge moral reconciliation’ (2004: 160). The structure and content of Nityananda Puri’s narrative follows a noticeable pattern that is variously expressed in the stories that I recorded from other male sadhus, in which an injury, illness or a personal crisis serves as an identifiable catalyst for pursuit of a permanent life of renunciation. For example, for one sadhu, the loss of an eye made him feel ostracised from society which, in turn, led him to renounce the world; for another, it was the loss of a limb. Even more common as a narrative motif was an unacceptable personal and/or domestic situation that prompted a sadhu’s renunciation of the world. One sadhu


described to me the emotional pain he experienced when the woman to whom he proposed marriage rejected him; as he explained to me, this experience led to his grave disillusionment with society and, ultimately, his counter-rejection of his lover—and everything she symbolised—by renouncing the world. Nityananda Puri’s story similarly exhibits the crisis motif but his story only indirectly associates it with his renunciation. He told me that ‘My family gave me trouble. Because of the rivalry with them, I joined the army’.

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

By making this statement, Nityananda Puri seems to be poignantly aware of common assumptions inherent in Indian society that sādhus often renounce the world because of their desire to escape from domestic hardships or difficulties. Yet by juxtaposing his seemingly contentious family life with his joining the army, and not his renunciation, he attempts to assuage the possible misperception that his audience would view his renunciation as motivated by the intent to escape from domestic duress.

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

Nowhere in his narrative does Nityananda Puri interpret his experience of renunciation as the effect of destiny or divine will; moreover, his rivalry with his family is not perceived as the result of a spontaneously-arising inner experience of devotion to God that makes him brave enough to resist expected social norms. On the contrary, his life constitutes the product of his own individual practice and effort, themes that remain hidden in this narrative but surface more explicitly in another telling of his life story that I analyse below. But Nityananda Puri’s personal narrative is not wholly unlike the stories of the female sādhus whom I described (DeNapoli 2009). If we read between the lines, Nityananda Puri’s story illuminates two themes characteristic of the content of female sādhus’ stories, those of detachment and duty. In the context of this narrative, these themes are not only interwoven but are also integrated in an implicit discourse that comments on sādhus’ proper relationship to the world. Nityananda Puri inserts this discourse at the end of his narrative, in response to my observation that he must have witnessed many changes in the 61 years that he has lived as a sādhhu. In his view, sādhus should be ‘like slippery pots’, that is, detached from what the ‘world’ says or thinks about them. As Nityananda Puri explains, ‘Let the world say what it wants to say… We don’t have anything to do with the world’.

Perhaps because of his discomfort with revealing personal details from his life, the very discussion of which might suggest his unrelinquished
attachment to the past and hence, compromise his reputation as a sādhhu (Gross 2001 [1992]; Khandelwal et al. 2006). Nityananda Puri uses my question as an opportunity to bring the discussion back to what he considers meaningful for me to know about his view of renunciation—that it is above everything else an experience of detachment from the world. His statement tangibly verbalises the influence of the dominant textual tradition of asceticism rather than that of the sānt devotional traditions featured in the stories of female sādhus. At the same time, by framing his renunciation in terms of detachment, Nityananda Puri obliquely comments on the irrelevance of the reasons behind sādhus’ renunciation of the world. Instead of their intentions, what matters to Nityananda Puri is the way a sādhū conducts himself or herself in the world once he or she has renounced it—as a detached observer. By virtue of its didacticism, Nityananda Puri’s discourse is both prescriptive in its view of detachment as the sine qua non of sādhus’ experiences of renunciation and proscriptive in its warning that sādhus avoid concerning themselves with what the world thinks of their lives. His idea of detachment, however, is gendered, revealing a male experience of renunciation that differs from the women’s representations of the path in their narratives.

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

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

Nityananda Puri’s vision echoes orthodox Hindu conceptualisations of dharma. From the broader perspective of Brahmanical Hindu cosmology, according to which all life in the cosmos participates in an intricate web of subtle and gross interrelationships, or connections (bandhu), humans as integral members of this cosmically interlinked design must perform their duty—based on their caste, gender, age and stage of life, or varnasāramadharmā—in order to maintain the order of society and the universe. In a Puranic framework, itself borrowing from ancient Vedic ideas of the universe, whereas acts of duty and righteousness produce goodness, virtue and truth, that is, sat in the cosmos, which trickle down into human societies, non-action or wrong actions produce the opposite effect—evil, destruction and ignorance (tamas) in the cosmos. In this way, both textual and non-textual conceptualisations of duty, particularly those that I heard elaborated by male sādhus, concede the idea of its performance, without the necessity of having a divine object for its expression, as intrinsically powerful and efficacious.

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

In their re-reading of the classical textual sources on renunciation, such as the sannyāsa upaṇisāads, other scholars have convincingly re-evaluated Olivelle’s theory on the negative state of duty in renunciation. Lise Vail, for instance, contends that, contrary to previous positions on the topic, sādhus do construct and maintain notions of duty that can be generally characterised as ‘positive’. Some of the ‘positively expressed dharmaic virtues’ that Vail identifies in her examination of the sources are: tranquility; wisdom; and kindness; others include ‘purity, knowledge, and equanimity’ (2002: 383). Central to Vail’s thesis is her observation that while they reject most aspects of Brahmical householder dharma, sādhus ‘recreate’ for themselves notions of duty that mirror their own unique religious and social worlds as individuals who participate in what is a holistically governed cosmic system (ibid.: 392).

Nityananda Puri’s representations of his experiences of renunciation likewise support the position that both notions and enactments of kartavya are woven into the variously defined and expressed religiousities of sādhus. As the excerpt above explicates, since, as Nityananda Puri explained to me, the guiding purpose of sādhus’ life path is to experience the individual soul as the highest soul/self in which all the seeming mental and physical dualities of existence ‘melt’ in an overriding flood of unity with the ‘Self’, their duty qualifies as supreme vis-à-vis that of householders. There is no other duty or moral imperative more important than that of realising oneself as divinity. Understandably, duty so conceptualised structures and determines most of the Rajasthani male sādhus’ experiences and interpretations of their life path; thus, instead of themes like destiny and devotion, renunciation for the male sādhus necessarily implicates the importance of personal agency and action as illustrative of their religious lives. We find arguments for agency in renunciation threaded throughout the personal narratives of the male sādhus through performance of the narrative themes of practice (abhīyās), effort (prāyās) and work (kārya).


III

‘Everything happens from practice’: Practice, effort and action

Another conversational narrative that I collected from Nityananda Puri, which metamorphosed into a life narrative and thereafter a teaching on the meaning of sannyās, underlines these three themes as explicit markers for the construction of his identity and practice. The context of our conversation concerned my attempts to understand his position on what role, if any, he perceived destiny to play in his becoming a sādhū. Since in the period of six months in which I had been conducting fieldwork, I had heard female sādhus like Sharda Puri, for example, construct their lives in light of the themes of destiny and devotion, I wanted to learn whether male sādhus similarly expressed and understood their lives through these themes or whether these ideas signify, instead, gendered interpretations of asceticism (DeNapoli 2014).

In his narrative, Nityananda Puri explicitly identifies practice, effort and action as the key markers of a renunciant life. Through emphasis on these ideals, Nityananda Puri performatively invokes classical Brahmical textual notions of renunciation into his narrative. Based on his explications of these themes, we can group them under the umbrella theme of kartavya, that is, like detachment, the idea of sādhus’ duty encompasses the elements of practice, effort and action because of which initiates ‘get everything’, most significantly, an experience in which the individual soul realises itself as the great soul. Nityananda Puri plucks his story within this definitive framework in his contextualisation of the details of his own renunciation. As his story makes clear, his renunciation stems from a ‘fixed’ desire in his ‘heart’ to achieve mokṣa. Having renounced the world, Nityananda Puri believes he will attain mokṣa from the laments, thirsts and imaginations characteristic of human experience in that very world. ‘This is why I left [for Haridwar]’, he explains—by his own choice. Even the expression Nityananda Puri uses to articulate this idea, ‘to take renunciation’, implies that he himself chose to renounce rather than as the female sādhū understand it. It was God who called them to asceticism. The complete statement he makes in the context of ‘I went to see my guru in order to take renunciation’ connotes that he chose not only his path, but also chose his guru whose knowledge Nityananda Puri would later test through the means of daily effort and practice.

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

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

By qualifying the meaning of destiny, Nityananda Puri turns the concept on its head. Rather than interpret destiny as a determinative force in people's lives, he prefers to think of it as that which humans themselves determine and, thus, control. Likewise, destiny is not 'written' before we take birth; instead, we write it as we plot the course of our lives (but cf. Kent 2009). Nityananda Puri's clever reappropriation and reinterpretation of destiny reinforces the underlying importance of male agency in renunciation, a view that most male sādhus shared. As Digambara Devendra Saraswati,² the mahant (head sādhu) of an ashram in Dilwaria, Rajsamand district, stressed in one of our meetings, 'Our own two hands create [our] destiny'.

Their reinterpretations of the term aside, however, most of the male sādhus whom I asked undermine or scoff at the idea of destiny as an explanation for their own taking of sannyās for several reasons. As the second of Nityananda Puri's conversational narratives suggests, male sādhus can use the concept as an excuse to avoid the discipline (sādhana) required of initiates for inner, spiritual advancement which, for male sādhus and female sādhus alike, is the goal of the path (DeNapoli 2014; Khandelwal 2004, 2009). '[N]ow-a-days', Nityananda Puri says, '90 percent of the sādhus...say, "We're sādhus. Why should we care? Nothing else remains for us to do".' While his estimate may be exaggerated, Nityananda Puri's concern over the growing number of male sādhus who abuse their position to claim spiritual superiority is plausible. Renunciation is an unregulated, social institution that 'lacks [any] centralized...authority' and has a reputation for attracting people of questionable character and intentions (Khandelwal 2004: 45). Fraudulent (pākhandi) sādhus, whether the subject of folklore (Bloomfield 1924) or local gossip, are a problem in India. Recognising this, the male sādhus' emphasis on practice, effort and hard work prudently defends the authenticity of their religious lives to their interlocutors.

Not all the male sādhus, however, agree with these dominant male views of destiny. Of the 15 sādhus whom I interviewed, three of them suggested that the possibility of oneself choosing renunciation rather than being chosen by God creates a greater probability for the presence of imposter (male) sādhus on the path. From these sādhus' perspectives, God decides for whom renunciation 'is written' in this birth and, to this extent, initiates' renunciation is considered to be 'pure' as its source lies in an infallible divine, instead of morally fallible humans. As one sādhu said, 'the ones for whom renunciation is written' will not harm anyone; cheat anyone; beat or kill anyone; or 'fill [their] stomach' unnecessarily, because their lives rest in God's hands. For these three sādhus, in my experience in the minority, destiny was as, if not more, important a theme as those of practice, effort and hard work in their stories.

IV

'Only God knows': Illness, destiny and asceticism in male sādhus' stories

An example of male sādhus' counterpoint view of agency in renunciation is the life story that Baldev Giri, whom I met for the first time in 2005, told my research assistant and me. Shortly after my departure from Udaipur in the summer of 2003, Baldev Giri began residing at Maya Nath's ashram in Gogunda. He served as both the pujārī (priest) of the adjoining temple and the 'assistant' caretaker of the ashram. In my initial encounter with

² As it was explained to me by Devendra Saraswati, the title 'Digambara' here refers to a branch of renouncers in the Dashanami sect known as nāgā bābās who roam around naked, or 'clad in sky', which is the literal meaning of digambara. At the time that I met him, Devendra Saraswati was, however, wearing a small loincloth around his body. According to him, earlier in his life, particularly when he wandered as an itinerant bābā throughout India, he remained naked as a testament to his own detachment from the world.
him, I remember being startled by and unsure of his commanding presence and forthright personality. One afternoon, my assistant and I had arrived unannounced at Maya Nath’s ashram, a usual practice for us, since Maya Nath, as most of the sādhus, did not have a phone at her hermitage. The temple and the ashram were empty, however. On the assumption that Maya Nath would eventually return to the site in the early afternoon, my assistant left on his motorcycle to purchase some milk for tea. During his absence, I sat under the magnificent mango tree that graced the front of the ashram and provided shade for temple visitors and passersby. While writing some details about the ashram in my notebook, a government bus pulled up at the site. I mistakenly thought Maya Nath had returned. To my surprise, I saw a tall, lean man dressed in ochre-coloured clothing jump off the bus; with the gait of a lion rushing toward its prey, he moved rapidly toward me, making direct eye contact and looking very serious. Not knowing who he was and thinking I might be in a difficult situation, I stood up to leave. Immediately Baldev Giri called out, ‘Hello! Hello! [using the English word] Don’t be afraid. Please sit [down] and let me make you some tea.’ After several meetings with him, I became comfortable with the multifaceted complexity of Baldev Giri’s character and many conversations on his life, stories and work evolved from our daily meetings over eating food and drinking tea at the ashram.

In one of those conversations, Baldev Giri explained to me that ‘The life of a mahātmā is extremely meaningful; it is a very difficult life to get. Only the one in whose destiny it happens gets the life of a mahātmā’. Baldev Giri spoke these exact words before he began to narrate his life story to my assistant and me. Born in Madhya Pradesh, the middle child of three brothers and the son of Brahmin parents who lived in a Hanuman ashram/temple they built, Baldev Giri was, as he described, a ‘sickly child’. From early on in his childhood, he developed mysterious stomach problems that left him unable to eat or drink. Although his parents had sought numerous types of treatments from various doctors, ‘nothing worked’. Having exhausted their allopathic options, Baldev Giri’s mother made a bold move. He told us:

I wasn’t getting well… I was born in the Hanuman ashram. So, what did my mother do? She went to the temple and put me there. I was sick; the doctors couldn’t do anything to make me well again. So, my mother brought me to the temple, put me there, and said to Mahadev

[Shiva]: ‘It’s you who can make him well and it’s you who can kill him.’ I was seven or eight years old. I was young.

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

I slept [in the temple] for several days. Then I got up and came from there. I said [to my mother], ‘I need food [roti].’ I ate half piece of bread [roti]. Since that time, my mother accepted this and she thought, ‘Now he will do your [Hanuman’s] puja’. Since then, such a feeling of detachment [vairāg] occurred in my soul [ātmā] that I thought, ‘I never want to marry.’ There was no longer any meaning for me to marry. And, if I were to have married someone then I couldn’t do Hanuman’s puja anymore. Instead I thought, ‘I will do bhajans, and from the bhajans I will earn something [here he means “spiritual profits”] for my soul, my life, and my family’s life so that everything shall turn out good’.

Of all the personal narratives I recorded from male sādhus, Baldev Giri’s is atypical; his narrative self-representation reflects the opposite of Nityananda Puri’s. Baldev Giri explicitly structures his story around the narrative themes of destiny and detachment, and implicitly around devotion. At the outset of this telling, not only does Baldev Giri invoke destiny to frame all the events of his life, he also identifies detachment, the feeling that, in his mind, arises automatically from within the soul, as the sine qua non of his renunciation. As with the female sādhus I knew, for Baldev Giri too, detachment arises early in his childhood, erasing any desire thereafter for him to fulfill expectations of marriage and householding. Had he married, Baldev Giri tells us, he would not have been able to do ‘Hanuman’s puja’. In itself, this statement implies the influence of devotion to Hanuman, to Mahadev, as well, in his becoming a sādhu. Baldev Giri’s characterisation of his religiosity in the context of ‘doing bhajans’ in order to earn the ‘spiritual currency’ to make ‘everything … turn out good’ further announces a trope for the signification of his experience of bhakti to god, one that seems synonymous with his experience of renunciation. His seamless stitching of these themes together in his story identifies a view of sannyās that approximates the views that the female sādhus also voiced (DeNapoli 2011, 2013, 2014).

Through use of these themes, Baldev Giri consciously deflects the possibility of his own agency accounting for his renunciation (cf. Gross 2001 [1992]; Lamb 2002). But apart from his soul being inundated with feelings of detachment, how did Baldev Giri know that the life of a mahátmá was written for him? To answer this question, we need to focus on the motif of illness in Baldev Giri’s story. Just as the predictions of an astrologer, visions of gods and goddesses, and the prophesying of elders signified portents of destiny in the stories of most of the female sādhus whom I knew, illness serves a similar purpose in Baldev Giri’s story. And yet, illness is more than a sign of Baldev Giri’s destiny; it is also the catalyst for his renunciation of the world.

Baldev Giri’s narrative shares the motif of illness with Nityananda Puri’s. Just as Nityananda Puri’s injury, which renders him ‘dead’ or incapable as a householder, serves as a conduit for his renunciation of the world, Baldev Giri’s illness also sets him on the path of becoming a sādhu. In this respect, Baldev Giri’s use of illness as a narrative motif may reflect an implicit accommodation to authoritative understandings of renunciation. However, a noticeable difference between the two sādhus’ approaches to illness still remains: whereas agency is born of Nityananda Puri’s injury, passivity results from Baldev Giri’s. Four conjoined events in the narrative, all of which stem from the impetus of Baldev Giri’s illness, promote this idea. Unsuccessful in finding treatments for her son’s illness, Baldev Giri’s mother decides to place him in the Hanuman temple, requesting Mahadev’s assistance. Her method of beseeching the deity similarly suggests that Baldev Giri’s mystery illness has a divine source: ‘It’s you who can make him well and it’s you who can kill him.’ Alone and separated from his family, Baldev Giri remains in the temple until Mahadev heals him. As soon as Mahadev cures him of his illness, Baldev Giri’s mother once again decides to dedicate him to the service of Hanuman. Occurring in the context of a Hanuman temple, Baldev Giri’s miraculous healing in turn validates his belief that his renunciation was ‘written’ before his birth. For most of the male sādhus with whom I worked, Hanuman is their patron deity, a symbol not only of the virtues of celibacy and virility but also of devotion to God (cf. Alter 1992, 1994; Khandelwal 2001). In our conversations, the male sādhus explained that Hanuman’s permanent state of celibacy simultaneously intensifies and maintains his devotion to God, because of which they identified him as a moral exemplar of their path. To this extent, as historian Caroline Bynum (1992: 27–51)

suggests in her study of the lives of medieval Christian saints, the male sādhus’ symbols such as ritual ‘death’ and/or ritual healing by celibate deities underscore their experiences of renunciation as one in which they must separate completely from their former worlds and selves. Though in Baldev Giri’s case, his complete ‘break’ from family does not happen until he becomes a teenager.

By linking the three events of his (i) being placed in the Hanuman temple by his mother; (ii) being healed in that temple by Mahadev; and (iii) being dedicated as Hanuman’s pujārī by his mother to his mystery illness in his self-representation, Baldev Giri constructs a direct chain of divine causation and relates the inevitability of his renunciation to his interlocutors. The fourth event that cements this perception of his life in the story is the mystery sādhu who appears at the family temple and announces his plans to take the young Baldev Giri away from his parents, a decision to which Baldev Giri’s mother, not surprisingly, voices no objection (cf. Kakar 1978).

The apparent thematic distinctions between the two sādhus’ stories alert us to the ways particular individuals of the same gender accept and/or resist culturally normative understandings of their gender in their narrative self-representations. That is, the patterned use of the themes of practice, effort and hard work by the male sādhus reflects and reproduces dominant constructions of Indian masculinity (cf. Alter 1992, 1994, 1997). The male sādhus’ perception of these themes as efficacious constituents of (male) renunciation depicts their internalisation and acceptance of the behavioural norms attributed to their gender, expressed via the notion that men choose their worlds, and by doing so, create their destinies. ‘[T]aken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions’ about gender thus underlie and shape the sādhus’ interpretations of their religiosity, producing in turn gendered narratives of renunciation (Lorber 1994: 13). Although Bynum represents male religiosity as an experience of gender reversal (1987, 1992), my data suggest that while the sādhus break with their personal and social worlds in their world renunciation, they do not necessarily break with dominant constructions of manhood, but rather appropriate them in the interpretation of their own asceticism. This observation offers another explanation for why the majority of the male sādhus I worked with rejected the significance of destiny in their taking renunciation—the very idea ‘disrupts’ normative expectations of masculinity by questioning the role of male agency (Lorber 1994).

Yet, Baldev Giri’s story does illustrate a break with normative representations of masculinity by means of his appropriation of the narrative themes of destiny, detachment and devotion, all of which allow him to resist, as the female sadhus do, notions of personal agency in his ‘taking’ renunciation. But even his feminine-like self-representation does not constitute his categorical rejection of masculinity. On the contrary, Baldev Giri’s utilisation of the narrative sub-theme of illness as well as the narrative symbol of ritualised (near) ‘death’, in this case, underscores ‘continuity’ with dominant male constructions of a religious self. While he interprets these (male) experiences through the lens of feminine themes, rather than the masculine ones of practice, effort and hard work, his doing so demonstrates more a strategy for authorising himself as a ‘real’ sadhu to his audience than a perception of himself as feminised. As multiple views of renunciation coexist amongst the Rajasthani sadhus, other male sadhus who hear this story would not necessarily discount the validity of Baldev Giri’s interpretations, nor would they perceive him as ‘fake’ because of them. Rather, in its depiction of an alternative view of men’s experiences of renunciation, Baldev Giri’s story leaves open the question of whether destiny affects one’s becoming a sadhu, because ultimately, as Baldev Giri himself maintains — and, if pressed, the other sadhus might also concede— ‘only God knows’. On the whole, then, Baldev Giri does not assert destiny, but instead lets it be part of the narrative.

V

Conclusions: Personal narrative performance as gendered strategy in sadhus’ constructions of asceticism

What do the personal narrative practices of the male sadhus teach us about asceticism as practiced, gender roles and the ways in which individuals have to grapple between their personal desires and the social expectations that frequently constrain those desires? When we examine the lives of the sadhus through the various narrative themes and symbols integrated into their personal stories, several illuminating patterns emerge. Through the motif of injury and/or illness, the male sadhus construct themselves in accordance with authoritative precepts on renunciation for two reasons. First, in the view of most of the (medieval) textual sources, ideally high-caste males of an advanced age are eligible for renunciation because by then, as the (high-caste) authors of the texts assumed, males have fulfilled not only their domestic but also their social and ritual obligations, including their ‘three debts’ to the gods, teachers and ancestors. Second, from an anthropological perspective, societal expectations of householding remain embedded in the ‘social body’ of Indian culture to such an extent that they are constantly produced, enacted and reinforced at both the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels of society, such as the family, religious institutions, the workplace, the economy and the government (Lorber 1994: 96). Although Brahmanical constructions and models have masculinised the tradition of renunciation (Khandelwal 2004), men who deviate from the orthodox model of householding by renouncing the world still experience various forms of emotional and social stigmatisation. Their narrative strategies, thus, represent religious responses to the potential for such stigmatisation.

Male sadhus like Devendra Saraswati, Nityananda Puri and Baldev Giri renounced without either fulfilling or completing the traditional expectations of marriage and householding for caste Hindus. While these sadhus are de facto exceptions to Sātric precepts, they utilise narrative strategies for minimising this fact in order to legitimate their renunciation. In sharp contrast to the men, the female sadhus with whom I worked had completed their householding duties before they formally renounced the world (DeNapoli 2009). Their narratives matter-of-factly express an underlying recognition of and compliance with traditional precepts that identify an appropriate time to take renunciation — after all the householding duties are finished. If it were not for the undeniable fact of their feminine gender, the sadhus might have been considered as exemplars of the orthodox Brahmanical textual prescriptions on renunciation. Nevertheless, with the forceful combination of the authoritative texts that reserve renunciation primarily for males and societal norms that associate womanhood with domesticity against them, the strategy of the female sadhus for expressing their right to lead alternative lives is to draw on the traditional religious ideas of duty, destiny and devotion in the performance of their personal narratives, and represent themselves through these narrative idioms as exceptions to gendered norms.

On the one hand, then, the lives of the female sadhus are strikingly similar to those of the Pentecostal women preachers described in Elaine Lawless’s study. By virtue of their religious positions, both the sadhus and the Pentecostal preachers employ various types of narrative strategies in their constructions of self as a means to negotiate their everyday lives with societal norms and pressures. Even though these women know...
they are different from everyone else, they carefully and convincingly account for that difference by interpreting their lives through traditional frameworks and ideas, which, in turn, traditionalise their own exceptional lives, providing them their status, power and authority (Lawless 1988: 57–87). On the other hand, however, and as Lawless suggests, the Pentecostal women preachers can remain preachers as long as they are able to straddle successfully the demands of their religious duties with their domestic ones. That is, only as long as these women remain wives and mothers are they able to justify their religious position (and the prestige and spiritual authority that come with it) as preachers to their congregations, which are run by men (Lawless 1988: 145–70). In this respect, the female sādhus’ study could not be more different from the Pentecostal women preachers because by renouncing the world, the sādhus formally leave behind the expected roles of wife, mother, daughter, caretaker, that is, roles connected to kinship. Renunciation, as such, implies a rejection of these social roles (and social identities) through which Indian women, in particular, gain their status, power and authority. While being a sādhu also carries status, power and authority in Indian society, this status is often attributed to and associated with men, not women.

Nonetheless, as this article has shown, no sādhu is exempt from having to validate his or her life and position in some way to others. Not only the female sādhus, but the male sādhus too, recognise that householders, including their own devotees, see their lives as unusual, even if they are men. The male sādhus are as subject to suspicion as the female sādhus because they represent people who pursued goals different from what they were expected to pursue. Similarly, like the female sādhus, the male sādhus struggle to make sense of their life circumstances and to represent their lives as non-transgressively as possible in a culture that upholds householding as the yardstick of Indian normality. Men are under as much pressure by their families and society to conform as are women. Hence, their male gender does not immunise the sādhus from representing their lives as legitimate options. Yet, for female sādhus, their negotiations are especially poignant in light of their social contexts. Where gender matters most, though, is in the strategies the sādhus employ in their narrative representations. What is more, the narrative strategies of the sādhus have different implications for negotiating their asceticism. Whereas the male sādhus’ narrative strategies of practice, effort and hard work promote notions of agency, as these themes support dominant understandings of masculinity, the female sādhus’ narrative strategies resist it, indicating, as a result, their recognition of gender differences. The female sādhus do not want to challenge the inherently patriarchal system of gender roles (DeNapoli 2014). This does not mean that the female sādhus agree with those patriarchal institutions that restrict women’s movements in society simply because of their gender. In my view, it seems that many of the female sādhus realise that that battle would not necessarily liberate them socially or religiously. For them, guarding their reputations is as important as following God’s command. These female sādhus, like many female sādhus throughout India, I presume, just want to be able to lead the kind of lives they believe God wants them to lead. Their claim to being acting by divine command allows the sādhus to do this. By contrast, for male sādhus, narrating their lives through use of categories that are typically associated with culturally constructed views of masculinity make it possible for male sādhus to construct their religiosity as a valid choice.

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Matrimonial strategies among peasant women in early 20th century Garhwal

Rashmi Pant

The extensive presence in the legal archives of cases of non-normative conjugalities in Garhwal cannot be explained as exceptions or cultural vestiges as colonial observers tended to do. By tracing their recurrence using the temporal depth of historical sources, the article is able to rehabilitate what appeared as deviant, marginal or even immoral practices at a given time, as culturally available strategies. They are interpreted in this article as practical solutions to the reproductive needs of the small peasant household. These conjugal arrangements were particularly useful when the support of lineage members was undependable or even hostile, as frequently in the case of widows. Such households could not be sustained, however, if their land were to return to the lineage on the death of its head. This conundrum forced them to negotiate the rule of patrilinial inheritance. While men were historically empowered to contest lineage rights under the colonial interpretation of local custom, women’s property was subject even more strictly to the reversionary right of patrilinial heirs. The article examines how women deployed custom and laws relating to debt to deal with unequal property rights.

Keywords: custom, Indian kinship, colonial law, peasant household, property rights, patrilinial inheritance

I

Introduction

This article looks at how peasant women were able to negotiate the gendered field of colonial custom to gain access to land and labour. They drew upon special forms of marriage and partition available in the repertoire of customary practices of Kumaon and Garhwal to do so. These alternate

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