
Chapter One

Gendering Hindu Renunciation

Hinduism has developed a wide array of overlapping categories of religious specialists, from married yogis and priests to celibate student-novices, each category representing one religious path (*marg*) among many. The habit of describing religious pursuits as a “path” is hardly unique to Hinduism, but the assumption that paths are plural and that their appropriateness is contextually defined is particularly Hindu. Although there is rivalry between followers of different paths, which gives rise to the notion of “higher” and “lower” paths, it is generally agreed that the paths lead to the same destination and, in this sense, are all legitimate, if not equal. The *Bhagavadgita*’s standard threefold division distinguishes the paths of knowledge (*jnanamarg*), action (*karmamarg*), and devotion (*bhaktimarg*), but these ideal types lose their heuristic value when they come to be seen as mutually exclusive and competing paths. Since the notion of paths is central to both philosophical and popular ways of understanding Hindu religious diversity, chapter 4 will explore in more detail its association with notions of movement or motion (*gati*), position or state (*sthiti*), time (*kal*), and the actor or vessel (*patra*). This metaphor of paths and journey help to explain why ascetics behave in such idiosyncratic ways and why sannyasa is eclectic without becoming an “anything goes” morality. Indeed, chapter 5 explores lay observers’ concern with evaluating ascetics’ sincerity and legitimacy.

It is also evident throughout the ethnography that renouncers communicate different kinds of messages to their interlocutors in different contexts. For example, what does the proclamation “in renunciation there is no male and female” mean and for whom is that message intended? What about the alternative message, “people should know the problems women face in sannyasa” (what Anand Mata said after reading portions of this book) or “women don’t need sannyasa” (which was a comment made by several sannyasinis)? The contextual subtlety of these messages are crucial for understanding both the relevance and irrelevance of gender, the tension between worldly and otherworldly values, commentaries about hypocrisy and authenticity, and how renouncers interact differently with, and construct different messages for, lay and monastic disciples, anthropologists, and other sadhus.¹ All these are related to the notion of contextually defined paths.

Sannyasa as an Institution: Sociological Messiness

Sannyasa, as one possible path to liberation, is ideally a single-minded pursuit of spiritual liberation that demands a total and permanent break from the ordinary household interests and activities of the Hindu laity. As such, it is considered by its initiates to be the most intense (and the “highest”) of religious paths. To take sannyasa is both a radical and irreversible move. One does not try out renunciation as one might experiment with hatha yoga, meditation, or the ritual worship of a particular deity. Thus, individuals must prove their readiness to a guru before receiving initiation into sannyasa. For initiates to fail in their vows and return to the very family life that they earlier renounced is a matter of serious disgrace. While sannyasa does not demand that its initiates take up any specific lifestyle or spiritual discipline, it does require that they permanently and totally give up their previous identities as householders. Household life is aimed at the moral and material prosperity of one’s family, so householders are expected to be concerned with getting married, having children, earning money, offering hospitality to guests, performing ritual sacrifice, worshipping gods and ancestors, and generally following the rules of moral conduct (dharma) as defined according to social class, stage of life, and gender (obviously this is a high-caste construction of the ideal household life). The goal of following one’s dharma is to ensure prosperity in this life and the next. Renouncers, by contrast, are concerned not with a good rebirth but with liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

According to sannyasa’s Advaita philosophy one attains liberation when one’s *atma* (individual soul) frees itself from the body in order to unite with Paramatma (Universal Soul) or Brahman (Ultimate Reality or Impersonal Absolute, not to be confused with the “creator” god Brahma or the caste status Brahmin). More accurately, *moksha* (liberation) is the realization, which can

come gradually after decades of discipline or instantaneously in a moment of grace, that *atma* and Brahman are and have always been the same and that, ultimately, nothing else is real. In order to achieve this goal, renouncers adopt an attitude of indifference toward their parents, spouses, siblings, children, and family events such as weddings or funerals. Having conquered all passions, conventionally identified as lust, anger, desire, attachment, and ego, they remain always calm, unruffled by the events of the material and temporal world. Renouncers are expected to face whatever obstacles come their way without fear or frustration. This shift in mental outlook is accompanied by a change in social and legal identity. Initiates leave home, cease to recognize marital and family obligations, vow to remain celibate, beg for food, discard all possessions, abandon their means of employment, forfeit all legal claim to family property, and replace their birth name with one given by the guru.

While the classic renunciant profile still enjoys widespread currency as an *ideal*, it does not characterize the values, personal goals, and life experiences of most contemporary renouncers. Many subsist on food provided by ashrams rather than begging door-to-door. And most have some possessions, perhaps even possessions so valuable as homes and land.² More importantly, female renouncers, by definition, do not fit the image of the archetypal renouncer. That the initiation ceremony emphasizes the abandonment of Vedic ritual reveals that the archetypal renouncer described above is also a high-caste male since only they were qualified to perform the ritual in the first place. If women and low-caste men are forbidden from performing Vedic sacrifice, as they have been historically, they are not in a position to renounce it. Women, by definition, have an ambivalent relationship to the renunciant ideal and reject elements of it on both practical and ideological grounds. For example, considerations of safety and reputation mean that the solitary, itinerant lifestyle is particularly unappealing to women. It is not surprising that the women featured here speak from diverse ideological positions, including those of classical renunciant values, conventional femininity, and a modernized neo-Hinduism.

Even though *sannyasa* is a radical form of asceticism, within the category of renouncer the range of acceptable values, lifestyles, spiritual practices, modes of interaction with householders, and dress is so great that one can speak only tentatively of patterns and hardly at all of constants. This can be attributed to sectarian complexity, nonbrahmanical influences, and a tolerance for independent renouncers. The lack of sociological specificity is evident in many general studies of Hindu asceticism written from sociological and anthropological perspectives (Burghart 1983a, 1983b; Ghurye 1964; Gross 1992; Miller and Wertz 1976; Sinha and Saraswati 1978; Tripathi 1978). Depending on sectarian affiliation, renouncers may eat only what is received from begging (having vowed not to touch a cooking fire) or refuse to accept food cooked by others. They may follow elaborate rules of ritual purity or deliberately ignore them. There are few statistics about the general population of contemporary renouncers.³

Sannyasa as an Idea: Singular Aim

It is easier to generalize about the goals of sannyasa than about its sociology. The singular aim of sannyasa is, of course, the attainment of knowledge (*jnana*) or liberation (*moksha*). To this end, renouncers cultivate an attitude of detachment (*vairagya*) toward the transient world. To have *vairagya* is to remain indifferent to illness, pain, loneliness, sensual temptation, material goods, uncertainty, fear, and even insults. Thus, one sannyasini noted that cultivating detachment does not mean that one cannot experience pleasure or enjoyment. "If someone offers you an ice cream," she explained, "it is alright to enjoy eating that ice cream, but, having eaten it, you should not feel desire to have it again." A common theme in popular narratives about ascetic detachment is testing the ability of a sadhu to resist temptation. In the version narrated to me by one sannyasini, a sadhu sits in a meditative trance while some people who were evading work and had nothing better to do try to disrupt his concentration. "These mischievous loafers," she said, "dressed a prostitute to look really beautiful and sent her to his side . . . to degrade him. She sat beside the sadhu and tried to attract his attention by jingling her anklets and bangles. Suddenly, his eyes opened, and he said 'Mother, what do you want?' The prostitute was so surprised, 'No one has ever addressed me as mother,' she said, 'Everybody comes to me with lust in their eyes.' Immediately, she removed all her jewelry and pleaded, 'Make me your disciple. I was sent by those wicked, sinful people to degrade you.' The sadhu declined, told her she was pure, and instructed her to worship god. Eventually she too became a sadhu." In accordance with sannyasa's emphasis on celibacy and detachment, there are many stories about male sadhus who demonstrate their lack of desire by addressing a beautiful woman as "mother" and more humorous ones in which the male sadhu is less successful. Detachment is central to the definition of sannyasa. Indeed, this attitude is sometimes seen as a prerequisite for taking sannyasa rather than its goal. Several renouncers I met explained detachment using the metaphor of fruit ripening on a tree. A tree automatically drops or "renounces" its fruit when the fruit becomes ripe, while unripe fruit must be forcibly plucked. Similarly, persons who feel detachment toward worldly life simply and easily let go of it, since it holds no meaning for them. Such a person is "ripe" for sannyasa compared to someone who is still attached to family, sensual pleasures, possessions and status, and must, therefore, wrench themselves away from worldly life.

Spiritual liberation, conceived as escape from *samsara*, can be accomplished in various ways. Denton has noted an ambiguity in ascetics' use of the word *samsara*. "The word appears to have two different, overlapping meanings: on the one hand, it clearly refers to the cycle of life, death and rebirth that results in the repeated transmigration of the soul; on the other, it refers to the world of human relations which, from the ascetic perspective, is the foremost social

expression of this cycle” (Denton 1991:215). Renouncers, then, seek eternal release from *samsara*, perceived as either the cycle of rebirths or social relationships, particularly family, that constitute worldly life. Burghart (1983a:642–43) has argued, contra Dumont, that ascetics define themselves in opposition to competing ascetic orders, not to householders. Moreover, ascetics view themselves as escaping the transient world of *samsara*, which they may or may not define as the social world of caste. Thus, individual renouncers might direct their attitude of indifference toward caste distinctions, family relationships, wealth, security, food, obligations, pride, or even the desire for liberation itself. This “contentless” definition of *sannyasa* is responsible, in part, for what I will argue is the “indeterminacy” of this tradition.⁴

Sannyasa as a Category: Restricted and General Meanings

In ordinary conversation, the word *sannyasa* has both a restricted and general sense. Its restricted usage refers to the Dashnami renunciant orders ostensibly founded in the eighth century by Shankara (but, see Hacker 1964:29). This monastic federation is divided into ten ascetic lineages, which have separate names but all trace their spiritual descent from Shankara (Dazey 1990:284). The ideological roots of the Dashnami Order lie in the philosophy of absolute monism, Advaita Vedanta, which posits the existence of an Ultimate Reality called Brahman that is without attributes or form. Corresponding to Brahman is the *atma* (individual soul) residing within each person, which originates from and, eventually (at the time of liberation), merges back into Brahman as a drop of water merges into an ocean. Those seeking advaitic knowledge need not practice the devotional worship of gods and goddesses so popular in India, since they see the self and its objects of devotion as ultimately the same.⁵ Nor must they perform Vedic sacrifice since they do not desire the worldly benefits that Hindu householders hope to gain from sacrifice and since they have symbolically internalized the sacrificial fire. According to Dashnami renouncers then, the *atma* that resides within each person is one and the same as the abstract Brahman. A correlate of this philosophical belief regarding the unity of *atma* and Brahman is the idea that renouncers themselves are beyond all dualities, oblivious to distinctions of purity and impurity, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty, female and male. Although British colonial and Indian nationalist discourses have tended to equate Advaita (or neo-Advaita) with Hindu thought itself, most Indian Hindus are not followers of this extreme, transcendent philosophy (King 1999:128–42).

How do Dashnami renouncers fit into the larger landscape of Hindu asceticism? Two of the most general sectarian categories divide Hindus into followers of either Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu. Although there is evidence that Shankara and his immediate disciples may have favored Vishnu rather than Shiva, the

entire Order has been regarded as Shaiva since the medieval period.⁶ Lord Shiva, destroyer of the universe and patron deity of many contemporary renouncers, is himself the quintessential ascetic of the Hindu pantheon. He is frequently portrayed in the garb of a wandering ascetic, his body smeared with ashes and the Ganges River flowing from his matted locks.⁷ Competing systems of Vedanta philosophy were established by Ramanuja and Madhava and offered alternative, Vaishnava forms of asceticism.⁸ Since Vaishnava ascetics, who wear yellow or white, are usually called by other terms such as “*bairagi*” and “*tyagi*,” the terms “*sannyasi*” and “*sannyasini*,” in their restricted sense, usually refer specifically to Shaiva renouncers.

Dashnami renouncers, as Shaivas, must be distinguished not only from their Vaishnava counterparts but also from other Shaiva ascetics. Nathpanthis (also called Kanphata Yogis) represent another major brand of Shaiva asceticism found primarily in North India. Influenced by Tantrism, they emphasize the practice of yogic postures (*hatha yoga*), seek to attain extraordinary magical and psychic powers (*siddhis*), and are commonly referred to simply as *yogis* or *jogis*.⁹ Another variety of Shaiva ascetics is the Virashaivas (also called Lingayats). Most Virashaivas are householders, and they are located almost exclusively in Karnataka, South India.¹⁰ Dashnami renouncers are more widespread and numerous than either the Nathpanthis or Virashaivas, and it is to them that the words “*sannyasi*” and “*sannyasini*” primarily refer. Other ascetic traditions are beyond the scope of this work.

Sannyasa, however, should not be completely equated with the Dashnami Order as represented by its monastic abbots, for the tradition has retained a high degree of philosophical and sociological diversity along sectarian lines. More importantly perhaps, it has also continued to allow the proliferation of independent renouncers who hold no substantial institutional or group affiliation. Those initiated into a Dashnami lineage need not maintain affiliation with the order. Moreover, it is possible (if not legally recognized) for one to simply don the ochre robes without formal initiation and live independently of a monastic center. Thus, according to Dazey, the centralization of the Advaita tradition is balanced by the decentralization of the wandering *sannyasis* (1990:308). Miller and Wertz note that solitary wandering ascetics are more likely to incorporate popular ideas and practices, in contrast to those who follow “pure” Advaita (1976:27). Focusing on independent, if not wandering, women renouncers reminds us that *sannyasa* is not essentially constituted of the Dashnami monasteries. Indeed, it suggests that *sannyasa* as it is practiced outside the monastic structures is an eclectic and dynamic contemporary practice.

In their more general meanings, then, the terms “*sannyasi*” and “*sannyasini*” refer to those ascetics who have rejected worldly and family life for the single-minded pursuit of liberation, even if they have not been initiated into one of the ten Dashnami Orders (though most have been). It is this general, nontechnical meaning of *sannyasa* that I intend when I use the word here. Shankara empha-

sized rigorous discipline, Sanskrit learning, and Advaita philosophy, and today's Dashnami renouncers often have a modern, secular education as well. This ideal has relevance beyond the strict boundaries of the Dashnami Order. "Sannyasis" and "sannyasins" then, in popular usage, refer to renouncers who wear the ochre robes of Shaiva renunciation and *more or less* model themselves after the Dashnamis. They are expected to have renounced family life (both literally and emotionally), remain celibate, own few or no possessions, maintain a strict vegetarian diet, eschew liquor, follow some form of spiritual discipline or austerities, and embrace Advaitic monism. Renouncers outside the Dashnami Order may be independent or associated with an alternative monastic institution. The modern Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Order, for example, have Dashnami origins, but their own interpretation of sannyasa and their own institutions; both initiate men and women into sannyasa and use Dashnami terminology. When referring to ascetic women who are not sannyasins in this general sense, I identify them in terms of their particular status as religious practitioners, such as *brahmacharini* (female celibate student).¹¹

A History of Tensions, Debates, and Compromises

Archeological evidence from the Indus Valley civilization suggests that ascetic practices on the subcontinent may date as far back as the third millennium B.C.E.¹² However, historians' primary source of knowledge about ancient Indian asceticism is scriptural rather than archeological, and religious texts indicate that ascetic practices flourished in northern India during the first millennium B.C.E. The corpus of ancient Sanskrit literature composed around this time indicates a wide spectrum of attitudes toward ascetic practices, ranging from outright hostility to glorification. The ideal of earlier Vedic theology was a married householder who studied the scriptures, fulfilled ritual obligations, and fathered sons, while the ideal person of the Upanishadic period was a celibate ascetic who shunned rituals and withdrew from family and society (Olivelle 1995).

The Vedic period (approximately 1500–600 B.C.E.) is associated with the earliest body of Indian literature known as the Vedas and the social dominance of the Brahmin or priestly class. Its system of beliefs, ideas, and rituals is referred to as "the brahmanical tradition," which has provided a systematic interpretation of social and religious behavior that many consider normative in India (Embre 1988:5). Its normativity, however, is a contested domain, since the voice of brahmanical Hinduism is by definition upper-caste and male. The main concern of Vedic religion was the proper performance of elaborate ritual fire sacrifices by highly trained Brahmin priests, the purpose of which was to ensure progeny and material prosperity for the patrilineal family. The earliest and most important of these texts, the *Rig Veda*, tends to refer to ascetics with words (*yati*, *muni*, *rishi*) that have connotations of magic, mystical rites, meditation and religious ecstasy,

while later Vedic literature uses terms (*tapasvin*, *sramana*, *sannyasin*, *parivrajaka*, *yogi*) that suggest renunciation, the casting off of social obligations, a life of austerities, wandering, and the control of such bodily functions as breathing (Thapar 1984:67–68). The terminology suggests a historical shift in the purpose and meaning of ascetic practices, from an ancient magico-religious mysticism to something closer to the classical Dashnami ideal.

Toward the end of the Vedic period, texts began to appear in which Vedic ritual was attributed with symbolic meaning, and understanding this mystical meaning became even more important than actually performing the rite (Embree 1988:29). A collection of texts called the Upanishads were composed during a period of great social, economic, and religious turmoil on the subcontinent and reflect a shift from Vedic ritualism to new ideas and institutions (Olivelle 1998:3).¹³ They also represent a major challenge to priestly religious authority and contain philosophical speculations about the nature of the human soul and its relationship to the cosmos. The Upanishads reflect the perspective of sages rather than priests and, as such, provide a mystical interpretation of the Vedas. In addition to switching from a literal to a symbolic interpretation of ritual sacrifice, the Upanishads also represented a shift in ideas about rebirth and the doctrine of karma. Karma refers to the fruits of past deeds, both good and bad, that cause rebirth. While the Vedas taught people to perform meritorious and ritual acts in order to ensure prosperity in their next life, the Upanishads held out the possibility that people could eliminate karma altogether through mystical and ascetic practices and thereby attain eternal release from rebirth. As the final stage in the development of Vedic philosophy, the Upanishads represent the “end of the Vedas” (*vedanta*), so later philosophical schools of classical Hinduism that are based on the Upanishads are referred to as Vedanta (Embree 1988:29). In claiming superiority of ascetic practices over ritual sacrifice, the Upanishads provide the primary textual authority for contemporary renunciation.

In general, the history of *sannyasa* can be seen as a continual process of dissent and neutralization, a tug-of-war between these two broad value systems central to Indian culture. On the one hand, an institutionalist orientation of brahmanical orthodoxy gives primacy to household and family prosperity, ritual sacrifice, Vedic learning, and the system of *varnashramadharma* (moral duty defined according to social class, life-stage, and gender). On the other hand, the otherworldly philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, as expounded in the Upanishads, emphasizes experiential and experimental knowledge over scholasticism and glorifies renunciation as the way to truth. Advaita insists on the unity of Brahman and *atma* and on the illusory, transient nature of everything else and thus encourages its adherents to ignore social institutions and distinctions (of social class, life-stage, and gender) as worldly, and, thus, ultimately unreal. Of course, as we will see, a dialogue between worldly and otherworldly realities occurs within *sannyasa*.

The Monastic Centers as Forces of Institutionalization

The parallel processes of domestication and dissent can be identified at the level of religious movements, particular orders, and individual renunciators.¹⁴ Renunciation seems to have originated as an individual practice but has tended to become increasingly monastic over time. For most of its early history, argues Thapar (1984), renunciators typically wandered alone or lived in isolated caves and forests on the fringes of society. There was no organization to speak for their interests, provide them with food and shelter, or formulate rules of behavior. Indeed, such an institution would have seemed antithetical to renunciators of the ancient period, as the very purpose of *sannyasa* was to rise above personal interests, physical needs, and social mores. The gradual organization of ascetics into monastic orders during the first millennium B.C.E., following the rise in the numbers of ascetics, may have had several causes. On a practical level, Thapar points out, itinerant *sadhus* needed a place to live during the monsoon when flooding made travel difficult and sometimes impossible. Also, they may have sought an institutional base in order to counter the hostility of political elites, for kings and other authorities tended to view itinerant holy men as loafers who simply wanted to avoid social or political responsibilities. There was a rise in sectarian groups during the first millennium B.C.E., though many of these monasteries were connected to the heterodox sects of Buddhism and Jainism. After the first millennium C.E., the wane of heterodox movements in North India was accompanied by a rise in Hindu monasticism, specifically the Dashnami Orders (Thapar 1984:87–92). Thus, Hindu renunciation as a noninstitutional, even anti-institutional, religious practice dates back at least to the first millennium B.C.E., but it did not acquire an organizational framework until much later.

Thapar argues that the gradual monasticization of renunciators had the effect of moving some away from the ideal of the solitary wanderer, possessing neither wealth nor political interest. Donations of wealth and property made administrative duties necessary, and this inevitably led to more hierarchy within the order than had previously existed among renunciators. The material prosperity of the monasteries was furthered by their exemption from paying taxes, and those with rich endowments were especially likely to seek out a political role. In general, monastic institutions, emphasizing group action, discipline, and rules, were not appropriate places for those seeking absolute freedom defined in *advaitic* terms. Thus, Thapar argues, the evolution of renunciant institutions toward a greater participation in secular life was in a sense self-annihilating. Householders made contributions (*dan*) to renunciators and gained spiritual merit (*punya*) in return. Ironically, the donations were sometimes of a nature that enabled the monastery to exist independently, resulting in its increasing distance from the lay community. When this occurred, reciprocity decreased and the anti-institutional, world-rejecting quality of *sannyasa* was undermined. Thus, the renunciant sects

themselves have changed over time, as the development of monastic institutions undermined sannyasa's tendency toward social protest (Thapar 1984:87–92).

However, the dissent-inspiring philosophy of Advaita ensured that sannyasa did not become completely controlled by monastic centers. When particular orders or individual renunciators were seen as having moved too far from the ascetic ideal, they were denounced, and sometimes individuals dissatisfied with monastic life took a solitary path in search of salvation. Even today it is not uncommon for renunciators to leave their sectarian institution for a lone path, and this move may involve an implicit or explicit critique of monastic and sectarian religiosity. Anand Mata, for example, left the camaraderie of fellow disciples in her guru's metropolitan ashram and began an intense discipline of silence and solitude. Baiji spent most of the year in her Haridwar ashram, heavily engaged in advising lay disciples, overseeing rituals, and organizing social service activities. However, she would leave this ashram periodically to spend time in a Himalayan ashram, almost, it seemed, as a way of renouncing her socially engaged renunciation. In the midst of the historical process of institutionalization, the idealized image of the solitary wanderer has retained validity and prevents sannyasa from becoming entirely institutionalized. The otherworldly advaitic roots of renunciation create a climate in which "walking away from it all" continues to have spiritual legitimacy. Through the centuries, the wandering ascetic who did not join any order and lived in isolation has remained the ultimate symbol of dissent. Today there is an acceptance of independent renunciators who reject institutional affiliation, although, as will be discussed in chapter 5, this acceptance is tempered by a cynical popular discourse warning of thieves, megalomaniacs, and sexual predators posing as ascetics. Thus, in the midst of increasing institutionalization, the countervailing advaitic tendency continually deconstructs social institutions and distinctions.

Rethinking Analytical Oppositions

These competing pulls of transcendent Advaita ideology on the one hand and social engagement and institutions on the other have been mapped onto the distinction between sannyasa and household life (*grihastha*), such that renunciation is understood as the rejection of the goals, values, and practices of household life. Dumont and Heesterman were among the first to seriously analyze renunciation in sociological and indological terms. Dumont (1980) posited a dialectical opposition between Brahmin householder as exemplar of the interdependence of caste society and renouncer as exemplar of the individualism of sannyasa. True individualism, according to Dumont, has no place in Indian society (defined as a system of interdependent and hierarchical castes) and, thus, can only exist outside of society in the world of renunciation. Accordingly, the Brahmin householder and the protesting renouncer represent mutually exclu-

sive, if complementary, worlds. Although Dumont himself was not concerned with the role of gender in this model, logically speaking, women would be associated exclusively with householder life even if they do not exemplify it.

As both an indologist working from texts and a structuralist concerned with grand civilizational issues, Heesterman (1985), unlike many critics, approaches Dumont on his own terms. Heesterman's understanding of Hinduism highlights Vedic ritual rather than caste. In a critique of Dumont's opposition between the Brahmin and renouncer, Heesterman argues that the *ideal* Brahmin is one who *renounces* priesthood and ritual, so that the Brahmin's true role is renunciation rather than caste-imbbeded priesthood. More importantly, he argues that renunciant values are inherent in Vedic ritual rather than anti-brahmanical. While Heesterman provides a convincing critique of Dumont's opposition between Brahmin and renouncer, his model nonetheless proposed another unresolvable conflict—between the atemporal order of renunciation and the sociopolitical realm of change. Thus, renunciation is still opposed to society, at least at an ideological level, and it remains absolutely transcendent, unchanging, and individualistic. The renouncer is seen as “turning his back on the world” and “leaving the world for good” (Heesterman 1985:4–5).

While the exact terms of their oppositions differ, both Dumont and Heesterman assume not a distinction but a fundamental ideological opposition between an otherworldly renunciation and the social world, the latter essentialized as caste by Dumont and kinship by Heesterman. Most scholars agree that household life, as the center of kinship and material concerns, does in some sense stand for the Hindu social world. That the householder and renouncer follow incompatible sets of values has also been widely accepted in the scholarship of India, though some scholars have brought attention to the ways in which Indian thought has attempted to resolve the contradiction (see, for example, O'Flaherty 1981:78–79). The householder-renouncer opposition has become central to anthropological and indological understandings of Hindu culture. Imbedded within this opposition as it has come to be used is the following set of analogies:

Renouncer : : Householder
 Otherworldly : : Worldly
 Ascetic Withdrawal : : Social Engagement
 Male World of Asceticism : : Female World of Domesticity

Focusing on sannyasinis requires disentangling this dichotomous framework, which renders them logical impossibilities. Although my intent in conducting this research was to dispense with the structural framework altogether, my observations have led me to take a less radical stance: to speak of tensions rather than oppositions and to retain distinctions while separating analogies. While there is evidence for positing these two lifestyles as logical and mutually exclusive opposites, especially when talking at the level of abstractions, highlighting individual lives not only suggests a distinction rather than an opposition

but also brings into focus unrecognized aspects of the practice and interpretation of sannyasa by contemporary initiates. We see, for example, that renunciators may in fact maintain connections with their families, although the nature of the relationship changes once they take sannyasa. Similarly, we observe that managing an ashram is not unlike managing a home. We learn too that while renunciators do not explicitly labor for wages, many freely discuss the reciprocity that exists in their relationships with householders. That this relationship can sometimes get perilously close to wage labor is a frequent subject of humor and sarcasm when, for example, disreputable renunciators are dubbed “professionals” and their activities referred to as “setting up shop.” As the work of other ethnographers has also suggested, the competing ideals of social involvement and ascetic withdrawal are more accurately understood, not in terms of absolute opposition, but difference (Burghart 1983a; Narayan 1989; Gold 1989a; Sinclair-Brull 1997). “Tension” conveys a sense that competing pulls are not simply logical or philosophical, but emotional and social as well. Renunciators exist in society, but are not supposed to be *of* it. This simple fact creates not only dilemmas that must be negotiated but also ironies central to a renunciator way of life.

My second claim is that the tension between engagement and withdrawal exists *within* sannyasa, not just between a socially engaged householder life and renunciator withdrawal. Sannyasinis speak in both otherworldly and worldly voices, and not as if the latter were simply a corruption of the former. They may perform Vedic ritual, worship in temples, acknowledge the importance of social distinctions, and involve themselves deeply in the social concerns of householders, though their attitude toward these activities is expected to be different, detached, since it is informed by Advaita philosophy. “Ironically, the act of renunciation may in fact push an ascetic into more extensive social involvement than if he or she remained a layperson” (Narayan 1989:80). The social involvement of particular renunciators varies in both nature and degree, but it was not seen by the women I met as antithetical to renunciation. Social involvement was not necessarily “selling out.” At the same time the tension here is real. For example, when householders view a particular renouncer as especially detached, and spiritually elevated, they seek to honor him or her by offering worldly and spiritual authority, personal adoration, and material comforts—all of which may present dilemmas for the renouncer. As Van der Veer has noted for Ramanandi sadhus, “[t]he more liberated he is from the restraining societal and physical bodies thanks to his ascetic feats, the more he will be surrounded socially by ascetic and lay followers” (1987:684). While renunciators’ social activities and relationships may be seen by some as a corruption of authentic renunciation, it may also, and with equal legitimacy, be seen as integral to spiritual discipline. For example, achieving the Advaita ideal of seeing no difference between oneself and others may cause one to feel the suffering of others as if it were one’s own and, perhaps, to become involved in their worldly problems in order to alleviate suffering. In other contexts, Advaita ideals may lead one to refuse to

become involved, throw all social and material distinctions into question, and affirm the superiority of experiential knowledge over ritual and book learning. Just as renouncers may feel a sense of social responsibility, so too do many male and female householders aspire to cultivate detachment within the contexts of pilgrimage, devotional ritual, or the intense sociality of Indian family life (Gold 1989; Madan 1987; Daniel 1984; Pearson 1996). The difference is that for renouncers it is their primary goal, but the tension between these alternative goals is one that both ascetics and householders must negotiate.

Olivelle describes this tension from a textual perspective: "Attempts to blunt the opposition between domesticity and celibate asceticism were at best only partially successful" (1995:542). I explore how it is manifested and dealt with in the everyday lives of particular women renouncers. The apparently conflicting ideals of engagement and withdrawal represent ends of a continuum and the sannyasinis I met struck their own compromises between them. Although the particular expression of these ideals may have changed in the last century, it has historical precedence in the parallel tendencies of monasticism and dissent previously discussed. More attention to the range and diversity of renunciant ideologies and practices, and the contradictions resulting from competing aims, helps to counter both romantic and ethnocentric stereotypes that portray renouncers as either transcendent, serene saints existing outside society or corrupt frauds driven by economic and political self-interest.¹⁵ Since sannyasa is informed by both Advaita philosophy and monastic institutionalism, I distinguish between these two strands *within* renunciation rather than opposing otherworldly renunciation and worldly society. For this reason, I speak not of householder and renouncer, but, rather of engagement and withdrawal, worldly and otherworldly, or, depending on context, the institutions of brahmanical orthodoxy and the transcendence of Advaita.

Finally, this tension is assumed to be gendered in predictable ways. Until recently scholars have taken for granted that women are always associated with household life and ascetics are always men, or, if not actual men, then symbolic males. Interestingly, Olivelle (1995) details an argument from the epic *Mahabharata* that reverses the ordinary gender associations of the conflict. The argument is between the famous king Janaka and a female ascetic named Sulabha who hears the news of Janaka's claim that he has attained liberation without abandoning his throne or household life. Sulabha wanted to test Janaka's claim, so she used her yogic powers to enter his body.

Janaka goes on to admonish Sulabha about the impropriety of her entering his body. Taking her to be a brahman, Janaka asserts that she has thus created a confusion of castes. He then inquires who she is and where she comes from. In her response, Sulabha points to these questions as demonstrating Janaka's lack of true knowledge. A man who is liberated would not ask such questions. Sulabha thus exposes the fallacy that a householder, in this case a king, can acquire the liberating knowledge without abandoning home and family. (Olivelle 1995:546)

This scriptural passage offers a critique of the analogies that equate maleness with asceticism, even if it retains the equation between withdrawal and genuine knowledge. Actual sannyasinis at times deconstruct even the latter.

Female Renunciation: Legitimacy and Historicity

The Upanishads' turn away from ritual toward contemplation, meditation, and asceticism had positive and negative implications for women. According to Katherine Young (1987), if ancient Vedic religion was centered in the home and oriented toward fulfilling people's desire for children, material prosperity, and long lives, women as wives and mothers were crucial to the family's success. Moreover, their participation in Vedic fire sacrifice (as wife of the sponsor) was considered necessary to maintain cosmic order. Thus, even if subordinated to men, women were central to Vedic religion.¹⁶ While one might expect that the Upanishads' new emphasis on meditation and ascetic practices, over Vedic learning and ritual, would have had a positive effect on women's religious status, the new approach was in fact androcentric in its goals and represented a critique of family and household life. Serenity Young observes that asceticism's androcentrism and emphasis on celibacy often "leaves women with the rather tiresome and religiously paralyzing role of sexual temptress" (1994:73). Katherine Young notes that religious and social changes also led to increasing educational disparities between men and women, and by the first century B.C.E. women were equated with low-caste Shudras and denied access to Vedic learning. Women came to be associated with both the household and ignorance, and it was assumed that women as a class aspire to a good rebirth rather than to the higher aim of liberation from the cycle of rebirths (K.Young 1987:69 and 2002:90–91). Insofar as these changes undercut the authority of priests, they also created new opportunities for those persons endowed with spiritual insight, which included some priests but also kings and women (Jaini cited in S.Young 1994:76). Thus, as will be discussed below, learned and possibly ascetic women appear in scripture.

Classical Sanskrit texts have much to say about who is eligible to take sannyasa, and, according to Olivelle, only when these discussions about eligibility focus on internal dispositions like detachment rather than external qualifications like Vedic learning are women included. When the question is addressed from the point of view of external, social qualifications the main point of debate is caste rather than gender. While all brahmanical authorities opposed the initiation of Shudras and outcasts, there is no consensus on the issue of whether only Brahmins or all twice-born men¹⁷ should be allowed to take sannyasa (Olivelle 1977:33). Nor is there agreement, across historical periods and textual traditions, about women's eligibility for initiation.

Olivelle stresses the importance of distinguishing between the legality of female renunciation, its historicity, and its legitimacy in the eyes of dharma (1984:113). Dharma, usually glossed as “duty,” is understood to refer to Hindu rules of right behavior that maintain the moral order of the universe. The attitude of the Dharmashastra literature toward female renunciation is more implicit than explicit. [These texts address every detail of the ideal life of Hindu men and women and, significantly, were considered by the British to be the most important and reliable source of Hindu law and custom.] Theoretically, women were unfit to renounce for the same reasons that low-caste Shudras were prohibited, since later brahmanical sources often equated women with Shudras:¹⁸ neither were entitled to Vedic initiation or Vedic study, two basic prerequisites of sannyasa according to the Dharmashastras. The classical initiation ritual for sannyasa symbolizes an internalization of the Vedic sacrifice, so that, from that point on, the renouncer makes offerings to the internal atma rather than to the sacrificial fire. McGee (2002) has problematized accepted ideas about the fact of, and possible reasons for, women’s ineligibility for Vedic learning and ritual in early Hinduism. Still, according to classical orthodoxy, women were prohibited from independently performing Vedic sacrifice, and excluded from undergoing the initiatory rite of sannyasa. Moreover, the Dharmashastras clearly state that the proper role of women (*stridharma*) is to be under the protection and control of men throughout their lives. That renunciation implied freedom and independence would in itself render it inappropriate for women. Classical Hinduism posits four stages that a man passes through during the course of his lifetime: celibate student, married householder, retired hermit, and renouncer. Classical thinkers viewed the *ashramas* (life-stages) as the appropriate sequence of stages in the life of a high-caste male, and excluded women from all except that of married householder.¹⁹ However, even in the Dharmashastras, which as a whole prohibit female renunciation, it is written that a widowed queen, if she prefers, may renounce rather than be maintained by the new king (Olivelle 1984:114-5). Moreover, the *Yatidharmaprakasa*, a treatise on renunciation from within the tradition of Dharmashastra, admits that women are entitled to renounce (Olivelle 1977:34). With some exceptions then, brahmanical thought as expressed in the Dharmashastras generally considered female renunciation to be illegitimate (Olivelle 1984:114-5; Chakraborti 1973:94; Rukmani 2002:xi).

While Hindu law was derived from religious concepts of right behavior, it was never identical to those concepts. Dharma describes the rules of proper conduct according to the dominant Hindu moral order. “But the rule of *dharma* can only become a rule of law by a process beyond the expression of it, a process which enables it to enter society armed with a power of constraint which is not inherent in it” (Lingat 1973:xiii).²⁰ Actual laws relating to renunciation, and specifically female renunciation, did exist in early Indian history. The ancient lawmaker Manu had a low opinion of female renouncers and imposed a small fine on those who secretly conversed with them. The political

theorist Kautilya legislated against initiating female ascetics (Chakraborti 1973:94–98). That he imposed a minimal fine on those who had sexual intercourse with a female renouncer indicates that he shared Manu’s low opinion of such women. In contrast, Vi and Narada considered sex with a female renouncer as a crime equal to that of violating the teacher’s bed (Olivelle 1984:114–15). Of course, that there were laws regulating female renunciation allows us to infer that it did exist.

As Rukmani notes, “there are plenty of examples both in the Epics and in literary works that tell us of the presence of women *samnyāsiniḥ*” (2002:xi). Although it can be inferred that female renouncers were a visible presence in ancient times and that they have existed throughout Indian history, little is known about their numbers in the past or what their lives were like. King (1984) and Ramaswamy (1997) see widespread social changes during the last hundred years or so as having made sannyasa more accessible to contemporary Indian women. Since some previously all-male monastic institutions have begun to admit women during the last two centuries and since modern times have seen a growth in women-only monastic institutions, I concur that there are probably more sannyasinis today than in the past. In the final analysis, whatever scholars might say about the historicity of female renunciation is speculative. Still, given the three obstacles that faced women interested in the ascetic life—their sexuality, the cultural emphasis on marriage, and the solitary nature of ascetic life—it is remarkable that there were any at all (S. Young 1994:75).

Colonial-era reform movements and the secular Indian women’s movement have had significant reverberations in the area of religion. During the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, both foreign missionaries and Indian nationalists, including reformist sannyasis like Vivekananda and Dayananda, criticized orthodox attitudes toward women and promoted women’s education in secular and religious fields.²¹ As part of his social program to uplift the poor masses for the sake of India’s renewal, Swami Vivekananda promoted women’s access to secular and religious education, insisted on a separate and independent monastic center for women, and felt that sannyasinis had an important role to play in strengthening national life (King 1984:75). Ursula King notes that gradually women have been allowed to learn Sanskrit, thereby gaining access to sacred knowledge. Late in the nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj revived Vedic ritual and granted women the right to perform it (Ibid.: 73–74). The Arya Samaj justifies women’s access to Vedic study and ritual as a return to an original, golden Vedic era in which both sexes were equal and educated in Sanskrit. Following the wishes of Swami Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Order established Sarada Math as a monastic institution for women, to be legally independent from its men’s counterpart but run along parallel lines; in 1959 eight women were given initiation into sannyasa with full rites, as practiced by the Ramakrishna Order (Sinclair-Brull 1997:74–75). Women’s self-understanding in modern India includes leadership in women’s organizations, social service roles,

higher education, monastic training, and participation in ritual (King 1984). Even if women's emergence into public roles of religious leadership has been linked to masculine projects, women became active agents in this process (Falk 1995). Several *sannyasinis* I met expressed their awareness of the secular women's movement in India and their agreement with its goals.

Not Just Sita: Alternative Models of Femininity in Hindu Scripture

Feminist scholars have had much to say about what are admittedly the most widely circulating models of Hindu femininity, including Sita and Draupadi, and have debated the feminist possibilities of these figures (Mankekar 1999; Sunder Rajan 1999). Hansen's essay on heroic women (1988) and Oldenburg's work on the courtesans of Lucknow (1990) show that alternative, if less accessible, models of femininity have existed in Indian history. In my conversations with *sannyasinis*, the names of other, less-known, female figures consistently came up—women attributed with spiritual knowledge and power and not identified primarily as wives and mothers.

Two women who were learned, and possibly ascetic as well, appear in the first Upanishad, the *Bṛhadaranyaka*. Findly (1985) offers a complex analysis of the philosophical tournament in which the learned woman Gargi emerges as a prominent figure. The tournament occurs in King Janaka's court on the eve of the historical decline in women's intellectual life and the shift from ritualism to contemplation. King Janaka offers a prize of enormous quantities of cows and gold coins to whoever among the Brahmins present can demonstrate true knowledge of Brahman. As the teacher Yajnavalkya asks his student to drive the cows home, the other Brahmins present become angry at his presumptuousness. By turn, each poses a question to Yajnavalkya to determine whether he is indeed the most knowledgeable among them. In the ensuing interrogation, Gargi, the only one to speak twice, distinguishes herself as the most astute, challenging, and learned of Yajnavalkya's philosophical interlocutors. Gargi is the one to affirm his true knowledge, and the other Brahmin men accept her evaluation. While Findly offers a subtle analysis of the literary and philosophical agenda of the text's composers and questions whether it should be considered feminist, she concludes that, in the figure of Gargi, the Indian tradition affirms "women as productive colleagues in the on-going search for truth" (1985:53).

Maitreyi, one of Yajnavalkya's two wives, appears in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* as well (II.4.1–13 and IV.5.1–15, trans. Olivelle 1998). Of his wives, according to the text, Maitreyi takes part in theological discussions while Katyayani is knowledgeable in conventionally feminine matters. When

Yajnavalkya is about to renounce home and family for the life of a wandering ascetic, he calls Maitreyi to make arrangements to divide his wealth between his two wives. Maitreyi asks him whether all the wealth in the world would bring her immortality, and he replies that one cannot achieve immortality through wealth. “What is the point of getting something that will not make me immortal?” she retorts. “Tell me instead, sir, all that you know.” Pleased, Yajnavalkya proceeds to instruct her with a philosophical discourse. While there is no evidence that Gargi and Maitreyi were ascetics rather than simply philosophers, several sannyasinis I interviewed held them up as exemplary women ascetics.

In the *Yoga Vasistha*, when a sage narrates a story to Ram about a royal couple, the queen Chudala emerges as a remarkably atypical devoted wife (VI, trans. Venkatesananda 1984).²² We learn that the noble king Shikhidhvaja and his wife Chudala were devoted to each other and enjoyed the pleasures of palace life. They became learned in all fields of knowledge and began to study spiritual texts. Chudala, in contemplating the inertness of the physical body, the sensual organs, and even the intellect, arrived at the realization that the self is pure consciousness. Observing her to be enlightened and resting in peace, the king remarked: “You appear to have regained your youthfulness and you shine with an extraordinary radiance, my beloved. You are not distracted by anything at all, and you have no craving. Yet, you are full of bliss. Tell me: is it that you have drunk the nectar of the gods? Surely, you have attained something which is extremely difficult to attain” (Ibid.: 291). She responded with a discourse on what she had learned from the scriptures, but, unable to understand, he simply laughed, calling her childish and ignorant. Queen Chudala pitied him for his inability to understand, but continued to go about her work in the palace. They lived this way for some time (Ibid.: 288–92).

Meanwhile, Queen Chudala gained psychic powers that enabled her to travel through the sky, oceans, and earth and to enter into such substances as rock—without ever leaving the side of her husband. She moved with celestial beings and conversed with enlightened sages. Despite her efforts to enlighten him, King Shikhidhvaja remained ignorant, and she thought it unwise to display her powers before him. While continuing to perform his royal duties as his ministers advised him, the king gradually descended into delusion and grief. One day he asked Chudala permission to go to the forest and live as an ascetic. She replied that forest life is fine for old age, but that household life was appropriate for people of his age. “When we grow old,” she exclaimed, “both of us shall leave this household life and go to the forest! Moreover, your subjects will grieve over your untimely departure from the kingdom” (Ibid.: 301). Dismissing her as childish and unsuited to the difficulties of ascetic life, he suggested that she stay back to rule the kingdom. Later that night while she slept, he quietly left the palace. When she woke and discovered that he had left, she flew through the sky and spotted him wandering in the forest. She used her psychic powers to see every-

thing that would happen in the future; then, without making her presence known to him, she returned to the palace (Ibid.: 300–02).

Chudala ruled the kingdom and Shikhidhvaja roamed the forest for eighteen years. At that point she learned through psychic powers that her husband's mind had matured and that it was time for her to help him attain enlightenment. Observing her husband from the sky, she was saddened to see him looking so emaciated and lonely in his foolish pursuit. Fearing that he would again reject her as an ignorant girl, she appeared before him in the disguise of a young male Brahmin ascetic named Kumbha. The king was delighted and offered flowers of worship to his visitor. In this guise, Chudala instructed the king through a series of parables that illustrated the foolishness of his ascetic yearnings. She pointed out that he had renounced everything except ego and the very trappings of asceticism (his cottage, staff, deerskin, rosary). He was so worried about his own austerities, Kumbha said, that the *spirit* of renunciation had left him. Hearing this, the king piled up all the material objects associated with his asceticism and lit a bonfire. Even then she insisted that there remained one thing yet to be renounced. Certain that she was referring to his body, he prepared to destroy it as well. She intervened and corrected him by suggesting that he must abandon the mind (*chitta*), which means the idea of the "I" itself and "even the notion 'I have renounced all'" (Ibid.: 313). He now understood and, like her, became radiant with enlightenment. At that moment, before Shikhidhvaja could offer flowers of adoration, Kumbha vanished. Leaving her disguise Chudala returned to the palace, and Shikhidhvaja retreated into deep meditation (Ibid.: 302–24).

Chudala returned in the guise of Kumbha after three days and used her psychic powers to awaken him. Together they roamed the forest for eight days, until, again, Chudala left to discharge her royal duties in the palace. She returned to the forest again as Kumbha and sorrowfully told the king that a sage whom she had encountered on her journey and angered with her teasing cursed her; the curse was that Kumbha would transform into a woman every night. But then, she contemplated aloud, she should not grieve, for this does not affect her inner self. Shikhidhvaja agreed that it did not matter if her body became female every night, for her real self was the soul. So Chudala lived with her husband as the young male ascetic Khumba during the day and as the beautiful Madanika at night. After a few days she said to him that she felt she should live as the wife of a worthy husband. "I wish to marry you," she said, "and enjoy conjugal pleasure with you. This is natural, pleasant, and possible" (Ibid.: 329). So they lived as friends during the day and made love on a bed of flowers at night. After several months of this, she decided to test her husband to make sure he was not attracted by temptations of pleasure and created two illusions with her magical power. In the first, the chief of gods Indra appeared before them, praised Shikhidhvaja, and invited him to heaven. Shikhidhvaja's reply proved he was untempted by pleasure: "I am happy wherever I am because I desire nothing"

(Ibid.: 330). In the second illusion, Chudala wanted to ascertain whether he would succumb to the dual forces of repulsion and attraction. Thus, she created a young male lover even more beautiful than her husband and a fragrant bed of flowers. When the king completed his evening prayers and looked around for Madanika, he found her seated on the bed in a passionate embrace with her lover. The two lovers appeared to be so immersed in passion that they were oblivious to their surroundings. Shikhidhvaja was unmoved and turned to go. When the couple noticed him, he said only, "Pray, let me not disturb your happiness" (Ibid.: 331). When the king thus proved that he had transcended both lust and anger, she revealed to him her true identity as Queen Chudala. He entered into deep meditation and witnessed all that had transpired since he left the palace. Emerging from this, he embraced Chudala fervently with a commentary on how devoted wives strive to enlighten their husbands and, because of their love for their husbands, they achieve what even the scriptures, guru, and mantra are unable to achieve. Because a wife is everything to her husband, he declares, she should be always adored and worshiped (Ibid.: 325–32). Even though this story seems to offer a critique of the practice of renunciation in that Chudala achieves enlightenment without ever leaving the palace or her husband and convinces her husband to renounce his renunciation, numerous sannyasins mentioned Chudala's name to me. Significantly, both Anand Mata and Baiji urged me to read this particular text.

While philosophical women were most frequently mentioned in my interviews with sannyasins, other women ascetics and saints also exist in history and legend, although only a few are well known. The bhakti saint Mirabai is believed to have been born in the fifteenth century to a royal family in present-day Rajasthan. Declaring her love for Lord Krishna, she refused to consummate her marriage to a prince and instead took up the life of a wandering mendicant (Mukta 1994). Mahadeviyakka was a twelfth-century Virashaiva mystic and bhakti poet from Karnataka. She was initiated into Shiva bhakti at age ten and betrothed herself to Shiva. It is likely that she married, according to Ramanujan (1973), but later left her husband to wander naked, clothed only by her hair. Legend has it that she died in "oneness with Shiva" (Ramanujan 1973:114). Andal was a ninth-century Tamil saint who dedicated herself to the god Ranganatha and refused to wed anyone else (Madhavananda and Majumdar 1982:301–03). History tells us that the legendary figures of Mirabai, Mahadeviyakka, and Andal were all bhakti poet-saints who took a path of emotion-filled devotion to a god envisioned as a true husband.²³ Even though bhakti (unlike sannyasa) explicitly elevated women and outcastes, the asceticism of these women nonetheless resulted in their "social alienation" (Ramaswamy 1997). References to extraordinary women in scripture, such as Chudala, do not constitute proof of the historical existence of such women, but they suggest that female asceticism was seen as legitimate, at least by some. Moreover, while most of these women in scripture, myth, and legend are identified as philosophers,

ascetics, poets, and saints—not sannyasinis per se—the sannyasinis I met refer to them to legitimate their own choices.

Sannyasa as a Site of Undetermination

Sannyasa has gained a reputation for being an archaic institution that promotes Hindu orthodoxy and plays a conservative role in society. This reputation is not unfounded if we look at the beliefs and activities of Dashnami monastic abbots. In the 1920s, the abbot of Puri Math opposed Mahatma Gandhi's legislative attempts to abolish untouchability (Cenkner 1983:132). In the 1970s an abbot, again of Puri Math, rose to national attention by establishing an organization against family planning (Ibid.: 1983:125). More recently, a Dashnami leader of Kamakoti Pitham condemned the changes in personal law proposed by women's groups, argued that women were barred from inheriting property on the basis of their ineligibility to perform the rites for ancestors, and dismissed the concepts of personal freedom and fulfillment as foreign (Robinson 1999:136–37). Clearly the Dashnami Orders have furthered a conservative agenda of classical education, priesthood, the use of Sanskrit language, and even caste distinctions (Cenkner 1983). This conservative reputation has only been intensified by sadhus' leadership in the nationalist movement since the mid-1980s.

It would be foolish to deny evidence that the Dashnami leadership has been both unconcerned with and overtly hostile to the interests of most women. However, if this is a self-evident view of sannyasa, it is also a partial view. I have argued that the practice of sannyasa is not defined by the authority of Dashnami monastic centers, have pointed to anti-institutional tendencies within sannyasa, and have noted the prevalence of independent renouncers affiliated loosely or not at all with a monastic institution. But more importantly, equating sannyasa with orthodox elements in the Dashnami Order blinds us to the existence of female and independent renouncers. A woman taking sannyasa is a transgressive act and a good place to explore issues of women's agency. I would like to suggest that renunciation is (at least potentially) a "site of undetermination" and, as such, it is a place where "agencies slip through the structures—in new situations, at transitional moments, or in liminal areas; those factors which allow women to act differently, independently, or even contrary to the demands of structured relationships" (Sangari 1993:872).²⁴ Feminist scholars have shown how important it is for us to extend the definition of politics in order to validate women's political activity, resistance, and protest, which often lie outside the domain of organized politics, group structures, and group consciousness (Moore 1988:179). Feminist scholars' interest in "sites of undetermination" converges with anthropologists' critique of holism that emerged in the 1980s.

Appadurai, for example, argued that a holistic conception of culture has led to India being defined by caste and hierarchy and that this has blinded scholars to the diversities and indeterminacies of social life in South Asia (1986:758). Similarly, in her reflection on the contributions of the subaltern studies project, Veena Das observed that the analytical tools of anthropology consist of “concepts that can render other societies knowable in terms of ‘laws,’ ‘rules,’ and patterns of authority” and preclude analyses of transgressions, disorder, and violence (Das 1989:310). Accordingly, the emphasis on order and constraint makes it difficult to recognize the subject in theories of social structure and social action (Ibid.:311).

In a parallel effort to historicize “culture” in India, scholars working in the area of post colonial theory have demonstrated that both academic and popular understandings of the systematic nature of Indian culture are the direct descendants of colonial efforts to define “tradition,” religion, and social identity for legislative and political purposes (Mani 1990; Narayan 1997; Dirks 2001). Considering the phenomenon of female renunciation offers a critique of the way in which anthropology still, despite postmodern and feminist critiques of holism and coherence, tends to represent the lives of people in other cultures as overdetermined. There is no institutionalized role for women in the world of *sannyasa*, and, in choosing this path, women defy normative expectations of marriage and motherhood. For these reasons, the lives of women renouncers can bring into focus the cracks and leakages in India’s social structure and gender ideologies. I probe the contradictions that might allow women, particularly women from religious and high-caste families where *sadhus* are respected, to transgress boundaries of gender.²⁵

Two peculiarities of *sannyasa* converge to make it a space that offers women the possibility of “slipping through the structures.” One is the contradiction between *sannyasa*’s elite brahmanism and the philosophy of Advaita. Advaita, as I have indicated, promises the possibility of transcending all dualities, and it is the conventional wisdom that renouncers seek to transcend the body. However, transcending the body means more than simply ignoring physical needs like eating or sensory distinctions like hot and cold. It means ignoring moral and social distinctions as well. The renunciant ideal of being indifferent to social differences (“treating everyone equally”) is simply one expression of a more general value that Advaita Vedanta places on transcending distinctions and dualities. Renouncers are expected to ignore differences among others and, in their self-perception, to identify with their inner *atma* rather than their external, transient form. The abstract philosophy of Advaita is self-consciously expressed in the everyday behavior and speech of contemporary renouncers when, for example, they ignore distinctions between purity and pollution by taking food from a low-caste household, claim to feel the pain of others as if it is their own, or announce that in *sannyasa* there is no male and female. There exists an “intrinsic tension between the teaching of Advaita Vedanta which proclaims absolute freedom of

the Spirit including the transcendence of all finite human institutions, and the monastic organization which is the custodian and exemplar of this teaching. In a very real sense, the Dashnami Order contains within it the seed of its own transcendence” (Dazey 1990:313). Because of this dynamic, sannyasa offers women important opportunities for transgression.

A second and related characteristic that renders sannyasa a potential site of undetermination is that the social world of sannyasa operates on a free market model without any authoritative hierarchy. The current Dashnami monastic heads are not like Popes charged with the responsibility for determining the saintly authenticity of particular holy persons. There are little in the way of institutional constraints on who can call herself a sadhu or wear the ochre robes of sannyasa. One implication is that there is space for independent renunciators who reject institutional affiliation; indeed, such independent and charismatic gurus are becoming increasingly popular in India and internationally. Many are women. Sannyasa’s privileging of Advaita philosophy and its lack of centralized institutional authority combine to create possibilities for women to lead unscripted and unconventional lives. The next three chapters will present Anand Mata and Baiji. I believe that their lives illustrate not only the undetermined potential of sannyasa but also the manner in which renunciators speak about gender and other matters from both worldly and otherworldly perspectives.