

Are women entitled to become ascetics?

An historical and ethnographic glimpse on female asceticism in Hindu religions

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This paper looks at the position of women in Indian asceticism through an historical and anthropological perspective. Introducing at first the traditional view that Brahmanic texts offer on the topic - women are innately impure therefore they do not have a natural inclination to dharma- the paper goes on demonstrating that women have always found ascetic paths to answer their religious quests. However, for these paths were jagged by social obstacles, women often lived their religious experience as a private one or had to cut the social norms in a revolutionary way to follow them. As a result of this discouragement, female participation remains low to be acknowledged and to become a normal reality rather than an exceptional one by the Indian lay and ascetic societies. Through examples from the past and the present, this paper shows that asceticism was and still is a path to realize an individual empowerment for those women who deliberately choose it. In contemporary India, the role of female ascetics is improving thanks to the new historical background: some have gained a position in traditional orthodox groups, others have created their own sect, and some others have become predominant activists in political and social movements. However, these female ascetics and gurus are still recognized as extraordinary, exceptional individuals. Women in the *sādhu samāj* continue to experience sometimes discriminations and difficulties, as they cannot strive for the highest assignments but in exceptional cases and outstanding characters. Therefore, as the case study of Rām Priya Dās presented in this paper demonstrates, the path to asceticism is still hard to follow and it needs a deep motivation and a strong personality to face the opposition of family and society.

This paper is the result of a lucky encounter I had during my fieldwork in Varanasi: while I was looking for religious centres belonging to the Rāmānandī order (*sampradāya*), I bumped into a Rāmānandī temple/*āśram* managed by a woman, Rām Priya Dās, who belongs to the *tyāgī* branch of the *sampradāya*. *Tyāgīs* are ascetics who follow a religious discipline (*sāadhanā*) focused on renounce and austerities, and usually have a wandering lifestyle. During my fieldwork I met very few female Rāmānandī ascetics, and to find one involved in such a spiritual path prompted me to get acquainted with her. However, as my fieldwork was about to end, I could spend with Rām Priya Dās only few mornings. Since I was not able to obtain much information from her, I asked about female asceticism to bachelor students (*brahmachārins*), to the Jagadgurū of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* living in Varanasi

and to his lay followers. Then, I confronted my data with those of several studies dealing with the topic of female asceticism.

The word asceticism in India has multifarious meanings, and does not always coincide with renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*)¹ as it can be accomplished also in the domestic realm. Therefore, asceticism can manifest in different contexts: remaining located within the ordinary social world; rejecting social roles; going beyond the structures of society (in this latter case asceticism coincides with renunciation). As Burghart affirms (1983, 643):

The only general statement which one can make concerning asceticism in the religious traditions of south Asia is that all ascetics see themselves as followers of some path which releases them from the transient world (not the social world) and that all ascetics distinguish themselves from non-ascetics who do not seek such release. The criteria must be specified in each case, for one sect does not necessarily accept the criteria of other sects.

The flexibility of the concept of asceticism makes even clearer the limitations suffered by women who were (and still are) often hindered not only from undertaking a wandering ascetic lifestyle, but also from following an ascetic path inside the domestic domain.

In the last decades several anthropological studies have analysed and described female asceticism, underlining both the participation of women in religious traditional orders and the development of new groups. It is difficult to have precise statistics on the ascetic population in total and to evaluate the female percentage: Khandelwal takes into consideration the works of Denton (1991), Gross (1992), Narayan (1989) and Ojha (1981), and assesses that female ascetics might be the 10-15 per cent of the entire ascetic population (1997, 80).

These studies (Clementin-Ojha, Denton among the others) have shown that the reasons that could drive a woman to become an ascetic are not always connected to a religious call – which remains, according to the aforementioned studies, the main cause– but to critical, social or economic conditions. For this reason widows and all those women² without the protection of a man³ can be

¹ As argued by Bronkhorst (1993), Indian asceticism may be linked with two different religious traditions: one has Vedic origin and concentrates on obtaining superhuman power through austerities and self-inflicted sufferings, while the other is non-Vedic and uses practices of meditation and abstinence from activity to reach the release from rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

² The life of a widow is described in the *Stridharmapaddhati* and follows the rules of the *vidhavādharma*, the appropriate behaviors of a widow. Widowhood is considered particularly polluting and inauspicious, as a widow is perceived as not having been strong enough to ensure her husband's longevity. However, as reported by Den-

subjected to economically precarious situations and can decide to begin an ascetic life as a more suitable dignified alternative. As Clémentin-Ojha reports (1998, 5), a woman who walks out of society “tends to be suspected of wanting to misuse her freedom” and can become victim of sexual harassment

Therefore, the path toward asceticism for women was and still is much more difficult than for men, and the fact that a woman decides to undertake the ascetic path is often highly socially criticized. The ascetic choice is primarily seen as a self-determination that lacerates, at least to some extent, the usual image of female gender and sexuality as depicted by the Brahmanic tradition, that is to be completely dependent and submitted to the male dominating order.

The presence of female ascetics and guru is accepted as exceptional, while the ascetic path for a woman is sometimes favourite to annihilate the dangerous, unrestrained and unchecked sexuality of a widow or a woman who cannot get married and therefore be under the control of her husband. In both the cases, the female ascetic is transformed into a socially benign, motherly figure, deprived of sexual and potentially harmful connotations.

This paper frames female asceticism in a general historical perspective to answer the question whether women were and are effectively entitled to become ascetics, and at the same time it inquires whether asceticism creates a kind of gender empowerment and a means of freeing women from the shackles of a patriarchal society.

1. Women in Brahmanic sources

To understand why women who want to become ascetics or renouncers have to face the opposition of lay society and male ascetics is necessary to introduce the idea of women and the role that is attributed to them by Brahmanic sources.

Taking into consideration normative Brahmanic sources, they appear internally coherent about the topic of female asceticism: although in only few texts⁴ it is forbidden, it is always discouraged and

ton (2004, 43), the reality a widow has to face is shaped not only by textual sanctions but mostly by the social context, which is often characterized by physical and emotional violence. Therefore, for those widows who have not to take care of children, the ascetic path may represent a valid alternative.

³ That means those women rejected and driven away by their husbands, women whose husbands become renouncers, women who cannot afford the dowry, women who have lost everything and do not want to spend their life as beggars, women unfit for the marriage market, women who prefer to be unmarried.

⁴ Namely the *Smṛticandrikā*, *Arthaśāstra* and *Strīdharmapaddhati* (Denton 2004, 23).

considered as inappropriate for women. Texts such as the *Manusmṛti*, and many centuries later, the *Strīdharmapaddhati*⁵ explain that women are supposed to follow a specific dharma (*strīdharma*), which depends on their nature (*strīsvabhāva*) and which is fully accomplished through marriage, householder life and the growth of children.

As described by Denton, it is due to the processes of menstruation⁶ and childbirth⁷ that women are considered innately impure and sinful, and therefore lacking natural inclination towards *dharma*. Because of this impurity, a woman has to follow several ritual acts to achieve a pure state, a condition that is shared with Śūdras, and because of her supposed sinful nature, she has to be controlled and protected by a male authority (2004, 25-26).

The *Manusmṛti* argues that “Even in their own homes, a female—whether she is a child, a young woman, or an old lady—should never carry out any task independently. As a child, she must remain under her father’s control; as a young woman, under her husband’s; and when her husband is dead, under her sons’. She must never seek to live independently” (Olivelle 2008, 55).

Furthermore, as women are deemed not appropriate for Vedic knowledge⁸ and for orthodox religious practice, they get initiated into their community through the marriage. According to the *Manusmṛti*, marriage is the Vedic sacrament for women and, as a consequence, should be obligatory for them.⁹ This ratifies that a woman can accomplish her life only within marriage and through family.¹⁰

⁵ Despite an early period for the *Manusmṛti* (between 200 BCE and 200 CE), the *Strī Dharma Paddhati* was written in Thanjavur in the 18th century by a *paṇḍit* minister named Tryambakayajvan (Leslie 1992, 108).

⁶ As Olivelle claims (2008, 115), it is thought that menstrual flows harbour living creatures, and which cannot be revealed naked in public.

⁷ Leela Mulatti shows that among the five pollutions (excluding caste and death pollutions) three affect only women: temporary pollution during menstruation; pollution during a period ranging from 5 to 1 month and half after childbirth and permanent pollution for widows. In the first two conditions a woman is not allowed any socio-religious activity (1989, 10).

⁸ As A. S. Altekar notices, in ancient times girls underwent the *upanayana* ceremony and were educated together with boys. Nevertheless, by the 300 BCE women’s education suffered an arrest caused by the new fashion of child marriage. This meant a “serious handicap to advanced studies” for girls, as the age in which these studies were usually accomplished, that of 12 or 13, became the new marriageable age. Hence, the *upanayana* was first reduced to a formality to accomplish before marriage, and then dropped out altogether (1962, 16).

⁹ According to Altekar, one of the reasons why marriage became obligatory was to react to the joining of Buddhist and Jain orders by maidens without a genuine spiritual urge, or without the permission of their elders. Social thinkers decided to prevent such abuses by making the marriage obligatory for girls. Marriage did not become obligatory for men, and following Altekar’s thoughts, the real reason “seems to have been the recognition

Theoretically there is no place for women in Brahmanic asceticism: according to Dharmaśāstra, *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation) is provided exclusively to men of the three higher *varṇas* –the so-called twice-born (*dvija*)– who have access to *Vedas* and are qualified to offer sacrifices. The asceticism a woman can undertake is inside her own married life. As stressed by Clémentin-Ojha, the *Smṛti* literature teaches an ethic of self-abnegation and equanimity to women:

Entirely dedicated to their husbands (*pativrata*) and forgetful of themselves, the ideal Hindu wives live within the pattern of married life an austere lifestyle marked by privations (such as food restrictions) and regular fasts [...] Through the total surrender to her husband's will, sacrificing her own desire to serve him, she ceases to belong to herself. (2011, 62)

The married life becomes then a *sādhanā* (religious discipline) and the wife a *sādhvī*, female form of *sādhu*, which commonly designates the perfect wife and not the female ascetics.

2. Presence of women in religious fields, a historical perspective

Despite these normative presuppositions, there is evidence in the Indian literature that women were able to undertake ascetic path in several religious currents, especially those based on the feminine principle of *śakti* (divine feminine) and those focused on *bhakti* (devotion), as well as in orthodox orders. As Marie-Thérèse Charpentier suggests, it is likely that those represented in dharmic and *śāstric* literature are idealized women and idealized behaviours for women, intended as symbols, which are not completely representative of women as agents (2010, 32).

Ancient *Upaniṣads* portrayed women as intellectuals and experts of religious matters. Pechilis gives the example of the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* wherein three typologies of women are presented while interacting with the sage Yājñavalkya (2004, 12-13). Gārgī, a philosopher with a solid education in sacred knowledge, is described questioning Yājñavalkya on the nature of the Brahman.¹¹

by society of the simple fact that an unmarried woman has to face greater risks in society than an unmarried man”, and that “public opinion also is much less sympathetic to a woman who has gone astray even unwillingly, than a man who leads a vicious life deliberately”. (1962, 32-34, 35)

¹⁰ Altekar informs us that in the *Mahābhārata* is told the story of Subhrū the daughter of the sage Kuni. Her father wanted to her to get married, but she preferred to remain unmarried in order to practice severe penance. At the time of her death she learnt that she could not go to heaven because her body was not consecrated by the sacrament of marriage (1962, 33).

¹¹ Altekar affirms that “the topic of her enquiry were so abstruse and esoteric in character that Yājñavalkya declined to discuss them in public [...] she was a dialectician and philosopher of a high order” (1962, 12).

Yājñavalkya's wife, Maitreyī, it is said, "took part in theological discussions", which demonstrates that she received an education on religious subjects; while the second wife of Yājñavalkya, Kātyāyanī, is described as concerned mostly in "womanly matters". Altekar (1962, 12), reporting other examples, affirms that these female philosophers "used to remain unmarried throughout the life in order to carry on their spiritual experiments unhampered".

Descriptions of women as philosophers, hermits, and renouncers are present in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, but also in Sanskrit dramas and poems. For example, in *Śākuntala*, Kālidāsa introduces a female wandering ascetic (*parivrajikā*) called Paṇḍitā Kauśikī, well versed in the *Vedas*. In the *Daśakumāracarita* (7th-8th century) Daṇḍin refers to a female ascetic undergoing hard penances. The *Mattavilāsa* by Mahendravikramavarma (7th century) and the *Malatimādhava* by Bhavabhūti (8th century) introduce female followers of extremist ascetic sects (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 63).

The currents of *bhakti*, which spread across different Indian regions since the 8th century CE, gave importance to devotion and surrender to God through a path based on love, where the mediation of Brahmans and Sanskrit texts were not necessary. The *bhakti* ideology spread in several directions, so that the term encompasses a wide number of groups and traditions both orthodox and reformist.¹² As *mokṣa* (release) depended on God, and all the human beings were considered as the same before God, theoretically, gender and status were not discriminating factors to follow the *bhakti* stream. Therefore, as devotionism became central to women's religiosity, they got the right to actively participate to religious activities (Denton, 1992, 213).

Another current that accepted women was formed by *Śākta* groups. Denton defines *Śāktism* as the worship of the Goddess, and *Tantrism* as the worship of the feminine through "ritual forms of sensual indulgence and seek occult powers" (2004, 118). These religious currents regard the *Śakti* to be the power of God. As argued by Gupta (1992, 205), "personified as a Goddess, Śakti is described as being created from God's blazing consciousness", the medium through which God creates the world: "as the world is both created from within her and held in her, she is looked upon as the cosmic Mother who has created the world and nurtures it herself" (1992, 207). Because of their potentiality to be mothers, women are closer to *śakti* than men, and to be a woman is considered a blessing in itself, reason why many Śākta religious texts provide a respectful treatment of women. Therefore, women gurus were (and still are) even preferred in tantric schools. Denton stresses that there are two prominent themes in tantric practice: the centrality of the body as a vehicle to attain salvation, and

¹² For a proper analysis of the orthodox and reformist sects, see Tripathi (2007).

the inversion of the standard social relations. These permitted women to disregard the *strīdharmā*, to have a sexual partner, use intoxicants and “engage in all manner of activities no traditional or orthodox woman would dream of doing” (Denton, 1992, 229). Moreover, the worship of virgins and married women as symbols of the goddess, found among tantric groups, “instil a sense of self-respect and confidence in those and other women of the community and also teach men new ways to look at their womenfolk” (Gupta, 1992, 207).

For women were supposed to share the same religious state of Śūdras, even those orthodox orders that granted the opportunity to enter *saṃnyāsa* to Śūdras allowed often the same right to women as well.¹³ Furthermore, as Clémentin-Ojha remarks (2011), given the presence of several sub-sectarian orders, and the autonomy of gurus in selecting and recruiting disciples, women were also admitted in some section of orders that traditionally did not concede their recruitment. For example, the orthodox Daśanāmī *sampradāya*, that brings its organization back to Śaṅkarācārya, theoretically does not admit women to enter *saṃnyāsa* because Śaṅkarācārya, who was an orthodox Brahman, did not accept female presence among ascetics. Nevertheless, it is likely that because some groups of *sādhus* (known as *nāgās*) allowed initiation for Śūdras, even women were allowed to get initiated in those sub-groups.

As already mentioned, a sectarian tradition that recognized the right to *saṃnyāsa* to women is the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, a Vaiṣṇava order supposed to be established by Rāmānanda around the 15th century. Rāmānanda is said to have given initiation (*dīkṣā*), to anyone without considering caste, religious affiliation or gender. The fact that he gave *dīkṣā* to women as well would be testified by the presence of two women among his circle of twelve disciples: Padmāvati and Susrī. He taught that human beings have the same possibility of religious development, because the *bhakti* path is made of love, devotion and complete surrendering to God.¹⁴

A woman who succeeded in engaging an ascetic life can choose the path according to her religious believes and background.

¹³ As Olivelle reports (280) although the renunciation of Śūdras and women was considered illegitimate by the *Dharmaśāstras*, it was a common phenomenon in ancient India. This fact was recognized by law. Śūdra and female renunciators had a legal standing; several provisions of Hindu law attempt to regulate their intercourse with society.

¹⁴ Other early religious orders that support female presence were the Mahānubhāv in Maharashtra, the Nāth *yoginīs* and the Bāul of Bengal (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 64).

Women connected with the Śaiva cult may choose to become *saṃnyāsīnīs* (initiated into one lineage of the Daśanāmi *saṃpradāya*) while those influenced by *śākta* and *tantric* currents are usually called *yogīnīs*, name also used for female ascetic of the Nāth panth.

Those devoted to Viṣṇu or one of his *avatāras*, can follow the ascetic path present in the various Vaiṣṇava *saṃpradāyas* and become *vairāginīs* (detached from the world) or *tyāginīs*, but also can live as *brahmacārinīs* (maiden) in female institutions or in their marriage life.

A particular position is held by female Baul renouncers of West Bengal and Bangladesh, who define themselves as *saṃnyāsīnīs*, *tyāginīs* and *vairāginīs*, but their ascetic life is based on ritual sexual practices, as Baul renouncers are expected to be in a couple.¹⁵

There are examples of ascetic life undertaken also in marriage, as the work of Frank Ernest Key (1995) on the Kabīr *panth* suggests. He says that in a section of the *panth* there are *vairāginīs* who usually are the wives of men who have become *vairāgīs*. In similar way, we can suppose that the wives of householder *sādhus*, like the *gharbhārīs* of the Rāmāvat *panth* cited by Horstmann (2003, 107), lead ascetic lives as well. The fact that the wife of a householder ascetic follows the path of her husband is not uncommon: one famous example is given by Sarada Devi, wife of Ramakrishna who, after the death of her husband, became the guru of his disciples.

Another example is given by the Swāminārāyana *saṃpradāya* (beginning of the 19th century). As Raymond Williams explains, there are female ascetics in the group known as *sāṃkhya yogīnīs* who receive the initiation from the wife of the *ācārya* of the *saṃpradāya*. They live in women's temples following strict ascetic rules, taking care of the place and conducting discourses for women.¹⁶ From the same modern Hindu stream, there are *brahmacārinīs* and *saṃnyāsīnīs* who belong to new groups led both by female and male gurus.¹⁷

The external appearances of female ascetics are codified according to the belonging group. Hence *vairāginīs* and *brahmacārinīs* will dress in white, in yellow, or in a light orange; *saṃnyāsīnīs* in saffron while *yogīnīs* in saffron or red, like the *bhairavīs*; *sāṃkhya*

¹⁵ On the position of women in Baul tradition, see Knight (2006, 191).

¹⁶ See Williams (2001, 117).

¹⁷ Tripathi gives the example of Bhagwan Rajneesh, famous as Osho, who founded a new ascetic institution called New-Sannyas where women were entitled to become renouncer (2007, 244).

yoginīs wear instead dark red clothing. Also the *mālā* (necklace) they wear discloses their affinity, *rudrākṣa* for *śaiva* groups, *tulsī* for *Vaiṣṇava*, as well as the *tilak* they apply on the forehead. To generalize it can be said that a *tilak* with horizontal lines manifests a *śaiva* and *śākta* affiliation, while two/three vertical lines a *Vaiṣṇava* one, although the sub-differentiation are innumerable (see Entwisle 2003). Female ascetics can have shaved hair, or they can keep their hair short or loose or have *jaṭā*, hairstyles which contrast the traditional tied style of a Hindu housewife (Clémentin-Ojha 2011, 64).

The life style of a female ascetic depends on the specific *sādhana* she decides to follow. As described by Clémentin-Ojha (2011, 64):

Their ascetic practices also differ depending on whether they attribute importance to the body as a vehicle of spiritual liberation, to devotional practices, or to ecstatic attitudes. While some show little awareness of the external world, others strictly follow the conventional rules of social behaviour. *In all that, in fact, they do not sensibly differ from the male ascetics* [italic mine]. And like male ascetics too, they depend on generous lay disciples for their daily survival and for the organization of many practical aspects of their life.

Female renouncers have to decide whether to have an itinerant life, roaming around from one pilgrimage site to another, or to settle in *āśrams* or other religious institutions. Those who keep travelling often move in groups to protect themselves. As Hausner and Khandelwal argue, “a community of women is protective, from men, from naysayers, and from doubting, angry, or resentful householder community members who might use the logic that if a woman has rejected her place in the world, she can be treated with violence or disrespect, as if she is no longer truly a member of society” (2006, 8). The mobility an ascetic can have can be, according to Hausner and Khandelwal, a real input for driving a woman to undertake the religious path. Having a wandering style of life is considered as a proof of strength because usually women in India are afraid to travel alone, and in many cases they are not even allowed to do so (2006, 9). However, as stressed by Khandelwal “an ochre robes does not in itself provide an escape from the everyday concerns of being a woman in north India” (1997, 91).

This statement brings us back to the issue of the difficulties that women have to face before undertaking the ascetic path, since this life choice is criticized not only by lay people but often by ascetics too. In the first section I have described the Brahmanic idea of women, now I will focus on the ascetic perspective that will further help to understand the reasons of such obstacles.

3. Women on the difficult ascetic path. Examples from the past

Asceticism is seen as a practice and a path for men, in which one of the most important practices to follow is celibacy. The importance of celibacy leads to a negative approach toward women: the presence of women is negative because they are sexually dangerous. According to Olivelle, in ascetic works there are frequent allusions to the nasty nature of a woman's body and to the dangers that women pose because they are seen as object of desire (2008, 111). An ascetic text declares: "a man becomes intoxicated by seeing a young woman just as much as by drinking liquor. Therefore, a man should avoid from afar a woman, the mere sight of whom is poison" (2008, 112).

Over the centuries, general portraits of female ascetics describe them as "untamed destructive selfish, malicious women with occult powers, who attack male renouncers, enchant, imprison and abuse them physically" (Gold 2006, 256).

We find such a portrait in the 17th century *Parcaī* written by Anantadās, a Rāmānandī ascetic (the *sampradāya* to which Rām Pyar Dās belongs too). In the *Parcaī* dedicated to Pīpā (a disciple of Rāmānanda), the description that Anantadās does of a speech between Rāmānanda and Pīpā's wives demonstrates the possibility for women to undertake the ascetic path:

He [Pīpā] will wander in strange lands, living on alms, with a shaven head and the garb of an ascetic, he has given up all the attachment to caste, status and family honour. A king and a beggar are equal in his eyes. He has no thought of sleep or hunger or pain or pleasure. Sometimes he might wear clothes, at other times he will go naked. This is my path, consider whether you can walk on it. [...] If you can do the same, then you can come with us, ladies.¹⁸

However, Anantadās' own idea seems different when he says:

Women have confused minds, they cannot tell evil from good. What is the point in their being instructed by a swami? They are impure and always full of lust. A woman is called a source of disagreement and pain. Gods, men and demons -she brings them all to naught. She attracts everyone with her beauty and dance, leaving no place of refuge even in hell. A woman leaves no one, she seduces both householders and ascetics. (2.6b 1-2)

He continues: "some women take you straight to hell, while others take you on the path of bhakti (2.7-11)". This exemplification of womanhood is represented by Angad's wife:

The wife of Angad was a fine lady she took good care of her beloved. [...] Blessed is the woman who is good for her husband and stops his downward fall. (2.11-12)

¹⁸ See Winand (2000, 156).

Thus, even in a *sampradāya* that was supposed to accept everyone, one of its most known 17th-century *sādhu* shared a Brahmanic generalized idea about women, accepting asceticism only for those who were ready to follow the arduous path of renouncers, while supporting the idea of *pativrata*.

Medieval sources, like hagiographies, devotional poems, autobiographies and contemporary studies are important sources to have glimpses of real lives. They describe the difficult life a woman has to face to satisfy her religious quest if this drives her out of the boundaries of life as socially constructed. There are also cases of married women who, as soon as they decided to dedicate their lives to spiritual achievement, had to face tensions created by their family, as they were supposed to follow the normal conduct expected from women. Social blame frequently recurs in legends, folktales, and biographies irrespective of the religious ascetic paths women attempted to venture.

We have first glimpses of the difficulty a woman could face before undertaking a religious/ascetic path from Tamil Nadu. Gupta reports the story of Ammaiyaṛ present in Cekkilaṛ's *Periyapurāṇam* (12th century). She was a saint-poetess of the 6th century, who was kept in high respect by other *śaiva* poets and devotees. The story goes that she was a beautiful woman who, through her religious practices, was able to acquire such occult powers to scare her husband and push him to abandon her. Therefore, she decided to leave her home to practise devotion in the forest where she obtained two boons from Śiva: to become an ugly ghost and to witness Śiva's dance (Gupta, 1992, 196-197). Ammaiyaṛ's new state stresses her being out of the social "normal" world, becoming, according to Denton, a prototype of the *aghorinī* a "human form of Bhairavī, female counterpart of Bhairava, Śiva as ghoul" (2004, 164).

In the 12th century, there is the example of Mahādevī, a *śaiva bhaktā* who became a member of the Vīraśaiva sect.¹⁹ She left her husband after the marriage, as he did not become a *śaiva* devotee as promised. As Gupta says "Mahādevī became so angry and frustrated that she left the conjugal home and discarded everything she possessed, including her clothes. She wandered alone and naked, her long dishevelled hair covering her nudity" (1992, 198). Mahādevī dedicated her life to the devotion of the Śiva *lingam*, so she entered into the Vīraśaiva group at Kalyani, where Allammā Prabhu initiated her. She started a life of wandering and begging, living in caves, following an ascetic path based on physical renunciation and rigid disciplines. Denton argues that her male contemporaries recognized

¹⁹ To specific information on the privileged status of women in the Vīraśaiva group compared to average Hindu women, see Leela Mullatti, *Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women*, Abhinav Publishers, 1989.

her as an enlightened woman, and kept transmitting her spiritual achievement through her religious verses (2004, 154).

Another exemplary life is that of Lalleśvarī (14th century), a Brahman woman from Kashmir, who was turned out of her conjugal home by her mother-in-law because she never had children and had a deep religious and independent spirit (Gupta 1992, 200). Instead of going back to her natal home, Lalla decided to take up the life of a female tantric renouncer practising yoga: she began a wandering life wearing few clothes,²⁰ following the left-hand path of the tantric tradition, using both wine and meat in her religious offerings. According to Gupta, Lalla led the life of an *avadhūta*, a tantric master who realizes the true nature of reality becoming indifferent to social and religious norms. It is likely that her antisocial way of life brought her criticism and even abuses, as she reports in some of her poems. However, she was able to overcome such criticism and win the respect of society with her honest spirituality: through her ecstatic behaviours and profound religious sight, she achieved the respect of exponents of the Kashmiri tradition and Sufis of her time (1992, 201).

In the 15th-16th century, there is the famous example of Mīrā Bāī. According to the tradition, she was a Rajput princess married to Bhoj Raj, the son of Rana Singh. Until the death of her husband, she was allowed to worship Krishna according to her wish, spending most of the time at the temple singing and dancing before the image, going into *samādhi* (deep state of meditation). When her husband died, Mīrā's relatives-in-law started disapproving her way of life, which, as also Nābhādās²¹ writes, was against domestic duties and modesty. They asked her to act as appropriate, and also tried to kill her, but Mīrā was miraculously saved. Probably after these episodes she went back to her parental home, to move then to Dwarka under the protection of her brothers and cousins (Gupta 1992, 204). Although Mīrā was completely absorbed in her religious *sādhana*, careless of the society blame, she could not totally disregard her social responsibilities but had to compromise, continuing to live in the society (Gupta, 1992, 202-204).

Another example of asceticism remaining in society is that of Bahinā Bāī (1628-1700), who devoted her life to spiritual practices and the duty towards her husband. In her autobiography, Bahinā Bāī tells that she became a devotee of a low caste saint, Tukāram, and focused her deep devotion towards Viṭhoba, a form of Viṣṇu. Gupta explains that her husband did not want her to

²⁰ According to Denton, she obtained *mokṣa* after winning an intellectual debate about her nudity (2004, 156).

²¹ Nābhādās was an ascetic of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* who wrote at the beginning of the 17th century the *Bhaktamāl*, a spiritual garland whose seed were the lives of exemplary *bhaktas*. Mīrā Bāī is the only woman to find a proper space in it.

attend Tukārām's sing sessions because, as she started having trances, people began to come to their house to visit her, a shameful event for a respected Brahman family. As Bahinā herself writes, her husband tried to change her attitude, even with violence (1992, 204). Gupta reports that finally, she solved the conflict "by totally internalizing her religious activities" dreaming that the saint Tukārām had given initiation to her. She was a dutiful wife but mentally she had renounced all the attachments to life: when she became a mother, she did not accept her son as a son but as a fellow religious aspirant and a friend. In this way, she was able to "reconcile herself to staying home as a humble wife and to curbing her desire to visit temples" (1992, 205).

These here reported are just a few examples of the female religious characters who were somehow²² able to create religious models that later female ascetics have taken into consideration to justify their religious attitude.²³

The shortage of narrations about female ascetics in the past is a proof that the literary works, especially non-autobiographic ones, were highly influenced by the patriarchal values of society and were distorted by male writers. Therefore, because the behaviours of female ascetics represented a challenge for the society they lived in and were not those expected for women, they were described mostly in exceptional cases and, as a consequence, they were not models to imitate.²⁴ Referring to Vaiṣṇava authors who had to write about Sītā Devī – who became a *guru* after her husband's death, in the second generation after Caitanya (16th cent.) – Manring underlines that "they had to find a way to talk about her that would make it clear that her case is very unusual, lest other women develop similar aspirations" (2004, 61).

In the next section I will provide a present example introducing the character of Rām Priya Dās.

4. A woman on the ascetic path. Rām Priya Dās

I met Rām Priya Dās in the Rām Jānkī temple, a temple/*āśram* close to Maṇikarṇikā Ghāṭ in Varanasi, which is under her management. The first time I met her, I was at the end of my fieldwork, so I did

²² I used the word "somehow" to stress that these stories do not make a full portrait of the personages, and in fact, as Clementin-Ojha remarks, "the main piece of evidence of their existence is to be found in their own poems" (2011, 64).

²³ A later example is offered by Banāsā, a saint of the 19th century. According to Horstmann, "the persona she came to be was created on the model of the paragon of the female bhakti Mīrā Bāī, and the way she would experience and articulate what she experienced was molded by the tradition of female bhakti as well" (2003, 11).

²⁴ As Gold argues, even today there are Rajput men who do not support the example of Mīrā Bāī and instead support and justify the attempt made by her relatives to kill her (2006, 263).

not have the opportunity to collect much information. However, few years back, during another fieldwork, I could spend more time with her and I could create a closer relationship. She always replied nicely and openly to my questions, and slowly she also told me few episodes of her childhood, despite quite often ascetics do not want to share their past, since they are supposed to be detached from their previous social life. Thanks to the friendly relationship we built, I could gather pieces of her life story to outline here her portrait and her path towards asceticism.

Rām Priya Dās is one of those women who find the married life unsuitable, while feeling a strong spiritual call. When she was only six years old,²⁵ she used to attend the religious practice that, in a cave, a *tyāgī* (Śrī 108 Śrī Rāmcaraṇ Dās Tyāgī jī, who was to become her guru) was performing. She continued to go and look at him for six years, crying desperately when her parents did not allow her to go. Usually, they went to pick her up when the sun was high over the cave in which the *tyāgī* was performing his austerities, because at that time they were sure that he had already come out to have his meal (only milk) and that he had given some to the little girl as holy food (*prasād*).

When Rām Priya Dās was twelve years old, she spent one year doing *sevā* (service) in Śrī Rāmcaraṇ Dās' *āśram*, and when she was thirteen years old, she got initiated into the Rāmānandī order and started practising yoga. Obviously, her family did not appreciate her involvement into this *sādhanā*, they tried to change her mind but finally, they had to acknowledge her serious commitment and her desire to continue the ascetic life. When she got initiated her family cut every relationship with her, and Rām Priya Dās became part of the *sādhu samāj*: “This is something natural”, she said to me, “once you walked through the boundaries of the lay community, and you enter in this new one, all are your brothers and sisters.”²⁶ She did not feel to have lost a family, but to have changed it. Nevertheless, even if she did not say it openly, the entrance into this new family was not that easy, because of her being a woman. She told me that her guru trained her properly so that she could behave correctly in different situations and with different people, especially with important gurus, to gain their respect and acceptance.

Like all the *tyāgīs*, Rām Priya Dās has *jaṭā* (knotted hair) and she wears unstitched pale ochre clothes, and earrings and a *mālā* (necklace) made of *tulsī* –basil– the plant sacred to Viṣṇu. On her

²⁵ At that time she also got tattooed the names of Rām and Sītā (the main deities of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*) on her arm without telling her parents. Usually, Indian girls get tattooed the name of their husbands, but she told me that even at that age she knew that her path would have been under the protection of Rām and Sītā. She hid the tattoo until it was completely healed.

²⁶ Interview, February 2013.

forehead the Rāmānandī *tilak*: two white lines that unify between the eyebrows and stretch down a bit on the nose, with a red line in the middle.

She followed her guru to Varanasi 27 years ago, in the Rām Jānkī Mandir, a place supported especially by devotees from Gujarat. It is a four floors building, with a Hanumān temple in the low ground and a Rām temple in the first floor. On the first floor there is also the kitchen and the room of Rām Priya Dās; on the second and third floors there are rooms to host ascetics and pilgrims. When Śrī Rāmcarāṇ Dās decided to leave the temple to continue his *sāadhanā* in Gujarat, she became the *mahant* of the place.

Not many people frequent the Rām Jānkī Mandir, often they are pilgrims from Gujarat since the temple is actually supported by a Trust set in Rajkot, Gujarat. However, this low flow does not bother Rām Priya Dās who continues to live her life according to the rhythm of the temple. There, *bhajans* (devotional songs) are chanted since early morning till late evening, with a pause only at 12 AM when the god is fed and the temple is closed till 4 PM. In the morning *sādhus* prepare *prasād* (blessed food) for devotees and ascetics, sometimes with the help of Rām Priya Dās.

Rām Priya Dās is not involved in social activities, which she does not consider as “job for *sādhus*”, a behaviour differing from that of many female gurus who focus their activities on *sevā* and social work. Her *sāadhanā* is based on yoga, which she mastered completely as it is shown in the photos on the walls of the temple: a thirteen years old Rām Priya Dās is displayed doing several difficult *āsanas* wearing a simple unstitched white clothes, while in other later pictures she is shown while doing the *nām jāp* with a *tulsī mālā*. Two more photos show her doing *tapasya* (strenuous activities aimed to focus the mind and to improve religious strength): during one *tapasya* she stood up one year on both the feet and one year standing on only one foot; for the second *tapasya* she was covered with soil for nine days until the sprout of millet seeds from the soil. She told me that she had performed this *tapasya* nine times in different places in India.

Today, her daily routine is completely influenced by her *sāadhanā*: she gets up at 3 o'clock every morning and from 3.30 till 5 she does *prāṇāyām*, *āsanas* and *vyāyam* (exercises) and mostly, meditation. Then, she spends a couple of hours in the morning and in the evening doing *adhyāya* that is reading and studying religious books. These readings have a devotional purpose since, according to her, devotion is the base for each action and it is the path that leads towards the grace of God.

When I asked her about the low number of female ascetics in the *sampradāya*, she replied that it is not that low, but that it is more difficult to see female *sādhus* since most of them live in *āśrams* and, therefore, they have less visibility compared to male. She made the example of her previous *āśram* in Gujarat, wherein almost a dozens of female *sādhus* lived. She agreed in saying that not many women

follow the *tyāgī* path since it is an arduous one, based on physical and mental efforts, much more difficult than the path of *saṃnyāsīnīs*, whose number is indeed increasing. She does not completely support the spread of female gurus, as they act against the ascetic tradition, especially the Daśanāmi tradition where Śaṅkarācārya forbade *saṃnyāsa* to women. However, she is also for the recognition of rights for female ascetics: she supports the creation of a *mahila akhārā* to organize the camping of female ascetics in the Kumbh Melā and their bath in the holiest days.

Rām Priya Dās's attitude toward ascetic life is orthodox in the sense that she deeply respects and follows the inner rules of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and of the ascetic society that is mainly for men. She does accept the bounding rule that she cannot give *dīkṣā* (initiation) to anyone, not even to lay people.²⁷ This rule does not allow her to become a guru and by consequence she cannot begin a tradition (*paramparā*) or continue a tradition to pass out. In fact, a religious discipline is passed out by a guru through his/her disciples (*guru-śiṣya-paramparā*) and it is because of these *paramparās* that various religious tendencies in a *sampradāya* form.²⁸ For this reason a girl who was living in the temple got her initiation from a male *tyāgī* guru of the order. This girl was mentally challenged, and she is not really into ascetic practice, so she used to spend her time helping Rām Priya Dās cooking food and cleaning the place. However, Rām Priya Dās found a simple way to make her do a different kind of *nām jāp*: she taught the girl to write the name of Rām on a notebook, so that she can fill pages with the repetition of God's name.

The story of Rām Priya Dās shows that she had to fight against her family to follow the ascetic path, and that only the strictness and the respect of traditions made her able to reach her actual position and the support among other Rāmānandīs. In fact, she needed the support of the Jagadguru Rāmnareśācārya when she arrived in the Rām Jankī temple with her guru (the idea that a *tyāginī* and a *tyāgī* were living in the same temple had arisen rumours). Later on, she had to face critics when she began to manage the temple, although in Benares there are many religious centres led by women.²⁹

²⁷ Clementin-Ojha describes a *vairāginī*, Rām Dulārī Dāsī who, instead, began to have disciples after the death of her guru and her disciples provided her with an *āśram* when she became too weary for wandering around (1988, 5).

²⁸ As Clémentin-Ojha points out "This has been going on in India from time immemorial so that any guru of today is theoretically the inheritor of an ancient tradition" (*Manushi* 3).

²⁹ In Varanasi there are several centres managed by female gurus, both linked to traditional *sampradāyas* and new centres, which have captured the attention of Clémentin-Ojha (1990) and Denton (2004).

I collected different observations about Rām Priya Dās after our meetings, useful also to add further remarks about female asceticism and to introduce another issue, that of the “motherization” of female ascetic.

5. Approaching female ascetics, interpreting female ascetics

When I talked about Rām Priya Dās, a brahmacārin from the Śrī Maṭh³⁰ told me that he does not have her in great esteem. He argued that she created a scandal when she was living in the temple with her guru, with whom she actually had a love story and from whom she got pregnant (!).³¹

According to him, the presence of female ascetics in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* depends on the low profile of the majority of the *sādhus* of the group, who lack a proper orthodox knowledge and therefore accept even women among them. He justifies his statement referring to Brahmanic texts. He said:

According to the Manu Smṛti men have 8 *guṇas* (qualities) more than women, so they can tolerate ascetic discipline better. For this reason, although there have always been *sādhvīs* and female ascetics in Indian history, for women it is better to complete their religious path through the marriage, which is the best way for them to get *mokṣa*. A *sādhvī*, indeed, can follow some rules and disciplines, showing her affiliation to a *sampradāya*, but she cannot follow the same practices as a man, neither she can live in the same way of a man. First of all because of her monthly impurity, secondly because some yogic practices are thought for a male body, like the retention of semen, or the mortification of his penis. As there are no equivalents for women, they cannot physically destroy the pleasure, so that they keep desiring.³²

A different comment was given by the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya (the official leader of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*). He has Rām Priya Dās in great esteem because of her religious practice and for how she is managing the temple. When she is present during *sammelan* (gathering), it is not rare that he introduces her stressing her role and value. His openness relies on his being part of a *sampradāya* that since its very beginning has a tradition of female ascetics. In fact, while talking

³⁰ The Śrī Maṭh is a temple/*āśram* built in the middle of 20th century on the place where, according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānand had his *āśram* and used to preach. Now it contains the *pādukā* (foot step) of Rāmānand and it is the residence of the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya.

³¹ Nobody I talked with lately mentioned this event ever. Therefore, I could guess that this was just a rumour spread in the past to slander Rām Pyār Dās.

³² Interview April 2013.

about female asceticism, Rāmnareśācārya introduces immediately the fact that Rāmānanda had female disciples. And he added:

The possibility of development of the human being is the same, external and internal development. Since in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* the *sādhanā* professed is based on love and devotion towards god and on the idea of *prapatti* -which doesn't need a specific or peculiar knowledge- the *sevā*, the *śaraṇ* to god, it is open to anyone, and gender distinctions are meaningless. [...] Putting in a corner all the different disciplines, a *bhakta* thinks about the well-being that comes from god. If you think about religious practice like that, then the meaning of male and female doesn't exist. And for this reason Rāmānandācārya opened his door even to females [...] Nevertheless the number of female ascetics is much lesser than that of male, the number for examples of *tyāginī* is not big.³³

According to the Jagadguru, the reason for such a low number of female ascetics is that the *sādhu samāj* (the society of ascetics) is organized by men and for men, and asceticism, with its rules and organizations, was thought for men. Therefore, the presence of female ascetics changes, especially in a practical way, the structure of asceticism. He gave to me the simple example of an *āśram*, where the contemporary presence of female and male ascetics could be problematic,³⁴ both for the *sādhanā* and for the practical organizations of the spaces. In fact, when there are women in religious-ascetic places they cause, indirectly, a problem, as their presence among *sādhus* has always arisen malicious gossip among people.³⁵ Being an *ācārya*,³⁶ he also underlined the more *saṃsārik* (worldly) attitude of women: the fact that they think more about marriage life, husbands, children, than men do. They have a “*Śṛṅgār kā jīvan*”, a natural inclination to devotion to their husbands and to sexual life.

Therefore, even the Jagadguru considers marriage as the normal and best path for the accomplishment of a woman, although he agrees that women with a pronounced religious attitude and spiritual talent should undertake the ascetic path as well as women who cannot or do not want to

³³ Interview April 2013

³⁴ As Tripathi shows (2007, 176-179), the approach of *sādhus* towards women is varied (he uses a classification which ranges from strong hatred to strong regard). The importance of celibacy drives ascetics in regarding women “as a great hurdle in the path of salvation”, to such a point that some ascetics prefer not to come into contact with them. Therefore, the presence of female ascetics in an *āśram* may represent a distraction for male ascetics (and obviously vice versa).

³⁵ The Jagadguru said that also in my case, as I was spending time at the Śrī Maṭh, it had been necessary to make clear my role there, to justify the presence of an unmarried woman in an ascetic community.

³⁶ An *ācārya* is a teacher learned in classical Brahmanic literary tradition.

be married. He claimed that, in any cases, the door of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and other orders are open for women.

Laypeople, especially women, gravitating around the Maṭh often show a detached/suspicious behaviour towards female ascetics. Many of them support celibacy (after a wrong marriage) and the *bhakti* path as the asceticism suitable for women rather than a proper renunciation path, which is deemed appropriate for elderly women. In fact, many female devotees expressed the desire to retire in an *āśram* following their guru as soon as they do not have anymore family duties to accomplish.

However, as we have seen in the aforementioned life stories, a female ascetic who is recognized for her faith and spiritual value succeeds in capturing the attention and the respect of people, and begins being venerated and considered as holy as male ascetics. They support lay people with religious and moral advices like male ascetics do. Therefore, once a female ascetic is brought back to a kind of archetypal role of “mother”, she is re-integrated in the society and accepted as a positive element. The identification of a *sādhvī* with a mother is a way to nullify her sexual power and her possible sexual freedom, bringing her toward a peaceful, harmless and rather enhanced role.

The *motherization* of a *sādhvī* is even more obvious when she also is a guru. There is not a common, female form of the word guru, so that a female guru is usually called Mātā jī, “revered mother” (Clementin-Ojha 1998; Pechilis 2004). Calling a women “mother” avoids a range of meanings associated with the marriage or with “courtesan’s proposition”, preventing women from being looked at in sexual terms (Pechilis 2004, 8). Pechilis argues that the source of authority of male and female gurus has a meaningful difference: while in the tradition of male gurus the importance of a guru is valued considering structures such as the guru lineage (*paramparā*), the teachings received and the *gurukula* system, “a prominent theme in the tradition of female gurus is personal experience³⁷ both in the sense of independent spiritual realization outside of initiation in a lineage as well as a pragmatic orientation that relates experience of the world to spiritual knowledge” (2012, 114).

However, it seems that sometimes even scholars have a tendency to interpret some behaviours of female ascetics as depending on a natural motherly attitude, while similar behaviours are not interpreted as a fatherly attitude in the case of male ascetics. I will give here few examples to explain my point. In her article, Hausner describes *yoginīs* from Northern India and she says that they use renunciation to move out from their society to

³⁷ Although there are many female gurus who belong to traditional *sampradāya*, many got their initiation by another female guru or are self-initiated.

enter, nevertheless, in another community, in a new place and with a new status but mostly doing the same activities of wives: feeding people, protecting children and teaching religious values (2006, 126). This attitude of caring for people in a single location, Hausner continues, is typical of female ascetics and is stressed by their being often called with the epithet *Mā* (2006, 131). Even, Khandelwal's point of view on female and male roles seems to be based on a standardized model, where only the female can be the lovely compassionate mother while the male lacks a female touch: she explains that "the relationship with a paternal figure, whether loving or authoritarian, cannot be symmetrical to that with an intimate nurturing mother" (1997, 93). From my experience, I noticed that many devotees and disciples call their male guru *Bāpu* (father), and that many *āśrams* with male ascetics feed community of wandering ascetics and common people. In the same way, it has often happened that male ascetics take care of children and teach them –one of the most famous example (17th century) is the five years old *Nābhādās* found by *Khiladās* and *Agradās* in the forest– but I have never found an interpretation of these events as a consequence of their inner "fatherly" attitude.

The second example I want to analyse is based on the interpretation DeNapoli gives of the narration of the story lives of *sādhvīs* in Rajasthan. She argues that their approach with asceticism, and in general with god, is marked by the themes of duty, destiny and devotion³⁸, which would depend on the gender of the ascetics, for they result in opposition with the themes that marked male ascetics, identified as detachment, work and effort.³⁹

Although I agree with DeNapoli in considering the use of the themes of duty, destiny and devotion as "narrative strategies through which means Rajasthani female sadhus neutralize widely-held, societal perceptions of their lives as transgressive and construct themselves as unusual, yet traditional women who act by divine order", I do not regard those themes as a female prerogative.

In fact, it seems to me that these examples tend to create a generalization, as they do not properly take into consideration the *sādhanā* that these ascetics undertake.⁴⁰ According

³⁸ Duty is perceived as the "to do" for God, a duty to serve God; the destiny is considered as the force who led them to asceticism "it happened because was written in my destiny"; devotion represents their path to reach the Truth (DeNapoli 2009).

³⁹ Cf. DeNapoli (2009).

⁴⁰ Only in a footnote, Khandelwal recognizes that "this may not be true of female renouncers who live an itinerant rather than settled lifestyle" (1997, 96, n23).

to me, it is the *sādhanā* that influences the activities of the *sādhus* and their perspectives, through which, obviously, they satisfy and reply to different needs. During my fieldwork, I met several male *sādhus* who described their approach to god and asceticism in the same way as the female ascetics described by DeNapoli, because, like them, their *sādhanā* was based on *bhakti*. In opposition, Rām Priya Dās did not seem to show a particular motherly attitude and for describing her becoming an ascetic she stressed that it was her own decision, her wish to detach herself from the world, reaching god through *tāpasya* and *vairāgya*. Even Denton, referring to the renunciators she worked with, involved in the so-called “path of knowledge” through mantra repetition, meditation and yoga, says they did not show a particular devotional approach, and in fact they do not capture Denton’s attention for their “motherly” attitude (1992, 221).

Generalized labels to define what is “typical female” and what is “typical male” risk of flattening the idea of female asceticism. In fact, as Denton argues (2004, 104):

Women [and man, I would add,] become ascetics for a wide variety of reasons and a summary of the social, cultural and economic factors that push them toward asceticism cannot adequately reveal the degree to which strivings of a more religious or spiritual sort draw them to this way of life.

Hence, only further comparative studies, not only between ascetic and householder women but also between female and male ascetics sharing the same *sādhanā*, could display in factual terms what differs in their practice and approach, and make understanding whether differences depend on gender, and whether some activities, as the *sevā* intended as social work, is typically female or is a shared characteristic among those ascetics (also male) who have a sedentary life and have to deal with the modernization of Hindu society.

6. Modernization of female asceticism

In the 19th and 20th centuries, new inputs have been given to female asceticism by outstanding figures such as Vivekānanda and Dayānanda Saraswatī. Wendy Sinclair-Brull argues that Vivekānanda, after a period abroad, realized the necessity for the rising of Indian women, to actualize through their education (1997, 64):

His plan was not to produce a generation of well-read, modern wives, who would support their husband’s careers, but rather to foster women of renunciation and high spiritual attainment, who would raise a new generation according to Vedic tradition. And for Vivekananda, education was the key.

Before Vivekānanda, also Dayānanda had demonstrated an open approach towards female asceticism. In fact, a central belief of his Ārya Samāj was that in “ancient Hinduism” gender difference in education and religion did not exist, therefore it was necessary to encourage both secular and Sanskrit education for girls and to allow female members to take *saṃnyāsa* from a guru of their own gender (Khandelwal 2006, 42). Such kind of approaches, catalysed perhaps by the presence of the English Raj⁴¹ and the spread of new forms of Hinduism, favoured an evolution of women’s role in asceticism. In effect, new female religious organizations arose.

In 1937, the Brahma Kumari, a sect comprising almost exclusively women, was established by Dada Lekhraj in Sindh and after the Indian Partition, shifted to Mount Abu (Rajasthan) in 1950. As it can be read from the Brahma Kumari web site, the spiritual trust was constituted of a committee of nine young women led by Om Radhe.⁴² Dada Lekhraj, who was himself a spiritual and enlightened person, gave all his belongings to this female trust with the purpose of spreading his religious realizations. With the passing of time, the first unit of three hundred spiritually empowered women reached different parts of India to convey the trust message and, later on, they were able to open branches of the Brahma Kumari all over the world. Although Clementin-Ojha argues that the monastic order “was founded by a male and has no powerful female figure for identification” (2011, 64), the web site presents several outstanding female figure (like Mateshwari Sarasvati) who, since the beginning, took care of the organizations from a practical and spiritual point of view.

As reported by Rüstam (2003, 152), in 1946 a *saṃnyāsini* of the Ramakrishna Math, Asha Debi, published an article titled *Sannyāse hindunarīr adhikār* (The Hindu woman’s right to *saṃnyāsa*), which referred to Vivekānanda’s idea to establish a women’s Math. In 1954 she organized a branch for *brahmacāriṇīs* and named it after the wife of Ramakrishna, the Śrī Sarada Math.⁴³ Few years later, with the ordination of several *brahmacāriṇīs* into *saṃnyāsa*, this feminine branch became totally independent from the male control. Rüstam reports that the Sarada Math main activity is social service, following the religious *sādhanā* as understood by Sarada Devi: liberation of the self and the welfare of the world, through philosophical studies and training in practical abilities as well (2003, 157).

⁴¹ For example Denton, considering the development of female institutions, connects them to the structure and organizations of Christian monastic orders (1992, 222).

⁴² <http://www.brahmakumaris.com/about-us/history.html> [Accessed March 2014]

⁴³ The already cited study of Sinclair-Brull (1997) is completely dedicated to the description of the foundation and organization of this female branch of the Ramakrishna order.

Other institutionalized female centres are the *kanyā pīṭh* (seat for virgins) arisen under the influence of the first *pīṭh* established in 1940 by Ānandamayī Mā, one of the most famous woman saints in India. In her study, Denton analyses three of these centres in Vārāṇasī⁴⁴, which host *brahmacāriṇīs* (female novices) formally initiated into celibacy through the *dīkṣā* mantra given by the head female renouncer. Interesting to our context is the report Denton gives about who are the *brahmacāriṇīs* living in these centres. From her data it results that (Denton 2004, 137-138):

Few have entered the ascetic world out of an entirely free choice. [...] (i) most have been placed here by impoverished, high caste families unable to provide a dowry for them, (ii) some have been sent by relatives unable to feed and clothe an orphaned child, (iii) some have parents who simply desire an orthodox education and protection for them, (iv) a few appear to have either been rejected by their husbands [...] (v) some are unable to compete in the marriage market because of physical disability or unattractiveness, suspicions about mental or emotional capacity, or relatively advanced age.

These examples show that the purpose of many female religious centres is actually to improve the education of girls, enabling them to receive traditional religious teachings that can provide them with the opportunity for a good marriage or with the chance to continue a retired, ascetic way of life. In fact, their religious/spiritual imprint has specifically ascetic characteristics, based on the instructions given by the female gurus who established the *pīṭhs* and led them, however these girls are not properly ascetics, as they do not take a *saṃnyāsa dīkṣā*. Many of these centres, and many female gurus often encourage people to respect their *svadharma*, supporting the caste system and the orthodox values of Hinduism.

According to Clémentin-Ojha (1998, 35), as a consequence of their non-conventional status, female renouncers and guru do not use asceticism as a platform to criticize aspects of Hindu society. They are rebels towards the social norms for their own life, but they are not revolutionaries.⁴⁵ The scholar supposes this is essential for their “survival”: female renouncers participate to the rules of orthodoxy and, at the same time, they try to justify their asceticism connecting it to the *Strīdharmā* and especially to the idea of motherhood. Many female gurus are heads of organizations focused on

⁴⁴ Denton has described in detail the organizations and structures of the *kanyā pīṭh* of Ānandamayī Mā, that of Gaṅgā Mā called Ānanda Devi Matr *Kanyā pīṭh*, and the *āśram* of Śrī 108 Śobhā Mā (2004, 128-137).

⁴⁵ As underlined by Ramanujan, also in the past male saints often addressed their poems towards social reforms, whereas female saints “despite the enormity of the social protest implicit in their life as they reject parents, husband, children, household, shelter, even clothes” preferred to focus their poetry on love and devotion, disclosing a poetry based on private and interior themes (1982, 323).

social activities and *sevā*, which is interpreted as the religious expression of a motherly attitude.

Rüstam explains this aspect as an evolution of Vivekānanda's idea of social service (2003, 161):

In the past the rejection of an ascetic life for women was a result of the common understanding which limited the role of women to their responsibilities as wives and mothers -their *stri dharma*. This contradiction was now resolved by Vivekananda's new interpretation of asceticism. By connecting the endeavour of individual salvation with social service, female asceticism too, got a new dimension –the motherly taking care of the needy. Female ascetics are giving up biological motherhood, to replace it with spiritual motherhood.

Therefore, it is likely that this *sevā* approach and the motherly attitude represents a contemporary development that some female ascetics have assumed to be accepted by society, creating a theoretical compromise between what is considered traditionally natural for women and asceticism.⁴⁶

However, some meaningful changes have arisen in the last decades. New developments have affected also the orthodox stream of asceticism: in the Haridwar Kumbh Melā of 1998 has been established the Akhil Bhartiya Sadhvi Sammelan, a meeting of *sādhvīs* affiliated to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and connected to the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad, a group within the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)⁴⁷ whose aim is to build up a network of *sādhvīs* (Rüstam 2003, 144).

In 2001, during the Mahā Kumbh Melā in Haridwar, female *saṃnyāsīnīs* were standing on the chariot of the Mahā Nirvāṇī Akhārā, and there was even one chariot with a woman sitting on the throne. She was Gītā Bhārtī, the first woman to be elected as Mahā Maṇḍaleśvarī of the Nirvāṇī Akhārā. This means that she had been appointed as one of the spiritual leaders of the *akhārā*, having the right to initiate also male members into the order.

In the Māgh Melā of Allahabad 2014, *sādhvī* Trikal Bhavanta led a group of about 50 women ascetics and proclaimed the formation of a new *akhārā* only for women. The purpose of her action was to raise woman pride and place in the religious hierarchy, as according to Bhavanta though women do hard work in all the *akhārās*, they stay in a subjugated position in a system run by men.

⁴⁶ Obviously, this does not mean that the idea of women as spiritual/religious mothers was created in the 19th century, as in several traditions the mother's role is highly considered (see the *śākta* idealization of maternal function) but that it had a further development which could justify the increasing number of female gurus.

⁴⁷ The VHP is an organization arisen from the soil of the Hindu nationalism with the purpose of gathering Hindu religious leaders for the improvement and maintenance of the Sanatana Dharma. The BJP is a political party that supports the voices of the right wing.

A similar position is held by Ānandamūrti Gurumā. This female guru, Charpentier says, “advises parents to make their daughters strong and powerful in order to make them self-supportive. She states that this can be done in two ways: first, through education, and second, through professional training eventually leading to financial independence. [...] She also advises parents to let their daughters train martial arts in order to acquire inner strength and be able to defend themselves against street Romeos [...] She refuses to reproduce cultural values, thus openly challenging conventional Indian standards. She consciously uses her socially sanctioned position as spiritual master in subversive ways, thus challenging all forms of oppression that support patriarchy” (2010, 256).

However, these developments often do not find the support of the male counterpart, nor of those female ascetics who respect the tradition, as Rām Priya Dās, because they are considered against the tradition.

7. Conclusion

To give a reply to the question “are women entitled to become ascetics?” it seems quite clear that women are and have always been entitled to become ascetics since it has never existed a real and strict ban on asceticism for them. However, their paths towards asceticism and renunciation was always jagged by many social obstacles that lead them to live the religious experience in a half-domestic realm, as a private experience, or to cut the social norms in a revolutionary way. Examples of female asceticism have been transmitted through narrations and hagiographies, but their purpose was to stress an extraordinary religiosity, not to present social models for other women. As a result of this discouragement, female participation remains low to be acknowledged by the Indian society and to become a normal reality rather than an exceptional one in the *sādhu samāj*.

In fact, women in the *sādhu samāj* continue to live some discriminations and difficulties, as they that cannot strive for the highest assignments but in exceptional cases and outstanding characters. Female sexuality is often tamed and hidden. In fact, while, for example, *nāgā* ascetics can walk and participate to religious gathering naked, *nāgā sādhvīs* are never naked, but they wear a cloth draped all around their body. Furthermore, while some male ascetics are renowned for practices that are based on the showing of the control of their sexuality, there are no female counterparts to them, as if the control of female sexuality and its repression is given for granted or, in any case, is not something to show off.

However, it is true that female ascetics have a degree of individual freedom that a householder woman cannot enjoy. Therefore, asceticism was and still is a path to realize an individual

empowerment for those women who deliberately choose the ascetic path for their personal belief and religious quest. However, this does not lead always to a complete equality with male ascetics because female ascetics are aware that there are various kinds of limitations because of their gender. On the other side, for those women who became ascetics not for religious purposes, being ascetics is a protective label, and by consequence, rather than being a sign of empowerment is the result of a “social fear”.

In contemporary India, the role of female ascetics is improving thanks to the new historical background: some have gained a position in traditional orthodox groups, others have created their own sect, and some others have become predominant activists in political and social movements.⁴⁸ However, these female ascetics and gurus are understood as manifestations of goddesses and are able to reach leadership positions because they are recognized as extraordinary, exceptional individuals. Therefore, the special consideration given to them doesn't affect women in a wider perspective.

It is likely that the increasing number of female ascetics may encourage further women to undertake the ascetic path. However, as the case of Rām Priya Dās has showed, the path to reach such a goal is still very hard to follow and it needs a deeply motivation and a strong personality to face the opposition of family and society.

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⁴⁸ Exemplary are Sādhvī Ritambara and Uma Bharti, politically active during the 80s and especially during the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. As argued by Kalyani Devaki Menon (2006:142) female ascetics were part of a specific nationalistic propaganda, where their being renouncers and women was used to stress and create the value and morality of the movement.

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