

## Article

# Sweet Asceticism: An Ethnographic Study of Female Renouncers in the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava Tradition

Leena Taneja

Department of International Studies and Social Sciences, Zayed University, Dubai 19282, United Arab Emirates; leena.taneja@zu.ac.ae

**Abstract:** This paper is based on an ethnographic study which aims to examine female asceticism in the Chaitanya Vaishnava sect, a Hindu devotional school found in the region of Vrindavan in Northwest India. Asceticism, meaning to renounce worldly life, is deeply rooted in Hindu practice. Yet, despite its wide acceptance, female asceticism has remained on the margins of Hindu religious experience. Despite the lack of a model of asceticism for women, scripturally and sociologically, female ascetics are a growing religious group in India. This paper seeks to use empirical data collected during two years of fieldwork to examine how asceticism is articulated and performed by women living in Vrindavan. It builds upon recent interventions in key areas of feminist scholarship and asceticism in South Asia by engaging a religious sect which has received little attention by feminist scholars. This engagement, it is believed, can productively enlarge the field of feminist theologizing and South Asian asceticism.

**Keywords:** female asceticism; Hindu Devotionalism; South Asia



**Citation:** Taneja, Leena. 2022. Sweet Asceticism: An Ethnographic Study of Female Renouncers in the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava Tradition. *Religions* 13: 231. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030231>

Academic Editor: Mary Nyangweso

Received: 2 November 2021

Accepted: 18 February 2022

Published: 8 March 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

“Renunciation is lime and juice. Renunciation in bhakti is lime, juice and honey. It is sweeter”.

## 1. Introduction

In Hinduism, fertility, abundance, prosperity, chastity and motherhood are values and virtues that represent the ideal Hindu woman. Embodying these qualities is a woman's religious duty (*strī-dharma*). Asceticism, meaning to renounce worldly pursuits, adopting a life of simplicity, purity, and celibacy, stands at odds from this idealized vision of a Hindu woman. The best-known type of Hindu asceticism is renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*).<sup>1</sup> From the Sanskrit, *Sam-ny-as*, ‘to throw down together’ which means ‘abandonment or ‘laying aside completely’. In the past, most scholarship on asceticism was primarily focused on normative male-oriented texts such as the *Dharmaśāstras* (codes of law) and the *Samnyāsa Upanishad*, marginalizing experiential forms of evidence that amplify and explore feminine expressions of *saṁnyāsa*. Vasudha Narayanan contends that, for a Hindu woman, “ascetic practices and piety are largely ignored by many normative Sanskrit codes of law as well as two centuries of Western scholarship which rely on these texts for information about Hindu culture” (Narayanan 1995, p. 443). Ruth Vanita concurs that debates about women in ancient India have “suffered from an over emphasis on the law book, *Manavadharmaśāstra* or *Manusmṛiti* (circa first century CE) to the exclusion of other texts” (Vanita 2003, p. 76). In short, an overreliance on text over experience and domesticity over austerity have contributed to a narrative about Hindu women which overlooks their ascetic side. Such exclusions have singularized our definition of asceticism and discredited other forms practiced by women and minority groups, prioritizing a normative form of asceticism which focusses on worldly detachment, itinerancy, and solitary religious practice (Hausner/Khandelwal). Scholars have concluded that placing a spotlight on female ascetics often reveals a more complex model of asceticism that depends on many variables such as family issues, religious knowledge, economic means, social status, and religious tradition.

Furthermore, Ann Grodzins Gold contends investigations into female ascetics reveals that “boundaries between a renouncer’s life dedicated to spirituality and a householder’s life enmeshed in worldliness and domesticity are almost impossibly fuzzy, blurry and permeable” (Khandelwal et al. 2006, p. 248). In short, South Asian religions have suffered from a monolithic and exclusionary conception of asceticism narrowly defined by texts such as the *Manusmṛiti*. Scholarship solely reliant on these texts repeats and reinforces the metanarrative of a ‘detached meditative recluse separated from the social world’ and reveals how scholars have unintentionally marginalized the role female renunciants have played and continue to play in the Hindu tradition. What this illustrates is that we need to move beyond the text and broaden the definition of asceticism to include practices which highlight not only giving up the world, but also living in the world.

With this end in mind, this paper will focus on the complex politics of gender and asceticism found in the *Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava* bhakti sect. Using primary ethnographic data on female ascetics, including real-life stories, observations, and conversations collected from interviews conducted over a two-year period in the Vrindavan region where *Vaiṣṇavism* is practiced today, this project was guided by the following overarching questions: How is asceticism being redefined, interpreted, performed and articulated by female practitioners in the *Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava* faith today? Since this project assumes that women are creating new ways of expressing renunciation in various frameworks, this paper also examines how female ascetics frame their practices and ideologies against the orthodox tradition and its widely accepted representations of womanhood presented in key texts such as the *Manusmṛiti* and the other seminal texts.<sup>2</sup> Finally, this paper seeks to probe the relationship between bhakti and asceticism as it is expressed by female renunciants today. How are ascetic and bhakti modes of practice performed by female renunciants given the fact that, historically, these are considered distinct and separate pathways to moksha or liberation?

By shifting the spotlight onto female renunciants and their lived experiences and reflections on asceticism, the researcher does not seek to minimize the impact of determining structures such as the *brāhminical* tradition on their lives, but hopes to show how the individuals comply with, respond to, evade, or overcome these patriarchal structures in various ways. The focus is on how isolated individuals or gestures have shown resistance and agency in less visible ways, internally or imaginatively (Okely 1991). These small shifts signal a move toward a form of devotional asceticism or sweet asceticism, I argue, that foregrounds the principles of care, service and community which quietly challenges the orthodox view of a detached and reclusive ascetic. The gendered form of devotional asceticism offered in this study illustrates a renouncer who cares and serves the community in creative and personal ways, while showing a commitment to the values of detachment and renunciation.

The paper will begin with a brief background on the *Chaitanya*<sup>3</sup> *Vaiṣṇava* tradition followed by a discussion on the ethnographic methodology utilized in this project, including demographic details about the respondents and their path to renunciation. This will be followed by an examination of key categories relevant to this project, including asceticism, devotion, householder and renunciant stages in a Hindu’s life. The history and interactions amongst these categories will provide the necessary textual and historical context from which to explore the experiences of female ascetics and how they are responding to these broader categories. Finally, this paper will turn to an examination of contemporary female ascetic practices in the Chaitanya bhakti faith.

## 2. Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavism

*Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavism*, also known as Bengali or *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, is commonly described as a devotional (*bhakti*) sect. It is one of four bhakti sects in Hinduism, with its roots traced back to 8th century South India. While not a monolithic movement, at the heart of all bhakti sects is a belief that unconditional devotion (*bhakti*) and attachment for *Viṣṇu*, the divine being, also known as *Sri Krishna*, is the sole way to achieve love (*prema*) for God. *Sri Krishna* is not without his female counterpart, the divine feminine energy,

Srimati Rādhārāni. Today, when the names of the divine couple are written (these are carved into trees and on walls all over Vrindavan) Rādhārāni's name always appears before *Krishnas*, indicating the significant status accorded to her theologically. Rādhārāni leads the way to *Krishna*. She is the embodiment of the perfect devotee, who demonstrates how to love unselfishly. Theological sources exhort that someone who wants to reach *prema* must adopt or emulate the feelings (*bhāva*) of Rādhārāni. However, first a novice devotee would follow nine principal bhakti processes including hearing, remembering, chanting, singing, etc., under the guidance of a spiritual teacher (*guru*) to cultivate and nurture one's relationship to *Krishna/Rādha*. In sum, relationships lie at the heart of all *bhakti* sects, with females enjoying a more superior position.

### 3. Historical Considerations

Ascetics have typically renounced or left behind worldly pursuits, adopting a life of simplicity, purity, and celibacy. Asceticism (Sanskrit *tapas*, also *tapasya*) is defined as “a voluntary sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual, or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state” (Kaelber 1986, p. 441). Despite its otherworldly lifestyle, ascetics have a place within the Hindu socio-cultural-religious structure known as the *varṇāśrama dharma* system outlined in the Hindu classical text known as the *dharmaśāstras*, the texts of religious law, compiled between 200 BCE and about 300 CE. In theory, the *dharmaśāstras* identify four stages of life (*brahmacharya*/student, *gṛhasthī*/householder, *vanaprastha*/forest dweller, *saṁnyāsa*, renunciant), which male members of the upper three classes of society follow. This social/religious model becomes the cornerstone of an overarching patriarchal social structure known broadly as the *brāhminical* orthodox tradition. At the fourth stage, the *saṁnyāsa* stage, a renunciant formally abandons society and performs funeral rites for himself. The Sanskrit root word *saṁnyāsa* literally means “putting or throwing down, laying aside, resignation, abandonment, renunciation of the world”. With the performance of these rites, he makes a clean cut with his earlier personality; he is considered socially dead. After this, in his new role as a renunciant, he was to be all alone; he went to a village only to get food. He owned nothing but a begging bowl and old clothing, but he was marked by tranquility and equanimity (Manusmṛiti 6, pp. 42–44).

Women generally do not go through these stages of life. In the Hindu tradition, “a women's religion is her family life”. In spite of a lack of a formal place provided for female religious experiences—apart from marriage and motherhood—this has not stopped women from participating in the activities and lifestyles associated with the *saṁnyāsa*/ascetic way of life. There is evidence of female poets/saints and female renunciants who do not seem to comply with the rules of Hindu *dharma* and duty. While the Hindu tradition has used hyperbole in declaring that women and *sudras* (servants) were denied from becoming renunciants, it did not mean that they actually followed all the rules. As Vasudha states, “There is a sense of dissonance between scripture and practice in some areas of dharma and the role of women and *sudras* falls in this category”. (Narayanan 1995, p. 446). One way to explain this dissonance, Narayanan suggests, is to draw a distinction between the words “ascetic” and “renunciation”. While often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction that can be made. The word “renunciation” is used to refer to the Sanskrit word ‘*Sannyāsīn*’ (male) (female: *Sannyāsīnī*) which signifies those people who have renounced the world formally, and who have performed their own “funeral rites”, performing a social and legal death of their earlier identities. This ceremony releases them from the commitments and obligations of their earlier personalities as they enter the final stage of life. The word ascetic, on the other hand, is used more widely to refer to a variety of disciplinary practices which are not limited to renunciants. We turn now to the ethnographic material.

#### 4. The Ethnographic Journey: Methodology

This project was envisioned in the spirit of an old-fashioned ethnography, in that it describes the study of a group of people. Its focus is the particular, the everyday, and the personal. Scholarly accounts of renunciation often focus on theoretical ideals and textual definitions, but this project seeks to convey the empirical practices of female renunciators—to show how they actually live, think, and practice—rather than reproduce textual ideals, because religious texts and abstract philosophical ideas are ultimately mediated by people and by practice. In general, Hindu renunciation highlights experience over intellect in arguing that religious knowledge can only be conveyed through experience. Without ignoring the big picture and overarching ideological paradigms, this study will focus on real life stories, quotations, conversations and observations from a period I spent working with contemporary female renunciators to convey how renunciation is articulated, enacted, and externalized by this group of women. A total of ten renunciators have been interviewed thus far, with more interviews scheduled for the future. This is a small sample size, but due to COVID-19 research was unable to continue. The research hopes to resume work in 2022. In this paper, only three participants will be discussed in order to provide a focus to this paper. These three were selected to demonstrate the *diversity* that exists amongst female renunciators and to illustrate the varied definitions and practices of female renunciators. The renunciators featured in these accounts were chosen by me for their articulateness, willingness to participate, and for their conduct and beliefs which were in some way informed by the normative *sannyāsa* lifestyle, even though I would come to appreciate in what ways they “deviated” from this norm. I do not claim to draw any conclusions with such a small sample size, but aim to draw attention to and highlight some themes that have emerged during my interviews. These include the themes of community, care, service, the interior experience, and above all, “sweetness”. These themes will not be discussed separately, but will be explored with the narratives provided by the woman.

This ethnographic study began more than two years ago, with fieldwork beginning in Vrindavan, India in the summer of 2019.<sup>4</sup> A standard questionnaire was devised, but in all cases the interviews were recorded using a GoPro camera, since interviews often did not follow a fixed format and spanned a few hours or days. Interviews were conducted in English, Hindi<sup>5</sup> and Brajbasis (the local dialect).<sup>6</sup> A translator was used during some interviews. Attempting to elicit life-historical information from renunciators can be difficult, since they are not supposed to discuss their lives as this may be construed as drawing attention to themselves, which is discouraged as it may be considered a sign of boastfulness. Instead, a *sannyāsini* is always encouraged to be humble and self-effacing. Conducting an interview and answering questions may also be seen as insulting and overly intrusive. For these reasons, the selection process was the most challenging task encountered in this project. Through a combination of circumstance, perseverance and luck, I did meet three people who became close informants and with whom I developed a constructive and genuine connection. All three were willing to take me, a complete stranger, into their confidences and into their lives. They all came from very different backgrounds and represented a wide range of experiences. My informants came from Canada, Germany and India. All three renunciators had lived in the region of *Braj* (including Vrindavan) for over twenty years. Two of my informants had never been married. Two lived independently, the other one lived in a sectarian ashrama. Two of my informants were urban while the third was from a rural background. All three were members of the *Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava sampradāya*. All three were in their late fifties or sixties, and two had been initiated into the full rank of *sannyāsa* by their respected gurus. Many renunciators have been left out, for example, those who sought monetary compensation and widows (of which there were many). It should also be noted that out of three participants, two came from the West—Germany and Canada—and this indicates the large expat community that is drawn to Vrindavan. Those who were finally chosen to include in this account are: (a) participants who were women and described themselves as followers of the *Vaiṣṇava /bhakti* sect living in the Vrindavan

region; (b) women who described themselves as *sadhus*<sup>7</sup> or *sannyāsinīs*. These are their stories.

### 5. Sudevi: Saṁnyāsa as Bhakti Engagement

My first informant (Sudevi 2019), was sixty-year-old German woman who runs a busy and crowded goshala or cow shelter for sick, injured, handicapped and abandoned cows in Vrindavan. Her goshala, Radha Surabhi goshala, was established in 1996, and now cares over 1800 cows. Their website, <https://radhasurabhi.com/> (accessed on 2 February 2022) describes their mission as follows: “Deep in the heart of *Braj*, we have built a home where no cow is denied”. More specifically, the shelter allows cows to live out their natural lives: mothers and calves are united. Food and medical care are provided for all the cows, and they buy pure milk to feed orphaned calves. Their number is growing daily with new abandoned or injured cows being brought in every day. Sudevi’s tireless service to the cows in Vrindavan earned her the Padma Lakshmi award, India’s fourth highest civilian award. She has lived in Vrindavan for over 40 years, and though she may not look like a typical *sannyāsinī*, living a detached lifestyle, roaming from one place to another with little or no possessions, she provided a vivid story of her path towards and practice of *saṁnyāsa* as a woman.

Sudevi is a quiet, shy and humble woman who lives in a single small room in the only building on the property, which is surrounded by open enclosures where the cows are allowed to roam freely, often roaming in and out of the main building at will. Her room was sparsely furnished and included a small chowpat in the corner. The sitting room where we met was small with a couple of windows and a framed picture of the Padma Lakshmi award. We sat comfortably on chairs as Sudevi described her story.

In our conversation, she spoke in English though she was fluent in Brajbasi, the local language. She attributes the start of her journey to *saṁnyāsa* with the discovery of the seminal Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita, when she was just twenty years old. She explains: “I found the Bhagavad Gita; I was so convinced by what I read. It was like a revelation. And I started to search for a teacher, guru. I didn’t find him. I went to many places. I went to Rishikesh. And met many mahatmas but I couldn’t find him. But I found him here in Vrindavan. I went to Rishikesh, and someone told me, you must go to Vrindavan for darshan. I went to Vrindavan . . . some old mahatma told me, “You go to Rādhā kunda, you will find your guru. He told me the name. I met him (her *guru*) and I knew that was the one”. During our conversation, Sudevi remarked that she belongs to the *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* sect where she initially took initiation, but she took a second *saṁnyāsa* diksha (initiation) from a *guru* outside the *Vaiṣṇava* sect in Rishikesh over thirty-eight years ago. She confessed that we do not “need to be so narrowminded”. She explains that she chose her *saṁnyāsa guru* because he was “very realized and highly qualified”. She continued, “it is not proper according to tradition for someone initiated in the *Gauḍīya* tradition to take *saṁnyāsa* from someone outside. Maybe others in my *sampradāya* are not pleased, but I do not mind; I have done the right thing”. When I asked her how she defined renunciation, she simply stated: “Renunciation just means to take renunciation from everything in this world, from worldly attachments so you can take it from anyone who seems to be the right person to do that”.

In general, normative social structures like *guru*, initiation, and lineage frame the ascetic’s social and religious life. The shared values and meanings of these structures, which are naturalized through tradition and ritual praxis, link female renunciators to masculine constructions which exercise control over their experiences and lives. By searching for a *guru* to give her *diksha*, Sudevi firmly situates herself within the *brāhminical* tradition. Central to the Hindu conception of renunciation is that the experience must be directed and guided by a qualified *guru*. Every renouncer I spoke with insisted on this point: the importance of and reliance on a *guru* is a critical part of practice. Sudevi similarly expressed the significance of a *guru* to formally initiate her into the *Vaiṣṇava* sect; this was clearly aligned with *brāhminical* practice and its attendant power structures.



However, rejecting the necessity to take *saṁnyāsa dikṣha* from a *guru* from the same *Vaiṣṇava* sect, illustrates her ability to frame and define her *saṁnyāsa* journey and identity on her own terms. Arguably, while female renunciators are borrowing from dominant, normative social structures such as the *varṇāśrama dharma*, the lack of commitment to lineage and *guru* shows signs of resistance and autonomy. Their choices show women actively colliding with patriarchal formations and showing signs of self-possession and individual agency. Passivity and submission are often attributed to Hindu women, but the *sannyāsini*s I interviewed deviated from the orthodox tradition through their individual choices and actions. Sudevi's choice to take initiation from two different *sampradāya* exemplifies the fluid boundaries that exist between sectarian divisions. Theoretically, we are taught that there are four *Vaiṣṇava* sectarian divisions, but empirically this shows how female *sannyāsini*s move across and beyond sectarian boundaries. In short, rather than being bound by a single community or sect, female renunciators pursue an agency that is more practical than discursive.

After sharing her renunciation story, I wanted to probe Sudevi's work at the *goshala* and how she interpreted her cow *sevā* in the context of the normative ascetic ideal without placing too much emphasis on this external structure. Still, I wanted to see how she negotiated living in the world and her practice of cow protection with the wider ethical ideal which encourages *sannyāsini*s to renounce the world and give up all attachments. She discussed how *bhakti* or devotion manifests as a form of doing good in the world or caring for all living beings, especially the cows of Vrindavan who are particularly dear to Lord Krishna. She poignantly put it as follows, "The whole practice of ego-less service (*nishkama karma*) is all connected. The practice of serving the cows is connected to the *saṁnyāsa* vow. Service to any living being will purify the mind and elevate the soul. But service to cows is even more because cows are dear to *Krishna*. I believe this is the fast highway to come close to god". Cow *sevā* is a way Sudevi puts her ascetic vows into practice and demonstrates how renunciation is articulated by woman today. Replacing its otherworldly nature with a form of asceticism that emphasizes worldly engagement and participation, she shows us that renunciation does not require isolation and detachment, two ethical values that are the cornerstone of *saṁnyāsa*. Instead, it is by serving others in her community that she develops a form of engaged *bhakti* that brings her to towards her desired goal: coming closer to *Lord Krishna*. In his essay, "Bhakti and Its Public," Christian Lee Novetzke points out that *bhakti* is often described by modern scholarship as two mutually contradictory modes; on the one hand, a social movement, and on the other hand an act of personal devotion. Even the etymology of the term *bhakti* supports this dichotomy. Its Sanskrit root, *bhaj*, is "to share, to apportion", and from this it comes to commonly indicate love, sharing, worship, and devotion. However, the root has other associations: to divide, distribute, and bestow; to obtain one's share, to enjoy or possess, to engage in, to experience; to practice or cultivate; to serve and adore (Monier-Williams 1993, p. 743; Sharma 1987, pp. 40–41). The noun *bhakta* refers to someone who is devoted, who serves, who is associated with a community, and who is faithful and loyal. Sudevi's actions towards the cows she serves, and the community at large reflects how *bhakti* is both a personal expression of her devotion to Krishna and a social experience. Novetzke's thesis is that "all manifestations of *bhakti* are performances and, more to the point, public ones, that is, performances that are part of, or help form, publics of reception (Novetzke 2007, p. 255)". I wonder if this line of argument might be usefully applied to Sudevi's religious practice of serving the cows of Vrindavan. As I stated earlier, we may view this practice as a form of engaged *bhakti* or, invoking Novetzke, it is a form of personal devotion that extends outwardly to the social sphere and becomes a form of public performance. What is key here is to view this practice, using Novetzke's words, as "an expressive one—an outward expression of the self, a performance of emotion" (Novetzke 2007, p. 256) that becomes a shared experience. The audience, claims Novetzke, is "never absent, but imagined and assumed in any iteration of *bhakti*, whether literary, iconographic, performative, or ritualized" (Novetzke 2007, p. 257). Here the audience may

very well be the community that Sudevi serves in Vrindavan who witness, authenticate, and validate her expression of bhakti.

Returning to Sudevi's own words, she equates the goal of sannyasa with her bhakti practice stating that serving the cows helps "to clear the mind and elevate the soul". This is quite telling, because it alludes to a conflation of ascetic goals with *bhakti* practices. In other words, rather than performing severe austerities for long periods of time to control the mind and senses, these goals can now be achieved through the performance of devotion to the cows and other living beings dear to *Krishna*. Thus, the goal of asceticism becomes 'sweetened', and by that it means it moves away from self-centeredness, and towards socially centered goals. When I pressed Sudevi for other practices—perhaps more traditional ones—she noted that one month a year she goes north to do *japa* (mantra meditation) in a cave. She also does not eat any food except dry fruits and milk. Sudevi's *sannyāsa* practices combine both *bhakti* and asceticism. One can say that by mixing bhakti into her *sannyāsa* practice, she amplifies the importance of love, care and connection; it makes asceticism sweeter by introducing these qualities.

It should be noted that Sudevi has created an active community of healers and care givers.

She employs fifteen full time people to help her run the goshala and raises funds for her project through donations and a website. She had also invested her family's inheritance in the project. The workers are devoted, like her, to the care of the cows, but are clearly motivated and inspired by her example. Sudevi stated that her choice of practice came out of compassion and care for all living beings, "Whatever I do is in service of these living entities, this world or god". During my visit, an injured cow was brought to the goshala, and Sudevi quickly prioritized this emergency and gathered the workers to assist her in getting the cow medical attention. There was a strong sense of community which had been forged in the physical space and in the social domain of the goshala that I interpreted as an extension of the *bhakti* principle of *sangha*, which loosely means congregation, and an ethics of devotion and care. *Bhakti* is cultivated and nurtured in and within communities of devotees, and rarely in isolation. It is the shared experience of serving *Krishna*, his devotees and his land that links devotees to the values embedded in the bhakti way of life. Sudevi's engaged bhakti is an expression of the ethics of care, compassion, and justice. For her, bhakti is action in the form of compassion and care for the cows. Thus, in acting to create a community of healers and care givers, Sudevi shows her commitment to the bhakti principles of sangha and devotion.

Texts such as the *Manusmṛiti* describe how sadhus or renunciators should break all attachments to sedentary householder communities and wander; however, renunciators like Sudevi had formed a home and a community that rooted her spatially. I agree with Hausner, who argues that "Breaking away from the spaces of householder life means that renunciators need to find alternative locations through which to articulate community and different ways to think about space, home, movement, and mobility (Hausner 2007, p. 93). Rather than rejecting structure renunciators like Sudevi, we can create alternative structures like the goshala which constitutes its own community that displays its own hierarchy, discipline, and recognizable modes of social interaction. Victor Turner's famous work on liminality offers fresh insight into the nature of community amongst renunciators. Turner argues that, broadly speaking, "renouncer societies establish themselves as permanent buffers from- or counter to- householder society. Monastic orders, he suggests, are liminal communities that do not resolve back into social structure but rather take the form of institutions (Hausner 2007, p. 199). Using Turner's model, ethnographer, Robert Gross applies Turner's model to the Hindu renouncer community:

(U)nlike other rites of passage where liminality is but a temporary condition leading to incorporation into another recognized status in the social order, ascetic initiation, or ordination, establishes the sadhus in a perpetual liminal phase . . . the entire lifestyle of renunciation transforms the transitional phase of initiation into a more or less permanent state of liminality. (Gross 1992, p. 301)

While I agree that *sannyāsinīs* reproduced an alternative, parallel community, I think in the case of Sudevi and other renouncers, the communities they build are less liminal and more collaborative. Rather than being aberrant outsiders who exist in a liminal state of in-betweenness, distinct from the wider householder society, female renouncers such as Sudevi are constructing communities that cooperate with dominant social structures. To be clear, I think they are liminal and are deliberately separate from the householder ideal, but I think they hold more linkages to the householder and the larger society.

Sudevi's *saṁnyāsa* practice of serving the cows of *Braj* in her overcrowded goshala coupled with her strict diet and her periods of isolation exemplifies how she is merging bhakti and ascetic practices into a third form of renunciation: devotional asceticism which is foregrounded by the values of community, care, and compassion, and buttressed by traditional ascetic practices like sensory detachment and the renunciation of bodily needs.

### 6. Veshwari: Bhava Sannyāsinī

My second informant, (Veshwari 2019) was a 54-year-old Indian woman from Canada who had lived in Vrindavan for 23 years. For the past three years, she has lived in her current ashrama, Kevala Bhakti, meaning Only Bhakti. Kevala Bhakti is an ashrama made up of a few small makeshift buildings in the heart of Vrindavan behind the Iskcon complex. The ashram is home to more than twenty *sannyāsinīs* from varied cultural backgrounds. Many devotees appeared to be West expats but of Indian origin, like Veshwari. While some participants were unwilling to talk unless their guru gave permission, Veshwari was not only willing but spent a few hours sharing her life story with me. Veshwari was well spoken, assertive, and forthright about her experience as a female ascetic. She wore a bright yellow sari covering her head and tilak, or clay paint, on her forehead drawn in the form of two lines joined together at the bottom, indicating that she was a devotee of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Veshwari had graduated from McGill university in psychology, and had been married twice before taking *saṁnyāsa*. She had clearly had a normal life in Canada before beginning on her *saṁnyāsa* journey. She spoke to me in English after most of the devotees had retired from the morning lecture given by her guru, Kripala Maharaj. Like other renouncers, Veshwari started talking about her personal reasons for taking *saṁnyāsa*. She explained that, after discovering an infidelity in her marriage, she was compelled to seek a different life. She explained: "I wanted a spiritual master in physical form even though masters never leave. They are always with you. I am not at the level where I can communicate at that level, so the need was there. Rādhārāni made it happen. I was brought here by a friend and that is it". In her previous life, she explained that she was married twice, but had no children. "I came to this master and decided to live a renunciants life. I took renunciation. We shave our heads; we take diksha, we change our clothes (she wore a yellow sari); we live by simple means of begging, we eat in earthen pots. That's external. So, it's very close to being a *sannyāsinī* but in a *Vaiṣṇava* sect". She went further to explain that the two paths are separated: "In *saṁnyāsa*, they do state it is a state of mind. In *Vaiṣṇavism* it is a state of mind. But in *Vaiṣṇavism* there is a step ahead. It's like drinking water and lime. And then there is drinking water and lime with *honey*. There is a sweetness to it and hence the effect is different. Because it is *Vaiṣṇavism*, there is a sweetness to it which makes the mind play at the mind level but also keeps it entertained with *līlas* of god... So it's a pleasant play of the mind. My words may be completely challenged because I do not speak of shastra (scripture), she continued, but it is my *experience*". In addition to using the term *sannyāsinī*, Veshwari also referred to herself as *sakhi*. I found this intriguing since *sakhi* is a term derived from the bhakti vocabulary and denotes a person devoted to the divine couple, while *sannyāsinī* is an orthodox term derived from the *brāhminical* tradition. It seemed that Veshwari was combining terms from both frameworks to describe her identity.

According to her guru, there are two ways to do *saṁnyāsa*. Veshwari asserted: "One is the internal *saṁnyāsa* and one is the external *saṁnyāsa*. One can argue that the external *saṁnyāsa* is not needed. But until the external is done, the internal cannot begin. And once the internal begins, it will not need all the externals. It automatically falls off ...



when external *sannyāsinī* is achieved, it leads to an internal *sannyāsinī* and the internal subsumes the body". The inner and outer dimensions of *saṁnyāsa* was a prevailing theme in many discussions I had with practitioners and scholars on *saṁnyāsa*. What I understood by Veshwari's words was simpler. She was referring to the inner life as far superior than the externals which included dressing, food, and lifestyle. These, she emphasized, were relevant to a point but were not enough. They help prepare the practitioner for a *saṁnyāsa* mindset, but since they are external, they keep a person glued to an identification with the body. However, with time and practice, the outer gives way to an inner disposition that becomes second nature and forms a habit which is far richer and more important. Women can benefit enormously from this bifurcation, since if body (or gender) does not matter, then anyone could gain access to the goals and benefits of *saṁnyāsa*. When I asked Veshwari about gender differences, she continued with the same line of argument. She stated: "Internally there is no difference between male and female renunciation as a person needs to go beyond the body. There is no difference, and you are neither male nor female. You are neither. There is no need to compete". She told me she follows the rules laid down by *Manusmṛiti* in a perfunctory fashion. For instance, she covers her head, does not go out at night, and is chaste and modest. In this way, she seemed to pay homage to the tradition, conforming to society's expectations of her as a woman. However, she went further in what appeared to be a critique, claiming that gender need not matter since the goal of a *saṁnyāsa* was to transgress bodily identification. In this respect, her actions did perpetuate power structures since traditional gender roles and expectations governed how women in the ashrama comported themselves in their social lives, but in less obvious ways Veshwari demonstrated how the theology about the body could subvert the outer differences between men and women.

This was not the first time I heard the distinction made between internal and external forms of *saṁnyāsa*. A brief digression here would help provide a deeper analysis of the two. To obtain a diversity of views and perspectives in my fieldwork, I interviewed both practitioners and scholars. Dr. Babaji Satyanarayana Das from the Jiva Institute in Vrindavan (Satyanarayana 2019) is a scholar of Sanskrit, who conducts workshops and publishes books on Indian philosophy; he provided a fresh point of view when I asked about the dissonance, I observed between *brāhminical* and female renunciation practices. He explained that the ideal of *saṁnyāsa* was dictated by the orthodox tradition evolved with Sri Chaitanya, who did away with many formalities commonly associated with the *saṁnyāsa* stage of life. Instead, he contends that Sri Chaitanya introduced, though not formally, two sides to the *saṁnyāsa* ideal: an inner *saṁnyāsa* known as *bhāva saṁnyāsa* (*bhāva* means mood), and an outer *saṁnyāsa* or householder/*grihasta saṁnyāsa*. This implies that the *saṁnyāsa* category was a malleable principle that could be shaped into multiple forms and modalities depending on individual preferences, social status, family issues, and religious tradition. With this bifurcation, a person could outwardly act as a householder (or a woman, for that matter) and still cultivate an inner *saṁnyāsa* identity which did not require validations from the larger society ruled by *varṇāśrama* norms. Put another way, the *varṇāśrama* social rules imposed on women could still be upheld while the *saṁnyāsa* mood was manifested internally in the heart and mind. Furthermore, the *varṇāśrama* system stipulates that each of the four stages of life: *brahmacharya*, *gṛhasthī*, *vanaprastha*, and *saṁnyāsa* should occur in sequence, because each one is considered a steppingstone for the next stage. However, a dual *saṁnyāsa* model would entail those stages of life that could be lived simultaneously, rather than only sequentially, so that one could embody more than one ashrama identity as long as one outwardly upheld the normative values and duties associated with their external identity.

There are historical examples of this dualistic *saṁnyāsa* model. In her article, *Three Vaiṣṇava Poetess-Saints*, Sanjukta Gupta provides a vivid historical example of Bahina Bai from Maharashtra. We are told, based on her autobiography, that Bahina Bai was born in northern Maharashtra in the seventeenth century during a time of surge in *Vaiṣṇava* devotionality in the region. Married at the age of 13, "she acquired a taste for the hymns

of Tukrama and started attending the congregations where they were sung...Extraordinary things happened to her, bringing her public attention". (Gupta 2019, p. 204). This greatly upset her husband because she had "broken the rules laid down for a brahmin wife and brought shame to the family". (Gupta 2019, p. 204). What comes next implies a paradigm shift. Gupta writes: "She solved the outward clash with her husband—by totally internalizing her religious activities. She dreamt that Tukrama came and initiated her with the six-syllable *Vaiṣṇava* mantra. As a result, she was able to reconcile herself to staying at home as a humble wife and to curbing her desire to visit temples and so on. She played the dutiful wife while mentally renouncing all attachment to life". (Gupta 2019, p. 205). This historical example demonstrates that, despite the lack of an ideological paradigm for female ascetics at the time, woman like Bahima Bai were active agents of their own constructs. So often we view woman as merely passive victims of an oppressive ideology such as the *varṇāśrama dharma* paradigm, but a careful evaluation of the religious experiences of women can reveal much more. Bahima Bai occupied two identities; she was outwardly carrying out her duties as a wife, and thus upholding her dharmic responsibilities, but internally she was absorbed in the mood or *bhāva* of a *saṁnyāsa*. These historical and theoretical considerations shed light on Veshwari's distinction between *brāhminical* and *Vaiṣṇava* forms of *saṁnyāsa*.

Another layer of analysis may be added here to deepen our understanding of *bhāva saṁnyāsa* and the "sweetness" that characterizes its nature. The Sanskrit word *bhāva* comes from the verbal root *bhū* meaning, "becoming or being" (Monier-Williams). *Bhāva* takes on many meanings based on context; it can simply be used to express the word "emotion", or an emotion. It is also used to designate the act of causing, generating, or creating emotion, or an emotional state. *Bhāva* is often conjoined with the word, *rasa* meaning to "taste, flavor, relish, essence or juice" (Monier-Williams). It is the experience of enjoying the flavor or essence of something. *Rasa*, for example, is the experience of savoring a good meal. *Bhāva* causes *rasa*; it is the ability or cause that brings about the experience of an emotion. Chaitanya's disciples developed an aesthetic theology that included *bhakti-rasa* as type of *rasa*. *Bhakti rasa* is "an experience of transcendental bliss triggered by the devotee's inner realization of the emotional bond between *Rādhā* and *Krishna*" (Johnson 2010). It is also described a religious ecstasy. To overlay these principles onto the idea of *bhāva saṁnyāsa*, it could be argued that those experiencing *bhāva saṁnyāsa* relish the mood or sweetness of *bhakti-rasa*. The *rasa* in *bhakti* is sweet; a transcendental ecstasy that comes from partaking in and experiencing the divine love of *Rādhā* and *Krishna*. Thus, outwardly, a practitioner displays the markers of orthodox *saṁnyāsa*, wearing saffron clothes, renouncing physical, sensory, and material pleasures. Inwardly, however, the *rasa* is different; the devotee engages in relishing the sweet ecstasy of divine love. I have termed this form of renunciation as devotional asceticism because it combines ascetic practices and ideologies with the inner "sweetness" of *bhakti-rasa*. *Rasa* is the key ingredient that distinguishes this form of devotional renunciation that allows the practitioner in savoring the essence of transcendental divine love.

In almost every narrative I heard, the *guru* was the route to spiritual awakening. In the words of Veshwari, the *guru* is, "The inner thread that binds us is the connection to the *guru*. Individually these connections (referring to other people) are not important. As the only important relationship is the one with Him (*guru*)". She used the word exclusivity to describe how she lives within the boundary of what her *guru* says, careful not to step outside that boundary in order to remain protected and safe. Applying the analogy of a parent imposing restrictions on a child for their protection, she explained the student-*guru* relationship as follows: "They are imposed out of love. These are not rules. The *guru* holds you, carries you". She pointed out that she officially belongs to the *Rādhā Vallabha* sect (another *bhakti* sect), but she is not committed to any specific *sampradāya* as her current *guru* is from the *Gaudiya* sect. This unifying role of the *guru* is a shared value in most Hindu renunciant schools. In subtle and informal ways, however, Veshwari demonstrated her agency and resistance from the hegemonic power structures of the *brāhminical* tradition.

She said at the end of her interview with me, “I chose this path,” then added “and God chose me”. Okely argues that we should look for resistance at the crevices of verbalized activities (Okely 1991, p. 8). In pronouncing her choice, Veshwari was exercising her free will. Like Sudevi, Veshwari demonstrated strong links to the role of *guru* and its relationship to the *brāhminical* tradition. Both asserted the need for a spiritual guide which connected them to shared social and religious norms and ideals, but interestingly both consider their affiliation to *sampradaya*<sup>8</sup> to be irrelevant. They did not acknowledge the doctrinal differences between *sampradāyas* and they did not share the exclusivism evident in texts and within the tradition. Their sense of identity as a *sannyāsini* thus is drawn from their relationship to their individual *gurus* rather than to the *sampradāya* itself. Sudevi demonstrated her agency in selecting a *diksha guru* whom she said “was very realized and highly qualified” regardless of *sampradāya*. Similarly, Veshwari too discounted the need to adhere to *sampradāya* delineations and chose a *guru* based on her preference and needs.

### 7. Gauri: Gopi as Saṃyāsini

My third informant’s life story and personal goals represent a different kind of contemporary renouncer (Gauri 2019). Gauri may be described, to use Vasudha Narayana’s distinction, as an ascetic but not a *samyāsini*, because she has not performed the initiatory rite of *sannyāsa* but lives and describes herself as a *gopi*, one of the divine companions of *Rādhā* and *Krishna*. In Sanskrit, *Gopi* comes from the root ‘*Gop*’ meaning hidden or secret. Gauri is a shy, soft-spoken, seventy-nine-year-old Indian woman from a rural region in Punjab. She lives in *Rādhā Kunda*<sup>9</sup> in her own home. Her home was made up of two small rooms: a bedroom, and the front room which was furnished with an impressive altar of deity images and a small sitting area. Unlike my other informants, Gauri did not dress in saffron clothes, the traditional color of renunciation, nor was she affiliated with any ashrama or religious institution. She lives alone, subsisting on some financial support from her family in Delhi and a small pension. She speaks Hindi, Bengali, a bit of Sanskrit, and her native language, Punjabi. During our conversation, she spoke primarily in Hindi. She was born in the state of Punjab in 1941, and in 1947 moved to Vrindavan with her parents when she was six years old, and has lived in Vrindavan ever since. She was interested in education and earned a scholarship, completing her M.A in political science. After her graduation, she started to work as a teacher at a school in Vrindavan. She never married. Gauri credits her mother and her guru for showing her the way. At age 42, realizing she had no need for wealth and no dependents, she resigned from her job as a teacher and supported herself with the small pension she receives. She gave up all worldly responsibilities to live as an ascetic.

What struck me during my brief interview with Gauri were her thoughts about renunciation. She explained it to me as follows: “What is *sannyāsa*?” She asked. “It means to give up the world. There should be *sannyāsa* in the heart, from inside. Our *sannyāsini rūpa* or form is private. It is not advertised to everyone”. She referred to herself as a *gopi*, a companion of the divine couple, *Rādhā* and *Krishna*. In his book, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, David Haberman explores a method of religious realization known as *raganuga bhakti sādhanā*, a technique developed by *Rūpa Goswāmī*<sup>10</sup> in which the devotee enters into the eternal drama or *lila* of *Krishna* and his associates in *Vraja/Braj* by assuming a particular role in that drama. Intriguingly, he explains how male practitioners embody the inner female roles they assume. He claims that, by identifying with a paradigmatic figure in *Krishna*’s world, the practitioner is liberated from ordinary constraints of society (Haberman and Vatsyayan 1988, p. 155). By claiming that a devotee is encouraged to cultivate an internal spiritual identity modeled after a paradigmatic individual, Haberman points to the formation of more than one identity in the practice of *raganuga bhakti sādhanā*, a mundane external identity and an internal one mirrored after a spiritual paradigmatic individual in *Krishna*’s divine drama. Thus, when Gauri describes her *sannyāsini rūpa* as one that is secret and private, she is alluding to this theological explanation. While there is no doubt that *raganuga*’s *sādhanā* was designed primarily for men who could embody

female subjectivities, in the case of Gauri there is a reversal of this theological system allowing female practitioners to use theology to overcome restrictions placed upon them as female ascetics. If society prevents them from living out their ascetic proclivities, the theology provides a loophole so that they can internally live as a *sannyāsini* while outwardly upholding societal rules and the restrictions placed upon them as women.

Furthermore, Gauri's *gopi* identity emphasizes the sweet devotion and inner spirituality that pervades all three narratives of renunciation. In general, a *gopi* is a handmaiden to the divine couple who serves without seeking pleasure for herself. In highly advanced forms of *raganuga bhakti*, a devotee exercises *manjari sādhanā*; in this esoteric practice, a devotee is a *manjari*. A *manjari* is a "bud," a young woman who finds her "existential essence in the role of a passionate handmaiden (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 87)". She identifies with the intense emotions experienced by *Rādhā* and the *gopis* which ultimately engenders an ecstatic experience of devotion in the imagination.<sup>11</sup> According to Sarbadhikary's account, "*Goswamis* and *babajis*<sup>12</sup> claim an exalted form of imaginative participation in divine activities such that the sexual dalliances itself is reserved to deities, while they imagine their spiritual selves as the deities' handmaidens, witnessing and serving them during their sexual play in imagination-Vrindavan and deriving the utmost sensual pleasures therefrom (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 73)". She calls this a form of imaginative devotion (72). Gauri's use of the term *gopi* to describe herself is packed with meaning and points to the passion, femininity, and inner spirituality at the heart of the *Bengali Vaishnava* school; this is in stark contrast to the purpose of orthodox renunciation. The *manjari sādhanā*, like most renunciation practices seeks ego-effacement and a lack of self-gratification, yet the goal, unlike traditional renunciation, is not complete self-erasure. This is one of the biggest differences between traditional renunciation and *bhakti* renunciation. In Sarbadhikary's words, "*Vaishnavism* is a religion of the passions, and it celebrates the body's feeling capacities. It asserts that without intense emotions neither *Krishna* nor *Vrindavan* can be apprehended (74)". The self is there, and the embodied experience is a requisite tool for achieving the desired end, whereas in other forms of renunciation, the annihilation of the self is the end goal. "In general, *bhakti* traditions do not view renunciation as a final detachment from the world but rather as a definite attachment to one's devotional object (74)".

In sum, it was clear when listening to Gauri and witnessing her humble demeanor that she felt uncomfortable drawing attention to herself as a *sannyāsini*. This was a way perhaps of distancing herself from the larger orthodox *sannyāsa* tradition. By disavowing this normative label, she was seeking to carve out, albeit unconsciously, a space where she could cultivate her own identity. In this way, *Vaishnavis* I encountered, including Veshwari, were often seen borrowing from the same discursive tenets and terminology of Bengali Vaishnavism but emphasizing different interpretations such as *gopi* or *sakhi*. The differing ways in which asceticism and devotion are cultivated and affectively experienced demonstrates the significant ways in which renunciation is embodied and articulated by renunciators. Thus, any categorization, whether ascetic, *sannyāsini*, *gopi*, *sakhi*, or *bhāva sannyāsini* is problematic and underscores the complexity and plurality of female renunciant subjectivities in contemporary Vrindavan.

## 8. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to spotlight the personal lives of female renunciators in the *Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava* sect which has, to date, received little attention. To shift our attention from texts, this ethnographic study used interviews and personal observations from three ascetics living in Vrindavan to observe how they reflect on their own lives and experiences as renunciators. How do they articulate, perform and interpret their lives as renunciators? How do they respond to patriarchal paradigms of womanhood outlined in the *brāhminical* tradition? How do they combine and perform both *bhakti* and ascetic practices in their daily lives?

Just as living practices do not always conform to textual exhortations, the *sannyāsini*s/ascetics I encountered in my fieldwork walked a tightrope between complicity and sub-



version. When women act with agency and transgress boundaries, their actions can either subvert or perpetuated power structures. Sangari (1993) argues that, in analyzing particular acts of women's agency for its potential subversion and complicity, we must consider both social practices and discursive modes, or, more importantly, look at the relationship between the two. This is a helpful way to proceed. When it came to their views about gurus, female ascetics were complicit in given value to the role of the guru which marked the beginning of a renouncer's life. It is important to note though that women are not flagrantly and loudly critiquing the orthodox tradition. For the most part, women are quietly doing their own thing. As Ojha points out, women ascetics are rebels but not revolutionaries (Ojha 1981, p. 280). They are complying with society's expectations of them, but at other times they are discursively subverting it.

My empirical data also illustrated ways in which female renunciants are departing from and even creatively interpreting wider traditions on their own terms. For instance, ideological divisions blur and contemporary renunciants blend elements of different *sampradāyas* and terminology. Veshwari used both the words 'sakhī' and 'sannyāsini' when describing herself, showing how she located herself in both *Vaiṣṇava* and *brāhminical* frameworks. Additionally, two of my informants were affiliated to more than one *sampradāya* through initiation. Veshwari belonged to both the *Gauḍiyya* and *Rādhā Vallabha sampradāyas*, while Sudevi belonged to the *Gauḍiyya sampradāya* but took initiation from someone outside the sect. This illustrates the amorphous and anti-institutional quality of renunciation found amongst women that provides practitioners with more agency and freedom to determine how and under whom they wish to seek spiritual guidance. A lack of allegiance to lineage was another place where women showed resistance. Dominant hegemonic forms do exist and exert control on female renunciants, but there are also signs illustrating how women are attempting to subvert them. The actions and articulations of two of my informants illuminates an example of intermittent resistance, thwarting homogenization into a single *sampradāya* and simultaneously exerting agency in determining their guru and path.

Finally, the ethnographic data showed that there was a lot of diversity amongst female renunciants in the way they identified themselves, how they practiced, lived, dressed, and worked. Female renunciants were more likely to tailor their renunciation to their individual needs and preferences. Each woman customized and articulated what renunciation meant to her in words and actions. This meant that classifying and categorizing them into types was not easy. Even within the two types provided by Vasudha Narayanan—*saṁnyāsa* and ascetic—there was still plenty of variation. For instance, Veshwari had formally renounced the world and identified herself as a *sannyāsini*; she lives in a traditional ashrama with a community of devotees. Sudevi, on the other hand, had also officially taken *saṁnyāsa* but lived independently and provided cow *sevā* by managing a goshala. So even though the term *sannyāsini* suggests a monolithic form, in reality, this was not the case. Finally, Gauri could be called an ascetic because she performs practices that an ascetic traditionally carries out; however, she has not formally accepted *saṁnyāsa*, nor did she feel comfortable with this label. She quietly devotes her time to *bhājan* (quiet chanting) and *kīrtan* (congregational chanting), but had intentionally renounced her work and family attachments. A focus on independent *sannyāsini*s thus conveys a sense of heterogeneity amongst practitioners in the Chaitanyaite school.

I call the form of gendered renunciation I encountered in my field, devotional asceticism; it is a "sweeter" form of asceticism that foregrounds the values of community, care, compassion, and living in the world, which evolves from the *bhakti* principles. *Bhakti* emphasizes the importance of connecting to the deity of Krishna on an emotional level. Unconditional love for Sri Krishna is the goal of the *bhakti* path. By caring for others and the active participation in the world, a devotee develops love for Sri Krishna because all things are a manifestation of the divine. So, caring for the cows and supporting other devotees in their devotional life helps a devotee nurture a connection to the divine. These sweeter principles permeate and shape the form of devotional asceticism practiced by renunciants. The emphasis on "sweetness", which gives color to stoicism, and "blandness",



which commonly characterizes the detached form of renunciation found in the scriptures, is paramount.

Female renouncers are a diverse group that are negotiating the meaning of *saṁnyāsa* in innovative ways. Using principles and practices from bhakti and asceticism, they are creating a form of devotional asceticism which highlights worldly engagement, care, community, and service.

**Funding:** This research has been funded by Zayed University's Research Incentive Grant (R18079) from 2018–2020.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Full ethical clearance was obtained from Citiprogram.org on 31 October 2018. Record ID: 29294563.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data is stored in digital form with the researcher.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 The Sanskrit term *saṁnyāsāśrama* (the Path of renunciation) is shortened in daily conversation to *saṁnyāsa* (Hindi *saṁnyāsa*, pronounced *sannyās*). (*Sannyāsini* refers to male renouncers, *Sannyāsini* refers to female renouncers, plural form, *sannyāsini*).
- 2 The author is cognizant that this implies there is only one representation of women hood in the orthodox tradition.
- 3 There are several names given to this sect: Chaitanya Vaishnavism (founder), Bengali or Gaudiya Vaishnavism refer to the place where the sect originates. All terms refer to the same sect and are used interchangeably here.
- 4 I am grateful to the generous funding by Zayed University and the Research Incentive Grant for this project. Proper ethical clearance was obtained before fieldwork commenced. Work halted in 2020 due to the pandemic so the ethnographic material presented here is limited. The researcher hopes to resume her work in 2022.
- 5 The researcher is fluent in Hindi.
- 6 A local translator was employed to help translate the Brajbasis into English.
- 7 Generic term for renouncers in the Hindu tradition.
- 8 The primary meaning of the word *sampradāya* is 'traditional handing down of instruction'. It is inextricably linked to the system of *parampara* which means 'uninterrupted series, succession'.
- 9 Radha Kunda is a holy site dedicated to the divine consort of Sri Krishna, Rādhārāni.
- 10 A key disciple of Sri Chaitanya who systematized the Vaishnava philosophy.
- 11 See Sukanya Sarbadhikary's Place of Devotion pg. 70–75 for more on this practice.
- 12 High advanced male bhaktas or devotees.

## References

- Gauri. 2019. Interviewed by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, March 21–25.
- Gross, Robert Lewis. 1992. *The Sadhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Gupta, Sanjukta. 2019. Three Vaiṣṇava Poetress-Saints. In *The Alvars: Brief History of Vaiṣṇava Saint Poets*. Edited by Prakashan Jayaraman. New Delhi: Vani Book Company.
- Haberman, David, and Kapila Vatsyayan, trans. 1988. *Acting as a Way of Salvation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hausner, Sondra L. 2007. *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, William. 2010. *A Dictionary of Hinduism (Oxford Quick Reference)*, 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaelber, Walter O. 1986. Asceticism. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, pp. 441–5.
- Khandelwal, Meena, Sondra L. Hausner, and Ann Grodzin Gold, eds. 2006. *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Monier-Williams, Monier. 1993. *An English-Sanskrit Dictionary*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Narayanan, Vasudha. 1995. Renunciation and Gender Issues in the Sri Vaiṣṇava Community. In *Asceticism*. Edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Novetzke, Christian Lee. 2007. Bhakti and its Public. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11: 255–72. [CrossRef]
- Ojha, Catherine. 1981. Feminine Asceticism in Hinduism: Its Tradition and Present Condition. *Man in India* 61: 254–85.
- Okely, Judith. 1991. Defiant Moments: Gender, Resistance and Individuals. *Man* 26: 3–22. [CrossRef]
- Sangari, Kumkum. 1993. Consent, Agency, and Rhetorics of Incitement. *Economic and Political Weekly* 28: 867–82.

- 
- Sarbadhikary, Sukanya. 2015. *The Place of Devotion: Sitting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Satyanarayana, Das. 2019. Interviewed by author. Babaji (Jiva Institute). March 20.
- Sharma, Krishna. 1987. *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective*. New Delhi: Munshirram Manoharlal.
- Sudevi. 2019. Interviewed by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, March 22–24.
- Vanita, Ruth. 2003. The Self Is Not Gendered: Sulabha's Debate with King Janaka. *NWSA Journal* 15: 76–93. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Veshwari. 2019. Interviewed by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, March 23–26.