

## Staying in Place: The Social Actions of Hindu *Yoginīs*

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*Yogīs* in South Asia are known as wanderers who live in no fixed location. Wandering is supposed to loosen ties with the material world, and cultivate detachment and religious knowledge in Hindu renouncers. In both religious text and popular legend, *yogīs* are supposed to wander through the countryside for all but the four rainy months of the year, spending no more than one night in a place and eating what food is given. They should possess only a blanket, a water-pot, and a staff to ward off wild animals.<sup>1</sup>

During my fieldwork, however, I found that most renouncers do actually base themselves in particular places.<sup>2</sup> On occasion, they depart to visit a pilgrimage destination or to attend a religious festival, but when they do, they leave a base behind, sometimes with a padlock on the door, signifying eventual but certain return. The words for “home” in Hindi and Nepali are certainly shunned by renouncers, who speak, instead, of their “seats” (*āsan*), or their “places” (*sthān*). But *yogīs* and *yoginīs* use their seats as home bases, and they interact with members of local communities as long-term and active residents.

In this paper, I look at the lives of women *yogīs*, or *yoginīs*, in the lower Himalayan region of North India and Nepal. I argue that contrary to popular legend, women renouncers do not wander perpetually between holy sites, but tend to settle in communities, and when they do, they often contribute to their new local communities in ways reminiscent of householder women. Although *yoginīs* consciously leave behind normative householder social structures, they still feed people, protect children, and teach religious values in their new roles as renouncers.

Being a woman renouncer, therefore, both reflects and defies women’s roles in householder communities. Women renouncers do not necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> See Doniger (1991) and Olivelle (1992) for good examples of textual requirements for renouncers. This imagery occurs throughout classical Indian philosophy and literature.

<sup>2</sup> My fieldwork with contemporary Hindu *yogīs* and *yoginīs* was conducted in Nepal and India between 1997 and 2001. I worked closely with three individual renouncers, two women and one man, at their bases in Kathmandu, Hardwar, and Allahabad. In addition, I spoke with hundreds of renouncers over the course of my travels to multiple Himalayan pilgrimage sites and important festival occasions.

wander to accrue religious power, but they do leave their natal and marital homes and find new places to settle as full-time religious practitioners. And in their new communities, women renouncers use their sedentary seats as bases from which to care for people. They do not reject the world but immerse themselves in it, using the religious power with which they are bestowed for the benefit of others.

One premise of my paper is that *yoginīs* use renunciation as a way to move out of stifling home communities. Once they have moved into new locations as renouncers, they support and are supported by the lay Hindu communities that are now their own. But in a new place, and with the new status (ambivalent though it may be) of renouncer, the caring, feeding work of women has a very different resonance. In their new locations, women renouncers do the things that women are supposed to do, but they do them as *yoginīs*, rather than as wives.

In the four sections that follow, I try to show how renunciation is simultaneously about departure and stasis, for different social reasons and with different social results. First, I describe Rādhā Giri, a fiercely independent and staunchly sedentary *yoginī* I met during fieldwork. Rādhā Giri's story clearly shows how staying in place can be translated into social activism for women renouncers. Second, I review the reasons *sādhus* are supposed to wander and, by contrast, I describe the sedentary choices made by the renouncers with whom I worked. Third, I look at the ways renouncers use staying in place to be active in their communities. And finally, I look at how *yoginīs* depart from their householder roles – literally and metaphorically – and recreate them in new settings.

### **Fierce, sedentary Rādhā Giri**

I met Rādhā Giri at the 1998 Kumbh Melā, a massive Hindu religious festival, in Hardwar, Uttar Pradesh, and I visited her often when I returned to Hardwar in 2000.<sup>3</sup> A fiercely independent *sādhvī*, or woman *sādhu*, she was rumoured to have magical powers, and she brooked no disrespect towards or disobedience of the rules she had established around her small quarters on the riverbank.<sup>4</sup> Rādhā Māī, or Mātājī, as she was more commonly known, had lived in a tent on a small island in the Ganges River for almost twenty-five years. Hardwar is one of the most popular pilgrimage

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<sup>3</sup> The two northernmost regions of Uttar Pradesh, Garhwal and Kumaon, together became the new state of Uttaranchal on November 9, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> See Lamb (2000) on the powers of women who fall outside of householder norms. Also see Lochtefeld (1992) for another account of Rādhā Giri's charisma.

places in South Asia,<sup>5</sup> and pilgrim traffic is heavy along the river, which passes directly in front of Rādhā Māī's place.

Rādhā Māī was well known for her feisty temper – I heard she was a witch – and also for the unforgiving manner with which she ruled her small stretch of Ganges riverbank. She was a well-respected figure among members of the Hardwar renouncer community (including the men), and among members of the poor local community, who made their living selling trinkets to visiting pilgrims. A steady flow of both Hardwar residents and local and travelling renouncers passed through her place, and I used my visits to her tent as a way to meet other *yogīs*, hear the pilgrimage stories that both *sādhus* and lay Hindus were eager to tell, and watch pilgrims pay their respects to Rādhā Giri's place and to the river.

Mātājī was neither particularly interested in my interview questions nor particularly verbal, but she was welcoming. I soon learned, however, that when people acted in ways she found inappropriate or disrespectful, she would become enraged, and lecture them in a tirade on how to behave properly in the future. On one occasion, I watched her shout at pilgrims who were treating a child unkindly – she dashed out of her tent with her arms flailing, screaming that such behaviour was patently unreligious and that the perpetrators should never come near her place again. I learned quickly to follow her instructions, and closely adhere to the code of proper behaviour she demanded at her place on the riverbank.

Rādhā Giri was reticent about her background, a tendency that was quite common in my conversations with renouncers. But over time I did learn that she had been raised and married in the Himalayan area of Kumaon. She had left her marriage – I wondered if her fiery character had contributed to her unwillingness to play the part of subordinate wife – and followed a guru to Hardwar, where she had lived on the riverbank ever since. She was clearly motivated by religious duty, for she unfailingly paid her daily homage to the river and meticulously maintained the altars around the trees under which she lived, although her tent was rather scruffy.

Rādhā Māī's sedentary quarters were an early indication to me that *yogīs* do not necessarily spend all their time wandering. Māī's style also showed me what staying in place affords renouncers, and how they use the religious power accorded them by local communities for the benefit of those communities. Mātājī sat guard over her island, and she used her power as a local *yoginī* to make sure that people whom she saw as powerless were properly treated. Living in one place was the way Rādhā Giri consolidated her power in and for the local riverbank community. Her social protections

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<sup>5</sup> See Bhardwaj (1973) for an informative breakdown of pilgrimage statistics. Hardwar is popular in part because it is the entry point for the *Cār Dhām*, the four Himalayan sites that are the sources of the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers.

efforts were usually directed to women, children, and dogs – creatures in the most need of defence. She mothered the children of the neighbourhood, scolding them gently when they misbehaved. She provided work and meals to a madwoman from the area. And she provided shelter for most of the neighbourhood dogs, who slept in or near her tent. In one instance, a young man from the area playfully pulled a leaf off the *pīpal* tree under which she lived. Mātājī, as protector of place, sternly but patiently explained that he must never disrespect a holy tree, especially in the presence of Mother Ganges. And on more than one occasion, she wrathfully drove away men whom she felt were questioning me too eagerly, telling them that unless they came for reasons of religion, they were not to come at all.

Most notably, since about 1996, Rādhā Giri has reared a small girl child, whom she named Gaṅgā Giri. The story goes that she found the newborn baby floating down the Ganges in a banana-leaf basket, and saved her life. The mythical rendering of how she came to raise the abandoned child deliberately refers to the river that flows in front of her place. The child arrived in her domain, buoyed by the sacred waters of the Ganges, and Rādhā Māi had no choice but to take her in. She refused to hand the child over to state authorities who wanted to take Gaṅgā to an orphanage – the baby had arrived in front of her doorstep, or tentflap as the case may be, and she would care for it.

Māi was a highly unusual mother figure, to be sure, closer to the age of the child's grandmother than its mother, and more concerned with the bare survival of the child than with any kind of long-term planning for school or for marriage. Feeding the child and tending to her medical needs seemed to be all Māi could afford or cope with. But as a woman, she told me, she felt responsible for the people around her, and all those powerless creatures who found their way to her tent, be they lost anthropologists or helpless infants.

Rādhā Giri was fiercely sedentary, as she was fierce in most of her actions. Her seat in the small tent was by a sacred fire, or *dhūnī*, beneath two large trees and across from the sacred river. Since the time she took over this spot from a different renouncer who had vacated it – thereby becoming the resident *yoginī* of the area – she had not lived away from the island. She refused to leave even during the massive Kumbh Melā festivals in Hardwar, when state authorities had asked her to move into the *sādhu* camps in the city proper, with the other women renouncers. “Once,” Māi defiantly told me, “I moved upriver.” But that was for two weeks only, and apart from that single occasion, the place between the two trees was her seat, and she would not budge.

### Moving through space and staying in place

Renouncers who live in one place disrupt one of the most popular images of asceticism. The *Samṇyāsa Upaniṣads* propose strict guidelines for the real ascetic: no more than one night must be spent in a village, no more than three in a town, and no more than five in a city.<sup>6</sup> These rules seem carefully calibrated to population size: they demand a very low ratio of nights per place in order to prohibit extended social contact, which might lead a renouncer to become attached to the people who live in a particular place. Place is one of the primary ways people become attached to one another, the texts suggest, and wandering is designed precisely to remove the threads of social connection.

The image of the wandering renouncer is powerful because it implies that *yogīs* leave places where householders live in illusion-filled homes. The symbolic act of wandering insists that *sādhus* have broken free from the spatial constraints of social life. Since they have no place in which they are rooted, and no location through which they are governed or socialized, wanderers live outside the social fray.<sup>7</sup> Wandering has always been part of *sādhu* life: the excitement and freedom of travel is one of the prerogatives of what for many is an otherwise difficult life choice.

Real-life renouncers are different from textual ideals in many ways, but the ideal of the wandering *sādhu* has had a particularly firm grasp in the public imagination. Even authors who have been instrumental in pointing out how renunciation does not fit into textual models – like Kirin Narayan, who eloquently deconstructs even that famed opposition between renunciation and caste society (1989) – emphasize the idea that householders are sedentary and renouncers are not.<sup>8</sup> But almost all renouncers I met – both men and women – were sedentary, and many told me that moving around was plainly counterproductive, since it distracted them from regular religious practice.

The circumstances of sedentariness varied among the renouncers I met. Some, like Rādhā Giri, moved to the places where their gurus had lived. Others found an ashram in a holy place, where they felt protected from the very difficult householder lives they had left behind. Some renouncers lived in a particular temple; some lived in a small room or *kuṭī*, which was affiliated with a temple or an ashram; many lived at a *dhūnī*, or sacred fire-

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<sup>6</sup> See Olivelle (1992) for the details of *saṃnyāsī* sleeping requirements, and the way they shift over time in the classical literature.

<sup>7</sup> See Freitag (1985) on how wandering renouncers may have frustrated British colonial officers, who could not govern people unrooted in space.

<sup>8</sup> Gross is the only ethnographer who emphasizes that many *sādhus* “are part-time itinerant wanderers having some sort of semi-permanent residence from which they make a number of pilgrimages throughout the year” (1992: 126).

pit. Traditionally, I was told, a *sādhu* should sleep under a tree or in a temple, but the *yogī* seats that I saw varied widely: caves, ashrams, *dhūnīs*, hotel rooms, apartments, tea shops, riverbanks, huts, tents, or *kuṭīs* in residential courtyards or temple complexes, made of stone, concrete, straw, brick, or wood, all served as bases for *sādhus* I knew. Most renouncer seats waved the small triangular red flag that also flies from temples, a public symbol of religious activity.

A *yogī*'s place is certainly not a *ghar*, however, which is an exclusively householder term for 'house' or 'home' in both Hindi and Nepali. My informants used the word *āsan* to refer to the specific places where they lived. From the Sanskrit verb *ās-*, 'to sit', 'to stay', or 'to live', *āsan* means seat. Renouncers' seats – sometimes literally marked by a small portable rug or deerskin – are the places they stay unless they are travelling to festivals or moving on pilgrimage. *Āsan* refers to both an external seat and to the internal seat or balance of the body. (Physical yoga postures are called *āsanas*, because *yogīs* are instructed to use their bodies to maintain the steadiness of a pose.) Through this language, renouncers differentiate their bases and places from those of householders: their dwellings are not homes, but mobile places of meditation.

Many renouncers choose to live in pilgrimage places, since these are holy locations infused with both a history of powerful religious practice and an infrastructure that will provide material sustenance, given a steady flow of pilgrims ready to support religious practitioners. Any place holy and convenient could be a *sādhu* seat, and sometimes a good spot recently vacated would be quickly re-occupied by another *sādhu*. When I asked Rādhā Giri why she had chosen to live in Hardwar, she thought it was a ridiculous question. "Where do you want me to live?" she retorted. "The railroad station?" The idea that a *yogī* should be transient rather than live within a community (or that a renouncer would choose a particular place, rather than accept her karmic destiny) seemed absurd in her view. Transience ran counter to her core ideas about the purpose of renunciation.

### **Meditation through action**

Despite the popular image of the wandering *yogī*, there is a long-standing tradition of respect for renouncers who stay in one place. Staying put means *yogīs* can do their religious practice (*sādhana*) and publicly receive and bless pilgrims. The places where renowned saints live usually take on religious significance. Two renouncers with whom I lived in the Ganges Valley for a few days told me with pride how their Rishikesh-based guru never left his ashram – or even his cave – while he was alive, even to cross the bridge into the main town. Certainly pilgrims who visited Rādhā Giri's

small island paid homage to the altars under her trees without fail. One local man offered incense to the river and to Māī's altar every evening.

Some of the sedentary women renouncers I met wished for isolation, wanting to do their religious practice undisturbed. But for others, staying in place meant that rather than detach from society, they became active, vigorous participants in it, on their own terms and in their own ways. Popular legends about *yogīs* explicitly refer to their community participation – renouncers are known as healers, religious story-tellers, and compassionate ritualists. As Narayan writes, “Ironically, the act of renunciation may in fact push an ascetic into more extensive social involvement than if he or she remained a layperson” (1989: 74).

In Rādhā Giri's interactions with the local community, we see exactly the kind of social engagement that the texts caution against: relationships, emotional involvements, parenthood, and an ongoing system of exchange between a renouncer and the residents of a particular place. A Hindu renouncer's religious practice is supposed to focus on liberating the Self, not improving society. *Yogīs* are supposed to be socially detached, not socially engaged. But Rādhā Giri interpreted her religious practice as a kind of community activism. Her fiery judgements of both pilgrim and resident behaviour were a way of protecting people – particularly the downtrodden – in her area. Shouting at householder men – an action that might be written off as *yogī* madness – was, for Rādhā Giri, a way to protect a woman or child who was treated badly.

In turn, Māī was accepted by the local community, and was allowed and encouraged to remain sedentary. (By contrast, one *yogī* I knew was run out of town for improperly treating local women in the community in which he lived.) Rādhā Giri's *dhūnī* was treated as a safe and holy place, where children came to play and neighbourhood residents came to offer incense and receive blessings during the evening rituals. By supporting the community through her protective behaviour, she was entrusted with religious power, which she in turn used to make sure people were treated well. Her social efforts were place-specific, even though as a renouncer she was precisely supposed to avoid staying in place. She held her place in the community by actively participating in it.

Rādhā Giri was a rather unique *yoginī*, but the way she cared for people in a single location was reflected by many other *yoginīs* I met or heard about. A *sādhvī* named Tapovan Mā abandoned her solitary ascetic practices at the 14,000-foot base camp of the mountain Shiv Ling when her health started to fail, and doctors encouraged her to live at a lower and warmer altitude. She moved to a town a few hours' drive down the mountain valley, and changed her severe, isolated *tapas*, or yogic discipline, into a practice of feeding people daily. A Western renouncer I met used her ashram home-base to feed the entire local community of renouncers each evening. Another

raised funds to create an ashram high in the mountains where renouncers who needed a place of respite could continue their religious practice and study. (This woman was actually concerned that by creating an ashram and living a sedentary life, she was going back on renouncer ideals.) A close informant in Kathmandu was reared on the grounds of the Pashupatinath temple by her *yoginī* grandmother, who had refused to let the baby granddaughter go uncared for when her mother died.

All these renouncers used their power as respected local *sādhus* to make sure people were treated well. Over the course of my fieldwork, many renouncers described religious practice to me as something that had to be done completely alone. But community involvement seemed to fulfil a different kind of religious mandate. These sorts of actions were referred to as *kriyā yoga*, ‘meditation through action’, and were clearly seen as an appropriate *sādhana* for sedentary *sādhus*. Both pilgrims and *yogīs* explained to me that a genuine concern for the social good reflects a religious character, and that active social participation proves a *yogī*’s capacity in a way different from, but equivalent to, solitary ritual practice.

### **New places, old actions**

The *yoginīs* I worked with were ascetics who had left their home communities. But they continued to act out women’s roles by devoting themselves to caring for others. In their new locations, however, and in their new stances as renouncers, womanly actions were transformed. Caring for children and feeding families no longer took place in the context of subordinate and required behaviour, but as the voluntary practice of powerful community women. The actions of care became part of a religious practice, not part of an unquestioned social role.

More than twenty years ago, A.K. Ramanujan wrote about how a maternal nature is seen as contributing to saintliness (1982). Recently, Meena Khandelwal has written on how *yoginīs* fulfil the roles of ideal mothers, by both gently scolding and heartily feeding their disciples and visitors (1997). This construction means that women have an added advantage as renouncers, in a sense: feminine qualities naturally provide the loving kindness and caring nature expected of a saint. The holy Ganges River is *Gaṅgā Mā*; the revered land of India is *Bhārat Mā*: through their nurturing qualities, the earth and the water become mother figures. And in these constructions, being a mother is the most sacred thing you can be.

Male renouncers also feed people on occasion, and in doing so, they too project the motherly qualities of a highly realized, compassionate being (Ramanujan 1982; Narayan 1989). One man with whom I worked took care of the children of the temple area in which he lived, giving them small amounts of money for completing little tasks. Both *yogīs* and *yoginīs* earn



the respect of local communities when they help out, and mitigate negative images of the mad and isolated renouncer.

Rādhā Giri became the literal “Mātājī” when she began to raise the girl Gaṅgā Giri. And yet as a loud and opinionated woman who smokes hashish, Māi defied the images of both traditional mother and beatific saint. She was unruly and impetuous, and she was widely credited with having real spiritual power, even by those Hardwar residents who told me that most *sādhus* were nothing more than money-hungry louts. Rādhā Giri was highly respected because she combined the most powerful qualities of a *yoginī*: she was both strong and forceful and, at the same time, she was maternal and caring. She was at once ready to challenge the stereotypes of womanly behaviour and ready to fulfil a woman’s roles.

The final point I want to make about women renunciators’ community participation is that even though their efforts are specifically local, they do not occur in *yoginīs*’ “native” places. Women renunciators engage in womanly activities – even having left householder society – precisely because they are not in their home places. A woman’s place, for Hindu *yoginīs*, is in somebody else’s home. Every single woman renouncer I met had left the place where she was born or where she was married.

For *yoginīs*, choosing to become a renouncer allows departure. Rādhā Giri’s reticence on the topics of her girlhood and marriage was typical of renunciators, but the women I spoke with strongly implied that they became *yoginīs* as a way to leave their natal or marital homes. They became *sādhvīs* because they wanted to live religious lives, to be sure, but also because they did not want to marry, or because they were unhappily married, or because they were widows and did not know where to turn.<sup>9</sup> The wandering that renunciators are supposed to do means that women who become renunciators can physically leave unhappy domestic situations. As *yoginīs*, they can leave home, and create a new place elsewhere. And they use their experiences as women who have suffered to preach detachment, and to protect householder women who have not been able to leave unhappy domesticity.

### **Householders and renunciators: A concluding comment**

The distinction between householder life and renouncer life is central to the identity of the *yoginīs* with whom I worked. But scholars who have tried to find a precise, pan-South Asian category with which to distinguish householders from renunciators have failed: each possible theoretical distinction breaks down when faced with the range of actual, lived experiences among *sādhus*. Some renouncer sects do pay attention to caste.

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<sup>9</sup> See Arthvale (1930) for a historical account of Hindu widowhood, and Wadley (1995) and Lamb (2000) for contemporary ethnographies.

Some ascetics are married, and some do raise children. Most *yogīs* are sedentary. There is no one bar on social engagement in renouncers' lives.

Here we have the fluid subjectivity of renunciation at work. What I mean by this is that different parts of a *yoginī*'s identity come to the fore in the context of different oppositions. The way a *yoginī* demonstrates her status as a renouncer – someone who has departed from householder life – depends on her circumstances and varies by context. For the renouncers I met, teaching detachment was important when faced with the petty intrigues of local gossip, while serving food was important when faced with a community's hunger. Sometimes being a *yoginī* means behaving like a mother, rather than accept a child's suffering, while at other times being a *yoginī* means behaving like a tyrant, rather than accept a woman's ill treatment.

Nonetheless, I argue that the opposition between being a householder and being a renouncer remains a critical component of *yogīs*' lives.<sup>10</sup> No matter how that opposition is articulated, being able to renounce the place and the status of wife or widow is a driving force for women who become *yoginīs*. Renunciation allows women to leave circumstances in which they are not happy, and to break free from so-called traditional women's roles.<sup>11</sup> *Yoginīs* do make use of those roles – by feeding people, caring for children, and teaching religious values – in their interpretation of religious practice. But renunciation allows for the break, even if it encourages women to do womanly things in new places and new contexts.

Women renouncers use tradition – both traditional women's activities and traditional paths of renunciation – in their religious lives. And yet they simultaneously use renunciation as a way to break free from those overly-strict and structured categories, in the ways they leave oppressive situations and choose to participate in new communities. It is really a rather radical act to leave the oppression of widowhood and become a “traditional” *yoginī*, or to leave the structure of marriage and raise someone else's child twenty years later. This is social engagement of the highest order, conducted through a practice renowned for its isolation. Women renouncers can stop

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<sup>10</sup> With this argument, I reinsert Dumont's opposition into the renouncer/householder debates (1980), countering Heesterman's arguments that renunciation developed as the logical extreme of Brahmanical Hinduism (1964; 1982). But while I argue that fieldwork supports Dumont's fundamental opposition between householders and renouncers, I agree with the many scholarly criticisms that Dumont's system is overly static (cf. Das 1982; Gellner 2001) and that his emphasis on the renouncer as “individual” is misplaced (cf. Mines 1994).

<sup>11</sup> See my AAA paper (2002b) on how a caste critique for renunciation is too limited. Renunciation clearly contains a feminist critique as well, in that women can leave abusive domestic situations.

being widows, or unhappy or unwilling wives, and start fulfilling women's roles in contexts where they are respected and thanked.

What about the social attachments that renunciators are supposed to avoid at all costs – the reasons that *yogīs* are supposed to wander? This was a real problem for the *yoginīs* I spoke with, who told me in the same breath that renouncer life was both completely blissful and terribly, painfully hard. Rādhā Giri sighed deeply when she answered this question. I had asked her about the difference between men and women renunciators and she responded by referring to the problem of attachment. “For men, it's easy not to get attached,” she said. “They have girlfriends, they act how they want to, and there's no problem. But we women, we want to care for the people around us. We start to love them, and then we feel responsible.” Later I realized she was probably referring to the circumstances of Gaṅgā's birth, and to the ironic fact that she ended up caring for a child that was not hers. But she had obviously made a choice: attachment would be the cost of staying in one place as a *yoginī*, and she would try to transform that attachment to offer what she could – in her hot, brash, not-so-saintly way – to the beings that came to her door.

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