

Women in Ochre Robes



Gendering Hindu Renunciation

Meena Khandelwal

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*Women In
Ochre
Robes*

SUNY series in Hindu Studies
Wendy Doniger, editor

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Gendering Hindu Renunciation

Meena Khandelwal

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For Uma and Jaya Rani

It has been said that the fact that I was listening to, and writing about, saints
while you were in the womb and through your infancies
will affect you positively.

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Note on Transliteration

The linguistic context in which I conducted research was complex. Most of my interviews with *sannyasinis* took place in Hindi, with a few in English. Depending on the mother tongue of a particular person, though, Punjabi or even English words occasionally punctuated their speech. For example, Anand Mata spoke to me in Hindi but used many English phrases, like “total surrender” and “extrovert.” As initiates into an elite ascetic tradition and residents of a pilgrimage town, their everyday language included many Sanskrit terms as well. The people I interacted with would, for example, often use *vairagya* rather than *virag*, *bhojan* rather than *khana*. They may have used the Sanskrit or Hindi form or alternated between them.

In an attempt to remain close to the language of those I interviewed, I use some words in Hindi (*sannyasi* rather than *sannyasin*) and others in Sanskrit (*vairagya* rather than *virag*). Depending on popular pronunciations, I have dropped the final Sanskrit “a” for many words (*jaṭ*, *dan*, *anand*, *marg*, *asan*) and retained it for others (*karma*, *dharma*). In an attempt to strike a balance between the goals of ethnographic accuracy and textual readability, I have generally chosen one form of a particular word. However, if the reference to another work or an ethnographic context specifically demanded an alternative spelling, I have sacrificed consistency for accuracy.

In my efforts to make this work accessible to nonspecialists and to a wider general audience, I have more often compromised technical accuracy for readability. To this end, I have omitted diacritics in the text (but included some in the glossary) and avoided italicizing foreign words that can now be found in English dictionaries and are in widespread usage: *ashram*, *guru*, *mantra*, *swami*, *sadhu*, *yoga*, and so on. I do, however, include some of these core terms in the glossary. I use the English convention for plurals by simply adding an italicized “s” to Hindi words (*sannyasinis* for *sannyasini*). Although I generally use “k” rather than “c” to signify the unaspirated “k” in Devanagari, I have made an exception for the adjectival noun ending, as in Vedic and karmic. I have sometimes rendered the “v” sound in Hindi as a “w” (even though the latter does not exist in the Devanagari alphabet) when I feel it better approximates popular pronunciation or conventional spelling, as in *swami*.

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Introduction

Sannyasinis as Persons

This is an ethnography of *sannyasinis* in Haridwar, North India. *Sannyasinis* are Hindu women who have renounced an ordinary life of marriage, family, domestic responsibilities, and worldly pleasures in order to pursue spiritual liberation (*moksha*) full-time. A woman who wishes to enter this path must find a guru willing to initiate her as a disciple and perform an initiation signifying rebirth.¹ During the ceremony, initiates receive from their guru new ochre-colored clothes, a secret mantra, and a title that ends with the name of the guru's monastic order. They also perform their own death rites and thereby sacrifice themselves into a "funeral pyre." Having already undergone this symbolic cremation, renouncers' bodies are not cremated at the time of literal death as are the bodies of ordinary Hindus; instead they are buried in a seated, meditative posture or are submerged in a river. If, along with formal initiation, they abandon all secular property, withdraw from society, and cease to cohabit with their spouse, they are legally recognized as renouncers and can no longer inherit property from natural relatives (Narayanan 1993). Thus, initiation renders them "dead" to their previous social and civil identity. But the people I write about here are very much alive. They struggle with, and joke about, the tensions and ironies of living in the world while trying not to be *of* it. In doing so, as we will see, they constantly shuttle between various levels of reality.

Renouncers are easily distinguishable from lay Hindus, conventionally referred to as "householders," by place of residence and appearance. Most either live itinerantly for much of the year or take up residence in pilgrimage towns such as Haridwar. Haridwar's significance for Hindus lies in its sacred geography;

it is the place where the sacred Ganges River descends from the Himalayas and meets the North Indian plains. The precise point of this transition is marked by Haridwar's main bathing *ghat* (steps or landing), and the Ganges' power to wash away sins is held to be greatest at this location. Lay Hindus are drawn to Haridwar from surrounding regions for a variety of reasons. They come to bathe in the holy river on auspicious occasions, to visit personal gurus who reside in the city's many monastic centers, or to immerse the ashes of a relative's cremated body in the river. They pass through, as pilgrims, tourists, and trekkers on their way to sites and mountain passes higher up in the spectacular and holy Himalayas. Just north of the city's main shopping bazaar and bathing area is Sadhubela, a suburb of sorts, built along the banks of the Ganges; here both sides of the main thoroughfare are lined with ashrams. Although the term "ashram" is usually glossed as "hermitage," it refers to both large monastic communities and small, loosely organized places where a handful of people (both ascetic and nonascetic) live and where pilgrims may stay for short visits. In Sadhubela, older ashrams and temples are interspersed with spanking new ones that attract tourists and electronically broadcast sacred chanting or religious services. But the chiming of brass temple bells has not yet been drowned out by loudspeakers, street vendors, and automobile horns. Here, instead of "hello" or "namaste" the more commonly heard greeting is a religious salutation such as "Hari Om" or "Om namah Shivaya." Ochre-clad ascetics wander, usually alone and occasionally in groups, up and down the streets and along the riverbank. Renouncers who flock to pilgrimage towns such as Haridwar might choose to live in the open on the river's edge, in a cave or hut, in a monastery belonging to their order, or in an independent ashram.² The sights and sounds of Sadhubela's streets, even before one enters the private spaces of ashrams, suggest that this is a culture of sadhus.

Sadhu is a general term for ascetics or holy persons. Renunciation (*sannyasa*) is one specific form of Hindu asceticism, and its initiates (m. *sannyasi*; f. *sannyasini*) are the focus of this study. In terms of physical appearance, the most reliable indications of renunciant status are ochre-colored garments, identifying hairstyles, and other ritual accessories. Because some Hindu ascetics are visually very stunning and a few engage in sensational, even repulsive, forms of ascetic discipline, sadhus have served as a primary photographic trope of the mystical East. Photographic portrayals tend to feature those (male) sadhus with the most dramatic appearance: naked bodies whitened by ash, elaborate sectarian clothing, colorful body markings, and matted hair piled high on the head or hanging down to the waist or ankles. Equally familiar to Westerners are images of (again male) sadhus engaging in spectacles of the exotic: sitting in meditation with pots of fire on their heads, holding their right arms up for so long that they shrivel, performing feats with their penises to demonstrate their celibacy and power. These activities are stand-ins for the proverbial ochre-turbaned Hindu lying on a bed of nails (see K. Narayan 1993b). While such attention-getting forms of religious discipline do

occur, they are not nearly as common as these images suggest. Because I believe that such photographs impede rather than aid understanding—and to protect the anonymity of my informants—I have not included photographs in this account.

If photographs were included here, they would probably be disappointing for their ordinariness. Both male and female renunciators may display shaven heads or, alternatively, piles of snakelike matted locks, and, for men, full beards.³ A few of the women I met did have shaven heads or long, matted locks, but most had short cropped hair or long hair worn simply in a bun or braid. Hairstyles are sometimes accompanied by sectarian markings on the forehead and various other accessories such as wooden sandals, a rosary of *rudraksha* beads worn around the neck, a staff, a begging bowl, or a water vessel.⁴ None of the women I interviewed wore the forehead markings associated with renunciators or carried these other accessories. Some went barefoot, but most wore either traditional wooden sandals or the plastic variety.⁵ Even without these accessories, however, renunciators are not easily mistaken for lay Hindus. Female initiates are not required to wear any particular *style* of ochre clothing, but they do reject the jewelry and clothing that is considered not only aesthetically pleasing for female householders, but also morally good and auspicious. The lack of beauty-enhancing ornamentation on their bodies differentiates them strikingly from most Hindu women. They engage in typical ascetic activities: meditation, silence, study of scriptures, pilgrimage, advising of disciples, and worship of deities. They also perform stereotypically domestic activities such as cooking food, looking after neighborhood children, shopping, matchmaking, visiting friends, and supervising servants.

Sannyasinis represent a minority among Hindu renunciators, most of whom are men, and an even smaller minority among Indian women, most of whom are wives and mothers. Yet I believe their conceptual importance far exceeds their statistical presence because of the way they problematize standard representations of both religious renunciation and gender in Hindu India. Sannyasa, the ascetic tradition into which these women have been initiated, is seen by scholars and most Indians as a male tradition, and, in many ways, it is. Indian women have been represented as always domestic and dependent, and, indeed, most are. Yet women who refuse to conform to cultural expectations regarding marriage, sexuality, and procreation not only exist but are respected, even revered, for making these choices.

This book complicates standard representations of Hindu culture. If the information available about Indian women overwhelmingly “fits” our scholarly models, then we are left feeling that the lives of Hindu women are generally determined by social expectations and institutions. Women have little self-determination—their parents deciding how long they will study and whom they will marry, their husbands deciding whether they will seek employment or not, their mothers-in-law deciding how many children they will have, and their sons deciding how they will spend their older years. Scholarly and popular accounts

most often identify the family, but sometimes the state, as the primary agent of control. Sannyasinis live on the margins of both family and state authority. Brahmanical Hinduism is also frequently and correctly identified as a source of patriarchy. Yet women renouncers have created opportunities for themselves within the most misogynous and brahmanical of Hindu ascetic traditions.

Westerners tend to overdetermine third world women's lives. In looking at them we see reflected back the free agents that we believe ourselves to be. This impression is reinforced by pervasive media representations of oppressed third world women and children and, sometimes, by anthropological analyses of social structures, laws, and apparently dominant ideologies. Moreover, many readers, in consuming ethnographic texts, see only what reinforces, and not what contradicts, their prior assumptions. Thus, the idea that third world people lead overdetermined lives is remarkably persistent. Here I demonstrate that Hindu women do sometimes determine their own lives in fairly radical ways—and I hope to do this without romanticizing them as mystic or feminist heroes, denying the reality of patriarchy, or elevating individual autonomy to the primary value by which we evaluate persons and cultures.

I have chosen to emphasize depth over breadth. Thus, while I interviewed nineteen female ascetics, and as many males, during eighteen months of ethnographic field research, I focused most of my attention on two women. Anand Mata left a husband and a successful career as a school principal to “take sannyasa” (that is, to be initiated into sannyasa) and now follows an ascetic path of meditative solitude. She lived in silence for many years, and, luckily for me, had just begun speaking again the year before I arrived. She refused to become a guru and take disciples, choosing instead to live alone in a small, quiet ashram. Although very serious about her own spiritual aims, Anand Mata was an insightful—and irreverent!—observer of the culture of sadhus. Baiji, as a young woman, resisted her parents' attempts to arrange her marriage, in order to pursue her spiritual interests. At a young age, she was initiated into sannyasa by a male guru and has become a guru in her own right with disciples and two ashrams of her own. Thus, while Anand Mata lives in someone else's ashram with other ascetics, Baiji is mistress of her own “home” and is surrounded by lay people, both employees and devotees. While Anand Mata leads a contemplative existence, Baiji's daily life bustles with religious, social, and charitable activities. While Anand Mata does not engage in much activity that is immediately recognizable as “religious,” Baiji oversees temple worship, vedic rituals, the recitation of scriptures, and the feeding of other sadhus in great ritual feasts. My conversations with and observations of these two women form the basis for chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Social Involvement and Ascetic Withdrawal

One of the most interesting things about Hindu culture is the presence of a persistent tension between the value of responsible involvement with family life

and the value of ascetic withdrawal from society in the pursuit of liberation. Thus, the ordinary goals and activities of getting married, nurturing children, respecting elders, eating well, maintaining good health, pursuing material prosperity, and experiencing sensual pleasure are valued as morally good. There is, however, another set of values that suggests: This is all fine, even ethically required, for ordinary people, but those who seek liberation will necessarily transcend these goals and activities; for them a different set of rules applies. This book is a meditation on the conflict between social responsibility and ascetic withdrawal. At times I will discuss this in terms of “worldly” and “otherworldly,” which evokes a host of interrelated Hindu distinctions between worldly and otherworldly (*laukik* and *alaukik*), gross and subtle (*sthul* and *sukshma*), the seen and the unseen (*drishya* and *adrishya*).⁶

More specifically, this book is a meditation on this conflict from the point of view of women ascetics rather than women householders—and not just women ascetics, but sannyasinis. Ascetic traditions proliferate in Hinduism. Initiates into sannyasa see theirs as the most radical form of Hindu asceticism. It is defined in the negative as the giving up of household life and characterized by an absolute finality.⁷ Thus, one conventional image is of the (male) renouncer who, in taking sannyasa, walks away from his family and never looks back. “Letting go” and cultivating a detached attitude is central to sannyasa; indeed, celibacy is important because it aids in the cultivation of detachment. Because of its emphasis on celibacy, vedic learning, solitude, and itinerancy, sannyasa is the form of Indian asceticism least hospitable to women. Despite the defining characteristics of celibacy and detachment, within contemporary sannyasa there exists a wide range of legitimate values, practices, and modes of interaction with laypersons. While most renouncers pass through an initiation ritual and are easily distinguishable from householders by appearance and place of residence, in general, the sociological indeterminacy of renunciation makes defining an ethnographic study of the subject especially problematic. To include women only makes this task more difficult.

Sannyasinis as an Analytical Category: Anomalous Women

Sannyasa is a tradition that was created by and for elite men. Women initiates may, but do not always, face opposition from their male peers in the world of ascetics. They may also, and most do, face opposition from family and friends when considering the option of renunciation. By rejecting the role of the good and virtuous wife whose life is devoted to husband and family, these women assert their agency. One need not seek out hidden and ritual social spaces to find evidence of their resistance to conventional gender expectations. They rebel against Manu, whose ancient treatise on correct behavior is said to provide “a direct line to the most influential construction of the Hindu religion and Indic society as a whole” (Doniger 1991:xvii). In *The Laws of Manu*, there is a

frequently quoted statement: "A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in [her own] house. In childhood, a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons.' She should not have independence" (V. 147–48, trans. Doniger 1991). To what degree, if at all, do ideological statements such as this actually determine even upper-caste women's lives? As Narayanan writes, "while the Hindu tradition has used hyperbole in declaring the religious-legal texts to be an exposition of the Vedas, it did not mean that they actually *followed* all the rules." (1999:35). Sannyasinis lead unconventional lives but are respected by ordinary and even conservative people as sources of both spiritual power and everyday morality.

Is it *because* sannyasinis fit neither classical Hindu models nor sociological categories for analyzing Indian culture, particularly the gendered opposition between renunciation and householder life, that we know so little about their lives? This state of affairs is beginning to change as written accounts of female Hindu asceticism begin to be published.⁸ Still, we know too little at this point to come up with much in the way of conclusive generalizations. I suggest that the category of sannyasini without further sectarian specification has no more sociological coherence than that of male renouncer (sannyasi). "[T]here is almost nothing one can say about female renouncer-ascetics that will apply to them all" (Denton 1991:221). How then do I justify taking sannyasinis as a subject of anthropological inquiry?

When I was a graduate student considering possible research topics, sannyasinis did not fit the standard anthropological categories through which I had come to understand Hindu culture. Both Hindu sacred literature and scholarly studies typically defined women in relation to men, as daughters, wives, sisters, mothers, and widows.⁹ The feminine ideal most clearly defined in sacred literature, anthropological accounts, and popular culture is best symbolized by the modest and chaste wife Sita, heroine of the epic *Ramayana*, who voluntarily abandons the comforts and security of palace life to follow her husband Ram into the forest for fourteen years of exile. In Valmiki's popular and influential version, Sita suffers the injustices perpetrated on her by men with quiet and graceful dignity. Although this image of the ideal wife has not gone unchallenged, particularly in oral traditions, it still holds legitimacy in contemporary India. It is an ideal to which Indian women, especially upper-caste women, are often held and to which many aspire. For actual women, the positive aspect of this image of the ideal wife is her relationship to the material and spiritual well-being of a household. Even as the lawmaker Manu warned against independent women, he stressed that prosperity only comes to households where the women are honored and happy (III. 55–59, trans. Doniger 1991). The moral duty of women (*stridharma*) is to ensure the prosperity of their marital homes by performing domestic tasks skillfully, bearing and nurturing children, and worshiping their husbands as gods. In orthodox thought, the role of wife seems to be ele-

vated above other female roles. I once heard that a *sannyasini*, in advising her female disciples to be devout wives, had said: "If you have only one glass of milk, should you give it to your husband or your child? Your husband." That the disciples related to me their surprise at this exchange suggested that it contradicted their own judgement. While brahmanical values that elevate a woman's husband above everything, including her children, may not be shared by women themselves, they send a clear message about orthodox expectations that, for women, the husband is supreme. The religious practices associated with Hindu women do seem to be oriented toward the household. The vows and fasts so important in women's religious practice are not unlike the austerities performed by renunciators, but householder women perform these fasts primarily for the sake of family members rather than for spiritual liberation (McGee 1991). Pearson (1996) suggests that this may be overstated and that women perform votive fasting rites (*vrats*) for other, more personal reasons as well, such as increasing personal purity and power or interacting socially with other women. Still, given the general female orientation toward home and family, women who opt for solitude, independence, and the full-time pursuit of their own spiritual aims do seem anomalous.

The anomalous status of female renunciators is suggested in the range of terms used to designate Hindu religious specialists. The grammatically feminine forms of masculine terms more often refer to the *wives* of male religious specialists than to their female counterparts in the vocation. For example, "*rishika*" refers to the wife of a sage (*rishi*) rather than to a female sage. "*Pandita*" designates the wife of a brahmin priest (*pandit*) rather than a brahmin priestess. Sinha and Saraswati note that a female *avadhut* (a particularly elevated category of Hindu ascetic) they met was called "Mataji" (Respected Mother) rather than "*avadhutini*" (the feminine form of *avadhut*) because the latter can refer to the wife of an *avadhut* (1978:73). There is a similar ambiguity in the term "*sadhvi*," the feminine form of the term "*sadhu*" (holy man); "*sadhvi*" can refer to a virtuous wife as well as a female ascetic. In recognition of this ambiguity most female ascetics I met used the masculine form "*sadhu*" to refer to themselves, sometimes tacking on "Mata" (Mother) if they wish to emphasize a feminine identity.¹⁰ Following their usage, I use "*sadhu*" as a general category to refer to both male and female ascetics. "Mataji" is the most common term of address for female ascetics. The assumption underlying the use of terms like "*rishika*" and "*pandita*" is that a woman cannot stand alone. The term "*sannyasini*" is different. Since renunciators are by definition unmarried, "*sannyasini*" cannot possibly refer to the wife of a *sannyasi*. Perhaps for this reason, as I will discuss shortly, there is some confusion about the term.

As I first imagined this project, the existence and acceptance of female renunciators challenged the ideal image of "Hindu women" as always married and any simple notion of renunciation as either ungendered or hypermasculine. It was intriguing to imagine that solitary Indian women could actually *reject* mar-

riage, as opposed to being widowed or unable to find suitable grooms, both of which signify pitiable states of existence. In this scenario, women renunciators could not be simply explained away as logical anomalies, social deviants, or conservative women who, in opting for an elitist and patriarchal tradition, suffer from false consciousness. Yet very little had been written about contemporary female ascetics, or, for that matter, about other intentionally unmarried Hindu women.

Although I am concerned here with rendering the phenomenon of female renunciation visible, I also risk making the tenuous assumption that *sannyasinis* are an already constituted group and appropriate unit of analysis. To assume outright that *sannyasinis* have more in common with each other than they do with the larger population of male renunciators might qualify as an example of discursive colonization of the material and historical differences among third world women, a colonization that assumes these women share identical problems, needs, interests, and goals (Mohanty 1984:334). Because the issue of *sannyasinis* as constituting an appropriate analytical category is a question rather than an assumption of this research, I approach *sannyasinis* in relation to both male renunciators and female householders. The term *sannyasini* does not refer to a group in the sociological sense of people who live or act together, as would, for example, the more specific “*sannyasinis* of the Juno Akhara” or “*Sarada Math sannyasinis*.” During the course of my field research, I spoke with women from different sectarian backgrounds specifically in order to understand female renunciation in at least some of its diversity, yet I make no claim to offer a complete representation of the subject. In addition to gender and sectarian background, differences in education, material wealth, number and status of disciples are equally relevant in the world of renunciators, so I avoid giving one aspect of a renouncer’s identity, such as gender, preeminence over other aspects across all contexts. Rather, the juxtaposition of women with different styles of renunciation is intended to make the most basic point that there is no such thing as a “typical” *sannyasini*. As I have indicated, it is difficult to generalize about Hindu renunciation because it is so loosely institutionalized. In order to obviate any assumption that it might be easier to generalize about female renunciators than about their male counterparts simply because they are women, I speak of “*sannyasinis*” as actual women with particular histories, not of “the *sannyasini*” as an abstract category. That a word for female renouncer (*sannyasini*) exists in Hindi and Sanskrit could be taken as sufficient evidence that the category is meaningful. But my discussions with people in Haridwar indicate that it is not a salient cultural category readily distinguishable from the male renouncer (*sannyasi*). In response to my queries about *sannyasinis*, people sometimes sought further clarification by asking if I meant “*lady sannyasis*” (*lady male renunciators*) or “*sadhu matas*” (*ascetic mothers*). A few wondered if I really wanted to meet widows. One orthodox Dashnami *sannyasi*, in a particularly hostile reaction, told me in no uncertain terms that female renunciators did not exist. In doing so, however, he was not doubting their existence so much as denying their legitimacy.

Another man, an elderly householder, wondered with more sympathetic concern how my learned professor in the United States could send me to study something that did not exist.

Rather than seeking an imagined unity in sociological terms, I have chosen to explore the meaning of *sannyasa* in the everyday lives of particular women pursuing diverse styles of renunciation. These women combine, with various emphases, the social roles and skills of a psychologist, medical doctor, mystic, social worker, priest, and mother. While female renouncers lack coherence as a group, the fact that they are women does color their everyday lives and identities in some very important ways. For example, their gender presents them with many specific problems in living and moving among men, such as the need to have a safe place to sleep every night. Moreover, the *sannyasinis* I met often seemed to identify with at least some of those values of the female householder that scholars have generally opposed to renunciation: fertility, health, prosperity, and nurturing.¹¹ Thus, I show that there is some degree of specificity to *sannyasinis*' lives as compared to those of male renouncers. Ojha points out a crucial difference between male and female asceticism in India: "[t]he male ascetic is a man who has made a choice between two ideals in life equally allowed for him. But the female ascetic is a woman who having renounced the single mode of life set for her adopts a behavior primarily intended for males" (Ojha 1981:256). For this reason, I have consciously decided to make gender issues central to my understanding of renunciation. As the following chapters make evident, my findings indicate that in some contexts *sannyasinis* ally themselves with female householders in opposition to all men, and in others they minimize the distance between themselves and their male peers by stressing their identity as renouncers.

My Own Not-Too-Straight Path to *Sannyasinis* in Haridwar

My initial fascination with *sannyasa* was fueled by the exoticism with which renouncers are often represented in the United States. Although I was born in the United States to immigrant Hindu parents, my upbringing was not particularly religious. As a child I experienced this as something of a lack. Christianity seemed alien, but I knew little about Hinduism. My parents immigrated long before the wave of South Asian immigration that began in 1965 and eventually led to the establishment of an infrastructure of temples, community centers, and diasporic public events in U.S. cities. I often note how young second-generation Indian students today seem so much more "Indian" than I ever felt. Aside from Indian food, Indian art, Indian habits of hygiene, and occasional trips to "the homeland" to visit much-adored relatives, there was little about my upbringing that was Indian. The music my parents played at parties was the Allman Brothers and Janis Joplin—never Bollywood songs or Ravi Shankar. They had Indian friends but were not immersed in a local

“Indian community.” My brothers and I had no curfew and were allowed to date. There was no talk of arranged marriage, except among a few hopeful aunts in India. We were what an earlier generation of sociologists would have called “assimilated.” I watched my first Hindi film as an adult and only enrolled in Hindi 101 as a sophomore in college.

During my undergraduate days studying religion and anthropology, when I first learned about *sannyasa*, it seemed like an extreme and dramatic version of lifestyles that had long fascinated me: self-sufficient and austere living in the context of homesteads and communes. *Sannyasa* is, of course, quite a different phenomenon. As Anand Mata once reflected, “I know I can solve all problems myself without guidance. This independence is not of the social type. In the West, they all look for independence from society and from rules of behavior. In *sadhana*, it is a spiritual independence. Don’t depend on other people but leave everything in the hands of God. Some say we won’t depend on God but on ourselves—this is the epitome of pride and ego.” Still, like hippies and others in the United States who had chosen alternative lifestyles, *sadhus* were people who dropped out of mainstream society, and, in this sense, represented a form of protest and rebellion.¹² After spending a semester of my junior year in India studying Hinduism, I was convinced that developing self-control and detachment were the most important qualities to cultivate and that one did this by denying oneself what one most desired. I imagined fieldwork as my own experiment in austerity. This was the context in which I first decided to conduct doctoral research on Hindu renunciation: my general interest in asceticism led me to focus on women rather than the other way around. I realized the unfeasibility of a young, female researcher living among male renunciators, given their misogynistic and unsavory reputation. Ironically, by the time I finally arrived in Haridwar to research female renunciation five years had passed and, with those five years, my ascetic yearnings. I was no longer fixated on cultivating self-control and detachment and had promised to marry a man with no leanings toward austerity. My interest in Hindu asceticism had become more intellectual and less personal. After relating this story to Anand Mata, she commented that it was God’s grace that had prevented me from living among *sannyasinis* at the time when I was most passionately interested in doing so. Had I been able to come immediately (rather than having to complete graduate coursework and obtain funding), she speculated, I might very well have taken *sannyasa*, but impulsively, without being fully “ripe.” It would have been a mistake because I was young and lacked the full awareness and firm determination that are necessary to succeed on this path. What I felt in those early days, she seemed to be saying, was simply a mood of renunciation, which everyone feels from time to time. And, of course, that it did not last is proof of this. In Hindu India, the mood of renunciation is seen as a common response to emotional loss or disillusionment, but only rarely do such moods translate into actual renunciation.

My reasons for deciding to engage in research with sannyasins in Haridwar rather than some other Hindi-speaking pilgrimage town were conceptual and pragmatic. It is often assumed by scholars and lay Hindus alike that most female ascetics are widows. Since Hindu orthodoxy requires that widows lead an ascetic lifestyle of poverty and austerity, but without the positive religious status of renunciators, it is reasonable to expect that many widows would turn to renunciation as a means to improve their status. However, even though Ojha worked in Benaras, a pilgrimage center that attracts large numbers of widows from Calcutta and elsewhere, she concluded that only a minority of female ascetics are widows (1981:279); my research in Haridwar further supports this conclusion (see also Caplan 1973:177). A widow's asceticism conforms to dharma, but a woman's taking sannyasa is a rejection of dharma (Narayanan 1993:281). Avoiding the confusion between widows and sannyasins would be facilitated by avoiding those pilgrimage centers that particularly attract widows. Since Haridwar is not known for its population of widows, I expected (and later confirmed) that most of the solitary women there would be ascetics and would be viewed as such by others. In addition, Haridwar was a town of manageable size and my family had acquaintances there, which translated into a place to stay and some initial introductions.

The Personal and Particular

I highlight the human and personal aspects of renunciation and incorporate humanistic styles of writing. While I have not organized this text in terms of life histories, I have adopted other techniques of humanistic writing for my central ethnographic chapters: narrative form, reflexivity, and intense focus on two individual women. While I understand and accept some of the postmodern critiques of a humanism that renders social difference and power invisible, I must agree with Abu-Lughod's comment that we ought not to abandon humanism because it "continues to be in the West the language of human equality with the greatest moral force" (1993:28–29). Indeed, anthropologists who want their work to be accessible and widely read seem to find this familiarizing style particularly useful.

One of my reasons for this focus is that the activities, conflicts, and interpersonal relationships that fill renunciators' everyday lives have generally been absent in scholarly accounts.¹³ What is most striking to me is the way in which sannyasins' lives are simultaneously extraordinary and utterly mundane. Moreover, a similar combination of reverence and disinterest seems to characterize the way renunciators are treated by the general lay population. Stereotypically "saintly" activities such as a meditative trance or vows of silence may be viewed by lay observers with cynicism or simple indifference, while the most "ordinary" action or speech may be interpreted as mystical. In sharing the