

Performing a Rhetoric of Renunciation: An Exploration of Hindu Female Renouncers'
Vernacular Practices in North India
By Antoinette DeNapoli¹

“There are so many *bhajans* [devotional songs] that I can sing,” Santosh Puri says to me, the American anthropologist who sits at her feet and records her performances. Santosh Puri is a high-caste (Rajput) female renouncer (*sadhu*) in her eighties and spends her days and her nights in a temple singing to God. She has left behind dominant societal expectations of householding and family in order to worship the divine. Her way of life identifies the radical path of Hindu renunciation. Santosh Puri has given up her worldly possessions and leads a life of simplicity. She resides in a village in the north Indian state of Rajasthan, consisting primarily of Brahmins and Rajputs. Santosh Puri tells me with pride that the villagers invited her to come and “sit” in their temple, which houses a form of the deity Vishnu, because of her “beautiful *bhajans*.” She is renowned in her locality for her devotional singing and for the “sweetness” of her voice with which she performs her songs. With the tape recorder running, Santosh Puri continues: “Whenever I sing a feeling comes over my body, and I become immersed in the song.” In response to my question about the length of time she has been singing *bhajans*, Santosh Puri replies, “since I was a young girl,” but after a short pause she adds: “Look, after I married, the *bhajans* really started to come into my body. That’s when the singing really became part of my life.” Santosh Puri further explains that, by singing *bhajans*, she has received salvific knowledge, which she would not have otherwise received. “*Bhajans* are knowledge. That is why I sing them. My mind has fallen in knowledge. This is why I became a *sadhu* and renounced the world.”

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Like many of the Rajasthani female *sadhus* with whom I worked for two years, Santosh Puri “performs” her renunciation through performance of what I call the *sadhus*’ “rhetoric of renunciation,” their songs, stories, and sacred texts.² My use of the term ‘performance’ follows that of performance studies-centered and folklore theorists and linguistic ethnologists³ who define it as an “aesthetically heightened” interpretative frame that not only communicates certain kinds of messages, but also brings about certain types of performative shifts and transformations for the creation of “a new situation and a new reality.”⁴ Performance has, as religious studies scholar Catherine Bell explains, “an emergent quality, which refers to what [practice] is uniquely able to create, effect, or bring about.”⁵ To that extent, performance functions doubly as a rhetorical strategy and cultural resource for individuals to construct, reproduce, challenge, and transform, or all of the above, their everyday worlds and realities. Using this analytic model as a way to think about female renunciators’ lives and practices, I argue that the Rajasthani *sadhus*’

²Notes

The female *sadhus* I worked with were initiated into one of two different, pan-Indian renunciator traditions, namely the Shankaracarya Dashanami and Natha orders. These traditions patronize the deity Shiva, and are thus classified as Shaiva forms of renunciation, in contrast to Vaishnava forms that worship Vishnu as Supreme deity.

³ The performance studies/folklore and linguistic ethnologists to whom I am referring are: Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Illinois: Waveland Heights, 1977); “Performance,” in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-centered Handbook*, edited by Richard Bauman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 41-46; Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); “Performance,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Charles Briggs, *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Elaine Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Edward Schieffelin, “Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality,” *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 707-24; “Problematising Performance,” in *Ritual, Performance, and Media*, edited by Felicia Hughes-Freeland (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 197-204; Joel Sherzer, “A Discourse-centered Approach to Language,” *American Anthropologist* 289/2(1987): 95-309; and Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

⁴ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 75.

⁵ Ibid.

performances of song, story, and sacred text enable them to imagine and articulate a vernacular (i.e., local) expression of renunciation that I classify as “devotional asceticism” as an alternative to the more orthodox Sanskritic (and gendered masculine) model of Brahmanical renunciation.⁶

Equally significant, I argue that the female *sadhus* employ their rhetorical practices in their constructions of renunciation as a way to say what they might not be able to say directly, but which they can say in the form of songs and stories. As individuals who have given up the world, and, hence, symbolize the renouncer ideal of detachment *par excellence*, *sadhus* are ideally not supposed to talk about their lives without losing their credibility. This implicit, and yet shared, renunciatory code of ethics, as the recent scholarship on female renunciation has shown, is often followed and maintained by female *sadhus* who, because they have relinquished normative gender roles, are frequently perceived as transgressive by Indian society. Quite often, female renunciators neutralize their perceived transgressions by constructing themselves as exceptions.⁷ In doing so, they secure and safeguard their authenticity as renunciators, which is further linked to societal perceptions of their honor and modesty. Many of the *sadhus* I worked with, therefore, are extremely vigilant with their words because they have to be, and typically perform their renunciatory rhetoric as a gendered strategy with which they comment on and interpret delicate issues like family life and female sexuality. Thus, in the words of historian James Scott, the *sadhus*' rhetoric offers them “a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that makes them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance,” even as they invoke it “to express how

⁶ The Brahmanical model of renunciation is known as *sannyasa*. For a discussion of the Brahmanical model of Renunciation, see Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Olivelle, trans., *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁷ See Meena Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), p. 21. See also the edited anthology, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*, edited by Meena Khandelwal, Sondra Hausner, and Ann Gold (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

they perceive a social situation.”⁸ Their performances constitute, as folklorist Roger Abrahams argues of vernacular practice in general, “an implement for argument, a tool for persuasion.”⁹

I became particularly interested in this ‘protective’ dimension of renunciant performance following my meeting with Santosh Puri. Notice that she says her experiences with devotional singing became a particularly eminent part of her life *after her marriage*. Santosh Puri implies that singing became a refuge what from she suggests in other conversational contexts was a “difficult” life of householding.¹⁰ She also indicates that singing acted as a way for her to request intervention from a divine being.¹¹ Santosh Puri, as I said earlier, is a high-caste Rajput, and women from this community rarely speak openly about their lives with strangers, including (and especially) foreign ethnographers.¹² In consideration of her caste and religious position, I was not about to ask Santosh Puri to elaborate on her situation. But I did not have to ask her about her previous domestic life. After her comment, Santosh Puri sings a *bhajan* that tells me what she cannot speak directly. The song is titled, “Hey old woman, come to *satsang* [fellowship] for two minutes.” This song’s structure occurs in the form of a dialogue between an old woman and an unnamed interlocutor. During the performance, Santosh Puri identifies the speaker as God (*bhagvan*). For ease of reading, I have marked the speakers as B (*bhagvan*) and

⁸ James Scott, as cited in Kirin Narayan, “The Practice of Oral Literary Criticism: Women’s Songs in Kangra, India,” *Journal of American Folklore* 108/429 (1995): 243-64, p. 258.

⁹ Roger Abrahams, “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968): 143-58, as cited in Narayan, “The Practice of Oral Literary Criticism,” p. 258.

¹⁰ In making this comment, I am referring to Santosh Puri’s householding life before she became a *sadhu*.

¹¹ See also Kirin Narayan, “The Practice of Oral Literary Criticism,” *Journal of American Folklore* (1995), for a similar discussion about this function of performance in connection with householder women’s *pakharu* performances in the north Indian village of Kangra, Himachal Pradesh.

¹² See Lindsey Harlan’s monograph, *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

O (old woman):

B: Hey old woman, what are you thinking while sitting there?

Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.

O: How can I come to *satsang*?

My life is buried in my child.

B: Send your child to work.

Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.

Hey old woman, what are you thinking while sitting there?

Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.

[Santosh Puri comments: God is saying, “Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.”]

Author: O.k., so God is speaking here?

SP: Yes. God is saying, “Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.” In *satsang* you receive knowledge. Without *satsang*, there is no knowledge. Now listen to the rest of the *bhajan*]

O: My life is buried in my daughter-in-law.

B: Send your daughter-in-law to the kitchen.

Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.

O: My life is buried in my grandson.

B: Put your grandson to sleep on the swing.

Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.

O: How can I come to *satsang*?

My life is buried in my daughter.

B: Send her to her in-laws.

Come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes.¹³

This *bhajan* resembles in its structure and content more the songs that north

¹³ In light of space constraints, I present a truncated version of this *bhajan*.

Indian female householders sing than those that renunciators typically perform.¹⁴ Generally, *sadhu bhajans* tend to extol a nameless/formless god, and are drawn from the vernacular language poetry of the medieval *bhakti* poet-saints of India.¹⁵ That this *bhajan* stands apart from what the *sadhus* usually perform as their rhetoric of renunciation, a song drawn from a genre of women's folk songs, indicates that Santosh Puri uses it mainly to interpret her view of women's difficult domestic lives and to explain her reasons for becoming a *sadhu*. The *bhajan*, however, is not without didactic intent. It emphasizes the necessity of *satsang* for women, in particular. Of course, it is not Santosh Puri's intention to promote the idea that women should leave their families and renounce the world. Rather, she views the conditions surrounding her own renunciation as an exception, and has explained on several occasions that only women who no longer have familial obligations should renounce. The *bhajan*, too, makes this point. It is addressed not to women, in general, but rather to an old woman, who has fulfilled her domestic obligations. Moreover, the *bhajan* suggests that the woman is not only old, but also widowed. Notice that in her multiple responses to God, the old woman speaks only of her children, grandchildren, and daughter-in-law. Not once does she mention that her life is "buried" in her husband. These details are significant in their implication that a life dedicated to remembering and serving God in *satsang* is appropriate for individuals (i.e., women and men) whose worldly

¹⁴ For documentation and analysis of north Indian householder women's songs and expressive traditions, see Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); for documentation and analysis of the types of songs (male) renunciators sing, see Edward O. Henry, *Chant the Names of God* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1988); "Jogīs and Nirgun Bhajans in Bhojpuri-Speaking India: Intra-Genre Heterogeneity, Adaptation, and Functional Shift," *Ethnomusicology* 35(2):221-242; "The Vitality of the Nirgun Bhajan: Sampling the Contemporary Tradition," in *Bhakti Religion in North India*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 232-252. See also David Lorenzen, *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguṇī Texts from North India* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

¹⁵ For a discussion of the poet-saints of medieval north India, see John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mira Bai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Linda Hess and Shukhdeo Singh, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

obligations/duties are either minimal or completely finished. But how is this idea gendered?

While both male and female householders have worldly obligations, the *bhajan* implies that women, more so than men, become buried under the weight of these obligations. The old woman's repetition of the word 'buried' to communicate her situation underscores that women especially become chained to their domestic lives, and more generally, to *sansar* (the cycle of reincarnation). Most of the *sadhus* agree that householding affects women differently than it affects men. Tulsi Giri, for example, characterizes the lives of female householders as a "magnet" in which they "get stuck" in the world. The gripping influence of householding continues to affect women even in their old age, a life stage when they should turn their attention away from domesticity and toward God instead. This seems to be the message of the *bhajan*—that (old) women, too, become so enmeshed in their daily domestic worlds that they forget about God. *Satsang* is essential, then, as it enables them to realize that God is the only reality behind the illusory and impermanent world. Thus, when God himself summons the old woman to "come and sit in *satsang* for two minutes," it is to remind all women to remember and serve the divine.

But *satsang* also signifies renunciation. Santosh Puri herself associates *satsang* with renunciation, explaining that the knowledge she received in *satsang* helped her to realize that householding entraps women in the world. Her realization in effect pushed her to become a *sadhu*, to leave everything behind and seek God as her ultimate refuge from illusion, impermanence, and death. Notice that Santosh Puri remarks that "[w]ithout *satsang* there is no knowledge." She suggests that renunciation constitutes a function of both salvific knowledge and devotion. Hence, God calling the old woman to *satsang* acts as a trope for God calling Santosh Puri to a new life of devotional asceticism. Therefore, by singing this *bhajan* Santosh Puri constructs renunciation as a path of devotion. At the same time, she speaks indirectly about the

solace she has found from her once difficult domestic life by virtue of her world renunciation.