

Women and renunciation in Bengal
Vaishnava Sahajiya Tradition



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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated.

Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisor Dr. Hiroko Kawanami.

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Abstract

This research is an ethnographic study of the Bengal Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition, which is the tantric influenced tradition blended together with Bengali devotion. Esoteric ritual is the Vaishnava Sahajiya key religious practice which leads the practitioners to liberation as well as marginalisation. Through participant observation, I draw on the unconventional lives and renunciant experiences of Vaishnava Sahajiya female renouncers to highlight the diversity in the lives of third-world women and the variety of female renunciation in South Asia. Brahmanical renunciant themes of celibacy, solitude and social engagement appearing in the Vaishnava religious practices of *brahmacharya*, *madhukari* and *sadhu seva*, will respectively be taken into account in analysing female renouncers' positions and how they exercise their agency within the Vaishnava context and in the broader context of South Asia. Female agency as seen in the Vaishnava tradition will demonstrate that third-world women, South Asian women in particular, do not adhere to the typical perceptions of them attributed by some Western Feminists, being powerless, subordinated and victims of a patriarchal system. Indeed, women in the context of Vaishnava are under patriarchal control where men either of this worldly (householder) or the other worldly (renouncer) are dominant actors. The women, however, make the most of their lives by utilising womanhood, motherhood and wifeness qualities in a male defined renunciant sphere. The extent to which Vaishnava female practitioners become autonomous actors and gain the most benefit from their marginalised situation is to conform to what has been prescribed to them; that is, being good Bengali women whose lives are valued by being dependent to either a male partner, gurus, disciples, or lay the community.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Motherhood is creativity, caring, and giving. Everyone can have motherhood qualities even if one does not have one’s own biological child, even if one is not a woman. But one needs to be able to love and care for others like one’s own child.”

Shyamali Khastkir (1940–2011)

This research is an ethnographic study of the Bengal Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition, which commonly understood as tantric influenced tradition blended together with Bengali devotion.¹ I draw on the unconventional lives and renunciant experiences of Vaishnava Sahajiya female renouncers (*sadhuma*) to highlight the diversity in the lives of third-world women and the variety in female renunciation in South Asia. The variety of ways in which female renouncers exercise their agency and their experiences will be used to illustrate that “there is no such a thing as a typical *sannyasini*”.² In addition, female agency as seen in the Sahajiya tradition will demonstrate that not all third-world women, or not all South Asian women, adhere to the typical perceptions of them attributed by some feminist scholars who adopt western progressive views, that those third-world women are powerless, subordinated and victims of a patriarchal system.³

¹ The term Sahajiya is believed to be a scholarly constructed term. It will only be used in this chapter and then, once we explore Sahajiya further, the term Vaishnava will be used for Sahajiya in order to align with the informants’ perceptions of themselves.

² Meena Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation* (New York: Suny Press, 2004), 8.

³ Western perception on third world women see Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses," *Feminist Reviews* 30, no. 1 (1988).

In contrast to the portrait of an individual renouncer who stays outside the world,⁴ my study shows that Vaishnava renouncers, especially female renouncers, are not able to live outside society. They are individuals outside the world but are not individualistic. They live in a collective community in which social norms and expectations vis-à-vis women play their roles in both domestic and renunciatory domains. Women thus need to exercise their power and agency within this patriarchal framework. I suggest that one way in which Vaishnava female renouncers try to find advantage in their way of life is to align themselves with the conventional Hindu and Vaishnava Sahajiya male-confined tradition.

Accordingly, the female agency that we will see in this research is not described in terms of resistance to male domination. It is not about women marching on the road to protest against patriarchy. It is also not about women wanting to become like men and take over their privileged position. Sahajiya women do not want to be above men. Many of them are satisfied to be merely above other women or, in other words, be at the top of the bottom. To Sahajiya women, female agency is about how to live harmoniously by following virtues constructed under the ideal of 'womanhood'; being a devout wife and a mother of a son.

I start my PhD thesis with open sentences on motherhood pronounced by Shyamali Khastkir, a local activist who worked with and for women till the last day of her life. 'Motherhood' and its unconditional love seems to be my most important research finding on Vaishnava Sahajiya women. Indeed, in Indian culture, 'being a mother of many sons' is the women's greatest status, and the Laws of Manu claims the greatness of being a

⁴ For more see Louis Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian religion," *Contributions to Indian sociology* 4 (1960). In against Dumont see such as Stanley J Tambiah, "The renouncer: his individuality and his community," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 15, no. 1-2 (1981); Richard Burghart, "Renunciation in the religious traditions of South Asia," *Man* 18, no. 4 (1983).

mother is greater than that of a teacher or indeed a father.⁵ Pat Caplan states that mother is the most respectable status which provide women a great spiritual power.⁶ Similarly, Meena Khandelwal also suggests that the role of mother that female renouncers embrace in their renunciation provides them power and respect in Hindu Society.⁷ My participation in the life of Sahajiya sadhus suggests that, for female renouncers, motherhood is a means not only to negotiate a space within male renunciation, but also a means for their religious liberation. 'Motherhood' also suggests a relatedness and is defined by the relationship with others. Indeed, Vaishnava Sahajiya female renouncers should not procreate and accordingly not be a real mother, however, their renunciant path does not void from mother quality of nurturing and caring for others.

My finding agrees with studies on female renouncers in other Hindu renunciant traditions described by Khandelwal, Antoinette DeNapoli and Sondra Hausner,⁸ which suggest that female renouncers do not renounce their womanhood, but rather use it as a means to negotiate an 'improvised' renunciant status within society. However, I propose that the ways in which Sahajiya female renouncers utilise womanhood to benefit their renunciation differ according to the social context they live in and the renunciant tradition they belong to. Sahajiya sadhumas express the qualities of motherhood loving, caring and nurturing, through various forms of devotional service to their gurus, male partners

⁵ Manu, *The law code of Manu*, ed. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶ Pat Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya," in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987), 285.

⁷ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*, 194.

⁸ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*; Antoinette E DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2014); Sondra L Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Meena Khandelwal, Sondra L Hausner, and A Gold, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers* (Springer, 2016).

and cohorts, or to the lay community. These practices allow them to be involved in and subsequently associate their renunciation with domesticity.

1.1 Doing research on the Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition

Studying Vaishnava Sahajiya female practitioners was not my initial research plan.⁹ Instead, I wanted to conduct research on a mendicant group called the Bauls, who sing and play indigenous music to salute humanity and of course earn their livelihood. My focus was initially on Baul female practitioners and I wanted to explore what renunciation meant to them. My return to Santiniketan in the winter of 2016 was to find Baul female practitioners who sing not only for a living, but also for their spiritual aspiration. I sought advice from Jeanne Openshaw, an anthropologist who has been researching the Baul tradition for many decades, and she gave me great support since while in the field and once back in England.¹⁰ Instead of guiding me to work on the Bauls, Openshaw suggested I worked with Sahajiya practitioners. She informed me that Bauls had become contaminated with modern values; many were womanising and even intoxicated and accordingly, it was not safe to work with them. Besides, my Bengali language seemed to be a major problem since Baul philosophy and practice are best accessed through their songs, which require advanced language proficiency.

I took advice from Openshaw, but still kept the possibility open for any research topic related to the Bauls. Fortunately, my first visit to the field as a novice researcher, in

⁹ In this research, Sahajiya female practitioners include both renouncers and householders who take initiation to Sahajiya tradition. Sahajiya female renouncers mean women who take renunciant robe (*sanyas/bhek*).

¹⁰ While I was conducting fieldwork in Santiniketan, it was Openshaw who not only introduced me to the Sahajiya group but also taught me to work and think like an anthropologist. I had weekly meetings with her while in the field in order to discuss my fieldwork and some issues with regard to sadhus.

January 2016, gave me a chance to meet many Bauls, such as Praban Das and Mimlu Sen, a famous Baul singer and writer respectively; Anando Das and his father, Vishvanath Das,¹¹ and his family and friends; and Tara and Karun, a Baul family studied by Kristin Hanssen.¹² I also met several Bauls on different occasions, either at their own ashrams or friends' houses. I spent several nights observing their rituals, their singing and smoking hashish. They seemed quite modern and were comfortable with foreigners, although some had only basic education, they could speak English fairly well.

In addition, I went to a festival called *Jaya Dev Mela*. It is the biggest Baul music festival organised every winter at Kenduli, located in the Birbhum District of West Bengal, about one hour's drive from Santiniketan. Many thousands of Baul singers and audience members went to the fair (*mela*). I kept an eye on female Baul singers; there were many of them, but the ones I came across seemed to be professional singers rather than the spiritual minstrels I was looking for. The location of the *mela* was huge and filled with thousands of people, dust and the smell and smoke of marijuana. I felt suffocated, but found no easy way to escape from the area and it took us many hours to be released from the Bauls' sphere.

In the meantime, I was introduced to two senior Sahajiya sadhu couples. I was impressed by their modest living and kindness. Before meeting Sahajiya sadhus in the flesh, I had some preconceptions of the Sahajiyas through the study of S.B. Dasgupta, which included Sahajiyas in an obscure religious cult.¹³ Because it has been influenced

¹¹ Their story has been written in Openshaw's book and Mimlu Sen's book. For more see Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005); Mimlu Sen, *Baulsphere* (New Delhi: Random House India, 2012).

¹² The life and experience of Karun and Tara, see Kristin Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls* (New York Routledge, 2018).

¹³ Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1969).

by tantric sexo-yogic practice, I was inclined to think that Sahajiyas were people obsessed with sex and would see every woman as a sex object. Instead I found an old couple who acted moderately and lived their lives actively and in support of each other.

After exploring Baul activities and meeting Sahajiya sadhus, it seemed to me that I could see myself as a researcher in the Sahajiya community rather than with the Bauls. Although there is already some research on Bauls and Baul women in the Santiniketan area,¹⁴ ethnographic research on Vaishnava Sahajiya and its women, in either the Birbhum district or even West Bengal, has been limited. This is probably because the Sahajiyas are publicly invisible, which makes researchers assume that there are no Sahajiyas in the area. Their negative reputation as perceived by orthodox Vaishnava and their esoteric coded language seem to discourage researchers from studying them.¹⁵ In addition, in comparison to the Baul group, which has gained international popularity and historical significance, the Sahajiyas seem to be an insignificant religious group seen as an obscure cult, and often condemned by mainstream society.¹⁶

Ethnographic scholarship on Sahajiya traditions in West Bengal seems to be an area that has been ignored by scholars. When it comes to a practical perspective of the Sahajiyas, scholars inclined to use Sahajiya textual sources such as *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* from orthodox Vaishnava and *Vivarta-Vilāsa* and

¹⁴ For more on Baul families including women see Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*. For Single Baul women see Lisa I Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For Baul traditions see Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*; Carola Erika Lorea, "Searching for the Divine, Handling Mobile Phones: Contemporary Lyrics of Baul Songs and their Osmotic Response to Globalisation," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 8, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁵ Glen A Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal," in *Religions of India in practice*, ed. Jr Donald S. Lopez (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Baul is claimed to be a Bengali identity and it was used as a reason for the partition of Pakistan and Bangladesh. For more see Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

Amrtaratnāvalī from Vaishnava Sahajiyas,¹⁷ and ethnographic sources on Bauls, such as those from Openshaw, Kristin Hanssen and Lisa Knight. The only recent ethnographic study on the Sahajiyas so far was done by Sukanya Sarbadhikari, who worked on Bengali Vaishnavism in Navadip and Mayapur, and included the Sahajiyas in her study. Her chapter on the Sahajiyas illustrates the significance of body and esoteric rituals, allowing the Sahajiyas to position themselves as authentic Vaishnava.¹⁸

Most work on Sahajiyas has been done based on textual studies, focusing on either historical and/or sexo-yogic ritual perspectives.¹⁹ Edward Dimock, S.B. Dasgupta and M.M. Bose are perhaps scholars who touched upon women in the Sahajiya tradition. However, their account of women does not seem to be sufficient in terms of tracing the lives and experiences of Sahajiya women in their actual living context.²⁰ Besides, their books were first published many decades ago, and though some data are still reliable and useable, we need to rediscover and explore further the current situation of Sahajiya as a practical religion. The lives and experiences of Vaishnava Sahajiya female renouncers seem to be underrepresented because these women are not acknowledged as renouncers to outsiders, but as ordinary women who live at home and occasionally go out begging like old widows. Accordingly, the ordinary lives of typical rural women do not seem to make any new contribution, thus they are not perceived as important informants.

¹⁷ Two hundred and fifty manuscripts of Sahajiya texts are kept at Calcutta University; Dimock, S.B. Dasgupta, M.M. Bose, and Hayes are major scholars who translated those manuscripts into English.

¹⁸ Sukanya Sarbadhikari, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

¹⁹ See Edward C Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal* (Chicago: Motilal Banarsidass Publication., 1991); Manindra Mohan Bose, *Post Caitanya Sahajiya Cult* (New Delhi: Calcutta University, 1986; repr., 2013); Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults*.

²⁰ Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*. Bose, *Post Caitanya Sahajiya Cult*.

The lack of ethnographic research on Vaishnava Sahajiya makes my research original work on Vaishnava Sahajiya female practitioners and tradition, as practised in West Bengal. However, the invisibility of Sahajiya practitioners initially made me pessimistic that I would not be able to find any Sahajiya informants in the area near Santiniketan. With this worry in my mind, I did however decide to go ahead with my research on Vaishnava Sahajiya. Eventually, my doubts were assuaged because the first Sahajiya couples I met confirmed that there were many sadhus like them in the Birbhum area.

1.2 Aims of the research

Another advantage and also originality deriving from studying Sahajiya female renouncers is that this tradition is perhaps the only tradition in South Asia that claims a superior spiritual position for women and the necessity for (male) renunciation.²¹ However, the Vaishnava women's higher position, as pointed out by Openshaw, needs to be closely examined through an observation based on ethnographic studies to find out if there is any gap between their ideological image and practical position.²² Following Openshaw, Knight's ethnographic research on Baul Vaishnava tradition suggests that Baul women do not have a high position as they are imagined in their ideology.²³ Indeed, the ideological and privileged position of Sahajiya women encouraged me to investigate further their legitimate lives and experiences in the "other worldly", and to find out what Sahajiya renunciation and women's higher spiritual position really bring to these females practitioners. As we shall see in the following chapters, women's high spiritual position

²¹ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

²² Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

²³ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

is opposed to their actual inferior position in society. Their low social position directly affects their religious position, and that shapes their patterns of renunciation.

Although my main objective is to conduct well-grounded ethnography on the religious life and experiences of Vaishnava Sahajiya women, I cannot ignore or discard the experiences and voices of male practitioners in my study. This is because of the lack of empirical research on the Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition as a whole and also the nature of the tradition itself, which requires both genders presented together in their day-to-day lives as well as their religious rituals. As a matter of fact, it seems that we cannot have a deep understanding of female sadhus without studying them in relation to their male partners. I set three main aims for my research. The first aim is to investigate and unveil the real identity and existing community of the Vaishnava Sahajiyas of West Bengal. Sahajiya practitioners worship Radha-Krishna and practise esoteric rituals. They often veil their Sahajiya identity in order to be accepted in the community. Accordingly, it appears that there are no Sahajiyas in the field; instead, practitioners are called Vaishnava (*Baishnab*) who, as claimed by the sadhus themselves, are the most authentic among other Vaishnavas.

The second aim is to bring together religious practices that considered significant on the Sahajiya renunciant path: esoteric rituals (*yugal sadhana*), alms collection (*madhukari*) and devotional feasts (*sadhu seva*). While most existing studies focus on esoteric rituals as the sole means to attain liberation, I suggest that other practices are also significant for their liberation as well as their socio-economic perspective. In addition, ways in which women appropriate those practices, which are largely for men in their renunciant life, will be closely examined to highlight how women within the tradition exercise their agency within male defined renunciation.

The third aim is to explore and analyse what renunciation means to these women and what renunciant life brings them. Ethnographic studies on female ascetics across South Asia and perhaps in Asia, e.g. in Khandelwal's study on female ascetics in Hardwar, DeNapoli's in Rajasthan, Hausner's in Nepal and India, Knight's in India and Bangladesh and Hanssen's in West Bengal, make a good general contribution to the discipline. However, as suggested by Hiroko Kawanami, "we still need more empirical data to examine common themes and compare fundamental values that govern female renunciation, and reach a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural experience of Buddhist nuns [female ascetics]." ²⁴ As a result, the lives of Vaishnava Sahajiya female renouncers will be used to explore the fundamental values that rule their renunciation and to assert that there are no typical female ascetics in South Asia.

1.3 Theoretical framework

1.3.1 Women and Hindu Renunciation

Texts and Context of Hindu Renunciation

Although this research is an anthropological study of women in Bengal Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition, it is important to draw our attention to authoritative texts that refer to Hindu renunciation and the Hindu way of life, such as *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* and *Laws of Manu* respectively. This allows us to have an understanding of how Hindu women are depicted by the local elites and by some Western scholars, and how their depictions play a role in constructing the image of 'other women', who belong to lower castes and

²⁴ Hiroko Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 11.

groupings in society, including Sahajiya women, who are generally marginalised or excluded from elite literary texts.²⁵ ‘Sanskritisation’ is a process that acknowledges that the dissemination of the textual ideas and the mainstream values trickle down to those placed down in the social hierarchy.²⁶ As this research will highlight, the practice of Vaishnava renunciation is valued by those women I studied, not only because it offers them a degree of an individualistic lifestyle and freedom, but also by allowing them to live the life of dependency, stipulated as ‘female *dharma*’ in the Laws of Manu. That is, a woman ideally should not live independently even in her own home since, “her father guards her in her childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her son guards her in her old age”.²⁷

It seems to me that Brahmanical texts prescribe renunciation solely for twice-born men, and once a male person becomes a renouncer, he is expected to follow the renunciant rules and regulations. The core practices require austerity, isolation, solitary wandering, non-possession, and detachment from all worldly values, which implicitly aims to discourage a person, especially a young one, from joining this path.²⁸ In theory, women are excluded from the practice of renunciation although stories of female renouncers often appear in the Brahmanical literature. In these texts, women are depicted to be wicked especially for male renouncers since they are the source of temptation luring

²⁵ The depiction of women in the Hindu texts such as the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* and the Laws of Manu is argued by scholars such as Sharada Sugirtharajah, that these texts do not include every Indian women in. See more Sharada Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 2 (2002).

²⁶ Sanskritisation is a process suggested by Srinivas to explain how the great tradition influences (Brahmanical and textual ideas) the little tradition (tribal, local ideas). See more Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1952), 32.

²⁷ Manu, *The law code of Manu*, 96.

²⁸ According to the Ashrama system only twice-born men who have fulfilled their duty of maintaining the lineage, having grey hair and seeing the son’s son can take a refuge in renunciant domain.

men to lose control of their physical bodies and stray from their spiritual endeavour towards liberation. There is a passage in the *Yājñavalkya Upaniṣad* that says, “When one abandons women, one abandons the world. When one abandons the world, one becomes happy”.²⁹

The reasons to exclude women from the practice of Brahmanical renunciation are various, which can be their lack of Vedic knowledge that disqualifies them from acting as independent ritual practitioners, or that women are not twice born men who possess the sacred thread.³⁰ Many scholars such as Mary McGee have stated that in South Asian religious traditions, a woman cannot attain spiritual liberation unless she becomes reborn as a man.³¹ This assumption seems to originate from the general bias towards the female body, viewing that her physiology is inferior to the male body and uncontrollable. Caplan has argued that the ability to control semen emission makes a male superior to a female.³² That is, while he can control his sexual fluids and accordingly stay celibate, she cannot control her fluids (menstrual blood and breast milk), and so she cannot control her celibate state. On this point, Khandelwal argues that celibacy is the central practice that excludes women from a proper act of renunciation.³³

According to the Brahmanical ideology, a woman’s proper duty (*stridharma*) and her entire religious devotion should be directed to her husband, and serving her husband is

²⁹Yajnavalkya Upaniṣad 316 translated by Patrick Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 279.

³⁰Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*; Patrick Olivelle, *Ascetics and Brahmins: studies in ideologies and institutions*, vol. 1 (London: Anthem Press, 2011).

³¹Mary McGee, "Desired fruits: motive and intention in the votive rites of Hindu women," in *Roles and rituals for Hindu women*, ed. Julia Leslie (London: Pinter, 1991), 76.

³²Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya," 284.

³³Meena Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," in *Celibacy, culture, and society: The anthropology of sexual abstinence*, ed. Elisa J. Sobo and Sandra Bell (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 163-4.

seen as a devotional service to the deities.³⁴ That being said, devotional practices are important for a woman's religious aspiration, which allows her an opportunity to be liberated even in the domestic domain. A wife with a husband provides an ideal model for a woman's life, and such a woman is viewed as *sumangali*; an 'auspicious married one', and her wifely duty involves sexual fidelity, bearing a child, and helping her husband fulfil his duty as a householder.³⁵ However, to be just a wife with a husband is not viewed as auspicious as being a 'mother of a son'. Sudhir Karkar posits that motherhood means everything to an Indian woman. He states, "an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can."³⁶ Indeed, being a faithful wife and a mother of a son is both a social and religious goal for a Hindu woman, which however, confined to the domestic domain. It needs to be noted that a man's duty is also in the householder's domain and it is generally commented that a man is born with three debts; debt to his ancestor, to the sages and to the gods. Indeed, these three debts can be paid off only while he is a householder. However, it seems that with exceptions a man can opt out from such debts by becoming a renouncer.

Since a woman is excluded from the so-called Brahmanical renunciant ideology, becoming a renouncer is not straightforward for her. Even though there are many women who have joined the renunciant traditions in India, and some of them have become successful guru, the legitimacy of their renunciant status is still being debated. Besides,

³⁴ Rita DasGupta Sharma, "SaHam-I am she: Women as Goddess," in *Is the goddess a feminist? the politics of South Asian goddesses*, ed. Alf Hildebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 29.

³⁵ Vasudha Narayanan, "Hindu perceptions of auspiciousness and sexuality," in *Women, religion and sexuality*, ed. Jeanne Becher (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 65.

³⁶ Sudhir Kakar, "Feminine identity in India," in *Women in Indian society: A reader*, ed. Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988), 44.

since there are no official guidelines for female religious practices outside the domestic domain, women who renounce challenge the existing renunciant model, which is a male model, or even construct a new renunciant way of life for themselves. I have observed that there are some commonalities in the way female ascetics or renouncers across a diversity of renunciant traditions perform their religious practices. That is, the ideal of female *dharma* and that of motherhood or even wifedom are always found in the practice of female renouncers. It is worth noting that the womanhood I refer to in this research and as a practice in the Bengali context I studied focus on the essential features of woman – the caring, loving, compassionate, and gentle nature. In the renunciant domain, female ascetics adopt the ideal of woman’s *dharma* – devotional service – into their path to renunciation. However, their devotional service, unlike that of lay women, is not limited to the husband and family, but expands to the wider community; to other ascetics, disciples, and devotees, even to anonymous strangers.

In the study of DeNapoli, radical devotion through singing *bhajan* is an expressive form that female practitioners adopt as a means for their liberation. This form of practice is unique in the sense that it is only those women who can piously devote themselves to the path through devotional singing.³⁷ Khandelwal and Hausner have provided evidence that the female ascetics they studied embrace giving services to others, either individuals or to the community, and that is their way to secure renunciant status and attain liberation.³⁸

³⁷ DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*.

³⁸ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*; Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*.

Similar findings have been reported by Hamaya, her study reveals that female lay ascetics shared their gifts (in the form of invitation cards to a feast) received from other ashrams with their female peers to ascertain their status within the female lay ascetic community.³⁹ In the Baul tradition, Knight has highlighted that a Baul female practitioner could be a respected woman and, at the same time, a revered sadhu if she adopted a normative practice of womanhood as well as wifedom on her renunciant path; a good housewife at home and a carefree liberated woman in the public space.⁴⁰ In the popular transnational movement of Mata Amritanandamayi, the guruma has become a successful role model for Indian female renunciators by giving a mother's compassionate hugs to all her devotees, as well as providing social services to the community, the act of which has made Ammachi gain a national and international reputation.⁴¹

Women and Vaishnava Sahajiya Renunciation

It is said that the practice of renunciation in the Sahajiya tradition has risen in order to counter an orthodox and conservative society dominated by the Brahmanical orthodoxy.⁴² Any person who is marginalised in society and finds no space within normative renunciation can alternatively take renunciation in the Sahajiya tradition. Indeed, from

³⁹ Mariko Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female 'lay ascetics' and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India," *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 1 (2018).

⁴⁰ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

⁴¹ For more see Amanda J. Lucia, "'Give Me Sevā Overtime': Selfless Service and Humanitarianism in Mata Amritanandamayi's Transnational Guru Movement," *History of Religions* 54, no. 2 (2014); Maya Warrior, *Hindu selves in a modern world: Guru faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi mission* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004); Maya Warrior, "Guru choice and spiritual seeking in contemporary India," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1 (2003).

⁴² According to Ramakanta Chakrabarty, Vaishnava-Sahajiya is the reaction of the social chaotic in the 17th and 18th centuries when the Bengal Vaishnava community led to deviant orders. Many marginal low caste people identified themselves with the Tantric Sahajiya tradition. Cited in Hugh Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 28, no. 1/2 (1993): 46.

many perspectives, such as in regard to women, sexuality and the caste origins of its members, Sahajiya renunciation critically challenges the social conventions and most renunciant traditions in South Asia. However, as argued by Hugh Urban, any challenge to the social order, such as in regard to sexuality or caste, is internal and personal rather than outwardly revolutionary.⁴³ In public, people conform to orthodox Vaishnava norms and accept their lower and less pure status, but in private they try to cultivate a secret and liberated body that is not bound to the caste hierarchy. Openshaw has suggested that Vaishnava Sahajiya replicates the ideology and practices prescribed in the Brahmanical renunciation.⁴⁴ In my study, it shows to a certain extent that the Sahajiya renouncers appear to follow the model and practice of the Brahmanical renunciation. As we shall see in the following chapters, the Sahajiya model of renunciation is obviously a masculine one. Traditional knowledge and lineage are maintained through a patrilineal system, transmitted from a male guru to male disciples. There are also, essential ascetic practices that suit male renouncers in the Sahajiya path, which include semen retention, wandering from place to place alone, austerity and the strict restrictions implied in the training of the male body. These practices focus on the male practitioners and emphasise how to make them attain liberation.

The yogic ritual involving sex and the necessity of female participation for a man's liberation causes Sahajiya to be heavily criticised by others and they are excluded from Bengal Vaishnavism by the orthodox Vaishnava, such as Gaudiya Vaishnava.⁴⁵ Spivak

⁴³ Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal."

⁴⁴ Jeanne Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female-male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism," *Religion* 37, no. 4 (2007).

⁴⁵ For more see Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*; Lucian Wong, "Against Vaiṣṇava Deviance: Brāhmanical and Bhadrakok Alliance in Bengal," *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018).

adds that the tantric sexo-yogic ritual is a practice that sees women as a means to an end,⁴⁶ expecting them to be passive during the sexual intercourse and not allowing women's sexual agency to be an active part of it.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, it seems to me that the necessity for female participation in the esoteric ritual allows women to play a prominent role in the male renunciant practice, where women can find unique opportunities to exercise their agency. In the case of Sahajiya I studied, in contrast to what Spivak has advocated, I argue that women's sexual agency is actively exercised in their esoteric ritual. Success in the esoteric ritual happens when both the bodies and minds of the male and female practitioners are in complete control. That is to say, the male practice of semen retention also depends on the female body control and her emotions, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 4.

It seems to me that Sahajiya women I studied are not concerned about progressive ideas about women's rights and gender equality. Similar to the householders, their relationships within the spiritual lineage and community is moderated by the notion of *dharma*, which is about performing one's duty well rather exercise one's rights. Then what is *dharma* for a Vaishnava female renouncer? This question is not easily answered by referring to authoritative texts in the Brahmanical tradition, and it seems to me that there is no particular text that describes what a Sahajiya female renouncer's *dharma* should be. Besides, Sahajiya renunciants I worked with do not recognise nor are confined to the authority of the texts, but follow their guru's teachings and direct instructions. Accordingly, the notion of *dharma* that a Sahajiya female renouncer refers to as a

⁴⁶ Women as a means to an end seems to be a general view regarding the tantric tradition. For more see Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female-male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

⁴⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi," *Cultural critique* 1, no. 47 (2001): 148.

guideline in conducting a relationship with her male partner and also in following her religious practice is *stridharma*, implying a woman's proper duty to especially her husband; the lord. That is, a Sahajiya female renouncer is expected to care for, nurture, and provide various services to her male partner. The motherly and wifely roles she performs towards her male partner, guru and disciples not only make her respectable in their eyes, but also allows her to fulfil her spiritual aspirations.

The next question is what makes Sahajiya female renouncers attain their religious goal on their renunciant path; the state of *sahaja*.⁴⁸ Achieving peace (*santi*) in their own alternative interpretation is neither about obtaining equal rights with men nor about pursuing *sahaja* in esoteric rituals through the same method as the male renouncers. For female renouncers, it is about them providing love and care, and conducting devotional service to others. That is to say, renunciation for Sahajiya women, similar to what Kawanami finds in the context of nuns in Myanmar,⁴⁹ is not about 'them' achieving higher social and religious status for themselves, but instead, it is about conferring to 'others' their [sahajiya woman's] devotional service. As a result, renunciation for a Sahajiya female renouncer is about fulfilling her essential duty as a woman. What they achieve from their renunciant life is the peaceful state in the mind (*santi man*) that one obtains from caring for, loving and giving to others. Therefore, the state of *sahaja* for these women implies the gaining of the ultimate peace, once they have provided their devotional service to others.

⁴⁸ *Sahaja* is translated as simple, natural, it is the Sahajiyas' highest religious goal. See more details in Chapter 2.

⁴⁹ Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful*, 7.

Indeed, the choice of Sahajjiya women in taking a renunciant robe appears to go against the normative path expected of a Bengali woman of being a wife and a mother. However, the ideal of *stridharma* that female renouncers follow in the renunciant domain is, on the other hand, a method that Sahajjiya female renouncers adopt to synergise social expectations and their personal life choices. Instead of challenging the dominant values in society that marginalise them, Sahajjiya women reproduce and utilise those values in their renunciant path. It seems to me that by incorporating the traditional notion of womanhood and *sridharma* to live a feminine way of renunciation, these Sahajjiya female renouncers lessen any conflict with society that may arise as a result of their chosen path. Gananath Obeyesekere's study of spirit possession prevalent among sorcerers in Sri Lanka reveals that alternative choices individuals can opt for have to be understood and described by referring to an acceptable symbolic model used by informants within their social and communal context.⁵⁰ Similarly, in the case of Sahajjiyas, I argue that female renouncers adopt the notion of normative motherhood as a myth-model in their renunciant life in order to be accepted and perceived as respectable sadhumas. Without the motherhood model, Sahajjiya female sadhus would merely be seen as sexual consorts of male sadhus, and thus will have limited space and a negative reputation in their own community.

⁵⁰ That is, the matted hair of his informants will be merely a symptom [not a symbol], if a matted-hair person opts for a socially unaccepted myth model to describe his/her symptoms. For more see Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's hair : an essay on personal symbols and religious experiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

1.3.2 Sahajiya Women's agency in a conservative male-defined context

The Hindu textual traditions may have various kinds of narratives that portray women as independent and defiant, and challenging the gender norm, however the classical portrayal of women is still that of being submissive, passive, and dependent, commonly identified by Orientalist scholars.⁵¹ Sharada Sugirtharajah states that biased patriarchal treatises such as the Laws of Manu are the means used to understand and assess how women are positioned in the Hindu tradition.⁵² Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold, cited in Hancock, have stated that the portrayal of Indian women as subordinated and submissive agents is 'half-true', and it not only misrepresents Indian women, but also 'Orientalises' the South Asian culture.⁵³ Hancock adds that South Asian women are not subordinated but marginalised, owing to the fact that they were not recognised as important actors in the field.⁵⁴ It is also my view from my personal experience that the submissive status of Indian women portrayed in the texts or in the real social situations seems derive from the stereotypical perception of Indian women perpetuated mostly by outsiders. However, in order to gain more varied and realistic portrayal of women in Indian society, we should consider women's narratives outside the orthodox texts in local sources such as in folklore, theatre, music, and in their own experiences.⁵⁵

Another stereotypical perception disseminated as the result of Orientalist scholars enhancing their submissive image is that Indian women are not the agents of their own

⁵¹ Rita M. Gross, *Toward a New Model of the Hindu Pantheon: A Report on Twenty-Some Years of Feminist Reflection* (University of California Press, 2009).

⁵² Hinduism and feminism: some concerns Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns."

⁵³ Mary Elizabeth Hancock, *Womanhood in the making : domestic ritual and public culture in urban South India* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 23-26.

⁵⁴ Hancock, *Womanhood in the making : domestic ritual and public culture in urban South India*, 23-26.

⁵⁵ Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns."

actions. Such a perception is based on the view that agency derives from the act of resistance and those women who do not resist against the dominant hegemony are seen as ‘lacking in agency’.⁵⁶ However, agency in my understanding provides a way to explore the extent to which women can gain some control over their lives.⁵⁷ Thus the notion of agency I render in this research, examined from an anthropological perspective, points to the relationship between individual and social structure, and the individual’s capability to be the source or originator of one’s acts.⁵⁸

Saba Mahmood argues that a ‘particular notion’ of progressive agency imposed by liberalism, which comprehends autonomy in term of power and agency in resisting, “limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations, and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions”.⁵⁹ Indeed, in many non-liberal Asian contexts, the way local women exercise their agency is not in agreement with the kind of resistance advocated by progressive liberal traditions. Instead of fighting the dominant system, women conform to it but without losing their agency. For example, in Egypt, Abu-Lughod demonstrates that wearing a veil does not always imply a woman lacking agency.⁶⁰ Egyptian women use the veil as their personal choice to express their piety, political stance, and so on. In the Indian Baul tradition, Knight points out that Baul women exercise their agency by making themselves ‘encumbered

⁵⁶ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist theory, agency, and the liberatory subject: Some reflections on the Islamic revival in Egypt," *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42, no. 1 (2006).

⁵⁷ Biswamitra Sahu, Patricia Jeffery, and Nakkeeran N, "Contextualizing Women’s Agency in Marital Negotiations: Muslim and Hindu Women in Karnataka, India," *SAGE Open* 6, no. 3 (2016).

⁵⁸ Nigel Rapport, *Social and cultural anthropology : the key concepts*, ed. Joanna Overing, 2nd ed. ed. (Routledge, 2007).

⁵⁹ Mahmood, "Feminist theory, agency, and the liberatory subject: Some reflections on the Islamic revival in Egypt," 33.

⁶⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim women need saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

actors'.⁶¹ In addition, DeNapoli states that the vernacular performance of female sadhus underlines the oppression they are subjected to by society, but that also contains, "the seeds for their empowerment and the development of their *sakti*".⁶² In this context, women's notion of empowerment and *sakti* are alternatively and creatively expressed through singing to their God, which is not considered as explicitly resisting the normative culture. She adds that many female sadhus disclaim their own intention to become 'proper' sadhus, holding that it is God who wants them to follow in this renunciant path. By disclaiming one's agency, DeNapoli argues how they exercise their 'instrumental agency'.⁶³ That is, they defer to God to choose for them rather than they themselves making the decision. Biswamitra Sahu, Patricia Jeffery, and Nakkeeran N's study of women's agency in marital negotiation in Karnataka suggests that agency is not always overt and if women decide to go along with arranged marriages, it does not mean that their interests are not reflected in the choice of spouse or they lack agency although the decision may at times counter their intentions.⁶⁴

It seems to me that there are a range of agency, which starts from conformity at one end and hard resistance at the other. In the context I studied, resistance does not appear to be the means Sahajiya women adopt to proclaim their self-autonomy and exercise their agency. Instead, the agency of Sahajiya female renouncers is expressed in conforming to dominant values in their renunciant community. Sahajiya women's conforming and submissive agency provides an important case assuring us that there are "other modalities

⁶¹ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

⁶² DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*, 84.

⁶³ DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*.

⁶⁴ Sahu, Jeffery, and N, "Contextualizing Women's Agency in Marital Negotiations: Muslim and Hindu Women in Karnataka, India."

of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse”.⁶⁵

However, it cannot be denied that women whom I studied are controlled by men to a degree, and can also be seen as marginalised and subjected to some forms of exploitation. And yet, I argue that being a marginalised victim or even subordinated by the male members does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that these women are always passive, submissive and agentless. It is noteworthy that the lives of Sahajiya female renouncers are not completely individualistic nor free, and they have to abide by many kinds of communal norms in their renunciant community. In this respect, their agency cannot be as pronounced. Moreover, their social disadvantage of being economically ‘dependent’ affects their life choices and they often end up choosing to be paired up with a partner and living as a coupled renouncer (*yugal sadhu*), which make them ‘dependent actors’ rather than individuals living outside the world.

As mentioned earlier, the devotional services female renouncers offer to their male partners are accepted as the *dharma* of Sahajiya women, which is similar to ‘*stridharma*’ of Indian female householders on the ground, involving caring for and nurturing men. From the outsiders’ perspective (often from those who render the notion of agency as an act of resistance to the dominant system), following one’s *dharma* is often interpreted as lacking in agency. However, living as dependent actors in the case of these female renouncers is out of their own choice, and most if not all Sahajiya women opt to become renouncers because they wish to be dependent on a male partner or a guru so that they can perform their female *dharma*. Accordingly, the women’s agency, in the Sahajiya

⁶⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 153.

tradition I studied, is pronounced in their language of submissiveness rather than that of subversion. That being said, conforming to the dominant ideology provides them a way of spiritual life in which Sahajiya female renouncers gain control over their lives. It allows them to show their ‘ability to be agents of their own acts’.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Participant observation

The train from Howrah station in West Bengal took me to my final destination, Santiniketan, where I was going to do fieldwork for my doctoral research on Sahajiya female renouncers. Even though I have been to Santiniketan many times and been part of the community for years, my journey did not make me feel at ease. I was on the late-night train with many local women in the ladies’ compartment, which is a reserved public space for women, specified by authorities to express for their concern for gender equality. The compartment was very crowded with women who carried many belongings. We struggled to get seats. Some shouted at others, others kept swearing in the local dialect, and there were some issues that required the police to intervene, they turned up to threaten anyone who did not follow their rules. I thought to myself that I put myself into that kind of situation nearly every day for almost a year, with hundreds of strangers on a train, and living in a village with sadhus and villagers whom I had not met before. As a novice anthropologist, I doubted if I could find my people and any space for myself in an alien community. The train and its passengers reminded me of a passage written by John

Van Maanen, which says, “anthropologists learn to move among strangers.”⁶⁶ Indeed, my fieldwork in rural West Bengal concerned studying those strangers, moving and living with them.

I adopted an ethnographic method in which participant observation of the daily lives of Sahajiya sadhus became my key method to access data. Since I had not been trained in social anthropology but rather philosophy, relying on ethnographic data seemed to be one of the many challenges in my journey towards writing a PhD dissertation. To prepare myself for fieldwork I took many courses on anthropology and ethnographic methodology, provided by Lancaster University. Since it is the traditional practice of social anthropologists to learn the local language, I also studied Bengali using William Radice’s and Alibha Dakshi’s books.⁶⁷ Initially, my supervisor also suggested I read and review books and journal articles written by anthropologists, such as *Death in Benares* by Jonathan Parry, *Songs at the River’s Edge* by Kathy Gardner, *Medusa’s Hair* by Gananath Obeyesekere and so on. The book that led me to the adventurous world of anthropological research was *Medusa’s Hair*. Although its cover photograph is horrific, the message of the book suggests that knowing the local language and having a good relationship with informants are essential for an anthropologist who studies other cultures.⁶⁸

Before I started fieldwork, it seemed that I knew very little Bengali and did not know anything about my informants. However, my situation was likely to be a common experience for many anthropologists whom I had the chance to interact with personally

⁶⁶ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the field : on writing ethnography*, 2nd ed. ed. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

⁶⁷ I studied some basic Bengali by taking a Bengali Foreign Casual Course provided by Vishva Bharati in 2006–2007.

⁶⁸ Obeyesekere, *Medusa's hair : an essay on personal symbols and religious experiences*.

and non-personally.⁶⁹ Knowing the work of other anthropologists made me reflect that they also started by being outsiders, but eventually went through the process of ‘becoming insiders’, while conducting participant observation.

During the fieldwork, I worked with 43 male and female sadhus affiliated to 26 ashrams. Their ashrams are located dispersedly across Birbhum, Bardhaman and Nadia district of West Bengal. Among them, there were seven ashrams which I regularly visited. I managed to visit other ashrams only once or twice because of their location, which made a day-return trip impossible. However, I regularly met those sadhus through devotional feasts called *sadhu seva*, organised in different ashrams throughout the year. I gathered empirical data for almost a year, which was spread across three winters from 2016 to 2018. During those three years I was not present in the field in other seasons, but I managed to telephone the sadhus regularly in order to maintain a good relationship and get updates on their lives. I only conducted fieldwork in the wintertime basically for reasons of safety. Since I had had the experience of living in Santiniketan before, I was aware that there could be extreme incidents caused by seasonal monsoons and high temperatures in the summer. Besides, sadhus themselves have more activities going on during the winter. They make more alms collections, and organise and participate in more feasts.

Since I worked with many sadhus and lived in many ashrams, I did not stay at one particular fieldwork site. Instead, I commuted to a different ashram everyday using every possible means of transportation, such as train, bus, bicycle, or walking. I occasionally stayed overnight in some ashrams where I felt safe and of course where there was a

⁶⁹ Those anthropologists include Hiroko Kawanami, Jeanne Openshaw, Kristin Hanssen, Sarah Lamb, Lisa Knight and Sandra Hausner.

latrine. When I started living among the sadhus, besides the issue of safety, I encountered two crucial issues that really concerned me. Those were hygiene and language. Initially, it was extremely difficult to consume their food because it appeared that their cooking process and food were not at all hygienic. I became ill from eating unclean food and was really paranoid to eat anything at their ashrams. I could not avoid eating with them, knowing how much commensality meant for my relationship with them. Initially, I could not help worrying about food hygiene, but I decided to go with the flow by eating whatever they offered me.⁷⁰ Eventually, I took on the role of cleaning vegetables and utensils, and getting water from the well or hand pump rather than from the public pond, which allowed me to take part in improving food hygiene at the ashrams.

During the initial period of fieldwork, I prepared questions for the sadhus beforehand, since my Bengali was not fluent. I recorded our conversations and whenever I returned to Santiniketan, my Bengali teacher would help me understand the conversations I had had with the sadhus. I also conducted several unstructured interviews in the initial period of fieldwork. However, the interview method was gradually replaced by spontaneous conversations, which later became the main means to elicit data from my informants. I wrote down significant points I observed in the field every day in my notebook, while I waited for the train to return to Santiniketan. I also wrote up my findings before bed and early in the morning before I left for an ashram. Living outside an ashram seemed to allow me to have a good routine to reflect on my daily experiences and write in my fieldnote.

⁷⁰ With the exception of water. Yet most ashram food is still considered unclean, though I have fewer problems and finally it seems to be wholesome food for me.

Not being fluent in Bengali and lacking interpreters, I began my fieldwork almost with a handicap. I remembered that ML Ma once commented, in a sympathetic tone, “If you don’t speak my language, how can you learn from me?” Her question confirmed that knowing the local language was essential. Also, it encouraged me to work harder in the field in order to have a means to receive their generosity. Meanwhile, I applied the ‘squatting observation’ technique, in which the researcher is present in context, whilst observing and participating in the informants’ lives without saying a word.⁷¹ Although this technique seemed to be effective in some contexts, sooner or later verbal communication was needed for more data collection. In the meantime, I had developed other skills, which helped me form a good rapport with the sadhus, and that eventually allowed me to be ‘their own person’.⁷² I visited ashrams almost every day, worked with sadhus, ate with them, helped them do some household chores, and from time to time travelled to different ashrams with them. My reciprocity with them, which meant helping sadhumas in the kitchen and providing services while they were organising *sadhu seva*, helped me to gain at least an ‘instant rapport’ in which sadhus felt at ease to share their life stories and have trust in me.⁷³ My regular presence allowed me to gain some sympathy from the sadhus. They also took a role in teaching me the Bengali and Sahajjiya languages, correcting my faulty pronunciation, simplifying their sentences, and being patient with me by repeating the same sentences over and over again. Gradually, we could communicate in Bengali, which became comprehensible to both parties.

⁷¹ This technique had been suggested by Openshaw. It is believed to have its roots in cultural anthropology, but neither I nor Openshaw could find any references.

⁷² A term used by Nicolas to describe Bengali kinship. Ronald B Inden and Ralph W Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali culture* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2005).

⁷³ It has been suggested that to be able to get informants’ answers, the researcher should at least build an instant rapport with the informants. For more see Kathleen Musante and Billie R DeWalt, *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers* (New York: Rowman Altamira, 2010).

After I developed a good relationship with the sadhus and improved my language skills, the best way to obtain data was from daily conversation. I collected most information from spontaneous conversations I had with female sadhus while working together with them in the kitchen, preparing food and cleaning the ashram, collecting alms and taking a rest. These daily practices allowed us to spend more time together, developing a good rapport and having intimate conversations. Generally speaking, when women are together, they are inclined to gossip or talk about others in the group. I must admit that I was able to access information about some secret practices and their personal lives without going through the initiation because of this gossiping nature of women.

As suggested by Kawanami what seems to be more important than language is relationships.⁷⁴ My fieldwork reassured me that it was the relationships between the researcher and her informants that made most data accessible. On the one hand, being limited in their local language, to a certain degree, hindered me from having deeper conversations; on the other hand, it helped me get to know my informants better. It prompted me to develop other anthropological skills, such as building up a good rapport with informants, which in my case was even more important than having language fluency. Indeed, if I was better at Bengali, I would not have been able to have spontaneous and intimate conversations, laugh and share with them many moments of happiness and sorrow.

⁷⁴ Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful*.

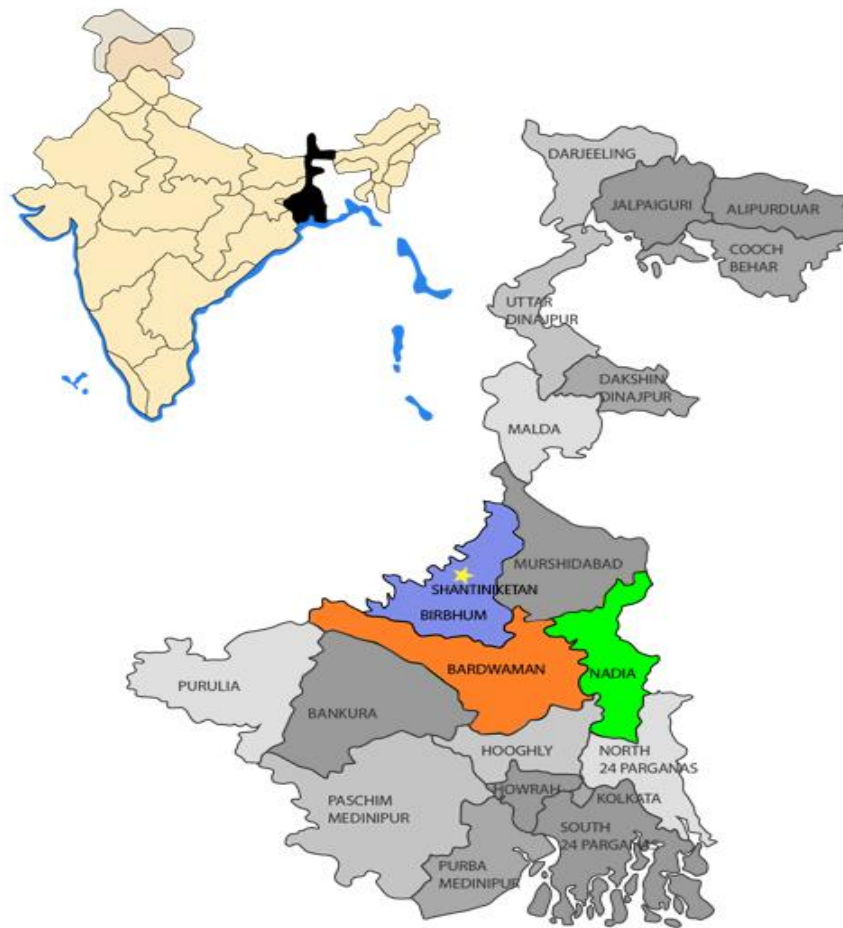


Figure 1.1 Map of West Bengal, India

1.4.2 Fieldwork site: Santiniketan and the surrounding area

Santiniketan was founded by Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to receive a Nobel Prize. It refers to a place, ‘an abode of peace’, where educational institutions, communities, human and divine spirits are situated. It is located in a rural area north of Kolkata, in the Bolpur subdivision of Birbhum district. The most convenient means to travel to and from Santiniketan is by train. There are a number of local and intercity trains that run to and from Howrah train station in Kolkata, but the most popular one is called

the ‘Santiniketan Express’, which takes about three hours to Kolkata. This train is outstanding as it is decorated with Tagore photographs and paintings, it also spellbinds its passengers with Baul songs sung by Baul mendicants, who ride the train to collect alms from passengers. In Santiniketan, there are educational institutions spanning from pre-school level to higher education. Visva-Bharati and Sriniketan are notable institutions in Santiniketan, providing spaces where local and global students and researchers meet and learn from each other. The learning environment that Santiniketan provides to the world is unique and it replicates the Indic learning tradition, in which learning, living and the natural environment are intertwined. The place itself has produced many international figures, such as Amartya Sen, Indira Gandhi and Satyajit Ray.



Figure 1.2 Bolpur town, the entry to Santiniketan

Many anthropologists who worked on West Bengal, e.g. Audrey Cantile, Jeanne Openshaw, Sarah Lamb, Kristen Hanssen, Lisa Knight and Carola Erika Lorea, chose Santiniketan as their fieldwork base. This is because Santiniketan became their gateway to both the local and international world. In addition, Santiniketan is known to be a place where one can find many Bauls. Tagore himself was a great artist and poet, he very much appreciated Baul songs and its philosophy, and his songs and poetry, including *Gitanjali*, are believed to have been influenced by Bengali Vaishnava ideology.⁷⁵ Besides, Santiniketan is a world heritage site which attracts local and international tourists. It hosts *poush mela* annually, in which Baul singers perform their concerts on the stage provided. These facts persuade many Bauls to relocate to Santiniketan in order to become visible in public, gain opportunities to give concerts, and thus attract more local and international patrons.⁷⁶

However, the reason why Vaishnava Sahajiya chose to relocate near Santiniketan seemed to have nothing to do with the reputation of Santiniketan or Tagore. Many Vaishnava Sahajiya sadhus, unlike the Bauls, have followed the renunciant tradition, choosing to locate their new ashram to achieve detachment from their families. They will settle in any place that can keep them away from their natal community. Accordingly, there are Vaishnava Sahajiya ashrams dispersed all over West Bengal, in areas such as Birbhum, Murshidabad, Bankura, Nadia and Bardhaman. To them, any place is a potential site to establish their ashram. However, we cannot ignore the fact that living

⁷⁵ Joseph O'Connell, "Tracing Vaishnava Strains in Tagore," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 4, no. 2 (2011).

⁷⁶ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

near Santiniketan allows them to have opportunities to attract middle-class devotees who live in and visit Santiniketan.

Following the trend of the aforementioned scholars, I chose Santiniketan to be my base site for reasons of safety and convenience. As I had resided there before, I was familiar with the place and its people, thus returning to Santiniketan as a researcher gave me an advantage that made me less naive about the world outside.

1.4.3 Positionality and reflexivity

My perception of myself before entering the field was, as one might imagine, of an Asian woman being educated in the West, willing to study South Asian women in their local context. However, I was not sure if I could be called a 'native' or a 'halfie'.⁷⁷ That is, being Asian (Southeast Asian) or, in other words, a third-world woman myself, I was already part of the homogeneous group of third-world women, who are perceived by some Western feminists as domesticated victims of a patriarchal system.⁷⁸ My education in India, a two-year master's degree I completed at Vishva-Bharati (2005–2007), also made me develop an affinity with Indian culture, Bengali in particular. Moreover, my religion, which is Buddhism, was imported from India, and Thai culture has been influenced by Hindu culture. As a result, in general, my positionality become that of a brown woman who was studying other brown women. And yet I also had the sense of a

⁷⁷ This term has been used by Kirin Narayan to discuss about the positionality of researchers who have shared some cultural or racial background with their informants. See more Kirin Narayan, "How native is a "native" anthropologist?," *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993).

⁷⁸ Mohanty, "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses."

mixed identity, which Narayan refers to, which is a sense of ‘the other’ rather than ‘the self.’⁷⁹

As a novice anthropologist, I initially tried to be humble and not treat informants as ‘cultural dopes’, in which informants become passive agents needed to produce research data. I wanted my fieldwork to meet the ideal scenario where “the researcher and the participants become active collaborators in the production of data, in which both parties are understood as reflexive social actors and the informant is encouraged to construct her experience of a lived reality”.⁸⁰ However, in agreement with Trzebiatowska, this over-emphasis on powerless informants resulted in a situation whereby “little attention has been given to the emotional and physical vulnerability of the researcher”.⁸¹ While doing fieldwork, I encountered various problems and challenges, which at times made me want to withdraw from the field, but challenges are often shared among many female anthropologists. Shaffir and Stebbins mention that doing fieldwork is “sometimes physically uncomfortable, frequently embarrassing, and, to a degree, always tense”,⁸² which reflects my own experience in the field.

Since I was a householder who was perceived as lower than a holy person, my status was explicitly lower than of my informants, who were generally regarded as holy persons. During the fieldwork, I struggled not to be ‘a vulnerable observer’,⁸³ in a ‘sacred’ and male-dominated field. Instead of telling local informants that I wanted to do research on

⁷⁹ Narayan, "How native is a "native" anthropologist?."

⁸⁰ Marta Trzebiatowska, "When reflexivity is not enough: researching Polish Catholics," *Fieldwork in Religion* 5, no. 1 (2010): 79.

⁸¹ Trzebiatowska, "When reflexivity is not enough: researching Polish Catholics," 80.

⁸² Cited from Emily. Burns, ""Thanks, but no thanks": Ethnographic fieldwork and the experience of rejection from a new religious movement," *Fieldwork in Religion* 10, no. 2 (2015).

⁸³ A term used in Ruth Behar’s work reflexing the experience of the researcher in ethnographic research. In this context I use it to refer to the emotional and physical vulnerability of the researcher.

them, I told them I was a student from Lancaster University, UK, and Vishva-Bharati University who wanted to write a book about the Vaishnava community, *sadhu seva*, food, *madhukaris* and *sadhumas*. I made it clear to them that I did not want to write about their esoteric rituals. They were pleased that a foreign student wanted to write a book about them and tried to supply me with all the data they thought would be useful for the book. In their view, the topics I wanted to study and the topics they wanted me to write about in the book were explicitly and implicitly related to the philosophy of the body (*dehatattva*). In other words, the practice of sex without ejaculation (*brahmacharya*) was an important practice. In their world view, *yugal sadhana* represented a most attractive religious practice in that whoever came to them always wanted to learn about its esoteric techniques. They thought I should have direct experience of esoteric ritual (*yugal sadhana*) in order to be able to convey the correct ideology of Sahajiya.

While conducting fieldwork, there was a question of whether I should be initiated, become Sahajiya and accordingly an 'insider'. If I took initiation, I would be able to participate in some secretive ritual, but it would limit me to work with only the guru who initiate me. The push and pull between me and my informants about whether should I have the initiation or not were resolved a few months later after I proved to them that my honest aim was neither to become a renouncer nor a Sahajiya householder, but one of their family members. After spending regular time with them in various contexts, they gradually started to open up and tell me about their secret practices that I was not qualified to know about as a non-initiate. In fact, the *sadhus* benefited from my presence at the ashram on the ground that having a foreigner visit them regularly indicated their authenticity, thus attracting more locals to the ashram. Eventually, the question about whether I should be initiated was put aside and, through Bengali kinship, I become

affiliated to them, which allowed me access to the Sahajiya cycle of living as a member of their community. Indeed, there were some activities that we could not do together since I was not initiated. However, since I had come under their supervision, they always made sure I was given everything I needed.

I was fortunate in my fieldwork being conducted over three winters, as this allowed me enough time to prove that I was being honest with them. My regular presence – either through actual fieldwork or phone calls throughout those three years – assured continuous kinship affiliation and rapport, which allowed me to remain an insider (through the back door). To me they were no longer informants but had become my family, and to them I had become ‘one of their own people’.

1.4.4 A female researcher in a male-dominated field

The safety of researchers in fieldwork must be taken into consideration by researchers themselves, and their supervisors, if not their institutions of affiliation. My research project was approved by the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee, to which I also submitted a lone worker protocol which allowed me and the University to estimate, foresee and prevent risks that I might experience in the field. Generally speaking, India is not a safe country for women to live or travel in alone, as a woman on her own is viewed as having no protector, thus any man can exploit the situation. Accordingly, it is less likely to see a woman travelling alone, particularly in rural villages, because if she needs to travel, she will be accompanied by her husband or family member, or in the case of poor villagers who work on farms, they always travel in groups.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Some studies hold that this practice is applied for only women of high caste and class. See Narayanan, "Brimming with bhakti, embodiments of Shakti: Devotees, deities, performers, reformers, and

I was travelling to ashrams regularly and interacted with locals who always asked me personal questions with regard to my marital status and family. Those personal questions and physical reactions made me realise that it would never be easy for an Indian woman to live outside a conventional life. The way of life in the village made me aware that social expectations from family and community were intense. As mentioned to me by one of my informants, they dare not be different from what society had prescribed for them because the price to pay for being different was too high. Indeed, the consequences of being different would not be easy for any woman living in such a conformist society.

I worked with sadhus from many ashrams and different lineages. As a novice fieldworker, I was so happy to be welcomed into every ashram I visited. The kindness of renouncers made me ignore some of the risks that I possibly took when I was in the ashrams. I had been advised by Openshaw before starting my fieldwork that Sahajiya sadhus were likely to be interested in either money and/or the bodies of female foreigners. So we were perceived as their potential disciples or potential patrons. We assumed that this was merely their attitude towards white female foreigners (*memsahib*), who were likely to be perceived by locals as being wealthy and used to having free sex. I hoped that the sadhus would think of me differently as I was an Asian woman (*bideshi*) who, to a degree, did not have wealth nor was interested in having free sex, but someone brought up with similar values shared with Indian women in general.⁸⁵

other women of power in the Hindu tradition." However, in my experience, women from lower castes will also not travel alone.

⁸⁵ To the locals I am '*bideshi*', a person who lives in a different area, rather than a '*memsahib*', a white foreigner. This suggests that I am different from them due to my home location. On the other hand, a white foreigner is completely different to them from every perspective. This allows me to be a near rather than a distant other.

However, I was wrong about their local perceptions towards other Asian foreigners. It seemed that, to locals in West Bengal, all foreigners who travelled to India were likely to have money and be available for free sex. In addition, as I roamed alone without any visible marital marks or symbols and often travelled with groups of male and female renunciators, people were inclined to think that I was that kind of foreigner who would have 'free sex' with them. This perception unfortunately allowed local men and women to approach me, a foreign Asian female researcher, in bizarre ways. There was a time when I was brought to a sadhu's bedroom located on the second floor of the ashram by a female sadhu and, while we were together in the room, she asked me many personal questions regarding my sex life. I was not only surprised, but extremely shocked when she asked me to have sex with her male partner; the sadhubaba, who was downstairs, was waiting for me to consent. She tried to convince me that I would not lose anything, but instead would gain joy (*ananda*) since her partner was a well-practised sadhu. He could have sex for longer without ejaculation, thus I would not get pregnant. She asked me if I was scared, and I, in a shaking but determined voice, replied that I was extremely scared and would not have any sexual relationship with anyone besides my husband. Instead of her having empathy for me, she replied, "There is no sin (*bhab nay*) to have sex with other men who are not your husband."

“I left the Ashram as quickly as I could and pretended as if nothing had happened. I bowed down to them and at the same time felt disgusted at what she had asked me ... I was lucky that bad things did not happen to me. I did not know what to do next. I wondered what she would get from asking me to have sex with her partner?”
(Fieldnote, 13th December 2016)

After I managed to leave the ashram, tears were dropping and it was as if my whole world had collapsed. The only thing I could be aware of at that time was that I wanted to stop everything and return to my home country, even though I thought I would be a loser.⁸⁶ I did not withdraw from my project, but I took a short break from the field. After a while, I returned to continue working with the Vaishnava but avoided going to that particular ashram, which was probably the best choice or even the only choice I had at that time.

I continued to conduct fieldwork in a paranoid state and was extremely nervous about encountering a similar situation. Sometimes I would over-read a situation. I always thought that if a male sadhu asked me sit in an area near to him, it meant that he wanted to have sex with me. I admitted that I behaved oddly for a certain period of time when I was in the vicinity of Vaishnava sadhus. Eventually, I became close to female renunciators and found couples who could offer me shelter in the Vaishnava tradition. ND Baba and ML Ma became my sadhus, although I had not been initiated with them or with anyone else. All the sadhus came to know that I was one of their people. Since ND Baba was a strict senior sadhu and his non-progeny had accredited him with authority, most sadhus I

⁸⁶ Meanwhile I encountered with many difficulties in the field, i.e. money (I arrived in the second day of the demonetisation), health, finding more informants, and language.

knew always obeyed and greeted him with respect. Accordingly, having him as my supporter helped me to avoid being invited to perform any ritual involving a sexual act.

Being sexually harassed is always a concern for female researchers and can be a reason for them to opt out of fieldwork. However, in the rural Indian context, not just female researchers but women in particular often encounter this kind of treatment in their daily lives, sometimes in contact with strangers and sometimes their own people. I, as a female researcher, to a certain extent shared similar experiences that local women go through. These experiences allowed me to understand why many local women did not want to become independent or live on their own, but sought shelter from their Bengali men, some of whom were not even good men. The experience I encountered as a woman allowed me to be an insider even though I did not completely belong to the tradition.

1.5 Remaining chapters

In this research, I examine issues concerning women and renunciation from the viewpoint of Sahajiya female renunciators. It appears that although women are important in Sahajiya renunciation, their renunciator path is not as revered as that of men. To them, being a fulltime renouncer is still a better life option; however, it does not release them from the hardships and social expectations that most local women have to endure. By referencing the main religious practices of Sahajiya – *brahmacharya*, *madhukari* and *sadhu seva* – I highlight the ways in which female practitioners experience the male renunciator ideal and try to make the robe fit by following convention.

The research is divided into eight chapters, in which this Chapter 1 is the Introduction and Chapter 8 the Conclusion. In Chapter 2, I explore the identity of Sahajiya sadhus,

their perception of the ‘self’ and the distinction between themselves and other Bengal Vaishnavas. I argue that Sahajiya is a scholarly constructed term. Although there are Vaishnava practitioners who match the Sahajiya category, those practitioners deny that they are Sahajiya. On the contrary, they establish themselves as real sadhus by virtue of their esoteric practices. This chapter also highlights the reasons why men and women decide to become Sahajiya sadhus. It appears that women have different reasons to opt out from normative society compared to men. While men offer liberation as the reason for their renunciation, women confess hardship in life as their main reason. Based on such reasons to take the renunciator robe, I explore further the varieties of practitioners found in the Sahajiya community.

Chapter 3 explores the sadhu lineage and community. The Vaishnava sadhu lineage is maintained through the male line, in which male gurus play a major role in transmitting Vaishnava religious practices, such as the esoteric ritual. In contrast, a female member cannot acquire guru status without the presence of her male partner and she has a lesser role in conveying religious teaching. Women, however, take up a supportive role in teaching and appear to be key persons who maintain religious practices and norms. With regard to the Vaishnava sadhu community, although Sahajiya ashrams are dispersed throughout the Birbhum region, the sadhus are connected through food contributions on occasions such as devotional feasts (*sadhu seva*). I argue that Sadhus are not individuals outside the world, but that they have created the other-worldly domain, which has a parallel structure to this worldly. This community not only helps the members enhance their confidence, but their togetherness helps them to form a strong sadhu community.

Chapter 4 analyses the Sahajiyas’ main religious practice, *brahmacharya*, which broadly translates as celibacy. Although the Sahajiyas’ esoteric ritual focuses on a sexual

act, attaining liberation through it, the sadhus interpret their esoteric practice as *brahmacharya*, referring to the practice of self-restraint rather than celibacy. ‘Celibacy’ in the Hindu context is commonly known as not losing semen through one’s mind imposing control over the body and desire. I argue that the practice of the Sahajiyas’ esoteric ritual claims *brahmacharya*, since it is about gaining control over one’s body and desire, hence not losing semen. However, it is arguable if female renouncers can control their bodies, since female bodily fluid is considered to be uncontrollable. Nonetheless, using the female renouncers’ experience, I argue that women can control their bodies and emotions, and thus can alternatively perform *brahmacharya*.

Chapter 5 explores gifts that circulate between renouncers and lay householders through the practice of alms collection (*madhukari*). I argue that a Sahajiya’s gift, following Mauss, is not free.⁸⁷ Any gift is expected to be redistributed through a devotional feast. Alms collection is one of the Sahajiyas’ religious practices, which not only associates Sahajiya sadhus with the ascetic tradition but also helps them lessen the ego and be humble. It is also a Vaishnava’s main source of living. An alms-collecting practice is mostly suitable for male renouncers and seems to be less attractive to females, so female renouncers who can financially rely on their male partners tend to opt out from *madhukari* because they feel discomfort in the public domain. However, female renouncers of a certain age, when they engage in alms collection, can gain better benefits due to their seniority. In addition, for many female renouncers, when they go for alms they appear to adopt the *madhukari* practice to suit their gender.

⁸⁷ Marcel Mauss, *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Chapter 6 discusses transactions that occur during devotional feasts (*sadhu seva*). Social transactions found in *sadhu seva* are reciprocal and host sadhus act as givers rather than recipients. Although to host a feast requires collaboration from both male and female renouncers, women take an active role in organising and distributing food during a feast. In addition, in the case of single female sadhus, they commit themselves to providing services, and some adopt the practice as their sole channel to liberation. This is because the practice of *sadhu seva* allows sadhus to be perceived as altruistic, thus real sadhus. In addition, in this chapter I make the point that gifts circulated among sadhus are reciprocated. Sahajiya gifts are not free of expectations for their return which, on the other hand, helps sadhus extend their network and strengthen their community.

Chapter 7 analyses the feminine model of renunciation. It becomes clear that, from major practices, Sahajiya renunciation is a model that prescribed suited male renouncers. Female renouncers have to find their own alternative ways for their renunciation. Here I argue that renunciation for women is not to renounce their woman's nature to become like male renouncers. On the contrary, female renouncers maintain their femininity and attain the state of peace once they give their love and care to others. For them, to achieve peace (*santi*) is a concrete goal and perhaps it provides a liberation model for Sahajiya feminine renunciation.

Chapter 2 Searching for Vaishnava Sahajiya sadhus

A person is claimed to be Sahajiya, as put forward by S. Dasgupta, on account of their ultimate reality, which is conceived in the form of *sahaja* and the means to attain *sahaja*, which is via the most natural path.¹ *Sahaja* literally means ‘being born together’, ‘innate’, ‘easy’ and ‘spontaneous’. In modern Bengali, the term *sahaj* means ‘simple’, ‘easy’ and ‘plain’.² That is to say, a person who believes in and practises simplicity can become Sahajiya. For them, the simplest way to attain the human state of nature is through esoteric rituals. Sahajiya indicates many tantric lineages in Northeastern India.³ According to some local Bengali beliefs, Sahajiya tradition often connotes sexual activities, some say that Sahajiyas are Bauls. Villagers even believe that Sahajiyas share their religious beliefs with tantric Buddhism on account of certain sexual activities of practitioners. Moreover, scholars such as Openshaw and Glen Hayes claim that Sahajiya is a scholarly constructed term denoting tantric-influenced religious traditions.⁴

With the many explanations of Sahajiya provided above, searching for Sahajiya in the field was not an easy task. As for myself, I had read about them in the scholarly literature.⁵ They are usually described as a Bengali Vaishnava group that follows esoteric practices. By esoteric practices, scholars mean the use of sex together with breath control as a means to achieve religious goals. However, once I started the fieldwork I found that

¹ Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults*, 78.

² The notion of *sahaja* has been widely discussed in the literature. See Per Kvaerne, *On the concept of sahaja in Indian Buddhist tantric literature* (na, 1975). Ronald M Davidson, "Reframing sahaja: genre, representation, ritual and lineage," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2002).

³ Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal."

⁴ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 260; Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal."

⁵ The book that brought me to the Sahajiya is *The place of the hidden moon*, by Edward Dimock.

things were not so simple. No sadhus used ‘Sahajiya’ in relation to themselves though they practise esoteric ritual, only in relation to others and in a negative sense. Who, then, was I to study? Was there anything in the field that bore any resemblance to the descriptions in the literature? My interest was not simply in the use of words, though obviously I had to pay attention to that. I realised that my prime interest lay in studying the lives and beliefs of fulltime renouncers who followed the esoteric path and did not sing Baul songs, regardless of what labels they used for themselves, or of what others used for them. Accordingly, to avoid confusion, ‘Vaishnava Sahajiya’ and sometimes ‘Sahajiya’ will be used when discussing ‘Vaishnava’ (*baishnab*) in relation to other Bengal Vaishnavas, but ‘Vaishnava’ is used for discussion in its context.⁶ Although the term denotes a general sense of Vaishnava (as a bhakti tradition) rather than their tantric influence, it does not come from scholars or outsiders, but from insiders who identify themselves as Vaishnava (*baishnab*).

My findings regarding the use of the term Sahajiya in fieldwork suggest that perhaps scholars should reconsider their use of the term ‘Sahajiya’.⁷ It is important to note that the term Vaishnava (*baishnab*) does not explicitly represent what Vaishnava Sahajiyas believe in. Indeed, it is a generalised term and largely represents orthodox Vaishnava, rather than its relation to esoteric ritual. As suggested by Sarbadhikari, not identifying themselves with other tantric groups makes Vaishnava Sahajiya equal competitors to other Vaishnavas in Navadvip.⁸ It seems to me that the sadhus I studied call themselves

⁶ Scholars such as Hayes, Hugh, O’ Connell and Dasgupta use ‘Vaishnava Sahajiya’ and sometimes ‘Sahajiya’, while Sarbadhikari and Dimock use ‘Sahajiya’.

⁷ My experience at the ECSAS2018 conference reflected that using ‘Vaishnava’ to refer to ‘Sahajiya’ did cause some confusion and some scholars were against this idea.

⁸ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 117.

Baishnab in order to hide their Sahajiya identity from the public and so make themselves appear as a worthy sadhu to the public.

This chapter explores how ‘Sahajiya’ is regarded by different groups and how the sadhus I studied construct themselves to claim that they are not Sahajiya, but authentic Vaishnava involved in the virtuous practice of sexo-yogic rituals. Furthermore, it explores the identity of female sadhus in relation to males in their community. Women identify themselves as ‘sadhumas’ (sadhu + mother), holy female persons, and yet they are domestic women on the ground of their mother identity. This suggests that in women’s form of renunciation, domesticity plays a major role. I will start my investigation by drawing on existing studies by scholars, such as Dimock, S. Dasgupta and Hayes, to highlight how the tradition has been formed and transformed into the contemporary tradition of Vaishnava Sahajiya. Then, I will explore how the current form of Vaishnava Sahajiya has been marginalised by orthodox Vaishnavas. The last section, which contains grounded ethnographic data, examines Vaishnavas whom I met in the field and introduces them as my informants. The reasons why an individual is initiated into this obscure religious cult will be investigated, along with exploring the identity and relationship of sadhus within and outside their own religious group. The various groups of Vaishnava Sahajiya practitioners will also be explored. These varieties are categorised using the degree of purity of the practitioners.

2.1 Exploring Vaishnava Sahajiya in Texts

The Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition was believed by scholars such as Dimock and S. Dasgupta to exist in Bengal before the time of Caitanya (1486–1533 C.E.), a great

Bengali saint who popularised Bengali Vaishnavism. Its doctrine and some fundamental characteristics are contained in Buddhist texts called *carya-padas*, written during the eight to ninth centuries, which imply the existence of its practitioners during that period.⁹ Hayes provides that Vaishnava Sahajiya practitioners were Hindu tantrikas who lived in Northern India from the sixth to the nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ Many things about Vaishnava Sahajiyas, such as date of origin, authorship of texts or social standing, are obscure and unclear to scholars. This is partly because, as claimed by Dimock and Hayes, Sahajiya Bengali manuscripts were written unsystematically and in a confusing way, and no written commentaries exist to help readers understand particular phrases or keywords, and since the tradition involves sexo-yogic practices, authors have tended to cover their Sahajiya identity by hiding their authorship.¹¹ During the Bengali Renaissance period, Vaishnava Sahajiyas were heavily marginalised and excluded from Bengali Vaishnavism. They were perceived as *chotolok* (*choto* means small and *lok* means person or people), implying that Vaishnava Sahajiya practitioners, unlike *bhadralok* (noble people), were dishonourable, they made the Vaishnava tradition impure (*asuddha*).¹²

Scholars such as Hayes consider that Vaishnava Sahajiya is Bengali vernacular tantrics, focusing on problems of everyday life, the body and desire.¹³ It is claimed that its philosophy is a blend of many different religious beliefs, including Hinduism,

⁹ Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*, 35.
¹⁰ G Hayes and DG White, "The Necklace of Immortality: A Seventeenth-Century Vaisnava Sahajiya Text," *Tantra in practice* 8 (2000): 308.

¹¹ Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal."; Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*.

¹² Jason D Fuller, "Re-membering the Tradition: Bhaktivinoda Thakura's 'Sajjanatosani' and the Construction of a Middle-Class Vaisnava Sampradaya in Nineteenth-Century Bengal," in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹³ Glen Alexander Hayes, "Rivers to the Sky," in *Transformations and Transfer of Tantra in Asia and Beyond*, ed. Istvan Keul (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 42.

Buddhism and even Islam. The tradition was influenced by the earlier tantric tradition, together with devotion to Radha and Krishna, called Bengali Vaishnavism.¹⁴ It should be noted that Bengali Vaishnavism is a *bhakti* tradition that worships the god Vishnu, who appears in the form of Krishna and his favourite consort Radha. Devotion to a selected deity implies religious practice involving emotion (pious devotion to a selected god), but also criticism of castes (anyone regardless of caste can have direct devotion to his/her god).¹⁵ Nonetheless, the tradition incorporates various beliefs and practices, which consequently developed into different sects of Vaishnavism. Krishna-focused Vaishnavism has been widely practised throughout India, especially in the Bengal region.¹⁶

The most recent study on Bengali Vaishnavism by Sarbadhikary categorised followers of Vaishnavism into four groups.¹⁷ The first group comprises householders or *goswami*. They generally come from high castes, are well-educated, and have a comfortable economic status. *Goswamis* are respected among Vaishnavas because of their scholarly outlook and a good representation of Vaishnavism. The second group is renunciators or *babaji*. They live in *akharas* (long established ashrams) secluded from other communities. Most of them are poor and have to subsist by living on alms. The third group is called ISKCON, it has many followers worldwide. This is the most modern and well established organisation. While the first two groups concentrate on imagining Radha

¹⁴ Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*; Hayes and White, "The Necklace of Immortality: A Seventeenth-Century Vaisnava Sahajiyā Text."

¹⁵ Bhakti was viewed as devotion and a movement, for more see Karen Pechilis, *The embodiment of bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor flame : popular Hinduism and society in India* (Princeton, N.J. ; London: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

¹⁷ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 15-25.

and Krishna's emotional love, ISKCON pays attention to selfless service to humankind. They are of the view that every human being is embedded with the seed of Krishna, and as a result, to serve humanity is to serve God. The last group is Vaishnava Sahajiyas. Most of them are poor, uneducated, and come from lower castes. Sahajiya's main practice is to realise the Ultimate Truth in one's body through imitation of the love play (*lila*) of Radha and Krishna.¹⁸ Esoteric rituals (*yugal sadhana*) are claimed to be a natural means (*sahaja*) leading practitioners to a state of realisation of the divine in one's body. Although the literal meaning of Sahajiya – nature, simple, spontaneous or born together – does not connote any negative meaning, the social meaning of the term Sahajiya signifies the subordinate status of Vaishnava Sahajiya. The term has become loaded with negative connotations because it implies unconventional sexual activities, e.g. a sexual relationship with a guru and the practice of non-marital sex. Esoteric practices together with the lower class and caste background of practitioners are the source of Sahajiya's marginalisation and exclusion.¹⁹ This is because most Bengalis are quite conservative in regard to sexuality.²⁰ A person involved in unconventional sexual activities would not generally be accepted by Bengali society. This fact induces Sahajiya practitioners to hide their esoteric practices and Sahajiya identity from the community.

Despite various approaches to attain a higher religious state, either through imagination or devotional service, what marks the difference between Vaishnava Sahajiyas and other types of Vaishnavas is the esoteric ritual in which a female partner is expected to take part. It is claimed that men cannot attain a higher state without women's

¹⁸ Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal."

¹⁹ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 111.

²⁰ Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal," 334.

co-operation and, likewise, women cannot realise the divine in the body without the companionship of men.²¹ As a matter of fact, Vaishnava Sahajiya is the only sect in the Vaishnava tradition and perhaps South Asian renunciation that welcomes women into its renunciate domain.²² Esoteric rituals, although the source of their subordination and exclusion, are also a Vaishnava key practice, which, to a certain degree, attracts many lay followers. Many householders visit sadhus to learn to how improve their sexual relations and learn contraceptive techniques.²³

It is worth noting that, in the Hindu tradition, Vishnu and Siva are the dominant gods and have many incarnations and female consorts. Siva is more prominent in the renunciate domain as he himself has been a sadhu (ascetic deity) and is a significant model for renouncers of many renunciant traditions. On the other hand, Vishnu seems to be more dominant in the domain of householders. Rama, who is one of his ten incarnations (*dashavatara*), is a significant incarnation as well as a role model for Hindu householders in the past and the present. Rama is claimed to be the role model for a good husband, and Sita, his consort, is the role model for a loyal wife. Krishna is one of Vishnu's *dashavatara*; however, in the Vaishnava tradition, he does not appear as a great renouncer but as an ordinary man (sometimes a child).

Krishna and Radha in the Vaishnava Sahajiya narrative are neither supreme gods nor renouncers. Instead, they are depicted as lay householders from a small village who earn a living by cow-herding. Radha herself was married to another man. Accordingly, the intimate relationship between the two breaks a social taboo which holds that a person

²¹ Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal."

²² Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

²³ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

should not have any extra marital relationships. Yet, in the story, Krishna and Radha fall in love and have a relationship. However, Krishna is perceived as a deity in human form. His love affair with another man's wife is not interpreted as immoral or corrupt, but rather represents true love, which is love without bondage (*parakiya*).²⁴

The story of Krishna and Radha's intimate and yet mundane relationship is used as an ideal or model religious practice for Vaishnava Sahajiya renunciators. That is, the householder mode of practice is used as a life model for renunciators in the renunciator domain. Their mating narratives are imitated in Vaishnava Sahajiyas' joint renunciation. As we shall see in the following section, many Vaishnava couples get together in unconventional ways. Having Krishna and Radha's love narrative as a model for renunciation, I argue, has allowed Vaishnava Sahajiya renunciation to share some key characteristics with the householder's life, especially for female renunciators. They live in a nuclear family setting in a new community, where to a degree they can live beyond social expectations. But male and female renunciators (*yugal sadhu*) are expected to perform the role of husband and wife, similar to lay couples. On the one hand, female renunciators are expected to perform their role of *stridharma*, performing the role of a good wife who gives selfless service to her husband who is upheld as her god. On the other, male renunciators are expected to be providers and protectors, as commonly seen in householder families.

²⁴ *Parakiya* literally means the practice of sex with a woman who is not one's own wife. This practice brings a sense of detachment and non-ownership, which is the ideal love of Sahajiya. For more see Frédérique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri* (Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal."

2.2 Searching for Vaishnava Sahajiya in the field

My first phase of fieldwork in West Bengal was in January 2016. I went there to search for potential sites and prospective informants for my research on Vaishnava Sahajiya renunciation. In particular, I wanted to find ashrams and renouncers who would allow me to conduct research on them. Eventually, I was taken to two ashrams located in the neighbourhoods of Santiniketan and Rampuhart. The sadhus who lived there were caste Vaishnava (*jati Baishnab*), classified by others as *sansari-sadhu* or *silpi-sadhu*, from the fact that they were initiated sadhus who sang Baul songs to make a living, had children, and were still attached to this world. When I arrived, I became doubtful about what I saw in front of me. Drawing on my knowledge and understanding of renunciation in both conventional Hindu and Buddhist traditions, I immediately came to the conclusion that the situation there did not fit my understanding of what an ashram should be.

Brahmanical ascetic is explained in terms of ‘negation’. Being a renouncer means to end one’s previous identity as a householder and thus his way of life is to negate the life and values of householders. That is, according to a Brahmanical understanding of renunciation, a renouncer should abandon his family as well as his householder activities.

I thought to myself that a nice simple mud house where all the family members lived together, furnished with modern items, such as a television, refrigerator and gas stove, and located in the village centre in a neighbourhood with other lay households, did not appear to be an ashram. The sadhus who lived there also did not appear to meet the ideal of ‘individual outside the world’ who gives up his place in society proposed by Dumont.²⁵

²⁵ Dumont provided that householder is a ‘man in the world’, whilst a renouncer is viewed as an ‘individual outside the world’. Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian religion."

To check that I had not arrived at the wrong place and mistaken it for an ashram, I asked them again whether this was a home or an ashram. The residents insisted that this was an ashram as renouncers were living there. I observed the people who lived in the mud house, to find any renouncers amongst the group. At that time, I thought perhaps this was Bengali humour because I could not see any renouncers, instead I saw a father, mother, aunt, son and daughter-in-law. I asked them why they claimed to be renouncers. What made them renouncers? They explained to me that they were renouncers because they had gone through an initiation ceremony (*bhek/ sannyas*) with a guru and often went to collect alms (*madhukari*). They claimed that they were ‘authentic’ renouncers who underwent prescribed injunctions, had undergone the initiation ritual and followed the renunciant path on account of their alms collection. Apart from these facts, they seemed to live like ordinary householders, i.e. earning some income, taking care of their family members and procreating children.

It seems to me that what makes a Vaishnava ashram like ‘a lay people’s home’ is not only because some renouncers have children, but also their mode and means of living, to a degree, replicates the secular lifestyle of a transient world. For example, most of the ashrams I visited were similar to a nuclear family household where a husband-and-wife couple reside. In a few ashrams, their sons and daughters-in-law lived together. The members of the ashram – *sadhubaba* and *sadhuma* – have their own prescribed duties. The female renouncer prepares the meals and does the household chores while the male renouncer collects alms to earn a living. The relationship between the two is similar to that of a normal husband and wife; they have a sexual relationship and regard each other as husband and wife. Besides the secular lifestyle, some ashrams have fairly good accommodation furnished with modern items such as a television, gas stove, motorcycle

and smartphones. Vaishnava sadhus reacted to this kind of criticism by claiming that they were in the world yet not of the world. According to them, the material items they used were not attached to them.

Although what the Vaishnava sadhus owned and their living conditions suggested a comfortable living in comparison to people from similar socio-economic backgrounds, Vaishnava ashrams were still regarded as moderate and some were very simple. Generally, there is only one main room where they keep their belongings and sometimes the guru shrine is situated in it. This main room always has a lock and often there are no windows, suggesting that some valuable items are kept there. The sleeping area is usually an open space that can be used for eating, chatting, sleeping and any other social activities. The cooking area is separated from the main compound in order to maintain the purity of food. The toilet is outside the main building, usually located far from the main compound and cooking area, also for reasons of purity. Many ashrams do not have toilets, so sadhus defecate in open fields nearby. Vaishnava ashrams are usually made of mud and the roof of straw, which are standard building materials in those areas. However, when I revisited the site in early 2018, some ashrams had new buildings constructed with bricks, cement and iron, and a tin roof. This construction and/or refurbishment, as explained by sadhus, was supported by the BJP government.²⁶ But from their external appearance, it is not possible to tell the difference between a sadhu's ashram and a layperson's house; besides, some sadhus' houses function as ashrams. The

²⁶ While I was conducting fieldwork, Modi had become Vaishnava sadhus' favourite. In their view, Modi has helped them to have better living standards. He will give money to sadhus (and poor people) to refurbish their ashrams and register sadhus in the system in order to provide them with financial support and social welfare. It turns out that most sadhus in the Birbhum community have a bank account and register themselves as sadhus with the government. Indeed, many sadhus have a new concrete (*paka*) ashram after getting financial support from the government.

only tangible indication that a building was an ashram was the renunciators' robes hanging on the clothes line. If there was only white or *geruya* (earth pink) attire on the line, that building was most likely to be an ashram.

Most ashrams are located on the outskirts of villages; some are located in the village while others sit far away in the midst of a paddy field. Most, if not all, the ashrams I visited were officially owned by sadhus. They were either bought or given away by their devotees many decades ago. Since the land and ashram are registered under the sadhu's name, sadhus are independent of pressure from the outside local community to a certain degree. Sadhus regard land that does not legitimately belong to them and land surrounded by the houses of laypeople, in the midst of a community, as not 'suitable'. This is because being too close to lay householders allows people to interfere in renunciators' daily routines. In addition, not legally owning the land may eventually lead to problems if a landlord changes his mind or wants to sell the land to others. For example, there was an ashram built on the land of Brahmins who initially welcomed the sadhu to stay for free, but after a few years, he did not want them living there anymore. The Brahmin landlord put a fence around the ashram to restrict their use of the land and water, and prevented them from defecating on his land. This restriction brought many difficulties for the sadhus, so they planned to move out of this village and went looking for a new ashram.²⁷

²⁷ Recently (2019), with the help of villagers, the sadhus are staying at the same ashram and now own the land legally.

2.2.1 Locals' perception of Vaishnava Sahajiya

If one searches for the term 'Vaishnava Sahajiya' on Google, one will find, in addition to the explanation provided by Wikipedia, many critiques of Sahajiya by orthodox Vaishnava. Some claim that Vaishnava Sahajiya is *agasampraday* or 'outside the tradition', meaning that Sahajiya is not Vaishnava.²⁸ Others suggest that Sahajiya's outward appearance may look like that of Vaishnavas but they eat meat and do not follow Vaishnava regulations. The main reason why Sahajiya are criticised and excluded from orthodox Vaishnava is on account of their disobeying Vaishnava conventional practices. The practice of *sexo-yogic* rituals among Sahajiya, especially between gurus and disciples, is an area where Sahajiya are condemned.²⁹ It should be noted that attacks on Vaishnava Sahajiya, as we shall see through the study of Sarbadhikary and online, were perpetrated by Vaishnavas in Navadib and Mayapur, where the centre of Gaudiya Vaishnava is located. Lucian Wong makes an interesting observation, from a historical point of view, that the Gaudiya Vaishnava that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century together with its devotees from the Bengali gentlemen group (*bhadralok*) set out a new moral framework, resulting in a "Vaishnava anti-sahajiya polemic."³⁰ He argues that this anti-sahajiya polemic was influenced by a colonial-shaped moral framework, in which the *bhadralok* played a major role in imposing an alien discourse on an indigenous ideology.

However, it seems that Santiniketan locals do not actually know whom or what 'Sahajiya' is. On this topic, I had informal interviews with a number of local people from various backgrounds such as postgraduate master students, artists, lecturers, teachers,

²⁸ "Tendency to become a sahajiya," 2019, accessed 20 November, 2019, <https://www.iskcontimes.com/tendency-to-become-a-sahajiya/>.

²⁹ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

³⁰ Wong, "Against Vaiṣṇava Deviance: Brāhmanical and Bhadrakok Alliance in Bengal," 1.

shopkeepers, day workers, homemakers and farmers. They seemed to know about the tantric tradition and its negative reputation of sexuality and black magic, however, their understanding of whom Vaishnava Sahajiyas were was limited. When I asked them if they knew anything about Sahajiya sadhus, they replied by asking me, “What is Sahajiya? (*sahajiya ki?*)” Eventually, I asked them using a different religious identity that I got from Vaishnava Sahajiya sadhus themselves, such as Vaishnava or *baishnab* in the local pronunciation.

The term *baishnab* is used among the sadhus I studied. They regard themselves as *baishnab* and never mentioned that they are Sahajiya. I asked the locals if they knew about Vaishnava or *baishnab* and they came up with different ideas. To some locals, *baishnab* referred to Bauls and for some it denoted Gaudiya Vaishnava. It should be noted that for many Santiniketan locals, Bauls have a relatively positive reputation, especially among students and Tagore people.³¹ This is because, to them, Bauls represent an alternative way of living, which has been shared with the Tagores’ ideology of ‘man’. Yet for some, Bauls also have a negative reputation. Some locals spoke of their womanising behaviour and overuse of hashish to achieve the divine. On the other hand, Gaudiya Vaishnava is orthodox Vaishnava, was founded by the Bengali saint, Caitanya, and seems to have the most devotees across the Bengal region. Gaudiya householders had similar external marks to Sahajiya householders: holy basil-bead necklaces (*tulsi malas*) and decorating one’s face with sandalwood paste (*tilak*). They claimed to rightly

³¹ Tagore people refers to those who try to maintain and sustain Tagore philosophy and practice in the current context. Parvathy Baul was a Vishva-Bharti student who become a famous Baul singer. She seems to have been a prominent figure among art students and Baul *silpi*.

follow the Vaishnava path, thus they were the only authentic Vaishnava. Their famous means to attain Krishna is through devotional singing of Hare's name.³²

The term 'Sahajiya' is only known among those who are educated in Indian philosophy or work in the field of religious studies. Even these people only know Vaishnava Sahajiya through texts and do not have any experience of Sahajiya in their real lives. When I mentioned my intention to study Vaishnava Sahajiya sadhus to my professor, Asha Mukherjee, at Vishva-Bharti, her initial reaction was negative. She said sharply, "Please, anything but not the Sahajiyas." Like many others, in her view, Vaishnava Sahajiyas are not trustworthy people and are likely to take advantage of researchers (me in particular) in exchange for giving them research data. Another person who appeared to know about Vaishnava Sahajiyas was a farmer with a master's degree in Buddhist Studies. Since she was in the field of religious studies in South Asia, she explained Sahajiya to me in the same way as what is written in a textbook used in class. Keywords on Sahajiya, such as filthy, poor, involved with sexual activities, drinking alcohol, smoking hashish and so on, were included in her explanation. At the end of the conversation she warned me, saying. "I hope you know what you are going to deal with."

Before I met any Vaishnava Sahajiya sadhus, my own assumption about them was not much different from that of Mukherjee's and the aforementioned educated farmer. This is perhaps because we tried to understand Vaishnava Sahajiya in similar ways, which was via academic texts. There was also a common perception that any tantric-influenced traditions and anyone associated with any tantric sexual practices end up with a negative

³² For more on Gaudiya Vaishnava, see Lucian Wong, "Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Studies: Mapping the Field," *Religions of South Asia* 9 (2015). For more on the debate concerning who is the real Vaishnava, see Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

reputation because they were not perceived as a good Bengali person. This is because, as mentioned by Hayes, taking up *sexo-yogic* practice as a religious means seems to violate Bengali traditional belief.³³ The standard knowledge of locals vis-à-vis Vaishnava Sahajiya practitioners convinced me that ‘Sahajiya’ was a scholarly constructed category. It is known among scholars in related disciplines, but unknown to the locals, even though they were living next to Sahajiya ashrams.

2.2.2 Not a Baul, not a Gaudiya and not a Sahajiya, but Vaishnava

I mentioned in the last section that sadhus themselves would never mention they were Sahajiya sadhus. They claimed that they were Vaishnava (*baishnab*). As I learned that the term ‘sahajiya’ is a subordinate term and in order not to appear disrespectful, I was advised to avoid using this term when talking with sadhus. So I conducted fieldwork without mentioning ‘sahajiya’ until my very last stay in the field. Initially, I assumed that this term would probably be unrecognised by the sadhus themselves, but in my last few days, I decided to ask some sadhus if they knew what Sahajiya meant and whom they were. Their responses to my query were significant in terms of Vaishnava Sahajiya’s positionality, how they perceived themselves and how they were perceived by outsiders.

Sadhus identify themselves as Vaishnava (*baishnab*) and to them, there are four types of Vaishnavas: Aul, Baul, Dorbes and Sai. According to Openshaw, these four types of Vaishnavas refer not only to different lineages or traditions (*sampraday*) of Vaishnava, but also to different stages of development of ritual practices.³⁴ The ISKCON’s guru

³³ Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal."

³⁴ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 113.

states that Aul, Baul, Dorbes and Sai are outside the Vaishnava tradition (*agasampraday*), and they are people whom a person should not be associated with.³⁵ In terms of lineage or tradition (*sampraday*), Aul is associated with a tradition called Karthabajas. Hayes describes Karthabajas as a modern form of Vaishnava Sahajiya. Its religious practice is to narrate the story of Krishna through singing *bajan*.³⁶ Dorbes is a lineage that can be traced back to Muslim origins. Sai connotes the highest status of the guru. On the other hand, with regard to the development of practices, Aul refers to a preliminary state, followed by Baul and Dorbes, while Sai refers to the highest state of ritual practice.³⁷

Contrary to what has been understood by Openshaw and ISKCON, Vaishnavas view Aul, Baul, Dorbes, and Sai as different lineages of Vaishnava on account of their respective food regulations. Auls are vegetarian sadhus, eating no meat at all, and they are single yet celibate sadhus (*ekas sadhus*). Bauls are vegetarian, but they eat fish and partake in esoteric rituals as the path to liberation. Accordingly, unlike Auls, Bauls are pair-renouncers (*yugal-sadhus*). Dorbes also practice esoteric rituals and are pair-renouncers. They, however, are non-vegetarian and eat meat. Sai seems to be related to the tantric practice of five ms (*panchamakara*).³⁸ That is, Sai practitioners are pair-renouncers, eat meat and drink alcohol.

Vaishnava sadhus identify themselves as Baul. They insist that although they are followers of the Baul tradition, they are not wandering minstrels like the Bauls. Their Baul lineage is different from the Bauls that most people know. What makes them

³⁵ Times, "Tendency to become a sahaiya."

³⁶ Hayes, "Rivers to the Sky." For more on *Karthabaja* see Hugh B Urban, *Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁷ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 260.

³⁸ 5ms refers to five substances used in Tantric Practice. They are alcohol (*madya*), meat (*mamsa*), fish (*matsya*), gesture (*mudra*) and sex (*maithuna*). For more see Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*, 49.

different from other lineages of Vaishnava is the food they consume. While other sadhus are either non-vegetarian or strict vegetarian sadhus, they are vegetarians but eat fish (pescatarians). They claim that their path is the correct one (*tik rasta*) since, unlike others, they can maintain their purity. The Baul lineage claims that the right esoteric ritual is the means to attain god within oneself; hence for them, the Auls, since they are celibate, do not have any direct experience of God. Dorbes and Sai are prone to be impure since they eat meat and some of them drink alcohol, which is strictly prohibited by Baul gurus. They are of the opinion that meat and alcohol produce heat in the body, causing a person to ejaculate easily. According to the Vaishnava sadhus I studied, Dorbes and Sai seem to use esoteric rituals for their sensual pleasure (*kam*) rather than for true love (*prem*).

Vaishnavas, like other orthodox Vaishnavas, condemn Sahajiyas as downgraded and filthy sadhus on account of their esoteric practices. They view Sahajiyas as similar to Tantric, Sai and Dorbes sadhus, who practise esoteric rituals as a means to achieve sensual pleasure (*kam*). Those Sahajiyas, Vaishnavas advocate further, do not have the right knowledge (*vidya*) about esoteric rituals. They do not have any discipline for their bodies. They eat meat and/or food cooked by uninitiated persons and drink alcohol. They have no food control and practise no yoga or meditation, and these is evidence of the differences between Vaishnava and Sahajiya. If a person is a real Vaishnava, they added, they should be fully aware that purity, yoga and meditation are key practices for success in their esoteric rituals. That said, someone who practises esoteric rituals for desire or personal pleasure (*kam*) is likely to be demeaned and called Sahajiya. In contrast, a person who practises rituals for divine love (*prem*) (i.e. with self-control and without ejaculation) is regarded as Vaishnava (*baishnab*).

Vaishnavas are of the view that they are not Gaudiya sadhus, even though they tend to appear in public and be counted as orthodox yet Gaudiya Vaishnava. They told me that those *tikky sadhus*, referring to Gaudiya sadhus, are celibate and thus incapable of reaching the sacred place (*pabitra jayga*) due to their lack of direct experience of Krishna-Radha love play (*lila*). Apart from this, SM Ma, a young Vaishnava sadhuma, said Gaudiya sadhus are impure because they eat food cooked by householders who, according to the Vaishnava, are literally ‘dead’ polluted people.³⁹

Interestingly, while most if not all scholars see *baishnab* as a ‘tantric influenced tradition’, sadhus perceive themselves as not related to the tantric community, and they regard tantric sadhus as downgraded. In fact, one of the sadhus had a son who was a tantric sadhu. The mother, a *baishnab* sadhuma, tried not to mention him to her peers. If she had to mention him, she would talk about him in a very disappointed tone. Her friend whispered to me that tantric sadhus were not good (*bhala na*). When I asked her if a *baishnab* was a tantric, she was confident that the two were different. In her opinion, tantric sadhus did not know *sadhana*, but they always drank, had sex and were filthy. Indeed, there is a major difference between *baishnab* and tantric practice. On the one hand, the tantric sexo-yogic ritual focuses on moving the fluid following kundalini, in which Vaishnava do not follow the chakras in the same way as tantric sadhus.⁴⁰ On the

³⁹ In general, Guadiya sadhus will not eat food cooked by householders. I am not certain if the details given to me are correct. However, this view is truly an understanding of sadhus themselves.

⁴⁰ For more see Edward C. Dimock, "Doctrine and Practice among the Vaishnavas of Bengal," *History of Religions* 3, no. 1 (1963), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062079>; Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal." Geoffrey Samuel, *The origins of yoga and tantra: Indic religions to the thirteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

other hand, as claimed by Openshaw, tantric practitioners treat women as a means to an end, but the Vaishnavas show high respect to women.⁴¹

The Baul tradition is claimed to be the modern inheritor of Sahajiya.⁴² S. Dasgupta claims that “Baul poets are Sahajiya in the general sense of the term.”⁴³ Though there is no one essence or thing called Baul, as suggested by Openshaw,⁴⁴ it seems to me that Bauls are like Vaishnavas’ half-brothers. They are different but come from the same root (father). Nonetheless, Vaishnava sadhus do not identify themselves as Bauls. They state that Bauls share similar religious practices and some of them have the same gurus as Vaishnava sadhus, but they have different lifestyles. In other words, Baul sadhus are regarded as either household renunciators (*sansari sadhu*) or performers (*silpi*), who are attached to the profane world by having families and children, and they sing on trains to beg for money. Also, Bauls are discriminated against by Vaishnava sadhus on account of them revealing the secrets of esoteric practices through singing Baul songs to the public.⁴⁵

The Vaishnavas I studied, although they never explicitly claimed that they were superior or authentic Vaishnava sadhus, insisted that they were real Vaishnava renunciators. They were different from ‘tantric-influenced’ sadhus and never claimed that their tradition was influenced by the tantric one. They saw themselves as virtuous sadhus worth reverence from the general public. It appears that there is no single essence or group called Sahajiya because it seems to me that engaging in an esoteric ritual does not

⁴¹ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

⁴² Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*, 28; Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults*, 165.

⁴³ Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults*, 164.

⁴⁴ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 111.

⁴⁵ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 117.

make a person Sahajiya. Instead, according to the sadhus I studied, what makes a person Sahajiya is the lack of knowledge and practice to discipline the body and sexuality.

2.2.3 Caste and class origin of the sadhus

Vaishnava ideology accepts people from all walks of life, including women, into the renunciant tradition. It is prescribed in the [tantra] texts that women with some sexual experience and so-called 'loose women' are more preferable.⁴⁶ It is recorded that there were a considerable number of prostitutes who sought protection in the Vaishnava renunciant community.⁴⁷ During the time of Nitayananda, he accepted people from low caste and fallen practitioners from Buddhism.⁴⁸ The acceptance of people from lower class and caste backgrounds degraded the Vaishnava caste. Previously it was classed as *jal cal*, meaning that they were pure enough to be able to offer water to the higher castes. But after many prostitutes came into the tradition, Vaishnava as a caste became *ajal cal*, which meant the caste became degraded so that people from the higher castes would not accept water from them because it might contaminate their purity.⁴⁹

Indeed, in recent times most of the sadhus I know are poor and from lower backgrounds. Although not all women who become Vaishnava are 'loose women', many of them would not fit the description of ideal Bengali women. I studied 43 sadhus who reside in and are dispersed across Birbhum, Bardhaman and Nadia District, and most of them come from impoverished backgrounds. Only one sadhu had completed secondary

⁴⁶ Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*.

⁴⁷ Joseph O'Connell, "Jati-Vaisnavas of Bengal:" Subcaste"(" Jati") without" Caste"(Varna)," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 17, no. 3 (1982).

⁴⁸ Dimock, "Doctrine and Practice among the Vaishnavas of Bengal."

⁴⁹ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

school, and three of them went to school but did not complete primary level. The rest had never been to school and could read and write only basic numbers and their names. Some of them learned to read and write from their peers after becoming sadhus. Before their renunciation, they were either farmers or day-workers in small shops or on farms. They came from relatively low castes, and among them the highest caste was Gosh (*Vaishyas*). Some sadhus were *Jat Baishnab* (Vaishnava caste), *Mahishya* (agrarian caste) and *Napit* (barber caste). Most of the sadhus I studied were *Ba-ngal* caste, suggesting that the family emigrated from East Bengal (Bangladesh). In rural Bengal, as told by non *Ba-ngal* villagers and sadhus, *Ba-ngal* are considered to be low, which they had inherited with a sense of ‘otherness’.

Previous studies acknowledge that the caste origin of sadhus still plays a role and has some influence on their sadhu life.⁵⁰ Narayan states that “all sadhus were, after all, born into a particular caste, and the indoctrination of upbringing does not altogether vanish with initiation”.⁵¹ DeNapoli provides similar view on the importance of the caste status and values to female sadhus in a way that it shapes their experiences of renunciation and “it can help validate their “right” to serve their unconventional roles”.⁵² In contrast, it appears that Vaishnava sadhus do not ascribe any value to caste although they still maintain a hierarchal structure in their community. Sadhus state that the success of their practices has nothing to do with caste and the hierarchy of sadhus depends on their age at

⁵⁰ For influences of caste origin in renouncers, see DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*; Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*; Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*.

⁵¹ Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, saints, and scoundrels: Folk narrative in Hindu religious teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 77.

⁵² Antoinette DeNapoli, ““Real sadhus sing to god”: The religious capital of devotion and domesticity in the leadership of female renouncers in Rajasthan,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1 (2013): 125-26.

renunciation and their degree of ritual purity. Indeed, sadhus do recognise their caste origin but they do not use it as a means to marginalise other sadhus. All sadhus told us that they are *baishnab*, implying that they discarded their previous caste and all of them belonged to the same renunciant tradition. This is perhaps because most sadhus used to be marginalised by their lower caste origin once when they were householders. When they are sadhus, they are also marginalised by other sadhus of different Vaishnava traditions. Accordingly, they seem to completely depart from that bitter part of life and establish a new hierarchical category for their new status. This perspective suggests that Vaishnava sadhus are following the ideology of asceticism, in which sadhus should completely depart from their previous identity, including caste origin.

2.3 Women in the Vaishnava Sahajiya Sphere

Vaishnava sadhus operate as pair-renouncers (*yugal sadhu*) in which male and female renouncers live together as husband and wife. The presence of many women presents the tradition as female-friendly and women have a higher status than men, at least in its ideology.⁵³ However, some male Vaishnava sadhus are of the view that, similar to Brahmanical ascetic perception, women are an obstacle to men's liberation. One of the male sadhus told me that Vaishnavas cannot be renouncers (*sannyasi*) due to the presence of women (*nari*) in their renunciant lives. Thus, they can merely be *bairagya*, who are people with a status in-between householders (*sansari*) and renouncers (*sannyasi*). *Bairagya* is used as the last name of Vaishnava sadhus. When sadhus undergo initiation,

⁵³ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female-male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."; Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

they are provided with a new name by their guru and *Bairagya* is every Vaishnava sadhu's last name. The term literally means 'desireless' and refers to renunciators. However, it is not limited to renunciators as householders can also be *bairagya*.⁵⁴

Indeed, in ideology female renunciators are spiritually higher but their social status is relatively inferior to that of male renunciators. Most female sadhus regard their partner as *gosai*. This term refers to the honorific status of a male sadhu, meaning 'lord'. That is, to a female sadhu, her partner is her 'lord' who has a higher status than her. In contrast, male renunciators regard their female partner as *ma* or 'mother'. This term signifies the highest status of women in relation to womanhood, which, however, seems to be lower than being a 'lord'. Similar observation provided in the study of Khandelwal, she states that female renunciators are perceived as mother (*mataji*), whilst males are 'master' (*swami*) or 'great king' (*maharaj*). The image of male renunciators as master or lord suggests the dominance and authority of the male sadhus.⁵⁵

Vernacular terms used for referring to male and female sadhus are 'sadhubaba' and 'sadhuma', respectively. Disciples and devotees call sadhuma 'mother' (*ma*), and use 'father' (*baba*) for sadhubaba. When I first interacted with sadhus, my initial question to everyone was: What is your identity? (*apnar parichoy ki?*) This question helped me to understand the sadhumas' position from an early stage of my fieldwork. All the female sadhus I studied gave the answer that they were 'sadhuma' (*amar sadhuma*). Their answer acknowledged that sadhumas do indeed perceive themselves as holy persons,

⁵⁴ "True vairāgya refers to an internal state of mind rather than an external lifestyle and can be practised equally well by one engaged in family life and a career as by a renunciate" "Vairagya-Wikipedia," in *Wikipedia* (October 2 2018). <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vairagya>. It refers to Vaishnava renouncer, see Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*. It means dispassion or desireless, see Richard Burghart, "bairagi mandals," *Contributions to Nepalese studies* 3, no. 1 (1976).

⁵⁵ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*, 185.

though their sadhu identity is associated with motherhood. This explicitly illustrates the dependent nature of female sadhus and the extent to which women bind themselves to the normative ideal of women. Mother is the highest status that Indian women can acquire, especially if one is the mother of sons; then, one is accorded the highest honour by family and community.⁵⁶ Being a mother suggests that a woman has accomplished the socially designated duties of being a wife, mother and perhaps mother-in-law. Accordingly, by claiming that they are sadhuma, female sadhus bind themselves to both other-worldly and this-worldly. They are holy persons who follow prescribed renunciant rules and regulations, meanwhile lay persons whose duties are to maintain the ashram, nurturing and feeding the male partner, gurus and disciples.

In contrast, male sadhus seem to be embedded with different life values. They replied that their identity is sadhu (*amar sadhu*). This term [sadhu] identifies their sadhu identity. No inclusion of a father (*baba*) identity implies the independence of a male renouncer. Once a male renounces the world, he is able leave everything behind and focus solely on his path to renunciation.⁵⁷

2.3.1 Reasons to become a renouncer

Although being a Vaishnava renouncer is not as respectable as being a renouncer in other traditions, a good number of householders in the area are interested in giving up their secular identity, including their caste affiliation, by undergoing initiation into the

⁵⁶ Elisabeth Bumiller, *May you be the mother of a hundred sons : a journey among the women of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1991).

⁵⁷ Kawanami makes a similar observation that in Myanmar Buddhism, while nuns' ways of renunciation is associated with providing and giving service to others, monks seem to be released from such worldly service and only focus on following renunciant injunctions. See Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful*.

Vaishnava renunciant community. The reasons for undergoing initiation are various and may vary from person to person. While women talk about their life difficulties as a reason, men tend to disclaim their intention, claiming that it is the gods who wanted them to follow this path. It seems that whether claiming intention for women or disclaiming intention for men, both are ways in which sadhus compromise their ‘negating lifestyles’⁵⁸ to the society. For Vaishnava women, Vaishnava renunciation is an implicit means whereby they can perform a woman’s prescribed duties (*stri dhamma*). Accordingly, undergoing renunciation into Vaishnava signifies their intention to follow the conventions, which they cannot do while living as householders. This is because to be a good Vaishnava sadhu implies that a woman has to be a good wife as well as a good mother. Accordingly, these women commit themselves to meet the social expectations in an alternative way.

For male sadhus, disclaiming their intention means that it is not them who wanted to live outside social norms, it was the gods who led their lives to renunciation, since it is important for them not to be perceived as being anti-society. Similarly, DeNapoli explains that disclaiming intention allowed the sadhus she studied not to be perceived as resisting the social structure. She suggests that by disclaiming the intention to be a renouncer, a sadhu has exercised their ‘instrumental agency’. Their life as a sadhu is only an instrument that played by god, it is the result of the divine will.⁵⁹

From my fieldwork data, the reason to undergo renunciation for women is mainly because there is limited or even no social space for women to express themselves outside

⁵⁸ Olivelle states that from a householder’s point of view, renunciation is explained in terms of negation, opposing the householder’s world. Olivelle, *Ascetics and Brahmins: studies in ideologies and institutions*, 1.

⁵⁹ DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*, 58.

the religious domain. Women who cannot meet social expectations tend to be discriminated against and are generally marginalised by society. There are many cases of women who run away from violent circumstances involving in-laws and husbands. Many Vaishnava women were in arranged marriages and only met their husbands a few days before getting married. Many of them had a violent and drunk husband, which was one of the reasons that led them to opt for renunciation. It is worth noting that, in India, once a woman is married off, she becomes a stranger to her own family. Although some women who run away from their in-laws can return to their natal family, many of them are not accepted back by their own parents. One of my informants, PL Ma, at the age of 14, lived with her in-laws for six months, and then decided to run away from her husband, back to her natal family. But her parents, instead of giving her shelter, asked her to return to her drunkard husband. She refused to go back and then decided to renounce altogether, along with a widower from her natal village, who was almost 40 years older than her. The only way the two could be together without violating social rules was by undergoing renunciation and entering the Vaishnava tradition. Her decision to take refuge in renunciation allowed her to escape from social expectations, and in-laws and a violent husband, and at the same time be provided for with the socially accepted status of *sadhuma*.

There are young women from poor families whose parents cannot afford to pay a dowry for their marriage, and thus they give their daughters away to much older Vaishnava male renunciators. KN Ma was given to Babaji when she was 14 years old. Babaji visited her village and saw her, and then asked her father if he would allow his daughter to become a renouncer and live with him. KN Ma's father was happy to give KN Ma to Babaji. He told her that he was too poor to afford a dowry for her wedding.

There are other cases of widows whose husbands passed away when they were young and could not find any shelter outside the religious realm. ML Ma and MD Ma shared similar tragedies after the deaths of their husbands. ML Ma's husband died when she was only 13 years old, she was not allowed to live with her in-laws or go back to her natal family. She also could not remarry.⁶⁰ She was wandering around aimlessly until she found shelter in a Vaishnava ashram. She underwent initiation and stayed with her guru until he arranged for her to become a female partner of her guru brother, ND Baba. MD Ma had a slightly different story as her late husband left her with three children. She raised her children alone until all of them were married off, and then in her late twenties she underwent renunciation and stayed at the ashram with her guru, who is the same guru that ML Ma and ND Baba have. MD Ma was also paired with her guru-brother, though their joint renunciatory life was not successful because of her partner's womanising behaviour. This made her decide to walk away from the prestigious ashram and rent a small shelter in a new settlement near the train station in Bardhaman district.

SM Ma and FK Ma had been renunciators in a conventional way, similar to a marriage arrangement in the secular sense. When they were 16 years of age, their parents, who were Vaishnava renunciators and devotees, respectively, arranged for them to marry Vaishnava sadhus. Like householders, their parents and gurus sought help from matchmakers who were sadhus and could help them to get marriage proposals from single male sadhus. Once the families were satisfied, the *malachandans*, or weddings in a

⁶⁰ Narayanan provides that only women from high castes are not allowed to remarry, while poor and low-caste women from rural villages do remarry. However, to my knowledge, this is only true for some. Many village women cannot afford to remarry due to the question of dowry and stigma. If some do manage to remarry, they seem to get the worst men for whom they need to provide everything in exchange for protection, symbolic protection. For more see Narayanan, "Brimming with bhakti, embodiments of Shakti: Devotees, deities, performers, reformers, and other women of power in the Hindu tradition."

profane sense, were arranged. SM Ma told me that it was her own will to become a sadhu instead of remaining a lay woman. She said that she wanted to meet God while young but meanwhile wanted to be released from the future burden of becoming a daughter-in-law and a mother.

There are also women who want to marry men from different castes, but they are not allowed to do so by their families, thus they seek licence to be together in the Vaishnava renunciant domain. SK Ma is such a woman who underwent initiation together with a man from a different caste. In addition, there is a case of a Naga sadhu who underwent *malachandan* to a girl he loved and then became a Vaishnava sadhu.⁶¹

Of the majority of the female sadhus I studied, more than ten of them underwent initiation in order to follow their husband's wishes. They initially did not want to become sadhumas, and at the same time they did not want to live alone at home as widows (whose husbands symbolically die in terms of a householder identity). They stated that their husbands would not have any problems if they chose not to follow them and remained householders. Although their husbands did not coerce them to become renouncers – for them it was meaningless to live on their own – they decided to renounces together with their husbands.

A women may undergo initiation together with a man who can give her shelter or she may undergo it alone and stay with a guru until he finds her a suitable partner. In cases of either a single male or female sadhu, the process of seeking a partner replicates the conventional process. The guru takes responsibility for finding partners for disciples and

⁶¹ Eventually their couple-sadhu life was not successful, so the male sadhu returned to the Naga community and the sadhuma returned to the householder realm. Their hair was shaped to signify failure on the renunciant path.

arranges marriage for them. If a guru cannot match a couple among his disciples, he may find one among his guru brothers' disciples or from other lineages. He may also seek help from a matchmaker who is a Vaishnava sadhu. The *malachandan* is a ceremony for garland exchange, indicating the right of a couple to live together as pair-renouncers (*yugal sadhu*). As suggested by Openshaw, *malachandan* is equivalent to a marriage ceremony for householders.⁶² Many studies promote the view that Vaishnava is a tradition whereby an individual has the freedom to choose his or her own partner, given that inter-caste marriage is allowed. However, from my observation, there are many Vaishnavas who accepted traditional arranged marriage or 'arranged *malachandan*' in practice. This practice thus contrasts with the Vaishnava ideal of freedom in choosing a partner. The new couples normally accept their fortune and show little or even no conflict with the guru's decision, and although their partners may not be as kind as they might want them to be, at least the female renouncer does not need to deal with in-laws. In addition, since the sadhus have their own community comprising guru kinship and peer group, if anyone acts inappropriately, he or she will get warnings from their guru, or guru brothers/sisters who are senior to them. There was a case of an angry sadhu who often used violence on his female partner. His aggressive behaviour was stopped by his guru and the sadhu community who warned him that if he kept behaving in that way towards his partner, they would exclude him from the group.

Records show that Vaishnava women outnumber men because the community is open to all castes, accepting women from all backgrounds, particularly 'loose' women.⁶³ Also,

⁶² Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

⁶³ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

since many male sadhus are much older than their female partners (about 20 to 30 years difference in age) – they pass away before their female partners, who are left as single sadhumas. A widowed sadhuma usually stays single for the rest of her life (while a male renouncer tends to find a new partner if his partner dies) because of the pressure from social conventions and lay society, on which she relies for socio-economic support. These are perhaps some of the practical reasons why Vaishnava women outnumber men.

I conducted informal interviews with more than 20 male renouncers to find out the reasons why they had become Vaishnava renouncers. Most if not all claimed that they chose this way of life due to an ‘inner calling’ driven by the will of God (*bhagavan*). It was God who wanted them to become Vaishnava Sadhus. No one mentioned their previous state of poverty as a reason to undergo initiation, even though it was evident that most Vaishnava renouncers were poor, illiterate and came from lower castes. Without the renunciant robe, they would have remained untouchable and treated as such by society.

2.4 Varieties of Vaishnava Sahajiya practitioners

Most of the Vaishnava sadhus I studied were *bhekdari sadhu* who formally underwent *sannyas* initiation with gurus, took full-time renunciation, lived in secluded ashrams, followed the renunciant injunctions prescribed by their gurus, and fully dedicated their life to renunciation. Although they were living as pair-sadhus (*yugal sadhu*), they lived their lives in seclusion from householders. They did not integrate with householders (with the exception of householder-devotees), and the only occasions on which sadhus came into contact with ordinary householders were during alms collection and sometimes at devotional feasts when the sadhus provided food to householders.

To be childless, as described by Openshaw as well as those sadhus I studied, appeared to be the concrete mark of Vaishnava renunciation.⁶⁴ That is, what marks householders from renouncers is a child. A sadhu who is childless while being a sadhu is accredited with being a 'real sadhu' by virtue of his commitment and success in this religious practice. Indeed, to be childless or have no progeny is not only about having sex without ejaculation, it also reveals having control over one's emotions, body and way of life. For Vaishnava sadhus, having children denotes a mistake (*bhul*) or their failure at *sadhana*, as it brings them endless responsibilities and attachment to the household world (*sansar*).

Sadhus who fail to follow the Vaishnava renunciant path by mistakenly procreating children are downgraded and called *sansari sadhus* by their cohorts. *Sansari* sadhus are *bhekdari* sadhus who became sadhus by the virtue of their *bhek/ sannyas* renunciation, but failed to maintain their sadhu lifestyle due to having children. Some of them had children before taking the *sannyas* robe or became sadhus while having small children. Some of them had children after undergoing initiation, meaning that they had made a mistake during the esoteric ritual. These sadhus, having children either before or after initiation, had to take care of their children until they were married off. *Sansari sadhus* usually lived in a home setting surrounded by family members, children as well as grandchildren, relatives, and neighbours. They participated in sadhu feasts, but usually were marginalised in their community since they were seen as impure sadhus. It should be noted that being 'marginalised' in this context does not imply that *sansari sadhus* are treated unequally by their colleagues. They are treated similarly to other sadhus, but they are at the bottom of the sadhu hierarchical structure, being seated at the end/ corner or

⁶⁴ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

perhaps getting fed after all the other sadhus. In addition, it appears that in the Vaishnava community, other sadhus (besides sadhus with children) who are likely to be *sansari sadhus* are old single female sadhus. For an old single sadhuma, her children or relatives take care of her, either staying with her at the ashram or moving her into their home. Either way, these sadhus lose their sadhu ways by living with householders and are less likely to commit themselves to the ascetic way of life.

Silpi sadhus is another name referring to these sadhus that one finds in the Birbhum sadhu community. This term refers explicitly to Baul sadhus. As mentioned earlier, although there is a close relationship between Vaishnava and Baul renunciators, ritually and historically, Vaishnavas do not regard Bauls as real sadhus in the same manner as them. Even though Bauls undergo *bhek* initiation and some of them even have the same guru as the Vaishnavas, they are seen as merely performer sadhus, who are identified as householders rather than sadhus. They claim that Bauls are more likely to attach themselves to what is this-worldly due to their musical performances. By singing and performing, Baul sadhus are in regular contact with the transient world, being influenced by its values, and may eventually adopt similar life values to householders. As said by a Vaishnava sadhu, when Bauls are on stage, they are performers, yet their loincloths (*dor-korpin*) mark them as renunciators.

Bhakta or devotee generally denotes any householder (*sansari*), who commits himself to the Vaishnava path. Dimock claimed that all Vaishnavas are either householders or renunciators and *bhakta* of Krishna.⁶⁵ However, in the context of the Birbhum sadhu community, *bhakta* refers to a householder who underwent either *diksha* or *shiksha*, or

⁶⁵ Dimock, "Doctrine and Practice among the Vaishnavas of Bengal," 115.

both, thus having been through some sacred practices. *Bhakta* have an intimate relationship with sadhus, but due to their householder status they are regarded as impure. Sadhus do not eat with them or accept water or any food cooked by them. *Bhakta* will sometimes travel together to pilgrim sites with sadhus and accompany sadhus while travelling, although they are not their disciples. Some *bhakta* may act like real sadhus by maintaining sadhu-like lifestyles, dressing in a sadhu robe, following eating regulations, collecting alms and organising *sadhu seva*. However, these *bhaktas* are not real sadhus as they have not taken the *sannyas* robe, thus they have not experienced any ritual that purifies their body.⁶⁶ This kind of *bhakta* may get some respect from householders and sadhus, but they will never be regarded as sadhus, especially by *baishnab* sadhus.

Vaishnava is also seen as an 'open caste' into which a person can either be born or undergo initiation to enter.⁶⁷ Those who are born into the caste are called 'caste Vaishnava' (*jati baishnab*). These *jati baishnabs* are usually ordinary householders who go to school, have a job, get married and maintain a family, like people from other castes. They seem to have less commitment or even no commitment at all to the Vaishnava path since Vaishnava is their birth caste. However, most *jati baishnabs* I came across took *diksha* or *siksha* from Vaishnava gurus when they reached a certain age, usually from 12–16 years.

It is worth noting that Vaishnava sadhus do not take food from *bhakta* and *jati Baishnab*. In addition, they are hesitant to take food from *sansari* sadhus and *silpi* sadhus, although these people are *bhekdari* sadhus. To them, these sadhus are impure for

⁶⁶ A sadhu body is purified through a ritual administered by their *bhek* guru. For more see Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*.

⁶⁷ O'Connell, "Jati-Vaisnavas of Bengal: " Subcaste" (" Jati") without " Caste"(Varna)."

different reasons. That is, while *sansari* and *silpi* sadhus are impure due to their failure to follow the Vaishnava path, the *bhakta* and *jati baishnab* are impure because they are householders. Although each sadhu carries a different degree of purity, which situates him/her at a different place in the hierarchy, they seem to understand and accept their differences. Sadhus do not debar others who are not real sadhus from the community. They still have good collaboration with each other, underlining that someone who can meet their religious criteria will be treated with respect and be positioned higher in the hierarchy. In contrast, sadhus who cannot fulfil the criteria will be treated differently from 'real' sadhus. These informal rules seem to be accepted by all practitioners.

In this chapter, I have discussed the self-perception and identity of sadhus who are the focus of this research. It would be interesting to explore the community of sadhus further, the internal dynamic of their community, how the sadhu community is formed and maintained, and the extent to which the Vaishnava sadhu community has challenged ascetic individualistic ideals of Brahmanical asceticism. That said, the 'other worldly' existing 'outside this worldly' will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Sadhu lineage and community

Ideally, sadhus deny living in a secular society. They prefer to live in less known areas or unknown places, and preferably in the wilderness.¹ Sadhus detach themselves from family and relatives, as well as most of the transient world, to live in a so-called ‘other-worldly’ domain. Dumont claims that renouncers leave a place in society and become symbolically dead to the social community. To him, the householder’s social world and the renouncer’s individualistic yet solitude world exist in opposition to one another.²

However, the ‘other-worldly’ world of the sadhus does not consist of asocial individuals who have left the world to live in isolation to focus solely on practice for liberation. In contrast to Dumont, subsequent scholarship has argued that renouncers form social structures (*sadhu samaj*) and maintain complex relationships with householder society,³ and the opposition between the two domains is not absolute but ‘nuanced tension’.⁴

Burghart claims that in Ramannandi sect, the sadhu communities known as *mandals* are formed and always have interrelationship with lay community.⁵ He adds that renouncers are of the view that they are not an individual outside the world but a member of society.⁶

Hausner states that the ‘other worldly’ community has its own structure constructed in parallel to the world of householders in which family, kinship and community are formed

¹ Olivelle, *Ascetics and Brahmins: studies in ideologies and institutions*, 1.

² Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian religion." Dumont world renunciation

³ Romila Thapar, "Renunciation: the making of a counter-culture?," *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (1978); Burghart, "Renunciation in the religious traditions of South Asia."; Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*; Tambiah, "The renouncer: his individuality and his community."

⁴ Meena Khandelwal, "Renunciation and Domesticity," in *Hinduism in the Modern World*, ed. Brian A. Hatcher (New York: Routledge, 2015), 198. Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*.

⁵ Burghart, "bairagi mandals."

⁶ Burghart, "Renunciation in the religious traditions of South Asia."

and maintained through as guru lineage. She suggests that sadhu communities provide an alternative community structure for people who cannot find a way to fit in elsewhere.⁷

This alternative community is based on brotherhood, in which male renouncers are the dominant actors. Indeed, Khandelwal observes, renunciation is constructed to be ‘the male world of other worldly asceticism’ and, to a degree, to oppose to the female world of domesticity.⁸

Following Burghart and Hausner, Vaishnava sadhus are not individual sadhus but pair renouncers who affiliate to the sadhu community. In addition, their sadhu community is not a male single-sex group secluded from the social world, but instead provides a prominent space to accommodate female members and always correlates with the householder community. However, their lineage, kinship and even friendship are maintained and widened through a network of male sadhus. To a degree, the Vaishnava community is patrilineal, sustained through the male line as often seen in Brahmanical ascetic communities, and yet also what we see in the householder domain. The guru lineage is passed down through male disciples rather than females. In addition, members of the Vaishnava sadhu community are bound together not only through their guru lineages, but also through friendship among male members of different lineages.

Women, as they appear in Vaishnava texts as well as in actual context, are necessary and important for male sadhus’ socio-religious account. However, when we look closely at the structure of the community, women seem to have limited space and less of a role in expanding the lineage and community. This is because female renouncers cannot be

⁷ Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*, 19.

⁸ Khandelwal, "Renunciation and Domesticity," 198.

gurus on their own merit. Women are acknowledged as gurus only in relation to their male partners and without them they cannot initiate any disciples.

I argue that even though women have no explicit role in maintaining religious knowledge and extending the lineage and the sadhu community, they do play a role in making the lineage and community sustainable. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, main patrons who support the patriarchy system are women. Hancock claims that women's main duty is to help men pay off their debts to the guru, ancestor and God. They ascertain that the ritual cycle, family lineage and the well-being of their family remains unbroken. She observed that the family puja should be performed correctly and regularly for the benefit of particularly the husband, and this practice was observed and maintained by women.⁹ Martin Wood in his study of the Gujarati diaspora in England also argues that women are key members who maintain religious food customs, and thus traditions and the community.¹⁰ In the context of Bengali culture, Inden and Nicholas suggest that Bengali culture is an interrelated organic system, bound together by shared bodily substances.¹¹ Food is one of the ways in which a person's body substance is shared with others. In addition, ingesting body fluids as practice among Vaishnavas, claims Hanssen, is the ultimate means to incorporate the essence of the other into oneself, in which female bodily fluids are significant ingredients.¹² Similarly, in the Vaishnava tradition, women are important for maintaining and sustaining Vaishnava food customs and community. They also play a role in forming 'an interrelated organic system' through their body fluids.

⁹ Hancock, *Womanhood in the making : domestic ritual and public culture in urban South India*, 115.

¹⁰ Martin Wood, "Divine Appetites: Food Miracles, Authority and Religious Identities in the Gujarati Hindu Diaspora," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (2008).

¹¹ Inden and Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali culture*.

¹² Kristin Hanssen, "Ingesting menstrual blood: Notions of health and bodily fluids in Bengal," *Ethnology* 41, no. 4 (2002): 374.

Accordingly, female fluids and their role in food customs cause Vaishnava female renouncers to have an influence in sustaining and strengthening the sadhu community.

This chapter will bring together the shape of the world existing outside ‘this worldly’. I first describe the organisation of the sadhu community, which consists of sadhus from different lineages and ashrams across Birbhum district. I will then focus on the guru lineage and how the Vaishnava ideology has been conveyed from gurus to disciples. The role of women as gurus and the knowledge that they convey to disciples will also be highlighted in this section. In the last section, I will explore the Vaishnava community in relation to other sadhu communities. The connection to other sadhus of different renunciant traditions suggests that Vaishnavas have associated themselves with a broader group of ascetics.

3.1 Mechanisms of the Vaishnava sadhu community

The Vaishnava sadhu community I studied, called the Birbhum community, consists of ashrams located in Birbhum, Bardhaman and Nadia district of West Bengal. It consists of three main lineages that belong to three senior sadhus: GS Baba, ND Baba and RK Baba. The Birbhum community comprises 32 regular members from 19 ashrams and 11 irregular members from 7 ashrams. The 32 members are regulars in the sense that they participate in every *sadhu seva* organised by other members of the Birbhum community. Their ashrams are located not far from each other in terms of distance so that a day-return trip is possible by train. In comparison, irregular members only participate in some *sadhu sevas* because their ashrams are far away in terms of distance, as is their link to the guru lineage. These sadhus live far away from other members and only have links with one or

two sadhus in the community. However, these irregular sadhus can be regular members of other sadhu communities and may potentially become regular members of the Birbhum community. Initially, sadhus may only gather together with those of their own lineage, but that lineage may grow and bring in members of other lineages due to geographical closeness, and they may later form a broader sadhu community.¹³



Figure 3.1 Sadhus of Birbhum community

Burghart provides that in Ramanandi sect, *mandals* are formed voluntarily and exist so far as its members take interest in sustaining it. These sadhus do not mutually own or had any right toward land or physical structure where they set to be a meeting place.

Bhandara or feast is the significant occasion which brings the sadhus together.¹⁴ Hausner

¹³ Geographical nearness in this context refers to sadhus being able travel to their peers' ashrams within a day. Indeed, most of the ashrams in the Birbhum community are quite dispersed. Some ashrams are located more than 80 miles away from their peers. However, this is considered near in comparison to some sadhu communities/ lineages which are many hundred miles away from each other.

¹⁴ Burghart, "bairagi mandals," 63-66.

highlights that sadhus, although they live separately in dispersed places, are connected to each other through their guru lineages and holy places, such as Allahabad, where Khumbh Mela takes place.¹⁵ Holy places where stories of gods, saints and famous religious people are presented are where members of the community connect together.

In my study, the community is formed and maintained through the guru lineage and their ashrams are dispersed and located away from each other, and there is no external holy place where all members feel they belong and connected to each other. This is because they value the god within their body more than the external transcendental god existing in either temples or at pilgrimage sites.¹⁶ In the absence of such a holy place, following Burghart, I argue that the members of Birbhum community are brought together frequently by the feast (*sadhu seva*) and are connected through various forms of food-sharing. Devotional feasts (*sadhu seva*) organised by sadhu members is one means for contributing food and sharing it with other members. In addition, bodily fluids and Vaishnava sacred foods are shared and consumed among members, which also helps to unite and connect members.

The locations of feasts change and rotate according to the ashrams and they are not embodied with any holy story or history, rather a site is merely chosen as the residing place of an individual sadhu or a sadhu couple. Throughout the year, sadhus from the Birbhum community frequently gather at different ashrams, meeting at least 19 times which equates to about 57 days per year. These gatherings are important events that foster friendship and a sense of connectedness to each other in the community.

¹⁵ Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*.

¹⁶ On Vaishnava Sahajiya's place of devotion, see Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

The context of *sadhu sevas* is not only an arena where sadhus can meet, eat and share their life stories, it is also a chance for them to be linked together through different practices which makes all sadhus feel that they belong and are connected to each other. In those rituals, a sense of kinship is pronounced in an emotional way, which consequently makes sadhus feel togetherness. The details of the *sadhu seva* will be described in Chapter 6.

It is important to note that Vaishnava sadhus do not worship an external holy place, but they do have a holy place internalised in their bodies, and they regularly worship it. That is, to Vaishnava, their body is a holy place and through consuming and sharing their fluids and those of others, sadhus become connected. The ingestion of female bodily fluids by sadhus of the same lineage and sometimes cross-lineage is a means to unite sadhus. Hanssen states that women's bodily fluids are significant ingredients that need to be ingested by male sadhus for their vitality and purity. The forms of ingestion can vary, starting with sharing food or drinks using the same utensils (sharing saliva, one of the Vaishnava sacred fluids), to directly ingesting or absorbing one another's bodily fluids. A mixture of female fluid (menstrual blood), cow's milk, camphor, palm juice and coconut milk will be shared among sadhus. This practice is inclusive for close-relation members either from the same or different lineage, and it helps to tighten and promote kinship among sadhus.¹⁷

¹⁷ Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*.

3.1.1 Ashram and kinship

To better understand the nature of a sadhu family, the character of a Vaishnava ashram will be brought into the discussion. Many Vaishnavas I studied regarded their residences as ashrams. However, some argued that their residences, unlike others, were *akharas*, given that they have land attached to their properties that contains many tombs (*samadhi*) of previous gurus who were buried either inside the building or outside, marking a long-established lineage. However, an *akhara*, as described by Hausner, is “the primary organisational structures which administer sadhu membership are known. In contemporary North India, *akharas* are structured social groups whose members come together for a common purpose.”¹⁸ There is a range of activities that go on at *akharas* in which the participation of their members is pivotal. Although some Vaishnava sadhus claim that their places are *akharas* rather than ashrams, it appears that a Vaishnava ashram is a less structured social group and there are limited social activities that bring members together. Indeed, there is only one particular activity, the devotional feast (*sadhu seva*), that brings members together.

The ashram of a guru is a headquarters where sadhu disciples come together, either to live or gather for ceremonial events hosted by the ashram. It is also a safe house for many female renunciators who have limited life choices or no choices at all and join to seek protection in the renunciator community. ML Ma is one of the women (originally 13 years old and a child widow), who was rescued by her guru through renunciation. She stayed at the guru’s ashram for almost 12 years, being fed, trained and nurtured by her guru and guru brothers. To her, the guru’s ashram was more than a place to live as it was

¹⁸ Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*, 77.

where she felt secure and found a meaningful life, which she could not find in the outside world.

Some gurus are famous and have many sadhu disciples who stay with them for an initial period when they first become sadhus. Years later, these new sadhus will find their own ashram; some take over and live in a deserted ashram, others in their own homes, and there are even those who buy a plot of land and build their own ashram. A sadhu told me that when he became a sadhu almost 40 years ago, there were many devotees who offered him land to build an ashram. The land he has been living on was offered by his devotees 30 years ago. Nowadays, householders are less likely to offer their land to sadhus because of the rise in land prices, prompting them to sell it rather than offer it freely to sadhus to gain merit. Accordingly, many sadhus have to buy land themselves to build an ashram. After a guru passes away, if he had many sadhu disciples, the most qualified disciple will be assigned to take over his ashram and maintain and expand the guru's lineage. If a deceased sadhu did not have any sadhu disciples, the ashram will be left deserted until some new sadhu moves in (they can move in only if they get permission from the surrounding lay community where the ashram is located.) The sadhus I studied had, after moving out from their gurus' ashrams, a sense of belonging to the ashrams they owned. However, in the case of sadhus who did not have their own ashrams but were permitted to continue living in deserted ones, they expressed how their gurus' ashrams were the place where they belonged to.

Places, as mentioned in Hausner's study, "are specific locations into which human beings infuse meaning and through which human bodies articulate culture and history".¹⁹

¹⁹Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*, 94.

In the Vaishnava tradition, a sense of belonging to a (external) place is marked by the place the sadhu wishes to be buried when they die. The site where a sadhu would like to be buried is the place where they felt they belonged and where they find their body becoming one with God, and where there boy can “articulate culture and history”, which are either their own ashram or their guru’s. In addition, a sense of belonging in this context also relates to the ownership of a particular place. All sadhus who legally own their ashrams insist on being buried on the premises. In contrast, a sadhu who does not legitimately own their ashram wishes to return to their guru’s place after they die. They are of the opinion that it is best to be buried with people of their own lineage rather than with others, noting that some deserted ashrams have tombs of previous sadhus who lived there.

Kinship in the Birbhum community replicates a householder’s kinship. The terms used to signify one’s relationship to other sadhus are kinship terms used in the secular world. However, it is important to note that the kinship terms used in the Vaishnava community are patrilineal. Disciples use mother (*ma*) or father (*baba*) to address their guru and young sadhus will relate to other sadhus using only paternal terms, such as *kaku* (paternal uncle), or *thakumar* (paternal grandmother).

3.1.2 Friendship

Vaishnavas are not only related to each other through guru lineages and kinship, but also through friendship. The way sadhus bring sadhus from different lineages into their community is consistent with Nicholas and Inden’s study of Bengali kinship. That is, a person does not only relate to others by blood, but also to those who can be regarded as

‘one’s own person’ or ‘family’, related to “by marriage, by living together in the same house, neighborhood, or village, . . . , by taking instruction from the same guru, by going pilgrimage together, and so forth.”²⁰ Many sadhus I worked with came from different lineages, but they embraced each other and formed a close community. Some sadhus bonded with their fellows more than with their guru’s brother /sister. Some of them met their guru’s brother/ sister once or twice a year, but saw their fellows almost every week, especially in the winter when many *sadhu sevas* were organised. Some sadhus never go on pilgrimage with their guru brothers, but instead travel with their sadhu fellows. For others whose gurus do not have other disciples besides them, fellows are their only family.

Sadhus from similar areas meet throughout the year by participating in *sadhu sevas*. That is, one will see these thirties sadhus at most of the *sadhu sevas* organised by community members. In addition, each ashram has its own lineage and friends who come from other districts. These sadhus are not part of the community, they are the guests of only one or two *sadhu sevas*. However, since these sadhus have a chance to interact with other members of the Birbhum community, some of them become friends with other sadhus and are also invited to *sadhu sevas*. In return, they also invite their new sadhu friends to their *sadhu sevas*. This reciprocal relationship helps sadhus to expand their community and/or become part of other sadhus’ communities. It should be noted that, it is the male sadhus who take a role in interacting to and start making friend with other new sadhus. Female sadhus only follow their partner’s decision.

²⁰ Inden and Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali culture*, 3.

3.2 Guru and lineage

Vaishnavas accept the supremacy of their gurus. Their lives are guided and created by their gurus. A guru is comparable to a god and he is the one who binds disciples together, forming a sadhu family. The dust underneath a guru's feet is said to be sacred. Even the waste of a guru, such as saliva and waste water after washing his feet, is said to be sacred and worthy of worship. It is a common practice when a guru arrives at a disciple's place for the disciple to wash his/her feet and sip the 'feet washed' water. This act represents the superior status of the guru and the act of the disciple surrendering to him. Disciples are of the view that giving service to their gurus is the same as serving God. In return, they will be blessed and protected by God or, in other words, the guru. Hausner states that the relationship between guru and disciples prevents social isolation and reassures that they are not outside the sadhu social structure.²¹

It seems that Vaishnavas respect their gurus even more than Krishna and Radha. They occasionally worship Krishna in their practice, but he seems to have less importance than their living guru in flesh and blood. Many sadhus also worship the tombs of their deceased gurus regularly and organise *sadhu sevas* dedicated to their gurus, but they have no particular practice or worship for saluting Krishna. Some sadhus may organise a small feast on the birthday of Krishna (*Krishna jonmoshtami*), but it is a voluntary option.

The study of Openshaw describes the roles of three Vaishnava gurus: they are the first initiation guru (*diksha guru*) who gives the initiation mantra, the teaching or training guru (*shiksha guru*) who gives instruction on esoteric rituals, and the renunciation guru

²¹ Hausner, *Wandering with sadhus: ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*, 74.

(*bhek/sannyas guru*) who gives renunciant robes to disciples.²² A *diksha* guru can be either a renouncer or a householder. He is the person who first initiates a practitioner. He provides the preliminary step for a person to become a full Vaishnava (householder). *Diksha* gurus are often Brahmin householders who, by giving *diksha* to disciples, receive a token fee (*dakshina*) in return. This allows them to be perceived as “a merely economic enterprise”²³ because many of these *diksha* gurus give *diksha* to disciples merely to obtain a fee from them. In contrast, only a renouncer, or the “wearer of the robe of renunciation (*bhek-dari*)”,²⁴ can be a *bhek* guru who gives *sannyas* or *bhek* initiation to renunciation to disciples. The colour of this guru’s robe determines the colour of his disciples’ robes. *Diksha* and *bhek* gurus are only men. Female renouncers who are partners of those *diksha* and *bhek* gurus, although present at initiation rituals, have no role besides giving a blessing to a new initiate.

The most revered and significant guru is the *shiksha* guru who teaches and trains his disciples in esoteric rituals. Openshaw argues that the *shiksha* guru is a guru tradition which provides an alternative hierarchy to the *diksha* and *bhek* guru traditions. While women cannot be *diksha* or *bhek* gurus, they can be *shiksha* gurus. It is also said that a wife is a husband’s guru and a husband a wife’s guru.²⁵ A *siksha* guru is the most significant guru because s/he is the guru who trains disciples in esoteric techniques to successfully perform the rituals, and one is not allowed to get a renunciant robe without permission from the *siksha* guru.

²² Jeanne Openshaw, "Killing' the guru: Anti-hierarchical tendencies of 'Bauls' of Bengal," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, no. 1 (1998).

²³ Openshaw, "Killing' the guru: Anti-hierarchical tendencies of 'Bauls' of Bengal," 5.

²⁴ Openshaw, "Killing' the guru: Anti-hierarchical tendencies of 'Bauls' of Bengal."

²⁵ Openshaw, "Killing' the guru: Anti-hierarchical tendencies of 'Bauls' of Bengal," 25.

In addition to these three gurus, the Vaishnavas I studied also acknowledge the *bhiksha* guru, who has a role in guiding new initiates in how to collect alms. They lead a new couple to beg for alms from door to door. Once they receive donations (rice grain) in their hands, the *bhiksha ma* will hit the new renunciators' hands, making rice grains disperse on the floor. This practice, described by Openshaw, symbolises detachment from the transient world. It signifies that whatever belongs to them will no longer be theirs.²⁶ Many female renunciators told me that their favourite guru was the *bhiksha ma*. This female guru also supported new renunciators emotionally. She stayed by the side of a new female renouncer, especially during the transitional time when she discarded her householder status to become a renouncer. In addition, a *bhiksha ma*'s main duty towards her disciples (a new sadhu couple) finishes once the begging process at the *malachandan* ceremony is done. After the ceremony, the *bhiksha ma* is likely to act like an older sister to her disciples. Accordingly, a *bhiksha ma* seems less strict than a *shiksha ma* and many female renunciators appear more comfortable and relaxed when they are with their *bhiksha ma*.

In contrast, a *shiksha* guru is the male sadhus' guru par excellence. Most of the male sadhus often mentioned the excellence in esoteric rituals of their *siksha* guru. The non-progeny status of the *siksha* guru is a symbol of his religious success and he is the pride of male disciples. It seems that success of their guru means success for his disciples. It implies that the guru will train them in the techniques he successfully practices and therefore the disciples will also be successful on their spiritual paths like their *siksha* guru.

²⁶ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

Vaishnava renouncers normally have these three or four gurus, and their lineage affiliations are made through these gurus. However, a renouncer can have one guru who performs all the roles of *diksha*, *shiksha* and *bhek* guru. Some renouncers have two gurus, where one guru acts as a *diksha* and a *bhek* guru, a *diksha* and a *shiksha* guru or a *shiksha* and a *bhek* guru. Some renouncers have more than one *shiksha* guru. The reason to be one's guru or to be one's disciple is dependent upon the personal fondness (*prochondo*) one has towards the guru. I interviewed many disciples, both householders and renouncers, as to why they chose to be the disciples of a particular guru. Most of them gave me a similar reply that when they were around the guru they felt peace.

Some sadhus who have many gurus seemingly belong to many lineages, thus they are members of several families. Before doing *malachandan* with VN Baba, SM Ma had her own *diksha*, *shiksha* and *bhek* guru. VN Baba was a sadhu before doing *malachandan* with SM Ma, thus he also had his own *diksha*, *shiksha* and *bhek* gurus. Both of them respected each other's gurus as their own gurus. SM Ma took VN Baba's *siksha* guru as her *siksha* guru, although she already had her own *siksha* guru. In the case of sadhus who have many gurus, the family lines are likely to be complicated because those sadhus are inclined to belong to many families or, in other words, to have many parents. In this way, kinship in the community continues to expand, much more so than in the secular world because sadhus not only have many children (disciples), but also many parents (gurus).

The issue of initiating disciples is a sensitive matter. For example, if the senior guru of a lineage is still alive, his disciples cannot give a *sannyas* robe or act as a *bhek* guru to any of their devotees. It is unclear to me whether they can act as *diksha* or *shiksha* gurus. I only came across two sadhu couples giving *diksha* initiation to their disciples while their guru was still alive. Although junior sadhus cannot have their own disciples while their

senior gurus are still alive, they can have their own devotees (*bhaktas*). The relationship of sadhu and *bhakta* is similar to that of a guru and his disciples. The sadhu discusses Vaishnava philosophy with them and in return for that the *bhaktas* give material support to the sadhu. VN Baba is an example of a popular junior sadhu who has a good number of *bhaktas*, but still cannot initiate any of them due to the presence of his gurus as well as other senior sadhus in his lineage. Sometimes he is required to present his devotees to his senior gurus and persuade devotees to undergo initiation by senior members in the lineage. This practice of avoiding initiating one's own disciples while one's guru is still alive implies the reverence they hold towards the guru and his supreme status, and the respect that sadhu disciples have for their guru. It also shows that a lineage should not split into many small lineages. For a guru, a large number of disciples confirms his financial and religious status, and for disciples, the number of a guru's disciples implies the number of sadhu brothers and sisters.

The Vaishnava lineage is not only maintained through the guru line, it is also mixed with the blood line and/or personal preferences. It seems to me that the Bengali kinship practised in a householder's domain is also practised in a renunciant community. As stated by Inden and Nicolas, kinship is built not only through one's agnates (*jnati*) but also through marrying (*kutumba*).²⁷ For example, a man is kin to the uncle of his wife not through blood lineage but through marriage. When I met MD Ma at AN Baba's ashram, I asked her how she was linked to AN Baba's family. The answer was that she was connected to this lineage through Gour, who was a householder disciple of her guru brother, ND Baba, and who was also AN Baba's wife's nephew. Through this link, MD

²⁷ Inden and Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali culture*.

Ma became part of AN Baba's family. In the family link she provided, the guru lineage incorporated blood lineage to recruit new members.

3.2.1 Seniority and hierarchy in the community

Vaishnava philosophy promotes equality among humankind regardless of caste and class background, or gender; however, in practice, hierarchy is important for their sadhu identity. As I mentioned in the previous chapter although sadhus quit from their previous caste, they still maintain their hierarchical social structure. It seems to me that the vertical relationship and hierarchy found in the Birbhum community revolves around many criteria, such as seniority by age, the number of years spent in a renunciant robe, gender, the degree of purity and the number of disciples. When talking about seniority, sadhus mostly focused on their biological age as well as the number of years they had spent as renunciants. On the other hand, a sadhu's hierarchy is determined by their religious knowledge and success in practising esoteric rituals. It is worth noting again that the hierarchy of Vaishnava sadhus is not associated with caste affiliation. Sadhus clearly stated that one's high or low status was dependent upon their practice. That is, although one might be a Brahmin, if he failed to control his body and emotions, then he would be perceived by others as lower than the lowest caste. Moreover, they put forward that there were no Brahmins or Sudras in the Vaishnava tradition since everyone was Vaishnava.

The most senior gurus were often sadhu couples who were old and had been in the robe for the longest. They were normally the most respected and had the power to warn, ban or acknowledge other sadhus. They also had many privileges in the community.

Only senior sadhus of the lineage could give initiation robes to new disciples and they were served food and other services before anyone else. In their food consumption, junior members only ate after senior members had taken their first bite, and junior members were not allowed to move from the dining area until their seniors had finished their meal. This practice in regard to seniority was strictly observed and female sadhus took a role in supervising this matter by making a sign when junior sadhus should eat, either through giving food to the most senior ones first and to the least last, or saying directly who should eat when.

The penalty for ignoring this practice of seniority is sometimes banishment from the community. For example, there were two gurus who appeared at the same time for a feast. One was a single female sadhu who was the most senior sadhu in the community. Another, a male sadhu, was the guru of the host. Whilst the host was eager to welcome and take care of his own guru, the senior female sadhu was ignored and welcomed later, after the host's guru. Other sadhus witnessed and complained about this inappropriate treatment, but the host ignored the practice and gave preference to his own guru. Other sadhus present eventually banned both the host and his guru from the Birbhum community.

The most senior sadhu is the one who has the most years in renunciation robes, so s/he became a renouncer before the others. However, this practice of seniority in the community contrasts with Bengali social practice in regard to age. In Bengali and Asian culture in general, the most senior person is the one who is the oldest by biological age and thus treated with the most respect. VN Baba had been a sadhu for more than ten years, but was only 30 years old, and yet he wanted NT Baba, a 60-year old sadhu, who had been in the robe only for a year and was not officially accepted into the sadhu

community to show him proper respect. VN Baba argued that NT Baba should touch his feet because he had been a sadhu longer and his sadhu status, unlike that of NT Baba, was officially accredited. NT Baba claimed that he was much older than him, more than 30 years older, so VN Baba should pay respect to him. This kind of clash of opinions between seniority in the community and biological age is an ongoing debate, but such discussion is always about authenticity.

In addition, sadhus who have been in the robe longer than others and have no children are considered to be ‘authentic’ sadhus, who have proved their success in *sadhana*. Non-progeny implies non-ejaculation, so the state of purity of a sadhu, and the degree of purity is the means to mark one’s high place in their hierarchy. It is noteworthy that the sadhus who can prove their degree of purity are those with partners who can together perform an esoteric ritual. A sadhu who has never had a partner is not regarded as an authentic sadhu because he has no means to prove his ritual purity. However, a sadhu who is old and whose partner has passed away is still revered if he, during his/her partner’s time, did not produce any children.

Among the three lineages, ND Baba and GS Baba are regarded as the most senior lineages. RK Baba, even though he is the guru of his lineage, is less senior than the other two, because he is younger in biological age as well as the years he has spent as a renouncer. All sadhus in the Birbhum community also pay great respect to ST Baba, who is VN Baba’s *siksha* guru, although he is not a regular member of the community. He is 98 years old and has been in the robe for more than half century; he is also physically healthy, still teaches and does alms collection regularly, and he has no progeny. These facts make all sadhus take him as a role model. When he appears at a *seva*, everyone rushes to touch his feet, and female sadhus bathe him and clean his robes to show their

respect for him. This is to say that Vaishnava sadhus not only worship the gurus who initiate them, but they also worship those sadhus who, although not their own gurus, are 'real' sadhus and senior in terms of years in the renunciant robe.

It seems to me that the purity of a sadhu does not relate to the number of successive years spent as a renouncer. Young sadhus who maintain their purity can stay at a higher rank than an old and senior sadhu who has made a mistake. If a sadhu can practise esoteric rituals (*sadhana*) without progeny, he will then be placed higher than other sadhus who make a mistake by having children. Sadhu cohorts are likely to admire sadhus who successfully practise *sadhana*. Householder devotees pay respect and choose a guru who can prove that he is pure by not procreating. Thus the degree of purity (authenticity) affects their religious status. A sadhu who fails to maintain purity either through exposure to polluted food, or impure people, or failure to abstain from ejaculation, is criticised or downgraded, even though he may be senior in the robe.

The practice of seniority and religious hierarchy bring harmony to the tradition, allowing those sadhus who fail to practice *sadhana* to still be respected by junior members. Even though a sadhus may not be pure in his practice, he will still be respected by his peers due to seniority or time in the robe. He, however, is likely to lose the chance to become a guru. A junior sadhu, if he practices well and successfully, can still be respected even if he is young. I suggest that acknowledging seniority and ritual purity in the tradition seems to be a way to give respect to every sadhu regardless of their religious status or background. In this way all sadhus are included in the community, and no one is banished as long as s/he follows the practice of hierarchy and seniority.

In the Birbhum community, gender seems to play a lesser role in terms of seniority. As a result, female renouncers are usually treated equally in the community. If a female

renouncer is senior, she is served first and if the host fails to do so, other members, especially senior male sadhus, will admonish the host. However, in the religious hierarchy, the position of a female renouncer is dependent upon her male partner. They are not recognised without their male partner. Scholars such as Marglin states that women like Radha are always together with and are worshiped in relation to Krishna. Without Krishna, a female renouncer's existence will not be recognised.²⁸ Similar to Radha, Vaishnava female renouncers are placed higher when they are with their partners, and the success of their partners becomes their success. If a male sadhu is good at teaching or performing religious rituals, his female partner shares his merit. I have not come across any female renouncers who are placed at a higher rank without their partner or any male renouncers placed at a higher rank due to the merit of their female partner. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that both male and female renouncers obtain an advantageous position when they are together as a couple, because both play a complementary role in proving their purity and authenticity.

Female renouncers without partners but who are gurus can maintain their seniority, but their guru status is insecure. If a female renouncer is a senior sadhu, she is treated with respect by the sadhu community. In many cases, especially in the case of a senior female guru, her singleness seems to play a lesser role in getting hospitality and respect from younger members. However, her religious status is fundamentally insecure. She cannot have any new disciples and some old disciples may disobey or disrespect her. This is because female renouncers without partners are seen as incapable of religious teaching or quenching male householders' religious thirst.

²⁸ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*.

3.2.2 Women and their guru status

Openshaw mentions that women can also be *siksha* gurus, though they cannot be *diksha* or *bhek* gurus (*sannyas gurus*).²⁹ The senior guru told me that woman on her own cannot acquire the status of a guru since there is already a rule prohibiting a female practitioner from giving initiation robes or teaching to disciples without the presence of a male partner. Having said that, there are still a few Vaishnava female gurus who break the rule by giving initiation robes (*sannyas*) to disciples without their male partners. However, their practice, claimed by both male and female sadhus, is regarded as inappropriate since it does not follow Vaishnava conventions (*niyam*). The reasons are unclear as to why, without a male partner, a female guru cannot give *sannyas* robes or esoteric teaching, and why she cannot acquire the status of a guru on her own merit. ML Ma told me that she was of the view that because women did not have *dor-kaupin*, ‘waist string and loin cloths’, like the males, but only possessed *dor*, ‘waist strings’, so they could not give robes to disciples. It should be noted that *dor-kaupin* is treated as equal to the Brahmin’s sacred thread and all Vaishnava sadhus worship it as a symbol of their gurus. The *kaupin* is a strip of cloth that “covers the genitals and that is attached front and back by a string (*dor*) which ties around the waist”.³⁰ This implies that the reason why a female guru cannot give initiation is because she does not possess male genitals, allowing her to have *dor-kaupin*.

According to Openshaw, *kaupin* refers to the feminisation of a male sadhu in the sense that “binding up of the male genitals with the loin cloth is said to create the

²⁹ Openshaw, "'Killing' the guru: Anti-hierarchical tendencies of 'Bauls' of Bengal."

³⁰ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism," 323.

appearance of a woman".³¹ However, in the context that I studied them, *kaupin* represents the symbolic means to claim male privilege to obtain disciples and to debar women from obtaining disciples on their own. The lack of *kaupin* also implicitly suggested the ambiguous renunciant status of a female renouncer, questioning the validity of a woman's status in the renunciant domain. If a woman was the 'wearer of the robe of renunciation (*bhek-dari*)', she should be qualified to initiate and give *sannyas* robes to disciples. However, being given only *kaupin* and not being able to conduct the ritual on her own merit suggested that a woman could not be a fully qualified renouncer.

3.2.3 Teaching and passing on knowledge

Vaishnava is an oral tradition in which the knowledge of gurus passes through disciples with hands-on experience of *sadhana*. Vaishnavas do not attach any importance to any Vaishnava texts such as *Caitanya Caritamrita*, *Vivarta Vilasa* or *Amrtaratnavali*.³² Some Vaishnavas who are able to read may be tempted to read Bhagavad Gita, rather than these Vaishnava texts. They know that Vaishnava gurus such as Caitanya, Candidasa and Jayadeva composed songs and wrote books, though they do not draw from any of these texts when they teach *sadhana* to their disciples. On the contrary, they always refer to their gurus as the source of their knowledge.

Besides being an oral tradition, one practical reason why most Vaishnava gurus do not use any texts to reference their teaching is on account of their illiteracy. ND Baba showed me his gurus' handwritten manuscripts. There were five pages of paper written

³¹ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism," 329.

³² I was not certain if the Vaishnavas aware of the existence of those texts.

in Bengali to describe illustrations of a tiger, man, woman, snake and bee drawn on the same page. ND Baba could explain the ideology behind the illustrations fluently. He, however, stated that he did not know what his guru wrote on the pages since he could not read. So, I had to find out for myself what they meant. He allowed me to make photocopies and mentioned that I should not show this teaching to other sadhus, claiming that other gurus did not have what his lineage had inherited. While ND Baba described the manuscripts, ML Ma was next to ND Baba. She glanced at the illustrations and listened to Baba carefully without saying a single word. I asked if Ma knew what it all meant. She smiled and said, “All these things are Baba’s stuff.”

Vaishnava ideology and practice are passed on from a male guru to his male disciples. Some lineages may require disciples to perform an esoteric practice with their gurus, more often, a male guru practises with a female disciple, and less often, a female guru with a male. However, most of the sadhus I worked with (besides the GS Baba lineage) declared that their guru only taught them with words (*emny khata*), and when it comes to practice the couple would figure it out on their own. Female sadhus were not always present when teaching took place, only a male guru and male disciples. Women usually spent time in the kitchen together, preparing food for their partners. Indeed, there was another kind of teaching going on in the kitchen. However, the knowledge that female gurus transferred to female disciples in the kitchen was less likely to be about esoteric rituals (even though sometimes it was) but mainly about how to prepare pure sadhu food and manage the household chores. Occasionally, they discussed their experience of esoteric rituals and how their guru taught them to manage their bodies in order to help their partners withhold their semen. A female guru said that the ideology of *sadhana* and its detailed instruction were part of the male sadhu’s duty. They only gave some

techniques or tips to make their bodies fertile (postponing their menopausal periods) and to synchronise their breathing with the movement of the body.

Interestingly, the majority of female renouncers did not want to have a role in teaching and instructing their disciples in esoteric rituals. If there were guests, either a lay person or a renouncer, the host sadhu couple performed different roles to welcome them. While the male sadhu took a role in greeting and having a conversation with guests, the female sadhu cooked and prepared snacks or meals for them. The gendered division of labour at the ashram was clear. That is, male renouncers were there to talk to or teach guests, whilst female members served and facilitated social interaction for the male renouncer. When SM Ma was preparing meals for lay devotees who visited the ashram, I asked if she liked to teach and address disciples as VN Baba was doing. She shook her head, saying that she would never teach them, but rather cook for them. On this point, Openshaw suggests that males are better with their upper mouth but females with their lower mouth, meaning that while males are good at teaching and speaking, females are good at practising the ritual.³³

Sadhumas did not give me any explicit answers as to why they did not like to take any role in teaching esoteric rituals. However, it appeared to me that these women were concerned about the appropriateness of being involved in such esoteric rituals. Of course, although they are sadhus (of a tantric-influenced lineage), the ideal of being a good Bengali woman was still embedded in them. So, these female renouncers perhaps felt uncomfortable to discuss sex (in detail) with the opposite sex. In addition, since teaching focused on the male body and how males co-operate and interact with the female body,

³³ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

female renouncers seemed to be less articulate on this area. The tradition itself seemed to serve mainly male renouncers, and as a result females were less likely to follow traditional practice or take the lead in this matter.

3.2.4 Vaishnava disciples

Vaishnava gurus are similar to Buddhist monks in their methods for recruiting disciples. Both traditions are less likely to go out to preach and recruit disciples. Instead, they stay at the ashram and wait for a lay person to come to them who is really interested to learn about their philosophy. Urban states that the Vaishnava tradition is attractive to lower caste followers on the account of its “devotion ecstasy and madness of love”.³⁴ The Vaishnava in my study, indeed, attracts mostly rural lower-caste villagers. The simplicity and peaceful atmosphere of their ashram together with the humble, and yet wise, character of sadhus prompt villagers to surrender themselves to them. Also, some acknowledge that Vaishnava gurus have better rhetoric (*bhala katha*) and are better communicators than people from similar rural backgrounds, even though sadhus are not always educated.³⁵ Their teaching skills are enhanced due to their constant interaction with people while they are travelling on pilgrimages and collecting alms. Sadhus also socialise with other gurus and their peer sadhus regularly in feast contexts, allowing them to develop their listening and speaking skills. Young sadhus who went to primary school, and thus can read and write, are able to enhance their religious knowledge by self-studying religious texts such as Bhagavad Gita. In comparison to educated Brahmin

³⁴ Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal," 46.

³⁵ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

gurus from a big temple (*mandir*), villagers say that Vaishnava gurus are more accessible. They also told me that a big and well decorated *mandir* together with the sophisticated teachings of educated high-caste gurus made them feel uncomfortable and marginalised.

3.3 Beyond the Vaishnava boundary

3.3.1 Lay communities in the neighbourhoods of ashrams

All the sadhus I studied lived in their own ashrams; some ashrams were their own homes but had been transformed to become ashrams after the owners took *bhekdari*, ‘renunciate robes’; others were passed down by their gurus, or built new. These ashrams were each located in different villages. It is a practice, held by sadhus, that Vaishnava sadhus do not live in a village where there is already a Vaishnava ashram. This is to avoid problems in regard to practices and followers. Most of the ashrams I studied were located as part of villages, located either in the village next to a layperson’s house or on the fringes of the village where they could keep a certain distance from lay people.

The villages where the ashrams were located embraced them as part of their community. Sometimes sadhus were invited to village meetings and at other times, the chief spoke on behalf of sadhus to request social welfare for them. Hindu villagers were generally pleased to have an ashram located in their village because in their view the sadhus represented auspiciousness. Accordingly, having an ashram and sadhus in the village assured, to a degree, the village’s good fortune and prosperity.

In my study, there was little variation in terms of occupations and lifestyles. Most of the villagers although from different villages were from lower castes and were farmers. Villages such as Maitirra (VN Baba and SM Ma’s ashram), Babuya (GP Baba and FK

Ma) and Labpur (KL Baba and KL Ma) were where most of the villagers were farmers. Maitirra for example is located about 6 km from the train station, and whenever villagers travel to the station, they either walk, ride bicycles or take auto-rickshaws (only one serves the whole village). Most villagers were involved in farming and came from low castes. Their houses were built in a traditional style, using mud and thatch, and people regularly painted them with cow dung mixed with mud. Only a few families were Brahmin, and they seemed to be the wealthiest in the village; they were engaged in working for the national train company.

Most of the villagers were busy throughout the year, especially during the harvest season. From November to December, they harvested the rice, then grew potatoes and harvested them a few months later. They also grew mustard in December–January and harvested it in February. Some villagers who had land with a good irrigation system planted rice a second time in March, which was harvested four to five months later. In the dry season, most villagers could take a rest and prepare seeds for the next season. The income from selling their agricultural products was not stable, depending on market prices. For example, in 2017, potatoes cost only 3 Indian Rupees per kg, and a family although growing many potatoes could only earn about 700–1,000 Indian Rupees. SM Ma and VN Baba who lived in this community always mentioned that, unlike their father's community where many villagers had decent jobs, their community was poor. They did not have money to make donations and so sadhus could not ask them for donations. The villagers, however, were always helpful and took part in the ashram's feasts. They also donated agricultural products to the sadhus, such as potatoes, mustard seeds, cow's milk and rice grains.



Figure 3.2 Village in the morning

Villages such as Bataspur (MD Baba and SW Ma' ashram), Albanda (GS Baba MG Ma), Kopai (ND Baba and ML Ma) shared some characteristics in terms of diversity of occupations. Bataspur is located about a 30 minute-walk from the main train station. Villagers have different careers and caste affiliations. They are day-labourers, farmers, shopkeepers, clerks, tutors and school teachers. Overall, this village is considered to be richer than Maitirra, and many houses had two storeys, built in brick and concrete, and painted different colours. When MD Baba organised a feast, he usually received cash as well as rice grains, which implies that donors were both farmers and non-farmers.

Santipur is the only village different in terms of its population and the occupations of villagers. The community is located in the suburb of Guskara town, along the rail tracks.

The houses were small, almost huts, and were made of tin. The majority of the population came from Bangladesh a few decades ago and took *diksha*, 'initiation', into the Vaishnava tradition. MD Ma had been living in this community for three years (in 2017). She rented a small tin hut from one of the followers. Many of the population were day workers, working on vegetable farms next to the community. Some of the men worked as shopkeepers in another town.

The above villages where the sadhus lived were not their natal villages. Most of them had moved from another district in order to live away from their families and friends. There were three ashrams I studied located in their natal villages. Some used their own home as an ashram and others built a new ashram on their land in the village. It seems to me that sadhus who live in their natal villages have both advantages and disadvantages in term of their socio-economic status. On the one hand, they can stay in their own home and continue to cultivate their land to earn a reasonable income and sustain a living. However, such an income appears to make them wealthy in the eyes of villagers, thus they get less support from them. Moreover, some sadhus had negative reputations before they became sadhus, and villagers were less inclined to give them support.

Local communities and ashrams are usually supportive of each other. Lay villagers are also likely to give their surplus farm products without being solicited by the sadhus, e.g. during harvest season when rice is harvested and villagers organise a harvest celebration (*nabanna*). Renouncers are invited to the village's auspicious occasion, to receive new rice grains offered by the villagers. The ashram of VN Baba is visited everyday by local farmers who have their farms nearby. They usually give the ashram potatoes, rice grains and seeds. Also, whenever VN Baba needs any physical help from the lay community, they always come to help him. In return, he offers them tea and

meals whenever they visit the ashram. Villagers also seek advice and support from VN Baba with regard to healthcare and family issues, such as husband-wife quarrelling, child education and so on. Especially when there is an outbreak of flu and fever, parents take their children to the ashram to get holy water (*mantra jal*).³⁶ This holy water is viewed as an alternative medicine, which villagers believe can help their children recover from sickness faster than taking only Western medicine.

At other ashrams, especially those located inside the village (GS Baba's, GP Baba's and MD Baba's ashrams) or in the suburbs of the village (VN Baba), male villagers often gather at the ashram for political and religious discussion, and occasionally to organise a *sadhu seva*. In this way, the ashram, even though it is legally a private space, becomes a public area where lay people and sadhus come together and discuss various situations, offering their respective views. This regular interaction also marks the interrelationship between the two realms

3.3.2 Sadhus' journeys to sacred locations

Vaishnava sadhus regularly travel to other sadhus' ashrams either for a general visit or to attend a *sadhu seva*. They, in addition, make special journeys to sacred locations either on their own (with their partner) or together in a big group of Vaishnava sadhus. Most sadhus, especially young ones, travel to visit many sacred places across India. They take free transportation, get free accommodation in any ashram or *akhara* and also get free

³⁶ VN Baba will chant a mantra while producing holy water. He then pours the water on the children's hands. Children will sip the water and put it on their heads. They also take some holy water back home to drink while they are sick. Scientifically speaking, drinking more water is good for health and having faith in recovering from sickness will mentally help the patient.

food offered by the ashrams where they are staying, but they mostly cook their own food. On their journey, sadhus said, they get a chance to see different places and interact with other sadhus from different traditions. Some sadhus whom they met on the journey visited them later at their ashrams and they also returned their visits. Special journeys allowed sadhus to learn about other traditions and compare others to their own. It also helped sadhus relate to the wider context of Hindu asceticism. Coleman and Elsner states that going on pilgrimage was “sacred travel outside one’s home culture”,³⁷ in which they could compare between the ‘world religion’ and the ‘community religion’ to which they belonged. The journey may take just a week or sometimes up to three months. This duration referred to life outside their ashram. That is, their ashram would be left empty and sadhus had a chance to live their life following ascetic ideals, having complete detachment from the past, present and future. During this time, they would have no worries about their ashram, where they were staying or when their trip would end. They only appreciated every moment and everything that life brought to them.

Pilgrimage, as described by Ian Reader, “is a process and practice where people (pilgrims) make special journeys to or through sacred locations and engage in acts of worship, and elements that surround the process”.³⁸ However, this description makes me hesitate to call the special journeys of Vaishnavas ‘pilgrimage.’ If we regard pilgrimage as the ‘process and practice of engaging in acts of worship’, most Vaishnavas in the Birbhum community never went on pilgrimage, considering it to be sacred travel or a special journey. This is because their sense of a sacred or devotional place and

³⁷ Cited in Ian Reader and Paul L Swanson, "Editors' introduction: Pilgrimage in the Japanese religious tradition," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24, no. 3/4 (1997): 227.

³⁸ Reader and Swanson, "Editors' introduction: Pilgrimage in the Japanese religious tradition," 228-9.

worshipping is different from that of a conventional one. Indeed, Vaishnava tradition also has its own sacred sites where the stories of their gods, Krishna and Radha, and their symbolical gurus, Caitanya and Jayadeva, originated. They, however, do not attach much importance to these places, because, as mentioned earlier, the most sacred place that one needs to worship is located in one's body. In addition, it is a rule (*niyam*) taught by gurus that Vaishnava people should not worship any images, iconic statues or sacred locations besides their own gurus. Accordingly, most Vaishnavas would not go on pilgrimage to worship sacred places such as other sadhus. They told me that when they visited pilgrimage sites, they never worshiped any particular sacred object or place and did not chant any mantra besides *Hari nam*.

I did not have the chance to take a long spiritual journey with these sadhus, though I often travelled with them to visit other ashrams to participate in *sadhu sevas*, and sometimes *madhukari*. In the different towns we visited, there were temples for worship considered important by locals. Some were *shakti peetha* shrines,³⁹ others were related to Kali, and there were also big beautiful temples. The sadhus took me to many temples thinking that, as a foreigner, I would be interested to have a look inside the temple, and as a householder, I would ask for blessings from the gods. The sadhus themselves did not perform any form of worship in those temples. Some would walk with me inside, encourage me to pay respect and take an auspicious red dot from the priest, but they did not engage in these practices. Others just waited for me outside the temple. Interestingly,

³⁹ Shakti Peetha shrines are important pilgrimage sites for the Shakti tradition. Each shrine is believed to house part of Siva's consort, Goddess Sati. There are six Shakti peetha shrines located in Birbhum District. For more see David Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses: Visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

although they did not worship at those religious sites, they never stopped me from doing so. Instead, they forcefully encouraged me to have an experience at different temples.

I curiously asked the sadhus the purpose of their special journeys. If they were not allowed to worship at sacred places or perform practices in similar ways to other pilgrims, what would be their reason to take the journey? They confirmed to me that although they did not relate to the sanctity of those places, they associated themselves with Hindu asceticism. That is, wandering through sacred places brought them a sense of what 'sadhu was in Hindu asceticism'. They seemed to have a sense of belonging to the (abstract) Hindu ascetic community as whole, rather than to the (concrete) sacred place they visited.

The world of Vaishnava sadhus, as the Birbhum community has been called, has a communal structure resembling that of the household world. Their lineages are extended and maintained through male disciples, similar to a family lineage in which the son is responsible for continuing the family. The sadhus always maintain reciprocal relationship with lay community. Also, relationship among the members is defined by their Bengali kinship. That is, persons do not only relate to each other through the guru line, but also through friendship. Within the Vaishnava community structure, women are treated with respect, especially if they are senior sadhus, and a woman's position can be secured even without the presence of her male partner. A woman, on the one hand, cannot acquire the status of guru on her own merit, but she herself tends to ignore the male guru's role of teaching esoteric rituals, especially to male disciples. Yet there is no clear explanation of why women cannot and do not want to convey the Vaishnava philosophy to their disciples. Whether or not it is due to their gender, which is generally conservative on the

issue of sexuality, or to tradition that subordinates them, or both, women seem to be generally satisfied with the role they are allotted in the community.

Chapter 4 Esoteric rituals, celibacy and women's sexuality

This chapter closely focuses on the esoteric practice of the Vaishnava tradition and the role that women play in this practice. However, since most of the existing studies elaborately describe the Vaishnava esoteric ritual, some from the perspective of insiders, I try not to reproduce the same argument and details but rather focus on the practice of *brahmacharya* and the extent to which this practice brings a different understanding of the female body and sexuality.

In the anthropological literature too, *brahmacharya* is generally translated and understood as sexual abstinence.¹ However, as argued by Khandelwal, this meaning does not include the complex practices of *brahmacharya*, which means more than just abstaining from sex. In fact, its primary meaning does not directly imply celibacy, but instead points to “a lifestyle to obtain the *Brahman* stage”.² Similarly, Alter argues that *brahmacharya* evokes a wider range of meanings. It could mean total control over the flow of one's semen, or an inclusive way of life based on simplicity, and its goal is to “bring all faculties under control as so to embody truth”.³ That said, the purpose of *brahmacharya* is to have complete control over the senses.

Mahatma Gandhi, who vowed to have total sexual abstinence when he was 36 years of age, defined *brahmacharya* as “the model of life which leads to the realization of God. That realization is impossible without practicing self-restrain. Self-restrain means

¹ Joseph S Alter, "Seminal truth: a modern science of male celibacy in north India," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1997); Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."

² Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 157.

³ Alter, "Seminal truth: a modern science of male celibacy in north India," 282.

restraint of all [the] senses.”⁴ According to him, a person who is in complete control of all the senses is one who not only has no sexual intercourse but also no sexual desire. However, in some cases, seminal discharge for procreation also claims *brahmacharya*. It is stated in the Laws of Manu that sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreating a child counts as *brahmacharya*.⁵ Similarly, among wrestlers, sex within marriage conducted only for procreation is also *brahmacharya*.⁶ Khandelwal suggests that the category of *brahmacharya* may extend to and include sexual activities and seminal discharge as long as its purpose is centred on something ‘utilitarian and passionless’.⁷ That is, sex for procreativity, which is the duty of a man to maintain his family line, is a practice of *brahmacharya*.

The esoteric ritual (*yugal sadhana*) is the main Vaishnava religious practice, involving the collaboration of both male and female practitioners in sexual intercourse, in which the success of the practice – ‘reversing’ the mixture of semen and female sexual fluid and storing it in a sacred place in the body – claims liberation.⁸ *Brahmacharya* is the correct character of Vaishnava esoteric practice and is commonly understood among its practitioners as sexual intercourse without ejaculation and thus non-procreation. The Vaishnava meaning of *brahmacharya* is different or even opposed to the common understanding of *brahmacharya*, which means ‘celibacy.’ For Indians in general, a person who practises *brahmacharya* is someone who abstains from sexual activities. The

⁴ Cited in Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya," 274.

⁵ Manu, *The law code of Manu*.

⁶ Joseph S Alter, "The sannyasi and the Indian wrestler: the anatomy of a relationship," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992).

⁷ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 162.

⁸ See Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiyā Tradition of Bengal."; Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*; Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

practice of complete celibacy is seen as one of the key features of Hindu asceticism, in which any sexual activity is generally seen as being incompatible with Indian asceticism and regarded as polluting. A male practitioner not only abstains from all sexual activity, but also, by any means, endeavours not lose his semen in practice because losing semen means losing his life force and vitality.⁹

The meaning of *brahmacharya* as either celibacy, sex strictly for procreation, or sexual intercourse without ejaculation and so non-procreation, largely involves 'semen', reflecting a masculine model of discipline imposed on the physical body in order to attain psychic power, generative ascetic heat or a higher spiritual level. Women are excluded from this masculine model of *brahmacharya* on account of their incapability to control bodily fluids and emotions, and so they cannot be celibate.¹⁰ Khandelwal argues that it is celibacy rather than ascetic discipline that is denied to women.¹¹

Although, in the context of Vaishnava, *brahmacharya* is not about sexual abstinence but sex with semen retention, women are also marginalised in this model. Like other models of semen retention, intercourse with semen reversion is explained using the hydraulic system. Hayes states that Vaishnava esoteric practice is understood from the male perspective and gives priority and privilege to the male body.¹² Instruction in the esoteric ritual is provided using a hydraulic method of drawing male seminal fluid together with female essence to be stored in a sacred place in the male body, and the instruction that women get from their gurus is to assist their male partners how not to ejaculate. Accordingly, the intensified pleasure resulting from this 'inverse intercourse'

⁹ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 159.

¹⁰ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."

¹¹ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 163-4.

¹² Hayes, "Rivers to the Sky," 315-6.

is said to take place in the male body.¹³ In contrast, the female body is not understood in such a mechanical way and it is contradictory when it is applied to the female 'leaky body'. Some women reproduce this contradiction, whilst others try to construct a model more suitable for women. Women also try to replicate the male sexual model claiming that, similar to a male, a female has her own seed, which she has to preserve or take it upward, storing it in a sacred place. In addition, women also create their own practice in order to control their bodies and respond to male bodies during the esoteric ritual.

There being no particular practice suited to the female body allows Vaishnava women to appear to be marginalised by this masculine model of sexuality. Their role in sexual activity seems to be similar to other female tantric practitioners, who are described as a means to an end for men.¹⁴ McDaniel claims that women in the tantric tradition are instruments for male practitioners' religious goals.¹⁵ White also suggests that tantric female practitioners have less autonomy in tantric rites that take sex as a means to harness numinous power.¹⁶ Spivak makes the point that in tantric sexo-yogic practice, women do not exercise their own sexual agency but merely act as sexual objects for men.¹⁷

However, although the Vaishnava practice of *brahmacharya* centres on semen retention and the male body, it cannot be done without women. As stated by Hayes, a man's true self cannot be discovered without the female cosmic principle, hence women and their essence are indispensable for male practitioners.¹⁸ The necessity of women and

¹³ Hayes, "Rivers to the Sky," 316.

¹⁴ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female-male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism." Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya," 284.

¹⁵ June McDaniel, *The madness of the saints : ecstatic religion in Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 274.

¹⁶ Cited in Loriliai Biernacki, "The yoginī and the tantric sex rite, or how to keep a secret," in *Yogini in South Asia: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. István Keul (New York: Routledge, 2013), 217.

¹⁷ Spivak, "Moving Devi."

¹⁸ Hayes, "Rivers to the Sky," 315-6.

their sexuality for male *brahmacharya* provides a different yet positive perception of women's bodies and sexuality. Their bodies and fluids are not seen as polluting and dangerous but valuable and needed for men's mortality and liberation. Sexuality is another domain in which female Vaishnavas claim their agency and expand their boundaries. It provides room for women to exercise their agency, take an active part in performing rituals, and sometimes take control over the esoteric ritual. In refuting Spivak, in the Vaishnava esoteric ritual, women are not always passive agents in the process of the esoteric ritual and the act of sexual intercourse. The female renunciators I interviewed claimed that the female body plays a predominant role in the success of the esoteric ritual. Their emotions during intercourse implicitly and explicitly affect men's seminal retention, thus their state of *brahmacharya*.

In order to understand how *brahmacharya* is defined in the context of the Vaishnava esoteric ritual, and the extent to which new perceptions of the female body and sexuality are brought in through this practice, I first present the concept and practice of *brahmacharya* among practitioners and then analyse how this concept is compatible with other categories of *brahmacharya*. In the eyes of Vaishnavas, *brahmacharya* not only implies having sex without ejaculation, but also relates to complete control over one's body and emotions during intercourse as well as in day-to-day life. I argue that although Vaishnava *brahmacharya* involves sexual intercourse, its fundamental practice of semen retention and self-control conforms to the ordinary category of *brahmacharya*.

The second section deals with the Vaishnava ascetic body and how sadhus discipline their bodies to aid the practice of *brahmacharya*. In contrast to Brahmanical asceticism, which views the body as a source of attachment and suffering, Vaishnava perceives the body as the locus of divine bliss (*gupta-vrindavan*), whereby practitioners can experience

divine love. However, only a body that undergoes a particular ritual, practice and disciplines is qualified to be a place of the divine. Accordingly, body purity is seen as important for practitioners' status and hierarchy. I argue that 'purity' is the state that all Vaishnava sadhus aspire to because not only it makes their bodies suitable for divine bliss, but it also implies their authenticity and high status.

The last section seeks to understand the extent to which Vaishnava *brahmacharya* or sex without procreation benefits its female practitioners. Indeed, being fertile but not allowed to procreate is opposite to the general understanding of Indian femininity, which values women on account of their fertility and ability to nurture, noting that their fertility refers to the potential to procreate and thus maintain the male line, and feeding is the quality of a mother who feeds and nurtures her children.¹⁹ Accordingly, how Vaishnava female practitioners balance these two ideals of female sexuality will be further analysed. I argue that *brahmacharya* brings more positive perception of the female body and sexuality, and in sexual intercourse that promotes non-procreation, a woman is not a means to an end but a wife and, at the same time, a mother, statuses that are auspicious and prestigious for Indian women.

4.1 *Brahmacharya* as sex without seminal discharge and so non-progeny

During the third week of fieldwork, I finally acquired a male interpreter, a Bengali PhD student from Vishva-Bharti. We went to GP Baba's ashram together and he straight away got on with his interpreting work. GP Baba explained that they were pair renunciators (*yugal sadhu*) and they practised *brahmacharya*. My interpreter happily told me that the

¹⁹ Cited in Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."

sadhus – although living together – were celibate sadhus, given the fact that they practised *brahmacharya* together. He also kindly explained to me that this sadhu couple were like Mahatma Gandhi, who stayed in a room with a naked woman but did not have a sexual relationship with her. The interpretation provided to me by the student interpreter was different from what I had learned about Vaishnava practices, especially when we were discussing on its religious terms, or twilight language (*sandhya bhasa*), which is also used by Bengali people to mean something different or even the opposite.

As mentioned earlier, *brahmacharya* in Vaishnava language refers to ‘sexual intercourse without ejaculation’, and therefore no progeny as a result of esoteric practice. Similar to the concept of *brahmacharya* in other Hindu ascetic practices, Vaishnava *brahmacharya* largely involves the practice of semen retention and a somatic mode of self-control. Nonetheless, the most tangible difference between the two is that, whilst the former denies sexual intercourse, Vaishnava practitioners do have intercourse, and at the same time withhold their semen. But in practice, sexual intercourse is the most effective activity to make a practitioner lose his self-control (semen).²⁰ Accordingly, the retention of semen while having sexual intercourse seemed to require advanced training and a greater degree of self-restraint, in which control of one’s emotions is essential.

Khandelwal claims that *brahmacharya* means control over one’s emotions. She suggests a more expansive understanding of celibacy, focusing on “moral as well as ritual purity, a lifestyle of self-restraint, and emotional detachment”.²¹ Likewise, I propose that although Vaishnava *brahmacharya* is not sexual abstinence or sex for the purpose of procreation,

²⁰ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."; Joseph S Alter, "Celibacy, sexuality, and the transformation of gender into nationalism in North India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994).

²¹ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 173.

intercourse with seminal retention together with control over and detachment from sexual desire during intercourse, and a lifestyle of self-control, situate Vaishnava *brahmacharya* within a wide ranging category of Indian *brahmacharya*.

Vaishnavas attach importance to emotional detachment, especially during intercourse, in which a particular body regimen is a key practice enable the practitioners to detach from desire. If sadhus can control their emotions and detach themselves from the pleasure arising during intercourse, they are able to control their semen, and thus attain the state of love (*prem*). *Prem* results from seminal retention and control over one's emotions and it is evidence to support the Vaishnava esoteric ritual's claim for *brahmacharya*. Marglin states that sexual intercourse generating *prem* brings no attachment since there is no progeny. It does not disturb the self (*atma*), but instead unites a man with his female partner in the realm of an extramarital relationship (*parakiya*), as exemplified in the love story of Radha and Krishna.²² Openshaw adds that *prem* is not confined only to the erotic and one's own pleasure but includes caring for the other.²³ If a sadhu does not detach himself from his desire and thus ejaculates, his esoteric ritual is merely pleasure or self-seeking sex which promotes *kam*. *Kam* also refers to a kind of relationship between a husband and a wife, in which possessiveness and overlordship (*aisvarya*) are taken into account.²⁴ Thus, it [*kam*] "separates one from oneself, splitting off and creating children."²⁵ A sexual relationship promoting *kam*

²² Krishna married eight queens. He thus legitimately belongs to those women. Radha, one of the cowherds (*gopis*), is also married to another man. Krishna and Radha meet each other and have a love relationship in Vrindavan. Their relationship marks no ownership, no feelings of ego, no status, and no hierarchy. Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*.

²³ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 174-5.

²⁴ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*.

²⁵ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 175.

centres on one's own pleasure (*atmasuk*), will procreate a child as its consequence and bring more attachment to practitioners.

Sadhus themselves are of the opinion that the state of *brahmacharya* is unstable, especially during the initial period of the practice, when new and young sadhus are exploring their sexuality for the first time. As ND Baba stated, young and untrained sadhus can make mistakes easily. They are more likely to be attached to the sensual pleasure deriving from intercourse, and are easily provoked to ejaculate their semen. A young sadhu couple, SM Ma and VN Baba, informed me that in the first few years of their *sadhana*, they were inexperienced, lacked confidence and doubted their capacity to retain semen. Meanwhile, they performed the ritual following their guru's instruction and put more emphasis on meditation and breath control. After being a sadhu for five years, SM Ma said that "now everything is easy for me. I can pull the seed in one breath (she demonstrated how she pulled the seed). VN Baba is very good. We can practise correctly. I have no fear now." Once a sadhu couple are well established in their sexual practice, which, according to some lineages, normally takes 64 months, the male sadhu becomes stable in his retention and thus a 'good' sadhu.

According to other Vaishnava sadhus I spoke to, *brahmacharya* not only meant sexual intercourse without ejaculation, but also celibacy in its conventional meaning, which is to abstain from any sexual activity. They told me that every new sadhu has to abstain from sexual intercourse completely during the initial period of renunciation, and this complete abstinence happens only once (*ek bar*) in their sadhu life. The duration of celibacy varies, depending on the sexual experience of the couple. If they are a new couple who have not been married before, have no sexual experience and/or have never

experienced another person's body, the duration of sexual abstinence will be shorter than for someone who was married before.

In the case of a new young couple like SM Ma and VN Baba, their guru instructed them to refrain from sexual activity for 10 days, starting from the date of *malachandan*. In the case of other sadhus who were husband and wife before and took initiation together, the period of sexual abstention was longer, in this case about 30 days. They said that sexual abstinence helps the sadhus to perform the esoteric ritual successfully. It is also a way to help them control their sexual desires and bodies. During a period of sexual abstinence, sadhus have to practise yoga, *asanas* and meditation (*dhyan*) regularly, according to their guru's instruction.²⁶ It should be noted that even though Vaishnavas recognise *brahmacharya* as a practice of sexual abstinence, it is only practised for a short period to assist in the ultimate practice of *brahmacharya* – sexual intercourse that involves emotional detachment and semen retention, and thus non-procreation.

In the Vaishnava tradition, *brahmacharya* also centres on semen retention, but women are not excluded because of their necessity for the ritual. That is, a male practitioner cannot claim a state of *brahmacharya* without performing an esoteric ritual with his female partner. However, it appears that *brahmacharya* is the preferred state for male practitioners, whereas females are less concerned about their own state of *brahmacharya*. In addition, it seems to me that there is no *brahmacharya* specifically constructed for women, and since women are constructed as both the 'self' and 'the other' to males,²⁷ they rely for their state of *brahmacharya* on their male partners. They claim that their and

²⁶ *The meaning of asanas* varies depending on the context, sometimes it is used as yoga postures and sometimes sadhus use it to refer to esoteric practice.

²⁷ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 175.

their partners' *brahmacharya* are the same (*ekki*) ones, and if their male partners can restrain their semen during intercourse, their esoteric rituals can claim to be *brahmacharya* and thus they both will experience the intensified love of Radha and Krishna.

Khandelwal provides that for female ascetics, their *brahmacharya* does not relate to controlling their seed (semen or body fluids) but rather appetite, passion and detachment.²⁸ Similarly, I suggest that *brahmacharya* for Vaishnava female practitioners is associated with detachment from, especially, passion and control over one's body, either through food or cleanliness, as we shall see in a later section. For men, detachment from sexual emotions allows them to withdraw their semen and direct it upwards to experience *prem*. In contrast, for women, their detachment from sexual pleasure seems to generate a different result. Indeed, like men, *prem* is the highest state that women can experience from the esoteric ritual. However, as Openshaw suggests, the arena of *prem* is not limited to the erotic and the genitals but expands to emotions and caring for others.²⁹ Not seeking one's own pleasure from intercourse, controlling one's sexual excitement during the intercourse to prompt one's male partner to retain semen imply Vaishnava female practitioners' practice of *brahmacharya*. They transform their sensual emotions into devotional love and the control they show for the success of their male counterparts is understood in the concept of *seva*, 'selfless service to God'. Vaishnava female renouncers regard their participation in the esoteric ritual as selfless service or *seva*. Interestingly, it was only female renouncers who used the term *seva* when describing their participation in the sexual ritual, as I never come across male renouncers using it in

²⁸ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 169.

²⁹ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 174.

regard to this practice. Male renunciators usually used the term, '*yugal sadhana*', the sexual practice of a male and female together, or sometimes '*sadhana*' or '*asana*' to refer to their esoteric practice.

4.2 The Vaishnava ascetic body and a lifestyle of self-restraint

The body is said to be composed of impure substances (semen and uterine blood), and to result from disgusting activity (sexual intercourse).³⁰ Its fluids, such as saliva, uterine blood, urine and sexual discharges, are regarded as impure, and a person who is in contact with those impure substances is polluting and in need of purification. The body is not only viewed as impure, but also perceived as a source of attachment and an endless cycle of death and birth. Accordingly, refutation of the physical body is viewed as necessary for liberation to practitioners of various religious traditions. Many Hindu renunciant traditions take the view that renunciators, once they renounce or detach from the body, leave the world. As a result, most Hindu ascetics agree that the body has to be renounced from, but at least it should be controlled. Accordingly, practices regarding controlling and disciplining the body are designed by many Hindu renunciant traditions for their practitioners at all levels.

In contrast, the body in the Vaishnava and tantric traditions is seen as comprising “microcosmic entities reflecting the macrocosmic truth”,³¹ accordingly, once a person knows their body, they know the world. Hayes claims that Vaishnava acknowledges the soteriology of the body and views that body as not only a container for the soul but the

³⁰ Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*.

³¹ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 230.

soul itself.³² Likewise, Sarbadhikary claims that Vaishnava-[Sahajiya] takes the view that *Gupta-Vrindavan*, which is a “site at once of sensuous delight, divine sexuality, and spiritual bliss”,³³ is located in the human body. In other words, the body is the place of devotion for Vaishnavas. Practitioners can experience ‘heightened divine pleasure’ through the esoteric ritual. That is, via the retention of sexual discharge, a practitioner is known to experience a longer duration of intercourse, indicating that the body becomes the site of intensified love (*prem*).³⁴

In addition to viewing the body as a sacred place of the divine, if not the divine itself, bodily fluids are perceived as the embodiment of Vaishnava deity. In their belief, the five sacred bodily substances – faeces, urine, semen, menstrual blood and female sexual discharge – are all embodied with sacred seeds, which bring great benefits to anyone who ingests them.³⁵ In Vaishnava ideology, the female body is a complete body because it contains most of the sacred bodily fluids. In contrast, the male body is less perfect because it lacks menstrual blood and sexual fluids and accordingly he has to take the female seed to make himself complete.³⁶ Vaishnava renouncers seem to recognise the difference between male and female bodies and they admit that to have a pure body and be successful in the esoteric ritual, men have to work harder in order to control their body and make it perfect. Women are seen as having a naturally perfect body, but in practice,

³² Glen Hayes, "Shapes of the Soul: A Study of Body Symbolism in the Vaishnava Sahajiya Tradition of Medieval Bengal" (PhD University of Chicago, 1985).

³³ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 4.

³⁴ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

³⁵ June McDaniel, "The embodiment of God among the Bāuls of Bengal," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 2 (1992); Hanssen, "Ingesting menstrual blood: Notions of health and bodily fluids in Bengal."

³⁶ Hanssen, "Ingesting menstrual blood: Notions of health and bodily fluids in Bengal."

to escort their partner and ascertain sadhu status, they still need to undergo similar rituals and practices.

Consistent with existing scholarship, the Vaishnavas I studied also underlined the body as a pure and sacred site. GS Baba added that the sadhu's body is *santiniketan*, translated as an 'abode of peace'. By following practices instructed by the guru, said GS Baba, a practitioner transforms their body into a place containing peace. He claimed that neither worshipping an image or icon of the divine, nor travelling to distant mountains, would lead a person to experience it. To him, God exists within one's body and, to experience God, a person needs to worship one's own physical body.

Not only is the living body a sacred place, the dead body of a sadhu sometimes functions as a sacred location, too. With a living body, a sadhu is said to experience spiritual heightened bliss through the esoteric ritual. With a decayed or dead body, s/he can experience the divine through worship. When a sadhu dies, s/he is buried near the ashram or in the sadhu's sleeping quarters inside it. Vaishnavas regard the remains of the body of a sadhu (*samadhi*) as, in some sense, still alive, particularly if the *samadhi* is that of their guru or partner. In this context, *samadhi* is said to be a tomb containing the corpse of a sadhu in a cross-legged sitting posture.³⁷ In addition, they also regard a dead body as a kind of knowledge (*gyan*). Sadhus explained to me that the body is the place where they store their sacred seed and where they experience divine love, and since it experiences the divine or, in other words, is a knower of knowledge, it becomes divine itself. Accordingly, to Vaishnavas the body functions as a place for storing knowledge

³⁷ Samadhi also means a state of meditative realisation. In the Vaishnava context, it refers to the dead body of a sadhu.

and knowledge itself. It should be noted that only the body of a sadhu who has taken the renunciant robe (*bhekdari*) is counted as a source of ‘knowledge’ (*gyan*) by them.

Valuing the body as a place of devotion, in either living or decayed form, acknowledges how the body is viewed as significant in the Vaishnava tradition. In addition, activities in regard to the body are addressed in conjunction with the term ‘*seva*’, which means ‘selfless service to God’. For example, massaging the body with oil is called “*tel seva*”; eating and performing an esoteric ritual is called “*seva*”; conducting a feast by feeding sadhus and villagers is also called “*sadhu seva*”. The use of the term *seva* in relation to the body implies how Vaishnavas value the body by serving it. It entails the divine nature of the body, in which maintaining and nurturing the body is treated almost akin to worship and giving service to God. As often quoted in Bengali Vaishnava verse: “Of all the sports of Krishna. That as a human being (*nara*) is supreme. The human body is the essence of Krishna.”³⁸

4.2.1 Characteristics of the Vaishnava ascetic body

It is a belief among Vaishnava sadhus I studied that a householder’s body and an ascetic body are significantly different in terms of their purity and inner strength. The householder’s body is thought of as weak/soft (*naram*) and impure (*asudha*), while the Vaishnava ascetic body is strong (*sakta*) and pure (*suddha*). One of the major reasons why a householder is regarded as impure and weak centres on how his or her body and sexuality are viewed. Sadhus view a layperson’s body as untrained and undisciplined, thus not in control, and often in contact with impurities that raise the ‘heat’ in the body.

³⁸ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 158.

Seminal emission among householders is regarded as losing their life essence, reducing their lifespan and having a ‘tendency to die.’³⁹ In comparison, a sadhu’s body gained its purity when s/he took initiation. However, the state of purity is said to be unstable, thus sadhus needed to maintain the purity of the body through various ascetic practices.

In the Vaishnava initiation ritual, a guru whispers a mantra into the left ear of a disciple, signifying the birth of a new sadhu, and the state of purity he obtains. As stated in *Virvarta Vilāsa*, the Vaishnava text written by Akincana-Dasa, the initiation ritual implies a sadhu’s new ascetic body.

“The praises for Krishna are the uterine blood, while the seed syllable is the semen. The guru’s tongue (guru-jihva) is the penis, while the ear of the disciple is the vagina. So your birth should result from these things. You should really try to understand how you can be born through the grace of practitioners.”⁴⁰

After taking initiation, the sadhu’s body becomes pure and is regarded as a sacred site for the divine, and this site can be transformed into a divinised and perfect body, or in other words the divine itself, through esoteric practice. In sexual practice, as narrated by Urban, “the female partner serves as the cooking vessel, and the motion of sexual intercourse is the stirring movement which mixes and ripens the semen and menstrual blood. But once the fluids are ripened, the male engages in the difficult and dangerous technique of *pravrtti*, ‘turing around’ or ‘reversing the flow’ ... in which he attempts to withdraw his semen, along with the female menstrual blood, out of his partner, and back

³⁹ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 175.

⁴⁰ Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal," 53.

through his penis into his body. He can then alchemically destroy, transmute and re-create these fluids, giving birth to a new spiritual foetus ... within his body.”⁴¹ Once the fluids arrive at the ‘place of the hidden moon’, located at the centre of the top of the head, the entire body of the practitioner experiences ecstasy, and it is transformed into a perfected body (*siddha deha*). Female essence is important for a male practitioner’s perfect body, her essence allows a male practitioner to obtain a state of purity and a divinised body.

The purity of a Vaishnava body has not only a religious function, but also a social function. From fieldwork observation, the concept of purity was used by Vaishnava renouncers as a means to gain authenticity and authority. This is perhaps similar to the idea of Dumont, which states that the rank of an Indian person is related to his degree of purity.⁴² That is, the high castes are placed higher due to their innate purity, and the low castes lower due to their lack of purity. By the same token, Vaishnava renouncers who maintain a higher degree of purity by not ejaculating are placed higher in the hierarchy. The emission of semen is regarded as death (*mara*), thus polluting in the Vaishnava tradition. However, the real problem arises in relation to this emission, since it means the loss of vital essence of the ‘self’. Fathering a child is thus a clear sign of not controlling one’s seminal flow and it becomes tangible evidence to exclude ‘unauthentic polluting

⁴¹ Urban, "Secret Bodies Re-imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal," 53.

⁴² Dumont argues that purity is the organising principle of the Hindu caste system. That is, the caste hierarchy has been constructed according to the gradation of the levels of purity. Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Criticism to Dumont’s notion see TN Madan, "On the Nature of Caste in India: A Review Symposium of Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus in Contributions to Indian Sociology," *NS* 5 (1971); Veena Das and Jit Singh Uberoi, "The elementary structure of caste," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 5, no. 1 (1971); Diane P. Mines, *Everyday Life in South Asia, Second Edition*, ed. Sarah E. Lamb, 2nd ed. ed. (Indiana University Press, 2010).

sadhus' from pure and authentic ones. Vaishnava practitioners thus use the notion of 'purity' to include/exclude a renouncer in/from their group. "A renouncer can be expelled from their group, and become dishonoured or downgraded to a household-renouncer (*sansari sadhu*) if s/he cannot maintain her/his purity", said GS Baba.

I participated in many *sadhu sevas* over the last three winters and encountered many sadhus from different lineages. My role in the feasts was that of a helper in sadhu kitchens as well as a server. I served food to householders at lunch time and served evening tea and snacks to everyone. Sadhus from other lineages and communities (Malda and Murshidabad) accepted tea and snacks from me and other householders. However, sadhus from the Birbhum community did not take any food from me or from any other laypersons. They explained that taking food from householders might cause them to lose their state of purity. Indeed, by not taking any food and water from householders at public event like *sadhu sevas* implicitly accredited them with a higher status and position in the hierarchy in comparison with sadhus from other communities who take food from householders. But it seems to me that having a low-caste origin was also perhaps the reason why they felt obliged to demonstrate their purity of habitual behaviour (food, touch, bathing etc.).⁴³ In the study of Openshaw, a Vaishnava sadhu, Mani Gosai, had Brahmin origin, but he was indiscriminate about food and the givers of food. He also took Muslim disciples and ate with them. He stated to his lay family that "the (his) stomach is a fire. It will consume whatever you give. The question is not whether I can eat your food, but whether you can feed me!"⁴⁴ Known as a sadhu who had practised and attained a pure state (no ejaculation), he was able and qualified to take any food from any

⁴³ I had no opportunity to find out the caste origin of the sadhus from other communities.

⁴⁴ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 209.

persons without becoming contaminated. Contrarily, he viewed givers as not being qualified to give to him due to their impurity.

In a case of *sansari-sadhu*, a few Vaishnava Baul sadhus of Brahmin origin I came across in Santiniketan were also indiscriminate about food consumption and the purity of the giver. It seems to me that while sadhus from low-caste origins emphasised their purity, the sadhus of Brahmin origin were able to ignore purity rules. This situation not only observed in the Vaishnava renunciant community, similar behaviours were also witnessed in Hindu lay communities. Many Brahmin householders told me that they were Brahmin and could break the rules without any great concerns. In comparison, if low-caste persons broke the purity rules, they would be in danger of being either criticised or banished from the community.

The Vaishnava ascetic body is not only pure but also has inner strength (*sakta*), and sadhus believe that a non-initiated person lacks this strength. During fieldwork, I spent a certain amount of time trying to convince ML Ma, a senior female sadhu whom I regularly spent time with, to allow me to accompany her when collecting alms in town. But she always rejected my requests, saying that, “*Madhukari* is a hard job,” and she thought I would not be able to handle it. ML Ma, in her understanding, was afraid that my body could not endure the heat and hardship that came with walking long distances and encountering with many strangers. Failing to convince ML Ma, I sought to go for alms with SW Ma who, like ML Ma, warned me that begging was hard and I would not be able to endure it. I told her that I would just go and see her beg for a short time and, once I observed how she did it, I would leave her and go home. The next day I went begging with SW Ma and after soliciting alms from a couple of shops, she told me to return home. I insisted on staying, telling her that I enjoyed roaming around with her.

We were collecting alms for almost 4 hours, from 9.30 a.m. until 1.30 p.m. in the afternoon, until I met ML Ma at one of the food shops. She demanded that I return immediately. SW Ma was well aware of ML Ma's disapproval, so she helped ML Ma organise transportation for me. ML Ma complained that, unlike her sadhu body, my body was soft and weak (*naram*) and I might become ill from roaming for alms. I insisted that I was strong enough to collect alms with them because I exercised regularly. But she claimed that strong (*sakta*) in sadhu practice was different from that of a householder. To her, a female practitioner, to be strong (*sakta*) was not about being physically strong from doing exercise. Instead, strength came from having absolute control of the body and mind. It involved the way a person lived her life; in the way one ate, slept, performed rituals, dressed and contacted people. Indeed, in their view the practice of *brahmacharya* underlines the sadhus' *sakta* body.

A Vaishnava I spoke to was of the opinion that semen retention while performing the sexual ritual also increased one's sacred energy. He argued that storing semen in one's sacred place provided one with generative psychic power. It is claimed that sadhus who practise the esoteric ritual correctly gain health benefits from it, and live longer. Some sadhus I worked with, particularly male sadhus, continued to be very healthy in their '80s and 90s. They not only had fewer ailments or no illnesses at all, but were able to maintain their daily routine like younger sadhus. One of the oldest sadhubaba told me that he lived longer and was healthier because of the way he ate and slept, along with the way he performed the esoteric ritual. The following section describes how Vaishnavas train and discipline their bodies in order to make their bodies pure (*suddha*) and strong (*sakta*), assisting their practice of *brahmacharya*.

4.2.2 Disciplining the ascetic body

To maintain inner strength and a pure ascetic body, sadhus must not only perform the esoteric ritual correctly, they also need to correlate other perspectives of life with this ideal. The lives of Birbhum sadhus I participated entailed that their day-to-day activities were encompassed by the ideal of body purity. There are rules and regulations in relation to the purity of the external and internal boundaries of the body, which all sadhus need to observe strictly.

Regulations on food

Food intake explicitly affects the purity and quality of a renouncer's bodily fluids, especially for a male practitioner. Parry suggests that a person is likely to contain certain qualities of the food that one eats. That is, eating hot food is seen to produce heat in the body and to provoke passion and lust. On the other hand, eating cold food reduces the temperature in the body, making it cool and calm.⁴⁵ Not only does the quality inherent to each raw ingredient affect the body, but when ingredients are cooked, the quality of the cook is also transmitted to the person who eats the food. It is believed that cooked food is strongly affected by the quality of the cook.⁴⁶ If the cook is impure, that impurity can also contaminate the person who eats their food. Moreover, eating itself is a risky process that can make a person impure, since it involves saliva, which Bengalis claim is an impure substance.⁴⁷ The food process is indeed a source that can threaten anyone's status by eating. As a result, an Indian person in a higher state of purity will avoid eating food cooked by someone from the lower castes.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Parry, "The gift, the Indian gift and the 'Indian gift'," *Man* 21, no. 3 (1986): 613.

⁴⁶ Parry, "The gift, the Indian gift and the 'Indian gift'."

⁴⁷ Sarah Lamb, *White saris and sweet mangoes: Aging, gender, and body in North India* (London: University of California Press, 2000).

There is a relationship between the food a person consumes and the quality of their bodily fluids. It is a belief among wrestlers, as well as many Indians, that semen and uterine blood are produced from food we consume. It is described that semen is “a highly condensed distillate of pure and wholesome food”,⁴⁸ in which one ejaculation is equivalent to the loss of energy accumulated from food taken for 30 days. Accordingly, to restore energy, sexual abstinence and semen retention are strictly practised by Indian wrestlers.⁴⁹

Vaishnavas also believe that food explicitly affects practitioners’ bodies and emotions, and directly affects the quality and emission of seminal fluids. There are restrictions in terms of food and medication, which Vaishnava practitioners take seriously. Taking non-prescribed food and medicine, they believe, contributes to an impure body and loss of capability in controlling one’s semen. As a general rule, a Vaishnava does not eat hot food as it can cause imbalance in their inner body, and in particular, it produces heat in the body, which provokes ejaculation.⁵⁰ Ingredients such as onions, garlic, eggs and meat are regarded as hot and therefore not eaten by Vaishnava practitioners. The common ingredients found in Vaishnava food include rice, potatoes, tomatoes, ginger and chillies, which are mostly offered by laypeople. Sometimes sadhus may have seasonal vegetables bought from market with their meal.

Vaishnava sadhus also eat fish but claim to be pure vegetarians because they eat only vegetarian food (*niramis*). Indeed, with the exception of fish, Vaishnava food is *sattvic*, which promotes *satva* qualities (peacefulness, balance, truth, positivity) in the eater.

⁴⁸ Alter, "Celibacy, sexuality, and the transformation of gender into nationalism in North India," 51.

⁴⁹ Joseph S. Alter, *The wrestler's body : identity and ideology in north India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁵⁰ Hot food in this context is neither high in temperature nor spicy, it is food that contains ingredients that produce heat in the body.

However, since they also eat fish, others argue that the Vaishnavas cannot be classified as vegetarians in the true sense of the word. It should be noted that fish is a *tamasic* ingredient which promotes *tamas* quality (destruction), and it also helps to strengthen the lower two chakra, which involve survival and sexuality.⁵¹ Sadhus, nonetheless, argue that it is utterly wrong to think that ‘fish’ is non-vegetarian food (*amis*), they say that fish are *niramis* food because they are cold and have water residency. Besides, ‘fish’ is a metaphor for the Vaishnava notion of semen, since they see fish that swim against the current as do sadhus’ semen, which goes upward and against the flow of seminal fluid. Some sadhus, or perhaps Bengalis in general, suggest that a fish is a kind of water plant.

Not only do some food ingredients make sadhus lose control over their bodies, but food cooked by non-initiated practitioners can also make them lose control. Only *bhekdhari* sadhus are allowed to cook for other sadhus. They say that sadhus should not accept any food cooked by householders regardless of their caste affiliation due to their impurity, which is comparable to the impurity caused by death. Accordingly, they do not take food from restaurants and the only food they are allowed to accept from the world outside their community is sweets (*misty*) cooked from bovine products. This is because the cow is a holy animal and any of its substances are regarded as pure and can be used for purification.

Body training routine

For each sadhu, the routine for training the body is different and it is set by their guru. A new sadhu couple normally focus on controlling their breath through meditation (*dhyan*)

⁵¹ For *satvic* diet see "Sattvic diet," 2019, accessed 20 November, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sattvic_diet.

and yoga, while experienced ones emphasise the practice of the esoteric ritual. Most Vaishnava sadhus emphasised the significant role of breath control and meditation. As proposed in Chapter 2, without meditation and breath control, the esoteric ritual will be done merely for sensual pleasure. Some lineages give priority to breath control and meditation rather than esoteric practice. Serious meditation and breath control are done during the initial period. New sadhus wake up at 3 a.m. to meditate for hours, and then take a cold bath and have breakfast. A cold bath needs to be taken in early morning to release bodily heat and sex drive. Some female renouncers opt out of taking a cold bath in early morning, asserting that their bodies cannot endure the cold the same way a male body can. In addition, the female body is said to be cool to start with and does not produce as much heat or sexual drive as a male body does, thus she does not need to take a cold bath regularly like a male practitioner.

Female renouncers usually take a bath after they finish cooking on the ground that they need to make their bodies pure, clean and suitable for having food (*seva*). Uncleanliness of their body is likely to come from cooking food and the dirt, smoke and sweat that accompany chores. So it seems to be less related to the cleaning of sexual pollution or cooling a 'heated' body. For a woman, it is much more about maintaining the actual cleanliness of the body since dirt, sweat, menstrual blood and female sexual discharges can all lead to an unhygienic body and cause illness. Women's bathing routine, after cooking, seems to be accepted by their gurus and male members, implying that the female body is not perceived as 'heating up' or containing sexual desire like a male's.

Before bathing, a sadhu will always massage their body using oil. They told me that it was to warm up their body before taking a cold shower. After taking a bath, they will

massage their body again with oil, groom their hair neatly and nicely, then apply *tilak*, (sandal wood paste) on their face. It seems to me that male renunciators spent most of their time grooming themselves, their hair, beard and moustache, and also their bodies. In contrast, female sadhus did not have much time to do that, and mostly did it quickly after they finished their household chores.

Vaishnava sadhus shave their hair, beard and mustache only once after they take initiation. They have to keep their hair uncut, clean and oil it regularly. Vaishnava sadhus who have matted hair (*jota*) are regarded as 'non-Vaishnava sadhus'. To them, matted hair refers to filth and carelessness. SM Ma asserted that, "If you clean and oil your hair regularly, it will never become matted. And if you are a Vaishnava, you will never ignore this practice." In this way they distinguished themselves from other kinds of sadhu, particularly Saivites who have matted hair.

Alter posits that the cleanliness of the clothes they wear affects the bodies of wrestlers. If a wrestler wears dirty smelly clothes, he will be at risk of ejaculating semen.⁵² Similarly, Vaishnava sadhus asserted that the cleanliness of their attire and accommodation was an important practice that they strictly followed. However, they did not relate dirt on their clothes to ejaculation as in Alter's study, they only mentioned that cleanliness generally brought them a peaceful mind (*santi man*). Sadhus are instructed to wash their robes after wearing them every day. Worn attire cannot be worn again without washing it. Most sadhus, regardless of their gender, wash their own robes. Sometimes male sadhus even wash for females. Sometimes females wash for males. Normally, married Indian men are less likely to wash their own clothes, so washing their own robes,

⁵² Alter, "Celibacy, sexuality, and the transformation of gender into nationalism in North India."

and sometimes for their female partners, marks a change in gender relations. Although male renouncers do not take over all the household chores, taking part in some areas, such as washing for themselves, cooking and cleaning the ashram, implies their consideration for female renouncers.

The cleanliness and purity of a place, both the inner and outer place, are also very important for Vaishnava renouncers. All the Vaishnava ashrams I visited were well maintained, clean and tidy. There are practices indicating their concern for purity and cleanness among Vaishnava sadhus. For example, the ashram area was swept at least twice a day, and the floor was regularly coated using mud mixed with cow dung. In addition, before eating, one needs to clean the dining area by first sweeping the dust away, and then sprinkling water on the floor. It should be noted here that sweeping implies cleanliness, whilst sprinkling water implies purification. The substances used for purifying impurity, like most Hindus, are water and cow products.

4.3 Women, sexuality and *brahmacharya*

4.3.1 General view on female sexuality in the Indian context

A woman is considered pure before her menarche and after her menopause, the time when they are viewed as sexually inactive. In contrast, women during their reproductive period, between 10 and 50 years old, are seen as polluting and a danger to men's celibate practice, and so barred from many activities in the context of religious rituals. The case of Sabarimala temple in Southern India illustrates how women as non-celibate agents can

interfere with men's celibate practices.⁵³ The study of Lamb focused on ageing and gender in Bengali culture, suggested that, according to her Bengali informants, women were regarded as impure due to their innate biological nature. That is, a woman's body is 'open' and thus can be exposed to mixing her fluids and those of others more easily.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the female body is perceived as a 'leaky bucket', suggesting that it cannot control its bodily fluids, either incoming or outgoing flows.⁵⁵ This means that female bodily fluids, such as menstrual blood and breast milk, just pour out and cannot be restrained. If women cannot control their bodies and fluids, then they also are unable to control their sexual passion, and for this reason they need to be placed under the control of their male kin.⁵⁶

The view that women lack control over themselves – emotionally, sexually and physically, and are sexually dangerous – is often seen in the Brahmanical Hindu texts. Temptress women as described in the texts are in contrast to women in the real context who are often the victims of men's uncontrolled desires.⁵⁷ Indeed, bodily fluids, such as breast milk and menstrual blood, are emitted from their bodies, beyond their control; however, this not seen to be as the same as losing one's life essence, like losing semen.⁵⁸ This is the case because they replenish themselves, like the moon waxing and waning. In contrast to the texts, it is regarded by female renouncers in both the Saiva and Vaishnava

⁵³ Sabarimala temple in Kerala is one of many temples in India which believe that women of menstruating age, from 10 to 50 years old, are polluting and not allowed to enter to Sabarimala temple, where the temple god is celibate. For more see Imran Qureshi, *Sabarimala temple: Indian women form '620km human chain' for equality*, BBC (India, 2019).

⁵⁴ Lamb, *White saris and sweet mangoes: Aging, gender, and body in North India*, 183.

⁵⁵ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."

⁵⁶ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."

⁵⁷ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."; Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*.

⁵⁸ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

traditions that the female body is complete in nature without having to undergo any rituals. In other words, while men seek help from others to make themselves perfect, women reveal their perfection from the inside.⁵⁹

Menstruation is a physical sign of the potential to reproduce for a young woman. It signifies a transition period from a young girl to a mature woman, implying significant changes both physically and socially. Meanwhile menstruation blood, even today, is seen as a pollutant and dangerous, and also the source of female subordination.⁶⁰ It is regarded that a woman's reproductive period is dangerous, not only in term of its pollution, but also sex and pregnancy before marriage, which potentially bring shame and stigma to the family. Accordingly, women, during their reproductive period, particularly unmarried ones, need to be put under strict control by their family. Many young women in rural villages are married off soon after they reach their puberty period, to avoid any shameful incidents that might happen to them and thus the family.

It has been described that women during their menstrual period should abstain from many activities, such as worshipping, cooking and having contact with other people. It is explained that this is because the female body is in a most vulnerable and impure state during that period. Their bodies are seen as polluting and that pollution can be transmitted to others through things that they are in contact with, by touching, eating and so on. Accordingly, *purdah*, isolating women during the menstrual period, is still a common practice in many families in South Asia.

⁵⁹ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."; Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*; Wendy Doniger, *Sexual metaphors and animal symbols in Indian Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981).

⁶⁰ Katherine K Young, "Women in Hinduism," in *Woman in Indian Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

However, this rule is less likely to be applied to women in rural villages or to those from the lower castes in the area where I did fieldwork. Indeed, menstruation is also perceived as pollution and a danger to them, but due to their socio-economic disadvantages, poor families cannot afford to have any female members not contributing to the household economy. Accordingly, women in villages have to work even during their menstrual period. They also have to cook and take full responsibility for the household chores. Some of them work as day labourers on farms. The only thing that they are prohibited from doing is visiting temples (*mandir*) and worshipping the deity (*puja*).

The overrepresentation of women's menstrual pollution, argues Marglin, ignores its fortune perspective. Marglin claims that menstruation, although pollution, does in one respect also show a woman as an auspicious person because her reproductive function is necessary for maintaining the male family line. Reproduction is a key element of women's social status. It provides a woman with wifhood and motherhood status, which are considered to be women's great virtues.⁶¹ Indeed, a woman cannot be auspicious (*sumangali*) woman of many sons without her uncontrollable fluids and polluting menstruation.

In the context of rural Bengal I studied, sexuality is a topic that is not spoken about and women are generally reserved on this matter and do not discuss their sexuality with others. A similar code of conduct is also applied to married women and they are reserved on sexual matters, even with their own husbands. Showing their lustful desires and seducing their husbands sexually would be seen as conduct for not good women. Women

⁶¹ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*.

see their sexuality as part of their conjugal 'duty'. Ideally, their sex should serve solely reproductive function and to maintain her husband's family line, procreating children, particularly a son.

Indeed, from my interaction with women who live in rural areas I studied, those women have limited (re)sources to learn about their sexuality. Some women told me that they did not know about their sexuality even if they were already mothers of two children.⁶² One of the reasons for this is because village women mostly have arranged marriages and get married when they are very young, about 14–17 years of age. In some cases, they are still children of just 12–13 years old.⁶³ These young teenagers do not have a chance to learn about the changes in their bodies. They are only aware that the first blood that comes out between their legs is a sign of getting married and moving to another, yet a stranger's family. They can only dream that their wedding night will be romantic in the same way as it represented by Bollywood, in which many films convincingly paint a romantic, but unrealistic, picture of an arranged marriage. Many of those women are left disappointed if not traumatised in reality, knowing that the gap between reality and imagined romance is too great.⁶⁴ Many of them are abused by their stranger husbands, who, instead of providing and protecting, leave them after marrying them with emotional and sometimes physical scars for life.

⁶² The study of Narayana provides that Indian women learn to deal with the changes in their bodies not from their mothers but from female relatives. Narayanan, "Hindu perceptions of auspiciousness and sexuality," 86.

⁶³ It is common to see young women carrying small children with them. Many of them have two children before the age of 20 and become grandmothers in their mid-thirties.

⁶⁴ Manisha Roy, *Bengali women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

4.3.2 Perception of female sexuality in the Vaishnava tradition

The generalised view on India women mentioned in the previous section seems to not capture the reality of all Indian women, at least in the tradition I studied. Vaishnavas do not take the view that menstrual blood is a polluting substance and a menstruating woman is polluted. Instead, Vaishnava practitioners see menstruation as pure and a menstruating woman is defined as pure and auspicious. She is pure because she occupies the sacred seed, and she is auspicious because she is ritually required by the male practitioner, and thus under his protection. A female's sexual fluid and her menstrual blood are considered food for men's vitality.⁶⁵ Menstrual blood is believed to contain 'fish',⁶⁶ which refers to the sacred seed of vitality. Without a woman and her sexual substance, a male sadhu will not be able to perform the esoteric ritual efficiently, and thus he loses his chance to attain a higher state.⁶⁷

Menstruation, according to Vaishnava, represents women as true givers. The seed that drops from their body through menstruation cannot be permanently lost as the body can replenish its supply.⁶⁸ Vaishnava women themselves state that they are pure and auspicious when they are menstruating because they can perform *seva* and attain a higher state together with their male partners. In addition, menstrual blood has a purifying quality, it purifies the female body regularly through monthly periods and it nurtures and

⁶⁵ Hanssen, "Ingesting menstrual blood: Notions of health and bodily fluids in Bengal."

⁶⁶ According to Vaishnava, fish represent the deity. In some contexts, fish also represent the fertility of women. For more, see Dimock, *The place of the hidden moon: erotic mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiyā cult of Bengal*; McDaniel, "The embodiment of God among the Bāuls of Bengal."; Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*.

⁶⁷ A religious higher state, as described by my informants, is a psychological emotion when a practitioner becomes one with the divine Krishna in his land through withdrawing a mixture of semen and menstrual blood and storing it in the sacred place located in the practitioner's body.

⁶⁸ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

purifies the male body when he ingests it during the esoteric ritual or through drinking it. The positive attitude of these women towards menstruation is also present in their narratives used to describe menstruation.

Outside their community, ordinary Bengali women view menstruation as a kind of 'illness'. They use the term *sorir kharab* (sick or bad body) to refer to the state of impurity of menstruation. Educated women regard their periods scientifically as *mashik*, meaning 'monthly bleeding'. In contrast, female sadhus acknowledge that menstruation is neither a sickness, nor a bleeding period. They use the term '*rup asha*' for menstruation, which implies that God manifests himself in their bodies. That is, Vaishnavas regard a woman during her menstrual period as being at her purest and most auspicious, since she becomes the revelation of a higher being.

Vaishnava female renunciators appear confident and grateful when they talk about their sacred bleeding. They regard menstruation as one of their sacred qualities and prefer to have a reproductive body until reaching very old age. KN Ma stated that having children was not acceptable and she would not consider having them because they would obstruct her from conducting *seva* – performing the esoteric ritual in her meaning. This is so because while pregnant, she would not menstruate and thus lose opportunities to perform the ritual. Female renunciators who can prolong their reproductive period are said to be the successful renunciators. They also claim that one of the benefits of practicing the esoteric ritual is to keep their bodies healthy and reproductive for longer. Male sadhus agree that a female who has a long reproductive period and reaches menopause at a very old age is very auspicious.

Menstruation may be viewed as containing the sacred seed needed for the esoteric ritual; however, in the social context outside the ritual, it is still seen as spilling impure

blood. Having contact with blood through sexual intercourse or ingesting it orally are sacred practices that cannot be revealed to the outside public. This is because renunciators are aware that the notion of purity and sacredness associated with menstrual blood cannot be accepted by the general public. If outsiders became aware of their practice of ingesting it, they would be banned from the community.⁶⁹

Most of the female renunciators I studied did not go out for alms during their menstrual period. The reason is not related to the notion of impurity, but it involves the more practical side of travelling, as sanitary pads and underwear are limited in rural areas. These women told me that going out for alms while having a period was inconvenient. They worried that blood might spill out and be seen by people in public. There was no particular injunction prohibiting female sadhus from engaging in any actions during their periods, and a sadhu couple would be instructed to perform an esoteric ritual during them. Some gurus instructed their disciples to perform an esoteric ritual on the third day of a woman's menstrual period. Others said any day but not the fourth day. Of course, sadhus also performed esoteric ritual on other days. Nonetheless, since the 'sacred seed' or 'fish' reside in menstrual blood, having sex during this period allows male practitioners to 'catch the fish' swimming in women's sacred flow.⁷⁰ In some cases, when a female partner reached her menopause, a male practitioner will take menstrual fluids from other Vaishnava women.

⁶⁹ The practice of ingesting menstrual blood is only revealed to very close members. See Hanssen, "Ingesting menstrual blood: Notions of health and bodily fluids in Bengal."

⁷⁰ For varieties ways to ingest female fluids see Sakti Nath Jha, "Cari-candra bheda: Use of the four moons," in *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal* (1995).

4.3.3 Vaishnava female renouncers and sex without procreation

Vaishnava female renouncers generally seem to be satisfied with how they are treated by their male partners in ritual contexts, but I wonder if their expression of satisfaction is a compensation to what they sacrifice in the sexual intercourse that bears no procreation or *brahmacharya* – being reproductive but not allowed to produce any children. As I have mentioned earlier, losing semen, even for the act of procreation, implies losing important life essence. In sexual intercourse by a husband and wife that is meant for procreation, the woman ‘takes’ the man’s substance, shortening his lifespan, so, logically speaking, the wife is seen as a danger to her husband’s life even if she is faithful.⁷¹ In contrast, a mother demonstrates herself to be a true giver by nurturing or by ‘giving’ her own bodily fluids in the form of breast milk to her child. As I have noted earlier, motherhood is seen as the greatest and most valuable status for many Indian women, and an Indian wife acquires her status and more influence once she has her first child in the family circles of in-laws.⁷²

Vaishnava female renouncers, although are regarded as mothers by their male partners and peers, are prohibited to have biological children. Knight posits that a Baul female practitioner is not respected by the community and one of reasons is that she is a wife (having intercourse) but not a mother.⁷³ Vaishnava practitioners claims that unlike the sexual intercourse of husband and wife, the esoteric ritual underlines women as a true giver like a mother. They claimed that during the sexual ritual they are wives who have sexual intercourse with their male partners and mothers who give their own body fluids to

⁷¹ Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya," 283.

⁷² Kakar, "Feminine identity in India." Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya."

⁷³ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

their children, meaning their menstrual blood is ingested during intercourse by their male partners. Their fluid is equivalent to breast milk because it contains seed that can nurture the male body.

In comparison to the general view on female sexuality I described in the previous section, it is remarkable that Vaishnava women value sex with their partners, or even with their gurus in some lineages, positively. Young women, taking initiation into the Vaishnava community, are helped by more experienced women to understand their bodies and how their bodies and sexuality work, and also contraceptive techniques. Female renunciators regularly consult each other and senior female members to discuss their sexuality, especially during feasts (*sadhu seva*). They gather together to chat whenever the occasion suits them. While young sadhumas jokingly discuss their partners' sexual capability, senior members listen and sometimes stop them from becoming too nasty or gossipy about other renunciators.

Although, gossiping and bad-mouthing other sadhus are common conversation topics, these informal group discussions appear to help many young sadhus to build up their confidence and be guided on issues they normally could not discuss if they were householders. A *siksha* guru teaches his/her disciples not only how to perform the esoteric ritual but every aspect in regard to their bodies and procreativity (to not procreate). Such an experience helps female practitioners to deal with the changes in their bodies better and seems to empower and provide them with confidence.

In the ritual context, the female body is prepared for the ritual, the male partner is taught by the guru how to approach his female partner, so that the participating woman

will be satisfied during sexual intercourse.⁷⁴ In addition, the longer the couple perform, the more likely that the woman will experience orgasm. Vaishnava women are generally of the opinion that they have better and longer relationships with their male partners because of the experience they undergo together in esoteric rituals.⁷⁵ In fact, they believe that foreigners keep changing their partners because they are not satisfied with sex. Thus, some female foreigners are likely to seek a Vaishnava/ Baul partner.⁷⁶

During sexual intercourse, Vaishnava practitioners are trained to withdraw their sexual fluids in order to sublimate their sexual force to a kind of generative power. It is not known if women can ingest mixing fluids as men do. It should be noted that the physical distinction between male and female bodies allows men to ingest and women to absorb fluids.⁷⁷ So, in the context of Vaishnava, the male ingests female fluids either during the esoteric ritual or takes sexual fluids in combination orally, believing that taking mixed fluids can limit the damage of emission and rejuvenate his body and strength.

According to Sarbadhikari, a woman's sacred place is located in her genitals and absorbing for a woman is a natural process which cannot be controlled.⁷⁸ This implies that women cannot control fluids in the same way as men. In contrast, Vaishnava female renunciators claim that females, in the same way as males, can also take in fluids through their genitals by pulling them upwards and storing them in a sacred place between their two eyes. I challenged some female renunciators by referring to academic studies on

⁷⁴ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

⁷⁵ This seems to oppose the study of Sarbadhikari, which provides that Sahajiya practitioners very often change their partners. See Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 111.

⁷⁶ Western female foreigners sought to have sex with Bauls, see Sen, *Baulsphere*.

⁷⁷ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."; Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

⁷⁸ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*.

Vaishnava that hold that women's bodies are different and thus are not able to take in fluids in a similar manner to men. To this, they replied that the books I read were wrong and told me to believe their words instead, that women ingested fluids and pulled (*tule*) them up into their heads. SM Ma and KN Ma also showed me how to do it through a heavy contraction of the stomach, followed by their breathing practice done consonantly. They added that each individual has their own 'seed' and one has to draw it upwards individually, that is, a woman draws her seed and a man draws his seed.

My study does not go into detail to investigate whether female renunciators' understanding and practice of sexual acts are scientifically valid. Instead, I tried to understand women's point of view in regard to a hydraulic system of ingesting and pulling up seed to the top of a female body. Their reference to this model entails women's partaking in the esoteric ritual. These women believe that they can control their bodies and are capable of restoring their generative power. Thus, they view the practice as benefiting not only men but also women. In this way, female renunciators seem to gain more confidence which, I argue, builds up their subjectivity and enhances their self-esteem. I received no clear explanation as to whether or not the male body can, explicitly or implicitly, affect a woman's capacity to withdraw her seed. In contrast, the female body explicitly affects the control of a man's body and his semen. Practically speaking, if a male renouncer makes a mistake – ejaculates his semen – the result will be tangible. In comparison, there is no tangible evidence of a mistake made by a woman in an esoteric ritual. If there is a mistake by the female partner, failing to draw the seed upwards, the result will not show in the same way as for a male. That is, there is no pregnancy if she loses control over her fluids, but she may perhaps become pregnant if her partner loses control.

Since a male practitioner cannot successfully withdraw his semen without his partner's cooperation, various techniques are found by women themselves to control their bodies and indirectly their partners' bodies. Openshaw describes how before performing an esoteric ritual, to make sure that woman's body does not get too excited, so that she might arouse her partner to ejaculate, some female renouncers put some ice or cold objects on their stomachs before the ritual start in order to cool down their bodies. They seemed to believe that heat in the female body could affect and sexually arouse her partner.⁷⁹ It is claimed that menstrual blood is hot (heat), which can dry out semen.⁸⁰ Accordingly, performing an esoteric ritual during the menstrual period is perceived to help a man not ejaculate, because the semen will be dried up by menstrual blood. Furthermore, during the ritual both parties chant a mantra and concentrate on their breathing, accordingly their focus will not be on sexual emotions but on controlling their minds.

It seems to me that in order to successfully perform an esoteric ritual, the female partner's collaboration plays a significant role. The control over her own body and emotions implicitly affects the body of her male partner. If she loses control, it is likely that her male partner will also lose control. Thus, women's experience in the esoteric ritual is reflected in them as active ritual agents who can not only control their own bodies but also their partners' bodies, and in this way, female renouncers become empowered in the spiritual domain. These women, on the other hand, instead of claiming success in esoteric ritual as their own, view their success as the result of collaborative work, or even as an achievement of their male partners. Interestingly, when I discussed the erotic ritual

⁷⁹ Personal discussion 2017

⁸⁰ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya."

with female renouncers, they always emphasised the capability of their male partners. Many female renouncers told me that: “Baba is very good, so we have no children”, referring to success in the erotic ritual being due to the male partner. In contrast, male renouncers did not view their success as depending on their female partners, though they accepted that they were dependent on their essence. In men’s world view, women were still seen as passive agents in sexual matters.

Brahmacharya as practised in the Vaishnava esoteric ritual not only adds to the existing categories of Indian *brahmacharya*, but also provides a positive view of female sexuality. Women although have not been provided a specific explanation of how they can withdraw their seeds, they cannot be excluded from the esoteric ritual and seem to have a greater role in managing their own bodies as well as their male partners’ bodies. The Vaishnava women’s views reflected above assure us that women are not only a means for their male partners’ liberation, but also for their own ‘liberation.’ What women’s liberation is like will be explored in Chapter 7.

Chapter 5 Religious transactions with the lay community

The status of Vaishnava sadhus, as glimpsed in previous chapters, is not as highly revered as that of orthodox Hindu renunciators whose practice involves sexual abstinence and life-long celibacy. Being a Vaishnava sadhu couple (*yugal sadhu*), thus having an ‘in-between’ status in renunciation, make them less socially acceptable, especially among the Bengali middle classes.¹ Many are likely to perceive these Vaishnavas as ‘frauds’, while some Brahmin priests or even lay Brahmins do not accept water from them or refuse to eat with them. Other Bengalis seem to believe that their robe is merely a licence to beg. My landlady in Santiniketan said that, “You will never know if a person in the robe is a real sadhu or just a thief.” This uncertainty over their status together with their lower social background implicitly affects their practice of gift-receiving.

Their ‘in-between’ status, I argue, results not only in various forms of interaction between Vaishnava renunciators and lay householders, but also highlights a unique form of reciprocal transaction between the two domains. The Brahmanical ideal of offering gifts may claim that religious offerings are non-reciprocal;² however, a Vaishnava who transacts with the outside world tends to contest such an ideal. Indeed, it appears that there are no free gifts in the Vaishnava tradition, and so sadhus give return-gifts, which is expected by lay donors.

I, therefore, examine Vaishnava religious transactions with lay communities through the practice of their alms collection (*madhukari*). *Madhukari* is an important religious

¹ Wong, "Against Vaiṣṇava Deviance: Brāhmanical and Bhadrakal Alliance in Bengal."

² Maria Heim, *Theories of the gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain reflections on dana* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

practice which not only links Vaishnava renouncers to other Hindu ascetic traditions, but also helps them improve their socio-economic status. The offerings received from donors in the form of alms make Vaishnava sadhus become gift-debtors, so that they are obliged to return what has been offered to the community. It is a common practice among sadhus that, after each alms round, the offerings solicited from donors are put together, then symbolically divided into three parts: the first part is kept for the guru, the second part is for the sadhu himself, and the last part is for the Vaishnava community. That said, Vaishnavas are taught to return about one third of what they receive from *madhukari* to the community. The ways in which Vaishnavas return gifts to the community are diverse, from making themselves become worthy through control of the body and mind while begging, to a tangible form of returning offerings through organising feasts (*sadhu seva*). The sadhu feast which I will describe in more detail in the next chapter, is evidence that shows how gifts received circulate in the Vaishnava tradition.

Before we explore the Vaishnava practice of *madhukari*, I will first draw attention to gifts that are circulated in India culture. I will then highlight the process of *madhukari* to help us understand not only the practice of alms collections, but also the features of Vaishnava transactions. The last section will discuss the experience of female renouncers when they go out to collect alms. It seems to me that it may give them freedom whilst commuting and travelling, but as they move and beg in a male-dominant social environment, this freedom is actually limited. However, older female renouncers may benefit from their age, as female renouncers, particularly older ones, are more likely to gain sympathy from lay donors than males and younger female renouncers. Such sympathy allows them to receive gifts from lay people in the same quantity to male renouncers, and in some cases they receive even more than them.

5.1 The nature of Vaishnava gifts

It has been argued whether or not an Indian gift (*dan*) is soteriology, merely serving the religious purposes of devotees and thus non-reciprocal, or sociological, in which social relations are maintained through exchanges and interactions between two domains. While Marcel Mauss claims a sociological perspective for the Indian gift,³ scholars such as Parry⁴ and Heim⁵ disagree with him, arguing that *dana* in religious tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism or Jain, is pure and merely serves soteriological purposes.⁶ In theories of gifts in South Asia, it is stated that “*dana* is not obligated in any way. It does not evoke a return from the recipient, and not premised on a notion of reciprocity and interdependence.”⁷ That is, in the Indian context, the only genuine gift is *dan*. Donors, as mentioned in the Law of Manu, are obliged to give *dan* to worthy recipients, and renouncers in particular. However, the offerings that lay donors give to renouncers are not supposed to create any obligation or personal connection in return.⁸ That is, the donor should not expect any return, either tangibly or intangibly, from his or her offering made to a renouncer.

³ Marcel Mauss holds that a gift is not given for free. Gift-giving is a way to establish and maintain social relations and there are always obligations that come with gift-receiving. Mauss also analysed gifts in Indian law. He mentioned that gifts are given to Brahmin because of the duty stated in the law. It is said to be a pure gift in order to favour Brahmin who want to receive without reciprocity. He adds that in other Indian contexts, for example in the Mahabharata, gifts are always reciprocated in the sense that a thing given reproduces itself. See Mauss, *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*.

⁴ Parry, "The gift, the Indian gift and the 'Indian gift'."

⁵ See Heim, *Theories of the gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain reflections on dana*.

⁶ Parry, on the one hand, provides that *dan* can be counted in the ideology of a pure gift, which is non-reciprocated. However, in his study on death in Benares, *dan* is reciprocated. See James Laidlaw, "A free gift makes no friends," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, no. 4 (2000).

⁷ Heim, *Theories of the gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain reflections on dana*, 34.

⁸ Laidlaw, "A free gift makes no friends."

Anthropologists in Indian Studies, such as Raheja, do not entirely agree with Mauss, but they recognise the sociological aspect of gift-giving.⁹ Raheja's studies acknowledge that the Indian gift is fundamentally reciprocal as it generates the notions of reciprocity and interdependence. Hamaya's ethnographic study also entails the sociological perspective of gifts. She posits that the ideal of gift-giving as practised among female lay ascetics in the Saivite tradition is to "share whatever one has with anyone".¹⁰ This happens because female lay ascetics see the care and love embedded in gifts offered by their lay donors.¹¹ Sharing and circulating love and care through gifts implies two-way traffic in gift-giving. The gift does not end with the renouncer (as the receiver), but is circulated among other parties, and reciprocated to either other householders or renouncers.

In the Buddhist context in Myanmar, gifts given to monastic recipients, especially nuns, generate an obligation to 'pay back' the donors and the lay community. Kawanami claims that gifts received from lay donors become a 'gift-debt', making nuns 'debtors', who need to pay back the 'debt' to the givers and the community. Nuns feel obliged to return more than monks due to their ambiguous religious status. Accordingly, she argues that a pure gift hardly exists in religious transactions. Also, the obligation to return seems to work bilaterally in the case of nuns. That is, not only do donors require nuns to return

⁹ Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The poison in the gift: ritual, prestation, and the dominant caste in a north Indian village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female 'lay ascetics' and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India," 46.

¹¹ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female 'lay ascetics' and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India," 48.

their gratitude, but the nuns themselves also feel obliged to give return gifts to donors and the community.¹²

In the Vaishnava tradition, the reciprocal relationship between the two domains suggests that unreciprocated gifts are almost non-existent. Similar to the Buddhist nuns in the study of Kawanami, Vaishnava renouncers feel obliged to return gifts to the community. The ambiguous status of Vaishnava sadhus obliges them to return gifts to the community, more so in the case of female sadhus without a male partner. It seems that returning gifts to the community is a way that Vaishnava sadhus enhance and secure their religious and social status. The more they return, the higher the degree of acceptability and respectability they will gain from their supporting community.

The study of Kawanami and Hamaya also suggests that female ascetics are obliged to return or share gifts with members of their own community more than male renouncers because of their ambiguous religious status. In the case of a Vaishnava sadhu couple (*yugal sadhu*), however, gender plays a lesser role in offering return gifts. This is because a sadhu couple are seen as a tied husband-wife unit and the same person. So what happens to one, explicitly or implicitly, affects the other. They share their life, happiness and sorrows, as well as the gifts they receive from the lay community, and accordingly, they work together in a complementary way to return gifts to the community that offered them.

Meanwhile, in the case of sadhus who are single, gender seems to play a role in giving return gifts. That is, a single female renouncer is normally more inclined to share her surplus income (gift) with the community than a single male sadhu. Single female

¹² Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful*, 133-4.

renouncers seem to believe that they will get continuous support and protection from the community if they regularly give return gifts, tangibly or intangibly, to the lay community, particularly to people who have given them. In contrast, male renouncers are of the view that their renunciant and single status as well as gender gives them licence to receive offerings with less commitment to return them to the community.

5.2 *Madhukari* and its social and religious implications

According to Samnyasa Upanisads, a renouncer's previous status literally dies after taking initiation. Unlike a lay householder, he is not able to produce, store or prepare food.¹³ He is not allowed to cook his own meals for fear that he might develop more desire and attachment to his worldly existence.¹⁴ Accordingly, begging for alms is the primary source of subsistence for renouncers and their living depends on the generosity of lay householders. And since they are not allowed to cook or store food, renouncers have to beg daily. A Buddhist monk begs for alms in the early morning, to receive cooked food from householders. A Jain renouncer goes in the late morning, the time when they are certain that lay householders have finished cooking, but have not yet started eating their meals.

Indeed, alms collection (*madhukari*) is a practice that bridges 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly'. It is an act that marks the interaction between two communities, and in contrast to the viewpoint of Dumont,¹⁵ a renouncer is not outside the world but is, instead,

¹³ I use 'he' because Samnyāsa Upaniṣads are orthodox texts that prescribe renunciation only for a twice-born male Brahmin.

¹⁴ Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*, 78.

¹⁵ According to Dumont, a renouncer is an individual outside the world. T N Madan, *Way of life: King, householder, renouncer: Essays in honour of Louis Dumont* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishe, 1988).

in the world and, to a degree, of the world. Since renouncers rely on the lay community, its values and expectations affect how sadhus should behave, especially in the public domain. The presence of an ‘individual outside the world’ who does not engage in any social activities, as claimed by Dumont, is challenged by the Vaishnava practice of giving and receiving. The Vaishnavas’ way of renunciation may make their sadhus ‘individuals outside the world’ on account of their life choice to become renouncers and their detachment from conventions, but their dependence on the lay community brings renouncers back to transact with the actual world.

Knight points out that alms collection (*madhukari*) is a means to prove the authenticity of Baul renouncers, since it associates them with the Hindu ascetic tradition. Some laypeople use the practice of *madhukari* to distinguish real Baul sadhus from Baul performers (*silpi*).¹⁶ That is, real Baul sadhus collect alms by going door to door, but Baul performers perform on stage and receive fees in return. However, Baul practitioners view *madhukari* slightly different from lay people, and Knight and Hanssen claim that some Baul practitioners view *madhukari* negatively.¹⁷ They seem to think that it is not a respectable option and see it as a way for desperate poor sadhus. Some Baul practitioners postpone the practice of *madhukari* until old age when they can no longer gain an income from other sources, such as singing and performing on stage. Similarly, the male and female ascetics studied by Hamaya expressed negative views towards begging for alms. They are of the opinion that the practice of begging not only dishonours them, but also brings negative emotions, such as greed, to renouncers. Both lay and ascetic communities

¹⁶ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*, 148.

¹⁷ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*; Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*.

appear to view renouncers who beg regularly as having an excessive attachment to worldly values. They are seen as greedy, and likely to accumulate offerings from alms and become comfortable in the same way as laypeople. In the view of ascetics studied by Hamaya, the less ascetics beg, the more prestige they gain.¹⁸

All the sadhus I studied take full-time renunciation and thus have no other means to earn income. To them, alms collection is the only legitimate means to sustain their lives, and also to assert their renunciant status to the outside world. Unlike the Baul tradition studied by Knight and Hanssen, and in the Saiva tradition studied by Hamaya, *madhukari* does not have any negative implications for sadhus themselves. They are of the opinion that *madhukari* is an obligation or duty (*niyam*) prescribed for them. ND Baba states that the more a sadhu goes for alms, the less ego s/he has, and most of them consider that it is not right (*tik noy*) for sadhus not to go for alms. Of course, there are exceptional cases whereby sadhus earn income from other sources, e.g. their land where they cultivate crops and sell them during the harvest season. Sadhus who are reasonably talented also do small jobs to earn extra income from cooking or singing *kirtan* at feasts. Others who are known as good respected sadhus (*bhalo sadhu*) gain income from their disciples and devotees. However, even if sadhus own a plot of land and receive income from other sources, they still do their alms round regularly. They believe that, to a certain degree, collecting alms in a proper manner enables them to progress in their religious practice and allows lay donors to perceive them as real sadhus.

Another reason to support the claim that Vaishnava sadhus do not regard *madhukari* as a negative practice is their use of the term *madhukari*, which means ‘alms collection.’

¹⁸ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female ‘lay ascetics’ and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India," 43.

Vaishnava sadhus do not regard their alms rounds as ‘begging’ (*bhiksha*). While other mendicants use the term *bhiksha*, meaning ‘to beg’ or ‘to ask for’, Vaishnava sadhus use the term *madhukari*, which literally means ‘honey-gathering.’ It implies how a sadhu should ‘take’ from a householder, a small amount from each house, just like a bee collecting nectar from each flower, little by little.¹⁹ Using the term *madhukari*, instead of *bhiksha*, implies how Vaishnava renouncers differentiate themselves from other Indian mendicants. While a mendicant ‘begs’ for food, Vaishnava renouncers ‘collect’ ingredients that have been prepared to offer them. Indeed, the explicit purpose of alms collection is to sustain their lives and, to a greater degree, to secure their economic living as well as improve their religious practice. In order to demonstrate how alms collection enhances their religious practice, I introduce the concept of *lajja*, ‘shame or to be shy’, which is a quality that sadhus should cultivate. The degree of *lajja* indicates the level of detachment from the fame and reputation of being a great sadhu, and also detachment from *dan* offered by the laity.

5.2.1 Alms and their economic implications

Offerings made during regular alms rounds are considered small-scale giving because lay donors only give a small amount of their surplus income, either in cash or in kind, to renouncers. However, from the renouncers’ perspective, gifts received from donors on a regular alms-round is the most reliable source of income. Sadhus often mentioned to me that as long as a sadhu goes out for alms, s/he will never come back with an empty bag,

¹⁹ For more on how Brahmanical renouncers should beg for alms, see Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*.

meaning they will always get some kind of material support from the lay community. However, unlike Buddhist or Jain monks, Vaishnava sadhus do not beg for cooked food, they only accept raw food, such as rice grains (*jal*), puffed rice (*muli*), potatoes (*aloo*), vegetables (*sabji*) and money (*poisa*). On a general alms round, a donor gives either one rupee, or a handful of rice grains (50 grams), and/or potatoes. During the harvest season, sadhus receive more from one household, up to a bucket of grains (200–500 grams), potatoes and some more vegetables, such as tomatoes, chillies and aubergines. On a lucky day, they get ten rupees from some households. On an average alms round, sadhus receive about 10–20 kg of rice grains and 50–100 rupees, but they usually receive more in towns, around 200–400 rupees per day begging as donors usually offer money – one-rupee coins rather than rice grains.

Vaishnavas cook their own food for the reason of preserving their purity. However, cooking their own food, to a degree, identifies them as householders, as ‘fire’ is a symbol of the domestic realm.²⁰ In practice, collecting dry food ingredients is the most appropriate practice because dry food can be stored for longer periods. It can also be sold for money and exchanged for other goods, and selling rice grains or bartering them for other goods is a regular practice among Vaishnava sadhus. It is noteworthy that sadhus do not beg only for the day’s meal, as prescribed in Brahmanical texts. The sadhus I worked with received as much as they could when they went on alms collection since they did not go for alms every day. Some sadhus collected more often during the harvest season because householders have more food surpluses than in the summer and rainy

²⁰ According to Samnyasa Upanisad, ‘fire’ is a symbol of householders. A renouncer is a person who has no fire (or internalises the fire in his body), accordingly he cannot cook. See Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*.

seasons. They store ‘gifts’ from alms collection and sell them for money whenever necessary, cook their own meals and host feasts.



Figure 5.1 Offering alms

Sadhus store rice grains for a couple months and once they reach a certain amount, about 50–100 kg, they sell them to villagers for a lower price than the local markets. For example, in 2018 they sold rice at 16 rupees per kg while at the market it was 22 rupees per kg. Such a practice improves their economic standing and living conditions.

Openshaw documents how renunciators manage to live comfortably, become financially able to support their children’s higher education, and go on pilgrimages by using the income from *madhukari*.²¹ Similarly, the sadhus I worked with use the income earned from alms to improve their living standards. Their accommodation and facilities appear far better than those from similar socio-economic backgrounds living in villages. The

²¹ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

sadhus, in comparison, have bathrooms, toilets and water from hand pumps, some even from taps.²² They go on pilgrimages to distant areas such as, Himachal Pradesh, Panjab, Hardwar, Benares and so on. These trips are expensive and they need to pay for transportation and accommodation, some of which are not provided free to sadhus.

The case of VN Baba and SM Ma is a good example to demonstrate how the income from *madhukari* has helped in improving their economic position. I met the couple when they moved to a new ashram. When I first visited their ashram in 2016, their living standard was very basic; they lived in a small and simple mud house covered with thatch and plastic bags. There was no toilet or any other facilities, apart from one traditional cooking pit (*dhuni*), a few pots, trays, pans and cups (I broke a couple of them). They used water from a paddy field to clean themselves, wash everything, and sometimes even to drink and cook food. Since they were new sadhus, they did not have any followers or disciples to support them. However, with hard work on *madhukari*, in 2017, they organised their first three-day feast costing them about 35,000 Indian Rupees (US\$ 490). During that year, they also accumulated more items for living, such as a Samsung smartphone, a gas stove and more utensils. In 2018, they could afford to have a hand pump and a tin roof. Finally, this year (2019), they built a proper latrine. The money used to improve their abode was collected by going for alms.²³

The income from alms can total about 600-700 Rupees per day (about US\$ 10) if a sadhu couple both go alms-collecting. This level of income is even higher than that of schoolteachers in rural areas of Birbhum, as they earn about 8,000–10,000 Rupees (US\$

²² I use plurals because some ashrams have two or more toilets and bathrooms.

²³ It should be noted that sadhus tend to get goods at lower prices because sellers often offer a discount as *dan*.

140) per month.²⁴ Moreover, sadhus do not participate in or pay for social events or social gatherings, nor do they have to pay for their children. So, all the alms income becomes their savings. When I went to ashrams, I often had interactions with lay householders in the neighbourhood. They secretly told me not to judge sadhus merely from their external appearance, since these sadhus might look poor but were actually wealthy in the eyes of their neighbours. One uncle I met regularly said, “They [sadhu couple] could feed the whole village for ten days without having any financial problem.” It was difficult to find out how much money a sadhu couple have as savings. Such information was not revealed by sadhus and peer sadhus gave no hint, apart from saying that, “This Baba has a lot of money.” All the sadhu couples I studied had bank accounts and could afford to organise *sadhu seva* annually, which cost about 25,000–40,000 Rupees (US\$ 350–560) per feast, depending on the number of participants.

Sadhus also take up opportunities from *madhukari* to attract more devotees, and even disciples. Vaishnava sadhus deliver their religious teaching and occasionally invite potential devotees to their ashram while they conduct *madhukari*. Even those renunciators who said that they did not need income from *madhukari* because they had a big plot of cultivated land and disciples, still went out regularly for alms to meet their lay followers and receive updated news. The alms-round allows a lay donor and a sadhu to interact with each other and build up their relationship, and such transactions are the first step to attract more followers.²⁵

²⁴ Data collected from schoolteachers who are not registered as government teachers.

²⁵ One of my Santiniketan senior friends turned out to be a regular donor of ND Baba. He said baba collects alms from his village every three to four months. Though he got a chance to see baba every four months, he felt connected to him due to the friendly conversation they had each time they met. And since baba has collected alms from them for more than 10 years, so he became part of his family. Recently, my friend is ND Baba’s *bhakta*.

5.2.2 Alms and its religious implications

New sadhus are taught how to do *madhukari* by their *bhiksha* guru on the day they take initiation. The first *madhukari* round, led by a *bhiksha* ma, is the most heart-breaking moment for the new sadhu, pronounced by SM Ma, since it is the moment which marks the parting from her previous secular life and a journey to a new unknown life.

Openshaw mentioned how the new sadhus became overwhelmed when their guru emptied the grains on their hands by striking the grains, to disperse them on the floor. Emptying rice grains signified the detachment from what one previously owned. It also marked their new state of dependency on the community.

The practice of full-time alms collecting is not easy for sadhus. During a regular alms-round, a sadhu has to wander from door to door under hot tropical sunshine, carrying a bag (*jhola*) and a begging bowl, waiting for a period of time to receive just a handful of rice grains, potatoes or a rupee coin. Some houses offer nothing and simply tell the sadhus about their difficult economic situation, saying, "I am poor myself, too." It seems to me that statements such as this and some donors' negative expressions imply the parasitic status of sadhus. Sadhus themselves can only accept lay persons' lack of welcome in a humble manner, because those people are their only supporters. Soliciting alms from others, as if a beggar and depending for one's life on others, sometimes being given money and at other times rejected, can perhaps generate feelings of humble (*lajja*) in sadhus who expect to be treated with respect. In some communities where there are generous devotees (*bhakta*), sadhus may get more support both materially and non-materially from them. In such cases, a proper sadhu will express *lajja* or 'shameful' for

taking advantage of lay donors' good will, taking more than needed, and accumulating alms merely to make their lives comfortable.

For a Bengali person, *lajja* is a positive quality, pointing to appropriate behaviour that one should have in relation to others, particularly for a woman. A good Bengali woman should be shameful (*lajja*) if she does not follow what has been socially prescribed for her.²⁶ Hanssen provides various references to *lajja*.²⁷ She refers to one's capacity for self-restraint whereby a person balances this emotion, not showing it excessively or lacking it. *Lajja* can also imply 'not knowing' or 'being insane' whereby a person either has no knowledge of social norms or has gone insane so they act without *lajja*. *Lajja* also signifies the act of subverting the code of conduct in mainstream society, suggesting that a renouncer should not be embarrassed to be different. Tara, in Hanssen's study, suggests that sadhus should not have *lajja* since it will prevent them from doing *madhukari*.²⁸ Eliminating or lessening the degree of *lajja*, suggested by Hanssen, seems to be a gradual process, which happens when a person gets older and has been through a number of *madhukari*, then one will have less *lajja*.²⁹

Lajja, which is the focus of practice by the sadhus in my study, is an emotion of wanting to be humble and shy, which they are expected to cultivate. In the Vaishnava renunciant context, *lajja* is used to explain their modesty, and as a means to control the greed and ego of sadhus, in which *madhukari* can enhance this inner quality by expecting

²⁶ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

²⁷ Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*, 127-31.

²⁸ I visited her and her family a couple times along with the sadhus in my study, one of them turned out to be her son's, Papay's, *diksha* and *siksha* gurus, and one of them turned out to be her ex-lover. I also met her and her husband occasionally on the train and at sadhu feasts. Even though she and her partner are *bhekdari* sadhus, they are not included in the Vaishnava group because they have a son and sing for alms. Other sadhus claim that they are not real sadhus but *sansari-sadhus*.

²⁹ Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*.

a sadhu to be humble in taking whatever is offered to him. The notion also reminds a sadhu that even though one is a great sadhu, he still has to earn a living from alms and is dependent upon people's generosity. The act of shame (modesty) or *lajja* is a type of a religious practice for Vaishnava sadhus. It was agreed by most renunciators studied by Khandelwal that egotism is the worst obstacle to their spiritual progress, especially for those who are gurus.³⁰ Openshaw states that *madhukari* is a practice that can lessen their ego and make them humble, particularly for a famous sadhu.³¹

Furthermore, sadhus should feel embarrassed to demand or take more than they need from lay householders. This sense of shame is used to control their desire and negative attitudes. It also relates to the degree of detachment that sadhus should have from the material world. Thus, *lajja* leads a renouncer to develop 'detachment' (*tyag*) towards what he has accumulated in reputation and/or material property. It makes him aware, as ND Baba explained, that whatever items or cash he collects do not belong to him, but are given by people (*lok dai*). Accordingly, sadhus are told to be mindful of what they have taken from society and try to give something back.

5.3 Rules and regulations of *Madhukari*

A person who lives in Santiniketan and its neighbourhood will be acquainted with sadhus and *bhiksharis* (ones who begs) roaming from door to door collecting alms. Some are inclined to think that begging is an easy job and only a hopeless person would beg for a living. However, *madhukari* as practised by Vaishnava sadhus suggests that *madhukari* is

³⁰ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*, 116.

³¹ Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

not a common form of begging, but requires a particular practice in which the purity and strength of their mind and body are tested.

Relying on people's generosity to sustain oneself prompts a renouncer to act according to what appears to be appropriate to the public. One of the ways in which renouncers transact with lay people is by making one's inner and outer boundaries clean. That is, being a worthy recipient is one of the ways in which a renouncer offers a return gift to his donors. This action signifies the 'care' of the sadhu towards his lay donors, but such care would not be relevant if he was a beggar. For example, before going for alms, sadhus purify and clean their bodies, preferably their minds also. They take a bath, then wear clean robes, put the *tilak* mark on their forehead and other sacred spots on the body, and groom their hair with oil. Then they tidy their begging bags (*jhola*) and make sure that a few rupee coins and a handful of rice grains always stay in them. Having grains and a rupee in a bag is a token of his fortune and that will get sufficient offerings from lay householders. A male sadhu also cleans and polishes his staff and begging bowl, made from a gourd, which he takes with him while soliciting alms.

In addition to cleaning and tidying their physical boundaries, sadhus make sure that their inner self is taken care of as well. They do not eat any heavy food, such as cooked rice and fish, before and while begging for alms. They eat only puffed rice (*muli*) mixed with nuts or cooked vegetables (*sabji*). According to sadhus, it was not pure (*asuddha*) to eat a heavy meal before begging. They seemed to believe that a light (*halka*) body affected the mind positively, while eating heavy food made their body heavy and also made them get angry easily. Sadhus considered that they should go for alms with a peaceful mind (*santi man*) and avoid being angry (*raga*), as that could affect people's giving. They stated that donors always preferred to sense peace (*santi*) and positive

energy from them; and besides, no one wanted to support a grumpy sadhu. However, the sadhus gave no clear explanation as to why a light body signified purity. In practice, it was better not to overeat while walking a long distance. Also, as mentioned in the previous chapter, hot food was seen to affect their emotions and make their bodies hot (*garam*) and prone to anger.

Sadhus not only need to control their meals while begging, they also need to control their weight. Being fat disqualifies them from begging. In fact, most sadhus from the Birbhum community were quite small (short and thin). MD Baba was the only sadhu who seemed to have gained weight, thus becoming fat. He had not gone for alms for almost six months, and his partner complained that he had become too fat (*kub mota*), so he should stay at home and not go out for alms. They considered that having a light body was more preferable as being fat showed that he was leading a comfortable life, which was against their religious image. Following their logic, a sadhu who is likely to eat well and have plenty to eat should not beg from villagers, since they have to work hard just to have a simple meal.

After a sadhu prepares his body and accessories for alms, s/he sets off to *madhukari* at about 7–8 a.m. in the morning. Vaishnava sadhus do not collect with their partners, so it is unlikely to see them walking together to solicit alms from lay householders. If they have to go alms-collecting in villages, each will go to a different village. If they beg in the same town, they will go separately. They leave home together and take the same train, but stay in different compartments. Female renouncers go into the ladies' compartment with other female *bhikshari* and lay women. After the train reaches the destination, female renouncers sit together to have a light snack, and then walk to the town centre, approaching it from different directions.

Collecting alms alone is one of the ways Vaishnava sadhus associate themselves with mainstream Hindu sadhus. From their outward appearance, they look similar to other orthodox Vaishnava sadhus who are respected and accepted by society. Vaishnavas also distinguish themselves from general beggars or *bhikshari*,³² as well as from Bauls. The way in which Vaishnava renunciators collect alms clearly marks a distinguishing line between (real) Vaishnava renunciators and Baul Vaishnava renunciators. Vaishnava renunciators, unlike the Bauls, do not beg on the train. To them, singing and begging on trains is not the way of renunciators, but of performers (*silpi*) who sing for money. It should be noted again that Vaishnava sadhus regard Bauls as householder-sadhus (*sansari-sadhus*) rather than real sadhus.

The manner in which Vaishnava sadhus beg also differs from ordinary beggars. They do not make themselves look poor or desperate, and never demand householders that donate to them. They walk to the door of a household, sing or chant the names of gods (*hari nam*) or recite “*Jay Nitai*, victory of the guru.” They do not bother people if the houses they visit do not offer them anything. If the householder at a particular house cannot afford to give anything due to reasons such as lacking rice grains or money, they simply say *aske hoy ne*, “there is nothing today”. The sadhu then accepts this rejection and responds by saying *bhalo tako*, “take care/ live well” to the householder, and just walks away.

³² This term means one who begs for alms and refers to anyone who begs, including beggars, widows, renunciators and disabled persons. Sadhus do not like to use this term because it tends to downgrade their renunciate status.

5.3.1 The right time and days to solicit alms

Making the inner and outer body pure, being humble and being considerate to their donors are the qualities required to be a worthy sadhu who relies on lay householders' generosity. In addition, sadhus also need to consider the time and places to beg, as they cannot solicit alms anytime and anywhere, even if they would like to do. Begging at an inappropriate time not only dishonours them, but also debars them from gaining donations from householders. Similarly, begging in the wrong place can result in rejection, or worse – impure gifts in their begging bags (*jhola*). On the other hand, begging at a prescribed time and place not only helps them maintain their tradition of alms-collection, but also gives them auspicious gifts to take back to their ashram.

The prescribed time for begging, according to Vaishnava sadhus, is in the morning between about 9 a.m. and 1.30 p.m. It coincides with the time between breakfast and lunch when homemakers are at home preparing their meals, and shops are open for business. It is also the time when donors are less likely to be busy and thus can offer alms. I was told by sadhus that when a person is having a meal, s/he should not be disturbed by *bhiksharis*. They said that begging while donors are eating not only shows their insensitivity, but also that the impurity transferred from their eating could contaminate sadhus.

There are also specific days when alms should not be collected. Openshaw's study suggests that sadhus should not go out for alms "on the nights of the full moon, new moon, or eleventh lunar day of the dark and bright lunar fortnights, or on the Thursday".³³ When I asked if there were any particular reasons not to beg on these lunar days, most

³³ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 134.

sadhus said that it was just a rule taught by their guru. However, some renouncers, such as ND Baba and his guru-brothers from their guru lineage, still go alms-collecting on those prescribed days, as for them, every day is a good day for alms. They are of the opinion that the concept of not going for alms on specific lunar days is simply a convention and not explicitly prescribed for Vaishnava sadhus.

Not soliciting alms on specific lunar days seems to divide the views of some sadhus, however, not collecting alms on Thursdays was followed by almost every sadhu. This is because Thursday is the ‘teachers’ day (*guru bar*), when sadhus stay at their ashrams to worship their deceased gurus. It is also the day when disciples and devotees can be certain that their sadhus will be at the ashram and they can visit them. Not begging on Thursdays is, on the other hand, a practice which is consistent with Indian culture in regard to the practice of *Lakshmi bar* or the day of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. She is a grain-giver and in order to keep the family prosperous, people do not give their rice grains away, but keep them at home.³⁴ That is, on Thursdays, a householder should not offer rice grains or money to anyone, including sadhus. As a result, if a sadhu went for alms on a Thursday, he not only would receive nothing, but would also be criticised by householders and his peer sadhus for violating a social norm.

5.3.2 Places to Collect Alms

I did my fieldwork mainly in rural areas where many different villages are spread out over a large area. However, I also visited many small towns where a handful of shops were located, as well as big towns in urban areas, where shopping centres and

³⁴ Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*.

government offices were situated.³⁵ Sadhus collect alms in both towns and villages, but different sadhus have different preferences as to where they collect alms. Some sadhus prefer to collect alms only in villages and others in both areas. The difference between urban centres and rural villages is not only in terms of geography, but also the relationship renouncers have with lay donors. While townspeople have less engagement with renouncers, villagers have a strong sense of responsibility to support renouncers and maintain a relationship with them.³⁶

Urban centres are about monetary exchange

In Birbhum, businesses are at the heart of life in the town and there are many and various kinds of shops located next to each other. Urban folk are either shopkeepers, office workers or business people, who are mostly men. Women are less likely to be in charge of family's business and as a result they are often at home doing the household chores. Cash transactions are the most common form of exchange and money is the only means of exchange that we see in Birbhum urban centres, and therefore the most common form of alms that sadhus collect in towns is money, in rupee coins.

In town centres, there is only one particular day of the week when any types of *bhiksharis*, including sadhus, can come to beg. It is only on specific days that urban residents make offerings to sadhus, and if they come for alms on other days, nothing is offered. The area I studied has four big towns and each town stipulated a specific begging day. Rampuhart town welcomed recipients only on Fridays, Sainthia town on

³⁵ I call them big towns or urban areas in a loose sense. It may seem big or even very big to rural people but it is tiny for anyone who comes from a big city like Kolkata.

³⁶ Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful*.

Sundays, Bolpur town on Tuesdays and Guskara town on Wednesdays. No particular reasons were given as to why they decided to approve donations only on those specific days. Some shopkeepers told me that it was a rule (*niyam*) that had been prescribed for generations. Others said that this practice was best for both shopkeepers and religious recipients. It was perhaps inconvenient for them to have *bhiksharis* begging at their shops every day while they ran their businesses and dealt with customers. Most shopkeepers gave priority to their customers, but also wanted to fulfil their responsibility to offer donations as part of their prescribed duty and also to prevent some unfortunate incidents.

Some shops place a tray of one-rupee coins at the front desk, so that any *bhikshari* can come and take a coin from the tray. When all the coins have gone, the recipient who was there at that time would tell the shopkeeper, so that he could put more coins on the tray. I followed a female renouncer on her alms collection in a town a couple of times. I did not wear a renunciant robe, but dressed in a semi-traditional costume which was old and worn so that I would not look much different from the villagers. I walked for almost two hours to beg with them at more than 100 shops, but no one paid any attention to my presence. Some of them probably thought that I too begged because I came with a renouncer. Finally, a fish-seller in the market asked me who I was and if I needed a rupee from her. I did not say anything but looked at the sadhu, SW Ma, whom I was with. SW Ma told her that we came together. The seller gave me a rupee and asked us to go away. On that day we together collected 400 Rupees, equivalent to about US\$ 5. If SW Ma went alone, she would have collected almost half that amount (about 250–350 Rupees.)

It seems to me that shopkeepers focused only on giving, not on the recipients or perhaps on gifts. To them, whoever came to the shop for a rupee was a *bhikshari*, ‘one

who begs'. Sadhus told me that most people whom I saw wandering around from shop to shop were not *bhekdari* sadhus, but *bhiksharis*.³⁷ They were beggars, widows or disabled people. They begged legitimately, but they were not sadhus. Many sadhus, particularly male sadhus, did not like to beg in town and did not like to be counted as a *bhiksharis* because that made them feel degraded and dishonoured. Hamaya suggests that the emphasis on dignity is a masculine issue since only male sadhus are concerned about their pride.³⁸ Female renouncers did not pay much attention to such a worldly concern. They were not concerned about whether or not begging would dishonour them. Similarly, the female sadhus I studied seemed to ignore the fact of whether they were dishonoured or downgraded, and did not even bother if shopkeepers thought they were beggars or widows, they visited to do their duty and contribute some income to their ashram.

The reasons why female renouncers did not like begging in towns were related to safety and inconvenience. Some female renouncers did not collect alms in towns because they felt unsafe, and they told me that there were people in towns who came from different places and could do them harm at any time. Other female renouncers said they were nervous when crossing the road as there were too many cars. Others said they had to beg very fast in towns, and this made them feel exhausted and restless. However, some still went for alms in towns because of the high monetary gains. The female renouncers who collected alms in towns were mostly old. These renouncers said that they would not be harassed because they were old, and it also was convenient for them to take rupee coins rather than carry heavy rice grains. It is noteworthy that female renouncers who

³⁷ A sadhu who undergoes initiation (*bhek*). It is quite normal to see *non-bhekdari sadhus* go for alms like a sadhu. Sadhus usually can tell the difference, but many lay householders cannot.

³⁸ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female 'lay ascetics' and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India."

solicited alms in towns seemed to enjoy a certain degree of freedom while begging.

While collecting alms, they also did some shopping and looked for interesting goods. We stopped at many gift shops or fruit shops to do window-shopping. The fact that people in urban centres were less curious about them and had a distant relationship with alms recipients allowed female renunciators to enjoy some degree of freedom without having strict expectations imposed on them. It was almost as if donors or public opinion did not have much influence on their act of receiving alms.

Village settings

In village settings, most villagers are farmers or day-labourers working on farms. Some may have decent jobs in the town or in schools, such as clerks, school teachers or at the train station, but they are the minority in villages. In one village, there was only one or two grocery shops run by the allegedly richest family in the village. The houses were not too close to each other and a garden or pond separated the houses rather than concrete walls or thick fences. Since the majority were farmers, that means giving depends on the seasons. That is, they give more when they have more agricultural surplus, usually during the harvest season and less during the dry season. Villagers usually give farm products to renunciators, they are unlikely to give money since it is a scarce resource.

Male renunciators visit many villages in one day and they also explore new villages, even though some are located far from their ashram. Being physically strong, they can carry heavy sacks of grains and accept more gifts from donors than female members. When begging in villages, male sadhus leave their bicycles at the edge of the village and walk slowly from door to door, banging cymbals and singing the names of gods (*hari nam*). Villagers, when hearing the names of gods, come to the door with rice grains

and/or vegetables ready to offer. They ask the sadhu for details about him, and if they know him already, they will share or update their experiences with him. When the conversation ends, he moves to the next household. When tired, he rests for a while and the villagers normally offer him a chair. Sadhus usually visit and collect alms from one to three villages in a day. During the harvest season, they collect about 10 to 20 kg of rice grains and a lot of potatoes.

“A proper sadhu should not go for *madhukari* to one village too often,” said VN and ND Baba. This seems to be a common rule for their alms-collecting. The sadhus will visit and collect alms in the same village several months later. VN Baba told me that he went to the same village every six months because he wanted to make sure that the villagers were happy to offer him alms and did not feel like they were being exploited. ND and GB Baba viewed that collecting alms at the same place too often would give them a negative reputation. It made villagers think of them as parasites, who only came to ask them for alms without giving any consideration to their economic situation.

If female renunciators visited villages for alms, they only went to places where they could go on foot, which were mostly villages surrounding their ashram's village. That meant sadhumas were known to the villagers, and most female renunciators visited these villages almost every month for many years. They built up good relationships with their regular donors and showed their concern for the villagers, while villagers showed their generosity to sadhus and gave more to those they knew.

Collecting alms from the same villages allows sadhumas to interact with their lay donors regularly and foster intimate relationships with the villagers, particularly female ones. Some offer more and better gifts to sadhumas for whom they have some affection. Others offer hospitality, asking sadhumas to stay at their homes to comfort them, and in

return, they receive personal consultations from them. Villagers also visit the ashram to gain knowledge about Vaishnava practices and some have undergone initiation into the tradition. The regular conversations with sadhumas allow lay women, especially young widows, to find a way to express their grief, and many widows take *diksha* with the sadhus because of the interaction they have had with sadhumas.

Villagers usually offer gifts to the sadhus because it is a known religious duty. It seems to me that in the village, while the relationships between female renouncers and laypersons who offer alms are intimate and personal, the relationships between male sadhus and laypersons are likely to be more formal. That is, donors perceive male sadhus as religious agents, and thus interact and relate to them in a religious context. For example, the topics they discuss are related to the gods or their religious belief. In contrast, with female renouncers, lay donors, especially female ones, relate to them as family members, and treat them like a grandmother or an aunt, and accordingly the conversation focuses on personal matters, e.g. about their family and kin.

5.3.3 Unworthy donors and poison in gifts

The ethnographic study of Parry shows that the gifts offered to priests and the service caste transmit the donor's misfortune.³⁹ That is, the recipient acts as a 'sewer' who circulates the misfortune transferred to him via a gift. The priests need to give away gifts or perform penances to make themselves less vulnerable to the bad energy conveyed through gifts given to them. Parry reports that failing to do so caused the priests suffering and it was documented that many priests died prematurely due to the symbolic 'poison' in

³⁹ Parry, "The gift, the Indian gift and the 'Indian gift'."

gifts. Similar to Parry, Raheja states that there is indeed poison in the gifts transmitted to recipients.⁴⁰ However, we do not know whether or not recipients actually suffer from any misfortune carried by gifts. Hamaya also holds that receiving gifts as alms can convey negative emotions, such as greed and anger. She describes how one of her informants mentioned that receiving gifts not only meant receiving prosperity but also sin, “the goddess Laksmi comes with money, but sin (*pap*) and poison (*jahar*) also come [with her]”.⁴¹ In contrast, the ethnographic study of Hanssen provides that Baul Vaishnava renouncers do not take that gifts received from lay householders transmit any misfortune or impurity.⁴²

It seems to me that some gifts received in the Vaishnava tradition carry inauspiciousness and impurity. From the sadhus’ point of view, householders are impure and thus any cooked food they offer is also seen as impure. To avoid impurity, sadhus accept only dry and uncooked food, such as rice grains, vegetables and money. In some cases, the impurity of donors is seen to contaminate even the dry food ingredients offered to renouncers. They say that gifts given by unworthy donors can transmit impurity to sadhus, causing them misfortune and/or obstructing them from performing religious practices effectively. Nonetheless, there is no tangible evidence to prove that impurity in gifts can actually be transmitted to renouncers. They merely mention that gifts received from impure donors negatively affect their esoteric practices (*sadhana*). Accordingly, Vaishnava gurus advise their disciples to avoid receiving alms from impure donors who are priests, Muslims or barbers, and from any households having a funeral, childbirth or

⁴⁰ Raheja, *The poison in the gift: ritual, prestation, and the dominant caste in a north Indian village*.

⁴¹ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female ‘lay ascetics’ and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India," 43.

⁴² Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*.

wedding. They believe that people in these situations are impure by being in contact with 'death'. The priest worships (*puja*) the deceased, the barber cuts the hair and fingernails of the dead, and the house having a funeral is ritually impure, caused by the death of a family member.⁴³ In households that welcome childbirth and weddings, impurity does not come from death, but from birth and family ties, respectively. They seem to believe that observing births and weddings can pull the renouncer back to the world of lay householders. NA Baba said that even positive emotions deriving from having a family and children are ultimately *maya*, 'illusory', which can divert a renouncer from his spiritual path. If a sadhu accidentally receives alms from unworthy donors, he needs to give them away by donating them to others or eschew them outside the ashram. To take back such gifts to the ashram is to embrace impurity into oneself.

It is worth noting that Vaishnava religious ideology welcomes everyone into the tradition. In many cases, a Vaishnava guru take Muslim disciples and usually eats with them without any concern for impurity.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Muslims are still unwelcome in the Vaishnava tradition I studied and sadhus seem to be careful not to collect alms from Muslims households since donations from them are regarded as impure. Although Muslims were not related to death, they were still considered by Hindus to be impure. The reason why Muslims were regarded as impure, a sadhu asserted, was because they ate beef and their fingers were used as toothbrushes polluted by their own saliva. If renouncers accidentally accepted rice grains or vegetables from those people, they did not cook them but simply gave them away.

⁴³ The duration to be impure depends on many factors, see Lamb, *White saris and sweet mangoes: Aging, gender, and body in North India*.

⁴⁴ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*.

5.4 Women and the practice of *madhukari*

Madhukari, as suggested by Hamaya in her ethnographic study of female lay ascetics in Haridwar, “is a gender practice. There are various norms that marginalise or exclude female ascetics from the arena of begging.”⁴⁵ In her study, male ascetics receive the privilege to collect alms as they are publicly invited to participate in feasts. In contrast, female lay ascetics are not allowed to collect alms with male sadhus. They have to beg individually after the male group has gone. Some ashrams do not allow females to beg at their ashrams as the space is reserved for male sadhus only.

There are many issues and challenges that Vaishnava women face when they go for alms. However, contrary to what Hamaya advocates, I argue that in the Vaishnava context, *madhukari* is not a gendered practice in which women are excluded or marginalised in their alms collection. There are no rules and regulations that expiate female renunciators from *madhukari*, in the contexts of feasts or private homes. What seems to exclude female renunciators from begging is not their female gender, but the practice and public context of begging which suits a male renouncer better than a female. In my observation, sadhumas also have some advantages in being female whenever they go for alms, since their vulnerability, at times, allows female renunciators to gain more sympathy from their donors than males. In contrast, male renunciators when they go for alms gain support due to their holy status, not because of their gender.

Kawanami states that in the Myanmar social context, Buddhist nuns gain sympathy from the lay community due to their commitment to *sasana*, despite the sacrifices they

⁴⁵ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female 'lay ascetics' and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India," 49.

make.⁴⁶ She describes how some laywomen felt ‘pity’ towards nuns whose lives are often perceived as involving ‘extreme deprivation’. Similarly, in the Vaishnava tradition, it seems that laywomen in villages show more sympathy or even pity towards female renouncers due to their choice of lifestyle. This is because being a female renouncer is very likely to be perceived as an ‘unfortunate life choice’ or even as a form of ‘extreme deprivation’ in a culture where the only suitable place for women is domesticity. The public may assume that any woman who lives outside the domestic realm as a renouncer has encountered hardships in life and wanted to be released from trauma via renunciation.⁴⁷ In the case of a famous female guru, however, such a stereotype is wiped away by her high reputation. Many female renouncers who have not gained fame or any reputation at all encounter this kind of prejudice. Lay people think that women in their old age should be at home getting support and care from their children and grandchildren. Accordingly, old women in white or saffron robes, roaming around alone, begging from house to house, make other women as well as men feel sympathy towards them rather than admiration. It appears that elderly female renouncers get most sympathy from laywomen who are younger than them. But laywomen of about the same age as elderly sadhumas (50 years old and above), particularly widows, seem to show less sympathy toward these female sadhus. It is likely that lay widows view female renouncers as women who share the same misfortunes as them. Some old lay widows I encountered, as well as some studied by Lamb, seemed to think that they had more misfortune than anyone else in the community; their husband died and their sons only focus on their wives

⁴⁶ Kawanami, *Renunciation and empowerment of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar-Burma : building a community of female faithful*, 142-5.

⁴⁷ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*.

and children, so they feel ignored by the family.⁴⁸ They, thus tend to share less, secure the family's property only for themselves, and demand attention from family members and neighbours. When I followed SD Ma soliciting alms, we did not get any offerings from elderly widows and they kept moaning about their misfortune of being widows. They, however, tend to offer gifts to male renouncers, believing that male renouncers can bring good fortune and merit in exchange for their offerings.

The practice of *madhukari* itself seems to be less friendly to the female body, as it requires physical as well as mental endurance. Walking long distances under hot tropical sunshine with an empty stomach, carrying sacks of heavy grains and potatoes, requires much physical stamina and training. It is acknowledged that female bodies are biologically more fragile than males. While males can cope with heavy physical work, females cannot endure such physical hardship. According to ML Ma, the female body is seen as prone to illnesses and, in order to avoid these, *madhukari* should ideally be conducted by a sadhu who has a strong (*sakta*) trained male body. Female renouncers who go out for alms usually lessen the hardship by going for alms in either nearby towns or villages they are familiar with. They spend fewer hours than males when they beg and take only what they can carry with them. Most of them go regularly, once or twice a week, but some go twice a month to the same village or town near their ashram.

All the female sadhus I worked with came from small villages and learnt to strictly follow the traditional norms when they were young, and accordingly they were brought up to embody traditional values of being a Bengali woman. Thus, travelling on their own for alms and appearing in front of strangers seemed to hinder them from alms round,

⁴⁸ Lamb, *White saris and sweet mangoes: Aging, gender, and body in North India*.

especially during the initial period of their sadhuhood. The youngest female sadhu, who was 20 years old, SM Ma, was not allowed to go out for alms. Her parents who were also Vaishnava sadhus and her partner agreed that it was better for her to be at home and do the household chores. They viewed that it was not safe for a young woman in her teens to roam alone for alms, although she was a renouncer. Similarly, there were a few female sadhus who were younger than 35 years of age who did not go out for alms for fear of harm they might experience while collecting them. These female renouncers get financial support from their partners who earn an income from alms as well as *dakshina* from their devotees.

Other female sadhus who were middle-aged or over 50 years of age had less fear or anxiety to collect alms in public alone and did not worry about being criticised. They travelled alone and appeared in public for religious purposes and even went shopping. However, they mentioned to me that even though they could go outside their community and wander around like male sadhus, they preferred to be at the ashram doing household chores. They were of the view that *madhukari* was an uncomfortable practice for women, but to achieve their religious goal, they had to go beyond such an experience of discomfort. It seems to me that women in old age can live outside social expectations compared to young members. In this respect, as Lamb states, gender seems to play a lesser role once a woman reaches the menopause and in old age.⁴⁹

Indeed, going out for alms may help sadhus develop a sense of shyness (*lajja*) needed to train their minds, but many young sadhus did not engage in this practice since *madhukari* engendered a fearful feeling (*bhoy*) rather than shyness (*lajja*) in these young

⁴⁹ Lamb, *White saris and sweet mangoes: Aging, gender, and body in North India*.

sadhus. This was because female sadhus encountered more physical and emotional hardship than males when they went out on their alms rounds. Moreover, during *madhukari*, a young sadhuma was likely to experience more inconvenience and insecurity than older ones, especially those who had reached the menopause.

Meanwhile *madhukari* entitled Vaishnava female renouncers to be financially independent from their male partners and also empowered them to be able to live on their own, especially when they had no one to rely on. In addition, when both male and females earned an income, the labour division in the household domain was shared between them, even though the female partner often took on more responsibility than her male partner. Indeed, Vaishnava women may gain benefits from *madhukari* practice, which could lead them to be independent actors (at least financially); they, however, regard women who are on their own and do not have anyone to rely for their socio-economics as women with *kasta*, pain, problems or difficulties, and all the Vaishnava female renouncers I studied did not prefer this independent but *kasta* situation. I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 7.

We can see from this chapter that the alms transactions between Vaishnava sadhus and the lay community do not allow sadhus to be free from being gift-debtors. Throughout the process of alms collection, sadhus have to demonstrate that they are not parasites on society, but worthy religious recipients. By being worthy religious recipients, sadhus reciprocate the generosity of their lay donors and gender seems to play a minimal role in this matter. Both males and females are able to be worthy recipients, and if the gifts given to them were completely free, sadhus would perhaps not be concerned about being considered worthy receivers by their donors.

Chapter 6 Devotional Feasts (*sadhu sevas*)

Renouncers engage with their donors by making themselves worthy as gift recipients and offering them psychological consultations as part of their duty. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that without this sense of duty to reciprocate, sadhus would not commit themselves to offering return gifts to the community. They, as renouncers, could only take from lay donors without reciprocating. In fact, as I demonstrated in the last chapter, Vaishnava sadhus do transact with the lay community and engage in social reciprocity. In this chapter I will highlight some more concrete forms of return gifts. As prescribed in the Vaishnava tradition, sadhus are obliged to organise devotional feasts, redistributing gifts received from alms into the community. Therefore, there are no free gifts for Vaishnava sadhus, and once they have received gifts from lay donors, they have to return them, at least one third of what they have received, especially in the form of devotional feasts (*sadhu sevas*).

A *sadhu seva* is a devotional feast organised by sadhus to commemorate their late gurus and show sadhus' gratitude to the lay community, on whom they rely for their living. I was told by every guru in Birbhum community that organising a *sadhu seva* is one of the religious practices that all sadhus need to conduct. ND Baba said that since sadhus collect so many gifts from laypeople, it is important for them to give those gifts back to their communities. Such giving not only shows their detachment from what they accumulate, but it is also a way in which sadhus interact with the laity. During a *sadhu seva*, there are many forms of gift transactions among sadhus themselves and between sadhus and laypeople. Gifts that circulate in a *sadhu seva* confirm that Vaishnava gifts

are reciprocal and have a social function. As such, the reciprocal transactions we observe in the Vaishnava tradition challenge the concept of free gifts advocated by scholars such as Parry and Heim,¹ who claim that genuine gifts in the context of India merely serve a soteriological purpose; they are free of any expectations and are non-reciprocal.

This chapter will investigate how Vaishnava gifts are reciprocated among sadhus and between sadhus and laypeople through their religious practice called *sadhu seva*, loosely translated as devotional feast. It will also highlight the social purpose of giving Vaishnava gifts. I argue that organising a *sadhu seva* not only fulfils sadhus' religious purpose, which is to detach themselves from money and prosperity resulting from alms, but also builds a social reputation, another worldly value that sadhus should detach from. However, many sadhus do not see that they should detach themselves from such a worldly reputation, gained from organising a feast. This is because their reputation implies social acceptability and a wider social space, which they did not have when they were householders or even when they become renouncers of the tantric line. In addition, the worldly reputation and image of 'authentic sadhus', constructed through organising *sadhu sevas*, also helps sadhus to extend and strengthen their community. The worldly 'gain' from organising a *sadhu seva* is not limited to fame and reputation, the hosts do appear to receive more financial support from the lay community.

The core element of a *sadhu seva* is 'giving', and by organising *sadhu sevas*, Vaishnava sadhus perform the role of 'givers'. Their 'giving' role helps to promote an image of 'authentic sadhus', which is important for Vaishnava sadhus, and they believe they cannot acquire such an image in the minds of the public without organising *sadhu*

¹ Heim, *Theories of the gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain reflections on dana*; Parry, "The gift, the Indian gift and the Indian gift."; Parry, "The gift, the Indian gift and the Indian gift'."

sevas. It appears that sadhus as ‘givers’ are more appreciated by the community than sadhus as ‘receivers.’ By giving to the community, sadhus demonstrate their detachment from worldly values. The high level of this detachment does, to a certain degree, imply their authenticity and a close association with the ideal of Brahmanical renunciation.² Returning gifts to the community also helps sadhus to balance the twin values of a transient world and that of renunciation, and it ensures that sadhus do not become attached to what they have gained. The best way to demonstrate their detachment is to organise a public feast, and in this way, their degree of detachment becomes acknowledged publicly, by both sadhus and the lay community.

The role of Vaishnava renouncers in the context of *sadhu seva* seems to reverse the traditional role prescribed for Indian ascetics. A renouncer is generally perceived as a religious recipient, one who receives the layperson’s generosity for maintaining his/her life. However, Vaishnava sadhus also act as givers, giving to both lay supporters and the sadhu community. They seem to give to others even more than when they were householders. This is probably because they have more means to give when they become renouncers and they are also expected to give back by the community. Their role as givers challenges the persistent critique toward renouncers thrown at them by colonial officials and missionaries, that they were “unproductive parasites who do not earn their living”.³

In the course of my research, I have observed that female members take an active role in religious practices involving providing care and services to others. While women appear to make less contribution in the area of esoteric rituals and alms collection, they

² For more see Olivelle, *Ascetics and Brahmins: studies in ideologies and institutions*, 1.

³ Khandelwal, "Renunciation and Domesticity," 204.

contribute the most to *sadhu sevas*. Success when organising a *sadhu seva* does, to a great extent, depend upon the contribution of these women, which seems to be because the event largely focuses on food, feasting and providing services to others. Openshaw states that different kinds of love and service to others are good qualities existing in women.⁴ Furthermore, as argued by Caroline Walker Bynum, “food practices were more central in women’s piety than men”.⁵ That is, women’s religious goal is achieved through a practice that relates to food in various ways, such as fasting, offering food to God or feasting. Khandelwal claims that food is an area that makes renunciation gendered, and sannyasinis providing food marks their motherhood. Food provided by a Baiji (her informant) is not the ‘distribution of blessing’ or *prasad*, but the “expression of *seva* and maternal love”.⁶

Vaishnava female renunciators’ religious goal is also achieved through a practice that relates to food-offering. Some female renunciators, especially single ones, see feeding people and organising *sadhu sevas* as the only means to express their religious piety and attain their religious aims. Indeed, a *sadhu seva* is an arena where female renunciators can prove their lack of ego to the public. The devotional food they provide for every participant demonstrates their mother-love and its quality of nurturing.

⁴ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 181.

⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Fast, feast, and flesh: The religious significance of food to medieval women," *Representations*, no. 11 (1985): 4.

⁶ Meena Khandelwal, "Do Saints Need Sleep? Baiji’s Renunciation as Service," in *Women’s Renunciation in South Asia*, ed. Sondra L. Hausner Meena Khandelwal, Ann Gold (New Delhi: Springer, 2006), 88.

6.1 *Seva* and its different implications

Seva has its linguistic roots in Sanskrit and is loosely translated in English as ‘service’.

The term derives from a devotional tradition in which disciples give devotional services to their gurus. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the meaning and implication of *seva* involved humanitarian service and national movement, this idea started in the late nineteenth century and was developed in the early twentieth century by Swami Vivekananda under the Ramakrishna mission. Later, *seva* was used for the Hindu national movement, and during this period *seva* was conceived as service to the nation.⁷

Gwilym Beckerlegge’s study of the Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna mission states that *seva* is part of Hindu tradition and not an idea imported from Christian philanthropy.⁸

In Bengal Vaishnavism, *seva* is used to promote the idea of selfless service to God among Vaishnava devotees. In some Vaishnava traditions, serving a human person is to serve the gods, and such selfless serving is in return believed to bring devotees to the realm of Krishna. In the study by Sarbadhikary, *seva* is generally interpreted as service towards the deity. However, for Vaishnava Sahajiya, the meaning of *seva* includes the ingestion of sacred and sexual fluids or public devotional gathering (*sadhu seva*). For ISKCON, *seva* means devotional service, which can be given to the deity through serving humankind.⁹

In the Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition, the term *seva* is used in various ways and refers to different actions depending on the context. However, it is mostly used in relation to

⁷ Maya Warrier, "The *Seva* ethic and the spirit of institution building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission," in *Hinduism in public and private*, ed. Anthony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁸ Gwilym Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda and seva: taking "social service" seriously* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁹ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 125,36,53.

the body, signifying how Vaishnavas value their body and use it to relate to the divine. I mentioned in Chapter 4 that the body is thought to be the place where gods exist and where practitioners meet them (Krishna/ Radha). Thus, a sadhu needs to nurture his/her body, since nurturing the body is equivalent to worshipping the gods. Accordingly, *seva* in the Vaishnava context can refer to the acts of eating, having sexual intercourse, massaging the body or feasting. My informants said that these activities of the body (or service to the body) are equivalent to the devotional services given to the divine.

In the guru-disciple relationship found in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, *seva* refers not only to selfless service, but also to “selfless service in fulfilling duties required or suggested by the guru”.¹⁰ Warriar suggests that although the term *seva* has many implications and references, the ethic of *seva*, which means ‘selflessness’, is the key notion, distinguishing *seva* from other kinds of actions. Warriar argues that, “*seva* as an ideal type is service rendered impersonally and selflessly, not with expectation of reciprocity, reward, protection, and patronage”.¹¹ It is a “meritorious action for the one who renders it” and it is intended “not for enhancing the reputation of benefactor.”¹²

The concept of *seva* I examine in this chapter is *sadhu seva*, interpreted as ‘sadhu feast’, ‘devotional feast’ or ‘public devotional gathering’. ‘Sadhu feast’ here is meant to centre on the sadhu as the patron of a feast rather than the sadhu as a recipient. In this context, the sadhu as a giver or patron of a feast is specially highlighted, because to be the giver or the host of a feast requires sacrifice, devotion and selflessness from the host more

¹⁰ Lucia, ““Give Me Sevā Overtime”: Selfless Service and Humanitarianism in Mata Amritanandamayi’s Transnational Guru Movement,” 191.

¹¹ Warriar, “The Seva ethic and the spirit of institution building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission,” 256.

¹² Warriar, “The Seva ethic and the spirit of institution building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.”

than the guests. In the Vaishnava context, *seva* as service to the community, on the one hand allows one to detach oneself from the material world, which underlines one's sacrifice and selflessness. It also marks him as a giver, a role that is usually that of a householder. On the other hand, it implies the ties sadhus build up towards the transient world, because *seva* sadhus provided to the community give them opportunities to attract more devotees, expand networks and gain a worldly reputation.

The study of Rozenberg in Myanmar focuses on a monk redistributing gifts to his community, which suggests that the redistribution of gifts is “a means by which a monk resolves the tension between the necessary attraction of gifts publicly testifying to his saintliness and, on the other hand, the demonstration of the religious detachment that is indispensable to this image of saintliness”.¹³ This monk, Thamanya Hsayadaw, redistributes gifts to other actors: monks, nuns and novices who have a similar monastic status, and in this transaction, reciprocity is not expected from them. That is, recipient monks, nuns and novices are not bound in any way to give back to the host monk. By offering gifts to them, Thamanya Hsayadaw proclaims himself as a patron and giver, which explicitly declares his superiority over other monks.

Offering or conducting *seva*, either in the form of redistributing gifts to other renouncers as we have seen in the context of Myanmar, or in various forms through services given to gurus as in the context of Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM), is done without any expectation of return.¹⁴ In contrast, I argue that in the Vaishnava community, *sadhu seva* implies a reciprocal relationship between the renouncer and householders, and

¹³ Guillaume Rozenberg, *Renunciation and power: The quest for sainthood in contemporary Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2010), 99.

¹⁴ Warrier, "The Seva ethic and the spirit of institution building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission."

between the renouncer and other renouncers. To them, it is a service that raises expectations of reciprocity, reward, protection or patronage. In that context, the renouncer-householder relationship is not unilateral, but involves a reciprocal mode of exchange. In addition, the exchange patterns among renouncers are also reciprocal, and once a renouncer offers the material and immaterial gifts to his fellow sadhus, he expects return gifts from them. Likewise, renouncers who receive are willing to give something back in return. Host sadhus expect that sadhu-participants will contribute some work to their feast, and guest sadhus expect that the host will come to their *sadhu sevas* in return.

Among the sadhus I studied, organising a *sadhu seva* is a must for most of them. Amongst 32 regular members and 11 irregular members, only five sadhus did not organise a *sadhu seva*.¹⁵ The rest, who were either single or with partners, managed to organise their own *sadhu seva* at least once a year. The sadhus who regularly organise *sadhu sevas* appear to be revered and trusted by the community. In contrast, sadhus who never organise a *sadhu seva* are less revered and remain at low rank. They usually have no disciples and/or followers and some of them are treated only as entertainers for the group.

A Vaishnava *sadhu seva* is privately organised by sadhus who own their ashram. Accordingly, the size of a Vaishnava *sadhu seva* is smaller than a *seva* organised by a big *arkara* where many sadhus live and are managed by sadhus, the lay community and the local authority. This is partly because a Vaishnava ashram is a private ashram where only one or two sadhus reside. Hosts may get some support from the lay community and/or

¹⁵ One is a single female who lives in her guru's ashram and four are single male sadhus, amongst them one lives with the guru and the others live on their own.

their disciples, but they run the feast and have to take complete responsibility for every matter in regard to their *sadhu seva*.

6.2 Process of *sadhu seva*

As a *sadhu seva* is the way in which sadhus redistribute gifts they receive from the community, the money and other resources spent on conducting the event are mainly obtained from alms collection. Some ingredients collected as alms, such as bean grains, will be preserved dry and used during the feast. Some items or goods will be traded for other goods, and others will be sold for money. There are two types of *sadhu seva* conducted in the Vaishnava Birbhum community. These are organised according to the number of days of the ceremony; there are one-day and three-day *sevas*.

6.2.1 One-day *sadhu seva*

A one-day *sadhu seva* is not paid as much attention as a three-day *sadhu seva* due to the number of participants and resources required for organising it. In a one-day *seva*, the participants are usually villagers and sadhu fellows who live near the ashram, with a maximum of about 100 villagers and five to ten sadhus participating. Sadhu hosts usually spend 2,000-5,000 Indian Rupees (US\$ 30–70) on a one-day feast. The hosts do not need to give *dakshina* to guest sadhus, but they need to feed them while they participate in the feast. The date to organise a day *seva* is flexible, depending on the host's preference. However, it is usually organised whenever the hosts have surplus goods or cash so that they can share these with others. For example, they may have abundant rice grains and sweets (sugar lumps) collected as alms or too much fruit and too many vegetables in the

garden. If their garden has too many jackfruits and they cannot consume all of them, they will, therefore, use this occasion to offer *seva* to their close neighbours. In a one-day *sava*, three to five meals are served to the guests; breakfast, tea/snacks, lunch, tea/snacks and dinner, especially to guest sadhus. Usually, there is no *kirtan* singing or any particular worship during a one-day *seva*. Laypeople who participate do not expect any exceptional services or meals, and they are not requested to make any contributions to this *seva*. However, some devotees may voluntarily contribute some money to the feast.

The giving of sadhus in their one-day *seva* seems to be free from any expectation of return, but this giving should not be counted as a free gift. It seems to me that the willingness to give through *sevas* has its foundation in reciprocal exchange. Most of the goods distributed to guests are from donations received from laypeople. It appears that such *sevas* pave the way for other support, patronage and protection that sadhus are willing to receive from the lay community. ND Baba's ashram is a good example of such a reciprocal relationship. ND Baba always goes for alms in different communities. It is claimed that he is the most hardworking sadhu in terms of alms-collecting and loves organising *sadhu sevas*. He organises one three-day *seva* and at least four one-day *sevas* annually. Giving to the community or, in other words, "return gifts", allows him to become revered. He is respected by the villagers, and they always support him in many areas. For example, the villagers requested a budget from the authorities to refurbish his ashram and erect a new building to accommodate at least 50 sadhus during *sadhu seva*. His ashram was a pioneer ashram in that area, which receives financial support from the local government. Whenever there is money from the authorities to give to elderly people, they put his name on the list, though his sadhu status could disqualify him. The support and protection ND Baba receive from the community seem to be a gift offered in

return for his generosity, which requires another return gift from him. Such a reciprocal relationship illustrates the infinite support the two realms give to each other, but the support is meant to end whenever either party stops giving.

It is worth noting that some sadhus, particularly single female sadhus, organise a one-day *seva* with the same goal as a three-day *seva*. This is because single sadhus do not have the means to organise big *sevas*; accordingly, a one-day *seva* organised by a single sadhu serves a different purpose from one organised by a sadhu couple. This means that while the latter is informal, the former is formal, and focuses on the heart of *sadhu seva*, i.e. detachment and devotion. This one-day *seva* is made formal in that the date of the *seva* is fixed according to the date of the deceased person they want to commemorate. It may be their late guru or a family member. Some hosts may have people to sing *kirtan* and perform dances, though the performances will be shorter than at a three-day *seva*.

6.2.2 Three-day *sadhu seva*

Unlike a one-day *seva*, a three-day *sadhu seva* needs to be prepared in advance. The main preparation for *sadhu seva*, claimed by sadhus, is financial. They are of the opinion that a *sadhu seva* cannot be performed without an adequate amount of funds. A few months before as *sadhu seva*, the sadhus will go out on alms collection almost every day, except Thursdays, in order to collect enough resources. In general, sadhus are less likely to beg from their neighbouring communities. They say that their neighbouring communities are like family and begging from family is considered inappropriate or even prohibited by Vaishnava gurus. However, for the occasion of a *seva*, they beg in their own and neighbouring communities a few days before the feast. They also take this chance to convey details of the *seva* and invite villagers to participate. This invitation, on

the other hand, implies that villagers have to offer more than their usual donations. But villagers do not seem to hesitate to give to sadhus more than usual if they are informed that the alms round is for conducting a *sadhu seva*. In general, neighbouring villages, that know the ashram well, join the feast and usually give at least one kilogram of rice grains and 10 rupees each. The wealthier give more, some give up to a total of 2,000 Indian rupees (US\$ 30). The main good they receive from alms is rice grains, which are traded for other goods, such as spices, sugar, cooking oil or vegetables, or they sell them for money. The money is used for buying fish, sweets, fruit or garments, or giving *dakshina* to guest sadhus. The sadhus told me that the main expense was for *dakshina*, normally offered in cash and/or garments.

It should be noted here that *dakshina* is usually given to sadhus when householders visit the ashram or when a sadhu visits their home. In the case of sadhus visiting the ashram, the host sadhu gives *dakshina* to guest sadhus. In the *seva* context, *dakshina* is given in two different ways, and the giver is a person who owes a gratitude to their recipients. That is to say, a person who gives *dakshina* seems to be indebted to their recipients. *Dakshina* is given to guest sadhus by host sadhus on the one hand, and on the other it is given to sadhu hosts by lay participants. That is, sadhu hosts show their gratitude to guest sadhus for their participation in the feast. Also, lay participants show their gratitude to host sadhus for offering them food.

Most renouncers look forward to organising a three-day *sadhu seva* once a year, if not once in a lifetime for some renouncers. For a new sadhu couple, organising a *sadhu seva* is their first milestone as renouncers. While sadhus organise a one-day *seva* as often as they can, a three-day *seva* is organised only once a year. This is because organising a big

seva consumes time, energy and resources, and sadhus have to spend as long as a year to obtain enough resources for their three-day feast.

To organise a three-day *seva*, a sadhu has to spend about 25,000-50,000 Indian Rupees (US\$ 360–720) to cover expenses. In addition, the expenses for a *sadhu seva* increase every year, which is partly due to the social meaning it confers. Renouncers believe that the number of participants reflects their greatness, and it results in their fame and high position in the community. That is, a sadhu organising big *sevas* shows his supremacy over other sadhus and even over the lay community. However, a big *sadhu seva* is more expensive and the hosts are expected to contribute more than usual by the participants. The status and fame of the guests also reflect on the hosts' social reputation. It appears that having famous sadhus, well-known devotees or foreigners at the *sadhu seva* helps to enhance the popularity of the hosts. Outsiders will think that the hosts must be good sadhus and have many connections, so famous people show respect by participating in their *seva*. The participation of Sadhan Das Baul, the famous Baul Brahmin Vaishnava, and his Japanese partners and disciples at GS Baba and AN Baba's *seva* created a phenomenon, which drew the attention of other participants. They were of the view that GS Baba and AN Baba were 'big' (famous and senior) sadhus (*bara sadhus*), so that other famous sadhus like Sadhan Das would come to their *seva*.

The date to organise a three-day *sadhu seva* is usually fixed by the date of death of a guru or sometimes the date of death of a late sadhu partner. For sadhus whose gurus are still alive, the date is depends on the personal preference of the host sadhu. However, wintertime is usually chosen for practical reasons, since the weather is not too hot, cold, dry or wet. It also allows participants from afar to travel to the ashram easily and stay at the ashram with less inconvenience. In addition, vegetables are cheaper and there is more

variety than in other seasons. Villagers also have more surpluses to give, thus they give sadhus more resources to prepare for the feast.

With regard to time, it appears that many of the Vaishnava I studied do not follow Bengali traditional practice. That is, lunar and solar times, which claim auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, play less role or even no role at all for sadhus organising a *sadhu seva*. If the chosen day matches their requirement – the date when their guru passed away – even if that day of the year is not an auspicious one, they will not postpone or change it.¹⁶ This idea in regard to time points to their unconventional Vaishnava attitude, suggesting taking their own decisions in choosing what they think is best for them. For sadhus, every day is an auspicious day for hosting a *seva* (*sab din subhodin*), so in theory they can host one on any day.

The first day of a three-day *sadhu seva*, called *agamani din*, is the reception when guest renunciators arrive at the ashram. The host welcomes them, offering drinking water and sweets made from coconuts and sugar. The feet of the guest sadhus are washed by the host and the water used for washing their feet is regarded as sacred, so it is publicly sipped by the host, who then puts it on her head for its auspiciousness and to show respect. However, if the hosts are senior sadhus, their disciples or lay devotees take over these duties. The water used to wash the feet of senior members is consumed by all the junior sadhus, although they do not perform the duty of welcoming guest sadhus.

¹⁶ According to Hindu tradition, different times bring different implications, particularly in terms of auspiciousness. For example, in the study of Srinivas, having a baby boy does not always bring auspiciousness to the family. Rather, if a baby is born at the wrong time, he will bring inauspiciousness to the family. See Srinivas, *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India*. Similarly, in the study of Marglin, the *devadasis* perform at the temple only at a particular time in order to bring auspiciousness to the community. See Marglin, *Wives of the God-King : the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*.

Guest sadhus are then brought into the ‘sleeping’ area, which is also what sadhus use for eating, socialising and so on. The sleeping area is prepared for all sadhus, usually made from a temporary tent or dome where all guest sadhus are accommodated together. Sadhus who participate in a *sadhu seva* bring their own blankets and sleeping sets. The sleeping area is marked by seniority, which means the most senior sadhus get the best places, usually in the middle of the dome, and junior ones are given places at the edge of the dome.

The second day is the ‘real’ *seva* day (*motchop din*), when laypeople join in. *Kirtan* is sung from morning till night. Meals are provided all day to every participating sadhu and layperson. While householders are expected to join only for lunch, sadhus are provided as many as five meals a day. Food is the key element of this day, which is not only free, but also regarded as auspicious. There are three types of food cooked and offered during a *sadhu seva*: one for the deity (for their late gurus or Krishna and Radha),¹⁷ another for participating sadhus, and then one for householders. Food for the deity is prepared by a sadhu, it consists of a variety of fruits, puffed rice, sugar and milk. After the deity is offered food, the leftovers are called *prasad*, which is sacred food or ‘blessing’ given back by deity. All the ingredients of *prasad* are mixed together and distributed to every participant. Everyone loves to have *prasad*, not only because it is regarded as God’s blessing, but also because it comprises sweet and delicious snacks made from good quality and expensive ingredients.

Meals offered apart from *prasad* are full Bengali vegetarian set, starting with unlimited amounts of rice, salt and chillies, lentil soup (*dal*), stir-fried vegetables (*sabji*),

¹⁷ Some ashrams whose gurus are still alive ignore this practice, claiming that this type of worship is similar to icon worship, which is not prescribed for Vaishnava.

curry (*tarkari*), sour dish (*tak*), sweet rice with milk (*payes*) and sweets (*misty*). The villagers usually cannot afford to have such full meals in their daily life and some of them bring food containers to take food home for their family who cannot join the feast. It is noteworthy that the food has to be distributed by a qualified person, starting with cooked rice and ending with sweets. For ashrams that have strict rules, each food item has to be allocated to the right place on the leaf plate. For example, rice and lentil soup have to go in the middle of the plate, then other foods are placed, starting on the left side and finishing on the right. That is, salt and chillies are placed first on the left, followed by stir-fried vegetables (*sabji*), curry (*tarkari*), sour dish (*tak*) and sweet rice with milk (*payes*), with sweets (*misty*) at the far right.

The quality and quantity of food represents the reputation of the host renunciators, and that affects the level of donations they will receive from donors during the following year. Accordingly, the hosts try their best to offer the best ingredients to their guests. The dishes offered to their guests, whether they are householders or renunciators, need to be delicate and tasty, but they also need to be pure, containing no pollution, especially from the lower castes. This means that food (for householders) needs to be cooked by sadhus themselves, Brahmins or Vaishnava who have formally taken initiation. This is to make sure that every caste member can participate in a *seva* without having to worry about becoming polluted. AN Baba told me that food cooked by lower castes hinders Brahmins and other higher castes participating in a feast, which in return gives a negative reputation to the hosts.

The food are not only cooked by high caste people or sadhus, but also need to be served by sadhus, high caste members or Vaishnavas. However, this practice is flexible depending on the participants and communities around the ashrams. In some ashrams, it

is compulsory that the food servers are members of high castes or sadhus. In ashrams such as that of AN Baba where lay people are tribal people, servers do not need to be from a high caste, they can be anyone who is willing to serve. It is mostly men who serve food to householders because serving food to many hundreds of people is indeed hard work. In some communities, the number of high caste members is low and then villagers accept anyone who is willing to do the job for them.

The food items served to sadhus and householders are normally the same. However, food dishes for renouncers need to be cooked and served only by sadhus. Their dining area is separated from that of the householders and sadhus are served before householders. In case the dining areas for sadhus and householders are close to each other, householders need to make sure that they do not eat or move from the dining area before sadhus. Among the sadhus, the most senior members have their meals first, and then the less senior ones, and the most junior ones are served last in the hierarchy. Once the most junior sadhu has taken his/her first bite, then the householders can start eating.



Figure 6.1 Serving food at the *sadhu seva*

While the food is prepared, *kirtan* and Baul songs are performed. Many sadhus and devotees take part in performing, either as singers or dancers, along with the music. The *kirtan* is mainly about their devotion to Lord Krishna and the most popular *kirtan* is three singular vocative cases, i.e. Hare, Krishna and Rama. Baul songs are also sung in such an event, mostly for the purpose of entertainment rather than for enhancing religious sentiments. The *sadhu sevas* of some Vaishnavas, such as Gaudiya, consist of singing and telling the story of Krishna or *kartabhajan*,¹⁸ but the Vaishnavas I studied did not perform *kartabhajan*. They did not give any particular reasons as to why they only sang a few *kirtans*. ND Baba told me that a *seva* is dedicated to gurus, but *kartabhajan* is about

¹⁸According to Hayes, *Kartabhajan* is a later version of Vaishnava Sahajiya. See Hayes, "Rivers to the Sky."

Krishna who, even though he was the Vaishnavas' god and a respected guru, seemed to be less important than living Vaishnava gurus. This confirmed to me that for Vaishnava sadhus, the god within the living human is more important than an external god, such as Krishna.

Music and food are provided until midnight of the second day and services are resumed the next morning, the last day of a *sadhu seva*, *santi din*. It is called *santi* day because, as explained by SM Ma, every sadhu will be connected (*yugal*) and eat good food (a lot of fish and sweets). The last day is the day when most sadhus are expected to leave, and its purpose is to strengthen the relationships among renunciators. On this day, only sadhus, disciples and their close devotees are invited. Renunciators and devotees gather and dance together, replicating the dance of Krishna and Gopis. After that, they touch the feet of their seniors and receive their blessings in return. This is the occasion when sadhu family and kinship are stressed. It seems to me that devotional emotion is aroused through music and this allows every sadhu to become connected to each other and to the divine. Many sadhus cry when they are paying their respects to their seniors by lying down on the floor and kissing or even licking their feet. They hold each other, which symbolically means that they will not let each other be led astray from the spiritual path.



Figure 6.2 The peaceful day; dancing with Radha and Krishna

After the dancing, all the sadhus and devotees have lunch, which is always a fish dish. Lunch on the third day is usually the last meal provided by the hosts. They told me that fish, the most expensive ingredient, is served by the hosts to show their appreciation and gratitude to their guests. After finishing lunch, sadhus take a nap, and then set off back to their ashrams in the evening. Before leaving the ashram, the hosts give all guests *dakshina*, a return gift offered to guest sadhus. *Dakshina* consists of money and/or garments. A high amount of *dakshina* relates to the status of host sadhus. If only a small amount of money is spent on *dakshina*, the hosts can lose face, especially if they are a senior sadhu couple. It is worth noting that the meaning of *dakshina* has been changed from time to time. However, the most common meaning is that of a 'service fee' for

Brahmin priests.¹⁹ In the Baul context, Hanssen described *dakshina* as a parting gift that one receives before leaving.²⁰ That is, when Baul performers finish their show, the host pays a fee (*dakshina*) to them before they leave. I suggest that *dakshina* can be interpreted as return gifts, given by host sadhus to guest sadhus in return for their participation. When sadhus visit the ashram, SW Ma said, their visit is considered an auspicious gift. In return for their participation, the host gives *dakshina* when a sadhu guest leaves the ashram. *Dakshina* can be spent for travelling expenses, noting that sadhus who visit the ashram usually travel from afar and thus need some means for travelling.

6.3 Transactions during a *sadhu seva*

Ideally speaking, *sadhu seva* is meant to be a means for a sadhu to detach himself from the material and transient world. Indeed, some sadhus show their willingness to ‘disown’ any material items by redistributing what they have received back to the community. However, there are sadhus who take this opportunity, i.e. redistributing gifts, to attract more gifts from donors and devotees. Organising *seva* was once criticised by a middle-class Bengali, Bhaktivinoda Thakur, as an inappropriate practice since it allows sadhus to touch money and become attached to material values.²¹ This implies that organising a *sadhu seva* involves monetary transactions and it is not only a means to return gifts to the community, but also a means to obtain more gifts from the people. It is evident that many

¹⁹ Romila Thapar, *Cultural pasts: Essays in early Indian history* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press New Delhi, 2000).

²⁰ Hanssen, *Women, religion, and the body in South Asia : living with Bengali Bauls*.

²¹ Fuller, "Re-memembering the Tradition: Bhaktivinoda Thakura's 'Sajjanatosani' and the Construction of a Middle-Class Vaisnava Sampradaya in Nineteenth-Century Bengal," 197-200.

sadhus have surplus money after organising *sevas*. This can result in new items or facilities being bought each year, such as a smartphone, gas stove, blender, hand-water pump or even tap water. Reciprocal transactions, in the next section, confirm that a gift as well as *seva* in the Vaishnava context is not free, but reciprocal, and ultimately expects some kind of return.

6.3.1 Transactions between sadhus

Gifts exchanged between sadhus appear to be reciprocal as the recipient is expected to give a return gift to the giver in order to maintain a good relationship. This transaction seems to be a balanced one in which members, irrespective of their roles and statuses, are required to reciprocate an initial gift in different ways. A *sadhu seva* is a clear example of how transactions among sadhus operate. In a *seva*, the host sadhu acts as the giver who gives food to other sadhus and lay people. At the same time, it is said that the host is also a receiver. S/he receives the generosity of guest sadhus who respond to their invitation, and their presence at the ashram brings auspiciousness and blessings to the hosts. Sadhus who participate in a *seva* are not just receivers. They contribute their time and support the cooking, worship the divine and interact with lay householders. There is an expectation to receive gifts from both parties: host sadhus and guest sadhus. Host sadhus expect guest sadhus to contribute some work to the event – cooking, serving, preparing food for God, singing and dancing to *kirtan*, and interacting with householders – and in return for their participation and contribution to the *seva*, the host sadhu offers *dakshina* to all guest sadhus.

In addition, guest sadhus expect the host sadhu to come to their *sadhu sevas* in return, and it is considered inappropriate if hosts ignore the guests' invitation. If a sadhu misses

the feast of his/her fellows without a proper reason, there is the possibility that they will stop coming to his in the following year. In this way, participation in each other's feasts helps to keep the sadhu community operating smoothly, keeping it alive and making sure that sadhus meet regularly and share their lives and experiences with each other.

6.3.2 Transactions between sadhus and laypeople

In a *sadhu seva*, the act of giving is a primary role of hosts. However, giving, or in other words 'redistributing gifts', is made possible by receiving gifts from householders and devotees. Thus, the giving practice of sadhus affirms that gifts are circulated within and redistributed back to the Vaishnava community. It also suggests that sadhus are givers, not just parasites on society. Redistributing or offering gifts to both lay and sadhu communities through the practice of *sadhu seva* expects return support in both monetary and nonmonetary forms.

The transaction first starts with sadhus who collect alms from householders, then they redistribute what they have received back to the lay community in the form of food offered during feasts. In return for the sadhus' generosity, lay participants offer *dakshina* to the sadhus. In this context, *dakshina* seems to be offered as a custom in which the laity, when visiting ashrams, have to offer a fee in return for sadhus' teaching or generosity. I was told that although the food offered to the guests is truly free of charge, the hosts need to make sure that their guests are satisfied. Satisfaction of the guests is pivotal because that determines if the *sadhu seva* at the ashram was successful. If lay people are happy with what they have been offered, *sadhu seva* could be a means to attract more monetary support from householders. It appears that devotees, especially well-to-do ones, who appreciate the contribution of sadhus tend to give large amounts of money to support

sadhu sevas. In my study, most villagers although from different villages were from lower castes, and some were farmers or day labourers. Their means of donation during the *sadhu seva* thus depended on their earnings and careers. If they were farmers, they would donate rice grains, potatoes and cash, from 1 to 10 rupees. If it was a day labourer, he only donated cash (1–10 rupees) because many day workers did not own land to cultivate, thus they had no grains to offer. If they had a decent job, they were likely to donate cash from 50 to 500 rupees, depending on their income and position. Some villagers who had no other means to give offered their help in cleaning the ashram during the *seva*, for which sadhus gave them some money. It should be noted that when the ashram organises a feast, villagers are likely to make a donation twice: once when the sadhus come for alms to their homes a few days before the feast, this donation is called *dan*. The second occasion is when they come to the feast, either before or after they eat, and they make another donation, which is called *dakshina*. It should be noted that in this context offering *dan* and *dakshina* both are voluntary action. In addition, there are *bhadralok* patrons who come to the *sadhu sevas* organised by famous or senior gurus. These *bhadralok* generally offer 2,000–5,000 Indian rupees to host sadhus. The large amounts of money they offer are an incentive for many sadhus to find a wealthy *bhadralok* patron.

The patronage and protection given by the community are significant for sadhus, especially for new sadhus and single female sadhus who are insecure in their position of renunciation. However, householders (like sadhus themselves) are not certain if these sadhus are as authentic as their senior members. Accordingly, organising a *sadhu seva* is one of the ways that sadhus demonstrate to the lay community that they are indeed authentic sadhus who strictly follow the ascetic tradition. Once sadhus have proved their

authenticity or shown their strong will to commit to the renunciant path, laypeople support them and treat them as worthy sadhus.

6.4 Gender practice during a *sadhu seva*

When I walked into the venue of a *sadhu seva*, I often saw two familiar pictures of sadhus. On one side I would see a group of male sadhus chatting and smoking hashish, and on the other side I would see a group of female sadhus busying themselves with preparing meals for the feast. Since there are about five meals a day to be prepared, most female renunciators' time is spent in the kitchen area. A few female sadhus stay in charge to cook, and the rest, including female devotees, help to prepare cooking ingredients and clean cooking utensils. Most, if not all, female sadhus never complain about their work at the *seva*. It seems to me that female sadhus enjoy their roles and are very willing to do the work. While preparing food, they chat and joke around, and devotees learn sadhu language from them as some of their words are different from those of householders. For example, cooked rice is *bhat* for householders, but *on-no* for renunciators, and to cut is *chhalao* for householders but *bannabo* for renunciators, and so on.

Food and serving it are significant components of *sadhu seva*. Offering good quality and sufficient amounts of food implies the satisfaction and admiration of the participants and results in a good reputation for the hosts. And since female renunciators and devotees are the key people of food transactions, accordingly they are essential for the success of a *sadhu seva*. In accordance with the study of Wood, which claims that women are key members who maintain religious food customs, in my study, it is women who maintain

Vaishnava food customs, especially in regard to purity.²² Their devotion to food practice helps to maintain religious food practices. They make sure that the ingredients and food that they have been preparing are sufficient and meet the necessary standard of purity so that every sadhu can consume food without any concern for impurity. Vaishnava women seem to regard their control of food as a means to have a direct connection to God, as they always mentioned to me that cooking was about doing *seva*. When they cooked they did service to God, they devoted themselves to the divine. Bynum states that food is a means for women's religious piety. She adds that, "food becomes such a pervasive concern that it provides both a literary and psychological unity to the women's way of seeing the world".²³ That is, according to her study, women's lives and writings are interwoven with food motifs.

The *seva's* hosts, who are usually a sadhu couple, have a particular role to play in the *sadhu seva*. During the 14 *sadhu sevas* I attended, I observed how women performed major roles in the process of organisation as well as the preparation of food. A female practitioner, as either host or participant, appears to contribute more to the feast than her male partner. The host couple start by collecting alms and exchanging them for money and ingredients for food preparation. The female host prepares the cooking materials. She, together with other female sadhus, cooks every meal during the *seva*, distributes and serves cooked food to the participants, as well as cleaning up after they finish eating. The male host is mostly in charge of alms collection, exchanging collected materials for

²² Wood, "Divine Appetites: Food Miracles, Authority and Religious Identities in the Gujarati Hindu Diaspora."

²³ Bynum, "Fast, feast, and flesh: The religious significance of food to medieval women," 4.

resources for organising the feast (this seems to be the main responsibility of the sadhubaba) and welcoming the guests as well as checking if they are enjoying the *seva*.

Female practitioners who come as guests help the female host prepare and serve the food to other guests. The male guests help with distributing food to other sadhu participants, but this is mostly taken care of by the female sadhus. It seems to me that most male renunciators engage in conversation with other male guests, exchange opinions about topics that concern them, including *sadhana* to their male peers, and contribute to teaching Vaishnava philosophy to younger sadhus and disciples who come to them. Some sit in groups, smoke marijuana and wait to be served food. Others who are good at singing sing *kirtans* or Baul songs at the venue. However, in terms of contributing to the feast, women are the main contributors.

With regard to participation, it seems to me that in the *sadhu seva* context, men and women are almost equal. Exclusion from the *seva*, if there is any exclusion at all, is not because of one's gender, but due to one's unacceptable behaviour. The practice of seniority observed in the *sadhu seva* context is not dependent on one's gender but on the length of one's service as a sadhu. If a female sadhu has been a sadhu longer than her guru brothers or male sadhus from other lineages, she will be respected by them and will be served first. That is, a male renouncer, even if he is a highly respected guru, has to pay respect to a female who is more senior than him, even though she may not be a well-known and respected guru. Unlike the Saiva tradition context studied by Hamaya, where female lay ascetics are excluded from begging and struggle to get an invitation to such a

feast, female renouncers in the Vaishnava tradition always get an invitation and they contribute actively to *sadhu sevas*.²⁴



Figure 6.3 Paying Respect; the senior male guru pays respect to his guru sister

Female practitioners consider that organising or hosting a *sadhu seva* is their essential religious practice. The data I collected during fieldwork tell me that every single female renouncer in the Birbhum community is obliged to organise a one-day *sadhu seva* at least once a year. They told me that *sadhu sevas* brought them *santi*, which literally means ‘peace’. For single female sadhus, organising a *sadhu seva* seems to be the only way to attain liberation or *santi* as their word.

Knowing that most single female renouncers are struggling economically to sustain their lives on their own, there is no requirement for them to organise a *sadhu seva*.

²⁴ Hamaya, "The circle of gift giving: a case study of female ‘lay ascetics’ and holy feasts in Haridwar, North India."

However, they see this service – organising feasts – not only as a path to liberation, but also to gain support from their community. Thus, the *sadhu seva* seems to be a tool for single female renunciators to secure their renunciator status, allowing them to inform the community that they are following renunciator path, even though they have no male partners to protect and support them.

In my study, I interviewed five single female and three single male sadhus. All five female sadhus managed to host at least one, or as many as three, one-day *sadhu sevas* every year. In contrast, male sadhus did not organise any *sadhu sevas* and merely participated in the *sevas* of their peers. These single male sadhus told me that their reasons to opt out of organising *sadhu sevas* were: poor health, being single, being a man.

On the other hand, the five single female sadhus told me that even though some were old and perhaps unwell, it was their duty (*niyam*) to organise a feast. If they could not afford to host one, their mind would not be at peace (*santi*). So organising a feast, whether big or small, was essential for their socio-religious identity. It seems to me that one of reasons why these single female renunciators were committed to giving back to their community more than those male renunciators was due to their female gender, with their natural inclination to give and nurture others. In addition, women are seen as the second sex in Indian culture, making them dependent on men in order to gain social status. Accordingly, giving to the community is a means they use to negotiate their position, become accepted and secure themselves as legitimate renunciators. As we have seen, single female sadhus have no male partners to practise esoteric rituals with, therefore, they have to find other ways to achieve their religious goals. The act of giving or selfless service through *sadhu sevas* is thus used as an alternative practice, which acts as a form of compensation in place of performing esoteric rituals. In contrast, male renunciators do

not need to endure the same pressure as females since their gender already makes them revered in public. Their maleness provides them with an advantageous position as they are revered even without the robe. They seem to believe that being a man and a holy person, or in other words a 'godlike human', allows them to engage with society in a balanced way. Like a god, they do not have to give back any tangible return, only blessings. Therefore, single male renunciators put less effort into giving back to their communities by conducting *sadhu sevas*.

6.5 *Sadhu sevas* and sadhu networking

As I argued in Chapter 3, the sadhus in my study are not renunciators who live completely outside the world. Their actual world, on the contrary, is formed in parallel to the householders' world. Family and kinship are formed through the guru lineage instead of the blood lineage of kith and kin. However, to be connected through a guru lineage, it is necessary for members of the lineage to have some other social ties and conducting *sadhu sevas* creates effective ties that sustain and strengthen the relationship among sadhus of the same lineage and community.²⁵ In a *sadhu seva*, sadhus spend time together, eating the same food, sleeping in the same place, and gathering to salute their guru and Radha-Krishna. The emotions created by being together and belonging to the same lineage and community are constantly pronounced, especially on the last day of the feast. In addition, since *sadhu sevas* are organised by different ashrams throughout the year, sadhus are regularly reminded of their kinship with their guru and guru brothers, invoking a sense of

²⁵ Other effective ties such as sharing or ingesting each other's bodily fluids. See Jha, "Cari-candra bhed: Use of the four moons."

belonging. In this way, the relationships and kinship of sadhus in the Birbhum community are sustained and maintained.

A sadhu seva creates a site where sadhus can socialise and network with other sadhus and lay people. It is also a chance for them to make new friends and attract new devotees. In my observation, sadhus in the Birbhum community are often invited to *sadhu sevas* by sadhus from other communities. For example, AN Baba's new ashram is located in Santiniketan and other ashrams in the Birbhum community are located nearby. When he organised a three-day *sadhu seva* for the first time, he invited 20 sadhus from the Birbhum community to show his respect to local sadhus. His lineage originally came from another region and he had guru brothers and sisters who lived in other regions who participated in his *seva*. AN Baba has also been friends with sadhus from the Malda and Murshidabad communities, so he invited 30 sadhus from his original lineage and 20 of his friends from Malda and Murshidabad. In total, AN Baba hosted almost 100 sadhus for his first three-day *sadhu seva*. In their tradition, sadhus from different lineages or other localities have to pay respect to other sadhus they do not know every morning during a three-day *sadhu seva*. Via this practice of paying respect, VN Baba made friends with sadhus from other regions. He visited their ashrams after the *seva*, and in return, they visited his ashram. They became friends and went on pilgrimage together. Also, the guru of his friends invited him to his *sadhu seva*. This practice of inviting each other to their *sevas* seems to help the Vaishnava sadhus expand their network, and it shows that sadhus do not only belong to one community, they can become members of other communities through participation in others' *sadhu sevas* on a regular basis.

6.5.1 Recruiting Devotees

A *sadhu seva* is a site where senior sadhus attract disciples and devotees. In layman's language, participants 'go shopping' for a potential guru. From my participation in *sadhu sevas*, I observed that devotees who looked for a guru were usually non-locals. Sadhus meet people at *sadhu sevas* organised by other sadhu communities and invite them to come to their own *sadhu sevas*. They may be invited by devotees or disciples of the hosts. I learned from my fieldwork experience that if a disciple recruited more new disciples for his guru, particularly from the middle-caste or even foreigners, that disciple was praised and became his guru's favourite disciple. During one *sadhu seva*, those who knew that I did not yet have a guru tried to convince me that their guru was the best guru so that I should become his disciple. They seemed to believe that having a guru brother or sister from a well-educated and/or middle-class background helped them to raise their social status. They were more likely to mention their guru brother or sister who came from a higher social position than one who was from a low-caste background. The gurus themselves also appeared proud to have disciples from higher society, since that promoted their reputations. Moreover, having disciples from better social backgrounds implicitly affirmed that sadhus received more income from *dakshina*. They believed that well-to-do disciples had more means to offer them than poorer ones.

It appears that the Vaishnava tradition is introduced through *sadhu sevas* to tribal villagers who do not share the same beliefs as them. AN Baba's *sadhu seva* is an example of how tribal villagers become Vaishnava followers as a result of taking part. AN Baba's ashram is located in a tribal village (*adibhashi gram*) where most of the

population are from the Santal tribe.²⁶ When AN Baba went collecting alms for the first time in their community, two days before his *sadhu seva*, he explained to every Santal household that his ashram was going to organise a *sadhu seva* and needed some support from the villagers. He also asked a few trustworthy villagers to beg with him and explained his *sadhu seva* in Santal language. Many villagers did not understand this practice and were not familiar with the practice of giving for *seva*. So the first time AN Baba invited Santal villagers to have a meal at his feast, not many villagers came and a lot of food was left uneaten.

However, the second year was different. Most villagers now knew AN Baba, his ashram and *sadhu seva*. When I went to beg with him this time, there was no need to tell them to give. They brought rice, vegetables and money when they heard us singing in front of their doors. In addition, having my participation in the alms collection and serving them food in both years, in the second year many more villagers came to have a meal at the *seva*. All of them were the same villagers whom we begged from in the first year. It turned out that there was not enough food for the villagers in the second year and a group of *sadhus* had to cook more rice and other kinds of food for them.

The example of AN Baba's *sadhu seva* provides us with a picture of how the Vaishnava tradition is extended through *sadhu sevas*. Similarly, VN Baba's ashram, although located in a village where the majority population are Hindus, also encountered similar problems when they first organised a *sadhu seva*. Most villagers who came to eat at the feast did not offer any help to organise the *seva*, besides making some donations. However, after they came to know each other through the *seva*, leaders of the village gave

²⁶ Santals worship *Marang buru* (spirit) as the Supreme Deity. They are of the view that by making offerings to the deity, their inauspiciousness will be warded off.

them more support. They planned the *seva* and went for *madhukari* with SM Ma in nearby villages. In addition, the ashram received the cooperation of village committees. Now, the villagers seem to regard this *seva* as their own community's *seva* and some of them who had been working closely with VN Baba became devotees (*bhakta*) of VN Baba.

It seems to me that *sadhu seva* is an entry point that leads villagers into the Vaishnava tradition. Laypeople appear to admire 'the selfless service' that sadhus offer to the community every year. This admiration gives rise to the devotion they show towards sadhus. In every village where the ashrams of Birbhum sadhus are located, there were disciples or devotees who became Vaishnava followers due to their appreciation of the sadhus' selfless service they witnessed by taking part in *sadhu seva*. One of ND Baba's disciples said that her guru was a 'true' giver and she chose him to be her guru because of that generous quality in him.

The practice of *sadhu seva* is a means through which sadhus expand their network and influence in their community. Sadhus who host *sevas* and redistribute gifts from various sources to other sadhus and laypeople show their detachment from 'this-worldly' and their devotion to the renunciant path. Many sadhus claim that hosting a *sadhu seva* sometimes requires more resources than what they already have. Nonetheless, they still invest whatever they have in order to demonstrate to the community that they are authentic sadhus. The result of this selfless service is worth more than anything else because of the reciprocal transactions generated among communities. It allows both parties – givers and recipients – to have a seemingly balanced exchange in which the one who gives is expected to receive and the one who receives is expected to give. Female renouncers have a dominant role in the cycle of giving because of their caring nature, and

their lower status in the communal hierarchy can be lifted by giving service to others. Gender as practised in devotional feasts highlights the apparent equality between male and female renunciators. Indeed, female renunciators have many disadvantages due to their gender, but they are not excluded from these public events due to their gender. On the contrary, the success of a feast, and the social reputation of the organisers, seems to largely depend on the work of female renunciators.

Chapter 7 Women in Vaishnava Renunciation

The previous chapters have explored women's religious space within different religious practices that are significant for practitioners' liberation. This chapter will focus on women and renunciation, how women describe their renunciation and what Vaishnava renunciation brings to their lives. Renunciation has been a subject of interest for Indologists and anthropologists of South Asia for decades. Dumont's seminal anthropological work on this topic states the traditional view that the option of renunciation is confined to upper-caste males.¹ However, his work was written from the perspective of the Brahmin householder and Brahminical textual sources.² These sources led to the notion of Hindu renunciation being the prerogative of upper-caste males, and the portrayal of the renouncer as an 'individual outside the world'.³ Subsequent scholarship has argued, on the contrary, that the origins of renouncers are far more heterogeneous, at least in West Bengal, the majority of renouncers are of low-caste origin, and they include many women within their ranks.⁴

Within the Vaishnava community, women are allowed to become female renouncers and are treated with relative respect. However, it appears that outside the community, female renouncers are generally not perceived as proper sadhus. When they go for alms collection in public, for example, they are often mistaken as widows whose single status

¹ Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian religion."

² Richard Burghart, "Wandering ascetics of the Rāmānandī sect," *History of religions* 22, no. 4 (1983).

³ Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian religion," 46.

⁴ Jeanne Openshaw, "Home or Ashram? The Vaishnavas of Bengal," *Fieldwork in Religion* 2, no. 1 (2007). Renunciation in the Bengali context is discussed in Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 127-39.

is often a source of their marginalisation and subordination.⁵ The ambivalence regarding female sadhus in the Vaishnava tradition reflects the ambiguous status of female ascetics in South Asia. In South Asia, women are generally regarded as having lower status than men of their caste. Simply by being a woman, regardless of her caste, she cannot be twice born,⁶ and so is generally not seen as a legitimate renouncer.

Ethnographic studies show that women who leave their domestic life, abandoning their prescribed female *dharma* to become renouncers, often encounter family objections and criticism from their own community. Having become renouncers, they also encounter problems in more subtle forms, involving structural inequalities.⁷ Khandelwal provides the householders' view, in which she observes female renouncers to be linked to widowhood, whose lives are seen as inauspicious and widows are required to follow the practices of austerity, celibacy, and purity.⁸ It should be noted that in many areas in India, including my fieldwork area of West Bengal, widowhood is unwanted and regarded as inauspiciousness. Narayanan noted the difficult life of widows, mentioning that "life holds nothing for Hindu widows".⁹ Similarly, Hancock points out that in South India, widows are viewed as *amankali*, in other words, 'inauspicious women'.¹⁰ Female renouncers are similar to widows, and especially those who do not have any national or international reputation, their socio-religious existence is almost unrecognised.

⁵ On widows, see Sarah Lamb, "Being a widow and other life stories: The interplay between lives and words," *Anthropology and Humanism* 26, no. 1 (2001).

⁶ Young, "Women in Hinduism," 9.

⁷ Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 198.

⁸ In contrast, female renouncers never link their renunciant lives to widows but to mothers or wives. Khandelwal, "Sexual fluids, emotions, morality: notes on the gendering of Brahmacharya," 192.

⁹ Narayanan, "Hindu perceptions of auspiciousness and sexuality," 78.

¹⁰ Hancock, *Womanhood in the making : domestic ritual and public culture in urban South India*, 125.

It is important to distinguish female renouncers who are in female orders, such as the Ramakrishna Mission, separate from male renouncers, and those female renouncers who are with males, and perhaps even take joint renunciation with them.¹¹ The latter are often regarded as *seva-dasi*, i.e. they are simply there to serve their partners or other male renouncers, sexually and/or otherwise. These women do not live their lives in opposition to normative society, but instead maintain their *stridharma* and perform both householder and renouncer duties in the renunciant domain.

Vijaya Ramaswamy makes the point that woman saints ranged from the rebels who did not follow every social norms and conformists who strictly followed the conventions, and both types of female saints were accepted in the modern Hindu pantheon.¹² In Tantra, female practitioners also ranged from rejection to conformity of domesticity. However, McDaniel argues that female practitioners who are celibate have higher social status than who perform sexo-yogic ritual.¹³ The study of Knight notes that representing one's self as an 'encumbered actor', who is never completely free from social restraints and expectations enables Baul female practitioners to live in the community with respect.¹⁴ I suggest that in the case of Vaishnava female renouncers, being conformist; following social expectations and maintaining their womanhood, even when renouncers, not only provides them with respectability and security in life, but also fulfils their spiritual longing. That being said, Vaishnava female sadhus are homemakers who take

¹¹ Openshaw, "Home or Ashram? The Vaishnavas of Bengal."

¹² Vijaya Ramaswamy, "Rebels—Conformists? Women Saints in Medieval South India," *Anthropos* 87 (1992).

¹³ June McDaniel, "Does tantric ritual empower women? renunciation and domesticity among female Bengali tantrikas," in *Women's lives, women's rituals in the Hindu tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 159.

¹⁴ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*, 6.

full responsibility for their household chores, including nurturing their male partner; and at the same time, they are sadhus who commit themselves to the path of renunciation.

Vaishnava female renouncers seem to be part of a patriarchal system, helping male sadhus to maintain the dominant male tradition. In fact, these women are the gatekeepers of Vaishnava rules and regulations, and they enforce these rules on every member. For example, it is a sadhuma who takes up the role of instructing lay devotees to address a sadhubaba or guru in a proper manner, she maintains food customs and also the sadhu hierarchy. In some cases, it is the sadhuma who supports her male partner's womanising behaviour by finding or supplying more women for him. It is also almost as if the sadhuma acts in collaboration with the dominant power in society, by being subservient and providing service to her male counterpart in exchange for an influence in the community. However, such practice may not be seen as a woman exercising her agency by feminist scholars, although similar behaviour by many women in domestic situations can also be witnessed in Western society. This is because the dependent lifestyle and subordinate role of Vaishnava women are understood as being imposed upon them by the tradition they live in. I, however, argue that their seeming acquiescence to patriarchy does not lead to the conclusion that women in the Vaishnava context are submissive agents who are not in charge of their own lives. As I have mentioned in the Introduction chapter, the notion of agency this research renders is not articulated in the language of resistance and we do not see how their agency is expressed in their socio-economic contexts unless we pay close attention to the context of the agents.

It seems to me that these women have chosen their lives by opting for the renunciant domain. Once they are female renouncers, instead of following male practice, they can choose to maintain their nurturing role through the devotional services (*seva*) they give to

their partners and the community. Such devotional services, claim Vaishnava female renouncers, provide an alternative practice in their religious life. Within the male-defined context, these women create their own ways of living as renouncers, and make their own decisions as to how to live as Vaishnava sadhumas.

This chapter thus seeks to make (religious) sense of the renunciation of Vaishnava female renouncers. I first describe what women's renunciation means and examine their practice. I argue that what renunciation brings to female renouncers is a state of 'belonging to' or 'being depended on' someone (partner, guru), or being affiliated to a community or a deceased partner or guru. It does not bring freedom or life outside the domestic domain, but rather security in a life which allows them to have 'peace of mind' (*santi mon*). In other words, the dependent state found in Vaishnava women's renunciation counters the normative ideal of renunciation, which claims that a renouncer has to be 'independent' or free from any kind of attachment, as suggested by one term for renunciation (*tyag*). Further, I will explore various ways in which women achieve the state of *sahaja*, the Vaishnava religious goal. I argue that for a Vaishnava woman, *sahaja* can be achieved whilst belonging to her male partner, since what lets her have a sense of spiritual fulfilment is being able to offer devotional services in relation to others.

7.1 Dependence as Vaishnava female renouncers' renunciation

Many women who choose a renunciant path often find themselves subject to contradictory values and practices, and they also face different kinds of tension in their lives.¹⁵ It has been suggested in *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* that once a person renounces the

¹⁵ Tensions that female renouncers in different tradition encounter, see Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*.

world, he renounces all social expectations.¹⁶ This view seems to apply more in the case of a male practitioner taking renunciation. When a male renounces, he can, to a certain degree, go beyond social expectations. As noted by Knight, male Bauls are carefree and unencumbered by social restraints.¹⁷ In contrast, the cultural expectations of Baul women are more confining and it is more challenging to step away from them.¹⁸ In addition, some women themselves are more likely to be attached to this world and to continue to follow social conventions, even though they have already undergone renunciation. Khandelwal claims that a woman may renounce the world, but never her womanhood and femininity.¹⁹ Womanhood and femininity seem to be the source of a woman's religious progression as well as success.²⁰ That is, being a woman in fact facilitates the pursuit of liberation, because the mother's love embodied in her allows her to cultivate the ability to surrender, love and have no ego, which are the goals of renunciation.²¹ In the case of Vaishnava, Openshaw posits that a woman's feminine nature provides her with a perfect spiritual body, which allows her to gain a degree of respectability among her male peers.²²

It appears that values that collective communities in rural Bengal hold for its members are the factor yet reality that prompt women to remain dependent to their family members. To them, being dependent does not infer to the limitation of freedom but

¹⁶ Olivelle, *The Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*.

¹⁷ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*, 6.

¹⁸ Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*, 2.

¹⁹ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*; DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*.

²⁰ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*.

²¹ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*, 192.

²² Openshaw, "Renunciation feminised? Joint renunciation of female–male pairs in Bengali Vaishnavism."

women's fulfilment and personhood. There is a stereotypical perception among Indians that women who undergo renunciation are those who cannot find space in the normal social structure. Renunciation is hence an alternative domain for so-called 'unwanted' (stigmatised) women, such as spinsters, widows or even prostitutes.²³ Likewise, in the case of Vaishnava female renouncers, most of them fall into this category. That is, they choose to be Vaishnava renouncers because of the disadvantage situation in life, as already described in Chapter 2. What seems to be the most significant reason to make them leave the householder domain is a desire to be a 'normal Bengali woman' who has a family and protection from male members. As mentioned earlier, many women who become Vaishnava renouncers are women who did 'not belong' or were 'independent' and thus abandoned by their family and/or community. This state of independence, instead of giving them a sense of self-autonomy, freedom or empowerment, gave them much insecurity in life. Having no one to rely on was a most terrifying life condition for them. They did not know how to live or whom to live for. Consequently, an independent status was not preferred by most, if not all, Vaishnava women in my study. To these women, being 'dependent on' and/or feeling a sense of belonging to someone or something was how they defined their personhood. Their lives were valued by themselves and others once they were 'dependent' on others.

That said, they (women whom I studied) become Vaishnava female renouncers in order to maintain (in the case of wives whose husbands chose to be renouncers) or (re)gain (in the case of widows and single women from poor families) the status of

²³ Some ethnographic studies on female ascetics in South Asia suggest that there are many women from a higher socio-economic background who choose this path not because of their impoverished condition but an inner call for liberation. For more see Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*; Lynn Teskey Denton, *Female ascetics in Hinduism*, ed. Steven Collins (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2004).

wifehood, so that they can be dependent upon their sadhu partners. As a matter of fact, renunciation for these women means to attain or maintain and secure the status of a respectable wife or, in other words, stay as dependents. The status of wifehood would not be possible if they remained as householders. Indeed, like the model of Brahmanical renunciation, Vaishnava renunciation is meant to detach them from family ties, community and whatever symbolically marks them as householders. However, this does not imply they want to renounce womanhood, wifehood or motherhood, and the duties and responsibilities that come with these identities. So women who renounce in the Vaishnava tradition do not leave their domesticity, but instead shift to include their domesticity in the renunciant domain. They leave the domestic domain of householders to enter the domestic domain of renouncers, which they perceive brings them security and peace of the mind. Perhaps the female nature of nurturing, caring and giving, and the social and spiritual benefits they receive from maintaining and perfecting this nature in the renunciant domain, are reasons why ‘complete detachment’, ‘renunciation’ or ‘independence’ is thought to be beyond the bounds of their potential.

In my study, ‘detachment’ or renouncing one’s previous life, secular identity and responsibilities seems to be easier for men than for women. Women do not seem to be able to completely free themselves from bondage, especially from ties with their male partner and householder family. Most male sadhus (except MD Baba and MT Baba) completely cut the ties with their natal family. In contrast, all female renouncers (except ML Ma) still maintained as relationship with their natal family, with their children and/or mother. They regularly visited their family, and some elderly single female renouncers were cared for by their children.

7.2 Peace of mind (*santi man*) as the feminine state of *sahaja*

“What do you get from being a sadhu? (*sadhu holo ki paan?*)” I asked ML Ma and other female sadhus while we were cooking in the kitchen. They said that being sadhu ma meant they gained everything – shelter, food, a joyful life (*ananda*) (no worries about children, in-laws or the future) – and were taken care of by God (*thakur dekte*). Once they obtained those things, their mind was at peace (*santi man*). The sadhumas’ answer demonstrated that what they considered meaningful was associated with a sense of security in this worldly life. Whenever they accomplished some works, for example providing services to their colleagues, organising *sadhu sevas* and so on, they would say that their mind was at peace. But whenever they could not accomplish what they wanted to do, such as organising a *sadhu seva* every year, they would say *man kharap* (*man*=mind, *kharap*=bad, not good). That is, whenever they could not provide services to others, their mind was not at peace.

This notion of *santi man* found in the explanations of Vaishnava female practitioners is related to a sense of security in their lives. This sense of security is felt when female renouncers can relate to and rely on their partner, guru or community. The way in which female renouncers bind themselves to others is through devotional services (*seva*). That is, the means that brings women *santi* is by serving others like serving deities. This suggests that the peaceful mind (*santi man*) that female renouncers claim to obtain from giving devotional services has two implications. At the social level, the practice makes them feel secure and protected. On the other hand, at the religious level, by providing *seva* to others, they are on the *bhakti* path to achieve their religious goal or the state of *sahaja*.

It is worth mentioning again that *sahaja* is the ultimate goal of Vaishnava, which has love (*prem*) as an innate quality.²⁴ It literally means, “that which is born or which originates with the birth or origination of any entity.”²⁵ According to Vaishnava, this natural state as well as the ultimate goal, can be achieved within one’s body through the right practice in esoteric rituals. The concrete sign that indicates success in the ritual is the non-ejaculation of a male practitioner. It means he has been able to sublimate his sexual energy into the sublime state of *sahaja*.²⁶ Nonetheless, as we have already seen in Chapter 4, male practitioners can be certain to reach a state of *sahaja* through esoteric ritual, though it has been argued and is unclear in the case of women. This is no doubt because the theory and practice are oriented towards men, rather than women.

Vaishnava female renouncers also recognise participating in esoteric rituals as the means to achieve *sahaja* and they agree that success in performing the esoteric ritual is revealed in the experience of love (*prem*). Nevertheless, women have another more feminine way to pursue the state of *sahaja*. It seems to me that their state of *sahaja* is alternatively explained in different practices and experiences which are most suited to their femininity. That is, what a woman is born with or, in other words, women’s *sahaja*, is related to her innate nature of caring, giving and nurturing. Openshaw notes that women (in Baul tradition) constitute the love of relatedness.²⁷ Their feminine nature requires an object to be taken care of, given to and nurtured. To attain *sahaja*, women hence need to give, to care and to nurture someone or something. They need to relate, associate and depend on someone or something else. Their caring nature is expressed

²⁴ Bose, *Post Caitanya Sahajiya Cult*, 209.

²⁵ Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults*, 77-8.

²⁶ See earlier references to works on *sahaja*, page 41

²⁷ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 181.

through devotional services (*seva*) towards others, towards their partner, guru, sadhu cohorts or lay devotees. Once they fulfil their nurturing nature, they experience ‘peace’ (*santi*). That said, women’s *sahaja* is centred on ‘giving’ but men’s is on ‘taking’ from women, noting that men’s only way to attain *sahaja* is to take their female partner’s seed.

In this context, *santi* is implicitly prescribed by women as one quality of *sahaja*. While the normative understanding of *sahaja* is explained through the practice of esoteric rituals, out of which love (*prem*) emanates, the feminine way is described through the practice of devotional services (*seva*), the fruits of which result in the form of peace in their minds (*santi mon*). Accordingly, devotional services to others enable female practitioners to realise the state of *sahaja*, or the Vaishnava religious goal.

7.3 The renunciant path of female renouncers

Since there is no particular teaching or practice that is prescribed specifically for women, each female renouncer from different traditions has to find her own way to attain liberation. Female renouncers studied by scholars appear to find that the path is not straightforward for them. They have to compromise and negotiate with the dominant community norms of both renouncers and householders.²⁸ In the study of Khandelwal, some female renouncers take services to the community on the path to liberation.²⁹ Baiji spent most of her time redistributing what she obtained from disciples to the community in the form of social services. She regularly organised feasts for lay people, building schools and hospital for everyone. In the study of DeNapoli, female sadhus in Rajasthan

²⁸ For ways in which women from different renunciant traditions pursue their liberation see Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*.

²⁹ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*.

saw singing *bhajan* as their devotion God, and they viewed only those who sing to God as real sadhus.³⁰ The study of Knight highlights the encumbered lives of Baul female renouncers in West Bengal and Bangladesh.³¹ To Baul female practitioners, what makes them real renouncers is not only following the renunciant path, but also following what have been prescribed for Bengali women. That is, to be a real (female) renouncer, one also needs to be a good Bengali woman. This indicates that female Bauls need to provide care and service to their male partners and at the same time perform on the stage and roam like mendicants.

It is worth mentioning again that Vaishnava is a religion of emotions centred on devotion and belonged to the *bhakti* tradition. In a general sense, *bhakti* is devotion to one's personal deity. It is "a personal emotion felt towards a particular chosen deity".³² Emotion is accredited as an autonomous means to attain liberation, in which in addition to the action path (*karma marga*) or knowledge path (*jnana marga*), a person can be liberated directly via the devotion path (*bhakti marga*).³³ The [Bhagavad] Gita, described by Prentiss, provides a technical meaning for *bhakti*, in that all actions can be a religious practice if one's mind is centred on God. "For Gita, the field of human worship is coextensive with the field of ordinary human activity, if one's mind is focused upon God ... *Bhakti* is represented in Gita as a religious perspective that can inform all actions, at any time and in any place."³⁴ This technical meaning allows a householder to attain liberation while being in the domestic realm without taking up the renunciant robe.

³⁰ DeNapoli, *Real sadhus sing to God: gender, asceticism, and vernacular religion in Rajasthan*.

³¹ Knight, *Contradictory lives: Baul women in India and Bangladesh*.

³² Fuller, *The Camphor flame : popular Hinduism and society in India*, 156.

³³ Pechilis, *The embodiment of bhakti*, 3,5.

³⁴ Pechilis, *The embodiment of bhakti*.

Devotional services practised in actual social contexts also contribute positively to the practitioners' spiritual liberation. Sarbadhikary and Warriar have stated that *seva* helps people progress in their religious practice, leading them into the realm of God.³⁵ *Seva*, as suggested in Lucia's study, means 'selfless service' to one's guru and it is considered to be one of the religious practices that brings a practitioner to his self-realisation. She points out that in the context of Amritanandamayi, when disciples provide *seva* to their gurus, the practice also helps develop their ascetic ethics.³⁶ This is because one's body and mind need to be refined and completely disciplined when offering *seva*.

I employ the meaning of *seva* as practised among Vaishnava female sadhus, as devotional service towards 'a particular chosen deity'. In their tradition, each female renouncer is likely to have her own personal deity in human form, as either her partner or guru. Vaishnava female renouncers make use of devotional services (*seva*) as an alternative practice in their renunciation. The various forms of devotional services practised by them show their detachment, and as they serve their partners selflessly they realise *sahaja*. The devotional services that they perform for their male partners and gurus, as well as their peers and lay communities, cannot be done without sacrificing their personal comfort and disciplining their minds to detach themselves from their emotions.

In contrast, male renouncers' devotion tends to focus on either their gurus or their own bodies. That infers, for a female practitioner, her male partner is her personal deity, but for a male, he himself (as a manifestation of the gods) is his personal deity. However, Openshaw argues that at least in private, a male may regard his female partner as his

³⁵ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*; Warriar, "The Seva ethic and the spirit of institution building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission."

³⁶ Lucia, "'Give Me Sevā Overtime': Selfless Service and Humanitarianism in Mata Amritanandamayi's Transnational Guru Movement," 193.

guru.³⁷ As mentioned in Chapter 4, the term *seva* is used more often in conversation among female renunciators than males. For example, men never describe sexual ritual as *seva*, but women do. In addition, unlike female renunciators, males do not view that all activities they engage in are *seva*. It seems to me that the only arena that male renunciators regard as *seva* is consuming food. Following this, I argue that *seva*, when conducted as devotional service to a chosen person or towards the gods, is performed as a feminine practice. While female members are devout practitioners of the devotional path (*bhakti marga*), male renunciators follow a ritual-action path (*kamma marga*). Providing selfless devotion is an independent means for liberation for women, and thus Vaishnava devotional service (*seva*) is seen as leading them to liberation.³⁸

These women, regardless of their different day-to-day issues and how they negotiate them, share common experiences in terms of their religious expression. All female sadhus conduct *seva*, selfless service to the gods and the public; however, they have different ways to express their devotion. Some females choose serving and caring for their male partners as their path, while others see helping other members as their way to connect to God (Krishna). Some may teach esoteric rituals to their disciples as their way, while others worship tombs (*samadhi*) of their deceased partners or gurus. Different forms of services performed by female renunciators reveal their status of belonging: being with a partner or without a partner. If a renouncer is with a partner, her devotional service centres on an individual: her male partner. But if she is without a partner, her

³⁷ Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, 146-8.

³⁸ There are various ideas among ascetics as to whether or not merely *Bhakti marga* can bring a person liberation. Female ascetics studied by Khandelwal argue that to attain liberation a person needs knowledge and action, as well as devotion. Buddhism provides that the most credit goes to knowledge, though action and devotion are also needed. For more see Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*.

devotional service will be offered towards to some public entity: the gods and the community. The female renouncers with partners that I studied focused their devotional service on their male partners, comforting them at home; cooking, cleaning and performing rituals with them, and in some cases even finding or arranging women to escort them. In the case of single female renouncers, their service was to provide services to their community, late partners, disciples or even their natal family.

7.3.1 Path to liberation of female renouncers with partners

I was told that the Vaishnava practice to liberation emphasised a *sexo-yogic* ritual in which practices to discipline the body and harness the mind involving food intake, yoga and meditation were required. These practices seemed to be the first priority for male sadhus, whilst females prioritised them as secondary to the services they provided for their male partners. In their view, male sadhus needed more practice in order to control their bodies and minds, and required support from their female partners, both in the religious context and in their day-to-day living. Hence, providing support to male sadhus, instead of spending time focusing on their own religious practice, was considered essential for female renouncers with a partner.

Most sadhumas insisted that, for them, there were no difficulties (*kasta*), but joy (*ananda*) in doing domestic chores and providing support to their partners. They expressed their *bhakti* to both human gods and God in their daily lives through all the work they do. All the females with partners I came across preferred to be busy with chores at the ashram rather than wandering for alms. These chores were considered as Vaishnava female practitioners' religious piety. While cooking lunch, GS Ma told that

she was very happy to cook, and it was not a burden at all. Instead, she stated “*ranna kore seva kore*”. For her, cooking was selfless service to the deity.

In their day-to-day lives, the sadhumas with whom I closely associated in their lives spent most of their time at the ashram doing household chores. Males would help only when female sadhus could not work, such as when they were ill or not at the ashram. A female sadhu’s day starts with cleaning the ashram and cooking breakfast, then cleaning up after her partner and fetching water for household use. Then she works on the grains collected from alms, either drying them outside in the sun or grinding and storing them in a safe place where no mice and/or humans could take them. After that, she starts cooking lunch. She usually takes a bath after cooking and again cleans everything after the meal is finished. Due to their purity concerns, a person is not allowed to eat while serving food, and as a result, a female sadhu serves her partner first and makes sure he finishes his meal before she starts eating her meal. A sadhu couple normally take an afternoon nap after lunch and wake up around 4 to 5 p.m. The sadhuma then prepares tea for everyone. This is the time when devotees visit the ashram to have conversations with male sadhus. While the sadhuma is preparing tea and snacks for visitors, the sadhubaba talks to them. The conversation can be diverse but the most popular topics are generally politics, health or Vaishnava *sadhana*.³⁹ The sadhuma sometimes joins the conversation when she finishes her work in the kitchen, but usually continues preparing dinner. Dinner is served around 8 to 9 p.m., depending on the ashram. She goes to bed once she finishes cleaning and tidying the ashram, but her work does not finish even after the kitchen door

³⁹ I mostly worked in the kitchen with the sadhumas. I often asked sadhumas what sadhubabas were discussing with *bhakta*. To their knowledge, they believed that their partners discussed *sadhana*, health, and politics. I myself had conversations with sadhubabas sometimes and the conversation was usually about *sadhana* and some tips on staying healthy.

has closed. Another service, which is performing an esoteric ritual with her male partner, resumes at bedtime.

When sadhumas go out for alms collection, they only cook breakfast and dinner before going and after coming back to the ashram. They only have a light meal, which does not have to be prepared. If the sadhubaba stays at the ashram when the sadhuma goes out for alms, he has to prepare his own lunch. When they have to participate in a *sadhu seva*, the sadhuma is released from her chores at the ashram, but may help with cooking and cleaning at the *sadhu seva*.

In the early stages of fieldwork, I wondered about their day-to-day lives; about what made them so confident to say that God looked after them when they mainly do the cooking and cleaning. Even when I spent considerable time with them and became part of their daily lives, I was still not certain if these domestic activities led them to be with God. It seemed that sadhumas had little time or no time at all to train their bodies and minds through the practices of meditation or yoga in the same way as their male partners. I asked many female sadhus when they practised meditation or yoga, but most of them said that they spent most of their time doing household chores. They even seemed to ignore these practices, and mainly focused on giving services to their partners, gurus and disciples, and occasionally went out for alms.

I sometimes shared my personal experience of living with the sadhumas with SM Ma, and I asked her, “How can you be with God if you only cook and clean for others all the time?” SM Ma smiled and said, “Our minds are with god though our action is cooking.” On another occasion, when I went out for *madhukari* in the village with MD Ma, we often collected many kilograms of rice grains and potatoes. I volunteered to carry them by putting a bag full of grains on my shoulders in the same way that villagers do. The bag

was very heavy and the weather was incredibly hot (and I regretted volunteering to do so). When I finished carrying the heavy bag and arrived at the ashram, I complained to MD Ma, saying, “Being sadhu ma is difficult. There is too much hard work for them.” She smiled and said, “All the work we do is provided by God and it is *seva*.”

From an outsider’s point of view, it seems that both lives in the domestic sphere, the householder’s and the renouncer’s, are not different. Female sadhus carry heavy loads similar to women who are householders. Their day-to-day lives are filled with household chores: cleaning, cooking, feeding their partners and serving devotees, plus earning income from alms collection. Nonetheless, Vaishnava female sadhus do not see themselves as submissive wives whose lives are burdened with serving their partners. It may be compulsory for householders to take full responsibility for domestic work, but it is a choice for them. They could choose to go out for alms collection and let their partners look after the domestic work, but they prefer to be in the kitchen and enjoy themselves cooking and cleaning. In fact, their view in regards to the household chores represent their understanding and practice following devotion path (*bhakti marga*) as described above, that is, every action can be religious practice if one sets her mind to God. Vaishnava sadhumas do not see their domestic work as valueless but as their path of renunciation, which leads them to peaceful state of mind (*santi man*). Indeed, most chores done by sadhumas involved feeding and serving their male partners, but it is the cleaning, cooking and serving that make them ‘true’ sadhumas.

It appears that female renouncers with partners are respected and have more choices than single ones. This is partly because they can gain social and financial support from their male partners. With his support, a female sadhu can obtain a revered space as a female guru (*guru ma*), and even have disciples to comfort and support her. Female

sadhus are also protected by their partners and have less worries about sustaining life or being harassed by other male sadhus or laypersons. Some females with partners do not go for alms collection, they just stay at the ashram taking care of the household like an ordinary homemaker.

Some female renunciators also comfort their male partners by finding other sexual consorts for them. GS Ma once told me that everything she does is *seva*. When she had a serious illness and needed an operation, she was unable to provide any sexual service to her husband for at least two months. Her husband, GS Baba, was well known for his womanising and seemed to be in need of practising an esoteric ritual almost every day. He boastfully claimed his sexual excellence, even in his late 80s he could last longer than three hours while practising an esoteric ritual. Since GS Ma could not perform an esoteric ritual with him due to her operation, to fulfil her devotional duty, she asked her female disciples to stay at the ashram, which implied that they had to perform esoteric rituals with GS Baba. I was not too surprised to hear that many female disciples stayed the night in order to serve their gurus.

There were a few more female renunciators in the Santiniketan area who found sexual consorts for their male partners. I found out later that FK Ma, who had earlier asked me to sleep with her male partner, also asked her other female disciples to do the same. Her partner, GP Baba, is a well-known womanising sadhu and I was told that he performs esoteric rituals with his female disciples and even female neighbours who live near the ashram. In addition, Openshaw stated that, during her time in the field, there were female sadhus who managed their male partners by providing other women to satisfy them.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Personal conversation 2016.

We can interpret this action as another form of ‘devotional service’ that female sadhus offer to their male partners as part of their duty towards them. It seemed to me that this was perhaps one of the ways in which subordinate women reacted to their womanising partners. Indeed, FK Ma and GS Ma could not stop their male partners from womanising and instead of ignoring or walking away from them, they chose to have some input into the situation. Choosing sexual consorts for their partners also meant they could exert certain power over other women she chose for them, so that their interaction and relationship were under their eyes. It kept them in the game (that they would never win).

It is stated in a Vaishnava text that *parakiya* refers to the practice of sex with another’s wife and it is ideal love creating no attachment, and Vaishnava practitioners have to progress their sexual practice towards this ideal. As reported by Sarbadhikari, it is not uncommon to see Vaishnava Sahajiya male and female practitioners taking on others’ partners. She claims that this kind of partnership model is possible because “being unmarried, married or renouncers does not make a difference to Sahajiyas’ sexual practice”.⁴¹ Indeed, there were sadhus in the community I studied who were taking on other women besides their female partners, though those sadhus were the minority in the group (two out of 19 male sadhus). However, this womanising behaviour of the sadhus is treated as a personal matter rather than their traditional practice or communal norm. It seemed to me that monogamy was valued among the Vaishnavas, especially in the case of female practitioners, and most of the sadhus I worked with had only one partner at a time. A female practitioner with a partner only performed the sexo-yogic ritual with her own partner. They were of the view that only a (sexual) relationship with their legitimate

⁴¹ Sarbadhikary, *Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*, 111.

partner (taking *sannyas* together or having *malachandan*) could claim success in an esoteric ritual.

Women who were asked to practice sex with sadhus were mostly single women, and their incentive to do so, as stated by SM Ma, was due to their single status. Some women were afraid (*bhoy*) of being denied by their gurus, and others believed that they could reciprocate their sex with protection from male practitioners. It seemed to me that women who find women for their partners, who sleep with many disciples or who sleep with their own gurus or male cohorts are those who have insecurity in their lives, and so having sexual relationships with or providing other services to male sadhus provided them with a kind of protection and support. Indeed, having sex with others' partners would not make women respectable, but at least they could ask for help from the sadhus with whom they had relationships when needed.

7.3.2 Single female renunciators and their ways of devotion

During my fieldwork, I met lay women who regularly visited the Vaishnava ashram to chat with a sadhuma. They were classified as divorcees or widows, who felt their single status made them unworthy or even perceived as second-class women by their neighbours. Perhaps these women felt isolated, because their position was not shared with other women. They saw their status of being single as a stigma, and the only place that they could be relieved of such tension was in the ashram.⁴² They could freely discuss

⁴² Similar to other renunciator traditions, female devotees tend to discuss their personal problems with female ascetics rather than males. See Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*.

their actual hardships in life with a sadhuma. Some single women whom I met at the ashram expressed their hope that the pair-sadhu would help them find male partners.

Just like these single lay women, the independence of single female renunciators was perceived as a problem and not preferable in society. In fact, single female renunciators had fewer options in their renunciation. I knew 11 single sadhumas and worked with five of them. All these single female renunciators told me they encountered pain and many problems from being without male partners in the renunciant community, where women were perceived as dependent agents, and best suited to living as sadhu couples. These single females found the renunciant life without partners full of *kasta*: pain, problems or difficulties. They have to depend on themselves economically and sometimes it is not even enough to satisfy their own stomachs. On the religious path, the absence of a male partner limits a woman's chances for esoteric practice and selfless service to a male partner, debarring her from achieving her religious goals. Indeed, some single female sadhus had sexual relationships with their male gurus or their male cohorts, but their practice of sex was not honourable in similar way to performing esoteric rituals with their own partners, and sometimes was not counted as religious practice. Sexual relationships with others (besides one's own partner or disciples in the case of male gurus) is generally not seen as a religious ritual, but merely as having sex, which can only be an outlet for desire. Accordingly, a female renouncer without a partner cannot perform an esoteric ritual although she may have sex with other sadhus.

From the conversations with single sadhumas, single sadhubabas, as well as those sadhus with partners, according to them what appears to be a source of *kasta* for single female renunciators was their single status, causing them to get less respect from or be disrespected by disciples and devotees, and at times sexually harassed by male cohorts,

having insufficient income, and not being able to achieve religious goals through *yugal sadhana*, the Vaishnava conventional ritual. It is worth noting that their problems were not shared with single male renunciators because the gender of the latter allows them to maintain their revered position even though they are single. In addition, they can find new female partners easily, even at a very old age. For them, as told by MT Baba, the only pain of being single was having to do all the household chores, to clean and cook by themselves.

Among the five single female sadhus I studied, four of them were sadhu widows. Their partners, whom they took *sannyas* robes with, had died due to old age. Only one of them became single because her partner took another sadhuma to stay with him; accordingly, she decided to run away from the ashram and live on her own. All four sadhu widows had their own ashrams and three were respected as gurumas. When their sadhu partners were alive, they, together with their partners, gave initiation robes to disciples. However, the deaths of their partners directly affected their guru status. Bara Ma told me that when her husband was still alive, there were many disciples and devotees visiting their ashram to pay homage and learn Vaishnava philosophy from them. She used to obtain a decent level of fees (*dakshina*) from their visits. But now, hardly any disciples visited her. Not only that, it appeared that she had lost her power as a guruma. As a result, her disciples did not obey her and ignored her warnings about their attire. Since their lineage wear white robes, they thus should always be in white robes, but instead of listening to her, they now wore *geruya* and sometimes *hollude* robes, and attracted criticism from other sadhus.

PL Ma addressed similar problems. Before taking *sannyas* robes, she was married but ran away from her husband due to his alcohol addiction and abusive behaviour. With no

choice left, she decided to take the *sannyas* robe with a very old widower from her natal village. They built their ashram on the outskirts of the village, on her husband's land. When her husband was still alive, the community gave them respect. However, after he died, she no longer received any support from the community. She did not go for alms because the villagers would not give her anything, and she sustained her life by cultivating land attached to her ashram. On a few occasions after her husband passed away, there were thieves who came to her ashram and stole some rice grains and mangoes she had harvested from her land. She said, sadly, that these incidents would not have happened if her husband were still with her. Not only was she neglected by her community, she was also ignored by her guru brothers and sadhu cohorts. When her husband was alive, more than 30 sadhus would join their *sadhu seva*, but she now had only six or seven sadhus who joined her *seva*, of which four were her immediate renouncer disciples.

PL Ma mostly stays at the ashram alone with a *samadhi*, the 'tomb' of her male partner buried next to her bed. Next to his tomb is an empty body-sized space which she has prepared for her *samadhi* once she dies. Every day before she takes snacks or meals, she provides *seva* –offering food – to her deceased partner, who is now her god. She said offering food to her god husband brings her peace of mind and strengthens her belief in Vaishnava. Doing so makes her become one with her god and she no longer fears anything, even though she lives alone. It should be noted that PL Ma had been living at the edge of her natal village, and so villagers who were acquainted with them in the past no longer gave her any respect. PL Ma did not think that she should transact with them by going for alms in the village or invite villagers to her *sadhu seva*. She said that her only devotion was given to her partner's *samadhi*.



Figure 7.1 PL Ma's bed and her male partner's *samadhi*

Female renunciators GG Ma and MD Ma were in their mid-forties when their male partners were no longer with them. GG Ma's sadhu-husband had died early in the year when I started fieldwork in 2016. The other, MD Ma, separated from her husband a few years before I started my fieldwork. Neither had disciples and had to rely solely on *madhukari*. GG Ma had better living conditions than MD Ma since she had her own ashram to stay in and her daughter took care of her. However, both were prone to sexual harassment from other male cohorts as well as their own gurus and guru brothers. GG Ma was a quiet sadhu. Whenever I saw her at the *sadhu seva*, she would sit alone at the very end of the sleeping tent/dome, organised for all sadhus. It seemed that she was still coming to terms with the sudden loss of her husband. SM Ma told me that not long after GG Ma's husband passed away, she was asked to perform a sexual ritual with her guru. She, on her own, could not deny the request, and she had sex with her guru. I was told that it is usual for some lineages to have sex with disciples. They claim this practice is

legitimate since it is considered to be part of teaching. I did not discuss this issue with GG Ma in person but learnt from her sadhu friends about it, they told me that GG Ma was forced to agree because of her situation without a partner. Her guru was a senior sadhu respected by sadhus and laypeople. Perhaps she was afraid that if she denied his sexual advances, she might be excluded from the sadhu community and lose support from the lay community.

The case of MD Ma was slightly different from GG Ma's. She appeared to be a confident and cheerful person. She could travel to different ashrams and interacted with new sadhus without looking nervous or fearful. This was due to her ability to read and write, which most of the females were unable to do. Being able to read and write not only helped her read signs when travelling, but also made her confident and, to a degree, respected. She could help other sadhus with paperwork when they needed to deal with government officers. Nonetheless, being a single woman made her life insecure. Unlike other female sadhus who had either partners or disciples to support them socio-economically or with income from cultivated land, MD Ma's sole income came from alms collection, which sometimes was not enough for her monthly rent (300 Indian Rupees per month).

It also seemed that lay people in her neighbourhood treated her as if she was just 'another woman who wore a *geruya* sari'. Many did not regard her as a sadhu. MD Ma was often asked for sex by male cohorts, despite her rejections. Unlike GG Ma, she was not related to any sadhus through a guru lineage and the sadhus who asked her for sexual ritual had no influence over her community and the villages she solicited alms from. The practice that MD Ma conducted to achieve a peaceful mind (*santi mon*) was to give services to both sadhus and the lay community. When there were *sadhu sevas* organised

by her guru brothers or other sadhus in the Birbhum community, she would actively help them. She would normally arrive at an ashram a few days before the start of a *sadhu seva* and stay until all tasks were finished. Her key duty was to cook and serve at the *sadhu seva*. She was sometimes given extra money for helping the host sadhu, which allowed her to have extra income and maintain her living.

In addition to helping out at *sadhu sevas*, MD Ma also helped her neighbours with their household chores. Because she rented a shelter from a householder and her ashram was in the middle of a lay community, she was not able to completely detach herself from them. Her neighbours sometimes asked her to take care their small children. Recently (May 2019), she took her own 8-year-old grandson away from his alcoholic father. Her daughter died many years ago and left the child under the care of his father and in-laws. However, the father and his family could not take care of him and left the boy without food.

Eventually, she decided to take him away and act as his guardian/ custodian, although having a child would move her close to the transient world. She would have to worry about many mundane matters, such as food, providing education, finding a wife for him at the right time and earning enough income to support him. MD Ma would also have less time to participate in *sadhu sevas* and less time to be with her sadhu colleagues. In this way, her life world gradually became more like that of householders whose lives are full of attachments. She said that what she had decided about her life and her grandson was something she had to do, and she would have deep regrets if she ignored her own grandson because of her robe. I am not quite sure how MD Ma would manage her social, financial and religious situation, as she was not a big sadhu (*bara sadhu*) who lived comfortably. For MD Ma, her life of renunciation was meant to help her neighbours,

sadhu peers, as well as her biological family. The services she provided them were her religious practice as a sadhuma.

SB Ma took the *sannyas* robe with her partner and acquired many disciples during the time her male partner was alive. She still maintained a respectable status, being revered as a guruma by disciples, and she continued to receive sufficient support from them, even after the death of her husband. Some female sadhus told me that SB Ma could maintain her respectability because of her role as a *shiksha* guru. That is, she regularly performed esoteric rituals with her disciples and gained a *dakshina*, or 'fee', from them. Other sadhumas told me that she has a *mantra*, and so can cast a spell on her disciples and devotees to support her financially. There was even a rumour that she cast a spell on a village bachelor who became very much attached to her and gave her money and jewellery almost blindly.

Although I knew SB Ma personally but decided not to ask about the gossip concerning her sexual behaviour. This information about her was obtained from her female peers, with whom I also had a very close relationship. The point is not whether the rumours were true or not, but how a single female renouncer was perceived by her own female colleagues. If she was successful in her practice, her success in socio-economic or religious areas was seen to be the outcome of some negative qualities, such as her wickedness or seductive behaviour, the practice of black magic (*mantra*) or having sex in exchange for support. In the eyes of sadhus, including female ones, a single female sadhu, or a woman on her own in particular, could not possibly have fame and be respectable on her own merit. To them, women's success cannot be achieved independently without men.

It seems to me that SB Ma takes up a role as a *siksha* guru, taught her male disciples to gain knowledge and experience in esoteric rituals, to be an important devotional service that she performed. It gave her a means to liberation as well as a way to survive on her own in the renunciant community. Although her having sexual relationships with disciples breaches the convention in West Bengal, if it is practised secretly, other sadhus seem to ignore the immoral deeds of a so-called 'independent sadhuma'.

It appears that although the life of single female renouncers is full of *kasta* more than that of females with male partners, the community seem to be more flexible in dealing with them. That is because sadhus and lay devotees have fewer expectations of a single sadhuma to act as or be a 'proper' Bengali woman and to live the life of a good Vaishnava sadhu once she is left on her own. The story would be different if a sadhuma with a partner displayed similar immoral behaviour like those single sadhumas. For example, if a female renouncer with a partner performed an esoteric ritual with her disciples or with other male sadhus in the manner of SB Ma, she would be heavily criticised by the community, and at worst expelled from the ashram by her partner. It seems to me that sadhus have lower expectations of single sadhumas, not only because they feel sorry for their unfortunate lives, but also the stereotypical perceptions of a woman left on her own. The Vaishnava community may be of the view that since single women are already stigmatised in society, whatever they do against social norms will not bring anything worse to their reputations.

Nonetheless, single sadhumas appear to have more freedom in their lives compared to other sadhumas. Their freedom is apparent when they travel and interact with other sadhus, visiting any places they like and interacting freely with male strangers. A female with a partner has to pay attention to her male partner's attitude and act according to his

wants and wishes. In contrast, single female renouncers have no one they need to worry about. And yet single sadhumas with such freedom have insecurities in their lives. In many ways, this freedom is not wanted by these sadhumas because it does not offer them a preferred and stable life. That is, having male partners to protect and support them will limit their freedom, but it makes and marked their security in life and respectability. I recall the moment when SM Ma and I were talking and criticising other female sadhus' behaviour. When I mentioned a single female sadhu's life, SM Ma said, "Everyone has their own way to make their living. I am lucky that I have my partner. I don't have to do what I don't want to do." Her statement suggested her understanding of the *kasta* those single sadhumas encounter and her preference to be a sadhuma with a partner.

Renunciation for Vaishnava female renouncers does not mean to renounce and detach themselves from all the social attributes and values prescribed for women. Instead, renunciation for them implies security and protection, by becoming dependent. However, once they are accepted into the Vaishnava community, they have to 'work out' their own path, and even if it means continuing to conform to the patriarchal system, these women have survived as female renouncers in a dominant male context. Vaishnava female renouncers worship their male partners as their personal gods and the devotional services offered to them allows them to practise in a feminine way. Focusing on devotional services as their alternative way to attain *sahaja* implies that women have the capacity to create what is meaningful in their social and spiritual lives. As we have seen, different female sadhus have different life situations or limitations, so they have to adjust and find their own ways to acquire the state of *santi man* or *sahaja*. The many different forms of *seva* created by female renouncers implies that these women have decided to act as agents of their own lives.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” a logical sentence from *Nyāya-Sūtra* that always appeared in Indian logic classes during my undergraduate years. After I moved towards social anthropology, the aforementioned logical statement was replaced in light of people I worked on in real contexts. At my fieldwork site in India, the logical truth is that, “where there’s smoke [from the *duni*], there’s *sadhuma*”. It appears that Vaishnava women’s religious and social lives are located in the ‘kitchen’. There they meet god (*bhagavan*) and friends, and are happy and peaceful in this ‘renouncer-domestic’ domain. “I don’t know what else to do if I don’t cook,” ML Ma stated when I asked if she felt cooking every meal was a burden for her.

I am not certain if cooking and domestic chores are the only way that women can express their religious piety. However, for Vaishnava female renunciators, domestic work is the means to connect them with the gods and bring them a sense of self. All the household chores they do are devotional services (*seva*), which bring them peace of mind (*santi man*) or a state of *sahaja*. Female renunciators’ state of *sahaja* is described in feminine language and it is associated with what they see as meaningful to them, which is to be a ‘good Bengali woman’ who follows the convention of being a wife and mother. Womanhood is underlined by Vaishnava female practitioners as a key character of their ‘true self’, and it makes renunciation possible for them. Mother love expressed through nurturing and offering other services to their male partners, gurus, and devotees is a means to let them attain their religious goals. That said, for Vaishnava female

renouncers, renunciation starts with domesticity. Their joint renunciation (*yukta-bairagya*) suggests a degree of relatedness rather than detachment.

If we think about agency as the degree to which women try to make their way of life work to their advantage, I suggest that Vaishnava women, in particular, or perhaps Indian women, in general, seem to exercise their agency to a greater degree than men. One possible reason for this is that being a woman in the Indian context may be a disadvantage in itself. Conversely, men have an advantage in this respect by just being men.

Vaishnava religious practices, esoteric ritual, alms collection and devotional feast do not specifically suit the feminine body and mind. There is a consensus among gurus regarding the male body and how to pull and store seed. In contrast, when sadhus explain the female body, each guru has a different explanation and there is still an ongoing debate about whether women have seed and can take seed upward in the same manner as men. A woman's main role in esoteric rituals is to control her body to ensure that her hot body does not arouse her partner so that he loses control over his semen. Concerning alms collection, although old women may get more benefit from their age and gender, most of them are of the view that this practice is not suited to women's mental and physical bodies. Indeed, we shall see more light cast upon female sadhus in the practice of *sadhu seva*. This is because the heart of the devotional feast is about food and feeding, which are associated with women rather than men.¹

Yet, renunciation for Vaishnava women is neither to detach from male culture nor to escape to a solely female sphere. To a degree, their renunciation is to maintain male-dominant renunciation. The Vaishnava women I met never mentioned the seemingly

¹ Bynum, "Fast, feast, and flesh: The religious significance of food to medieval women," 4.

unfair system they abided by. They did not see male sadhus as their rivals. They never wanted to take over the sadhubabas' revered space or to turn the whole system upside down and put themselves at the top of the system. They only wished to be above other women, i.e. 'at the top of the bottom'. Instead of challenging the male-dominant system in order to gain higher status, Vaishnava sadhumas are likely to support this system, letting men stay at the top. In any area that males are incapable of managing on their own, women do not hesitate to assist them. Female sadhus show their gratitude and sympathy towards the imperfection of the male body. They are of the view that supporting their partners is their duty, as sadhumas and the success of male sadhus are their success.

In fact, from many perspectives, male sadhus are likely to exploit women, maintain their dominant character and be self-centred and demanding. Nonetheless, women do not find that these actions subordinate them. They are of the view that their relationships with their partners is a matter of 'give and take.' While female renouncers support males' religious practice and day-to-day living, male renouncers support females socially and economically. Male sadhus are the ones who support the ashrams financially. They go for alms more frequently than females and some ashrams I worked at relied for their finances solely on male sadhus. From a social perspective, female renouncers are respectable due to the presence of their partners. The existence of a male partner will assure a female renouncer's safety and respectability. As a result, both genders seem to benefit and complement one another, rather than being regarded as rivals. As discussed earlier, women without partners as well as men are prone to be entertainers in the community. They are seen as less reliable, less respectable and not well-established sadhus in the same way that sadhu couples (*yugal sadhus*) are.

In the patriarchal culture of India, it is not only women in rural areas such as Birbhum district who find it hard to deviate from the lifestyle model that has been prescribed for them by society and the community, men themselves also find it hard not to meet social expectations.² They all, both men and women, have to follow the expectations of their families and society, with no compromises. While men are expected to be the breadwinners, women are supposed to be homemakers. If they are unable to perform their prescribed duties, it is the role of the society or community to sanction them. A person who follows the *ashrama* stage of life must: be a learned child, be a good husband/wife who establishes a good family, be a good grandparent and prepare to detach themselves from what has been accumulated, and finally completely detach from everything that is dear to them, and in so doing s/he is said to be a complete person who will be in the realm of God.³ There is little room for them to be different from the accepted life model. Not only women have to live with strangers when being married off; men also have to go through a similar process. That is to say, a man also has to accept a stranger as his wife or, in other words, the other half of their 'self'.

However, men always have more choices than women. As we already know, the existing norms and culture seem to benefit men the most. Men do not have to find an alternative way to live. Whichever realm they want to be in, either this worldly or other worldly, there is a system prescribed to comfort them.⁴ Conversely, women are expected to comfort men. There is a belief that by supporting and nurturing men in whichever realm they are in, women can attain a higher religious state. Women will gain merit that

² Narayanan, "Brimming with bhakti, embodiments of Shakti: Devotees, deities, performers, reformers, and other women of power in the Hindu tradition."

³ Manu, *The law code of Manu*.

⁴ Khandelwal, *Women in ochre robes: Gendering Hindu renunciation*.

will make them auspicious in this world and perhaps be with God after death by staying at home to perform their duty.⁵ When men reside at home, it is women who care for their wellbeing, and when they live as wandering ascetics, it is mostly women who are their main patrons, offering them food and other necessary means to live.

Many Vaishnava male renouncers I studied were also marginalised by the Brahmanical system. Their opportunities in life were limited because they were not born as Brahmin or twice-born men. Most if not all came from a deprived situation: lower class and caste, poor and illiterate. As mentioned in Chapter 1, even though most male renouncers claim the will of God as their reason to renounce the world, they cannot deny that poverty and family tensions also push them into this other realm. Similar to female renouncers, Vaishnava renunciation helps male renouncers to renounce their impoverishment and deprived status. Once they become Vaishnava renouncers, they seem to gain the most benefit from the Vaishnava system, which again has been written by men and for men, similar to other Hindu ascetic traditions. Since this system also serves men rather than women, men only seem to need to follow the tradition strictly to gain the most benefit from it. For men, it is a question of how much they would like to commit to this path, not if this path has any room for them. However, how Vaishnava men exercise their agency is indeed an area that needs further study.

While conducting my fieldwork, I decided to work with many sadhus and rotate my visits to each ashram regularly. This practice seemed to work well when I had only five to six ashrams to work with. That said, I could visit each ashram at least once a week. However, when the number of my informants increased I ended up working with almost

⁵ Manu, *The law code of Manu*.

20 ashrams, which later led me to see some sadhus less than I would have wished. Consequently, I had fewer opportunities to build up a rapport with every lay community where ashrams were located. Indeed, to a degree, a community's opinion on and relationship with Vaishnava sadhus influences Vaishnava renunciant life. In further studies, staying in a place [ashram] or two with sadhus and roaming with them to different places would perhaps elicit more insightful details of a Vaishnava sadhu's life, including the communities supporting them.

In fact, there are many Vaishnava sadhus residing across West Bengal. I have met more than 100 Vaishnava sadhus who come from other regions, such as Malda, Bankura and Murshidabad, at *sadhu sevas* organised by AN Baba. Those sadhus have not yet been studied by any scholars and, accordingly, a comparative study to find fundamental themes that Vaishnava female renouncers across these regions are dealing with would allow a more complete study of Vaishnava women in the renunciant domain.

When I started this project, I did not expect to find 'my people' in such a remote place and alien situation. I only wished to find informants who could help me make some contribution to the study of Hindu ascetics. As the years passed, I left my fieldwork in April 2018 in the hope that, in a year or two, I would finish my PhD and return to the field, not as a researcher but as a family member. My positionality progressed from being a 'nobody' (outsider) to 'one's own person' (insider) in a spontaneous way. Indeed, they are no longer informants but, rather, friends and relatives to me. I always wondered how my teachers, Kawanami and Openshaw, could maintain their relationships with their informants for many decades. Perhaps, this is the art of social anthropology. The academic contribution that this research makes may one day diminish, but stories of the people whom I lived with will keep shining in my memory.

Glossary

<i>Agasampraday</i>	non-tradition, term used by Gaudiya to refer to Vaishnava Sahajiya
<i>Amis</i>	Non-vegetarian diet
<i>Ananda</i>	Joy, happiness
<i>Aul</i>	The first sub-sect of Vaishnava, Aul, Baul, Dorbes, and Sai, refers to the group that eats pure vegetarian food.
<i>Bhadralok</i>	Noble people, Bengali middle class
<i>Bairagya</i>	Term means desireless and refers to Vaishnava renouncer
<i>Baishnab</i>	Bengali Vaishnava, including Vaishnava Sahajiya
<i>Bara sadhu</i>	Big and famous renouncer
<i>Baul</i>	Vaishnava Sahajiya identify themselves as Baul, the second sub-sect that eat vegetarian food and fish.
<i>Bhakta</i>	Vaishnava devotees
<i>Bhek</i>	Renunciant initiation
<i>Bhekdari</i>	Renouncer who take <i>bhek</i> and so is a wearer renunciant robe
<i>Bhikshama</i>	The guru who guide new renouncers on their first alms round
<i>Bhikshari</i>	Mendicants including a beggar
<i>Bideshi</i>	People who are from different place/country, referring to non-Western (white) foreigner.

<i>Brahmacharya</i>	Celibacy, sexual abstinence, in Vaishnava Sahajiya context it means sexual intercourse without ejaculation and so non-procreation.
<i>Chottolok</i>	Little or non-noble people, refers to Vaishnava Sahajiya.
<i>Dakshina</i>	Fee offered by the host-sadhu to the guest-sadhus when they visit the ashram, or fee offered by the householder to the sadhus.
<i>Dan</i>	Donation, gift.
<i>Deha tattva</i>	Knowledge, philosophy, or theory of body.
<i>Diksha</i>	Generally means initiation, in Vaishnava Sahajiya context it means the first initiation by mantra.
<i>Dor kaupin</i>	Waist string and loin cloth given to the male practitioner who takes renunciation.
<i>Dorbes</i>	Sub-sect of Vaishnava refers to those who eat meat.
<i>Ekas sadhu</i>	Single sadhu who has no partner.
<i>Gosai</i>	'The lord', used to address male sadhus.
<i>Jati Baishnab</i>	A complex category used to identify those who are Vaishnava caste either by birth or recruitment.
<i>Kam</i>	Lust, desire.
<i>Kasta</i>	Pain, problem, or difficulty.
<i>Lajja</i>	Shame, shy, act of moderate.
<i>Madhukari</i>	Honey gathering, alms collection
<i>Malachandan</i>	Exchanging garland ceremony, acts like wedding ceremony of householder.
<i>Memshahib</i>	White foreigners

<i>Niramis</i>	Vegetarian diet
<i>Niyam</i>	Rule, norm
<i>Parakiya</i>	Refer to the practice of sex with another's wife and it is ideal love creating no attachment.
<i>Prem</i>	Love without bondage, the goal of Vaishnava esoteric ritual
<i>Rup asha</i>	Having menstrual period
<i>Sadhana</i>	Religious practice
<i>Sadhubaba</i>	Male renouncer
<i>Sadhuma</i>	Female renouncer
<i>Sahaja</i>	Easy, simple, born together, term use to describe the Vaishnava religious practice.
<i>Sahajiya</i>	Term refers to those who practice esoteric ritual without self-control
<i>Sai</i>	Vaishnava sub-sect that not only take meat but also alcohol
<i>Samadhi</i>	Tomb made for Vaishnava renouncers
<i>Sannyas</i>	Renunciation
<i>Sansar</i>	Family, householder world
<i>Santi Man</i>	Peace of mind, refers to female renouncers' <i>sahaja</i>
<i>Shiksha</i>	Practice, instruction, or training, and it also means the initiation to esoteric practice.
<i>Siddha deha</i>	Perfect body
<i>Suddha</i>	Pure, opposite to <i>asuddha</i> , impure
<i>Tyag</i>	Detachment, renunciation
<i>Yugal Sadhana</i>	Esoteric practice

Yugal Sadhu Pair-renouncer

Yukta Bairagya Joint-renunciation of male and female renouncers

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Members of Birbhum community

Birbhum Sadhu communities are comprised of three main lineages. There are 43 members from 26 ashrams; 19 male sadhus and 25 female sadhus. Among the 43 members, 11 members (highlighted in green) are irregular. There are 9 single female sadhus and 4 single male sadhus in the community. Of them, I worked closely with 15 sadhus (highlighted in blue). Sadhus highlighted in red are sadhu excluded from the community. I worked and had a conversation with the rest of sadhus regularly at different *sadhu seva* and visited their ashram once or twice.

GS Baba Lineage

Total 23 members; 10 male sadhus and 13 female sadhus from 14 ashrams

Guru Brother/Sister		Sadhu-Disciples		Sadhu-in- laws (via VN Baba)	
GS Baba	GS Ma	MN Baba	SW Ma	BK Baba	BK Ma
BR Baba	BR Ma	KL Baba	KL Ma	ST Baba	ST Ma
	PL Ma	VN Baba	SM Ma	VV Baba	KN Ma
	GK Ma		GG Ma		
MD Baba					
KP Baba					
	SB Ma				

ND Baba Lineage

Total 7 members; 2 male sadhus and 5 female sadhus from 5 ashrams.

Guru Brother/sister		Sadhu-Disciples		Sadhu-in- laws	
ND Baba	ML Ma	RB Baba	MI Ma		
	RB Ma				
	MD Ma				
	MN Ma				

RK Baba Lineage

Total 6 members; 3 male sadhus and 3 female sadhus from 2 ashrams.

Guru Brother/sister		Sadhu-Disciples		Sadhu-in- laws	
RK Baba	RK Ma	MT Baba	ST MA		
			MJ Ma		
		NT Baba			

Miscellaneous lineage (their ashrams are in the Birbhum area but their guru lineage come from other areas)

Total 8 members; 4 male sadhus and 4 female sadhus from 5 ashrams

Guru Brother/sister	
GP Baba	FK Ma
SP Baba	
AN Baba	SD Ma
SK Baba	SK Ma
	BB Ma