

FEMALE RENOUNCERS IN INDIA: A NEGLECTED CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

Female Renouncers in India: A Neglected Chapter in the History of Indian Religions

This paper is a panoramic survey of a millennia-long tradition of asceticism and monasticism in the Indian subcontinent. The main ascetic traditions of India are overviewed, with a particular focus given to female renouncers. Their doctrinal premises and religious practices are discussed within a historical framework, and major emerging themes are identified. Since this paper forms part of a research project investigating the lives of Catholic female missionaries in India in the twentieth century, it concludes with the identification of significant overlaps between female renunciation in the Indic and Christian traditions, and engages in some reflections on the encounter between the two discourses.

KEY WORDS: Indian asceticism, female renouncers in India, nuns in Indian religions

IZVLEČEK

Odpoved indijskih žensk posvetnemu življenju: Pozabljeno poglavje v zgodovini indijskih religij

Prispevek najprej predstavi večtisočletno tradicijo indijskega asketizma in monasticizma ter oriše njihove glavne verske predpostavke in prakse. Pri tem se osredotoči na položaj žensk v starih asketskih tradicijah Indije, predvsem v budizmu, hinduizmu in džainizmu, kar predstavlja področje, ki je bilo doslej deležno malo pozornosti sodobnih raziskovalcev. Ker je prispevek del večjega raziskovalnega projekta o delovanju katoliških misijonark v kolonialni Indiji, na koncu identificira pomembna stičišča med indijskimi asketinjami in katoliškimi nunami in razmišlja o srečanju katoliškega in indijskega verskega diskurza.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: indijski asketizem, indijske asketinje, nune v indijskih religijah

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RENUNCIATION OF WORLDLY LIFE IN ANCIENT INDIA

This paper, which forms part of a larger research project investigating female Catholic missionaries in twentieth-century India, is an attempt to provide a religious context through a panoramic historical overview of female renouncers in India. This backdrop will serve as an indication of the complex religious canvas against which the encounters between various renouncer traditions can be investigated.

For millennia, renunciation has been at the core of most ancient Indic religious traditions. Here, the umbrella term “renouncer tradition” refers to a wide spectrum of different, yet interrelated traditions of doctrines, practices, and social institutions involving asceticism and renunciation, which freely borrow from and influence each other on account of their very fluid boundaries. Although the first records of asceticism¹ can be found in early Vedic literature, a burgeoning of the renouncer tradition seems to have emerged in the middle of the first millennium BCE. This was a period of great social and political change in India, which occurred with the expansion of urbanisation, the growing power of kingship, the development of new trade routes, and increased communication, all of which allowed for a broader exchange and expansion of new ideas and movements (Gombrich 1988: 50–60). These developments may have contributed to an increased sense of individualism (Olivelle 2011: 13) that offered people new choices, including the pursuit of the life of a homeless renouncer. Ancient texts inform about a wide range of different ascetics and wandering mendicants in India at that time, living individually or in small groups, and apparently without a central body or pronounced hierarchical structure.²

Despite a diversity of doctrinal foundations and practices among the various groups of ancient Indian renouncers, a frame of reference may be drawn by identifying a few common denominators, perhaps above all, the fundamental premise that human life (as well as the life of animals and other beings) does not end with death but continues into a new life; thus, there is no beginning and no end to birth, death, and subsequent rebirth (*saṃsāra*). Being caught in the endless cycle of life and death, conditioned by the law of cause and effect (*karma*), was viewed as unsatisfactory, subject to suffering, and therefore highly undesirable. Hence, most Indian spiritual traditions engaged with the question of how to be released from

1 The term “asceticism” signifies various practices of restraint and abstinence, performed mainly by renouncers and, to a lesser degree, by householders, in the pursuit of spiritual goals, whereas “renunciation” refers to the abandoning of worldly life, which would involve a form of initiation and include asceticism.

2 For example, in the *Brahmajālasutta* (Walshe 2012: 67–90), sixty-two types of worldviews are listed, demonstrating a vast spectrum of philosophies and ascetic practices in ancient India at the time.

the entanglements of *samsāra* and achieve liberation,³ which was considered to be attainable through detachment and spiritual knowledge.⁴

The renouncer's path to liberation required radical lifestyle changes, i.e., becoming homeless, wandering without permanent residency, or dwelling either alone or in small groups in forests and other secluded places. Typically, renouncers would train in ascetic practices, including celibacy, fasting, and various other austerities in order to cultivate detachment in relation to the body and mind. In other words, by abandoning social status, name, family life (by following the vow of celibacy), and even food production (by begging for food or subsisting in the wilderness), the renouncers apparently aspired to deconstruct the socially conditioned identities that are created by actively participating in domestic and communal life. Nonetheless, as will be discussed, the institutions that developed within the renouncer traditions would still participate, to varying degrees, in social life and thus reflect the structural patterns of the society of the time, particularly in relation to the social hierarchy and the construct of gender.

The renouncer's lifestyle was considered to be a negation of everything that society represented, but it was through this very rejection of social structures that they received the recognition, deep respect, and support of society. They were attributed special knowledge or magical powers, and through their support of renouncers, people believed that they would obtain karmic merit, which could also be transferred to their family and ancestors. The renouncers displayed easily visible and specific signs or marks (*liṅga*) such as a shaven head (e.g., Buddhist monks) or matted hair (e.g., Brahmanical anchorites), and they lived naked (e.g., Digambara Jain ascetics) or dressed in distinct clothing. Through these means alone, they received recognition of their ascetic status along with the support from the public, often, it would seem, irrespective of their specific doctrinal beliefs.

The main sources of information about early Indian asceticism and monasticism are found within three major ancient Indian traditions, namely Brahmanism (often situated under the broader umbrella term of "Hinduism"),⁵ Jainism, and Buddhism. References to ascetics already occur in the earliest recorded texts, the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas, but the most expansive evidence is found in two large bodies of texts, i.e., the Upaniṣads and the Dharmasāstra literature, which describe anchorites who dwell in forest hermitages and practice various restraints in pursuit of spiritual liberation

3 Within the different traditions, spiritual liberation was known by different terms such as *mokṣa*, *mukti*, *nirvāṇa*, and *kaivalya*, thus manifesting the heterogeneity of the Indian renouncer tradition.

4 For studies on the ancient Indian renouncer tradition, see Bronkhorst 1993; Olivelle 2011.

5 The term "Hinduism" loosely represents the wide range of schools of thought, beliefs, and religious practices of India, other than Muslim, Christian, Jain, and Sikh. It emerged as a category only in the nineteenth century CE, mainly as the outcome of Western colonisation and the dominant social role of Brahmanism, and was appropriated by Indians during the anti-colonial movement, while being strongly linked to the formation of an Indian national identity (King 1999: 96–142).

(Olivelle 2011: 91–125). With time, the records of renouncers within the Brahmanical tradition expanded, particularly in the collections of legal texts, known as the *Dharmaśāstras*, composed around the first few centuries CE, and in a group of about twenty *Upaniṣads*, called the *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, situated (tentatively) between the beginning of CE and the twelfth century CE (Olivelle 1992: 8–11).

The developments within Brahmanism were significantly influenced by two ascetic movements that had been spreading across the Indian subcontinent from the middle of the first millennium BCE onwards, namely Buddhism and Jainism. Both traditions shared the quest for liberation from *saṃsāra* to be attained through a life of renunciation. For Buddhist renouncers, this involved the cultivation of virtues, detachment, celibacy, and meditation, whereas the path of Jains was more ascetic, incorporating severe austerities, extreme non-violence, and prolonged fasting periods. Both traditions established monastic orders for men and women and allowed people from all walks of life to ordain on a voluntary basis. Buddhism flourished in the Indian subcontinent until (about) the end of the first millennium CE, by which time its many schools had influenced other religious traditions throughout India and Asia, whereas Jainism has remained within the Indian subcontinent until the present day. It is well evidenced that with the expansion of Jainism and Buddhism, monasticism became well established in India and, consequently, influenced most Indian religious movements, which involved an extraordinary variety of renouncer groups and institutions. Thus, the renouncer tradition has flourished throughout recorded Indian history, encompassing continuous changes, innovations, and developments, and perhaps generating the most important nourishing ground for the multifarious spiritual and cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent down to the present day.

FEMALE RENOUNCERS THROUGHOUT INDIAN HISTORY

The freedom of choice to follow the path of renunciation was granted not only to men but also to women, although their position was always presented as marginal and inferior to men's, at least according to the traditional records, which allot very meagre attention to female ascetics. The prevalent disregard of women in the textual traditions of India reflects the fact, as noted by many scholars (e.g., Gross 1993: 20; Black 2007: 133), that historical records on Indian religions were almost exclusively composed, transmitted, and recorded by men, targeted at a male audience, and thus speaking mostly about men. Therefore, textual sources on female renouncers should be approached with great caution, bearing in mind that they tend to construct an ideal of femininity that is related to – but does not represent – the actual social realities and gender relations of the time. In other words, the literary records of ancient India are certainly not simple historical accounts but, to a large extent, complex reflections on and transmissions of (male) societal expectations, utopias, fears, and projections, which resonate the predominantly androcentric and patriarchal

views of the time. As a result, they may be of very little relevance to the everyday life of female renouncers. Women's voices occur very rarely and, when they do speak, they are not heard; they are included in the texts by male editors and "their speech is mediated by male speakers" (Black 2007: 158).

Female renunciation is not only a neglected chapter in the textual records of Indian religions but also in modern scholarship. Numerous studies, especially from the first half of the twentieth century or earlier, as well as many contemporary textbooks on Indic religions dedicate very limited attention to women (and even less so to female renouncers), often mentioning them in a few sentences or paragraphs as a single homogenous category. Only in the last few decades has research on female ascetics and monastics started to emerge based on the study of ancient texts (e.g., Sponberg 1992: 3–36; Black 2007: 133–168; Collett 2016), often explored through a feminist lens (e.g., Gross 1993) or, more frequently, drawing from research on modern female renouncers (e.g., Denton 2004; Salgado 2013; Sethi 2012); these studies show a significant discrepancy between traditional textual sources and modern ethnographical data. Having underlined the great paucity of resources and research on female renouncers – especially in comparison to the attention given to their male counterparts – it should nevertheless be highlighted that there is sufficient evidence to indicate a continuity of female renouncer traditions on the Indian subcontinent from ancient times to the present day.

Representations of Women in Brahmanical Sources

The early Upaniṣads, situated in the first half of the first millennium BCE, inform about the engagement of women in spiritual pursuits; though largely marginalised, they are occasionally allowed to speak. For example, Gārgī, the oft-mentioned female character from the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, demonstrates her superior knowledge and understanding of the teachings on spiritual liberation when she challenges the sage Yājñavalkya (Olivelle 1998: 89–93), and yet, at the end of the debate, she remains silent, although her "defeat" may be questioned. Apart from such exceptions, female voices in the Brahmanical literature are few and far between and "are continually restricted and muted" (Black 2007: 135).

The Dharmaśāstra, another important body of ancient Brahmanical texts, attributes only one role to women, namely that of a married woman whose religious life and duties (*strīdharmā*) are centred on serving and obeying her husband and bearing him sons. Thus, one of the most renowned legal texts of ancient India, the Law Code of Manu (MS), probably composed between the second century BCE and the second century CE, consistently presents women as inferior to men – physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually – and prescribes that they should always, in all circumstances, be subordinate to and controlled by men (MS 5: 147–148; Ditrich 2010: 145). This text speaks of women only in relation to men and reiterates their wifely

subordination with such strong emphasis that a very apparent subtext emerges, pointing to a great fear of female power, expressed especially in her sexuality and motherhood (Ditrich 2010: 156–157). Although the Brahmanical tradition incorporated renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) as a possible life choice, it was available solely to men, whereas the only model proposed in the texts for women was to be a perfect wife.⁶ This role was envisaged as a kind of domestic asceticism, which encompassed chastity, self-sacrifice, total submission to and worship of her husband, regular fasting, and other restrictions and vows (*vrata*) in order to generate merit for her husband and family (Clémentin Ojha 2012). Furthermore, if widowed, the woman was expected to live a celibate life and practice austerities, considered to be the only appropriate path for her to join her husband after death.

To stress once again, the Brahmanical construct of women's position in society, which strips them almost completely of any agency, must be questioned in terms of how relevant these master narratives actually were to the everyday life of women, if at all. A careful reading of the legal texts themselves implies that women at the time possessed some economic power and agency (Olivelle 2004); in addition, ancient Indian literature provides many examples of female ascetics or renouncers, from the great epics to the dramas by Kālidāsa (e.g., Kauśikī in Śakuntalā). Moreover, at the time of the composition of legal texts, there were many non-Brahmanical female ascetics in India such as Buddhist and Jain nuns who are scarcely mentioned by the Brahmanical texts; this silence suggests that female renouncer movements, which gave new choices to women, may have been conceived by the Brahmanical orthodoxy as a threat to their own constructions of femininity (Ditrich 2010: 154).

Buddhist Nuns

While female renouncers were largely ignored by Brahmanical texts, the non-Brahmanical movements such as Buddhism and Jainism supported female renunciation. The establishment of female monastic orders in Buddhism and Jainism was apparently a unique innovation; for the first time in recorded history, female renunciation was legitimised and institutionalised, thus providing a new option for women to leave behind domestic life with its social structures of class (*varṇa*) and, albeit to a much lesser extent, gender. However, as the texts narrate, the Buddha established the female monastic order with reluctance; he created an additional eight specific rules for nuns (*garudhammas*), which firmly positioned them, at all times, as inferior

6 In the Brahmanical tradition, renunciation was interpreted as abandoning the performance of rituals, and consequently, it was open only to those permitted to conduct rituals in the first place, namely, the three upper classes (*varṇa*) of men (Olivelle 1992: 60–75). Since women had no active role in sacrificial rites, there was no option for them to become a renouncer; from the ritual perspective, women were perceived as equal to the lowest class (*śūdra*).

to monks.⁷ Many modern scholars suggest that these rules were aimed at protecting women (Anālayo 2016: 128–129) or were simply in line with the social norms of ancient India, which prescribed that women always had to be under male supervision (Horner 1963: 352–358; Collett 2016: 156–158). These assumptions mostly seem to be based on ancient normative legal texts and other literary sources, which should be questioned, as they do not necessarily reflect the actual position and realities of women themselves (Ditrich 2017: 154).⁸

From the Buddhist doctrinal point of view, women are regarded as soteriologically equal to men in their ability to attain spiritual liberation. This is evidenced by several accounts of women who became fully enlightened, renowned teachers, or even the bearers of Buddhist transmission such as Khujjuttarā, a woman of very humble background who became one of the chief disciples of the Buddha and even transmitted a body of texts, the *Itivuttaka* (Heim 2015: 145–148). Although women are certainly underrepresented in Buddhist literature, occasionally, though rarely, they would speak in their own voices: the *Therīgāthā*, an anthology of seventy-three poems, was composed by Buddhist nuns, presumably during the lifetime of the Buddha.⁹ In these poems, the nuns express the joy of freedom from family life, their dedication to meditation, and the exultation of spiritual liberation (Schelling, Waldman 1996; Collett 2016). However, it should be underlined that these narratives, which underwent centuries of transmission and editing, represent only a minute fraction of the large body of Buddhist textual tradition (composed by and for men), and they have often been singled out by modern Buddhists and scholars as a kind of Buddhist apologetics within the framework of the modern (Western) enterprise of gender equality.¹⁰

Notwithstanding institutionalised female monasticism, which was allegedly an unprecedented option for women at the time, and several positive portrayals of women in the literary sources, Buddhism also contributed, like other ascetic movements, to misogyny. Women were frequently described as objects of male sexual desire, as malevolent temptresses that monks should avoid at all times (Paul 1979: 3–59; Sponberg 1992: 18–24). It should be highlighted that these positive and negative portrayals of female renouncers represent just two facets of multifarious constructs of femininity drawn from textual sources. As discussed by Salgado (2013: 11), contemporary Buddhist nuns frequently “challenge, ignore or simply bypass” the rules that position them as inferior to monks. It may be inferred that this was

7 For a comprehensive analysis of early Buddhist sources on the foundation of the nun’s order, see Anālayo 2016.

8 Research of modern Buddhist renouncers by Salgado (2013: 77–100) indicates that these restrictive rules are perceived by many contemporary Sri Lankan nuns as marginal or irrelevant.

9 For studies on the *Therīgāthā*, see Murcott 1991, Blackstone 2000, and Collett 2016.

10 The question of gender (in)equality in Buddhism is addressed in several studies: e.g., Cabezón 1992; Gross 1993; Salgado 2013; Anālayo 2016; Collett 2016.

likewise the case in the past; indeed, archaeological records suggest that the nuns may have been more independent, influential, and respected than what is implied in the textual representations of them. For example, ancient Buddhist inscriptions, especially those written before the end of the Gupta period, inform that nuns had their own economic agency (Schopen 1997: 238–257; Barnes 2000: 17–36) and were major donors, with significant independence and property ownership; hence, their prescribed subordination to monks may have had “no bearing on their legal and economic status” (Schopen 2014: 91). Nevertheless, it appears that from the middle of the first millennium CE, for various reasons, records about Buddhist nuns became increasingly sparse, implying that their social position may have gradually diminished (Paul 1985: 187–190; Schopen 1997: 250).

Jain Nuns

While Buddhist nuns probably more or less disappeared from the Indian subcontinent by the mediaeval period, the female renouncers of other traditions remained, especially the seemingly unbroken institution of Jain nuns, spanning from the middle of the first millennium BCE to the present day. In contrast to Buddhist nuns who have received significant scholarly attention in recent decades, research on Jain nuns has been relatively scarce. Throughout history (until only recently), the Jain community remained mostly confined to the Indian subcontinent, and their female renouncers did not attract many Western scholars or practitioners, barring a few exceptions such as Charlotte Krause (Banthia, Soni 1999) and several modern researchers (e.g., Fohr 2006; Sethi 2012). According to historical records, Jainism was probably founded in northern India around the same time as Buddhism. The two traditions have many parallels in their teachings, social institutions, and monastic organisation but also major differences; above all, Jain monastics are expected to live a significantly stricter ascetic life. Like Buddhists, Jains established monastic orders for monks and nuns, supported by male and female lay communities, and formally positioned nuns as inferior to monks.¹¹

Jains are broadly divided into two sects due to several doctrinal divergences, which include different views on gender: the Śvetāmbaras (“white clad”) believe that women are able to achieve spiritual liberation, whereas the Digambaras (“sky clad”), comprised of naked ascetics, claim that women need to be reborn as men in order to be liberated (Dundas 2002: 45–59).¹² Although both sects include male and female renouncers, most nuns belong to the Śvetāmbaras. Unlike other Indian renouncer traditions, Jainism has an unusual gender ratio among monastics: it seems that from

11 For a good overview of Jainism, see Dundas 2002.

12 For historical Jain debates on gender in which a distinction was made between biological sex and the psychological and social construct of gender (a rather unique premodern text that recognises these distinctions), see Jaini 1991.

the very beginning until the present day, nuns have largely outnumbered monks. According to the tradition, as stated in the Kalpasūtra (§133–135), at the time of the founder Mahāvira, there were 36,000 nuns and 14,000 monks; in addition, women also largely outnumbered men among the laity (Jaini 1979: 37). A similar ratio was identified in the demographic overview of Jain monastics in modern times (Flügel 2006). Some scholars explain this ratio by proposing that nuns were prevalently either widows or wives of ordained monks who would have presumably had several wives before joining the order (Jaini 1979: 37). This supposition, often also claimed for Indian female renouncers of other traditions, seems problematic and ungrounded, as it divests women of any spiritual agency.¹³ In the late 1990s, Sethi (2012) conducted research with sixty-five contemporary Jain nuns and showed that they were not widows but almost entirely young unmarried women who had freely chosen to ordain, often despite family objections. They were highly inspired by their Jain tradition, especially the rich narrative literature, which provides strong positive images of female ascetics and elevates asceticism as the most ideal possible life. Renunciation was perceived by these women as a life of great independence, freedom, and opportunity to focus on the cultivation of detachment in the pursuit of spiritual goals (Sethi 2012: 123–128).

As in all other Indic religious traditions, textual representations of Jain femininity also feature contradictions and ambiguities, ranging from the valorisation of chaste wives and pious nuns to misogynistic images of dangerous, lustful temptresses. On the one hand, renunciation is presented as a mainly male pursuit, while women are often portrayed as detrimental to male ascetics (*ibid.*: 62–66). On the other, female renunciation is considered to be a legitimate and respected choice for women, and the monastic institution regarded as protective of nuns' chastity and hence a safe environment for girls and women (Fohr 2006: 161).

Jain nuns lead itinerant lives, collect alms, and follow the same rules as monks based on the five vows of total non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and detachment (Dundas 2002: 157–160). They are highly respected and generously supported by the lay community, especially within their kin networks from which many nuns are recruited. Although normatively subordinate to monks, they would often (indirectly) supersede the norms and consider themselves to be equal to monks in their social position and spiritual potential (Fohr 2006: 167). Occasionally, they even challenge the rules, as exemplified by a group of nuns from the Sthānakavāsī sect who attempted to abolish male hegemony in the ascetic ranks in the 1980s (Sethi 2012: 212–214). Although in the last few decades some groups of nuns have been increasingly engaged in social work, particularly in the health services and education (*ibid.*: 177–180), thus reflecting changes in twentieth-century India, their main concern remains religious practice, encompassing the cultivation of detachment in the

¹³ According to Jain customary law, Jain widows would inherit their dead husband's property and would not be destitute (Sethi 2012: 90–93); hence, they would have no economic incentive to ordain.

pursuit of liberation. Their understanding of being female in the monastic context is primarily shown in their choice of the path of renunciation.

Hindu Female Ascetics

Apart from Jain nuns, there have been many other groups of female renouncers in India, usually designated under the umbrella term “Hindu ascetics” (Denton 2004; Clémentin Ojha 2012). The resources and research on Hindu female ascetics of the past and present are very sparse, and only in the last few decades have they received some scholarly attention (e.g., Denton 2004; Khandelwal 2009; Bevilacqua 2017). One of the reasons for this paucity of information is that their communities have been dispersed among numerous sects and groups, and there is no known record of any exclusively female Hindu renouncer tradition before the twentieth century. As discussed above, according to the textual records, the Brahmanical path of renunciation was only accessible to men; nevertheless, this model was continuously challenged, particularly with the emergence and expansion of theistic and Tantric movements in India, which were open to all classes and genders. From the mediaeval period onwards, several literary accounts inform about female ascetics, mystics, and saints. Moreover, female renouncers also speak by themselves: for example, the famous *yoginī* Lāl Ded from fourteenth-century Kashmir (Hoskote 2013) or the saint and poet *Mirābāī* from the sixteenth century (Hawley, Juergensmeyer 2004) spoke in their own voices of their spiritual path, ecstasy, and the joy of liberation, and thus contributed to the vast depository of Indian devotional and mystical literature. They embodied spiritual liberation for women; however, because their status was considered divine and thus outside the human domain, they were exceptional individuals and, though inspiring, not role models for women at large (Clémentin Ojha 2012).

Within the abundant and long-standing Indian renouncer tradition, Hindu female renouncers were always marginal; women would join various male monastic groups or orders (*saṃpradāya*), provided that they were open to them. Various Śākta and Tantric ascetic groups were perhaps most welcoming: they honour the female body as sacred and consider all women to share in the Goddess nature. Consequently, they grant women reverence, authority, and independence, and frequently reject or even reverse the Brahmanical ideas of purity and asceticism (Khanna 2000). Though not mainstream, Tantrism has for centuries provided a domain where women have been respected despite the overarching constraints of patriarchy.

Generally, Hindu female renouncers share the same aims, practices, and institutions as their male counterparts within the particular group or tradition to which they belong. They undergo a form of initiation and bear specific visual signs of their affiliation such as bodily marks, shaven, loose, or matted hair, and white, red, or saffron clothes; these signs are vital for signifying the renouncer’s identity, affiliation, and related spiritual practices. In their pursuit of liberation, they mostly observe

celibacy, cultivate austerities, have various dietary restrictions, and perform a range of rituals, prayers, or meditations. There has been a remarkable plurality of Hindu female renouncers, and in contrast to their male counterparts, becoming an initiated female renouncer would involve a major shift – from the religious practices expected of laywomen, which are almost entirely dedicated to the welfare of others (primarily the husband and sons), to the life of a renouncer whose main religious focus is on themselves in the pursuit of self-liberation (Denton 2004: 34). Their links to society vary widely, hence the dichotomy of worldly/non-worldly applies to female renouncers to a significantly lesser extent than it does to their male counterparts: women can take celibacy vows and follow ascetic practices while staying in the domestic environment, or join a renouncer group and live a relatively stationary life, or become itinerant ascetics without retaining any family ties.

It was only in the twentieth century that predominantly or exclusively female monastic orders within Hinduism were established in India, reflecting the significant changes of the time such as colonial subjugation, encounters with Christianity, and the Hindu reformist movement (Sinclair Brull 1997: 7–22; Bachetta 2002: 157–176; Singh 200: 171–201). Perhaps the most well-known modern monastic group, with numerous centres worldwide, is that of the Brahma Kumaris, established in 1937. Despite being established by a man, it is largely comprised of female renouncers and run by women. This movement could be viewed, on the one hand, as a kind of feminist movement within “a distinctively Hindu idiom” (Babb 1986: 107) or, on the other, as a patriarchal attempt to control female sexuality (Chowdhry 1996: 2312). Their spiritual practice specially emphasises celibacy, since sexuality is viewed as the source of oppression for women in Hindu society. The movement represents a critique of traditional social structures that subordinate women in marriage, stating that husbands are not worthy of veneration and that female primeval divine status, autonomy, and freedom are gained through celibacy (Babb 1986: 141).

Often no clear boundaries are perceived between widows and female renouncers in modern India; one of the reasons may be in the similar appearance of certain groups of female renouncers who, like widows, dress in white, shave their head, and practice asceticism (Denton 2004: 19–21). This assumption is not only made for modern Hindu female renouncers but, interestingly, even projected onto early Buddhist and Jain nuns. Sweeping statements that deny female renouncers any agency are very problematic, and as shown in more recent research (Denton 2004: 41–55; Sethi 2012: 221–225), most female renouncers in India are not “victims” who are pushed to the margins of society, but on the contrary, it is their choice to dedicate their lives to asceticism and spiritual goals.

From what was said above, it may be proposed that the path of female renunciation constitutes the domain where Indian women have been able to articulate their agency the most. It is expressed mainly as the freedom to choose a way of life that is conducive to the pursuit of liberation, culminating in the transcendence of any construct of self or social agency, and is considered, in line with the overarching Indian

renouncer tradition, to be ultimately beyond all opposites. Thus, the classic dichotomies of public/private, lay/monastic, and worldly/non-worldly cannot easily be imposed on female renouncers, and modern attempts to construct a narrative about them can be contested (Salgado 2013: 30). The issues and perspectives explored by researchers may not at all be relevant for the renouncers who are the subject of research, since the cultural translation in theorising religion is prevalently conducted from the perspective of secular Western liberalism, as argued by Salgado (*ibid.*: 21–76) in her study of modern Buddhist nuns. To illustrate, from the Buddhist perspective, female renunciation is not so much about the liberation of self (from the constraints of patriarchal society) but rather the liberation *from* self, i.e., freedom from any construct of an “I,” ideally to be achieved through the cultivation of detachment and the relinquishment of the social self (Ditrich 2017: 158–160). In this light, terms such as “power,” “freedom,” and “equality” that have inevitably informed discussions about female renouncers and are linked to subjectivity and identity may need to be re-examined and used in a different sense (Salgado 2013: 197). Consequently, the issue of the un-translatability between different discourses (i.e., liberal universalistic Western and Buddhist) should be revisited, but primarily, female renouncers should be allowed not only to speak for themselves but also to be listened to more carefully.

In debating the various frameworks and discourses, it is proposed here that all the approaches that draw from textual and oral sources and investigate within various paradigms may be considered to be both necessary and valid: in studying female renouncer tradition(s), multiple facets need to be uncovered, as each one constructs its own standpoint and contributes to a more holistic representation.¹⁴ Through diverse frameworks, the interplay of a range of conditions, causes, and parameters that contribute to the female renouncers’ lives could emerge, and coexisting multiple frameworks could perhaps even serve as an incentive for creating new methodological premises outside the extant scholarly research of female renunciation.

By way of recapitulation, it is evident that the ever-evolving Indian female renouncer tradition is by far too complex and multivalent, embracing numerous ambivalences and contradictions, to allow for generalisations; for every statement made, a counterexample can also be found. Nevertheless, some parameters or themes that seem to be frequently shared by most female renouncer groups in India deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, their diversity is significant: throughout history, the Indian female renouncer tradition has been dynamic and ever-changing, giving way to innovation as well as new doctrines and practices. In spite of their heterogeneity, they share the overarching common goal of the Indian renouncer tradition, i.e., the pursuit of liberation through various forms of asceticism, particularly celibacy and the cultivation of detachment. Their organisation varies: some live in large institutions (particularly the Jain monastics) and others in smaller, decentralised groups,

14 In such an approach, inspiration may be drawn from the ancient Jain doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (“doctrine on many-sidedness”), which embraces all standpoints as incomplete yet valid, as they are partial expressions of the totality (Dundas 1992: 229).

but nearly all of them are affiliated to organisations led by male renouncers who are normatively positioned as their superiors (though female renouncers would frequently consider this irrelevant). Female renouncers seem to have been more integrated into society than their male counterparts: they would commonly have closer links with their particular community and especially with their kin networks. Central to female (and male) renunciation is their lifestyle, encompassing ascetic practices, celibacy, and particular dress codes, whereas their beliefs and doctrinal premises are rather secondary.

INDIAN FEMALE RENOUNCERS AND CATHOLIC NUNS: REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, this research forms part of a larger project investigating female Catholic missionaries in twentieth-century India. It aims to present a panoramic historical outline of female renouncers in India, which would serve as a backdrop for the investigation of the encounters between Catholic nuns and indigenous Indian female renouncers.

As underlined by Singh (2000: 8), a considerable body of textual accounts on India by Christian missionaries is available, but surprisingly little is known about the perspective of the receiving culture regarding the perceptions of, interactions with, and responses to Catholic female missionaries among the recipients, i.e., Indians of various religious backgrounds and social classes, and especially women and female renouncers who may have perceived Catholic nuns differently from their male counterparts. Hence, by way of conclusion, this paper enquires whether one of the multiple parameters contributing to the reception of Christianity in India (and Catholic nuns in particular) could have been the millennia-long Indian renouncer tradition, with its inherent respect for any individual opting for the spiritual path. To explore this question, some of the main commonalities between the Christian and Indian female renouncer traditions will be briefly noted, and a few directions proposed for further research.

Firstly, both female renouncer traditions have a long history and share the similar aim of spiritual liberation or salvation, though understood within very different frameworks and founded on distinct doctrinal assumptions. A commonality could be found in the monotheistic Christian faith in one God, which may have resonated with the Hindu devotion to a god or goddess, considered to be one of the many paths to spiritual liberation. Particularly within the theistic movements, Indian female renouncers would often perceive their life of chastity and devotion as a sort of marriage to the deity they worship (Hawley, Juergensmeyer 2004); hence, the question can be posed whether and to what extent this Indian devotional attitude could be comparable to the representation of Catholic nuns as “brides of Christ.”

Another overlap between the two traditions lies in the area of social action, perceived as a spiritual path. Although the Indian renouncer tradition is founded on the premise that worldly life is intrinsically problematic and cannot be fundamentally “improved,” but should instead be transcended by leaving behind the cycle of re-births, social engagement as a spiritual path was not completely absent (e.g., from the idea of renunciation in action in the *Bhagavadgītā* to revalorisation of asceticism linked to social action by Gandhi). However, explicit social work was not taken as a central religious practice until the changes brought about by the colonial experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., the Ramakrishna Mission; see Sinclair-Brull 1997). In comparison, the focus on the social engagement of Catholic nuns, though more pronounced among certain orders than others, received a major stimulus in the twentieth century, with the primary aim to engage with the oppressed, poor, and sick. Conversely, in the Indian religious discourse, difficult life circumstances are commonly perceived to result from one’s *karma*, and thus renunciation is commonly understood as a path to a better future life or complete spiritual liberation. Still, social action as a spiritual practice, albeit not the main path for renouncers, has a long history in India and is therefore not considered to be entirely alien to spiritual practice; thus, we may ask whether the Indian tradition of social action may have played a role in allowing Catholic nuns to engage in social missionary activities, understood by the receiving culture as legitimate spiritual practice.

A further important commonality between the two traditions is monasticism: despite a great variety of decentralised groups and affiliations among Indian female renouncers, some are organised in larger monastic institutions such as Jain nuns, and thus they bear comparison with Catholic monasticism. Both Jainism and Catholicism uphold the ideal of the renunciation of worldly life, including celibacy and ethical living. For Catholic monastics, this would involve vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience across all denominations, whereas the vows and practices are more diverse among Indian renouncers. For Indian ascetics, their external appearance, including particular dress codes, hairstyles, and other signs, is a vital corollary, signifying the renouncer’s identity and social recognition, whereas their doctrinal views and beliefs, which are of an exceptional variety and fluidity among the various traditions, would be less important. Traditionally, the dress code also defined Catholic nuns, but it was never a central component, since their faith was considered of preeminent significance. Hence, in contrast to Indian renouncers, many female Catholic orders in the twentieth century, after the Second Vatican Council in 1965, replaced their traditional habit for lay clothes; it may be worth investigating how indigenous Indian Catholic nuns perceived and adjusted to this innovation.

Yet another significant commonality between the two traditions is female empowerment through renunciation, which may serve, within the constraints of patriarchy, as a platform for expressing female agency, though understood within rather different contexts. The focus of Indian laywomen on serving others (mainly their husband and family) would shift through renunciation to their own pursuit of spiritual

liberation (Denton 2004: 34), whereas for modern Catholic female missionaries, the path to salvation is primarily envisaged by serving others (mainly the poor, sick, and destitute). Hence, in their serving roles, female Christian missionaries were often perceived as maternal figures (Singh 2000: 25), and consequently, it can be asked whether, with their maternal image, they may have been regarded within the prevalent Indian patriarchy as more acceptable (and less threatening) to the religious and political structures than their male counterparts.

As indicated in these preliminary reflections and questions, the religious context of India, which Catholic nuns entered in the twentieth century, may have had a sufficient intersecting space between the two discourses, which could be viewed as one of many historical conditions that would have provided the grounds for Christian nuns to be accepted and understood, however differently. This paper suggests that the commonalities between the Catholic and indigenous Indian renouncers may have been one of the parameters that contributed to the recognition, respect, and support of Christian nuns in India during the colonial era and allowed them to engage in communal activities, which may have been perceived by the recipient culture as one of many legitimate spiritual practices. Undoubtedly, these contentions, questions, and suggestions require further exploration and scholarly attention.

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POVZETEK

ODPOVED INDIJSKIH ŽENSK POSVETNEMU ŽIVLJENJU: POZABLJENO POGlavJE V ZGODOVINI INDIJSKIH RELIGIJ

Tamara DITRICH

Avtorica položaj žensk v indijskih asketskih tradicijah obravnava z namenom predstavitve širšega indijskega verskega konteksta, v katerega so vstopale in v njem delovale katoliške misijonarke. Raziskava, na kateri sloni prispevek, je del širšega raziskovalnega projekta o delovanju slovenskih katoliških misijonark v kolonialni Indiji v 20. stoletju.

Prispevek najprej uvede večtisočletno tradicijo indijskega asketizma in monasticizma ter oriše njihove glavne verske predpostavke in prakse. Pri tem se osredotoča na položaj žensk v starih indijskih asketskih tradicijah – temu področju so tako tradicionalni indijski viri kot sodobni znanstveniki doslej posvečali le malo pozornosti. Odpoved posvetnemu življenju kot poti k duhovni osvoboditvi ima v Indiji starodavne korenine, o čemer pričajo že najstarejša besedila iz prvega tisočletja pr. n. št. Največja zakladnica informacij o asketskih gibanjih so tri glavne staroindijske duhovne tradicije – brahmanizem (oz. hinduizem), budizem in džainizem. V okviru omenjenih treh tradicij prispevek kritično raziskuje (z različnih perspektiv) vlogo žensk, njihovo avtonomijo in družbene omejitve. Predstavi konstruktivne normativnih postavk za ženske v brahmanizmu ter razpravlja o prvih monastičnih ženskih redovih v budizmu in džainizmu.

Avtorica ugotavlja, da je večtisočletna tradicija indijskih ženskih asketinj in nun izjemno kompleksna in mnogovrstna ter zaobjema številne ambivalentnosti in nasprotja, a je po njenem mnenju mogoče identificirati nekaj glavnih tem, ki so skupne večini asketskih in monastičnih skupin. Najbolj vseobsegajoča skupna tema vseh tradicij je njihov cilj – pot do duhovne osvoboditve, ki vključuje odpoved posvetnemu življenju, raznolike asketske prakse in celibat. Asketinje, ki so živele v okviru različnih institucij, od velikih monastičnih organizacij (npr. džainske nune) do manjših decentraliziranih skupin, so bile vedno normativno podrejene moškim, a so svojo podrejenost pogosto doživljale kot nerelevantno.

Na koncu prispevka avtorica razmišlja o srečanju katoliškega in indijskega verskega diskurza in skuša identificirati pomembna stičišča med indijskimi asketinjami in katoliškimi nunami. Pri tem se sprašuje, ali niso prav ta stičišča pripomogla k temu, da so bile katoliške misijonarke v kolonialni Indiji deležne podpore Indijcev, ki so morda njihovo družbeno angažiranost razumeli kot eno od legitimnih duhovnih praks v indijskih religijah.