

Local Concepts of Women Ascetics: Living Goddesses of the ChâraG

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ABSTRACT This essay deals with a local tradition of female asceticism practiced by women of the Charan caste in Kacchh and Saurashtra (Gujarat). Drawing upon pan-Indian concepts of world renunciation, women ascetics remain unmarried and follow a renunciatory way of life. A peculiar conjunction between notions of the Goddess and asceticism provides women with a culturally accepted alternative role to that of a wife and mother of her husband's children. Such women are deified and worshipped by their followers as "living goddesses". Thereby the Charan draw upon a specific notion of Hindu goddesses as women of whom it is said that they once appeared on earth in a human female body. Their names were Kho
îyâr Mâtâjî, Bahucharâ Mâtâjî or Ravechi Mâtâjî. They are considered to be incarnations (avatar) or human manifestations of Pârvatî, Durgâ Kalî and other classical Devîs¹. The focus of the paper is directed at the experiences of women who, by employing these concepts, display a highly individualistic outlook which runs counter to gender norms that otherwise regulate the life of the caste. These phenomenon throw new light on theories of Indian individualism that are based exclusively upon androcentric perspectives in relation to male constructions of social identity. By contrast, concepts of female asceticism considered here point to the necessity to include the analytic category of gender in order to give the gendered nature of both hierarchy and individualism its due place.