

Local Concepts of Women Ascetics: Living Goddesses of the ChāraG

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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 Khoīyār Mātājī, Bahucharā Mātājī or Ravechi Mātājī. They are considered to be incarnations (avatar) or human manifestations of Pārvatī, Durgā Kalī and other classical Devīs¹. 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.