

## Local Concepts of Women Ascetics: Living Goddesses of the Chāraṇ

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**ABSTRACT** This essay deals with a local tradition of female asceticism practiced by women of the Chāraṇ 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 Chāraṇ 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 Khoḍiyār Mātāji, Bahucharā Mātāji or Ravechi Mātāji. They are considered to be incarnations (avatar) or human manifestations of Pārvatī, Durgā, Kālī and other classical Devis<sup>1</sup>. 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.

### INTRODUCTION

Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch was the first anthropologist who came across deified ascetic women of the Chāraṇ caste in Saurashtra (Gujarat) whom she called "living goddesses" (Westphal-Hellbusch 1973). Whereas Westphal-Hellbusch at the time did not give much importance to concepts of world renunciation in relation to women, today the phenomenon of female ascetics is seen as an interesting problem which puts into question hegemonic brahmanical notions of world renunciation that exclude women from the pursuit of salvation by defining it as a path open exclusively to men. Recent research has shown that the field of world renunciation is not exclu-

sively male but is structured on various levels by gender principles<sup>2</sup>. Different forms of asceticism that are opposed to the existence of women householders offer practical alternatives to the role of a wife. As will be shown, the phenomenon of the "living goddess" in Kacchh is solely understandable in its specific cultural context. The tradition of female asceticism considered here shows features which differ from those that have been emphasized in studies of concepts and practices of male ascetics, in which numerous male conundrums come to the fore, such as the relationship between Brahman priests and the king, or that between householder and ascetic<sup>3</sup>. The Hindu goddess has also been treated mainly in relation to men. Her cult seems to have significance mainly for men, while for women she only represents negatively or positively rated models of female roles<sup>4</sup>.

The case under discussion displays a unique combination of notions of feminine deification<sup>5</sup> with notions of asceticism. Thereby a contrast to the role of the wife is explicitly created, which nevertheless results in a function complementary to it as these deified women watch over the values of caste "from the outside". They manifest a female version of ascetic individualism because in their way of thinking and in their religious aspirations living goddesses follow values that run counter to those norms by which the lives of non-ascetic women in their roles of wives are defined<sup>6</sup>. While married women devote their entire social existence to being there "for others", their social actions being determined by male domination (home, family, lineage), ascetic goddesses by contrast aspire to perfecting themselves and only act for their own Self.

In Kacchh, ascetic goddesses are called Mātāji, as is the Hindu goddess in general. The term is also used for female ascetics. In the case

of living Mātājis one is neither dealing with single persons nor with members of a specific religious school (*sampradaya*, *panth*), but mainly – although not exclusively – with women from the Chāraṇ caste. Thus, the phenomenon of Chāraṇ-Mātājis can not easily be subsumed under well-established theories both on the goddess and on Indian ascetics. The latter state that an ascetic renounces the world by breaking the ties to his caste of origin, which often implies certain ritual procedures as for example the symbolic performance of his own death ritual<sup>7</sup>. The goddess on the other hand, with all her numerous forms of being, paradoxes and ambiguities, has usually been described in relation to men, and even the independent so-called “wild village goddess” could only be regarded as a negation – and as dangerous because she was freed from male control. Whereas the Hindu goddess has been associated with fertility, sexuality, earth, locality, and female impurity (blood, menstruation), asceticism seems to have been connected with notions of the goddess only in the form of Pārvatī. Pārvatī’s asceticism, however, consists of the well-known “innerworldly” asceticism ordained for women as part of their conjugal life (*pativrata*): Pārvatī applies ascetic practices in order to get Śiva out of his meditative depths and back into his role as a spouse. These representations, which are dominant in brahmanic traditions and Sanskrit myths, stand in contrast to local conceptions which bring together images of the goddess and ideals of world renunciation. It will be shown that it is quite possible for women ascetics of the Chāraṇ to live both within and outside the caste at the same time. Herein seems to lie, what might be termed a “feminine conundrum”: an ascetic goddess is at once a world renouncer following the goal of individual perfection, and a goddess who is responsible for the moral well-being (*dharma*) of the caste.

#### Ascetic goddesses and the Chāraṇ caste

The self-perception of the Chāraṇ as a caste is connected in varied ways with the goddess and her power (*śakti*). Kacchh, the largest district of the modern federal state of Gujarat, currently has a population of approximately 30 - 35,000 Chāraṇ. The name Chāraṇ, or also Gadhvi, stands for one of several regional castes of cattle-

raisers. One connection between the Chāraṇ and the goddess can be found at the level of their professional specialization. Although most Chāraṇs today are sedentary peasants, they still consider themselves as belonging to the category of cattle-raisers. The traditional caste duties of the Chāraṇs consisted in the raising of black water buffaloes, of which the males until recently were regularly sacrificed to the goddess. Buffalo sacrifices for the goddess represented the most important form of worship until the 1960s<sup>8</sup>.

The myth of origin of the Chāraṇ emphasizes their having been created by the goddess Pārvatī. According to tradition the first Chāraṇ literally had been “made” by Pārvatī: While Śiva was absorbed in meditation on mount Khailash, his wife Pārvatī was tired from grazing Śiva’s bull Nandi. From some dirt and sweat she formed a young boy into whom God breathed life. The relationship between this godly ancestor of the Chāraṇ and Śiva’s bull is also visually represented in many temples in Kacchh, in which images of Nandi are often accompanied by a male figure.

The Chāraṇ claim a further connection to the goddess and her *śakti* in pointing to linguistic and poetic talents which are very widespread in their caste, especially among men. The Chāraṇ were the bards, poets and genealogists of the ruling kings and local chiefs, in whose names they composed heroic songs and whose praise they sang. Even today, quite a number of Chāraṇ are poets, some of them very successful<sup>9</sup>. “Upon our tongue lives the goddess Sarasvatī”, by thus referring to the presence of Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning, poetry and erudition, the Chāraṇ explain the literary achievements of members of their caste.

Moreover, the special relationship to the goddess is made clear when the men of the Chāraṇ caste describe themselves as *devīputra*, “Sons of the Goddess”. This designation is justified by referring to the numerous women who embody *śakti*, energy and power and who, as “living goddesses” (Mātāji), play an essential role in the life of the caste while they are exempt from the same. Although every woman bears the *śakti* of the goddess in her, not every woman is endowed with the ability to fulfill it to the same degree. The Chāraṇ like to compare the different degrees of *śakti* with the luminous power of light

bulbs and stress that some have more "power" than others<sup>10</sup>. This results in a perceptible hierarchy between ascetic goddesses among the Chāraṇ: There are three "mighty" or "great" Mātājīs currently living in Kacchh (Haṁsbāī Mā, Deval Mā, Gaṅgā Mā), of whom the eldest, Haṁsbāī Mā, is recognized as holding the highest rank. Many Chāraṇ in Kacchh agree that she possesses an extraordinarily powerful *śakti*. Men compose songs of praise about and for her and she is considered the epitome of love (*prem*) the goddess bestows upon her devotees. Men and women alike are eager to render this Mātāji numerous selfless services (*sevā*) that also include the writing of a hagiographical biography (*jivancharitra*). Her name is known beyond the bounds of Kacchh but mainly within the confines of the Chāraṇ caste who gather regularly to celebrate her birthday (*Mataji na janm divas*). In order to appreciate the significance of this fact, one must bear in mind that it is quite uncommon for ordinary people to celebrate their birthdays. In the case of a living goddess, however, her own birthday celebration corresponds to the temple feast which is annually held at regional goddess temples.

The residence of a Mataji, like that of a *guru*, is called *aśram*. The core of an *aśram* of a living goddess consists of a temple-house (*mandir*), in which the Mātāji actually resides and receives the veneration of her devotees. Each of the three "great ascetic goddesses" in Kacchh lives in a village in close proximity to other Chāraṇ, who are her "former" relatives. The expression "former" is appropriate as breaking off social ties is imperative if she is to renounce the world. In the world of the Chāraṇ, ascetic women do not break these social bonds by leaving physically or changing their environment, but by altering the structure of their social relationships. This is brought about by referring to different sets of rules (*niyam*). *Niyam*, rule, is an important word in Chāraṇ discourse and usually defines a number of social conventions which householders and their wives have to live up to. Ascetic goddesses follow other rules than "worldly people" (*sansārī*) of both sexes. Whereas all humans - as all living beings - live according to specific rules that vary according to caste and gender, world renunciators and living goddesses follow rules of

world renunciation. A fundamental distinction between "worldly people" and world renunciators can thus be found at the level of rules differentiating women from each other. In order to delineate the position of a Mātāji in this context, gender rules that are applied by the Chāraṇ have to be examined in further detail.

### The Rules of Gender

Rules of gender are given a wide-ranging meaning in the social universe of the Chāraṇ. Every social field and level - ranging from agricultural division of labor, structuring of house and village space, observing a dress code attributing different colors to men and women - men wear white, no red or black, while women (including widows) wear red and black, but never white - to the terminology of kinship relationships and of social interaction - seem to be equally characterized by a differentiation according to definitions of gender. This creates an extraordinary symmetry in the social and symbolic order which is perpetuated by the observance of these rules. You act because the social rules demand that you do. For example, if a person is not in the mood to attend a wedding reception at a relative's house, he or she will attend nevertheless, simply "because the social rules prescribe it" (*niyam chhe*). The most effective punishment which prompts the Chāraṇ to respect the rules is the threat of being ridiculed. He who disobeys the rules shall suffer the laughter of the others.

Among the most important rules to be observed in the world of the Chāraṇ are marriage rules. By our (modern) Western standards, and by those of the modern Indian middle-class, Chāraṇ women enter into wedlock at a very early age (approx. 15-16 years). In the world of the Chāraṇ it is common practice to prepare and arrange a woman's wedding when she is still a child. Children are engaged between the ages of six months and three years, becoming the bearers of a promise of marriage which aims at creating a lasting bond between the two families through the mutual offering and receiving of gifts. For this reason, most girls have usually been engaged ever since they can remember. In many cases, they might even have gone to school with their husband-to-be. In spite of that, female ways of life in the world of the Chāraṇ are not limited to a

married life involuntarily imposed on women by tradition. In the same way that there is a ritual "pre-wedding" at a very young age, there is also a "post-wedding practice", through which almost half of the marriages entered into in this manner are dissolved within a short period of time.

In contrast to the image that is often presented of the typical Hindu marriage as an indissoluble sacrament, the Chāraṇ view marriage less as an indissoluble sacred bond than as an attempted alliance between two families or groups of kin<sup>11</sup>. Such an alliance, which through all the years, from the engagement ceremony to the day of the wedding, is maintained by the rule of mutual offerings of gifts by parents and other relations of the boy and the girl, may very well run counter to the wishes and feelings of husband and wife, of bride and bridegroom. Many of the marriages that are annulled soon after the wedding are broken up on the request of the woman: if they are not fond of the man, find him sexually unattractive or simply unsympathetic, they can refuse to return to their husband's home after a visit to their parental home. This is not considered as breaking the rules and no menace of laughter or ridicule forces women to remain in their husband's houses against their will.

Women opting against a life with the man chosen for them by their kin usually give one of two possible reasons for their decision: either they did not like the man or his "nature" (*svabhāva*) or they flatly reject the idea of life as a married woman, especially the sexual aspect, preferring to lead a more or less elaborate life as an ascetic or "holy woman". Whereas the first reason may result in a second marriage with another man of their choice (naturally always in line with their social status), the second reason may lead women to live alone. Women who reject married life for religious reasons emphasize their freedom from social ties and the fact that they follow different rules (*niyam*). If they are endowed with strong *śakti* they can rise to the status of a locally and even regionally respected ascetic goddess. They embody the role of the "ascetic goddess", a "living goddess", or a "holy woman", which implies that they are wholly liberated both from male domination and from social control by the community. While married women work principally for others and always bear in mind the well-be-

ing of the common household, of husband, children and other relatives, and generally have to forego their own wishes to a large extent, an ascetic goddess follows only her own rules and goals. Others work for her, not the other way around. In the following I shall deal with the course this process, during which a young woman turns into an ascetic goddess, can sometimes take. In doing this, I will draw on the personal story of Deval Mā, one of the "great" Mātājī s of Kacchh. During my field research among the Chāraṇ I spent several months at her *aśram* in a village in Kacchh<sup>12</sup>.

### Deval Mā

Deval Mā is in her mid-fifties and, as she explains herself, has been living as a single woman practicing celibacy (*brahmachārī*) since over thirty years. In her case, she cannot claim the status of *bal brahmachārī* with the connotation "free of children" (as children are signs of previous sexual activity), as opposed to Haṁsbāi Mātājī (the "mightiest" Mātājī of Kacchh mentioned earlier on). She had had two children because she was urged to marry as a young girl and because no one ever believed that she would have the will-power to stick to her decision to renounce the world (*tyāga*). She emphasizes the fact that although she raised the children, she never at any point enjoyed any aspect of these chores. Deval Mā explains her lack of interest in the "world", in the normal course of the life of a woman in the role of a wife, mother or mother-in-law by the fact that she took a very early and eager interest in religious matters, leading her to feel called to a life of world renunciation. During the time we spent together at her *aśram* Deval Mā allowed me to record on tape the conversations we had on the side or in the evenings. The following text is an excerpt of these conversations, in which Deval Mā speaks about her resolution to follow the ascetic path:

"I was still very little when my wedding took place. I used to cry a lot and ran away again and again back to my mother's house. The mother-in-law and he too [the husband] were very fond of me. I was a pretty girl (*rupālī*) and I could sing well. But I did not want to stay there. I felt a longing for the Gods, for the *sādhu-sant*

*loko* (saints, ascetics). I felt out of place in this world (*sansār*). When he came to me at night I would have to vomit. This [physical] kind of love (*prem*) is impure (*achuth*), it means passion (*moh*) and makes us unhappy. What is the body (*śarīr*)? It is nothing but a receptacle of flesh, blood, excrement and urine. Once we have eaten, everything turns mushy. When we die, the flesh rots. No, I didn't like that idea at all. I longed for pure love (*pavitra prem*). But they kept forcing me to go back there [to her husband's house]. They thought I was too young and would find life difficult later on without a man. They didn't know that my intentions were very serious. And then came the children. First the daughter, Vassu, one year later the son, Sammat. Right after his birth, I was eighteen, I took both children and returned to my mother. I told him: 'I set you free with good wishes and without a grudge. Go and marry another. I am not made for this world'. But he didn't want to. He said I should go and think about it. His people waited a long time. A few years. The mother-in-law repeatedly came and said 'come back, you will have a good life'. But I said no, my life is with *bhagvān*. I have no interest for the transactions of married life (*vevarik*). The worldly life (*sansārī*) is only hypocrisy (*dhong*). My duties lie elsewhere."

When Sammat was older he [the husband] came and said: "well, my lineage will die out, so I shall marry another". I gave him my good wishes. Then he took Vassu and Sammat to his house. He also arranged the wedding of Vassu and Sammat. I did not go to the wedding, neither to Vassu's nor to Sammat's. His wife, the second mother of Vassu and Sammat, took care of everything that was to be taken care of. When the children were gone, I took *tyāg* (world renunciation). I left the world behind me. I learned how to read and write by myself. I read the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Gita*. I am all alone here, all to myself and I follow the rules of the *sādhu sant loko* (world renouncers and saints).

These and other biographic narratives of Deval Mā show above all a strong distaste for sexuality as well as a reluctance to follow the demands of the female gender roles - in particular that of a wife or mother - with the social obligations appertaining to them. The worldly existence of a woman focused around marriage, children and family obligations becomes a foil against which the ascetic goddess consciously distances and distinguishes herself. The role of the ascetic goddess demands just the opposite in every respect: contrary to married ("worldly") women, Deval Mā never employs common terms for family relations when addressing a person. This indicates the transformation or the dissolution of social bonds as reciprocal sets of relationship terminology (ex. FZ-BD) that indicate social relationships with an obligatory character<sup>13</sup>. Deval Mā has succeeded in entirely freeing herself from this context of social order: she recognizes neither given relationships, nor does she participate in the life-cycle rituals related to them - an ascetic goddess does not attend any engagement ceremony or wedding or death ritual, not even those of her own biological children and grandchildren. As an ascetic goddess, Deval Mā sees herself as "Father and Mother (*mabap*) to the whole world" - in doing this she emphasizes that she makes no distinction between "her own" and other children, neither between adults and children nor men and women. Seen from the angle of a system of social relationships, the decisive difference lies here: the role of the ascetic goddess implies the transformation of relationships which connects a woman to the social world.

In this transformation of social relationships, which is just as valid for male world renouncers, the main issue is to give up *artha*. The classical term *artha* refers to instrumental handling with regard to worldly desire, which are motive and purpose of instrumental actions aiming at achieving (political) power, prosperity, advantageous marriages, prestige, etc. This kind of behavior is appropriate for householders who live in the world and try to prosper. Success in this might, in the best-case scenario in the Hindu view of the world, increase chances of reincarnation, but does not free anyone of the cycle of rebirths, nor does it lead to *mokṣa*, spiritual liberation. For the Chāraṇ *artha* thus signifies what can be

described as the personal interest or "egoism" which inevitably goes along with the life as a householder and the responsibility he and his wife have for dependents. In the Chāraṇ view of the world, personal interest and egoism are thus not related to the individual (as is the case in Western notions of egoism) - nor to an individual person, but rather to "divisible", "dividable" persons who are a part of a larger (holistic) universe, to which they remain bound through processes of social exchange<sup>14</sup>. Personal interest here is to be understood chiefly as related to transactions between actors.

Therein also lies the moral inferiority of the householder and his wife compared to world renouncers and ascetic goddesses: the latter are free from obligations of social exchange, and can thus fully use their spiritual strength for the well-being of others, i.e. of humanity. Ascetic goddesses have stepped out of the cycle of social obligations such as exchanging gifts whereby they enter a different level of exchange: that of moral substances. Living goddesses (and *sādhu*, world renouncers) possess spiritual powers (*śakti*) that enable them to bless as well as curse people (*āśirvād* and *śrāp*). These powers are regarded to be at the same level as *dharma*, those highest moral rules that encompass all specific rules and regulations (*niyam*). Ascetic goddesses embody *dharma*, the values of the religion and of the social order that are more highly valued than *artha*, the householders' goals and conventions<sup>15</sup>.

This is where one may come across the paradox mentioned at the beginning of the essay: in order to attain the highest spiritual-moral level of *dharma* identified by Deval Mā in her report with the gods (*bhagvān*), it is necessary to free oneself of the social world governed by conventional rules and of its transactions, to turn from a "dividual" (divisible) to an "individual", and thus become an autonomous moral person<sup>16</sup>. This is where the decisive transformation of relationships occurs, which in this case is not brought about through initiation into a sect - as is the case of many male and female ascetics - but solely through a woman's personal and individual decision. If she succeeds in surmounting the obstacles of her own and her husband's family - as Deval Mā described in her own story - it is seen

as a sign of *śakti* and thus as her legitimization to become an ascetic goddess.

Without entering into the study of the psychological motives of women such as Deval Mā, which might be a separate research task, it is a remarkable fact that the devaluation of the body, the rejection of sexuality and the disgust with sexual activities appear as recurring features in reports by women living alone, even if they do not achieve a widely recognized and respected position as an ascetic goddess. The aversion to sexual activity expressed by women reflects a cultural stereotype deeply rooted in Brahman Hinduism, which ascribes compulsive, sexually seducing, uncontrollable and therefore (for men) dangerous aspects to women. Correspondingly, the menstruation fundamentally represents female sexuality as well as the impurity of the female body as such. As Deval Mā clearly states, the female transformation to an individual thus implies the transformation of the female body, which by means of abstinence from sexuality, is made "purer" but never (and this stands in contrast to the degrees of spiritual and physical purification ascribed to male ascetics) completely loses its fundamental impurity. Ascetic goddesses also menstruate (at least in their early years). Deval Mā, who is already past her menopause, emphasizes the fact that she used to leave her temple house during her menstruation and spend a few days in an adjoining building where she did not receive anyone.

The ritual self-purification of the body and surmounting its natural limits generally lie at the center of the ascetic Hindu tradition, the sects of which distinguish themselves among other things through Yoga techniques and other physical disciplines. Chāraṇ-Mātājīs speak of rules here (*niyam*), which they follow: rules concerning diet, vows (*vrata*) and *pūjā* (daily rites of god-worshipping), which all aim at purifying the body. Their individuality on the one hand lies in following these rules, thus distinguishing ascetic goddesses from worldly women, and on the other hand it lies in their representing the positive goals of female religiosity that present a contrast to the world of gender order. Like other Chāraṇ Mātājīs, Deval Mā follows a strict diet, eating only dairy products and fruits for instance, but no cereals. On certain days she holds *maun*,

meaning that she follows a vow of silence. On such days Deval Mā communicates with her surroundings by writing messages on a slate. Every day she spends several hours in the morning and evening accomplishing *pūjā* for the Gods. Her *istadev* (god of her choice) is Hanuman – Rāma's helper, who normally is only to be worshipped by men<sup>17</sup>. Hanuman, God of wrestlers and ascetics, usually represents pure masculinity. Worldly women are not supposed to worship Hanumanji, explains Deval Mā, only women ascetics may do so because they possess special powers – which again is a sign of *śakti*.

Deval Mā does not participate in life-cycle-rituals, but she does attend other public events – other Mātājīs' birthdays, literary and singing contests, caste meetings, temple feasts or political gatherings. In keeping with their reputation, living goddesses like Deval Mā are invited to a large number of public events as guests of honor and usually even as speakers – they give "*bhaṣan*", sermons, and *āśīrvād* – blessings. In Kacchh the presence of as many Mātājīs as possible is regarded as indispensable for the success of any public undertaking. Mātājīs represent *subh*, auspiciousness, which has to be "injected" into every social function – in this case with the help of ascetic goddesses.

Despite the fact that many of the ascetic exercises practiced by the living goddesses – especially observing fasting periods and special meals – are also followed by married women, their objectives are quite distinct: in the role of a wife a woman keeps fasts for the sake of others – for the success of her husband's projects, for the fertility of her daughter and similar matters, which always concern her circle of kin. An ascetic goddess by contrast fasts for the sake of her own self, her objective lying in the transformation of her (empirical) self. She thus presents herself as a living icon. This image also calls for the interaction and exchange of moral substances with her believers. Similarly to the Hindu goddess in general, the power of the living Chāraṇ goddess is double-edged: she is capable of good and evil, of distributing blessings or curses. Thus, for example the well-respected living goddess Haṁsbāi Mā, who, like Deval Mā was married against her will in her early years, is said to have cursed her husband's family, which ultimately led to the

death of her mother-in-law and her husband. However, stories of Mātājīs' *āśīrvād*, their blessings, are much more common than are stories about Mātājīs cursing people in her surrounding. The Chāraṇ in Kacchh use a reciprocal term to describe this: the living goddess endures suffering and pain, and gives blessings in return (*āśīrvād*). A living goddess has transformative powers (*śakti*) which enable her to "digest" or transform anything negative coming from the world of people without harm being done to herself, her person or to her status, as would be the case with non-ascetics. "Taking suffering" and "Giving blessings" is also expressed with gestures: the believer bows to the ground and touches the feet of the living goddess (*pagelāge*), while the Mātāji in turn holds both hands over his head and then touches her forehead. This demonstrates the asymmetry in the status of the living goddess and that of the believer on the one hand – a woman in the role of a living goddess has a higher position than worldly people, be it men or women – and the type of individualism on which her higher status is based: given that they have detached themselves from organic processes and from the exchanges of giving and taking common to worldly people and women, they have thus also succeeded in overcoming the impurity implied therein.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a conclusion, it is to be observed that the role of the ascetic goddess is constructed in contrast to that of the married woman, which also determines the difference between the way of life of a wife and of a goddess. Thus the conclusions drawn from the study of the Chāraṇ can not possibly support the thesis that female world renunciation applies the same ideas and concepts which define the life of a housewife. Meena Khandelwal (1998) for instance also supports this theory in her study of women ascetics in Benares, in which she comes to the conclusion that the world renunciation practiced by women implies fundamental similarities between domestic and ascetic female roles, since they are both based on the concept of the "mother". The fact that the goddess is addressed as mother (Mā, Mātāji) has often been taken as evidence for the fact

that only a mother figure is worshipped in the goddess (therefore "Mother Goddess") - the goddess always appears to be identified with the ideals of a "mother". What proves the contrary is, first of all the fact that Hindu goddesses can symbolize not only the role of the mother, but also other female gender roles such as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, etc. Furthermore, we have seen that Deval Mā expresses a personal, deep-rooted aversion to the role of a "real" mother. Ascetic goddesses are not considered identical with human mothers, rather as "mabap" (father and mother) transcending human motherhood and parenthood as well as gender boundaries. This is shown also by Deval Mā's choice of *īstadev* which is Hanuman, a god particularly tied to concepts of masculinity. The deification of human women is not based upon the blurring of the limits of saints and profanes, but creates these limits by means of a semiotic application of gender signs which are taken out of their original context and transferred to another level. It is in this manner that the role of the ascetic goddess primarily sets and signifies hierarchical differences between women - more clearly so than between the two sexes - which manifests itself at the level of status, personality and life practice. This shows that the question of individualism and asceticism in Hinduism can not be understood apart from considering the categorizations of gender.

#### NOTES

1. On the Hindu Goddess, cf. for example David Kinsley (1987).
2. Cf. Ojha (1981); Clementin-Ojha (1988); Denton (1992); Gupta (1992); Khandelwal (1997); Kinsley (1981); Ojha (1981).
3. Heesterman (1985); Schnepel (1994).
4. Cf. Kakar (1982); Obeyesekere (1984).
5. For another case of deification of women, cf. Luchesi (1999).
6. Here I am following the conception of Indian world renunciation as a form of "outworldly individualism", as developed by Louis Dumont (1980: 287ff; 1991).
7. On male Ascetics, cf. Burghart for example (1978; 1983b); Ghurye (1953); Michaels (1998).
8. Ever since, the values of non-violence and vegetarianism represented by Gandhi, the Brahmins, and the Jains, have also established themselves here, as everywhere else in Gujarat, which led to the systematic abolition of blood sacrifices, especially that of the buffalo. These have been replaced by the fire sacrifice (*havan*) and other vegetarian rites as well as forms of religious servitude (*sevā*).
9. On the musical role of the Chāraṇ, cf. Thompson (1987).
10. The association of *śakti* with electricity is not characteristic of the Chāraṇ alone: the administration of the electricity plant in New Delhi is located in a building bearing the name of "Śakti Bhavan".
11. On the theory of alliance, see Louis Dumont (1957).
12. My special thanks go to Prof. Georg Pfeffer, who supported the research work in a generous and stimulating manner, as well as to the Freie Universität Berlin, without whose support this research project could not have been carried out.
13. Compare with Pfeffer for example (1985; 1992).
14. On the term "divisible", cf. Marriott (1976).
15. On the hierarchy of *artha*, *dharma*, and *kāma*, compare Dumont (1980:287ff).
16. Cf. Mauss 1989; Dumont 1980: 287ff.
17. Currently however, an argumentation in favour of the worship of Hanuman by men and women alike can be observed among the modern Indian middle class.

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