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The Religious Life of Woman-as-householder

Traditional textual sources that specifically forbid asceticism to women are few.¹ They occur in the religious lawbooks and focus on only one type, orthodox Brahmanical fourth-stage-of-life renunciation (*sannyāsa*). Often where the textual tradition does not directly prohibit, it nonetheless discourages, and conventional sentiment regards formal ascetic vows as inappropriate to women. As I. J. Leslie notes, “the concept ‘female ascetic’ is in itself an anomaly. For women are so identified with both family life and sexual pleasure that the idea of a woman renouncing these things is (from the orthodox male point of view) a contradiction in terms” (1989, 139). There is no known account of women’s duties in any such text which suggests that asceticism is a viable, let alone desirable, alternative for a woman. Nonetheless, not only do female ascetics exist today, but there are enough descriptions of and indirect references to them in both classical texts and popular lore to suggest that women leading a wide variety of ascetic lifestyles have always been part of the Indian scene.²

Perhaps in no instance is the relationship between textual and popular tradition, the *śāstrik* and the *laukik*, more complex than when women are the subject of discussion. Indeed, the peculiar tension in the *śāstrik-laukik* relationship is implicated in the glaring contradictions and pronounced ambivalence that characterize the attitudes of both women and men toward the very fact of femaleness (Srinivas 1978, 28). While the lawbooks contain the Brahmanical statement of the duties in life appropriate to women, the average woman ignores, neglects, or otherwise considers irrel-

evant many of its injunctions. Her daily life is more likely to combine certain textually defined prescriptions with many that are not; so, in a sense, the ordinary woman's idea of her role contains both more and less than the textual view. Simultaneously, many of the most persistent and popular notions about women and femaleness, notions that might typify the worldview of any ancient, complex agricultural society, are well enshrined in the orthodox textual assessment of women. Appreciating the interplay between official and popular perceptions helps clarify the ambiguous status of the female ascetic in Hinduism and of women in general in that tradition. Furthermore, it allows us to make some sense of the fact that female ascetics exist at all.

THE TEXTUAL DEFINITION OF WOMEN'S ESSENTIAL NATURE AND DUTIES

In regard to women, the lawgivers confront two separate but directly related issues. They have to establish and describe the inherent nature of woman (*strīsvabhāva*), but also to determine her appropriate duties in life (*strīdharma*). A distinction between notions of nature and duty appears also at less formalized levels of culture, often with contradictory implications. Thus, for example, in the course of casual conversations about female ascetics, I noted that those people who consider asceticism legitimate for women often rest their case on an appreciation of *strīsvabhāva*, appealing to features of what is perceived as woman's basic temperament or essential nature, stressing that they have an innate capacity for asceticism and for attaining spiritual release. Their opponents more commonly appeal to *strīdharma*, insisting that various features of asceticism violate the duties in life required of a woman.

As we shall see, the classical authorities express opinions about the nature of women that are contradictory, although their duties are quite carefully described throughout the literature, usually as part of more general discussions of *dharma*. There is only one extant text devoted specifically to the topic, the late medieval *Strīdharmapaddhati* (*Sdhp*).³ Although there are differences between religio-legal texts, composed over a period of more than a thousand years, taken together with other major religio-legal texts such as the *Manusmṛiti* this text serves well to illustrate certain basic features of the *śāstrīk* conception of *strīsvabhāva* and *strīdharma*.

One section of the *Strīdharmapaddhati* takes *strīsvabhāva* as its topic (*Sdhp* 21r.3–22r.8; Leslie 1989, 246–72). From this text we learn that, owing to the processes of menstruation and childbirth, woman is innately impure. Moreover, she is inherently sinful (*adharmik*), that is, she has no natural inclination to *dharma*. Woman is thus not an appropriate candidate for sacred knowledge: she is “without a *mantra*” (*amantravat*). That is, she is unfit to hear and pronounce the sacred Sanskrit formulae (*mantra*) essential to orthodox religious practice. Being sinful and without a *mantra* poses an insoluble dilemma: “being sinful, a woman is *amantravat*; being *amantravat* she cannot purify herself of sin; she therefore remains sinful all her life” (Leslie 1989, 246). From these three features of *strīsvabhāva*, viz. that a woman is impure, sinful, and prohibited from having a *mantra*, certain rules for behavior inevitably follow. Tryambaka, the author of the *Strīdharmapaddhati*, quite carefully delineates the duties of women so as to accommodate their faults.⁴ Of the many specifications of *strīdharmā*, we will consider those that have special implications for female asceticism.

First, because of her impurity a woman’s daily life requires a great number of ritual acts designed to remove or contain this special impurity and to maintain achieved states of purity. In fact, in this text as in others, women are assimilated into the fourth and lowest status class, that of the *śūdra* (e.g., Manu V.139; cf. Orenstein 1968, 122–23).⁵ The allocation of women to *śūdra* status is important in the question of women’s right to undertake formal asceticism. In the classic debate over who might become renunciators, those who permit *śūdras* to enter *sannyāsa* recognize, by extension, the right of women also to undertake that form of asceticism (Chakraborti 1973, 93; Olivelle 1977, 33–34). So consistently were women identified with the lowest *varṇa* that the issue became significant in the development of sectarian movements: both historically and today the liberality of a sect is measured by noting whether it grants admission to “women and *śūdras*.” Further, in a reversal of values, the notion that women are essentially impure gains a special positive significance in those sectarian traditions that adopt a radical *tantrik* ideology. We shall return to these themes. For the moment, the important point to note is that from the perspective of orthodoxy, women’s inherent impurity places strict limitations on their participation in certain religious rituals and statuses.

Second, because women are sinful, having no natural inclination to *dharma*, they need to be continually goaded and reminded

of their duties, and so remain perpetually dependent. As stated by the renowned lawgiver, Manu, in her progression through life a woman should always be under the authority of some male person: first father, then husband, and finally, in old age, son (Manu V.148, IX.2–3). They alone can protect her from her own sinful nature and her wanton passion. Women are inherently sinful, and the *dharma* of both male and female householders is designed to accommodate this fact. In certain sectors of orthodox asceticism, many notions based in householder ideology are maintained and so, as just noted, some people would argue that a woman's impurity, like that of a *śūdra*, renders her unfit for Brahmanical asceticism in particular. We can now see that women's sinfulness poses an equally important obstacle, especially to those forms of asceticism that assure their practitioners freedom and independence. Impurity and sinfulness are not inextricable: We will see that in some sects, conventional criteria for purity are ignored and women and *śūdras* are welcomed with open arms. But while these sects assume that asceticism itself purifies one's qualities, they nonetheless recognize sinfulness as a major problem, and so the majority of their ascetics live in a dependent status under the authority of a guru. Girls and women are found in disproportionately high numbers in these traditions, a fact which poses few problems for the average householder. Given a theory about women's inherent nature which stresses that she should be always controlled, this type of asceticism is entirely appropriate to her.

Third, the fact that women are entitled to neither hear nor speak a *mantra* has certain far-reaching implications. Orthodox rituals are accompanied and rendered efficacious by the uttering of these sacred verbal formulae, so the fact that a woman is *amantravat* prevents her performing major religious roles. For example, she should not conduct any form of ritual deity worship requiring the use of classical Sanskrit *mantras*, whether in a public temple or a domestic shrine. Women may in fact spend a good deal of time each day in the household shrine but, as Leslie notes, "their worship is strictly devotional. For unless a woman has been initiated, taught the *mantras* and what to do, she may not offer *pūjā* [worship] herself; her husband or a priest must do it for her" (Leslie 1989, 180).⁶ The historical process whereby women became—in the eyes of the lawgivers—unfit to hear or recite sacred formulae is not entirely clear, but it is correlated with the exclusion of girls from the first of the four stages of life, Vedic studentship. As noted in the Introduction, the life-transition rite that marks entry into

studentship is called *upanayana*. During the *upanayana* ceremony, a sacred thread is bestowed on the initiate, who thus formally undertakes the life of a Vedic student and simultaneously enters the so-called “twice-born” (*dvija*) community. This consists of the top three status classes, who, by this ritual of “second birth,” are distinct from and superior to the lowest and, theoretically most impure class, the *śūdra*. This first stage of life, *brahmacarya*, is to prepare the student for ritual and social adulthood as a twice-born member of society; under the careful guidance of the preceptor-*guru* in whose house the student resides, he or she studies the Veda and learns to perform Vedic ritual, most notably maintenance of the sacred fire with its accompanying *mantras*. There is good evidence that in ancient times girls underwent the sacred thread investiture and were educated together with boys (Kane 1941a, 293–95, 365–368; Altekar 1973, 13–16, 200–04), which would of necessity make them conversant with Vedic *mantras*. By 500 BCE, however, the *upanayana* had become for girls a symbolic rite performed just before marriage (Altekar 1973, 203). A few centuries later, prescriptions in the *Manusmṛti* indicate that the initiation of girls continued, but without the recitation of the sacred formulae. Leslie rightly observes (1989, 37) “the lack of Vedic training for girls made nonsense of their use of mantras.” Finally, by the time of the lawgiver Yājñavalkya, 100 BCE–300 CE, women had lost the right to the *upanayana* initiation and subsequent Vedic studentship altogether (Olivelle 1977, 22 n.5); in the process they had been relegated to *śūdra* status and effectively excluded from all the classical stages of life but one, householdership. Householdership is entered by the ritual of marriage, as studentship is entered by the ritual of *upanayana*, investiture with the sacred thread. By the early centuries of this era, the Brahmanical lawgivers had established a direct parallel between the sacred thread investiture (for boys) and marriage (for girls); and thus, between Vedic studentship (for boys) and householdership (for girls). In this way provision was made for a girl’s “education”: While a young man should become a student and study at the feet of his *guru*, a young woman should marry and become a householder, taking her husband as *guru*, the house of her in-laws as her school of learning, and the dutiful performance of all the tasks of wife and daughter-in-law as her special education. In short, for a girl the ritual of marriage actually replaces the *upanayana* (*Sdhp* 2r.8–9). As the *Manusmṛti* (II.67) succinctly puts it: “The nuptial ceremony is stated to be the Vedic sacrament for women (and to be equal to the initiation), serving

the husband (equivalent to) the residence in (the house of the) teacher, and the household duties (the same) as the (daily) worship of the sacred fire.” We can now more clearly see why Hindu thought conceives of the ideal woman in terms of marriage and family life. Marriage provides for her proper education, and is the sphere within which her spirituality should flourish.

Like many other religiously defined lifestyles, that of the ideal Hindu woman involves self-denial and self-sacrifice. Its truly striking feature is the pivotal role played by the husband. A reading of the texts shows that of all the specifications of *strīdharmā*, those that focus on the husband are perhaps the most dramatic. Out of the wide range of customary religious practices the one that most typifies a wife’s religiosity is the vow (*vrata*), of which one stands above all others: *pativrata*, self-abnegating love for and devotional service to the husband (*pati*). The *Strīdharmapaddhati* contains a lengthy section in praise of the *pativrata*, the woman who excels in all the virtues of wifely devotion (*Sdhp* 27r.4–33v.8). The entire range of a woman’s duties is conceived of as a vow which takes the husband as its focal deity. This imperative continues even after his death so that the virtuous widow worships her deceased husband using his portrait or an image of him in clay (*Sdhp* 45v.9–10). Indeed, according to this text, religious acts other than devotional service to the husband are superfluous and to be avoided (*Sdhp* 22r.1–6). Tryambaka opens and closes his treatise with the bold assertion that obedient service to one’s husband is the primary religious duty of a wife (*Sdhp* iv.2; 48v.7–8).

ENABLING FEATURES OF WOMEN’S *DHARMA* AND NATURE

If this were all that textual tradition had to say, women’s social and religious lives would appear to be almost impossibly constrained. But there is more. In prescribing certain elements of *strīdharmā*, they insist on the complementarity of woman and man, an idea especially conveyed in the notion of woman as *ardhāṅginī*. The word is compounded of *ardha* (half) and *aṅga* (limbs of the body) and refers to a woman as being half of her husband. (When used by a man in a place such as Benares, it usually contains the same touch of self-mockery as the Englishman’s calling his wife “my better half.”) Today, as in the past no doubt, people often illustrate the notion of *ardhāṅginī* by pointing out that a man’s wife is his necessary partner in the performance of sacrificial rites centered

on the domestic fire.⁷ The *Strīdharmapaddhati* states quite clearly that her presence is essential (*Sdhp* I.14). Moreover, all the prescribed domestic *pūjās*, whether for gods or guests, require that a man's wife be in attendance and assist. A woman's *amantravat* status remains, however: At the rituals of the domestic fire, the formulas are spoken by the husband and other nontechnical performances are done by the wife.⁸

It is difficult to assess the significance of this ideal male-female complementarity. Text-historical studies demonstrate that the erosion of women's ritual participation has been a long-standing fact, though the process was probably gradual: By reading between the lines of even very early Vedic texts, we can see "an increasing isolation and exclusion of women by men from 'their' rituals" (Smith 1991, 22). Certainly, the contemporary feminist appraisal of women's social and religious status in Hinduism dismisses the notion of *ardhāṅganī* as having any real benefit for women.⁹ If it is not true to say that women were religiously disenfranchised (Altekar 1973, 204, 206), it is still the case that within the sphere of orthodox Brahmanical ritual their religious activity was narrowly circumscribed.

CONTEMPORARY HINDU WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS LIFE: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Until recently, very few studies focused on the everyday religion of women in Hindu India. Women's religious life was, by and large, subsumed under the more general sociological study of marriage and family life. The paucity of studies is quite remarkable given the fact that as early as 1920 M. S. Stevenson introduced us to the body of religious belief and practice that is the property of women exclusively, and which some people, only half in jest, refer to as "the Fifth Veda" (Stevenson 1971, xiii). The idea that women have their own religion is common enough; indeed, this religion has a name: *strī-ācār*, the tradition (*ācār*) of women (*strī*). What has been rarely noted is that this women's religion, though not entirely *sāstrīk*, is nonetheless compelling and essential to the welfare of all members of society.

For example, all the major textually defined initiation rites are effective only when the women of the family participate. They perform many exacting and often colorful rituals as part of rites such as the *upanayana* and marriage, which are officially conducted

by the family priest. Knowledge about these women's ritual traditions is transmitted orally and a significant portion of it has no textual correlate. On the whole, neither women nor men consider these rituals frivolous or optional; their fastidious performance is as necessary to the progress of the rite as the priest's correct pronunciation of his *mantras*. I have heard men declare that it is the women of the family who are genuinely knowledgeable in religious matters, including details of the rituals that men themselves must perform as part of their caste duties on important occasions.¹⁰

In recent years our knowledge of women's religion in Hinduism has greatly increased. With the publication of major studies by anthropologists such as Susan Wadley (1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1980a, 1980b), Doranne Jacobson (1977, 1980), Veena Das (1979), Sylvia Vatuk (1980), Lina Fruzetti (1981, 1982), and Lynn Bennett (1983), we now have much more information about the everyday religious life of women in several sectors of society. Some of these observers vividly convey how the women they studied perceive their own religion. We come to know from Sylvia Vatuk, for example, that women, who as noted earlier are excluded from the classical four stages of life scheme, have their own notion of life stages. Among the Rajput women she has studied, renunciation of householdership has little virtue at all; on the contrary, for a well-established woman who has worked her way up through the entrenched hierarchy of the extended family, from humble daughter-in-law to head lady of the household, the taking of *sannyāsa* would amount to a complete capitulation to her own daughter-in-law (Vatuk 1980, 304). Another anthropologist suggests that women have an alternative myth structure so that, for example, the aspects of the goddess honored by men and the myths conventionally represented as the goddess myths of Hinduism, have little personal significance for women. Thus, while men honor Durgā, women prefer Parvatī and her myth cycle; women tell myths about classical goddesses that men do not report; and, even more interesting, women often have an entirely different way of telling the same myth a man might proffer as the explanation for a particular ritual (Bennett 1983, 236ff).

A thorough reading of the anthropological and sociological literature would allow us to see if and how the specifications of classical *strīdharmā* are worked out in everyday life. In addition, it would amplify our understanding of *strī-ācār*, women's tradition, so that we could better ascertain the relationship between

the body of customary practice and textually defined duties that together constitute women's religious life. However, at this point I wish to consider only three topics, topics that I have noted briefly above and that are important to the study of female asceticism. They are: women's religious vows, women's rituals of worship, and the notion of a uniquely female purity. Even a cursory treatment of *vratas* and *pūjās* (which I will consider together) will serve to highlight the ways in which the religion of the average housewife differs from that of her ascetic counterpart; and a brief discussion of why popular sentiment supports the notion of the unique purity of women will enable us to clarify how, textual prescriptions notwithstanding, many people consider asceticism appropriate for women.

WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS VOWS AND WORSHIP RITUALS

The Importance of *Vratas*

Ethnographic evidence overwhelmingly supports the textual portrayal of women's religious life as centered on the family and defined by the roles of sister, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Nearly all of the very many regular and periodic rituals the average woman performs are intended to ensure the survival of infants, the health of brothers, children and husbands, and the general welfare—especially the economic good fortune—of the extended family and lineage (Wadley 1977a, 1977b, 1980a; Jacobson 1977, 1980; Bennett 1983). Of all the duties specified in classical *śrīdharmā*, the one that is perhaps most important today is the religious observance or vow. In part, people's assessment of a woman is based on the number and severity of her ritual acts of self-denial, and of these the *vrata* is the most common.

The *vrata* is a type of religious observance that has fasting as its central feature. It is a "votive rite" in that it commences with a statement of intent to undertake the observance for the achievement of a specific goal.¹¹ A *vrata* may last for one or two days, or for several weeks; its timing is determined by the lunar cycle and other planetary configurations (in the case of regular calendrical ones), or by consultation with an astrologer (in the case of optional or supernumerary ones). Elements of some *vratas* are quite social affairs that involve group singing or chanting, recitation of

religious stories, and the construction of intricate, symbolic floor patterns out of powdered or colored rice. But the most characteristic feature of the *vrata* is the fast, so much so that the word *vrata* is popularly translated as “fast” (Tewari 1982, 43). Certain *vratas* invite the participation of other family members and friends, and include a *pūjā* that entails the ritual worship of diagrams, implements, animals, people, or deities that figure in the overall structure and intended purpose of the *vrata*.

The vast majority of *vratas* are pursued for the benefit of husbands and sons. In addition to undertaking any or all of the vows from the annual cycle of *vratas* followed in a given region (the cycles appear to vary from one area to another [Wadley 1980a, Logan 1980, and Tewari 1982]), a woman may spontaneously decide to undertake a vow at any time. A woman decides to observe a vow because she has heard about it from a friend or female relative, or because she has been so advised by a *guru* or teacher and because she perceives it to be the best solution to a problem. So central is the vow to the lives of ordinary Indian women that it may be taken as tantamount to female householder religiosity itself. As I discovered through general conversation, in Benares at least, should one wish to learn whether or not a woman is “religious,” the question to ask her is, “What *vratas* do you keep?”. Close relatives are always aware of a woman’s pledge to keep a fast; indeed, some women keep so many *vratas* so often that family members become alarmed for their health, and sometimes even irritated at their performance.

As noted earlier, the *dharma* literature elevates one feature of *strīdharmā* above all others as the criterion of a woman’s worth: *pativrata*, the worshipful service of one’s husband.¹² Some sociologists describe the compelling force exerted by society’s expectation that all young girls should mature into paragons of *pativrata* (e.g., Gough 1956, 841–42; Srinivas 1978, 18; P. Mukherji 1978, 17, 50–51). Others focus on a young woman’s acquiescence to her husband’s authority, or, if Veena Das’s observations are correct (1979, 97), the projection of acquiescence, as the most characteristic feature of a woman’s relationship with her husband. It is my observation that precisely because the submissiveness of *pativrata* is so formalized and routinized, conformity to this ideal serves far less as a criterion for measuring a woman’s devotion to her husband and her religiosity as a whole, than does the performance of religious vows or ritual observances like the *vratas*. Unlike *pativrata*, the religious vow demonstrates a woman’s active and often spontaneous

decision to take a difficult problem into her own hands, to command the attention and respect of men and gods, and to effectively coerce them both.

Women's Rituals of Worship

Vratas often entail a ritual of worship, a *pūjā*, but women's *pūjās* must not be confused with orthodox forms of worship, which require both the use of Sanskrit *mantras* and a high level of sustained purity. Women are forbidden *mantras*, menstruate, and give birth to children, so they cannot, in theory at least, be priestesses in orthodox temples. But women may and do, especially in the south of India, act as oracles or priestesses at small shrines to non-Sanskritic deities. They may even act as priestesses in larger temples, especially to the goddess, provided they have received a sectarian initiation into the proper performance of worship rituals. But the *pūjās* performed on the occasion of *vratas* and as part of exclusively female festivals are quite different from all of the above.¹³ Whether done alone or in groups, women's *pūjās* employ no *mantras* at all. They require no special initiation, though they are complex and must be learned from older women. Tewari notes that there is room for elaboration and creativity in the performance of these *pūjās* and that "the womens' memory for ritual detail is astounding" (1982, 43). In the *pūjās* I have observed, the images of the deities are fashioned by the women, out of clay or the like. They make simple offerings of flower petals and rice, enact playful dramatic performances, and invariably sing popular songs and tell stories. Interestingly, on certain occasions the womens' husbands may preside over or participate in the worship ritual associated with a *vrata*, but, as Tewari points out, "women tell them what to do at each moment of the ritual" (1982, 43).

I have touched on these two elements of *strī-ācār*—religious vows such as the *vrata* and deity worship—in order to highlight, by comparison, several points pertinent to the topic of female ascetic religiosity. First of all, the religious life of the average woman, that is, the woman who is wife, mother, and householder, is almost exclusively concerned with the well-being, the fertility, health, and prosperity, of persons other than herself; even those rituals designed to assure or increase her own fertility are ultimately for the promotion of the lineage. Second, it is, in the main, self-effacing and requires the conscientious submersion of her individuality. Third, it is exclusive, that is, the large body of practice and belief

characteristic of women's religious life is theirs alone; it is orally transmitted from one woman to another and, though we do find in it certain textually based prescriptions, the greater portion of it is nonetheless popularly conceived and sustained. In short, the married woman householder has a religion that is practical or "this-worldly,"¹⁴ essentially altruistic, and almost exclusively feminine. By contrast, we shall see that the religion of the woman who becomes an ascetic differs from that of the woman householder both in its specific practices and general orientation. She joins a community whose religiosity is not sex-differentiated, and whose goals are distinctly other-worldly. Rather than the welfare of others, she seeks the goal of spiritual liberation, and the liberation she seeks is her own.

WOMEN'S INHERENT NATURE AND THE LEGITIMATION OF FEMALE ASCETICISM

Some of the most interesting discussions in the course of this research turned on the question, "Are women entitled to become ascetics?" I was particularly keen to learn how nonascetics might respond to this question. Though the major part of my work was conducted among ascetics, I lived and interacted with householders who were often well aware that the greater part of my day was spent with women ascetics. So even without directly raising the issue, acquaintances often volunteered their opinions. In Benares many people affirm women's right to asceticism, or assert that formal asceticism is an appropriate way of life for a woman, should she wish to undertake it. By and large, the arguments advanced in support of female asceticism appeal to various features of women's personality, to characteristics that are believed to be inherently female. And though some of these features find explicit expression in the textual assessment of women's inherent nature, others are only vaguely represented or else not mentioned at all. There is a wide variety of popular notions about the inherent nature of women, some of which amplify, while others contradict, *sāstrik* textual formulations.

Only certain elements of the *laukik* list of women's innate characteristics are directly relevant to female asceticism. The suggestions, observations, and arguments that my question elicited frequently explored dimensions of womanhood rooted in a large and seemingly nebulous concept: the auspicious (*maṅgal*). The concept of auspiciousness raises issues that go far beyond the limits of

this study, but it merits some attention here both because it informs popular perceptions of womanhood, and so understanding its essential features will amplify the textual formulation of *strīsvabhāva*, and more specifically because certain ideas Benarsis raise in their discussions of women and asceticism prove, on closer examination, to be special and particularized expressions of it.

AUSPICIOUSNESS AS A VALUE IN THE ASSESSMENT OF A WOMAN

I noted earlier that an inconsistency in the textual assessment of *strīsvabhāva* might be resolved by reference to popular sentiments. The *Strīdharmapaddhati* poses a problem: it states that women are impure and yet, simultaneously, that they are possessed of a purity that men do not have. How can this be? In addition to the pure-impure axis defined by orthodox concerns for the avoidance of pollution, auspiciousness sees a qualitative difference between those things, places, times, animals, and persons that are auspicious and those that are not. Such notions appear to be highly developed in popular tradition, particularly as they apply to women.¹⁵ This is a largely unexplored topic, but as far as I can tell it is woman's auspiciousness, her being *maṅglik*, that accounts for her being pure in a way that man is not. Auspiciousness or inauspiciousness can invert a person's status as defined by conventional pure-impure criteria. Thus, for example, the highly impure prostitute is an auspicious figure, yet a widow, even if she is chaste, circumspect, and meticulous in matters of ritual purity, is nonetheless an embodiment of inauspiciousness.

Not every individual woman is *maṅglik*, but both woman and femaleness as notions, and women as a class are. Auspiciousness rests on two principles, fertility and nurturance, the power to give and maintain life, and it thus pertains to females of all species. Its relationship to fertility and nurturance is translated into various socially recognized forms, from the honor accorded a woman who bears many sons to the abhorrence felt for those who are intimately associated with death. The young bride is often called *grhalakṣmī*, literally, "the Good Fortune of the household." Lakṣmī is the divine personification of good luck and wealth, and the phrase indicates that the bride's very presence—inasmuch as it presages children—foretells wealth for the family. By giving birth to sons, she strengthens the lineage, and a family with many sons is bound to prosper. For a girl to prove barren is a most awful curse, which renders her, as does widowhood, supremely inauspicious. Nurturance

and maintenance of life are evident physically in a mother's giving of milk, and emotionally in her selfless love and tender devotion to her children. Woman thus appears as an active, life-engendering, and powerful being. These capacities are generalized and her ability to effect increase is transformed into the notion that her very presence in the household is Good Fortune.¹⁶

THE SPIRITUAL VALUES OF FEMALENESS

How does this provide a basis to legitimate female asceticism? All the values implicit in auspiciousness would appear to discourage rather than promote asceticism as a way of life for women. In the act of elevating and glorifying certain dimensions of femaleness, Hindu tradition takes what we view as fundamentally biological and social facts and transubstantiates them, so to speak, assigning them a supreme spiritual value. The auspicious character of femaleness bears with it two related spiritual powers: nurturance presupposes an especially expansive repertoire of emotions that are powerful enough to change the ordinary course of *sansārik* existence; and parturition, as an expression of ultimate power, suggests that women are somehow closer to the very source of life itself. Anyone who takes formal initiation does so with only one goal in mind, spiritual liberation. To this end the spiritual implications of woman's emotionalism and reproductivity can be her greatest asset. Both these facts of femaleness, nurturance and parturition, figure in ordinary discourse and support the assertion that, for some women at least, asceticism is an entirely appropriate and legitimate enterprise.

WOMEN'S NURTURANT EMOTIONALISM AND PASSION AS A SPIRITUAL FORCE

The first point—that women are expansively and uncontrollably emotional—is one of the most common observations made about women. It is noteworthy that in discussions with even learned men and women on the topic of women's right to asceticism, no one ever made reference to the decidedly negative, textually based observations about *strīsvabhāva* such as that discussed above, which sees women as impure, sinful, and without a *mantra*, and thus ineligible to take *sannyāsa*. Rather, many pointed to a feature that they themselves consider woman's greatest strength, her capacity for strong emotions of love, nurturance, and passion. Educated Benarsis,

both ascetic and householder, told me that women are emotional in the extreme. Some, largely men, went further with statements in English and Hindi to the effect that “women have too great a capacity for *vāsanā* [passion].” (*Vāsanā* means enjoyment in a general sense, but it always carries with it the notion of sexual enjoyment, carnal pleasure.)

These factors would seem to contradict the fundamental prerequisite of asceticism, dispassion, *vairāgya*. Yet it is generally acknowledged, even by these same men, that, although it may not be altogether appropriate for a woman to become an ascetic, when she has entered that life, it is *easier* for her to attain liberation. And people admit that those women who follow their discipline well do become liberated. Indeed, as both householders and ascetics frequently reminded me, among the greatest women of India are Andal, Mirabai, and Mā Anandamāi: all three are renowned for their asceticism, and all three are saints, that is, *jīvanmuktas* (liberated souls). Perhaps a direct link between women’s emotionalism and liberation is forged only in popular imagination, expressed as a part of the informal, unofficial, and, largely oral folk tradition. The issue appears to turn on certain differences in the assessment of the content of the highest spiritual state. Both popular and textual tradition hold that the visible evidence that a person has attained liberation is that she or he easily enters into a state of meditative trance (*samādhi*). While philosophers disagree about the ontological status of *samādhi*, most ordinary people, including many of the women I met, conceive of it more simply: in their view, it is an extraordinarily refined, yet nonetheless emotional state of bliss, a state in which, as one English-speaking female ascetic told me, “you get union with God.” On this account it can be seen that women’s passion and capacity for intense emotion serve her well. Ideally, of course, both of these should be converted into acceptable expressions of devotionism or bliss. Formal asceticism allows for some rather dramatic acting out of intense passion; most disciplines recognize that emotional outbursts may be a legitimate means to the attainment of release and conclusive evidence that one has indeed achieved such a state.

ŚAKTI AS A SPIRITUALLY SUPERIOR, FEMALE POWER

The second “fact” of woman’s auspiciousness, parturition or reproductivity, also figures in informal discussions of female asceticism, but in a more subtle way. It is perhaps the main source of the

insight contained in the textual assertion that woman has a unique purity. Both men and women—but predominantly men—state that from the perspective of the ultimate goal of human existence, that is, the eventual attainment of spiritual liberation, woman's greatness lies in this fact: without her, humankind could never attain release, no one would ever escape *sansār*, the transient world, at all. It is woman who, by giving birth to us all, provides the opportunity for *mokṣa* in the first place. She gives us *mokṣadān*, the gift of liberation, and must therefore be the superior form of sentient being. Dimensions of this cosmological argument are evident in nearly all religio-philosophical systems (*darśanas*), and the idea figures prominently in the official philosophy and folk theology of all *śāktabhaktas*, those who are devoted to the goddess (*devī*), or the feminine principle (*śakti*), as the supreme expression of divinity. The majority of Bengalis are *śāktas* and, on the whole, they accord greater respect to women ascetics and saints than do other Hindus. As said earlier, there is a disproportionate number of Bengalis among both the female ascetic community in Benares and the householder clientele of those women who are recognized as preceptors, whether or not these female *gurus* are themselves Bengali. The *śākta* mode of thought typically gives spiritual expression to the fertile, reproductive dimension of auspiciousness. Here, the potency or power (*śakti*) attributed to woman is in recognition of her life-generating capacities.¹⁷ Even though for a female ascetic the salvation that this power provides is primarily her own, people still assume that the power is available to them also, because that is how things are with women in the world at large.

Having introduced the notion of *śakti* it is appropriate at this point to note that this concept has another, more controversial implication. Those who see women as the incarnation of *śakti* may well emphasize sexuality rather than reproduction as the foremost feature of this embodiment. Such an interpretation has legitimate roots in both textual and popular notions about woman's inherent nature, but to articulate it fully presupposes more than a passing acquaintance with *tantrik* ideology. Thus, though many sectors of the ascetic population have appropriated the idea of *śakti* as female sexual power, householders are rarely familiar with it. Translating the doctrine of yoga and the Sāṃkhya tradition of philosophy into practice, certain *tantrik* disciplines require that male and female practitioners engage in ritualized sexual intercourse. In this manner, the union of the feminine and masculine principles, Śakti and Śiva, is effected. Ritualized sexual intercourse is, in its most elabo-

rate forms, confined to only a minority of sects, but members of that minority most certainly condone female asceticism. Although in fact few female ascetics act as ritual partners to a male ascetic or householder, or aspire to the *tantrik* path, because *tantra* so effectively pervades asceticism as a whole, the status of all female ascetics is affected by *tantrik* formulations. Textual sources are always written by men, and so portray the matter in androcentric terms: in such rituals, woman is primarily the agent of man's salvation, but oral traditions among female *tantriks* do not present it this way. There are even more extreme *tantrik* sects which require their practitioners to indulge in many polluting acts, from necrophagy to sexual intercourse (for men) with a woman who is, ideally, both a prostitute and menstruating. These sects attribute the power of the sexual ritual less to the inherent virtues of woman as the embodiment of *śakti* than to the dramatic effect of immersing oneself in impurity. In this case, power is rooted in the specifically female impurity of menstruation and childbirth, and arises out of a complete inversion of the normal order of things.

In examining the practice of a given sectarian tradition, it is not always possible to determine at first glance whether its assessment of women is based on a valuation of *śakti*, feminine power in its auspicious form, or on the reversal of conventional criteria, the efficacy of impurity, women's uniquely dangerous power. I return to the specifically tantric codifications of Śaktism in the discussion of sectarianism in chapters 3 and 4. For now, it is important to note that from the perspective of women themselves, whether householder or ascetic, and from the perspective of the populace at large, the notion of power that is central to women's religiosity is one linked with auspiciousness rather than impurity.

In this chapter I have focused on the religious life of woman-as-householder, noting how despite the careful definition of a woman's duties and the specificity of her religious rituals, there is still a complex and rather ambiguous range of notions about the inherent nature of woman, and how some of these can provide justification for a woman's becoming ascetic. But few do: The dominant model of womanhood locates her squarely in the domain of householdership. Values such as auspiciousness, ritual purity, and chaste obedience are crucial primarily in the definition of ordinary womanhood. Nonetheless, for a variety of reasons, girls and women can and often do slip outside the sphere of householdership to find themselves inauspicious, economically insecure, and suspected of sexual impropriety. If we look closely at the high-caste women who

suffer most from such disabilities, we can see that nearly all belong to a category defined by involuntary exclusion from precisely the way of life we have just outlined, householdership. Since such women figure prominently in asceticism, we need to explore their predicament, and so in the next chapter I turn to an examination of the woman who is not a householder.