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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Lifelong commitment to ascetic life and orders: Hindu women renunciants in India

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**Abstract:** Based on the survey of 3,699 Hindu women renunciants across six Hindu-based orders/faith-based organisations in India that encourage women's renunciation and lifelong commitment to religious life and ascetism, this paper maps their profile, religiosity, spirituality, reasons for joining the order, fears, future plans, strategies of dealing with life in the order and strategies to enhance life quality, as well as their perceived meaning in life. Results of the logistic regression analysis showed that Hindu women renunciants with higher education and higher scores on religiosity and spirituality scales had joined the orders/FBOs by choice and personal inclination or commitment to faith and the charismatic teacher, had a greater propensity to get more involved in varied activities the orders/faith-based organisations, and perceived a higher meaning in life. Substantiating the gap of macro data on Hindu women's renunciation, this paper then stresses on newer nuances of this form of women's ascetism whose crux lies in challenging the prescribed cultural time-tables for women such as marriage and motherhood by emphasizing celibacy, that deem in-depth exploration.

**Subjects:** Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Social Sciences; Behavioral Sciences

**Keywords:** women; Hindu; renunciation; ascetic life; orders/faith-based organisations; survey

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Based on the survey of 3,699 Hindu women renunciants across six Hindu-based orders/faith-based organisations in India that encourage women's renunciation and lifelong commitment to religious life and ascetism, this paper maps their profile, religiosity, spirituality, reasons for joining the order, fears, future plans, strategies of dealing with life in the order and strategies to enhance life quality, as well as their perceived meaning in life. Results showed that Hindu women renunciants with higher education and higher scores on religiosity and spirituality scales had joined the orders/FBOs by choice and personal inclination or commitment to faith and the charismatic teacher, had a greater propensity to get more involved in varied activities the orders/faith-based organisations, and perceived a higher meaning in life. This paper substantiates the gap of macro data on Hindu women's renunciation and shows how they challenge the prescribed cultural time-tables for women such as marriage and motherhood.

## 1. Introduction

Within feminist theological studies, the inquiry on Hindu women renunciants is an emerging area. “Bhakti” (the devotional path), constitutes a defining characteristic for female gurus (teachers) and renunciants and also contributes to their expectations of femininity (Pechilis, 2004). Some critical strands which emerge from discussions on female gurus and renunciants are: performing the gendered model of religious leadership; differential paths to spiritual enlightenment; message of universal love; duty, destiny and devotion; co-existence of renunciation and devotion, and celibacy (DeNapoli, 2013). Essentially Hindu women renunciants demonstrate a personal freedom to create for oneself a religious life conducive to one’s particular individual tastes and self authorship of a highly personalised form of religious faith (Warrier, 2006). Further their lives symbolise transgression and hence this highlights the importance of their life stories. Life stories<sup>1</sup> of female renunciants are embedded in conversational contexts: which includes everyday talk between them and their devotees. These life story performances constitute a genre in the “rhetoric of renunciation” through which they construct the renunciant identity and practice (DeNapoli, 2009).

There have been anthropological and sociological studies on gurus and their institutions that emphasise on world renunciation, ascetism and lifelong celibacy for women. Some of these female gurus are unattached and wanderers and yet others have set up vast institutional empires. According to citations of census data by both Gross (2001/1992) and Khandelwal (2004), female sadhus or ascetics comprise approximately ten to fifteen% of the ascetic population in the Indian subcontinent. Renunciation for Hindu women has been visualised as stemming from the Bhakti tradition where it is equated to sexual containment via the devotionism and abstinence all evoking the imagery of God (Malhotra, 2012). Hence Bhakti and Tantra<sup>2</sup> have been seen as inspirational points for female ascetics, wanderers, renunciants and sadhus who have challenged cultural timetables for women in the Indian context (Anderson, 2008; David, 2010; Gross, 2001; Khandelwal, 1997, 2004; Khandelwal, Hausner, & Gold, 2006; Miller & Wertz, 1976; Pechilis, 2008; Samanta, 1998).

Specifically the studies on Hindu women’s renunciation talk of the problems of gender among women ascetics (Khandelwal, 1996), discuss hagiographies (Aymard, 2008) and stories of how they have rejected marriage for full-time religious pursuits, at the risk of being called anomalous (Charpentier, 2010; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 5), and particularly how Hindu women renunciants engage with politics, very often of the right-wing nature<sup>3</sup> (Bacchetta, 2002). Menon (2009) in her study on women renunciants in the Hindu nationalist frame explores the distinction between ascetic withdrawal and involvement in community. Menon argues that these women use religious texts (the Gita in particular, a Hindu philosophical text) and their own authority as renouncers to construct the Hindutva movement as religious rather than political. Further one compelling argument is that of maternal continuity in female experiences of ascetism (Denton, 2004; Khandelwal, 2004). The central theme that emerges is that renunciants in Hindu traditions express continuity with female biological and/or social roles. They experience continuity with traditional gender roles not as wives and mothers, but rather as female ascetics/renunciants (Hausner, 2006, p. 126). For women ascetics central values are community, reciprocity and engagement vis-à-vis male centered values of detachment, isolation and wandering that signify ascetism.

Emerging research on Hindu women’s renunciation leaves many questions unanswered and sociological or anthropological research on renunciation also presents its own particular challenges. It would very useful to have more statistical data on women’s renunciation (Khandelwal, 2009), for most studies to date have had a micro-level focus on a particular institution or individual woman renunciant, using an ethnographical and life history perspective. This is true even for such basic information about, say, the total population of women renouncers or their percentage in the larger community of renouncers.

To fill the gap for the need for a more macro level data, the present large scale survey focuses on Hindu women renunciants, specifically those who have spent a considerable amount of time there, and committed their lives to faith. The objective of this exploratory study is to understand their

reasons for joining the order or faith-based organisation (henceforth FBO), their future plans, fears, strategies of dealing with life in the order/FBO, strategies of enhancing their quality of lives, and more generally their perceived meaning in life. The focus is to map the uncharted domain of lives of Hindu renunciants in the order, from a big picture lens. The feminist lens to this aspect of asceticism or renunciant life comes from the emphasis on negating the prescribed cultural timetables for women, entailing marriage and motherhood, by an emphasis on celibacy.

## 2. Data and methods

A survey method of investigation has been adopted. To meet the broad objective of understanding lives of Hindu women renunciants who had committed their life to an order, the sampling universe comprised women ascetics belonging to various Hindu orders. The sampling frame was derived from the following six orders/faith-based organisations (henceforth FBOs). In the two stage sampling procedure for this cohort, at the first stage, the following orders and FBOs were selected. The criteria for selection was the coverage of religious-spiritual groups having women renunciants, access possibilities and familiarity of the primary investigator, which were mainly responsible for getting permissions to interview women renunciants in these orders/FBOs. The orders/FBOs selected were: Brahmakumaris,<sup>4</sup> Sri Aurobindo Ashram,<sup>5</sup> Ramakrishna Sarada Math,<sup>6</sup> Upasani ashram Sakori,<sup>7</sup> Chinmaya Mission<sup>8</sup> and Amritanandamayi Mission.<sup>9</sup>

At the second stage, a systematic sample ( $k = 2$ ) of women renunciants who had spent at least 10 years in the order/FBO, was obtained. The reason for determining length of membership as a criterion for selection was that longer and lifelong commitment would enable an understanding of what it means to be a permanent member of the order/FBO and derive one's identity therefrom. Sampling was done from the lists obtained at the headquarters or Mumbai centres of these orders/FBOs. For the Brahmakumaris, from the list of 2,781 women renunciants obtained at the Abu (Rajasthan) headquarters, 1,336 older Brahmakumaris were sampled. The response rate was 91.29%. For the Ramakrishna Sarada Math, from a list of 278 women ascetics obtained from the Howrah headquarters, 121 women ascetics were sampled. The response rate was 89.24%. For the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, from the list of 456 women sadhaks obtained from the Pondicherry headquarters, 250 women sadhaks were sampled. The response rate was 88.23%. For the Upasani Ashram Sakori, from the list of 186 older kanyas obtained from the Sakori (Ahmednagar district) headquarters, 86 kanyas were sampled. The response rate was 92.36%. For Chinmaya Mission, from a list of 3,586 swaminis obtained from the Mumbai Sandeepany headquarters, 1,677 women swaminis were sampled. The response rate was 92.36%. For Amritanandamayi Mission, from a list of 278 swaminis obtained from the Kollam (Kerala) headquarters, 129 swaminis were sampled. The response rate was 92.37%. Hence a total of 3,699 women ascetics were sampled from various orders/FBOs. The total average response rate was 89.19%.

### 2.1. Instruments

An interview schedule was used comprising questions on background characteristics: age, caste, education, work done in the order/FBO, and living arrangement. Two scales have been used to measure religiosity and spirituality: the Duke University Religiosity Index (DUREL) and Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS). Further questions were posed on their reasons for joining the order/FBO, future plans, fears, strategies of dealing with life in the order and strategies to enhance their quality of life and meaning in life through the Meaning in Life questionnaire (MLQ). The scales were translated into Hindi language too and used where translation was required. Scales were cross-checked for validity, reliability and cross-cultural usage. The purpose of using the scales developed in the western context in the Indian context were—to obtain a more accurate idea of the aspects under study through tested statistical measures, to overcome the limitation of not having such and similar scales in the Indian context and to contribute to the scale robustness by adding to its citation index in a trans cultural context.

The scale descriptions are as follows. The Duke University Religion/Religiosity Index (DUREL) is a five-item measure of religious involvement, and was developed for use in large cross-sectional and

longitudinal observational studies (Koenig & Büssing, 2010). The instrument assesses the three major dimensions of religiosity that were identified DURELng a consensus meeting sponsored by the National Institute on Aging. Those three dimensions are organizational religious activity, non-organisational religious activity, and intrinsic religiosity (or subjective religiosity). The overall scale has high test-retest reliability (intra-class correlation = 0.91), high internal consistence (Cronbach's alpha's = 0.78–0.91), high convergent validity with other measures of religiosity ( $r$ 's = 0.71–0.86), and the factor structure of the index has now been demonstrated and confirmed in separate samples by other independent investigative teams. The index has been used in over 100 published studies conducted throughout the world and is available in 10 languages. DUREL has been suitably modified to suit the Indian context. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  of the scale for this study is 0.91 with high construct validity.

The SAS developed by Liu and Robertson (2011) conceptualises that the construct of spirituality is captured by three distinct, yet correlated, dimensions: interconnection with human beings, interconnection with nature and all living things, and interconnection with a higher power. Spirituality as a continuum composed of different self-identity levels is both a fixed trait and a flexible state. Religiousness corresponds to “interconnection with a higher power” and thus is a component of the spirituality construct. Spirituality is a broader construct that incorporates and transcends religiousness. Sixteen items have been selected from four different spirituality scales (Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993; Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Hatch, Burg, Naberhaus, & Hellmich, 1998; Piedmont, 1999). The spirituality construct is represented through the total disaggregation approach (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). Reflective measures are used which represent reflections or manifestations of the spirituality construct. Spirituality is viewed as the cause of the measures, that is, variation in a construct leads to variation in its measures (Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000). The 16 items used to measure the three aspects of spirituality are anchored by a “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree” Likert-type format. For this study the SAS has been translated also into Hindi for better comprehension. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  of the scale for this study is 0.93 with fairly high construct validity.

MLQ developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) contains a list of ten statements examining what makes life and existence significant and important to an individual. The score range on the Likert type rating is 10–70 with higher end scores indicating higher meanings in life. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  of the scale for this study is 0.92 with fairly high construct validity.

## 2.2. Analysis

Data was analysed using the STATA 13 computer package. Univariate and bivariate analysis has been undertaken. Responses to open ended questions were manually coded for developing categories, which could then be subject to further statistical treatments. Five logistic regression models have been developed to understand background predictors of women renunciants' reasons for joining the order, fears, future plans, strategies for dealing with life in the order and strategies to enhance life quality. A logistic regression model has also been developed to understand predictors of the MLQ scores of the respondents. For all the logistic regression models, nominal/categorical variables were suitably recoded into binary/dummy variables for the analyses. Further one structural equation model has also been developed to understand the influence of independent variables on MLQ as the dependent parameter and the compounding influences of independent variables through the existence or otherwise of internal co-variances.

## 2.3. Study limitations

The study although robust in intent and spread, has the following limitations. The study has adopted a quantitative paradigm and hence there is no in-depth qualitative data on lives and lived experiences of Hindu women renunciants. This could become a very critical aspect of future investigation, with new themes then providing newer insights into lives of the elderly women and women renunciants. Restrictions on permissions and access has determined the selection of orders/FBOs. While attempts were made to cover a broader spectrum, and have an unbiased sample, the convenience

and access based selection of orders/FBOs at the first stage poses limitations. Fourthly absence of any Indian data on such cohorts of women has made it imperative to have an exploratory undertone to the study. To some extent this limitation has been overcome by subjecting the data to multivariate analysis and structural equation modelling using robust background variables as independent variables and predictors.

#### **2.4. Respondent profile**

Of the 3,699 Hindu women renunciants, approximately 53.11% of the women renunciants were in the age group 40–59 years, 21.55% were in the age group 60–79 years and 25.32% were in the age group of 80 years and above i.e. the oldest old. Approximately 36.94% belonged to the Brahmakumaris order, 5.57% were sadhikas at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 3.37% were from the Ramakrishna Sarada Math, 5.18% were from the Upasani ashram at Sakori, 45.33% were Brahmacharinis of the Chinmaya Mission and 3.59% were monastic members of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.

Approximately 66.23% belonged to the upper caste, 1.92% were from the scheduled castes, 1.70% belonged to the scheduled tribes and 21.21% belonged to the other backward classes. Around 1.06% had less than matriculation level education, 12.38% were educated till the higher secondary school level or lower, half i.e. 5.17% had a graduate or baccalaureate degree, 21.14% had post-graduate qualifications, 1.69% had doctoral level and above qualification and 4.48% had professional qualifications which included medicine (21.67%), engineering (33.33%), architecture (22.67%) and chartered accountancy (22.33%). Roughly 8.60% of the women renunciants were engaged in administrative work in the order, 58.92% did teaching/training and 32.47% were involved in social service projects of the institution/organization/order. Around 39.23% lived in the order/institution headquarters, 49.39% lived in the branches/centres of the orders and institutions, 9.65% claimed that they had no fixed residence and were traditionally wanderers and 1.71% lived independently in private residences.

Around 67.34% of the women renunciants had fairly high scores on the DUREL scale, indicating fairly high religiosity and participation. Around 31.26% had very high scores in the range 20 and above. No respondent had low scores and a very small proportion (1.39%) had average scores. Hence in general women renunciants had high scores on the DUREL scale indicating high levels of religiosity and participation in organizational/institutional religious activities. Majority (81.65%) of the respondents had scores in the range 48–63 indicating fairly high levels of spiritual orientation. Approximately 13.66% of the respondents had very high scores. Around 4.68% of the respondents had low and moderate level scores indicating low and moderate levels of spiritual orientation.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Reasons for joining the order/FBO**

Majority (81.96%) of the Hindu women renunciants said that they had joined the order a matter of personal choice and inclination commitment to the faith/order/teacher. Approximately 18.02% of them said that certain circumstances such as financial difficulties and lack of family support, were their reasons for joining the order.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine predictors of whether the Hindu women renunciants had joined the order as a matter of choice or circumstances, using background variables as predictors (Table 1). A test of full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between Hindu women renunciants who joined the order/FBO as a matter of choice or circumstances [LR  $\chi^2(8) = 45.59$ , Prob.  $> \chi^2 = 0.0001$ ]. Prediction success is 39.06% (pseudo  $R^2 = 0.3906$ ). To look at the effect size of the said predictors, the odds ratio of the predictors age, education and DUREL scores is greater than one. This means that for older women renunciants (60 and above), with graduate and above level of educational attainment and with higher DUREL scores, joining the order/FBO was more a matter of choice and personal inclination. For older women Hindu renunciants of younger ages, with lower

**Table 1. Logistic regression—Predictors of reasons for joining the order by Hindu women renunciants: choice (1) or circumstances (0)**

| Reasons for joining the order (choice = 1, circumstances = 0) | Odds ratio | Std. error | t    | p >  t | 95% confidence interval |        |
|---|------------|------------|------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Constant  | 3.89       | 0.7182     | 1.16 | 0.0208 | 1.8172                  | 4.9012 |
| Age   | 1.12       | 0.0681     | 1.24 | 0.0407 | 1.6891                  | 2.3102 |
| Order/FBO   | 0.89       | 1.1786     | 1.13 | 0.0709 | 0.3918                  | 3.6719 |
| Caste/tribe   | 0.89       | 0.5718     | 1.17 | 0.0609 | -1.8912                 | 3.6715 |
| Education   | 1.13       | 0.6781     | 1.26 | 0.0306 | 0.7162                  | 2.5172 |
| Work in the order   | 0.18       | 0.0932     | 1.08 | 0.0924 | -1.1872                 | 2.6175 |
| Living arrangement  | 0.27       | 0.0162     | 1.17 | 0.0792 | 0.5124                  | 2.3019 |
| DUREL scores  | 1.15       | 0.1092     | 1.62 | 0.0309 | -1.2718                 | 2.3871 |
| SAS scores  | 0.89       | 0.1728     | 1.15 | 0.0981 | 0.7162                  | 2.3981 |

educational attainment and lower DUREL and SAS scores, the reasons for joining the order was more a matter of circumstances.

### 3.2. Future plans

In terms of future plans, majority (88.65%) of the respondents said that they would like to continue and be more involved in the order/FBO, 11.28% said that they had no specific plans and 0.06% said that they would like to leave the order.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine predictors of whether Hindu women renunciants had made future plans of continuation/greater involvement in the order/FBO or no specific plans/plans of discontinuation (Table 2). A test of full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those renunciant women who had made future plans of continuation/greater involvement in the order/FBO and those who had no specific plans or plans of discontinuation [LR  $\chi^2(8) = 59.32$ , Prob. >  $\chi^2 = .0001$ ]. Prediction success is 41.67% (pseudo  $R^2 = 0.4167$ ). To look at the effect size of the said predictors, the odds ratio of the predictors education, work undertaken in the order, DUREL and

**Table 2. Logistic regression—Predictors of future plans of Hindu women renunciants: continue and more involvement (=1) or no specific plans-discontinue (=0)**

| Future plans (continue/more involvement in the order/FBO/faith = 1, no specific plans-discontinue = 0) | Odds ratio | Std. error | t    | p >  t | 95% confidence interval |        |
|--|------------|------------|------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Constant   | 2.02       | 0.0382     | 1.16 | 0.0036 | 0.7819                  | 3.3923 |
| Age  | 0.89       | 1.1920     | 1.23 | 0.0709 | 0.3710                  | 2.3912 |
| Order/FBO  | 0.78       | 1.3526     | 1.45 | 0.0982 | 0.3618                  | 3.4517 |
| Caste/tribe  | 0.67       | 1.3729     | 1.37 | 0.0791 | -1.8712                 | 4.9016 |
| Education  | 1.14       | 1.3892     | 1.65 | 0.0402 | 0.9816                  | 3.9903 |
| Work in the order  | 1.12       | 1.4891     | 2.14 | 0.0301 | 0.7910                  | 3.9613 |
| Living arrangement   | 0.59       | 1.1481     | 2.79 | 0.0609 | 0.0710                  | 3.4518 |
| DUREL scores   | 1.13       | 1.6159     | 2.35 | 0.0304 | 0.3781                  | 2.7816 |
| SAS scores   | 1.12       | 1.6718     | 2.16 | 0.0203 | -1.7819                 | 2.9902 |

**Table 3. Logistic regression: Predictors of no fears (=1) or fears of discharge of religious-spiritual duties (=0) of Hindu women renunciants**

| No fears (=1) or fears (=0) | Odds ratio | Std. error | t    | p >  t | 95% confidence interval |        |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Constant                    | 2.01       | 0.8712     | 1.13 | 0.0308 | 0.3829                  | 2.9172 |
| Age                         | 0.89       | 0.3292     | 1.23 | 0.0608 | 0.2382                  | 3.9185 |
| Order/FBO                   | 0.65       | 0.6172     | 1.89 | 0.2301 | -1.3018                 | 3.9185 |
| Caste/tribe                 | 0.43       | 0.6914     | 1.13 | 0.0937 | 0.7814                  | 5.6901 |
| Education                   | 0.67       | 0.7102     | 1.04 | 0.1095 | 0.6703                  | 5.9047 |
| Work in the order           | 0.89       | 0.1289     | 1.16 | 0.0806 | -1.8190                 | 4.0032 |
| Residence                   | 0.56       | 0.6710     | 2.01 | 0.0907 | 0.0016                  | 4.1007 |
| DUREL scores                | 1.12       | 0.1028     | 1.13 | 0.0503 | 0.5693                  | 2.0076 |
| SAS scores                  | 1.03       | 0.0013     | 1.17 | 0.0407 | -1.6702                 | 2.0094 |

SAS scores is greater than one. This means that Hindu women renunciants with Bachelor’s degree and higher level educational attainment, doing teaching-training and social projects related work in the order and having higher DUREL and SAS scores, were more likely to have plans of continuation and greater involvement in the order/FBO. On the other hand, women renunciants with lower educational attainment, doing administrative work in the order and with lower DUREL and SAS scores, were more likely to have no specific plans or plans of discontinuation.

### 3.3. Fears of Hindu women renunciants

Majority (91.81%) of the Hindu women renunciants said that they had no fears, as all happens due to the will of the higher power. Approximately 8.19% of them said that they feared not being able to discharge the religious-spiritual duties to satisfaction and faltering in perpetual vows of religious commitment and celibacy.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine predictors of no fears (=1) or fears regarding discharge of religious-spiritual duties (=0) of women renunciants, using background predictors (Table 3). A test of full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those who had no fears vis-à-vis those who had fears (LR  $\chi^2(8) = 31.45$ , Prob.  $> \chi^2 = 0.0001$ ). Prediction success was 23.31% (pseudo  $R^2 = 0.2331$ ). To look at the effect size of the said predictors: the odds ratio of DUREL and SAS scores is greater than one. This means that those women renunciants who had higher DUREL and SAS scores were more likely to have no fears and believe that all happens due to the will of the higher power.

### 3.4. Strategies of dealing with life in the order/FBO

The Hindu women renunciants were asked of their strategies to deal with life in the order. Majority (77.75%) said that they had not envisaged any specific strategy and would like to continue in the same manner. Approximately 12.45% of them said that they would like to generally withdraw and keep time for their own spiritual pursuits. Around 9.80% felt that they would like to be further engaged with religious and spiritual activities.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine predictors of Hindu women renunciants’ strategies of dealing with life in the order: whether more engagement (=1) or general withdrawal and no specific strategy (=0), using background variables as predictors (Table 4). A test of full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those whose strategy of dealing with the life in the order was more engagement vis-à-vis general withdrawal or having no specific strategy [LR  $\chi^2(8) = 37.89$ , Prob.  $> \chi^2 = 0.001$ ]. Prediction success is 22.63% (pseudo  $R^2 = 0.2263$ ). To look at the effect size of the

**Table 4. Logistic regression analysis: Predictors of Hindu women renunciants' strategies to deal with life in the order—more engagement (=1), general withdrawal or no strategy (=0)**

| Strategies—more engagement (=1), general withdrawal or no strategy (=0) | Odds ratio | Std. error | t    | p >  t | 95% confidence interval |        |
|---|------------|------------|------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Constant  | 3.21       | 0.8172     | 1.18 | 0.0040 | 0.2819                  | 4.8923 |
| Age   | 0.81       | 0.6719     | 1.12 | 0.0782 | 0.3819                  | 3.8172 |
| Order   | 1.22       | 0.6712     | 1.67 | 0.0012 | 0.6718                  | 4.8913 |
| Caste/tribe   | 0.76       | 0.4502     | 1.37 | 0.7810 | 0.5606                  | 5.9701 |
| Education   | 0.89       | 0.3789     | 2.03 | 0.0689 | -1.8906                 | 5.6723 |
| Work in the order   | 0.78       | 0.2395     | 2.08 | 0.0789 | 0.0973                  | 3.9067 |
| Living arrangement  | 0.39       | 1.1782     | 1.38 | 0.0982 | 0.7162                  | 4.6979 |
| DUREL scores  | 0.82       | 1.7830     | 1.39 | 0.0977 | -1.3905                 | 3.8706 |
| SAS scores  | 0.98       | 1.2390     | 1.37 | 0.0863 | 0.3012                  | 3.8907 |

**Table 5. Logistic regression—Predictors of Hindu women renunciants' strategies to enhance their quality of life in the order (more engagement and aspiration for divine communion = 1, no specific strategy = 0)**

| Strategies for life quality enhancement (more engagement and divine communion = 1, no specific strategy = 0) | Odds ratio | Std. error | t    | p >  t | 95% confidence interval |        |
|--|------------|------------|------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Constant   | 2.31       | 0.7612     | 1.26 | 0.0304 | 0.3461                  | 4.3781 |
| Age  | 1.13       | 0.0721     | 2.34 | 0.0267 | 0.8912                  | 3.4519 |
| Order/FBO  | 0.89       | 0.0923     | 2.56 | 0.0708 | 0.4781                  | 4.8918 |
| Caste/tribe  | 0.65       | 0.0825     | 2.17 | 0.0907 | -2.7689                 | 4.2391 |
| Education  | 1.32       | 0.6721     | 1.89 | 0.0321 | 0.2139                  | 4.2235 |
| Work in the order  | 1.08       | 0.5239     | 1.15 | 0.0407 | 0.1904                  | 2.3871 |
| Residence  | 0.89       | 0.9023     | 2.01 | 0.0659 | 0.3718                  | 2.7855 |
| DUREL scores   | 0.78       | 0.7813     | 1.17 | 0.9621 | -1.1132                 | 1.2298 |
| SAS scores   | 0.91       | 0.0562     | 1.04 | 0.7921 | 0.3714                  | 2.3819 |

said predictors: the odds ratio of the predictor: order/FBO of the women renunciants, is greater than one. This means that women renunciants belonging to bigger Hindu based orders i.e. those having global spread and operations, were more likely to see greater engagement in the order/FBO/faith as a strategy to deal with life in the order. On the other hand, Hindu women renunciants belonging to smaller, local based orders (Upasani Ashram and Ramakrishna Sarada Math) were more likely to see general withdrawal as a strategy to deal with life in the order or have no specific strategy.

### 3.5. Strategies to enhance the quality of life in the order/FBO

The Hindu women renunciants were asked about what they would like to do to enhance their quality of life. Approximately 46.27% of them said that they aspired for higher level spiritual life of oneness with the higher power and divine communion. Around 3.67% of them said that they would like to continue in the present way as they were very satisfied with their life. Around 23.05% of the women renunciants said that they would enhance their life quality by being more engaged in the work of the order or the faith-based organization that they were aligned to, as faith is the sure path to liberation.

**Table 6. Logistic regression—Predictors of MLQ scores of Hindu women renunciants (moderate and high = 1, low and fair = 0)**

| MLQ scores of Hindu women renunciants (moderate and high = 1, low and fair = 0) | Odds ratio | Std. error | t    | p >  t | 95% confidence interval |        |
|---|------------|------------|------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Constant  | 3.04       | 0.2381     | 3.19 | 0.0328 | 1.1562                  | 5.298  |
| Age   | 0.92       | 0.3218     | 2.13 | 0.0832 | 0.1146                  | 4.1290 |
| Order/FBO   | 0.88       | 0.1375     | 2.38 | 0.0736 | 0.1395                  | 3.4529 |
| Caste/tribe   | 0.96       | 0.1387     | 2.89 | 0.0948 | 0.1128                  | 4.1906 |
| Education   | 0.99       | 0.8943     | 3.22 | 0.0843 | 0.1389                  | 3.4486 |
| Work done in the order  | 1.12       | 0.3128     | 4.18 | 0.0329 | 0.1486                  | 4.1389 |
| Present residence   | 0.89       | 0.6729     | 4.33 | 0.0934 | -2.1386                 | 5.1139 |
| DUREL scores  | 1.09       | 0.2186     | 3.12 | 0.0218 | 0.1185                  | 4.1396 |
| SAS scores  | 1.08       | 0.3186     | 2.38 | 0.0342 | 0.1386                  | 2.3329 |

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to understand predictors of women renunciants' strategies to enhance their quality of life in the order (more engagement in order/FBO and aspiration for divine communion = 1 or no specific strategy = 0) (Table 5). A test of full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those women renunciants who had a life quality enhancement strategy as more engagement in the order/FBO and aspiration for divine communion and those who had no specific strategy [LR  $\chi^2(8) = 34.19$ , Prob. >  $\chi^2 = 0.0001$ ]. Prediction success was 21.11% (pseudo  $R^2 = 0.2111$ ). To look at the effect size of the said predictors, the odds ratio of the predictors age, education and work in the order is greater than one.

This means that respondents of younger ages, having higher educational qualifications and doing teaching-training and working in the social projects of the orders/FBOs were more likely to see greater engagement in the order/FBO and aspiration for divine communion as a strategy to enhance their quality of life. Further those who were older, those who were doing administrative work in the order/FBO and those who had fewer educational qualifications were more likely to have no specific strategy to enhance their quality of life in the order/FBO.

### 3.6. MLQ scores of Hindu women renunciants

Approximately 42.49% of the Hindu women renunciants had MLQ scores in the range 31–40 indicating a fair meaning in life. Around 31.18% of the women renunciants had moderate scores on the MLQ (range 41–50), 15.23% of them had high scores (range 51–60) and 9.68% of them had very high scores (range 61–70). Around 1.42% of the women renunciants had low scores on MLQ indicating a low, poor and diminished meaning in life (range 0–30). All Hindu women renunciants said that the order/FBO, religious life, and the charismatic teacher and his/her teachings was a source of their meaning in life.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine predictors of MLQ scores of women renunciants (Table 6), using background variables as predictors. A test of full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those Hindu women renunciants who had moderate and high MLQ scores vis-à-vis those who had low and fair scores [LR  $\chi^2(8) = 139.12$ , Prob. >  $\chi^2 = 0.0001$ ]. Prediction success was 17.13% (pseudo  $R^2 = 0.1713$ ). To look at the effect size of the said predictors, the odds ratio of the predictors work done in the order, DUREL scores and SAS scores is greater than one. This means that those Hindu women renunciants doing teaching-training and social projects related work in the

**Table 7. SEM model of MLQ scores of Hindu women renunciants (standardized coefficients)**

| Structural equation standardized | Coefficient | OIM std. error | z    | p >  z | 95% confidence interval |          |
|----------------------------------|-------------|----------------|------|--------|-------------------------|----------|
| MLQ scores                       |             |                |      |        |                         |          |
| Work                             | 2.5813      | 0.1365         | 2.11 | 0.00   | 1.3287                  | 2.9987   |
| DUREL                            | 3.4643      | 0.2387         | 1.39 | 0.03   | 2.1356                  | 4.8976   |
| SAS                              | 2.1335      | 0.3876         | 1.98 | 0.00   | 1.3428                  | 4.5672   |
| Constant                         | 13.4218     | 0.1765         | 2.14 | 0.02   | 11.2186                 | 18.9034  |
| Mean (work)                      | 2.7823      | 0.2186         | 2.13 | 0.04   | 1.8903                  | 3.4529   |
| Mean (DUREL)                     | 22.7636     | 0.8976         | 2.87 | 0.00   | 19.0854                 | 23.4589  |
| Mean (SAS)                       | 39.8764     | 0.3376         | 1.88 | 0.00   | 32.1674                 | 43.8976  |
| Variance (e. MLQ)                | 12.7628     | 0.4076         |      |        | 1.3786                  | 18.9054  |
| Variance (work)                  | 19.0827     | 0.3287         |      |        | 16.5423                 | 25.6703  |
| Variance (DUREL)                 | 88.0734     | 0.4127         |      |        | 76.2118                 | 98.7163  |
| Variance (SAS)                   | 89.0545     | 0.3287         |      |        | 86.2134                 | 118.9034 |
| Covariance (work, DUREL)         | 3.7234      | 0.2189         | 2.08 | 0.08   | 2.4813                  | 4.1183   |
| Covariance (DUREL, SAS)          | 7.3176      | 0.1128         | 3.12 | 0.09   | 5.4092                  | 9.0538   |
| Covariance (work, SAS)           | 4.8923      | 0.8783         | 4.12 | 0.13   | 3.4817                  | 8.6653   |

Notes:  $\chi^2(6) = 121.54, p < 0.001$ ; GFI = 0.87; NFI = 0.82 and RMSEA = 0.04.

order/FBO, those having high DUREL scores and those having high SAS scores, were more likely to have high MLQ scores. On the other hand those who did administrative work in the order/FBO, those who had lower DUREL scores and those who had lower SAS scores were more likely to have lower MLQ scores.

Table 7 depicts the structural equation model with standardized coefficients of the MLQ scores of women renunciants with work done in the order/FBO, DUREL scores and SAS scores as independent variables. The maximum likelihood method has been used with four iterations and log likelihood = -41.282659. The figure and table show that work done in the order/FBO, DUREL scores and SAS scores influence MLQ scores. Further the goodness of fit measures are also significant, indicating model reliability. None of the covariances i.e. between work done in the order/FBO and DUREL scores, DUREL scores and SAS scores and work done in the order/FBO and SAS scores are significant.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The study has shown that for the majority of the Hindu women renunciants, joining the order/FBO was a matter of personal choice and inclination and commitment to the faith/order/teacher. Some, however, said that certain circumstances such as financial difficulties and lack of family support, were their reasons for joining the order. For older age renunciants, with graduate and above level of educational attainment and with higher DUREL scores, joining the order/FBO was more a matter of choice and personal inclination. This corroborates the range of empirical literature on religious and spiritual movements and organisations that says that they attract followers largely from educated, urban, 'middle class' sections of the country's population (Tøllefsen, 2011, 2013, 2014; Tøllefsen, Alisaukiene, & Lewis, 2016; Warriar, 2003). The focus is individual self fulfillment (Copeman & Ikegame, 2012; Mines, 1999; Valanciute & Thampy, 2011). This also establishes the connection between education and religious life (see Krause, 2006; Moen, Field, Quick, & Hofmeister, 2000; Weitzman, Jalandani, Lampkin, & Pollak, 2002 for a link between education and God perceptions). For women renunciants of younger ages, with lower educational attainment and lower DUREL and

SAS scores, the reasons for joining the order was more a matter of circumstances. This corroborates Gutschow's (2003) work on how economic reasons may be behind women joining nunneries. For these renunciants then, survival takes a precedence over spiritual and religious quests. Specifically there are studies on Buddhist Catholic nuns, whose biological families' economic situation propelled them to join orders (e.g. Ebaugh, Lorence, & Chafetz, 1996; Stark & Finke, 2000), which finds resonance with the findings of this study, with a specific cadre of Hindu women renunciants. The common element across Hindu women renunciants however was that they had collectively denied the prescribed cultural time-tables for women in terms of marriage and motherhood, by opting for celibate life, a critical accompaniment of Hindu renunciation. More research is required, along the lines of Khandelwal (2004) and DeNapoli, (2009, 2013) on how they enact their celibate roles and also find vicarious ways of fulfilling needs of marriage and motherhood if any, through the renunciant images.

In terms of future plans, majority of the women renunciants said that they would like to continue and be more involved in the order/FBO. Some said that they had no specific plans and a smaller proportion said that they would like to leave the order/FBO. Women renunciants with Bachelor's degree and higher level educational attainment, doing teaching-training and social projects related work in the order and having higher DUREL and SAS scores, were more likely to have plans of continuation and greater involvement in the order/FBO. On the other hand, Hindu women renunciants with lower educational attainment, doing administrative work in the order and with lower DUREL and SAS scores, were more likely to have no specific plans or plans of discontinuation. Taking forward the earlier argument, this finding suggests that those women renunciants who had made a conscious choice to join the order/FBO, were more inclined to contribute and participate more in order/FBO activities.

Women renunciants had no fears as they believed that all happens due to the will of the higher power. Of those who had fears, the sole one expressed was not being able to discharge religious-spiritual duties to satisfaction. Women renunciants with higher DUREL and SAS scores were more likely to have no fears and believe that all happens due to the will of the higher power. This confirms the contention that religion and spirituality serve to be protector variables (e.g. See Espindula, Valle, & Bello, 2010; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Oman & Reed, 1998).

In terms of strategies to deal with life in the order/FBO, majority of the women renunciants said that they had not envisaged any specific strategy and would like to continue in the same manner. A few however said that they would like to keep time for their own spiritual pursuits and some also said that they would like to be further engaged in religious and spiritual activities. This finds congruence in the general Hindu ethos of this worldly action and world affirmation vis-à-vis the idea of world renunciation, which accompanies dominant notions of ascetic life (see e.g. David, 2010; DeNapoli, 2009; Ito, 2007; Khandelwal, 2004; Valley, 2002). Hence, the idea of having a strategy to deal with life in the order/FBO was not appealing to women renunciants as they believed that they would like to go with the flow.

With respect to quality of life enhancement strategy, close to half of the women renunciants said that they aspired for higher level spiritual life of oneness with the higher power and divine communion. Close to one-third of them said that they would like to continue in the present way and some also said that they would like to be more engaged in the work of the order/FBO they were aligned to. Education and nature of work engagement in the order/FBO found an inimitable link to the women renunciants' life quality enhancement strategies.

Those Hindu women renunciants who did teaching training and social work in the order/FBO, had high DUREL scores and high SAS scores were more likely to have higher scores on MLQ. This corroborates the empirical evidence on ascetics in the orders, their religiosity and spirituality and how they seek satisfaction and meaning in life thereby (e.g. Carbine, 2012; Charpentier, 2010; DeNapoli, 2009, 2013; Khandelwal, 2009; Lindman, 2010; Tøllefsen et al., 2016).

Hence overall Hindu women renunciants belonging to various Hindu orders scored well on parameters of religiosity and spirituality, were able to deploy those for negotiating lives in the order as finding meanings therein. Based on this survey, some further questions that deem inquiry are: the nature of lives of women in different orders, specific individual experiences and stories of how “choice” is exercised and what specific “circumstances” propel women to opt for ascetic life; how they differentially construct understandings of future plans and fears as well as strategies; and what is the defining aspect of meaning in life and how that meaning is construed by Hindu women renunciants, while simultaneously negotiating with the politics of boundaries and space in a male dominated renunciant world and worldview.

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#### Notes

1. Folklorist Elaine Lawless says that life stories need to be considered as an “alternative narrative strateg[y]” in an individual's narrative self-representations (Lawless, 1988). This need to be a lens which should be taken more seriously, by religious and anthropological studies on female renunciation.
2. The Tantric version of feminist theology is an affirmation of the body (Biernacki, 2006) but not its natural subjugation.
3. Bacchetta, furthermore, argues that while the rhetoric of public female ascetic political figures resists values that are central to Brahmanical Hinduism(s), and thus, displaces, albeit temporarily, male authority, it is not meant to be a global challenge to the oppressive patriarchal practices and institutions of the culture. Rather, such rhetoric effectively establishes ascetics' continuity with maternal roles and behaviours.
4. Headquartered in Abu (Rajasthan), the Brahmakumaris are a sect that propagate millenarian philosophy and predict a world apocalypse. They believe that their Raja Yoga philosophy would be the panacea to all impending evils. Their followers, primarily women (though the sect now also has men), who choose to become a part of the order, are advised a strict ascetic lifestyle and serious study of the teachings of Brahma Baba, the organisation's founder.
5. Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry is founded on the vision of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and his spiritual consort Mirra Alfassa or the Mother. Those who choose to be a part of the ashram as renunciants are called sadhaks, which include an equal number of women. Apart from celibacy, they are also advised work in the various activities of the ashram and study of the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.
6. Ramakrishna Sarada Math is founded on the devotion of Sarada Devi, the wife of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and functions as a sister concern of the Ramakrishna Mission. It is a missionary organization simultaneously engaged in literature study and devotion to Ramakrishna-Sarada Devi-Vivekananda triune and social service. Sarada Math has only women ascetics or renunciants and has strict norms of entry and exit.
7. The Upasani Ashram at Sakori in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra was founded by Upasani Baba,

a Vedic scholar and devotee of Saibaba of Shirdi. His wife, Godavari Mata also partnered in his intellectual and spiritual quests and floated the idea of creating a cadre of women renunciants, opting for ascetic life, and performing Vedic rituals – generally a male prerogative. Women who live in the Sakori ashram premise are lifelong celibates and devote their lives to worship of Upasani Baba-Godavari Mata, performing rituals and self study. The ashram is sustained by benefactors and patrons who have received the blessings of Upasani Baba, generally believed to be the realized one.

8. The Chinmaya Mission is a Hindu faith-based organization founded by Swami Chinmayananda to propagate Hindu thoughts, ideals and more importantly the 8th century saint Adi Sankara's Advaita philosophy. Currently the organization is headed by Swami Tejomayananda. Like a new religious movement, it simultaneously engaged in religious and social service pursuits. The aim is also to create a cadre of ascetics to continue this tradition, as a result of which both men and women are recruited into the Mission. They have a global presence and hence a vast number of women have chosen to renounce worldly life and join the Mission as swaminis. The Mission is sustained by their own income generating activities (such as providing spiritual services, sale of literature) and more importantly philanthropy and donations. Swaminis engage as full time functionaries to propagate the spiritual and social service of the Mission.
9. Founded in Kollam, Kerala by Mata Amritanandamayi or Amma (also called the hugging saint) it is aimed at propagating Amma's teachings, her Integrated Amrita Meditation technique, and also do social service. The staunch adherents join the Mission as ascetics and the women are called swaminis.

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