

**Singing *Rāmāyan* and Performing Literacy:
Male Hindu Renouncers' Idea and Performance of Vernacular Texts in Rajasthan**

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This article analyzes the *Rāmāyan* song (*bhajan*) performance of a non-literate male renouncer (*sadhu*) by the name of Baldevgiri, a strategy by which he, like the other male *sadhus* with whom I worked in the North Indian state of Rajasthan over the last decade, “perform” and, thus, create their authority, power, and legitimacy as *sadhus* in asceticism as practiced. While *sannyās* exemplifies a way of life situated on the periphery of Indian society, *sadhus* like Baldevgiri, nonetheless, perform what I have characterized as *sadhus*’ “rhetoric of renunciation,” their songs, stories, and sacred texts, as a way to create their spiritual constituencies, on which they depend economically for their physical survival and sustenance. What is more, this article argues that male *sadhus* like Baldevgiri engender a relationship with God, whom they conceive of in various ways, by means of performing religious texts like *Rāmāyan*, a popular vernacular-language text in North India. But since Baldevgiri, like the majority of the male *sadhus*, is non-literate, he suggests that his authority as a *sadhu* constitutes a function of his “literacy” in the *Rāmāyan* textual tradition. Therefore, as this article shows, Baldevgiri crafts his authenticity by reconfiguring the *idea* of the written text in his performances as the *bhajans* that the poet-saint Tulsidas, the author of the Hindi *Rāmcaritmānas*, sang before he composed his text. In this way, singing the *bhajans* that Baldevgiri says Tulsidas himself sang makes it possible for him to construct himself as “literate” in the written textual tradition of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*. Similarly, by performing the *bhajans* attributed to Tulsidas, Baldevgiri performs the “same” *Rāmāyan* that Tulsidas wrote. This article shines light on the “textual” performances of male *sadhus* in order to show *how* the performance strategies on which they draw enable them to create and establish their “scripturality” in literate textual traditions. This article concentrates on the “textual” performances of Baldevgiri as a case study because his textual practices are illustrative of both non and semi-literate male *sadhus*’ conceptualizations of the idea of the text and the ways that these (male) *sadhus* perform texts to craft *sannyās* as a path of detachment and knowledge.

The world knows it as a book, but the Rāmāyan is really the bhajans of Tulsiji
Baldevgiri, 2005

This article analyzes the *Rāmāyan*¹ “textual” performance of a non-literate male renouncer (*sādhu*) by the name of Baldevgiri, a strategy by which he, like the other male *sadhus* with whom I conducted extensive fieldwork the North Indian state of Rajasthan over the last decade (2001-2011), “performs”² and, thus, creates authority, power, and legitimacy as a *sadhu* in asceticism as

¹ This transliteration of the *Rāmāyan*, as opposed to the Sanskritic *Rāmāyaṇa*, reflects the Hindi pronunciation of the Hindu renouncers, men and women, with whom I worked in Rajasthan between 2001 and 2012.

² My use of the term ‘performance’ is drawn from the usage featured in performance studies-centered and folkloristic studies, in which the term describes the notion of constructive ritual and/or religious practice by which means performers create their worlds. See Bauman (1977; 1992); Briggs (1989); Bell (1997; 1998).

practiced.³ At the time that I conducted field research with sadhus, who received initiation (*dīkṣā*) into one of the two pan-Indian Shaiva⁴ traditions of asceticism, namely the Shankaracarya Dashanami⁵ and Kanphata Nath orders,⁶ Baldevgiri was sixty years old (2005) and born into the Brahmin caste. He was living in an ashram in Gogunda village, Udaipur district, known as Bholenath⁷ Ashram, which was managed by a female sadhu, Maya Nath. As a sadhu, Baldevgiri has renounced, or left behind and “thrown down,”⁸ the normative societal expectations of marriage, family, and householding in order to dedicate himself to the worship of the divine and, in doing so, attain liberation (*mokṣ*) from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth characterized as *sansār*.⁹ Baldevgiri’s religious way of life is known as renunciation (*sannyās*) and represents a radical alternative to the norms of householding in Indian society.¹⁰

While *sannyās* exemplifies a way of life situated on the periphery of Indian society, sadhus like Baldevgiri, nonetheless, perform what I have characterized as their “rhetoric of renunciation,” that is, songs (*bhajans*), stories (*kaḥāniyān*), and sacred texts (*pāḥ*), as a means to create their spiritual constituencies, on which they depend economically for their physical survival and sustenance.¹¹ What is more, as this article argues, sadhus like Baldevgiri create a relationship with God, whom they conceive of in various ways, by means of performing religious texts like the *Rāmāyan*, a popular vernacular-language text in North India. Despite that Baldevgiri and the majority of the male sadhus I worked with are non-literate, they say that their song and/or story performances of *Rāmāyan* constitute “textual” performances? How is this so?

In the following analysis, I will demonstrate that Baldevgiri crafts his “literacy” in the *Rāmāyan* textual tradition by reconfiguring the *idea* of the “text” in his performances as the songs (*bhajans*) that the poet-saint Tulsidas, the author of the Hindi *Rāmcaritmānas*, sang as he composed his text.¹² In this way, singing the *bhajans* that Baldevgiri says “the great” Tulsidas himself sang while enrapt in devotion (*bhakti*) to the divine makes it possible for Baldevgiri to construct himself as “literate” in the written textual tradition of the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*.¹³ To

³ This article is based on field research that I conducted in the region of Mewar, south Rajasthan, between 2004 and 2006. I conducted research in three different districts of Mewar, namely Udaipur district, Rajsamand district, and Banswara district. The research on which this article is based was funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Fellows’ Dissertation Research Grant, and by an Internationalization Grant from Emory University.

⁴ Shaiva *sannyās* describes the renunciant traditions in which the deity Shiv is seen as the exemplar and progenitor of the tradition.

⁵ Dashanami literally translates as “ten names” and refers to the ten branches of the order. See Gross (2001) and Khandelwal (2004).

⁶ The Khanphata Yogi tradition is believed to have originated from the 12th century Tantric saint, Gorakhnatha. See Gross (2001).

⁷ Bholenath describes a local manifestation of the deity Shiv, and the name translates as “innocent lord.”

⁸ See Olivelle (1975). The formal term for sadhus who renounce the world is *sannyāsi* (masculine) and *sannyāsini* (feminine). Baldevgiri, however, as with the majority of the sadhus with whom I worked, men as well as women, preferred to represent himself as a sadhu, rather than *sannyāsi*. I follow his characterizations in this article.

⁹ *Sansār* reflects the Hindi pronunciation of the Sanskrit term *samsāra*.

¹⁰ For textual studies on renunciation, see Olivelle (1975; 1981; 1986; 1992; 1996; 2004; 2007; 2011). For a review of the literature of female renunciation in South Asia, see also DeNapoli (2009 b) and Khandelwal (2009).

¹¹ DeNapoli 2009a, 2010, 2011, 2012. As individuals who have left behind work and career, sadhus are not wage earners. Their cash flow, so to speak, comes from the donations of their devotees, usually householders, who provide for the sadhus economically, making it possible for them to survive in the world.

¹² For a discussion on Hindu notions on the idea of the text, see Thomas Coburn (1984), Wendy Doniger (1991), and William A. Graham (1993).

¹³ Both the female sadhus and the male sadhus I worked with characterize the *Rāmcaritmānas* as the Tulsī *Rāmāyan*.

Baldevgiri, the “book” that Tulsidas composed and the *bhajans* he sang as he composed his text signify “*Rāmāyan*.” Not surprisingly, by performing the *bhajans* attributed to Tulsidas, Baldevgiri says that he performs the “same” *Rāmāyan* that Tulsidas wrote and, by implication, establishes his renunciant legitimacy. I have published an article that explores the “textual” performances of the Rajasthani female sadhus with whom I worked (DeNapoli 2010[2008]).¹⁴ I argued that these sadhus perform “literacy” in textual traditions by reworking the idea of the text beyond that of the written word.¹⁵ This strategy, as this article shows, is not exclusive to the female sadhus. The male sadhus also expand the conceptual boundaries of the “text” beyond the standard notion of the written “book” to create literacy. This article calls attention to the “textual” performances of male sadhus in Rajasthan in order to show *how* the performance strategies on which they draw enable them to create and establish their “scripturality” in the literate textual tradition of the *Rāmāyan*.¹⁶ It fills a lacuna in the scholarship on *sannyās* in South Asia, as this literature represents sadhus’ performing of texts as a way to transmit teachings, and does not consider performance as a rhetorical strategy by which sadhus construct a relationship with texts or gendered views of asceticism (Narayan 1989; Lamb 1991; 2002; Gross 2001). This article examines Baldevgiri’s *Rāmāyan* “textual” performance as a case study to illuminate the ways in which the male sadhus in my field study rework the idea of the text as *bhajan* and, in doing so, perform “texts” to craft *sannyās* in a gendered masculine way as a path of detachment and knowledge. I recorded Baldevgiri’s *bhajan* in March of 2005 at the Gogunda ashram.

An Evening Satsang with Baldevgiri: Bhajan Singing as Performance of Tulsi’s Rāmāyan

When Baldevgiri invited me and my field assistant Manvendra Singh to the Bholenath ashram he manages on behalf of Maya Nath for an evening of *bhajan satsang* (a devotional gathering in which participants sing *bhajans*, tell stories, and recite texts), I did not know what to expect. Aware of my research interest in the religious practices of sadhus, Baldevgiri had made similar invitations for *bhajan satsang* to me a number of times before. These invitations, however, never materialized, as Baldevgiri was either engrossed in organizing Maya Nath’s upcoming *bhaṇḍāras* (feasting ceremonies to commemorate the completion of a special religious vow), or simply too busy serving devotees, especially since Maya Nath was busy establishing another ashram in nearby Pipara village, Udaipur district. The Gogunda ashram is also a popular place. Located along highway 8, the main thoroughfare that connects Rajasthan to Delhi, and directly opposite a site where Udaipuri city-dwellers riding in government-operated buses arrive in Gogunda village daily, the ashram attracts fifty to one-hundred people every day (and twice as many during the Hindu holy days). These pilgrims come to take the *darśan* of Bholenath and a host of other deities in the adjoining temple, and often request religious services from Baldevgiri.

Under such circumstances, Baldevgiri cannot spend lengthy periods of time with any single individual, including me. On most days, after staying up to six hours at the ashram, during which time I observed Baldevgiri’s schedule and his interactions with the pilgrims and locals consisting of both sadhus and householders, including, sometimes, Maya Nath’s relatives, who

¹⁴ For readers interested in that article, here is the citation: Antoinette E. DeNapoli (2008), “Write the Text Letter-by-Letter in the Heart: Non-literacy, Religious Authority, and Female Sadhus’ Performance of Asceticism through Sacred Texts.” *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 4(3): 3-40.

¹⁵ DeNapoli (2008).

¹⁶ The notion of “scripturality” is borrowed from William A. Graham (1993). In his usage the concept means people’s uses of written sacred texts to perform “scripturality” and the means by which they create themselves as “scriptural” in textual traditions. See Graham, William A. 1993 [1987]. *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

inundated the ashram, I left without having received from him the *bhajan* traditions (or religious teachings) I had come for. But at that evening of *bhajan satsang* to which Baldevgiri had invited me, he emphasized, “Few people will be here. We’ll sing *bhajans*, lots of them. So come.”

That evening of *satsang* was different from my earlier meetings with Baldevgiri. Three late-middle aged male villagers, and one tribal male sadhu, joined us for the occasion. The tribal sadhu came regularly from a nearby village to assist Baldevgiri with maintaining, and in the tribal sadhu’s own words, “protecting [*rakṣā karnā*]” the ashram and its donated material belongings.¹⁷ After the tasty evening meal, which Baldevgiri had prepared, and which consisted of lentil soup (*dāl*), unleavened wheat bread (*capātī*), and vegetables (*sabzī*), he began to speak about the importance of faith [*śraddhā*] for a religious life. “Faith,” Baldevgiri said looking at me, “has brought you here to *jambhuriya kī nāl* [the name of the water source on which the Gogunda ashram was built], faith that tonight we would have *satsang*. So, you have come here with faith in your heart.” Baldevgiri’s discussion on faith, however, quickly metamorphosed into a *Rāmāyan bhajan* performance, as this statement that he made to me that evening foreshadows:

Because of faith you have come here [tonight]. This faith is about the *paramātmā* [i.e., the God-self within every human being]. Look, just as Tulsiji who composed the *Rāmāyan*, he, too, had faith. You’ve heard of the *Rāmāyan*, right?...We Indians read [*bāncnā*] the *Rāmāyan* written by Tulsiji. Big scholars [*vidvān*], educated pandits, and educated people [read the *Rāmāyan*]. Like, at [some] ashrams, there are even those *kathāvācaks* who drive [i.e., explain] the meaning [of the text]. O.k., this whole *Rāmāyan* is a song [*gāthā*]; it’s a song about life—your life, his [motioning toward Manvendra Singh] life, my life, everyone’s [life]. [Baldevgiri then sings this “song about life.”]

Baldevgiri frames his teachings about faith by defining the concept in terms of that which he perceives Tulsidas to have had experienced in his own life. By mentioning the name of the legendary poet-saint, though, Baldevgiri immediately associates him with the text he composed, the *Rāmāyan*. In his description of the *Rāmāyan*, Baldevgiri explains that “big scholars, educated pandits, and educated people,” including the *kathāvācaks*, meaning the professional storytellers on the *Rāmāyan*, read and study the text. But he also states that “this whole *Rāmāyan* is a song...about...everyone’s life.” To Baldevgiri, the Tulsī *Rāmāyan* describes not only a literate text that is read by the educated and the elite, but also a song (*gāthā*) that is sung by “everyone,” including uneducated individuals like himself. In our meetings, Baldevgiri often characterized himself as an “unlettered [*anpaḍh*]” man; he never went to school and learned how to read “books.” His representation of the *Rāmāyan* as both a “book” and a “song” composed by Tulsidas is significant. Despite his being non-literate, like most of the male sadhus whose textual practices that I observed, Baldevgiri ties himself back to this textual tradition by singing the *bhajans* he understands “Tulsiji” to have written as a devotee (*bhakt*) of God (*bhagvān*).

¹⁷ In the summer of 2011 when I returned for several months to Udaipur district to conduct follow-up research for my forthcoming book, *Real Sadhus Sing to God: Gender, Asceticism, and Vernacular Religion in Rajasthan* (Oxford University Press), I learned that, following the passing of Maya Nath, which just happened forty days before my arrival in the country, this tribal sadhu began to live at the ashram permanently with the permission of Baldevgiri, who left Gogunda ashram in order to manage another of Maya Nath’s ashrams in Pipara village, near Nathdwara.

The *bhajans* that Baldevgiri attributes to Tulsidas are not found in the written text. And even though its refrain contains the names of the text's central characters, Sita and Ram, the particular *bhajan* Baldevgiri sang for our evening *satsang* does not depict any of the stories or narrative episodes from Tulsi's text. Rather, it illustrates the series of events that led to Tulsi's composition of the *Rāmāyan*. In this respect, Baldevgiri's *bhajans* represent a kind of meta-*Rāmāyan*, that is, devotional songs that move beyond—or perhaps along with—the traditional *Rāmāyan* narrative. Composed in Hindi or Avadhi, these *Rāmāyan bhajans* derive from an oral tradition associated with the life story of “the almost mythical figure of Tulsidas” (Flueckiger 1991, 49), which probably developed around the literate Hindi tradition of the *Rāmāyan*. Neither the oral origins of these *bhajans*, nor the fact that their themes extend well beyond the narrative grammar of Tulsi's written text, however, diminishes their “literary” status as *Rāmāyan* to Baldevgiri. From his perspective, these *bhajans* represent the same devotional songs which Tulsiji himself sang to God as he composed his “book” that “the world knows as [the] *Rāmāyan*.” Baldevgiri himself associates the *bhajans* Tulsi sang with the text he also wrote:

Tulsiji sang a lot of *bhajans* [to *bhagvān*]. He sang so many *bhajans*; he took the name of God a lot. So, the *Rāmāyan* was made by Tulsiji in this way. I mean, he sang so many, so many *bhajans*, wrote these songs about *bhagvān* down [that] he [eventually] composed a *śāstra* [authoritative text dealing with many topics], the *Rāmāyan*. He composed such a large book. It was such a large volume. Today the world calls [this book] the *Rāmāyan*.

In Baldevgiri's view, the “many” *bhajans* Tulsidas sings become the text (“*śāstra*”) he writes. That Tulsidas's text constitutes the *bhajans* he “wrote down” creates the “*Rāmāyan*” that Baldevgiri sings as the same literary *Rāmāyan* that Tulsidas composed. In this way, as with the female sadhus' idea of Tulsidas' “text” as oral tradition,¹⁸ Baldevgiri's concept of the *Rāmāyan* illuminates a broader understanding of the text than that of the story of the adventures of Prince Ram of Ayodhya. For him, as for the Chhattisgarhi women of the *Rāmāyan mandalī* groups described by Joyce Flueckiger, the text serves as a “conceptual referent.” It represents “a more loosely defined tradition,” and in Baldevgiri's case, a tradition of *bhajans* composed by Tulsidas (Flueckiger 1991, 49 and 53). Although the *bhajan* Baldevgiri performs in this *satsang* describes Tulsi's personal journey toward the divine, it repeatedly alludes back to the literate tradition of Tulsidas in its refrain: “Tulsi says, speak [the names of] Sita and Ram and worship them.” Through the means of the conceptual associations produced by the divine names of Sita and Ram, the *bhajan* evokes Tulsidas's written *Rāmāyan*. But what does a *bhajan* about Tulsi's life have to do with the subject that initially started this *Rāmāyan satsang*—that of faith?

The pivotal theme of the *bhajan*, from Baldevgiri's perspective, has to do with faith in God. He explicitly associates this characteristic not only with Tulsidas, God's preeminent *bhakt*, but also with me, the American anthropologist whom Baldevgiri perceives as a potential disciple (*celī*). In Baldevgiri's telling words, “faith has brought [me]” to the ashram that evening for *satsang*, and by implication, to God, the remembrance of whom constitutes the undergirding purpose of the *satsangs* of all sadhus. Similarly, according to Baldevgiri, just as faith empowers me to meet with the sadhus and write a “book” about their lives and practices, it also empowered Tulsidas to sing *bhajans* to *bhagvān* and compose the renowned *Rāmāyan* book. But whether

¹⁸ See DeNapoli (2010[2008]).

exemplified by a scholar or a saint, Baldevgiri understands faith in terms of the spiritual experience of journeying to the divine, and he sings the *bhajan* as a meaningful way to perform his idea of the concept with respect to Tulsi's own spiritual movement from a state of disbelief to that of belief in God. Following is the *bhajan* that Baldevgiri performed for our *satsang*:

[Refrain]

Tulsi says, speak [the names of] Sita and Ram and worship them!

A corpse was floating in the rain-flooded river ahead, Oh my Rama.
Tulsi grabbed [the corpse] and reached the far bank [of the river].

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them!

Tulsi circumambulated all four sides of the palace [where his wife resided],
But he found no door anywhere; he found no door anywhere, Oh my Rama.

Tulsi grabbed the snake and entered [the palace].

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them!

“My Lord, why don't you love God (*hari*) in the way that you love me,” [said Tulsi's wife].

[Tulsi's wife said]: “Your life will improve, my Lord.”

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.

“Woman, you are the mother of *dharm* and have told me the truth today,” [said Tulsi].

“Woman, you are the mother of *dharm* and have told me the truth today.”

Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.¹⁹

¹⁹ The Hindi transcription is as follows:

sītā rām kaho nā re bhajo tulsī kahā (refrain)
agam disā ek nadiyā bahat hai/
murdā jāt bahe mere rām/1
vāhe to pakaḍ tulsī/
pār to bhayo nā re/2
chautarphā phirhī bhavan ke darvāzo nahī pāyo rī/
vāhe to pakaḍ tulsī mel to padhārā re/3
jītnā het prabhu mose kinhā itnā hari se kyon nā kiyā/
tumhārā bhalā ho jātā/4
tū triyā merī dharm kī mātā/
tūne jnān batāyo rī/5

How does this “*Rāmāyan*” *bhajan* illustrate the message of the power of faith in God? It begins with Tulsi’s infatuation with his wife, but ends with his faith in God. The popular legend about Tulsi’s life as a married householder, to which Baldevgiri’s *bhajan* refers, has been generally understood, as Philip Lutgendorf discusses, to be a story about his infatuation with his wife (Lutgendorf 1991, 6). In framing his performance of the *bhajan*, Baldevgiri suggests this idea by telling the audience that Tulsi loved his wife “beyond the normal limit.” However, in his representation of Tulsi’s behavior, Baldevgiri accentuates faith, not infatuation. He explains,

B[al]D[ev]G[iri]: Look, Tulsiji who made the *Rāmāyan*, right, he had a wife. He loved her so much, beyond the [normal] limit, in fact [*had se zyādā*]. [Directs his comments to Antoinette] O.k., imagine your husband. Do you have a husband? [Audience begins to laugh]

A[uthor]: No.

BDG: No? Where did he go? [More laughter from the audience]

A: Who, my husband?

BDG: Yes, your husband? Where did he go?

A: I don’t have a husband, Maharaj.

BDG: You haven’t made a husband yet? All right, you haven’t married and therefore you don’t have a husband [Antoinette confirms his statement with the response, “Yes.”] Well, Tulsiji made a wife...He married; he had so much faith in her that he thought, “Whatever happens, she is my wife.” Do you understand? Tulsi made a *bhajan* about this [experience].

Although he does not explicitly refer to Tulsi’s experience as one of infatuation, what Baldevgiri seems to want me and the rest of the audience to understand is that faith in God should be as powerful and all-consuming an experience as that of infatuation with one’s spouse; an experience of love (*prem*) “beyond the [normal] limit.” Infatuation in fallible mortals, he suggests, brings disappointment and, as the *bhajan* implies, disillusionment with the world itself.

Baldevgiri highlights the central message of the importance of faith in *bhagvān* through the combined use of performance strategies such as translation and commentary. His expository-like performance style compares to the female sadhus’ *Rāmāyan* recitations (cf. DeNapoli 2010). In Baldevgiri’s case, he recites either a half line or a full line of the *bhajan* and supplements the recitation with a prose translation of the verse, detailed commentary, and/or explanations. The following passage illustrates his method of mixing translation and commentary in performance:

BDG: Tulsiji said [sings the first line of the *bhajan* after the refrain],
agam disā ek nadiyā bahat hai/ murdā jāt bahe mere rām//

What does this mean? *Agam disā*—that is, like, here’s a temple, and there’s a river that flows in front of it. But when it rains a lot, then the river floods, right? O.k., so in that rain-flood river a corpse floating.

vāhe to pakaḍh tulsī/

He grabbed the dead body and sat on it. How did he sit on it? He sat on top of it. Why did he sit on top of the corpse? [In order to go to] His wife [who] went to her natal home [*pīhar*]. Where did she go?

Audience: To her natal home.

BDG: Yes. She went to the place where she took birth. O.k., Anita [the name by which Baldevgiri calls Antoinette], like, you are in America, but your husband is here [i.e., in India; audience members laugh and Baldevgiri laughs, too]. Just imagine that you have a husband, and he is here [in India]. So, your husband followed you [there to America]. Tulsi said,

agam disā ek nadiyā bahat hai/ murdā jāt bahe mere rām//

vāhe to pakaḍh tulsī/ pār to bhayo nā re//

O.k., so Tulsi was sitting atop the corpse floating in the rain-flooded river, and what happened? He reached the other side of its bank. [He repeats the refrain of the *bhajan*] “Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.” Tulsi reached the other side and saw [his wife’s] palace. It was very big. Anita, imagine that your husband has followed you [Antoinette responds, “Alright”], and you are sitting in your house. Your husband has followed you because he has faith only in you; he thinks, “Whatever happens, she is my wife.” Tulsi thought like this and he said,

chautarphā phirhī bhavan ke darvāzo nahī pāyo rī/

What did he say? Tulsi said he circumambulated [*parikrama karnā*] all four sides of the house. But he didn’t find any door going inside. He couldn’t find any door.

darvāzo nahī pāyo rī/

A snake was hanging from the window [of the palace]...A snake was hanging from the window, but he thought it was a rope. It was a snake, but it looked like a rope to Tulsi. So, he grabbed it.

vāhe to pakaḍh tulsī mel to padhārā re//

[Repeats refrain], “Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.”

What did Tulsi do? He grabbed the snake and entered into the palace...He wasn’t even afraid of the snake; he didn’t think, “Oh ho! This snake will bite me,” because he didn’t see a snake. He saw a rope. But Tulsiji did all this because of the faith he had for his wife. He felt, “I have to see her.” His faith, his love [was so strong]. He thought, “She is my wife; I will go there [to the palace] and meet her.”...When his wife saw him, she said, “Oh ho ho! Thank you, husband. You have come at such a [late] time of the night and in a palace where there is no

door to enter or to leave. But tell me, how did you come? How did you enter the palace? Tulsi said, “There was a rope hanging from the window. I grabbed the rope and came to you.” [His wife] replied, “But where is there any rope here?” Tulsi looked and saw that no rope was hanging from the window, only a snake. He thought the snake was a rope and entered the palace. What did that wife say to him? She said,

jitnā het prabhu mose kinhā itnā hari se kyon nā kiyā/

She said, “My Lord, why don’t love God [Baldevgiri substitutes “*paramātmā*” here for God] in the way that you love me?” This means that Tulsi should have loved the Lord [*bhagvān*] the way he loved his wife. “Why don’t you love God in the way that you love me?” So, then, Tulsi spoke,

tū triyā merī dharm kī mātā tūne jnān batāyo rī/

[He said], “Woman, you are the mother of *dharm*; you have given me knowledge [today].” What did she give him? Knowledge, I mean, she led Tulsi on the path of *dharm*. She told him, “Why don’t you love the *paramātmā* like you love me? If you love the *paramātmā* [as you love me], you shall surely prosper.” She told him his life would be improved [*sudhar ho jānā*] by [worshipping] the feet of God. Look, all of us have come to this earth by wearing the form of a human body. But, before you can get a human body, you have to experience [*bhognā*] birth in 8, 400,000 (*ek lākh caurāsī*) vaginas [*yonī*]. [Baldevgiri’s meaning here is that the *ātma* has to take birth 8, 400,000 times before it reaches the *yonī* of a human female]. We have to take birth 8, 400,000 times before we can be born in the *yonī* of a woman. [Tulsi’s wife] understood [this teaching]. She said, “My Lord, why don’t you love God in the way that you love me.”

tumhārā bhalā ho jātā/

“Your life will improve,” [said Tulsi’s wife]. Tulsi said, “Woman, you are the mother of *dharm*. You have told me the truth [today].” [Baldevgiri repeats the refrain of the *bhajan*], “Tulsi says, speak the names of Sita and Ram and worship them.”...We have to sing God’s [*bhagvān*] *bhajans*. *Bhagvān* is the *paramātmā*; the *paramātmā* is *bhagvān*.

Antoinette: And the *paramātmā/bhagvān* comes in the form of Sita and Ram?

BDG: God comes in all forms. Whether you call it Shiv, Ram, or Krishna, everything is *bhagvān*; it’s all the same. O.k., listen, from that day, Tulsi started to sing the *bhajans* of *bhagvān*. He sang so many *bhajans*; he took the name of God a lot. So, the *Rāmāyan* was made by Tulsi in this way [i.e., by doing the *bhajans* of God]. He sang so many, so many *bhajans*, wrote these songs [*gāthāen*] about *bhagvān* down [that] he [eventually] composed a *śāstra*, the *Rāmāyan*.

As this excerpt shows, storytelling constitutes a definitive component of Baldevgiri's performance style. After he recites a line of the *bhajan* text, Baldevgiri gives a brief prose translation; and as further examination of the performance reveals, every translation produces several dramatic moments of storytelling. Baldevgiri alternates *bhajan* recitation with narrative performance throughout the whole event. Despite the absence of musical accompaniment, this pattern of alternation still produces an underlying rhythm to his *satsang*. Moreover, Baldevgiri's storytelling compellingly draws the audience into the performance by engaging them with the characters, Tulsi and Ratnavali.²⁰ While the story of Tulsi's faith in Ratnavali that Baldevgiri weaves into his *bhajan* performance is based on "[o]ne of the best known legends" from the hagiographical tradition, it is not the audience's *a priori* knowledge of this legend, but rather Baldevgiri's performance of it that transports them into the narrative world (Lutgendorf 1991, 6). Hence, though he frequently characterizes himself as "an uneducated man," through his use of storytelling Baldevgiri implicitly affiliates himself with the "educated" *kathāvācaks* with whom he associates *Rāmāyan* (textual) performance, i.e., the professional storytellers who represent Tulsi's *Rāmāyan* in new and innovative ways. As Lutgendorf explains:

The...audience's expectation of a certain constancy of subject matter does not rule out the possibility of artistry on the part of the performer...Certainly we can generalize that for the *kathā* tradition originality and artistry lie not in the story but in the manner of its telling; not in the ideas presented but in the feelings they convey, from the heart of the speaker to that of the listener, *within the community of satsang* (Lutgendorf 1991, 242; italics mine).

As with the *Rāmāyan* pandits with whom Lutgendorf worked, Baldevgiri also demonstrates his artistry as a gifted performer "within the community of *satsang*" through use of two interrelated performance strategies. One is the technique of character personalization—that is, personalizing the characters in the narrative by associating them with members of the audience. For example, Baldevgiri attempts to personalize Tulsi and make his seemingly bewildering behavior understandable to the audience at two key points in his narration of the legend. The first is shortly after Baldevgiri explains that Tulsi "grabbed" a corpse floating in the river, and the second attempt takes place at the point in the story when Tulsi arrives at the palace of his wife's family and, unable to locate any entranceway into the building, "snatches" a snake in order to enter the window of her bedroom. Why would Tulsi grab corpses and snatch snakes? As Baldevgiri suggests, out of his intense faith in Ratnavali, whom he loved "beyond the limit." Yet, a simple explanation of Tulsi's behavior hardly suffices for Baldevgiri. His immediate goal is for the participants to identify emotionally with the characters in order to engage them in the narrative events. To bring about this result, Baldevgiri personalizes Tulsi by associating him with the husband he asks me to imagine I have (I told him I was unmarried). Here is an example of the way Baldevgiri enacts his performance strategy of character personalization:

²⁰ Although Ratnavali is not mentioned by her proper name in Baldevgiri's narrative performance, this is the name under which she is known in the hagiographical tradition associated with the life of Tulsidas. In keeping with the spirit of the hagiographical tradition, and in an attempt to personalize her character for my readers, I too shall refer to Ratnavali by her name, rather than as "Tulsi's wife," the way Baldevgiri refers to her.

Anita²¹...you are in America, but your husband is here [i.e., in India]. Just imagine that you have a husband, and he is here [in India]. So, [just as Tulsi followed his wife to her natal home] your husband followed you [to America].

But Tulsi is not the only character whom Baldevgiri personalizes in this performance. He similarly personalizes Ratnavali by means of his association of her character with me, intensifying the levels of character identification for me and the other participants. He says,

...Tulsi was sitting atop the corpse floating in the river, and what happened? He reached the other side of its bank...and saw [his wife's family's] palace. It was very big. Anita, imagine that [like Tulsi's wife] you are sitting in your house [in America]. Your husband has followed you because he has so much faith in you; he thinks [to himself], "Whatever happens, she is my wife." Well, Tulsi thought like this [about his wife].

From Baldevgiri's standpoint, if I imagine my husband whose faith in me prompts him to go to extreme lengths to reach me at my natal home of America, Tulsi's behavior then becomes culturally and personally meaningful to me on the basis of the empathy engendered by this process of character personalization. Through the strategy of personalization in narrative performance, Baldevgiri grabs and maintains the attention of his enrapt audience in order to take them on an imaginative journey into the narrative world. Baldevgiri's performance style recalls that used by the male sadhu with whom Kirin Narayan has worked in Nasik, India (1989). Swamiji, too, integrated personalized storytelling into his performances as a strategy with which to transport his audience into the narrative and evoke empathy. And, as with Swamiji, the responses of laughter from the audience on account of Baldevgiri's personalization indicated his competency as a performer (that is, his ability to assume responsibility to an audience).²²

This particular example of Baldevgiri's personalization of the characters Tulsi and Ratnavali in the context of this *bhajan* performance might seem like a random occurrence; the result of my "foreign" presence affecting his performance style which, here, constitutes an attempt to make a Hindi *bhajan*, and by extension, a Hindi story understandable to a native English speaker. Why else would he have singled me out in this performance if not to engender cultural understanding on my part? While this may have been partially the case since, at the time in which I attended this *satsang*, I had known Baldevgiri only for a period of two months, throughout the course of our interactions at the Bholenath temple in Gogunda I observed Baldevgiri repeatedly personalize his religious performances to his audiences in multiple ways.

For instance, one day while teaching a small group of householders who were gathered in the shade of the ashram's magnificent mango tree the importance of faith in God (*bhagvān*), Baldevgiri maintained, "We must always have faith [in God] because we never know when our *karm* [actions] will ripen [*pak ho jānā*], and then to whom will we cry for help?" He continued,

²¹ The sadhus called me Anita, rather than Antoinette, as the latter was difficult for them to pronounce. Many Indians I met, in fact, had trouble pronouncing my name and called me, instead, "Internet." Choosing Anita as my name was something many Indians, including the sadhus, welcomed.

²² See Bauman 1977 and 1992.

O.k., like that day when these mangoes here fell on Kesar Bai's face; she was sleeping, and [suddenly] they fell on her face. Why? [Because of the ripening of her] *karm*. Who knows when our *karm* will also fall from the tree? So, [we must] worship the [form of the] guru and say the name of *bhagvān*."

The woman about whom Baldevgiri speaks, Kesar Bai, an elderly devotee of Maya Nath who comes regularly for her *darśan* at the Bholenath temple, had been sitting in the audience listening to his teaching and chuckled in response to his statement, as if sorely embarrassed by the unexpected incident to which he refers. Many other members of the audience also laughed, because, like me, they too had witnessed some unripened green mangoes fall from the tree and strike a handful of devotees, including Kesar Bai, on the head. More significantly, their responses to Baldevgiri's anecdote arose as the result of his clever association of the "ripening of *karm*" with Kesar Bai's experience under the mango tree. In this way, Baldevgiri not only personalizes an abstract teaching on *karm* for the participants, but also enables them to understand its poignant message by promoting their identification with what had randomly happened to Kesar Bai. Thus, personalization constitutes one performative means through which Baldevgiri engages his audience with the messages of religious teachings or, in the context of "Rāmāyan" *bhajan* performance, with the lives of characters such as Tulsi and Ratnavali.

Another strategy is Baldevgiri's extended commentaries on particular scenes and/or episodes illustrated by the *bhajan*. His commentaries provide a three-dimensional portrait of the characters by ascribing to them his interpretations of their thoughts, intentions, and motivations in order to make explicit for the audience the underlying the reasons for their actions. Through the means of commentary, Baldevgiri infuses layers of meaning and insight to the lives of the characters otherwise absent (or implicit) in the hagiographical materials (cf. Grierson 1893).

As an example, in his narrative reconstruction of Tulsi's journey to Ratnavali's natal home, Baldevgiri comments that Tulsi was so engrossed in the thought of meeting her that he perceived the poisonous snake hanging from her bedroom window to be simply an innocuous rope. Many members of the audience already know this detail of the legend. Their verbal responses of "Yes, that's right" or affirmative nods of the head suggest as much. Nevertheless, Baldevgiri's representation of Tulsi in his performance of this event reconstitutes an old legend in a new way for the participants. His retelling of the incident makes both readily transparent and familiar the emotional world of Tulsi's mind by describing the content of his thoughts. Throughout his narrative performance, Baldevgiri repeatedly describes for his predominantly male audience what Tulsi thinks and feels while he journeys to Ratnavali's palace. Recall the snake scene in which Baldevgiri comments, "[Tulsi] wasn't...afraid of the snake; he didn't think [to himself], 'Oh ho, this snake will bite me,' because he didn't see a snake. He saw a rope."²³

Similarly, Baldevgiri carefully shapes the participants' understanding of the meaning of the narrative, even as he reshapes notions of the "text" beyond the written book in his

²³ The question, of course, becomes, might Tulsi have experienced a similar optical illusion in the case of the corpse he grabbed to cross the river? After the *satsang*, in reviewing my notes on Baldevgiri's *bhajan* performance I wondered if, in his "faith-stricken" state of mind for Ratnavali, Tulsi had seen something other than a corpse floating down the river. When I put my question to Baldevgiri, he replied, "Yes, yes. Tulsi grabbed a corpse, but he saw a raft instead. It was a corpse, o.k., but to him it looked like a raft. His faith in his wife was so strong [that] he saw a raft, not a corpse."

performance, by telling them how to interpret Tulsi's actions toward Ratnavali. In the course of his narrative performance Baldevgiri consistently describes Tulsi's behavior not in terms of his infatuation for his wife (since in his interpretation that is not what this story is about), but rather in terms of his faith in and love for her. Again, commenting on Tulsi's behavior in the context of the snake scene Baldevgiri explains, "...Tulsiji did all this [i.e., maneuver a rain-flooded river by sitting on a floating corpse and scale a palace wall by climbing a snake] because of the faith he had for his wife. He felt, 'I have to see her.' His faith, his love [was so powerful]. He thought, 'She is my wife; I will go there and meet her.'" With the assistance of Baldevgiri's commentaries, the audience learns to perceive Tulsi's story in a new light of faith, and to this extent, understands the story in terms of the spiritual journey Tulsi makes from a state of having faith in Ratnavali to that of having faith in *bhagvān*. Not only his narrative performance, but also Baldevgiri's commentaries on Tulsi's behavior, contribute to the vitality and development of the legend, and emotionally engage the participants in the imaginative world of the narrative.

In addition to his three-dimensional portrait of Tulsi, Baldevgiri similarly enlarges Ratnavali's character through his commentaries and expands upon the image of her depicted in the hagiographical tradition. In his discussion of the various accounts of Tulsi's life, Lutgendorf cites from this tradition a particular couplet "that has become proverbial" amongst Ram devotees. In this verse Ratnavali offers a "stinging rebuke" to her love-stricken husband:

This passion for my flesh-and-bone-filled body—
had you such for Lord Ram, you'd have no dread of death
(Lutgendorf 1991, 6).

How does Baldevgiri interpret this episode as it appears in the *bhajan*? His translation of the verse approximates the meaning intended by the hagiographical tradition's depiction of the event: "My Lord, why don't you love God in the way that you love me?" To this translation he adds a brief commentary, "Tulsi should have loved the Lord like he did his own wife," implying that faith in *bhagvān* is more powerful than faith in humans. However, his commentary that both precedes and follows this translation moves beyond the "stinging" representation of Ratnavali in the hagiographical tradition. Baldevgiri, therefore, not only portrays Ratnavali in a more positive light, but he also situates her actions toward Tulsi in a broader religious context.

For example, in his description of the scene in which Ratnavali initially encounters Tulsi, Baldevgiri develops the emotional complexity of her character by attributing various types of feelings to her, such as happiness, gratitude, and surprise. In Baldevgiri's own words:

When his wife saw him, she said, "Oh ho ho! Thank you, husband [for coming here to the palace to see me]. You have come at such a [late] time of the night and in a palace where there is no door to enter or to leave. But tell me, how did you come? How did you enter the palace? Tulsi said, "There was a rope hanging from the window. I grabbed the rope and came to you." She replied, "But where is there any rope here?" Tulsi looked and saw that no rope was hanging from the window, only a snake...What did his wife [then] say to him? She said, "My lord, why don't you love God in the way that you love me?"

In his description of her behavior toward Tulsi, Baldevgiri emphasizes that Ratnavali's speech came on account of her desire to help Tulsi improve his life—that is, Ratnavali wanted to show Tulsi “the path of *dharm*,” and hence through the means of her own seemingly rough speech beseeched him to love God (*hari*; *paramātmā*; *bhagvān*) in the way that he loved her. To Baldevgiri, Ratnavali is a compassionate woman and a caring wife. As I mentioned earlier, the hagiographical tradition implies that Ratnavali's caustic response to Tulsi comes as the result of her recognition of the impermanence of the body. For Baldevgiri, however, her actions mirror her realization of human life as a precious commodity in the cycle of existence (*sansār*).

Toward the end of his commentary on the *bhajan*, Baldevgiri provides such an interpretation of Ratnavali's religious awareness. He explains that it takes 8, 400,000 births in the endless cycle of *sansār* before individuals can “wear” a human body. Baldevgiri contends,

Look, we have come to this earth by taking birth as humans. But, before you can wear [*dharan karnā*] the form of a human, you have to experience birth in 8, 400,000 *yonīs* ... We have to take birth [that many] times before we can be born in the *yonī* of a woman.

The implication of Baldevgiri's statement, as I learned from conversations with the other male sadhus and female sadhus, is that *mokṣ* (liberation from *sansār*), only occurs in a human body. If an individual does not experience release from *sansār* in this birth, she or he remains “trapped [*phāns ho jāno*]” in the cycle and takes birth in all kinds of *yonīs*, until the time in which s/he receives another human body and experiences liberation from existence in that birth. Since, in this religious framework birth in a human body is extremely difficult to procure, rather than waste it by having faith in other human beings, devotees ought to treasure their human births by having faith in *bhagvān* alone. Ratnavali, Baldevgiri mentions at the conclusion of his discussion on the endless cycle of existence, understood the precious value of a human birth. From his standpoint, Ratnavali realized that both she and Tulsi had to experience (or suffer) many millions of births in many millions of *yonīs* just to be able to wear their human bodies.

By making this statement about Ratnavali, Baldevgiri effectively endows her with the qualities of prescience and salvific knowledge, suggesting that she sought to transmit these spiritual teachings to Tulsi in order to set him on the path of *dharm*. Through the means of his commentaries, Baldevgiri constructs Ratnavali as an agent of Tulsi's religious transformation, which Tulsi himself acknowledges in the *bhajan* by addressing her as “the mother of *dharm*.” Baldevgiri not only provides the audience access into Ratnavali's emotional world by making explicit her thoughts and motivations, but also frames her actions in terms of a larger religious context wherein faith and the worship of *bhagvān* define the purpose of human life.

The religious explanations Baldevgiri infuses into his *bhajan* performance allow him to create and establish a nonsectarian vision of the divine that expands on the religious vision elaborated in the written text of Tulsidas. In its representation of Lord Ram²⁴ as “the personification of the ultimate reality or ground of being,” the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* has often been considered to be a devotional text that bridges various sectarian and philosophical differences with respect to Hindu ideas of the divine. As Lutgendorf discusses, Tulsidas, in his composition of the text, sought to harmonize Advaita Vedanta (a non-dualist school of philosophy) and

²⁴ To indicate the Supreme Being of the universe, I italicize the word *Rām*. In this way, I make a distinction between the human incarnation, Ram, and the abstract “ground of being,” *Rām*.

Vaishnava (dualist) systems of thought in his representation of *Rām* as the divinity who doubly signifies the human incarnation of the “preserver-god Viṣṇu,” and the abstract “*brahman* of the Upanishads,” which lacks any qualities and characteristics (Lutgendorf 1991, 7). For many North Indian Hindus, “the word *Rām*,” Lutgendorf explains, “is the most commonly used nonsectarian designation for the Supreme Being” (Lutgendorf 1991, 4; see also Lamb 2002; Hess 1982).

In his commentaries on the *bhajan*, Baldevgiri refers to the Supreme Being not as *Rām*, but rather as *bhagvān*, a generic term for God, or as the *paramātmā*, a slightly more specialized term used in Advaita Vedanta traditions to denote the Supreme Spirit of the universe (*Brahman*). Nonetheless, Baldevgiri, like many of the other male sadhus and female sadhus whom I asked in connection with this topic, considers Lord Ram to be both a particular manifestation (*rūp*) of *bhagvān* and *bhagvān* itself. Baldevgiri specifically explains, “God comes in all forms. Whether you call [the form of God as] Shiv, Ram, or Krishna, everything is *bhagvān*; it’s all the same.”

And yet, that Baldevgiri does not conceptualize the Supreme Being specifically as *Rām* is significant. Notice that in his statement Baldevgiri does not say, “[E]verything is *Rām*,” which, according to oral lore, Tulsi is thought to have expressed in his worship of divinity. Instead, Baldevgiri says, “everything is *bhagvān*.”²⁵ In his consistent use of only abstract terms like *bhagvān* or the *paramātmā* to signify the Supreme Being, Baldevgiri implies that the use of proper names such as *Rām* to indicate an impersonal God might stimulate rather than neutralize sectarian understandings of divinity. A sadhu who serves Hindus of multiple castes and theological persuasions,²⁶ Baldevgiri obviates this possibility of (perceived) religious exclusivism. He is careful not to associate the Supreme Being with any particular name or form of the divine, other than with *bhagvān* and the *paramātmā*, which he describes as “the same.”

A telling example of this practice occurs in the context of Baldevgiri’s explanation of the verse in which Ratnavali beseeches Tulsi to love God in the way he loves her. The word for God that appears in the *bhajan* is Hari, a common appellation for Krishna or Vishnu (cf. McGregor 2004), and a popular name for Lord Ram in the Tusli *Rāmāyan*.²⁷ An “indexical sign,” Hari, therefore, specifically connotes *Rām* both as a personal and an abstract God.²⁸ However, in his translation of this verse Baldevgiri substitutes the name *bhagvān* for the name Hari, and in his subsequent explanation uses the term *bhagvān* in order to avoid representing God according to what primarily signify Vaishnava theological understandings of the divine. That is, despite their connotations of the formless and eternal absolute, both Hari and *Rām* have sectarian overtones in their signification of the god Vishnu (or his incarnations Krishna and Ram) as the Supreme Being of the universe, whereas the term *bhagvān*, which is used by Hindus across sectarian traditions, lacks any specific signification. As the historical evidence suggests, Tulsidas may have sought to establish a nonsectarian tradition of *Rām* devotion in north India through means of his representation of *Rām* as the ineffable *brahman*. However, his privileging of the use of the name *Rām*, or the nominal compound *Sītā Rām*, to signify the Supreme Being still reveals the

²⁵ We note a similar occurrence in the context of Baldevgiri’s idea that the *Rāmāyan* represents the *bhajans* which Tulsi composed to *bhagvān*, the genderless and formless God, rather than to any specific form of deity.

²⁶ Even though he was initiated in the Shaivaitic tradition of Dashanami renunciants in which non-dual, or Advaita, persuasions are privileged, Baldevgiri, like most of the male and female sadhus, follows his own personal theology of God, rather than what the Daśanāmī institution itself propounds. See also Khandelwal’s (2004) discussion on *sannyās* as an institution, pp. 24–25.

²⁷ Hari, though, is also used as a name for other deities, such as Shiv. However, the Vaiṣṇava overtones of the name are certainly there. See McGregor (2004), p. 1061.

²⁸ As cited in Lutgendorf, the verse from the hagiographical tradition uses the name *Rām*.

underlying influence that the Vaishnava traditions, and hence the Vaishnava views of God, wielded over his own conceptualizations of divinity (cf. Klostermaier 1994; Lutgendorf 1991).²⁹

By emphasizing the use of the generic terms *bhagvān* and the *paramātmā* for God, Baldevgiri performs a perception of God that expands beyond the sectarian vision of *Rām* as Supreme Being elaborated within Tulsi's written text. Baldevgiri's performance, therefore, constructs an inclusive view of God for his audience. Baldevgiri is not alone in this respect. We witness a similar occurrence in the case of the *Rāmāyan pāthas* of the female sadhus. Unlike Baldevgiri who espouses inclusive views of divinity through his use of verbal commentary, in their version of *Rāmāyan satsang* the female sadhus underscore similar visions of God in their *bhajan* performances. These *bhajans*, as I have explained elsewhere,³⁰ which the sadhus sing before and after the recitation, either extol the virtues of various divine manifestations (Shiv, Parvati, or Ganesh) or, more commonly, praise a formless, genderless, and nameless God. While features such as translation and the *samput*³¹ indicate that the female sadhus adhere to the lexical text, their *bhajans* illustrate the ways they, too, performatively create an inclusive religious vision and conceptualization of divinity, beyond that which we find in Tulsi's written text.

These variations in the performance styles of the sadhus, then, sensitize us to their individual perceptions of the differential functions of *Rāmāyan satsang*. For all of the sadhus, men and women, *satsang* constitutes a devotional context of fellowship in remembrance of the divine. And while this is clearly the purpose of the *Rāmāyan pāthas* for the female sadhus, we must at the same time, however, recognize that *Rāmāyan satsang* serves other equally significant purposes beyond strictly that of evoking *bhakti* to *bhagvān* in the sadhus and other participants. Both the female sadhus' and Baldevgiri's textual practices exemplify the multi-textured nature and purpose of *satsang*. Their integration of storytelling, translation, and commentary into the structure of their performances suggests that the male sadhus and the female sadhus consider *Rāmāyan satsang* as a context for both devotion and entertainment (*manoranjan*). Participants are gathered around a sadhu (or sadhus), who recites from the written version of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan* or sings songs and/or tells stories that are identified with that tradition, for the purpose of hearing a story and enjoying themselves. For Baldevgiri's singing session, factors such as the late evening time at which he began this *satsang*; the convivial ambience of the setting; and even the post-*satsang* comments that I heard several of the participants that night make along the lines of, "I really enjoyed myself tonight [*bahut mazā āyā*]," suggest such a view of *Rāmāyan satsang*.

More significantly, though, Baldevgiri's performance style demonstrates that he performs the *Rāmāyan* in much the same way that he conceptualizes the written text of Tulsidas. That is, he considers the *Rāmāyan* to be "a song about life." The word I gloss here as "song" is *gāthā*, which also means "a narrative poem" (McGregor 2004, 263). Hence, this word has a double connotation, and Baldevgiri seems to capitalize on its dual semantic valency. Thus, like Tulsidas who, in Baldevgiri's view, sang *bhajans* to God and wrote these songs down in the form of a narrative poem known as the *Rāmāyan*, Baldevgiri, too, sings these *bhajans* and reworks them into narrative form in *satsang*. Baldevgiri's practices performatively situate him within the

²⁹ According to Klostermaier, Tulsi's devotion to Ram may have promoted not just an exclusive sectarian vision of God, but condemnation toward those who did not believe in God as Ram. Klostermaier states, "*Bhakti* means not only love for God, but also enmity toward those who do not love him in the same way. Even a saint like Tulsidas, whose verses generally exude a very humane form of religiosity, teaches Ram *bhaktas*: 'Avoid those who do not love Ram and Sita, as your bitter most enemies...'" (Klostermaier 1994, 228).

³⁰ See DeNapoli (2010 [2008]).

³¹ The *samput* characterizes verses of praise and homage to Ram, which the sadhus recite in their textual performances.

textual tradition of Tulsidas. Although he is non-literate, Baldevgiri, like the majority of sadhus with whom I worked, reconceptualizes the *Rāmāyan* as a song/story about God as a means to construct himself as scriptural in the *Rāmāyan*, that is, as “literate” in the literary Hindi tradition of Tulsidas. Baldevgiri’s reconfiguring of the idea of the text as song makes it possible for him to establish not only a personal relationship with the written book but also his “literacy” in this elite textual tradition. Furthermore, the “literacy” that Baldevgiri creates by performing the “same” text that Tulsidas composed as he sang *bhajans* performs his authenticity to his interlocutors.

Conclusions: Gendering *Sannyās* through Performance of the Tulsi *Rāmāyan*

As this article has shown, regardless of their individual literacy levels, male sadhus like Baldevgiri perform asceticism as primarily a path of knowledge (*jnān*) and detachment (*vairāgya*)—and, in the latter sense, from women, who, as the narrative suggests, represent the both problem and the solution to men’s spiritual development—and, by doing so, construct *sannyās* in a masculine way. Baldevgiri’s *Rāmāyan bhajan* performance creates this gendered (and orthodox) vision of asceticism. Baldevgiri emphasizes faith in God as the central message of his performance. His emphasis is based on an underlying renunciant understanding of the nature of reality, or worldly existence. Baldevgiri, like many of the male sadhus I worked with, considers the world to be ultimately illusory and impermanent. He often says in his *satsangs* that “this whole world is *māyā* [i.e., an illusion],” comparing *sansār* to a dream. His statement implies that “reality,” as humans experience it, is unreal simply because it is transitory, and that God as the permanent basis of an ultimately impermanent existence is the only true reality. Baldevgiri’s discourse on the millions of births it takes just to acquire a human body, which he gave in the context of explaining Ratnavali’s seemingly caustic behavior toward Tulsidas, obliquely signals this renunciant teaching. Both Baldevgiri’s *bhajan* and his *bhajan* commentary call attention to the idea that faith in an illusory/impermanent world produces endless suffering and pain, whereas faith in God effects everlasting happiness. This view is informed by Advaita Vedanta interpretations of the nature of reality, and is not exclusive to the male sadhus.

What is significant for our analysis, however, is the way in which Baldevgiri applies this view of reality to construct a gendered interpretation of asceticism. That is, he represents Tulsidas’ experience as a spiritual journey in which he moves from having faith in Ratnavali to having faith in God. The implication here is that Tulsi’s spiritual experience signifies a journey not only from householding to asceticism, but also from (a state of) ignorance to knowledge. Baldevgiri himself says at the conclusion of his narrative/song performance that “this is the life story [*jīvan kī kahānī*] of a sadhu,” suggesting that Tulsidas renounced his life as a householder and became an ascetic. Vernacular language and Brahmanical literary/oral sources on asceticism often represent women as synonymous with the world, and by extension, with a life of suffering (Olivelle 1992, 1995; Gold 1989, 1992). As in the larger hagiographical tradition associated with Tulsidas, in Baldevgiri’s narrative, too, Ratnavali symbolizes what is ultimately unreal, and thus, represents a life of pain and suffering. Because Tulsi remains ignorant of the “real” nature of existence, he places faith in Ratnavali and suffers on account of his infatuation with her. Tulsi’s confrontation with Ratnavali, however, enables him to receive salvific knowledge about the true nature of the world, which, in turn, alters his relationship not only to the world itself, but also to his wife. Baldevgiri indicates Tulsi’s spiritual transformation from his state of ignorance to divine knowledge in his recitation of the last line of the *bhajan*: “Woman, you are the mother of *dharm* and have told me the truth today.” Here, truth connotes the notions that God (*bhagvān* and/or *paramātmā*) is the true reality and faith in God leads to true happiness and peace.

But, as Baldevgiri's performance also suggests, happiness and peace are not the only states of mind that faith in God evokes. Baldevgiri's statement at the end of his performance in the context that Tulsidas became a sadhu after his verbal exchange with Ratnavali implies that faith in God also leads to a state of detachment from the world. Tulsidas' spiritual transformation from having faith in his wife to (having) faith in the divine; from a householder to an ascetic; from an ignorant man to a wise poet-saint, then, illustrates a journey from worldly engagement to otherworldly detachment. To this extent, his emphasis on the importance of faith in God provides a strategy with which Baldevgiri crafts asceticism as a path of knowledge and detachment.

The structure of Baldevgiri's textual performance similarly creates this androcentric interpretation of asceticism. Baldevgiri's narrative/song exhibits a conceptual pattern that moves along a continuum of connection/relationship to detachment/separation. In the beginning of the *bhajan*, Tulsi, though physically separated from his wife, is so emotionally attached to Ratnavali that he has become infatuated with her "beyond the normal limit." Baldevgiri's narrative performance signals this attachment through Tulsi's crossing of the river on a corpse and his scaling up the wall that leads to Ratnavali's room. The first half of the *bhajan* illustrates these events. The rest of the song narrates Tulsi's meeting with, and finally, separation from Ratnavali. His encounter with Ratnavali is fleeting and unsatisfactory. It lasts long enough for him to become enlightened by Ratnavali's words. To that extent, Ratnavali, in the tale that Baldevgiri dramatizes, enacts agency insofar as she makes it possible for Tulsidas to awaken from his own debilitating ignorance. In this, Tulsi's relationship with Ratnavali spawns not only his detachment and separation from her, but more crucial, his world renunciation. The structure of Baldevgiri's performance, then, creates asceticism as a path of knowledge and detachment. In sum, Baldevgiri's performance of asceticism by way of the telling of Tulsidas' story accents values that recall those underscored by the dominant model of *sannyās* in the classical texts. A standard renunciatory value, detachment constitutes the ultimate basis for a life of asceticism, and in the Brahmanical representation, connotes both mental and physical separation from the world.

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