CHAPTER 12

The Renouncer Tradition

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Shaven-headed and clad in yellow-orange robes — whether they are Buddhist monks in Thailand, Sadhus in the Indian countryside, or Hare Krishnas in American airports — this is the enduring image of Indian religion that many westerners carry in their minds. The cultural institution behind these modern manifestations, an institution which we have chosen to call the "renouncer tradition," is very old. It goes back to about the middle of the first millennium BCE and took shape along the mid-Ganges plain in roughly what is today the state of Bihar.

The image of Indian religion as essentially world-renouncing and ascetic (Durand 1960), however, is grossly inaccurate. Yet, behind that image lies a kernel of truth: the renouncer tradition has been a central and important ingredient in the sociocultural mix that contributed to the formation of the historical religions in India. As any human institution, nevertheless, that kernel and the Indian religions themselves changed over time and space.

The earliest historical information about the renouncer tradition comes from the Upaniṣads and other Vedic writings, as well as from Buddhist literary sources. Given the uncertainty of their dates, however, it is impossible to give a precise or certain date to the origin of that tradition: hence, my vague reference to "the middle of the first millennium BCE." The earliest datable source that attests to the existence of the renouncer tradition is the Asokan inscriptions of the middle of the third century BCE. Around this time, if I may be permitted to generalize, two competing ascetic traditions appear to have crystallized: ascetics living settled lives in forest hermitages cut off from social intercourse, and renouncers living itinerant lives in the wilderness but in interaction with towns and villages from which they begged their food.

An ancient Brahmanical law book describes the normative lifestyle of ascetics:
An anchorite shall live in the forest, living on roots and fruits and given to austerities. He kindles the sacred fire according to the procedure for recluses and refrains from eating what is grown in a village. He may also avail himself of the flesh of animals killed by predators. He should not step on plowed land or enter a village. He shall wear matted hair and clothes of bark or skin and never eat anything that has been stored for more than a year. (Gautama Dharmasūtra, 3.26–35)

The anchorite's life is marked by his refusal to avail himself of any product mediated by human culture. His clothing and food come from the wild; he is not permitted to step on plowed land, the symbol of human culture and society. The anchorite has physically withdrawn from society, even though he continues to participate in some of the central religious activities of society, such as maintaining a ritual fire and performing rituals. At least some of the anchorites may have lived in family units: we hear often of wives and children living in forest hermitages.

The renouncer, on the other hand, lives in proximity to civilized society and in close interaction with it.

A mendicant shall live without any possessions, be chaste, and remain in one place during the rainy season. Let him enter a village only to obtain almsfood and go on his begging round late in the evening, without visiting the same house twice and without pronouncing blessings. He shall control his speech, sight, and actions and wear garments to cover his private parts, using, according to his means, a discarded piece of cloth after washing it. Outside the rainy season, he should not spend two nights in the same village. He shall be shaven-headed or wear a topknot refrain from injuring seeds, treat all creatures alike, whether they cause him harm or treat him with kindness; and not undertake ritual activities. (Gautama Dharmasūtra, 3.11–25)

The renouncer's withdrawal from society is not physical but ideological. He does not participate in the most central of ascetic religious institutions, family and sex, ritual life and ritual activities, a permanent residence, and wealth and economic activities. He is a religious beggar, depending on social charity for his most basic needs.

Of these two ascetic institutions, the one that became central to the development of Indian religions and cultures was the renouncer tradition. The hermit culture became obsolete at least by the beginning of the common era and lived on only in poetic imagination; some of the most beloved of Indian poetry and drama, including the two great epics, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, center around hermit life in the forest. Sakuntala, the famous Indian heroine immortalized by the Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa, was a girl living in a forest hermitage. But it had little historical influence on Indian religion.

The Origins

There is a longstanding and ongoing scholarly debate regarding the origin of the renouncer tradition. To simplify a somewhat intricate issue, some contend that the origins of Indian asceticism in general and of the renouncer tradition in particular go back to the indigenous non-Aryan population (Bronkhorst 1993, Pande 1978, Singh 1972). Others, on the contrary, see it as an organic and logical development of ideas found in the Vedic religious culture (Heesterman 1964).

It is time, I think, to move beyond this sterile debate and artificial dichotomy. They are based, on the one hand, on the false premise that the extant vedic texts provide us with an adequate picture of the religious and cultural life of that period spanning over half a millennium. These texts, on the contrary, provide only a tiny window into this period, and that too only throws light only on what their priestly authors thought it important to record. It is biased, on the other hand, on the untenable assumption that we can isolate Aryan and non-Aryan strands in the Indian culture a millennium or more removed from the original and putative Aryan migrations. It is obvious that the ancient Indian society comprised numerous racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups and that their beliefs and practices must have influenced the development of Indian religions. It is quite a different matter, however, to attempt to isolate these different strands at any given point in Indian history (Olivelle 1993, 1995).

It is a much more profitable exercise to study the social, economic, political, and geographical factors along the Ganges valley during the middle of the first millennium BC that may have contributed to the growth of ascetic institutions and ideologies (Olivelle 1993, Combrich 1988). This was a time of radical social and economic change, a period that saw the second urbanization in India — after the initial one over a millennium earlier in the Indus Valley — with large kingdoms, state formation, a surplus economy, and long-distance trade. Ambition, strategy, drive, and risk-taking all played a role in both a king's quest for power and a merchant's pursuit of wealth. A similar spirit of individual enterprise is evident in a person's decision to leave home and family and to become a wandering mendicant. The new social and economic realities of this period surely permitted and even fostered the rise of rival religious ideologies and modes of life.

The Formative Period of Indian Religions

The second half of the first millennium BC was the period that created many of the ideological and institutional elements that characterize later Indian religions. The renouncer tradition played a central role during this formative period of Indian religious history.
Renouncers often formed groups around prominent and charismatic ascetic leaders, groups that often developed into major religious organizations. Some of them, such as Buddhism and Jainism, survived as major religions; others, such as the Ājīvakas, existed for many centuries before disappearing. Renunciation was at the heart of these religions.

Even though the ideal of homeless wandering is often maintained as a theoretical fiction, many of these renouncer groups, such as the Buddhist and the Jain, organized themselves into monastic communities with at least a semi-permanent residence. These communities vied with each other to attract lay members, donors and benefactors, and for political patronage.

A significant feature of these celibate communities is that they were voluntary organizations, the first such religious organizations perhaps in the entire world, and continued their existence even today attracting new members. Another was the admission, at least in some traditions such as the Buddhist and the Jain, of women and the creation of female monastic communities. If voluntary celibate communities that rejected marriage were remarkable even for men, they must certainly have been revolutionary in the case of women.

The influence of renouncer practices and ideologies was not limited to what we have come to regard as non-Hindu or “heterodox” traditions: their influence can be seen within the Brahmanical tradition itself. Indeed, during this early period of Indian history the very division into “orthodox” and “heterodox” is anachronistic and presents a distorted historical picture. Scholars in the past have argued that some of the changes within the Brahmanical tradition such as the creation of the āśrama (orders of life) system, was instituted as a defense mechanism against the onslaught of renunciation. Evidence does not support such claims. The Brahmanical tradition was not a monolithic entity. The debates, controversies, and struggles between the new ideologies and lifestyles of renunciation and the older ritualistic religion took place as much within the Brahmanical tradition as between it and the new religions (Olivelle 1993). This struggle created new institutions and ideas within that tradition, the āśrama system being one of the more remarkable and enduring.

Some of the fundamental values and beliefs that we generally associate with Indian religions in general and Hinduism in particular were at least in part the creation of the renouncer tradition. These include the two pillars of Indian religions: suṣṭhā - the belief that life in this world is one of suffering and subject to repeated deaths and births (rebirth; mokṣa/surviva) - the goal of human existence, and, therefore, of the religious quest is the search for liberation from that life of suffering. All later Indian religious traditions and sects are fundamentally ideologies that map the processes of Suṣṭhā and Mokṣa and technologies that provide humans the tools for escaping suṣṭhā existence. Such technologies include different forms of yoga and meditation. An offshoot of these ideologies and technologies is the profound antinomianism evident in most later traditions. In the areas of ethics and values, moreover, renunciation was principally responsible for the ideals of non-injury (ahimsā) and vegetarianism.

Several of the renouncer movements that turned into major religions were founded by people who had renounced the world. Gautama Buddha and the Jina Mahāvīra in the case of Buddhism and Jainism. Within these religions the monastic communities are at the center of both theology and ecclesiastical structure.

Within the Brahmanical tradition, on the other hand, the situation was more complex. In the old Vedic religion, the Brahmin was the ritual specialist and religious leader, but these very functions required that he get married and father children, activities diametrically opposed to renunciation. We will examine diverse attempts to integrate the ideals of these two poles of the tradition at both the institutional and the theological levels. The tension between the two ideals of religious living, however, continued to exist throughout the history of the Brahmanical and Hindu traditions.

Values in Conflict

The debate on the conflicting value systems of renunciation and the societal-oriental Vedic religion is recorded in many early texts and evolved especially around the male obligation to marry, father offspring, and carry out ritual duties. These obligations were given theological expression in a novel doctrine, probably the result of that very debate on values. The “doctrine of debts” posited that a man is born with three debts - to gods, ancestors, and Vedic seers - debts from which one can be freed only by offering sacrifices, begetting offspring, and studying the Vedas. An ancient text waxes eloquent on the importance of a son, who is viewed as the continuation of the father and the guarantor of his immortality:

A debt he pays in him,
And immortality he gains.
The father who sees the face
Of his son born and alive.

Greater than the delights
That earth, fire, and water
Bring to living beings.
is a father's delight in his son.
(Almetaa Brahmana, 7.13)

And in what appears to be a dig at ascetic claims, the same text continues:

What is the use of dirt and dead skin?
What profit in heat and austerity?
Seek a son, O Brahmin,
He is the world free of blame.
The proponents of ascetic and renunciatory values, on the other hand, dismiss these claims for sons and rituals. Their view of immortality and liberation is centered not on outward activities but on inward self-cultivation, sacrifices, and dhāraṇas only guarantee the return to a new life of suffering within the wheel of saṃsāra. An Upaniṣad comments on the futility of sacrifices:

Surely, they are lost in unraftered,
these eighteen forms of the sacrifice,
the rites within which are called inferior.
The fools who hail that as the best,
return once more to old age and death.
(Mandūka Upaniṣad, 1.2)

The Upaniṣads also devalue the importance of marriage and progeny:

This immense, unborn self is none other than the one consisting of perception here among the vital functions. It is when they desire him as their world that wandering ascetics undertake the ascetic life of wandering. It was when they knew this that men of old did not desire offspring, reasoning: "Thus is this self, and it is our world. What then is the use of offspring for us?" (Urdhva-rāja Upaniṣad, 4.5.22)

This conflict in values and ideologies is often presented as a contrast between village and wilderness, the normative geographical spaces of society and renunciation. People inhabiting these spaces are destined to vastly different paths after death, the villagers returning back to the misery of earthly existence and ascetics proceeding to immortality:

Now, the people who know this and the people here in the wilderness who venerate thus: "Austerity is death"—they pass into the flame, from the flame into the day, from the day into the night, from the night into the month, from the month into the six months, when the sun moves north, from these months into the month of the waning moon, from the month of the waning moon into the six months, when the sun moves south, from these months into the year, from the year into the sun, from the sun into the moon, and from the moon into the light. Then a person who is not human—he leads them to brahma, this is the path leading to the gods.

The people here in villages, on the other hand, who venerate thus: "GIVING is offerings to gods and priests"—they pass into the smoke, from the smoke into the night, from the night into the waning moon, from the waning moon into the six months, when the sun moves south. These do not reach the year but from these months pass into the world of the fathers, and from the world of the fathers into space, and from space into the moon. This is king Soma, the food of the gods, and the gods eat it. They remain there as long as there is a residue, and then they return by the same path they went. (Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 5.10.1-2)

The theological debates concerning the two value systems took place as much within the Brahmanical circles as between the so-called orthodox Brahmanism and the heterodox sects. The intense discussion between Krśna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gītā on the issue of the relative value of renunciation and engagement in one's socially appointed duties is a classic example of such controversy and debate.

The Āśrama System

The system of four āśramas (orders of life) was an early attempt to institutionalize renunciation within Brahmanical social structures. Created probably around the fourth century BCE, the system in its original form proposed four alternate modes of religious living that young adults could pursue after they had completed their period of temporary studentship following vedic initiation. These were: continuing to be a student until death, getting married and setting up a household, withdrawing to the forest as a hermit, or becoming a renouncer (Olivelle 1993). This system, first recorded in the early Dharmaśāstras composed between the second and third centuries BCE, envisaged a free choice among the āśramas, which were viewed as permanent and lifelong vocations. Here is one of the oldest descriptions of the āśramas:

There are four orders of life: the householder's life, the life of a sage, and that of a forest hermit. If a man remain steadfast in any of these, he attains bliss. A common prerequisite for all is to live at the teacher's house following one's initiation, and all are required not to abandon vedic learning. After he has learnt the rites, he may undertake the order that he prefers.

Following the rules of a novice student, a student should serve his teacher until death, leaving his body in his teacher's house.

Next, the wandering ascetic. From that very state, remaining chaste, he goes forth. With regard to him they admonish: "He should live as a silent sage, without fire or house, without shelter or protection." Speaking only when he is engaged in private vedic recitation and obtaining food from a village to sustain himself, he should live without any concern for this world or the next. Discarded clothes are prescribed for him. Some say that he should go completely naked. Abandoning all truth and falsehood, pleasure and pain, the Vedas, this world and the next, he should seek the Self. When he gains insight, he attains bliss.

Next, the forest hermit. From that very state, remaining chaste, he goes forth. With regard to him they admonish: "He should live as a silent sage with a single fire, but without house, shelter, or protection." Let him speak only when he is engaged in private vedic recitation. Clothes made of materials from the wild are prescribed for him. (Āpastamba Dharmaśāstra, 2.21.1-22.1)

The term āśrama is somewhat new in the Sanskrit vocabulary and was probably coined to express a new reality. Contrary to the common perception, the term did not refer to ascetic habitats or modes of life, if by "ascetic" we understand values and institutions that oppose Brahmanical values centered around the householder. On the contrary, āśrama is a fundamentally Brahmanical
married, beget offspring, and offer sacrifices. In effect, the classical āśrama system transformed renunciation from a life's calling into an institution of old age, a form of retirement.

Both these formulations of the system contained aspects of artificiality. They answered to the requirements of theological and legal minds demanding order; they did not reflect the usually chaotic reality of social or religious institutions. In the original system the choice of āśrama was limited to a single moment of a young adult's life; in reality, as we know from numerous contemporary sources, married people did leave their families and become renouncers. The classical system limited renunciation to old age; in reality people of all ages became renouncers. In time riders were attached to the classical system permitting individuals with extraordinary zeal and detachment to become renouncers early in life.

Attempts to blunt the opposition between domesticity and celibate asceticism were at best only partially successful. Proponents of asceticism objected especially to the fact that the grand compromise of the āśrama system relegated asceticism to old age, equating it thereby with retirement. The urgency of personal salvation could not brook such postponement. An example comes from a life of the Buddha written in the first century CE by Āśvaghosa, a Brahmin who converted to Buddhism and became a Buddhist monk. Although the setting is formally Buddhist, the dialogue between the future Buddha and his father, Suddhodana, captures the controversy both within and outside the Brahmanical mainstream regarding the proper age for becoming an ascetic. When the future Buddha informs his father of his intention to leave the world, Suddhodana tells him:

Give up this plan, dear child; the time is not right for you to devote yourself to religion (āśrama). For in the first period of life, when the mind is unstable, the practice of religion, they say, can cause great harm. His senses easily excited by sensual pleasures, a young man is incapable of remaining steadfast when confronted with the hardships of ascetic vows. So his mind recoils from the wilderness, especially because he is unaccustomed to solitude.

The future Buddha replies:

I will not enter the renunciates grove, O king, if you will be the surety for me in four things. My life shall not be subject to death. Sickness shall not rob me of my health. Old age shall not strike down my youth. And misfortune shall never plunder my wealth.

Given that separation is certain in this world, is it not better to separate oneself voluntarily for the sake of religion? Or should I wait for death to separate me bodily even before I have reached my goal and attained satisfaction. (Āśvaghosa, Buddhakarita, tr. E.H. Johnston, 5.30–8 selections)

The rejection of the compromise proposed in the classical āśrama system is presented vividly also in a conversation recorded in the Mahābhārata (12.169:
selections) between a father, the guardian of the old order, and his son, representing the troubled and anguished spirit of the new religious world. This story, appearing as it does in Jain (Uttarādhyayana, 1.4) and Buddhist (Mātaka, 509), and later Brahmanical (Markandeya Purāṇa, ch. 10) texts as well, probably belonged to the generic ascetic folklore before it was incorporated into the Mahābhārata. This text, just like the story of the Buddha, points to the ascetic rejection of societal attempts to convert asceticism into an institution of old age. To the son’s question regarding how a person should lead a virtuous life, the father replies:

First, learn the Vedas, son, by living as a Vedic student. Then you should desire to purify your forefathers, establish the sacred fires, and offer sacrifices. Thereafter, you may enter the forest and seek to become an ascetic.

The son retorts:

When the world is thus afflicted and surrounded on all sides, when spears rain down, why do you pretend to speak like a wise man? The world is afflicted by death. It is surrounded by old age. These days and nights rain down. Why can’t you understand?

When I know that death never rests, how can I wait, when I am caught in a net. This very day do what is good. Let not this moment pass you by, for surely death may strike you even before your duties are done.

Tomorrow’s task today perform, evening’s work finish before noon, for death does not wait to ask whether your duties are done.

For who knows when death’s legions may seize today. Practice good from your youth, for uncertain is life’s erratic path.

The delight one finds in living in a village is truly the house of death, while the wilderness is the dwelling place of the gods — so the Veda teach.

The delight one finds in living in a village is the rope that binds. The virtuous cut it and depart, while evil-doers are unable to cut it.

In oneself alone and by the self I am born, on the self I stand, and, though childless, in the self alone I shall come into being. I will not be saved by a child of mine.

The text concludes:

Of what use is wealth to you, O Brahmin, you who must soon die. Of what use are even wife and relatives. Seek the self that has entered the cave. Where have your father and grandfather gone? (Translation from Winternitz 1923)

Textual Traditions

Renouncer groups both within and outside the Brahmanical tradition developed their own literature, especially texts that dealt with their modes of life and rules of conduct. The Buddhist and Jain textual traditions are well known. Within Brahmanism itself we have evidence of renouncer texts. The fourth century CE grammarian Pāṇini (4.3.10-11), for example, mentions the Bhūṣṇaṇ’s as composed by Pāṇiśa and Karman. The Bhādāpana Dharmaśāstra (2.11.14; 3.3.15) mentions a treatise on forest hermits.

None of these early texts has survived. One of the reasons may have been that discussions of ascetic life became incorporated in the Dharmaśāstras within the context of the Āśrama system. Some of their sections dealing with renouncers and forest hermits may, indeed, be fragments from early handbooks for these ascetics. The epic Mahābhārata, likewise, contains similar fragments of ascetic literature (Winternitz 1923). Sections of some of the early Upaniṣads may reflect renouncer influence or literature.

Within the Brahmanical tradition, nevertheless, the only surviving literature dealing with renunciation is embedded within the Dharmaśāstras. It was not until the early middle ages that independent compositions dealing with the life of renouncers were composed. These fall into the category called Nibandha, that is, scholarly texts dealing with one or several elements of Dharma with copious quotations from earlier Dharmaśāstric treatises. One of the earliest surviving texts of this class is the Vatilharmasastroti by Yadvana Prākṣeśa (twelfth century CE: Olivelle 1995a). Numerous other texts dealing with the rites for becoming a renouncer, his daily life and activities, rules governing his life, and his funeral were composed during medieval times. Most of these have not been edited or printed and only exist in manuscript (Olivelle 1976-7, 1987).

Saṃnyāsa: Abandoning Fire and Ritual

I have already alluded to an important aspect of renunciation that cuts across sectarian divides: the refusal to use fire and the rejection of ritual activities centered on the sacred fire. This led to another central feature of renunciation: mendicancy. Renouncers begged cooked food and not dry rations; without a lire they were not able to cook. At least in some traditions, likewise, renouncers did not follow the normal social custom of cremating their dead but instead buried them. One of the reasons given for this practice is again their refusal to use fire.

Although present also in Buddhist and Jain traditions, the abandoning of the fire became a central feature especially in the Brahmanical understanding of renunciation. The sacred fire and the rituals connected with it are a central feature in the vedic and Brahmanical religion. The very first word of the very first hymn of the very first text of the Vedas, namely the Rigveda, is “Agni.” Fire—a celebration of the fire god as the priest who conveys oblations to the gods, who is the mouth of the gods in which all oblations are deposited. Abandoning this paramount symbol of vedic religion, therefore, received special attention in this tradition.

Sometime toward the end of the first millennium BCE, a new word was coined to express this significant element of Brahmanical renunciation. The word was saṃnyāsa, which in later times became the most common term in the
Brahmanical/Hindu vocabulary for the institution of renunciation. In the early years, however, the term had a more restricted meaning, referring primarily to the abandonment of the fire and ritual during the rite of renunciation. This ritual is often referred to simply as **sanyāsa**.

A medieval definition of renunciation captures the central meaning of this term: "Sanyāsa is the abandonment of daily, occasional, and optional rites found in the Veda and in the texts of tradition, rites known though injunctions, an abandonment carried out by reciting the Pārśva formula" (Olivelle 1975).

The Pārśva formula is the central act in the rite by which a person becomes a renouncer. It consists of saying three times the words "I have renounced" (sanyāsim manāi), first softly, second in a moderate voice, and the third time aloud. The ceremonies leading up to this climax begin the day before with a series of offerings to ancestors and the shaving of the head and beard of the candidate followed by a bath. On the day of renunciation, the candidate offers a final sacrifice in his sacred fire and extinguishes the fire. The abandonment of the fire is interpreted within the tradition as an internalization. The fire is deposited in the renouncer, who carries it within himself in the form of his breaths. There are five types of sacred fires in the vedic ritual, and there are five types of breaths within the human body. Thus, the two sets dovetailed nicely: after his renunciation the five breaths are his five fires, and whenever a renouncer eats he offers an internal sacrifice in the fires of his breaths.

The final act of the renunciatory ritual is the taking possession of the emblems of his new state: ochre robe, water pot, begging bowl, pot hanger, and staff. The new renouncer places himself under the tutelage of an experienced teacher.

The medieval theological tradition of Advaita Vedānta made renunciation central in its understanding of the path to liberation. Advaita was a monistic system of philosophy that looked upon the world of multiplicity as in some way illusory. Taking this illusion that constitutes one's own individual existence and the external world as reality is ignorance, the cause of our suffering and of our bondage to repeated births and deaths. The first step in the direction of true knowledge is to give up all activities (karma) that are the driving force of the universe, and the most potent of such acts are the ritual acts, which are also called *karma*. Thus, the giving up of the ritual and the ritual paraphernalia, especially the ritual fire, was considered in Advaita Vedānta as a prerequisite for spiritual progress.

### Renunciation as Penance

The Dharmaśāstra of Manu (first to third centuries CE) contains a significant verse which was probably a proverb current during that period: "What needs cleansing is cleansed by using earth and water; a river is cleansed by its current, a woman with a defiled mind by her menstrual flow, and a Brahmin by means of renunciation" (5.108). Here we find renunciation compared to other methods of purification; renouncing is an act of purification from sin and defilement.

Now, the normal method for getting rid of sin in the Hindu tradition is by performing an appropriate penance, which is called *pīṣṭāवर्धन* or *ṣāṇḍha*. The most common form of penance is fasting. Sometimes penitential acts are carried out as a vow, which is called *vātta*. Beginning about the fifth century CE and with increasing frequency, the literature on Dharma subsumes renunciation under these two categories of religious acts. The early texts of Dharma generally discuss renunciation and ascetic modes of life under the *śrama* system. Later texts, for example the Dharmaśāstra of Yajñavalkya and medieval legal digests (*nārāyanam*), on the other hand, place them within the section dealing with penances (*prāṇānāṇa-nā ṛṣiṇa*). According to this understanding, the difference between normal penitential acts and renunciation is that the former are undertaken for a limited, often brief period of time, whereas the latter is undertaken for life.

This connection between penance and renunciation influenced both the religious practices of ordinary people and the behavior of renouncers, a process that I have referred to as the domestication of renunciation (Olivelle 1995a). This process is most evident in the handbook on renunciation written by Yādava Prakṛti. He integrates ascetic life into the normal ritual life of Brahmanism. In dealing with the daily practices of a renouncer, for example, he concludes that any practice not mentioned in connection with ascetics should be gathered from corresponding practices of householders and vedic students. Penances for renouncers, likewise, are the same as those for householders, except that they are sometimes more intense. So, for example, the common lunar fast (*vāṃśikā*), which consists in reducing and increasing by one mouthful the intake of food according to the waning and the waxing of the moon, has a more severe ascetic counterpart called *vāṃśikā* which not only ascetics but also ordinary people can perform. Reading Yādava's work closely, one gets the distinct impression that the Brahmānic renouncer is a very excited type of householder rather than a figure who contradicts the value system represented by domestic life.

### Renunciation in Later Religions

The leadership provided by renouncers in founding and propagating sects, already evident in the case of Buddhism and Jainism, continued well into the middle ages and modern times. The French social anthropologist, Louis Dumont, has drawn attention to the close connection between sects and renunciation (Dumont 1960). Many of the founders of both Śaiva and Śaiva sects were renouncers, and the organization of sects often accorded renouncers a central position.

Most of the medieval Indian sects, however, had devotional theologies and liturgies that asserted the centrality of love and devotion to its particular god.
the sole means of attaining liberation. These theological and religious traditions are collectively referred to as "bhakti." Most bhakti sects accepted the institution of renunciation, often redefining its meaning as withdrawal from worldly concerns so as to focus solely on devotion to God. Nevertheless, the internal logic of bhakti contradicted the ethic inherent in the institution of renunciation. Renouncers were religious virtuosos, and in theologies where mystical quests and ascetic discipline were central, the claim could be made that only renouncers were able to achieve the highest goal of religion, namely liberation. Love, on the other hand, is egalitarian; anyone can love. Indeed, bhakti literature is filled with examples of poor and ignorant men and women who gain divine favor by the intensity of their love.

Bhakti contained the potential for radicalism both in religion and in society, even though not all bhakti tradition espoused radical social or religious change. Most were, in fact, rather conservative, acknowledging caste and gender differences within religion. There were some, however, that did draw radical conclusions from the premise that all humans are alike in the eyes of God, and the only thing God requires from humans is complete and unconditional love and surrender. It was not necessary to go to Benares to see God; he is present in one's heart. For a person who loves God, his or her front yard is heaven. There is no need to leave home and family and to become a world renouncer in order to love God; a poor farmer can love God more intensely while pursuing his lowly tasks than an arrogant renouncer surrounded by a throng of disciples.

The seeds of this challenge were already sown in the Bhagavad Gītā. Standing in his chariot with Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, in the middle of the two armies ready for battle in the great Bhārata war, Arjuna is struck with remorse at the imminent destruction of kin and kin. There they stood, fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, grandfathers and grandsons, teachers and pupils, ready to kill each other for the petty comforts of royal power. In disgust and dejection, Arjuna throws down his bow and says, "I will not fight!" Kṛṣṇa, god and upholder of social order, uses every argument possible to convince Arjuna that it is his duty as a warrior to fight, to kill and to be killed. The author of the Gītā subtly but effectively transforms Arjuna's refusal to fight into the broader theological dispute over engagement in and withdrawal from activity, living in society and renouncing it. What is better to act or not to act?

Kṛṣṇa's response amounts to a redefinition of renunciation, which is called saṃnyāsa in the Gītā. Renunciation, Kṛṣṇa points out, is not simply the running away from society, the refusal to act—whether we like it or not, our very nature forces us to act. "True" renunciation is not the mere withdrawal from action, which is impossible in any case, but the abandonment of any desire for the fruits of one's actions. This true renunciation is an inner attitude and habit, not an external institution with specific rules and emblems. Kṛṣṇa calls it "continuous or perpetual renunciation." Unlike institutional renunciation, which is carried out on the day that one performs the ritual of renunciation, here one has to continuously light inner longings and give up desire for fruits every time one engages in any activity. Finally, this inner and true renunciation is not a simple negativity, a giving up of desire; desire is given up so that one can offer to God one's actions as an offering, as a token of one's love.

This new understanding of renunciation pervades later bhakti discourse. Most often, it only supplements the more traditional understanding of renunciation. Debates raging between competing traditions in medieval India about renouncers and renunciation—from lofty theological arguments about the nature and the function of renunciation in the path to liberation to what appears to the outside observer as petty squabbles about the dress, food, and emblems of a renouncer, even whether they should carry a simple bamboo staff or three bamboo tied together (Olivelle 1986–7).

In some of the more radical sects and traditions, however, we find the explicit rejection of renunciation. The Sikh religion that emerged in north India in the sixteenth century rejecting both Muslim and Hindu identities—"There is neither Hindu nor Muslim"—does not have a place for renouncers within its institutional structure. The fifteenth-century bhakti saint Kabir is at his sarcastic best when he rails against the holier-than-thou ascetics:

Go naked if you want, put on animal skins: what does it matter till you see the inward Ram? If the union yogis seek come from roaming about in the bush, every deer in the forest would be saved. If shaving your head spelled spiritual success, heaven would be filled with sheep. And brother, if holding back your seed earned you a place in heaven, channels would be the first to arrive. (Hawley and Jaegermeyer 1988)

Down the centuries the Hindu traditions have been caught in an internal and unresolved conflict not just between two institutions—married household life and celibate renunciation—but also between the two value systems represented by these two institutions. We have seen many and repeated attempts to bring these two poles of the tradition together, always with limited success. This long debate, with echoes in the ancient Upaniṣads, epics, Dharmaśāstras, and medieval theological tracts, continues in India today, as exemplified in this 1978 speech by the then Vice-President of India, whose view of household as "true renouncer" goes back to the Bhagavad Gītā:

Who is better—the householder or the sannyasi? Of course, the householder, according to Vice-President B. B. Jatti. While the householder willingly renounces all that he earns to his wife and children for their love and affection, the sannyasi depends on others for his milk and fruits. Parasites, who are a mere burden on society, are sinners. If man has to progress, everybody must work. (Indian Express, May 3, 1978)

Bibliography


