ASCETICISM

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New York  Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1995
Deconstruction of the Body in Indian Asceticism

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Asceticism, modern scholarship has often argued, is a cornerstone of Indian religions. It was fashionable not too long ago to contrast Indian religions, with their life-and-world-negating tendencies, to the life-affirming religions of the West.1 Louis Dumont’s (1960) seminal study, “World Renunciation in Indian Religions,” pointed out the inadequacy of that generalization by showing what Heesterman (1985) has called “the inner conflict of the tradition,” that is, the conflict between world-renouncing and world-affirming ideologies within the history of Indian religious traditions. Dumont’s own emphasis on world renunciation as the dominant and creative force within Indian religious history has been recently subjected to review and correction (Madan 1987). Indeed, Dumont’s structural dichotomy between the renouncer and the man in the world is tenable only at the level of ideal types: the lived reality of both the ascetics and people living in society was much more complex and much less tidy.

The more significant point of Dumont’s analysis, in my view, is the dialectical and creative relationship and tension in which the ascetic and the societal dimensions of Indian religions existed and developed both ideologically and in their institutions and practices. This relationship is the point of departure for this paper, which examines the ascetic creation of the human body. But, like most aspects of Indian ascetic ideology and practice, the ascetic creation of the body can be understood adequately only within its structural relationship to the human body as social creation. Thus, at least for heuristic purposes, I think it is useful to consider the ascetic creation as a deconstruction2 of the socially created body. This approach is justified also by the native theological understanding of renunciatory asceticism at least with the Brähmanical tradition, which views asceticism as an antithetical category defined more by its negation of social structures than by any internal structure or property of its own (Olivelle 1973).

Given recent scholarship in widely different disciplines, it is unnecessary to belabor the major assumption of this paper: the human body as culturally created and perceived stands as the primary symbol of the social body, the body politic. Bodily appearance, movements, and functions—from dress, hair, food, and toilet to excrement, sexual fluids, and menstrual discharge—are culturally and socially determined meanings (Mauss 1973; Turner 1984). The ascetic deconstruction of the body has to be located, therefore, within the socially constructed correspondence between the two.

Douglas:

The social body is a social construction. It is known, sustained and constructed through understandings between and of the other. It is through the construction of expression in manifold ways that theories about who we are should go through the body, because it is in the body in which it is seen in some form.

One of the arguments that I’m making is that the body also carries with it social roles and values. I will focus on (1) the physical body.

If, with Mary Douglas, we take the idea that, at least as Douglas says, the body is the inside of things and the things flow out and become part of the inside. The problem for me is that traditional religions of India, particularly Brähmanical traditions, have a major element in them that is convincingly Indian, with keeping the body clean and maintaining social purity increasing the value of the body. As through the body, the loss of group identity and the minority vis-à-vis majority groups anxiety about one’s mutilation, degrees pervades the ideology and practice of this behavior.

In Brähmanical tradition...
between the two bodies—the physical and the social—well expressed by Mary Douglas:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. As a result of this interaction the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression. The forms it adopts in movement and repose express social pressures in manifold ways. The care that is given to it, in grooming, feeding and therapy, the theories about what it needs in the way of sleep and exercise, about the stages it should go through, the pains it can stand, its span of life, all the cultural categories in which it is perceived, must correlate closely with the categories in which society is seen in so far as these also draw upon the same culturally processed idea of the body.

One of the arguments of this paper will be that the ascetic deconstruction of the body also carries implicit meanings with regard to society and socially sanctioned roles and values.

I will focus here on four major themes in the ascetic deconstruction of the body: (1) the physical body; (2) sexuality; (3) food; and (4) hair.

Body without Boundaries

If, with Mary Douglas (1984), we define dirt as matter out of place, then it seems that, at least as far as the social perception of the human body is concerned, dirt gathers predominantly on its margins and in a special way at the openings that let the inside of the body meet the outside both by letting bodily excreta and fluids flow out and by permitting outside elements—especially food and water—to come inside. The protection of these boundaries has been a major preoccupation of most traditional religions, and the Indian are no exception. Especially within the Brāhmanical tradition, maintaining the purity of the body was and continues to be a major element of ritual and morality. Mary Douglas (1982) again has argued, convincingly I believe, that anxiety about bodily margins and the preoccupation with keeping them clean express anxieties about social integrity and concern for maintaining social order. This anxiety and the resultant preoccupation with bodily purity increase with the increase in the perceived threat to the integrity of the social body. As throughout their history the Israelites were a minority threatened with the loss of group identity, so each Hindu caste—especially the Brahmans—was a minority vis-à-vis the larger society. Both the Jews and the Brahmans show a similar anxiety about the body and bodily fluids. The Brahmin anxiety has to varying degrees pervaded other castes of Indian society. It is, nevertheless, the Brahmin ideology and practice that is the counterpoint for much of ascetic rhetoric and behavior.

In Brāhmanical ideology, then, the body is by definition a pure structure con-
stantly threatened at its boundaries with impurity, both through the discharge of bodily fluids and excrement and from contact with impure substances and individuals. There are thus minute prescriptions regarding the maintenance of bodily purity: when and how to bathe; how to purify after eating, defecating, and urinating, sexual intercourse and menstruation, touching anything or anybody impure; what to eat; from whom to accept food; with whom one can have sexual, social, or physical contact; and so on.

The ascetic deconstruction begins with the body itself. Far from being something intrinsically pure that is under the constant threat of impurity, ascetic discourse presents the body as impure in its very essence, the source indeed of all pollution. Here, for example, is a tongue-in-cheek parody of the Brähmanical effort at maintaining purity by constant bathing:

Made with its mother’s and father’s filth, this body dies soon after it is born. It is a filthy house of joy and grief. When it is touched a bath is ordained.

By its very nature, foul secretions continuously ooze out from its nine openings. It smells foul and it contains awful filth. When it is touched a bath is ordained.

Through its mother the body is impure at birth; in birth-impurity it is born. It is impure also through death. When it is touched a bath is ordained. 

Society itself views the sexual act as impure and requires the couple to bathe after it to restore purity to their bodies. The ascetic deconstruction shows the futility of this, since the body itself is created from that impure act. The body is thus intrinsically and at its very source impure, molded out of its parents’ filthy sexual fluids. The birth of a child in Brähmanical practice, likewise, results in impurity and requires a bath. So does death. But the body cannot be purified from those events, argues the ascetic, because they are not events external to the body, but constitute its very essence. The ascetic author concludes that after touching the body one must surely bathe. But of course that is impossible, because one is constantly in touch with one’s body. That is the dilemma of an embodied being. The deconstruction thus begins with familiar concepts, but subverts their meanings and demonstrates their inadequacy.

Lord, this body is produced just by sexual intercourse and is devoid of consciousness; it is a veritable hell. Born through the urinary canal, it is built with bones, plastered with flesh, and covered with skin. It is filled with feces, urine, wind, bile, phlegm, marrow, fat, serum, and many other kinds of filth. In such a body do I live.

This prayer of an ascetic points out several significant aspects of the ascetic deconstruction. The body is impure in its very creation, produced, as it is, by sexual intercourse and born through the urinary canal. Note the constant association of the body with excrement and bodily discharges. The body is also dissociated from consciousness, the familiar dichotomy between body and spirit. Detached from the spirit, the body—and, I believe, the society of which it is the symbol—is devalued as worthless. Indeed, we find this separation of consciousness from the body in several Indian theologies with deep ascetic roots, such as Sāmkhya, Yoga, Jainism, and Advaita Vedānta. The body is thus laid bare, the filth beneath its leather, the unclean exposed to view. The body is thus devalued as worthless and removed from the circle of the sacred.
and Advaita Vedānta. Even in Buddhism, which regards consciousness as one of the five elements that constitute an individual in samsāric existence (cycle of matter, thoughts, and events), that consciousness, together with the other bodily properties, is carefully separated from the ultimate dimension of nirvāṇa, however that may be defined.

Further, in the above passage the body is compared implicitly to a house, an image we encounter frequently and more explicitly in ascetic literature. The most significant aspect of this analogy is the contents of this house: feces, urine, phlegm, fat, and the like—the very substances that Brahmāṇa practice regards as causing bodily impurity. If the body itself consists of these substances, how can it be made pure? What can purify the very source of impurity? These impurities do not exist at the boundaries of the body but at its very heart. What purpose is there in protecting the boundaries when the danger is present within?

A medieval work compares the body explicitly to a house full of filth. The purpose of this comparison is to instill a sense of loathing towards the body and a desire to be rid of it.

Let him abandon this impermanent dwelling place of the elements. It has beams of bones tied with tendons. It is plastered with flesh and blood and thatched with skin. It is foul-smelling, filled with feces and urine, and infested with age and grief. Covered with dust and harassed by pain, it is the abode of disease.

If a man finds joy in the body—a heap of flesh, blood, pus, feces, urine, tendons, marrow, and bones—that fool will find joy even in hell.⁷

Those who take delight in this collection of skin, flesh, blood, tendons, marrow, fat, and bones, stinking with feces and urine—what difference is there between them and worms?⁸

These passages invite the listener to look upon the body not as a whole—an illusory perspective that presents the body as beautiful and pure—but as it truly is when it is dissolved into its constituent parts. When they are found separately, society considers them to be impure. People are polluted when they touch human bones, flesh, blood, pus, and excrement. How, then, can the body be pure or beautiful when it contains and consists of these very substances? The body is thus likened to a rubbish heap or to a putrefying corpse inhabited by worms. People who find delight in their own bodies and those of others are thus likened to worms; both revel in putrid matter and excrement.

The very boundary of the body that people take such great care in keeping pure consists of skin. Now dead skin is an extremely polluting substance; tanners and leather workers in India belong to a very low caste, and their very touch pollutes a person of an upper caste. But, the ascetic argues, our body is covered with precisely that skin, which should make us even more impure than an untouchable tanner!

The parallel between body and house is interesting as much for its deconstruction of the body and the house, both nearly universal symbols of society, as for its resonance with the ascetic practice of leaving home and family and leading a homeless and wandering life. The conception of the house as a body and the body as a
house is not confined to the Hindu ascetic traditions. The Buddhist text Visuddhi-magga, for example, states:

Just as when a space is enclosed by timbers, creepers, grass and clay, it is called a “house,” so when a space is enclosed by bones, sinews, flesh and skin, it comes to be called “body.”

This correlation between the images of house and body is not the invention, however, of the ascetic traditions. Indian culture in general has conceived of the building of a temple or a house not as a construction project but as a conception leading to a birth (Beck 1976). Daniels (1984) has described how in modern South India a house is conceived as a body, with the mouth and face in the front, the belly (kitchen) at the center, and the excretory openings at the back. Indians attend meticulously to maintaining the purity of both their bodies and their houses. This well-established correlation permits the ascetic to deconstruct both: the body is like a house full of filth and the house itself contains filthy bodies and hides filthy activities, especially sex. The same Sanskrit word, grha, means both home and house. It conveys the same sense of warmth and security to Indian listeners as it does to the western, a sense admirably captured by Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space:

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imaging its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.  

Bachelard 1964:17

Ascetic discourse attempts to reverse this feeling by focusing on the possibility that this very womb of comfort, security, and stability may become the source of fear, danger, and death, as when a house is on fire or harbors a snake.

I will examine in the third section of this paper a Buddhist myth of origins that has counterparts also in the Hindu mythological complex (Olivelle 1991), a myth that depicts the gradual deterioration of the world set in motion by, of all things, eating food. Food causes, among other things, the differentiation of sexes. When men and women emerged as sexually distinct individuals, some began to engage in sexual intercourse. Seeing this, others were scandalized and threw dirt at those depraved beings. The latter then built houses to hide their sexual activities! Sexually differentiated bodies, the lust arising out of that differentiation, the sexual acts resulting from lust, and houses where those acts take place are neatly brought together here. From the ascetic perspective, therefore, all of them have negative connotations.

A house carried a deeply negative value in the Indian ascetic tradition of wandering mendicants. Departure from home to the homeless state was the defining element of this form of asceticism within Brāhmaṇical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. “He leaves home for the homeless state” (agāraṃ añāgāriyaṃ pabbajati) is a stock phrase in the Pali canon. The words pravrajati (he goes forth or he departs) and pravrajyā (going forth) are used in all these traditions as technical terms for the rite for becoming an ascetic. These terms refer to the ascetic’s initial departure.
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departure from home to the homeless state. The absence of a permanent residence has remained—at least in theory, ritual, and legal fiction, but occasionally also in practice—a defining element of mendicant asceticism throughout its history, even after many of these ascetic traditions had adopted monastic forms of life. So when the ascetic traditions compare a body to a house, it is a telling comparison. The stability and security of a house is just as illusory as that of a body. A house represents all that is evil in social living: lust, sex, attachment, and prolongation of sansāric life. An ascetic has rejected it and freed himself from home. But he carries a second home with him, and that is his own body. It is this more intimate "house" toward which the rhetoric of deconstruction is directed so as to elicit in the ascetic a sense of repugnance toward the body, and implicitly towards society of which it is a symbol.

We saw how ascetic literature dwells on bodily components to illustrate the radical impurity of the body. Another strategy is to contemplate the body as bereft of the conscious life-giving spirit. Brāhmaṇical ascetics are frequently encouraged to contemplate their body as a corpse.11 Buddhist meditative practice also adopts the technique of deconstructing the body by mentally dissecting it and by seeing it as a lifeless corpse. The Visuddhimagga (chapter 6) advises Buddhist monks to meditate on a corpse in various stages of dismemberment and putrefaction: swollen, discolored, festering, cut up, mangled, dismembered, bloody, filled with worms, and finally a skeleton. In the meditative technique of satipatthāna (mindfulness), one contemplates, among other things, one’s own body. “This contemplation opens,” Nyanaponika Thera (1962:65) comments,

as it were with a scalpel, the skin of this body of ours, and exposes to view what is hidden under it. This mental dissection dissolves the vaguely held notion of the oneness of the body, by pointing to its various parts; it removes the delusion of the body’s beauty, by revealing its impurity. When visualizing the body as a walking skeleton loosely covered by flesh and skin, or seeing it as a conglomeration of its various strangely-shaped parts, one will feel little inclination to identify oneself with one’s so-called “own” body, or to desire that of another being.

The Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta of the Pāli canon, the basic text on which the Theravāda meditative practice is based, echoes the Brāhmaṇical texts in explaining the reality of the human body.

And again, monks, a monk reflects upon this very body, from the soles of his feet up and from the crown of his head down, enclosed by the skin and full of impurities, thinking thus: “There are in this body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, gorge, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, solid fat, liquid fat, saliva, mucus, synovic fluid, urine.”12

The body, therefore, is not a single bounded reality, whose boundaries are threatened with contamination and need to be carefully protected. In reality, it is simply an aggregate of substances that are in themselves impure and loathsome. These substances are contained in a bag of skin with nine openings out of which they
continuously ooze out. And we call it our body! Only one kind of attitude and feeling is appropriate with regard to such a thing: a feeling of disgust accompanied by a desire to be rid of it.

Sexuality and Procreation

Two activities constitute the very heart of Vedic theology and religion: sacrifice and procreation (Olivelle 1993:35–55). Only a married man accompanied by his lawful wife could legitimately undertake either of these activities. Marriage and family constituted, therefore, the foundation as much of Vedic religion as of Vedic society. Creation itself is often depicted as an act of procreation by the creator god Prajāpati, and the working of the sacrifice is likened to the procreative process. Sacrifice, creation and procreation are all intertwined in the images and thought of Vedic theology.

Immortality itself, Vedic texts argue, is dependent on procreation. A Rgvedic verse (5.4.10) contains this prayer: “Through offspring, O Agni, may we attain immortality.” The Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (1.5.5.6) puts it in a nutshell: “In your offspring you are born again; that, O mortal, is your immortality.” The importance of marriage and the obligation to father a son are central and recurrent themes of Brāhmaṇical theology.

A full half of one’s self is one’s wife. As long as one does not obtain a wife, therefore, for so long one is not reborn and remains incomplete. As soon as he obtains a wife, however, he is reborn and becomes complete. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, 5.2.1.10

A man is reborn in the wife when he deposits his semen in her and she conceives a son. One of the most eloquent statements on the importance of offspring in general and of sons in particular is found in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (7.13):

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.

By means of sons have fathers ever crossed over the mighty darkness;
For one is born from oneself a ferry laden with food.

What is the use of dirt and deer skin? What profit in beard and austerity?
Seek a son, O Brahmin;
He is the world free of blame.

Food is life. 
Gold is for wealth.
The wife is for the family.
But a son is for the gods.
The husband gives her, she becomes his wife.
Becoming his wife, she is his. 
A wife is for her husband, because he is for her.
He is produced, she for him, for the gods.
The gods brought her the wife. 
The gods gave her life.
“She is for him.”

“A sonless man is a dog among all the other men.”
Therefore even he, the townsman, is sonless.
This is the life of man. 
Beasts and birds, they do not.

The son, then, continues to live. This book puts it this way:

Through a son, a man lives through offspring. He enjoys himself by the fruits of his life, the fear of death is put off both before and after his own death. His son brings his offspring."

In sharp contrast to most of Indian asceticism, the construction of self within the context of the Vedic world is a subject of primary concern.

Within the structure which emerges, the son is not only an heir to his father. The father produces the son, instead as two.
Food is life, clothes protect.
Gold is for beauty, cattle for marriage.
The wife is a friend, a daughter brings grief.
But a son is a light in the highest heaven.

The husband enters the wife;
becoming an embryo he enters the mother.
Becoming in her a new man again,
his is born in the tenth month.

A wife is called wife, 
because in her he is born again.
He is productive, she's productive,
for the seed is placed in her.

The gods and the seers
brought to her great luster.
The gods said to men:
"She is your mother again."

"A sonless man has no world";
all the beasts know this.
Therefore a son mounts
even his mother and sister.

This is the broad and easy path
along which travel men with sons, free from sorrow;
Beasts and birds see it:
so they copulate even with their mothers.

The son, therefore, is the father reborn; in him and his descendants the father continues to live, and through them he attains immortality. A classical Indian law book puts it this way:

Through a son one wins the worlds, through a grandson one attains eternal life, and through one's son's grandson one ascends the very summit of heaven. A man saves himself by begetting a virtuous son. A man who obtains a virtuous son saves from the fear of sin seven generations—that is, six others with himself as the seventh—both before him and after him. . . . Therefore, he should assiduously beget offspring.}

In sharp contrast to this construction of human sexuality stands the ideal of celibacy in Indian asceticism. I want to focus here on just two aspects of the ascetic deconstruction of sexuality: the son and the female body. The first is the central element of the Vedic theology of sexuality. The second is the object of male desire, and the subject of poetic imagination.

Within the ideology of rebirth, karmic retribution, and mokṣa (final liberation) which emerged as the Vedic period came to a close (around the fifth century BCE), the son is not viewed either as assuring bliss after death or securing immortality for the father. The son and the sexual lust inherent in fathering offspring are regarded instead as two of the main sources of desire and attachment that keep people bound
to the rounds of birth and death. An early Upaniṣadic passage states that the wise give up all desires, including the desire for a son, and live a life of celibacy as wandering mendicants.\textsuperscript{17} Sons and sacrifices may secure heavenly worlds. But these are temporary joys that will come to an end. The world that the ascetic seeks is his own ātman (self), and no person other than himself can secure it for him.

The ascetic deconstruction of the son also depicts him as a source of constant pain and headaches for the father rather than a source of solace here and hereafter. An early Buddhist text presents Māra, the god of death and evil, as upholding the traditional values. “A puttīma [father; lit. “a man with sons”] rejoices in his sons,” says Māra. To which the Buddha replies: “A father grieves on account of his sons.”\textsuperscript{18} The Buddha does not spell out how a son brings grief to his father. One sure way, however, is the attachment a father feels towards his son, an attachment that will prolong his saṃsāric life of suffering. Ascetic literature identifies this attachment as one of the primary links to the world that an ascetic must sever in order to seek personal liberation.

Verses cited in several medieval works from the Brāhmaṇical tradition give other and more immediate reasons for avoiding marriage and sons.

A son, when he is not conceived, long torments the parents. When conceived, he causes pain by miscarriage or in delivery. When he is born one has to contend with the influence of evil planets, illnesses, and the like. When he is young he takes to mischief. Even after he has undergone Vedic initiation, he may not learn, and should he become learned he may not get married. As a young man he may commit adultery and the like. When he has a family he may become penniless. If he is rich then he may die. There is no end to the suffering caused by a son.\textsuperscript{19}

Apart from the ideological battle regarding the religious importance of a son, the ascetic traditions had a more immediate concern regarding human sexuality: sexual instincts do not die merely because a man has cut his family ties and become an ascetic. In the fantasy world of the ascetic, the female body must have occupied a prominent place, judging from the frequent allusions to the loathsome nature of a woman’s body and to the dangers that women pose. Misogynistic attitudes and statements, of course, are not limited to ascetic literature; they are found in most Brāhmaṇical texts. In ascetic works, however, the tone is harsher and the intent is not just mistrust but total abhorrence of the female species. “A man becomes intoxicated,” one ascetic text declares, “by seeing a young woman just as much as by drinking liquor. Therefore, a man should avoid from afar a woman, the mere sight of whom is poison.”\textsuperscript{20} The perfect ascetic may be like an eunuch, “who remains the same when he sees a sixteen-year-old young lady, as when he sees a newborn girl or a hundred-year-old woman,”\textsuperscript{21} but most ascetics are undoubtedly moved by the youthful female body. This internal attraction is often externalized and projected onto the object of desire in ascetic texts: women are depicted as evil temptresses who want to entrap the hapless ascetic.

With stylish hair and painted eyes, hard to touch but pleasing to the eye, women are like the flame of sin and burn a man like straw.
Burning from afar, sweet yet bitter, women indeed are the fuel of hellfire, both lovely and cruel. Foolish women are the nets spread out by the fowler called Kāma, binding the limbs of men as if they were birds.

A woman is the bait on the fishhook tied to the line of evil tendencies for men who are like fish in the pond of birth, wading in the mud of the mind.²³

Liquor intoxicates when it is drunk, fire burns when it is touched, snakes kill when they bite, but women do all that by their mere sight!

India may be the land of ascetics, but it is also home to some of the best and most explicit erotic sculpture, art, and literature the world has known. Cultured courtesans occupied a place of honor in ancient Indian society. Erotic love and sexual techniques became the subject of specialized inquiry in texts such as the Kāmasūtra long before the advent of Masters and Johnson. This “worldly” tradition of artistic expression saw the female body as the epitome of beauty and the source of both erotic and aesthetic joy. Sanskrit belles-lettres dwell on the beauty of the female body, describing tenderly the charm of a woman’s eyes, lips, hair, breasts, hips, and so forth. The poet Bihāna reminisces longingly on the beauty of his lover.

Even now, if I see her again, her full moon face, lush new youth, swollen breasts, passion’s glow, body burned by fire from love’s arrows— I’ll quickly cool her limbs!

Even now, if I see her again, a lotus-eyed girl weary from bearing her own heavy breasts— I’ll crush her in my arms and drink her mouth like a madman, a bee insatiably drinking a lotus!

Even now, I remember her in love— her body weak with fatigue, swarms of curling hair falling on pale cheeks, trying to hide the secret of her guilt. Her soft arms clung, like vines on my neck.²⁴

And the greatest of Indian poets, Kālidāsa, paints this picture of Śakuntalā, the forest girl of heavenly beauty:
With rounded breasts concealed by cloth of bark
fastened at the shoulder in a fine knot,
her youthful form enfolded like a flower
in its pale leafy sheath unfolds not its glory.

Her lower lip has the rich sheen of young shoots,
her arms the very grace of tender twining stems;
her limbs enchanting as a lovely flower
glow with the radiance of magical youth.\textsuperscript{25}

Even Bhartṛhari, in his ode to renunciation, admits:

Renunciation of worldly attachments
is only the talk of scholars,
whose mouths are wordy with wisdom.

Who can really forsake the hips
of beautiful women bound
with girdles of ruby jewels?\textsuperscript{26}

Ascetic deconstruction seeks to dispel this male fascination with and fantasy about the female body by analyzing what it regards as the reality behind its imagined beauty.

What, pray, is the beauty of a woman, who is a puppet of flesh furnished with tendons, bones, and joints, within a cage of limbs moved by a machine?

Examine her eyes after separating the skin, the flesh, the blood, the tears, and the fluid, and see if there is any charm. Why are you bewitched in vain?

The same breast of a girl, on which we see the brilliant splendor of a pearl necklace comparable to the swift waters of the Ganges rippling down the slopes of mount Meru, is in time eaten with relish by dogs in remote cemeteries as if it were a little morsel of food.\textsuperscript{27}

The author here resorts to surgical dissection to uncover the hidden beauty of the female eye, so lovingly described by poets, and finds only blood, skin, veins, and other impurities. Of beauty there is none. Another text focuses directly on the final object of sexual passion: the vagina. Why, the author wonders, are people enamored by this opening of flesh that is foul smelling and resembles a festering wound?

Even though a woman’s private parts are not different from a deep and festering ulcer, men generally deceive themselves by imagining them to be different.

I salute those who take delight in a piece of skin split in two scented by the breaking of the wind! What could be more rash?\textsuperscript{28}

A significant aspect of the ascetic deconstruction of the body in general and of the female body in particular is the association of the body or of particular parts of the body, such as the vagina, with urine and excrement. Within the context of Brāhmanical culture which considered bodily excreta as extremely defiling, this
association evokes feelings of disgust, precisely the feelings that ascetics are expected to have with regard to the body.

Such attitudes with regard to the female body is not confined to Brâhmaṇical asceticism. I want to mention just one example from the Jain ascetic tradition. Padmanabha Jains (1991) has recently studied a long-standing Jain controversy regarding the possibility of women achieving strimokṣa (liberation). One argument against such a possibility is of interest to our study. The Digambara Jains who reject the possibility of female liberation present two reasons. First, ascetic nudity is essential for liberation, but women cannot go naked. Second, women cannot be ordained ascetics, because women's bodies produce small creatures. These creatures are killed when women purify themselves. Thus it is impossible for women to observe the fundamental Jain vow of ahinṣā (noninjury).

[A nun] eats only one meal a day and wears a single piece of cloth. According to the Teaching of the Jīna, a person wearing clothes cannot attain mokṣa even if he be a Tīrthankara. The path of mokṣa consists of nudity; all other paths are wrong paths.

In the genital organs of women, in between their breasts, in their navels, and in the armpits, it is said [in the scriptures that] there are very subtle living beings. How can there be the mendicant ordination for them [since they must violate the vow of ahinṣā]? Women have no purity of mind; they are by nature fickle-minded. They have menstrual flows. [Therefore] there is no meditation for them free from anxiety.39

Although this conception of women relates to a theological debate, it parallels the Brâhmaṇical conceptions examined earlier. The reason for the inferiority of women is the very constitution of their bodies which are subject to menstrual flows, which harbor living creatures, and which cannot be revealed naked in public.

Food

Because I have written a longer article on this topic recently (Olivelle 1991), I will here summarize some of the observations I made there. In few other cultures does food play as central a role in cosmological speculations, ritual practice, and social transactions as in India (Khare 1976; Marriott 1968). Not only is the creative act closely associated with the creation of food in Brâhmaṇical myths and theology, but even the creator god Prajāpati is often depicted as food. The whole of creation consists of food and eaters of food; but because food is food only when it is eaten, and the eater in its turn become the eaten, one can equate reality with food. The centrality of food in ancient Indian cosmology is highlighted in the speculations regarding the cycle of beings. Food when eaten becomes semen, and from semen arises a person. Indeed, in some Upaniṣadic speculations food itself is a dead person transformed: when he is cremated, the dead person becomes smoke, rises to the sky and through a complicated process, the details of which we do not have the time to investigate, returns as rain, which is transformed into plants, food, and finally into semen and a new birth.30
The continued existence of the universe depends, moreover, on ritual food transactions between gods and humans. It is well known that every Indian ritual from the earliest Vedic sacrifices to the recent devotional liturgies involves offering food to the gods (Khare 1992). The law book of Manu (3.76) puts it plainly:

An oblation duly offered in the fire reaches the sun; from the sun comes rain, and from rain food, and thereby living creatures derive their sustenance.

This then is the ritual food chain: sacrifice, rain, plants, food, procreation.

The ritual use of food underscores both its centrality at the cosmic and social levels and its inherently transactional nature. Food is the central element of a cosmic transaction that maintains both the social and the physical cosmos. Food becomes plentiful only when it is shared. The didactic literature admonishes people not to cook for themselves alone; such food becomes poison. Indian food transactions include all known beings: gods, ancestors, various divine and demonic beings, and human guests and beggars. The interdependence of all beings within the cosmic chain is expressed in this socio-ritual-cosmic food transaction. The cosmos, indeed, is a giant food cycle (Khare 1976).

The regulation and restriction of food transactions between humans, moreover, is at the root of social stratification and caste distinctions (Marriott 1968).

Historical and textual studies as well as substantial ethnographic research show that Hindu culture in India has preserved, throughout its history, a set of core cultural assumptions concerning the link between human society, food transactions, and divinity. These assumptions are: that the interdependence of men and gods depends on ritual transactions of food between them; that the distinctiveness of various groups in Hindu society as well as the relationship between such groups is ritually constructed in such food transactions with the gods; and lastly, that the ritual concentration and redistribution of food is a critical mechanism for the formation of social groups and the articulation of leadership (original italics).

Breckenridge 1986:24

Food, therefore, plays a central role in the socio-cultural construction of reality in India. Rules of proper and improper food provide a clear cultural definition of food. Rules regarding food transactions constitute a social code that strengthens the hierarchical organization of castes and demarcates the boundaries of purity. The rules that surround all aspects of food in Indian society can thus be seen as constituting an elaborate food code.

Ascetic ideology and practice, however, presents an interesting counterpoint to the socially constructed reality of food. The ascetic attitude towards food can be broadly described as one of fear and ambivalence. On the one hand, one has to eat and is therefore dependent on food. On the other hand, food is what keeps samsāra going and is, therefore, inimical to the whole ascetic enterprise. This ambivalence has created what I would characterize as an obsession with food within Indian ascetic traditions.

Indeed, the relationship to food—how one procures it, how long one stores it, and how and whether one eats it—is a defining characteristic of Indian asceticism in general as well as of individual ascetic orders and sects. A common name for wandering ascetics does not reflect their actual lifestyle; rather, they are food farers, mendicants, and uncultivated eaters. A common name for food.

There are six kinds of mendicant ascetics, which I will refer to as food, mendicant, and wandering ascetics. Food ascetics are human food eaters, emphasizing behavior different from the behavior cultural mainstream. Food ascetics are a hallmark of asceticism in its own right, just as food and drink are. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but does not describe a food-obsessed ascetic, but rather an ascetic who eats food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. Food ascetics is not a term used in India, but refers to ascetics who eat food. 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wandering ascetics—bhikṣu or beggar—points to this relationship. Mendicant ascetics do not own or produce food and are totally dependent on the generosity of others for their sustenance. Forest hermits show a different relationship to food: they are food gatherers. Their food is not mediated by culture and consists of wild and uncultivated fruits, leaves, roots, and the like. Most Brāhmanical classifications of ascetics, moreover, are based on the way ascetics procure, store, and consume food.

There are four areas of the human relationship to food that play significant roles in ascetic food practices: production or procurement, storage, preparation, and consumption. In each of these areas, people expend enormous effort and energy, which I will call the human food effort. The major pattern that emerges from ascetic food practices is the minimization and, at some levels, even the elimination of the human food effort in each of these four areas. At the level of production, ascetic behavior demonstrates a progressive lessening of effort. All Indian ascetics abandon cultural mediation in procuring/producing their food. This, indeed, appears to be a hallmark of Indian asceticism. Both the mendicant and the hermit are, each in his own way, food gatherers. Hermits gather from the forest, renouncers gather or beg from people. In several Brāhmanical classifications of mendicants, the highest type does not direct any effort at all toward procuring food and are said to observe the “python vow”: they remain still like a python awaiting what they may receive by chance.

The length of food storage is the most frequent criterion for the classification of hermits; the highest do not store at all, eating what they gather each day. All mendicants follow the same rule of not storing anything for the morrow. They are, moreover, forbidden to cook, the absence of fire being a hallmark of mendicant ascetics.

When the minimization of the food effort is taken to its logical conclusion, an ascetic would not even make the effort to take food into his mouth or to swallow it. This is religious suicide by fasting, a well-known and respected way of ending life in numerous Hindu and non-Hindu traditions, especially the Jain (Dundas 1985; Settar 1986, 1990).

The ascetic attitude toward food is the very antithesis of the boast recorded in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (3.10.6):

Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!
I am food! I am food! I am food!
I am the eater of food! Eater of food! Eater of food!

and of the value placed on having plenty of food:

According to the Veda, one’s diet was overdetermined. Eating was simultaneously an act of nourishment, a display of wealth and status, and a demonstration of domination over that which was eaten. In all cases, to eat one’s proper food was to participate in a natural and cosmic order of things. Smith 1990:178

The minimization of the food effort, which is a major principle behind ascetic food practices, is based on the ascetic ideology that sees creation as something
deeply flawed and from which one must seek liberation. The Vedic tradition's close association between food and creation would generate positive attitudes with regard to food if creation and human life are considered positively as things of value. If, however, creation is regarded as a fall from a more perfect state, then the same cosmic role of food would necessarily impart a negative value to food. This is what appears to have happened within the context of the *samsāric* view of creation shared by all ascetic traditions.

An interesting confirmation of this comes from a Buddhist myth found in the *Aggañña Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In the beginning, before the appearance of the sun and the moon, there existed beings without sexual or other distinctions. This is presented as a paradisiacal state. Then on the primordial cosmic water there appeared a sort of scum tasting like honey. The beings made the fatal mistake of eating this scum. This first eating of food set in motion a series of events that gave rise to the world as it is. All the significant moments of this process involved eating, which made the beings more coarse and food more scarce. As the eating progressed the early forms of spontaneous food was replaced by rice. This primordial rice was without the husk or brown powder that today covers the grain. It did not have to be cultivated, and it could be eaten as it was picked. As they continued to eat that rice sexual differentiation emerged among those beings: men and women appeared. Lust and passion entered their hearts and they began to have sexual intercourse with each other. The origin of houses, as we have seen, is traced to these depraved acts; they built them to hide their acts from others!

The event that finally destroyed the early paradisiacal state was the act of food storage. Until then rice had grown spontaneously in a form that needed no preparation and was ready to be eaten. When one crop was gathered, another appeared the next day. Some of those people, however, were lazy and did not want to go out each morning and evening to gather rice. They began to fetch rice sufficient for more than one day. As they hoarded rice, powder and husk began to envelop the grain, and when reaped the rice plants did not spontaneously grow back. Rice had to be cultivated. Cultivation led to private property, theft, and the institution of social and governmental structures. All because those primordial beings had started to eat!

In the ideal world nature provides everything humans need. So long as they take only what they need each day, this condition continues. Taking more than one needs, hoarding for the future, creation of ownership: these results of greed are the basic causes of the world’s deterioration.

The food code of ascetics has both a cosmological and a soteriological dimension and meaning. The progression of the ascetic withdrawal from the food effort is a mirror image of the progression of cosmic evolution, an evolution produced by the human involvement in the food effort. At one level it signifies the ascetic evaluation of the cosmos and society as negative realities from which the ascetic flees. His very withdrawal from food is an expression of his withdrawal from social and cosmic engagement. He stands outside the food cycle, because he only eats food but never offers it to others, thus inverting the admonition, often repeated, that food must be shared. The food of the ascetic is thus unlike the food of other humans.

The ascetic’s attitude towards food resources, for example, provides an interesting contrast to the social organization of the Minangkabau as the social organization of hair has recently been examined (Essed 1971; Firth 1950). In the early stages of the control of hair, there were different interpretations of the control of hair. For example, Sekere (1958) provides a fascinating account of an approach prevalent in the early days

There is little evidence that control of hair had a role in religious initiation in Indonesia. On the other hand, the structure of social relations in Indonesia is quite different from that of the Minangkabau. As van Genne noted (1982:85), the Minangkabau in Indonesia, for example, have their heads shaved, which Leach (1960) suggests is an expression of the early organization of the Minangkabau society.

Leach (1960) argues that the food code is an expression of the early organization of the Minangkabau society. He makes a number of suggestions about the social organization of the Minangkabau, which are important for our understanding of the early organization of the Minangkabau society. He makes a number of suggestions about the social organization of the Minangkabau, which are important for our understanding of the early organization of the Minangkabau society.

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The ascetic deconstruction of food transforms its ritual and social meanings. Many sources, for example, ask ascetics to regard food as medicine—something to be taken because of necessity and not for enjoyment, something whose taking lacks the meanings ascribed to it within society and underscores the ascetic perception of the body as a disease in search of a cure.

Hair

In the three decades since the publication of Leach’s seminal essay “Magical Hair” (1958), which was itself a response to the naïve psychoanalytic work of Berg (1951), the social and anthropological significance of the cultural manipulation of head hair has received long overdue scholarly attention (Hallpike 1969, 1987; Cooper 1971; Firth 1973; Hershman 1974; Lincoln 1977). This is not the place to discuss the controversies between the socio-anthropological and the psychoanalytic interpretations of hair symbolism. I believe, however, that the recent work of Obeyesekere (1981, 1990) has provided us a way of combining the best of both disciplines, an approach I will follow in this study.

There appears, however, to be a scholarly consensus that, cross-culturally, control of head hair marks a person’s association with society and his or her participation in social structures (Hallpike 1969, 1987; Douglas 1982:72). Shaving, on the other hand, represents a moment of separation from society. Such separations in India occur during periods of mourning and prior to a life-cycle ritual (van Gennep 1960). Some forms of separation and social marginality (Douglas 1982:85), moreover, are signified by loose and unkempt hair. In the case of women in India, this occurs also during periods of mourning and menstruation, when their hair is left unbraided and unwashed (Hershman 1974). These are the social and what Leach (1958:153) calls the publicly recognized meanings of hair.

Leach (1958) himself acknowledges, however, that much of the ethnographic evidence supports an unconscious association of hair with sexuality: “In ritual situations: long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair or partially shaved hair or tightly bound hair = restricted sexuality; close shaven hair = celibacy” (p. 154). Leach, however, separates the unconscious sphere from the social, the latter dealing with individual deep motivations and the latter with socially accepted meanings and public means of communication. Obeyesekere objects, rightly I believe, both to Leach’s watertight division between private and public symbols and to the psychoanalyst assumption that all symbols must have deep motivational significance. He makes a useful distinction between personal symbols involving deep motivational significance and what he calls psychogenetic symbols, which originate in the unconscious but acquire conventional and publicly available meanings. “Symbols originating from unconscious sources,” Obeyesekere (1981) observes, “are used to give expression to meanings that have nothing to do with their origin” (pp. 13–14). These operational meanings of symbols such as hair should be analytically distinguished from their deep motivational genesis. In his recent work The Work of Culture (1990), Obeyesekere calls this distinction symbolic remove. A symbol
may operate at different levels of symbolic remove from its genesis in deep motivation "producing different levels of symbolization, some closer to, some more distant from the motivations that initially (psychogenetically) triggered the symbolic formation" (Obeysekere 1990:57).

The public meaning of separation from society as well as the unconscious sexual associations of shaven and unkempt hair are operative in the symbolic complex of the hair of Indian ascetics.33 Ascetic hair in India comes in two forms: it may be completely shaved or it may be left unkempt and thus become matted. The former is associated with wandering mendicants, including Hindu samnyasins as well as Buddhist and Jain monks, who are ritually separated from society but return to it to beg their food and who operate within it as holy men and teachers. The latter is obligatory for forest hermits who are physically separated from society.

Let us take up first the case of matted-haired ascetics. To understand adequately the symbolism of matted hair it is necessary to locate it within the larger grammar of the symbols associated with the physical withdrawal from society. Besides long and matted hair, bodily symbols include long and uncut beard in the case of males, long and uncut nails, eating only uncultivated forest produce, clothes of tree bark or animal skin, and frequently also bodily uncleanliness. People with matted hair are required to live in the forest and not to enter a village; they are repeatedly admonished not to step on plowed land,34 the prime symbol of civilized geography. They are said to imitate the habits of wild animals. One can decipher from this symbolic grammar the following statement: a matted-haired individual renounces all culturally mediated products and institutions and all culturally demarcated geographical areas. He or she leaves social structures and return to the state of nature and to the way of life of wild animals. Not grooming the hair, not controlling it in any way, letting it grow naturally into a matted condition—all this symbolizes a person's total and absolute withdrawal from social space, structures, and controls.

Mary Douglas (1982) has drawn attention to the correspondence between social control and bodily control:

If there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries. The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy. Consequently I now advance the hypothesis that bodily control is an expression of social control—abandonment of bodily control in ritual responds to the requirements of a social experience which is being expressed.35

Matted-haired ascetics of India are a prime example of total neglect of bodily boundaries resulting in the utter lack of control of those boundaries. Nails, beard, hair—they are all left uncontrolled. This lack of concern for bodily boundaries, as Mary Douglas’s hypothesis predicts, is accompanied by total withdrawal from society and socially defined space.

Leach and others consider long and uncontrolled hair as equivalent to sexual license. While in a given case this may be true, in a publicly available symbol such as the Indian matted hair there is a considerable symbolic remove between its operational meaning and its possible unconscious sexual associations. It is clear that sexual license is not the primary concern. From soma to samnyasi, the consciousness of a man led to a life of unmistakable mattedness, even if the mystic was a harmless maharishi or a halfmad yogi.

Let us consider the initiation into the mattedness. The removal of hair is brought about, as we have seen, through ritual action. Social meaning always opposes the act of asceticism. A man of asceticism is, of course, a man of a certain sex but a man not in the sphere of that sex. The shaven hair of a student, a man, a yogi, and has a social meaning.

Sexual license is not the primary concern of ascetics, and it is also a given that a man is required to control his hair, that it is permitted to be long, and that ritual shaves are required. The social incidence of asceticism is different from that of the sacred prostitution. The ascetic's hair is not cut, but is allowed to grow in a certain context, the context of a religious life, a life in a community.

Elemental symbolism, of course, symbolizes the physical body. During the initiation rituals, the initiate’s body is: The naked initiate. The initiate is "one who is reduced to his essence:" I believe this is not a metaphorical form he has, but it is a form, the initiate bears from the initiation on.

The sacred body of the ascetic becomes one that is elemental and periodized by the sacred.
sexual license was not a characteristic of Indian matted-haired ascetics. Here the primary public meaning of matted hair appears to be the total physical separation from society and social boundaries. Thus the matted hair and other outward insignia of a forest hermit are employed even when a person is sent into political exile, the most prominent case of which is that of Rāma and his wife Sītā. The unconscious associations, however, have some relevance, because the sexuality of the matted-haired ascetic has always remained ambiguous, in stark contrast to the universally accepted celibacy of the shaven-haired ascetic. In any case, celibacy is not a hallmark of matted-haired hermits of India.

Let us now turn to the shaven-headed ascetics. A central feature of the rites of initiation into the ascetic life in all traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain—is the removal of the hair of the head and, for males, of the face. Although, as we shall see, there are clear sexual implications in shaving the head, I believe that its central social message is not that of castration, as many have argued, but the ritual (as opposed to the physical) separation from society of the shaven ascetic. The message of ascetic shaving cannot be totally different from the message inherent in the spectrum of Indian rites involving shaving. And that message is not principally about sex but about society, or, more accurately, about the ritual separation from society. The shaven head of an ascetic, just as much as the shaven head of an initiated student, a widow, or a criminal, proclaims that the individual is not part of society and has no social role or status.

Sexual symbolism, however, is not lacking. All people ritually shaven, not just ascetics, are forbidden to engage in sex. For most this is a temporary condition required by a rite of passage or necessitated by ritual pollution, but for the ascetic it is permanent, and therein lies the difference between ascetic and other forms of ritual shaving. Social control is primarily sexual control, and the controlled hair of social individuals symbolizes their participation in the socially sanctioned structures for sexual expression, especially marriage. Removal of hair separates the individual from that structure and from the legitimate exercise of sexual activity. Shaving for the ascetic, I believe, indicates his or her removal from socially sanctioned sexual structures and also from other types of social structures and roles. In the Indian context, this implies loss of caste, inability to own property, and lack of legal standing in a court of law.

Elements of the ascetic initiatory ritual indicate, furthermore, that shaving symbolizes the return to the sexually and socially undifferentiated status of an infant. During the Hindu ritual, for example, the shaven ascetic takes off all his clothes. The naked renouncer is significantly called jātariṇipadbara, which literally means “one who bears the form one had at birth.” The ascetic is not just naked; he is reduced to the condition in which he was born, to the state of a new-born infant. I believe that shaving is part of the symbolic complex that signifies his return to the form he had at birth. The absence of hair, just as much as nakedness, takes the initiate back to the prepubertal state of infancy.

The sexual symbolism of hair also helps explain some interesting features of ascetic behavior toward hair. It is well known that Jain monks at their initiation and periodically throughout their life remove the hair of their head by the painful
procedure of plucking them from their roots. That this custom was not limited to the Jains is demonstrated by its presence in a somewhat abbreviated form in the Hindu ritual of ascetic initiation. Here the ascetic's hair is first shaved, but five or seven hairs at the crown are left uncut. At the conclusion of the rite the ascetic plucks these few hairs from the roots. Now, one may attribute this practice to the common ascetic propensity to bodily torture and pain. But I think that this literal eradication of hair can be viewed as a symbolic uprooting of sexual drives and attachments, a ritual castration.

That shaving is the opposite of sexual engagement is also brought out in the way Hindu ascetics shave their heads during the annual liturgical cycle. They are not allowed to shave any time they want to. Rather the prescribed time for shaving is at the junctures between the five Indian seasons: spring, summer, rains, autumn, and winter. Now the Sanskrit term for season is *tithu*, the same term that is used to indicate the monthly menstrual cycle of a woman. A husband is required to have sexual intercourse with his wife in the *tithu*, that is soon after the end of her menstrual period when a new season begins for his wife. I think it is not farfetched to see a correspondence between the husband approaching his wife at the beginning of her season, and the ascetic shaving his head at the beginning of a season. This shaving appears to symbolize an ascetic's renunciation of sex precisely at the time when the ethics of society requires a man to engage in it.

Mary Douglas (1982) has argued, convincingly I believe, that there is a direct correspondence between social experience and bodily expression. Ecstatic states, spirit possessions, and lack of bodily control depend not as much on psychological maladjustment or economic deprivation as on the experience of weak social constraints. Social marginality is thus expressed through the medium of the body by the slackening of bodily control.

Even within societies with a high degree of control, where, in Douglas's terminology, the group and the grid are strong, there are bound to be individuals and groups that are alienated from or ideologically opposed to the social and religious mainstream. These subsystems also express their alienation through the restricted code of bodily symbols. In such subsystems,

we can see another restricted code taking over. The body is still the image of society but somewhere inside it someone is not accepting its rule. I am suggesting that the symbolic medium of the body has its restricted code to express and sustain alienation of a sub-category from the wider society. In this code the claims of the body and of the wider society are not highly credited: bodily grooming, diet, pathology, these subjects attract less interest than other non-bodily claims. The body is despised and disregarded, consciousness is conceptually separated from its vehicle and accorded independent honour. Experimenting with consciousness becomes the most personal form of experience, contributing least to the widest social system, and therefore most approved.³⁶

Many of the features that Mary Douglas identifies in the subsystems of alienation are precisely those we have seen within the ideology and practice of Indian ascetic traditions. These include antitrivialism, neglect of the body, withdrawal from

NOTES

1. Contrary to the claim that some prophets have made in the past, the origin of this activity in nature, a common body function, is not a contrived means of producing a communal bond. The situation is directly analogous to the abstinence that there are in the cases of some mystics.

2. I do not mean to exclude the possibility that the ascetic can be the object of persecution. For example, some mystics have been subjected to the Inquisition.
society, an ethic of internal motive, techniques for gaining altered states of consciousness, lack of community, and the lonely quest for personal salvation. The deconstruction of the body we have examined can thus be seen as the expression of an antisocial and individualist ideology through the medium of the body. We can see in this type of religion the rejection of a religious view based on strong social constraints, such as we find in the early Vedic and the later Brahmanical traditions. The rejection of social structures implicit in the deconstruction of the body is also expressed in the ascetic imitation of the life and habits of wild beasts, what may be called the ascetic’s adoption of an animal body. Animal symbolism is present in much of Indian ascetic literature, especially in connection with forest hermits. The ascetic impulse to leave society and culturally mediated structures, tools, and geography is nicely captured in this verse:

Moving about with wild beasts,
and dwelling with them alone;
Living a life just like theirs—
clearly that’s the way to heaven. 37

But what sort of a social experience creates the ascetic alienation and underlies the ascetic bodily expressions? This is a question to which we cannot provide an adequate answer, because we have so little information about Indian society during the time when many of these ascetic traditions started, although ascetic movements in India appear around the same time as the formation of city-states. 38

The ascetic deconstruction of the body throughout the history of Indian religions, however, has remained in lively tension with the socially approved expressions of bodily control. At many points the two attitudes and expressions influenced and modified each other. A good example of this is the controversies regarding bodily purity and the observance of the Brahmanical code within medieval ascetic sects (Olivelle 1986–1987). Over time, moreover, ascetic traditions themselves became monastic institutions with powerful social, economic, and political roles within society. The social experience of individuals in such institutions was clearly not marginal, alienated, or revolutionary; their society was, to use Douglas’s terms, strong in terms of both group and grid. The changes such changing social experiences caused in the ascetic perception of the body are an interesting and important subject of inquiry, but outside the scope of this essay.

NOTES

1. Contrasting the Indian forms of asceticism to the Hellenistic, which according to him originated within specific historical circumstances, Albert Schweitzer (1960:19) echoes a commonly held, though clearly erroneous, perception: “In the thought of India, on the other hand, world and life negation does not originate in a similar experience. It is there from the very beginning, self-originated, born as it were in a cloudless sky.”

2. I do not attach an overly technical meaning to this term, such as that found in literary theory. My use of the term in intended to show that the ascetic construction of the body can be understood adequately only in its negative and thus deconstructing relationship to the socially constructed body.
4. Even though modern scholarship has shown that Brahmanical perceptions and attitudes, especially in matters of ritual purity, do not necessarily reflect those of Indian society as a whole (Carman and Marglin 1985), nevertheless Brahmin customs and ideas, especially when codified in “sacred” texts, became often the standard for others to imitate and emulate.
6. Ibid., p. 108.
10. Mary Douglas (1982:158) has described a similar conception of the home in working-class British families.
13. This refers to the Vedic doctrine of debts with which humans are born and which they must pay during their lifetime. The classical doctrine of debts is spelled out in the Taitya Samhitā 6.3.10.5: “A Brahmin, at his very birth, is born with a triple debt—of studentship to the seers, of sacrifice to the gods, of offspring to the fathers. He is, indeed, free from debt, who has a son, is a sacrificer, and who has lived as a student.”
14. This appears to be a reference to the ascetics who rejected marriage and procreation and lived celibate lives in the forest.
15. This is a play on jāyā, the Sanskrit word for wife, which is derived from a verbal root meaning “to beger.” So, a wife’s “wifehood” consists in begetting a son for her husband.
16. Baudhāyana Dharmasūtras 2.16.6, 8, 9, 11.
17. Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 5.1; 4.4.22.
21. Ibid., p. 147.
22. The term means both lust and the god of love.
23. Yogavāsīṣṭha 1.21.11, 12, 18, 20; Yajnavalkya Upaniṣad, pp. 315–316.
26. Barbara Stoler Miller, op. cit., p. 82.
27. Yogavāsīṣṭha, 1.21.1–2, 5–6. This chapter of the Yogavāsīṣṭha contains a detailed deconstruction of the female body. See also Yajnavalkya Upaniṣad, p. 315.
30. See Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, 6.2.15–16; Chāndogya Upaniṣad 5.10. For perhaps the most eloquent praise of food as the primary cosmological principle, see the Taitya Samhitā 2.1–2; 3.7–10.
31. Baudhāyana Dharmasūtras, 2.5.18.
32. For a longer discussion see Olivelle 1991. The nature of this myth has been the subject of some controversy; see Olivelle 1991; note 8; Gombrich 1992; Collins (unpublished ms.)

References

ms.) has noted the resonance in terminology and images between this myth and the Buddhist monastic code. Gombrich has argued that this is not a creation myth but a satirical parody of the Brāhmanical obsession with food. For my purposes it does not matter whether it is a myth or a parody. In either case the story presents a view that is antithetical to the Brāhmanical ideology of food. For a similar myth from the Hindu tradition, see Liṅga Purāṇa 1.39.

33. I refer the reader to my forthcoming longer study of hair symbolism in India in general and among Indian ascetics in particular: "Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in Indian Religions."

34. Gautama Dharmasūtra 3.32.


37. This verse concludes and encapsulates the sections dealing with holy householders (3.2.19) and forest hermits (3.3.22) in the Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra.

38. For a longer discussion about the possible connection between urbanism and the rise of asceticism, see Olivelle 1993:55–58. The psychoanalytic attempts to imagine the social experiences (Masson 1976) underlying Indian asceticism are mere scholarly guesses, not historical evidence.

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