

KYKÉION STUDI E TESTI

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Ascetics and Brahmins
Studies in Ideologies and Institutions

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6.

The Beast and the Ascetic The Wild in the Indian Religious Imagination

*mṛgaiḥ saha pariṣpandaḥ saṃvāsas tebhīr eva ca |
tair eva sadṛṣī vṛttīḥ pratyakṣaṃ svargalakṣaṇam ||*

Moving about with wild beasts,
And dwelling with them alone,
Living a life just theirs –
Clearly that's the way to heaven.

This extraordinary verse concludes Baudhāyana's description of both the holy householders (*BDh* 3.2.19) and the forest hermits (*BDh* 3.3.22). In many religions the pursuit of holiness has been associated with renunciation and fleeing from society. Living austere and often solitary lives in the wilderness, forest, or desert is viewed in many traditions as a sign of holiness. An extreme expression of this attitude is the practice of imitating the life style and behavior of wild animals.

The Desert Fathers of early Christianity are depicted as living like animals. According to a contemporary description, the monks in the Syrian desert "had one garment, went barefoot, mortified themselves, ate grass, legumes and roots, wandered about on the mountains like wild animals. . . ."¹ "I looked," says a monk describing his encounter with a Desert Father, "I saw a man afar off, who was very fearful. His hair was spread over his body like a leopard. . . . When he approached me, I was afraid. I climbed on a mountain peak, lest perhaps he was a mountain ass. . . . He said to me: 'Onnophrius is my name and,

¹ Vööbus 1960, 25. See Devin DeWeese, *Wilderness and Barbarian: Favourable Evaluations of the Wilderness and the Wilderness Peoples in Medieval Christian and Islamic Literature*. MA Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington. Lord Chalmers in the introduction to his translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (I.xvi) observes that the Indian ascetics who acted like bovines "anticipated by a thousand years those Christian anchorites who 'derived their name from their humble practice of grazing in the fields of Mesopotamia with the common herd'."

behold, for sixty years I have been in the desert, walking in the mountains like the animals.’”² “Behold,” says Ephrem, “they graze like animals for roots upon the mountains, and behold like birds they pick up dry vegetables from the heights.”³

It may well be that some of these descriptions contain metaphor and hyperbole; it is unclear whether the Christian ascetics consciously imitated animal behavior. In India, however, the imitation of animals is systematically developed within a well articulated ascetic ideology, even though the historical reality behind that ideology – whether there were ascetics who behaved like animals – remains uncertain. This paper will focus on the ideology rather than on the historical realities of Indian asceticism.

In the Indian ascetic ideologies, moreover, life in the wilderness and the imitation of wild animals carry a deeper meaning. They are expressions of the belief that an ascetic’s life style is the antithesis of all that civilization stands for. The first and the most obvious feature of the ascetic anti-civilization is the ideal-typical habitat of ascetics. From the time of the Upaniṣads, all ascetic traditions, both Brahmanical and heterodox, enjoin the wilderness or the forest as the place where ascetics should live their lives.⁴ Renouncers are allowed to enter a village only to beg,⁵ while forest hermits are forbidden even to step on plowed land.⁶ A forest hermit is expected to avoid everything connected with the village (*grāmya*), be it food or clothing.⁷ He is not allowed to eat cultivated food; his food is only what grows naturally on uncultivated land:

*na phālakṛṣṭam aśnīyād utsṛṣṭam api kenacit |
na grāmajātāny ārto ’pi puṣpāṇi ca phalāni ca ||*

He must never eat anything grown on plowed land, even if it has been thrown away by someone; or flowers and fruits grown in a village, even if he is in dire straits. (*MDh* 6.16)

This ideology, therefore, reduces the hermit to the level of a food gatherer. His clothes are made of tree bark (*cīra*, *valkala*) or animal skins.⁸ Renouncers, the wandering mendicants, are expected to go

² MacDermot 1971, 278.

³ Vööbus 1960, 26.

⁴ See, for example, *DN* II.77, 242, 284; III. 49; *MN* I.323, 333, 425, 440; III.3, 35, 82, 115–16; *SuNi* 958–59; *VaDh* 10.15–17; *BDh* 2.11.15, 17; *GDh* 3.26; *MDh* 6.4.

⁵ “Living always in the wilderness, let him never walk within sight of village animals” – *araṇyānityaṃ | na grāmyaapaśūnāṃ saṃdarśane vicaret | VaDh* 10.15–16. See also *GDh* 3.14; *MDh* 6.43; *MBh* 12.237.5.

⁶ “He should not step on plowed land or enter a village” – *na phālakṛṣṭam adhiṣṭhet | grāmaṃ ca na pravīset | GDh* 3.32–33. See also *BDh* 2.11.15; *VaDh* 9.3; *VkhDh* 3.5; *Rām* 4.25.9.

⁷ Uncultivated food is referred to as “sage’s food” (*munyanna*): *MDh* 3.257, 272; 5.54; 6.5, 11; *YDh* 1.260. “Giving up village food and all his belongings, he should go to the forest.” *MDh* 6.3. See also *MBh* 12.185.2; *Kūrma Purāṇa* 2.27.13; *VaDh* 9.4; *VkhDh* 2.4; *ĀpDh* 2.22.1; *YDh* 3.46; *Ahīrbudhnyā Saṃhitā* 15.56; Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* 7.14.

⁸ See *BDh* 3.2.18; 3.3.19; *VaDh* 9.1; *MDh* 6.6; *ViDh* 94.8; *MBh* 3.145.29; 13.129.40; 13.130.12.

naked or to use rags.⁹ Naked, he is like an animal or a baby, both symbols of a non-civilized state. *Jātarūpadhara* (“bearing the form one had at birth”), a common term for the renouncer’s naked condition, indicates his return to the infant state.¹⁰

Civilizations, especially the economic aspects of civilizations, are built on anticipation and foresight. Planning for the future and the storage of goods are basic to an economy. They create surpluses and security, free many people from the daily grind, and facilitate leisure and the creative activities that we associate with civilization. Ascetics on the contrary are expected to live from day to day. Not possessing stores, not hoarding is a hallmark of Indian asceticism. Renouncers are expected to beg their daily food and not to keep any leftovers for the morrow. Hermits and even holy householders are often classified according to how much each is allowed to store.¹¹ The highest category of ascetic collects only what can be consume that very day. This practice is called *aśvastianavidhāna*, the method of not providing for tomorrow.¹² All hermits, in any case, are expected to throw away all their stores during the month of Āśvina (September-October).¹³ Ascetics are thus reduced to the level of animals, who forage daily for their sustenance. Significantly, the major portion of most ascetic codes of ascetic rules deals with the gathering and the eating of food.

Purity and cleanliness, furthermore, are central features of civilized living. This is especially true in ancient India, where ritual purity is a central element of societal religion. Ascetics, however, are often depicted as dirty and loathsome.¹⁴ The greater the dirt, the better the ascetic. Hermits are not allowed to cut their nails and hair.¹⁵ The Buddha himself, describing his former austerities, claims that he let dirt gather on his body for so long that it peeled off by itself. Never once did he clean it (*MN* I.78). There is also the fascinating story about the great ascetic, Vyāsa, the author of the epic *Mahābhārata*. He was called upon to father children for his dead brother, Vicitravīrya (*MBh* 1.99–100). While accepting this role, Vyāsa remarks that his brother’s wife, Ambikā, should “bear with my ugliness. If she bears with my smell, my looks, my garb, and my body, Kauśalyā shall straightway conceive a superior child” (*MBh* 1.99.42–43). His odor and sight are so overwhelming, however, that Ambikā is unable to bear them. She closes her eyes when he comes to bed. So her son,

⁹ See *GDh* 3.18–19; *ĀpDh* 2.21.11–12.

¹⁰ See *JābU* 70.3; *NṣvU* 153.5; 155.3; 168.11, etc. See Sprockhoff 1976, 207, note 33.

¹¹ See *BDh* 3.2.11–18; *MDh* 4.7; 6.18; *ViDh* 94.11–12; *YDh* 1.124–28; *MBh* 12.236.8–9; *Kūrma Purāṇa* 2.27.21–22. For the food of ascetics, see Olivelle 1991 (see above, pp. 71–89).

¹² See *BDh* 3.3.21; 4.5.28; *ĀpDh* 2.23.1; *MDh* 4.7; 6.18; *MBh* 12.159.11.

¹³ See *MDh* 6.15; *VaDh* 3.5; *YDh* 3.47. Other texts forbid the eating of anything that has been hoarded for more than one year: *BDh* 2.11.15; *GDh* 3.35.

¹⁴ See *MBh* 1.110.8; 1.201.17; 3.119.19; 3.123.7; 5.187.18–20; 12.9.13; 12.253.3; 15.33.17; *Rām* 3.6.4; *MNI*.181.

¹⁵ *MBh* 3.186.41; 13.144.12.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is born blind. When Vyāsa approaches Ambikā's co-wife, Ambālikā, she turns pale and as a consequence bears Pāṇḍu, the pale one. When Ambikā's turn comes again, she loses courage and sends her slave-girl in her stead!

The use of fire separates man from beast. In the Vedic society fire was the central symbol of both civilization and religion. It played a central role in the Vedic sacrifice. At his marriage the Brahmanical householder lights a sacred fire; it will serve him for the rest of his life. The abandonment of fire by renunciators, therefore, which indicated their rejection of ritual and society, can also be seen as a symbol of their return to the non-civilized state. They did not use fire for cooking (they begged cooked food) or for ritual purposes. Even at death they were not cremated; lacking a fire, they were buried.

It is within the context of this anti-civilizational ideology that the animal symbolism in Indian ascetic literature needs to be understood. Acting contrary to the norms of civilized behavior, an ascetic imitates animals, the inhabitants of the wild.

The animal most commonly associated with the ascetic life style is the deer. The term *mṛga* used in ascetic texts, however, can mean either a deer in particular or a wild animal in general. Either interpretation is adequate, because the purpose of the texts is to show that ascetics should roam in the wilderness and flee human company. I think that most texts, however, refer to the deer in particular. *Mṛgacārin* (wandering with/like deer) is the name of a class of ascetics living in a hermitage visited by Kṛṣṇa (*MBh* 13.14.39). Likewise, in Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśīya* (4.36–37) and in Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* (7.5) certain hermits are identified as *mṛgacārin*. In the *VkDh* (1.8) also *mṛgacārikā* is considered a class of forest hermits. It is not totally clear what special mode of life the *mṛgacārin* ascetics followed. Some information is contained in the episode of Mādhavī, the daughter of Yayāti, contained in the *Mahābhārata*. At her *svayamvara* (the ceremony at which she chose her husband) Mādhavī spurns all her suitor and enters the forest:

Yayāti's daughter descended from the chariot, bowed to her relatives, went to the holy forest, and practiced austerity. By means of various fasts, observances, and restraints, she made herself light and lived like a deer (*babhūva mṛgacāriṇī*). She grazed soft green sprouts of the color of beryl, fine grasses pungent and sweet; she drank the choice waters, tasty and pure, cool and unmuddied, of holy streams; she roamed in forests deserted by lions, where deer were king, empty and dense and left alone by fires, alongside antelopes, like a deer roaming the woods (*carantī hariṇaiḥ sārdaṇṇ mṛgīva vanacāriṇī*); and practiced the *dharma* thoroughly, decked with chastity. (*MBh* 5.118.6–11; van Buitenen's translation modified)

Elsewhere the comparison with deer is more general. I cited at the outset the text of Baudhāyana (3.2.19) which declares that the

way to heaven consists of imitating the life of a *mṛga* –deer or wild beast. The goddess death, *mṛtyu*, practising penance “roamed with the deer” for a billion years (*MBh* 12.250.19). The Buddha, describing his past austerities, says:

The mere glimpse of a cowherd or neatherd or grasscutter, or of a man gathering firewood or edible roots in the forest, was enough to make me dart from wood to wood, from thicket to thicket, from dale to dale, and from hill to hill –in order that they might not see me or I them. As a deer at the sight of man darts away over hills and dale, even so did I dart away. (*MN*1.79)

The *Lomaḥaṃsa Jātaka* says that the Bodhisattva, living as an Ājivaka, fled from the sight of men like a deer. The *Suttanipāta* (39) also admonishes an ascetic to be unfettered like a deer and to wander wherever he wants. The *Milindapañho* (IV.5.2) agrees:

For just as a deer in the forest, O King, wandering in the woods, sleeps wherever he desires, having no home and no dwelling place, so also should the recluse.

In the legend of the hermit Kiṃdama and King Pāṇḍu (*MBh* 1.109), the imitation of the deer is taken to the extreme. During a hunting trip, Pāṇḍu shot a buck and a doe while they were copulating. “The buck,” the story goes, “was a powerful ascetic, ... the son of a seer, who had been consorting with his wife in the form of a deer” (*MBh* 1.109.7). Struck by the arrow, the hermit-buck curses the king himself to die in the act of sexual intercourse. “What did it profit you, best of men,” says Kiṃdama, “to kill me, an innocent? Me, a hermit who lives on roots and fruits, wearing the guise of a deer, who always dwells in the forest, seeking serenity? ... I am Kiṃdama, a hermit of unequaled austerities. I mated with a doe because I shy away from humans, and as a deer I live with deer in the depths of the forest” (*MBh* 1.109.24, 26; van Buitenen’s tr.). In verse 7 the doe is depicted as the transformed wife of the hermit, whereas verse 26 seems to indicate that Kiṃdama was copulating with a real doe after assuming the guise of a buck.

It appears from these texts that the imitation of the deer consisted of three things: 1. A life of unfettered wandering in the forest; 2. The diet of a deer (possibly also gathering food like a deer); and 3. Fleeing the company of human beings.

Forest hermitages, moreover, are depicted as places where deer roam freely. A fascinating episode is described in Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (6.59–62). The Bodhisattva, in need of an ascetic’s dress (*kāśāyavastra*), encounters a hunter who happened to have one. The hunter gives the dress to the Bodhisattva and remarks that he had used it to get closer to the deer, because in an ascetic’s garb the deer trusted him and did not flee.

The imitation of the cow resembles that of the deer. *Gocārin* or *govratin*, like the *mṛgacārin*, is a class of ascetics.¹⁶ In an episode of the *Mahābhārata*, Nārada points out to Mātali, Indra’s charioteer, the *govratin* living in Pātāla. He gives a definition of such an ascetic:

yatrataśayo nityaṃ yenakenacid āśitaṃ |
yenakenacid ācchannaṃ sa govrate ihocyate ||

He is said to observe the vow of a cow who lies down anywhere, feeds on anything, and covers himself with anything whatsoever. *MBh* 5.97.14 (tr. van Buitenan)

In the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* the imitation of the cow is associated with the *Turiyātita* class of renunciators. This life style is called *gomukha* (“cow-mouth”),¹⁷ *gomukhavṛtti* (“behaving in the manner of a cow-mouth”),¹⁸ *govṛtti* (“behaving like a cow”),¹⁹ and *gocaryā* (“imitating/following a cow”).²⁰ Within this context the imitation consists primarily in the way an ascetic obtains and eats his food. This kind of an ascetic does not use a begging bowl but uses his mouth as a receptacle. He probably ate his food without using his hands, picking the food up directly from the ground using his mouth, just like a cow. An oft-cited verse points to this custom:

āsyena tu yadāhāraṃ govan mṛgayate muniḥ |

When, like a cow, a sage forages for his food with his mouth.²¹

The *YPra* 57.56–57 remarks that this verse refers to the kind of ascetics who are called *udarapātrin*, that is, those who use their stomachs as begging bowls. They do not use external begging bowls or even use their cupped hands to receive the food.

This close association with the cow may have been influenced also by the growing belief in the sacredness of the cow. The Buddha, for example, says that, while he was practising austerities, he walked on all fours (*cātukunḍiko*) like an animal. When the cow-herds left for the night, he used to eat the dung of young milch-cows (*MNI*.79). A similar practice may have been the basis for a class of ascetics known as *phenapa* (“froth drinkers”).²² It is possible that *phena* here refers to the foam of water. These ascetics would then resemble those who are

¹⁶ See *MBh* 13.14.39; *MNI*.387–88.

¹⁷ *NṣvU* 177.1–2; 204.4.

¹⁸ *BSaU* 255.4.

¹⁹ *TurU* 243.5–6; *PhU* 284.9.

²⁰ *NṣvU* 184.13.

²¹ See *MBh* 1.86.17; *BDh* 3.3.12; *Matsya Purāṇa* 40.17; *NṣvU* 182.6; *BSaU* 268.1; *YDhS* p. 77.

²² See *VkhDh* 1.7; *MBh* 12.325.4 (100); 12.336.14; 13.129.36–38. Some ascetics are also called *kṣīraṇa* (“milk drinkers”: *MBh* 13.14.38–39), and others *payobhakṣa* (“milk consumers”).

said to subsist solely on water.²³ One passage of the *MBh* (5.100.5–6), however, locates the Phenapas around the mythical milk ocean created by the stream of milk issuing from the udder of Surabhi, the divine mother of cows. These ascetics are said to subsist on the foam of that milk ocean. There is, furthermore, an interesting custom of some ascetics that resembles the practice of “froth drinkers”. The *Mahābhārata* records the episode of King Parikṣit’s encounter with a hermit who “was sitting in a cow pasture, where he fed on the plentiful froth that trickled from the mouths of suckling calves.”²⁴ The same ascetic has a son called Śṛṅgin, who was born from a cow (*MBh* 1.46.2).

A life style closely associated with *govṛtti* is called *ajagaravṛtti*, acting like a python or boa constrictor. Here too the imitation is in the method by which food is obtained. A python lies in wait for its prey and eats animals who happen to cross its path. The noteworthy characteristic of a python’s method is that it does not hunt its prey actively; it does not search for food. It lets the food come to it. Similarly, an *ajagaravṛtti* ascetic does not actively search for food; he does not go from house to house begging. He eats what he obtains without asking (*ayācita*), food that someone may give him without being asked. Such an ascetic minimizes his food effort.

The *Mahābhārata* (12.172.19–34) records a conversation between Prahlāda, the pious king of the demons, and the ascetic Ajagara, whose name is derived from the fact that he followed the *ajagaravṛtti*.²⁵ The ascetic says that he has given up striving. He uses whatever is at hand without discriminating between the good and the bad, the proper and the improper. He eats whatever he gets, good or bad; and if he gets nothing, he goes without food. He sleeps wherever he is, sometimes in costly beds, sometimes on the bare ground. He dresses in tree barks or costly garments, whatever is at hand. In the classification of renunciators, *ajagaravṛtti* is associated with the Avadhūta.²⁶ They are the highest class of ascetics, superior to even the Turīyātītas, who follow the *govṛtti*.

In the Buddhist literature the *govratins* are closely associated with ascetics bearing the name *kukkuravratin*, those who behave like dogs.²⁷ The *Dīgha Nikāya* (III.6–7) describes such an ascetic as naked, walking on all fours, and picking up with his mouth food that has been thrown on the ground. The latter practice may also imply scavenging. The *Majjhima Nikāya* (I.387) records the meeting

²³ See *ĀpDh* 2.23.2.

²⁴ *gavām pracaveṣu āsinam vatsānām mukhaniḥsṛtam | bhūyiṣṭham upyūñjānam phenam āpibatām payam* || *MBh* 1.36.15. See also *MBh* 1.3.48–49; *BDh* 3.3.13; *MDh* 6.31.

²⁵ Ascetics often have animal names. The *Bṛhaddevatā* (8.67–68) records an ascetic named Kapota (pigeon), while in the *MBh* (13.95.2, 4 etc.) an ascetic is called Śunahśakha (dog’s friend).

²⁶ See *NṣuU* 175.6; 204.4–5; *BSaU* 255.6–7. See also Sprockhoff 1976, 127.

²⁷ See the similar classification in Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, tr. L. M. Pruden (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1988), p. 418

between the Buddha and two ascetics. The one was named Puṇṇo Koliyaputto, who followed the vow of the cow (*govratika*). The other was named Seniyo. He was naked and followed the dog vow (*kukkuravatika*), lying on the ground like a dog and eating what was thrown on the ground.

An ascetic's life is also compared to that of birds and fish. This verse occurs in numerous sources:

*śakunīnām ivākāṣe jale vāricarasya ca |
yathā gatir na dṛśyate tathā tasya na saṃśayaḥ ||*

As the course of birds in the air and of fish in the water is not seen, so also, without doubt, is his course.²⁸

The term *gati* here can mean the final state, namely liberation, that an ascetic is expected to attain. It can also be a reference to the way an ascetic is expected to go about in the world. He leaves no trail. He travels unnoticed and without a destination.²⁹ The Buddha compares the life of a renouncer to that of a bird, because a renouncer is content with sufficient food and clothing, and “withersoever he may go forth, these he takes with him as he goes –just as a bird with his wings, O King, withersoever he may fly, carries his wings with him as he flies” (*DN* 1.71). Clearly, these images are mostly metaphorical.

The imitation of birds, however, can move beyond the metaphorical. It is often said to consist of gleaning (*uñcha*).³⁰ As birds pick up seeds here and there, so ascetics glean grain and other edibles. These are either what grows in the wild or what is left in the fields after the crops have been harvested. This life style is in a special way associated with pigeons.³¹ One class of hermits and of holy householders is named *kāpotī* or *kāpotavṛtti*, behaving like pigeons. Baudhāyana provides a description of this life style:

*kāpotēti | avāritasthāneṣu pathiṣu vā kṣetreṣu vāpratihatāvākāṣeṣu vā yatra
yatrauśadhayo vidyante tatra tatrāṅgulībhyām ekaikām ośadhim uñchayitvā
saṃdaṃśanāt kapotavad iti kāpotā |*

With respect to *Kāpotā* –in whatever unfenced area he finds cereal plants, either along roads or in fields or in other places with unrestricted access, he gleans with just two fingers those cereals one by one and eats like a pigeon (*kapota*); from which is derived the name “*Kāpotā*”. (*BDh* 3.2.15)

²⁸ *MBh* 12.154.28. Variant in *MBh* 12.174.19. See also *MBh* 12.261.21; 12.231.23; 12.254.32; Śaṅkara on *VeS* 4.2.14.

²⁹ See *MBh* 12.19.15; 14.46.49.

³⁰ See *BDh* 3.2.14; *VkhDh* 1.8; *MN* II.6–8; *MBh* 1.81.13; 3.246.3; 12.174.18; 12.231.23–24; 12.262.2; 12.264.2–3; 12.341–353; 13.27.19; 13.129.39; 14.92.7; 14.93.2.

³¹ See *MBh* 3.246.4; 13.32.19; 14.93.2; *BDh* 4.5.27–28; *VkhDh* 1.8; *ViDh* 95.11; *Kūrma Purāṇa* 2.27.23. An interesting inversion of the metaphor occurs in the *Mahābhārata* (12.142.34–35) episode where a pigeon tells a fowler that pigeons live like ascetics, because they do not store food.

The imitation of fish would seem a rather difficult enterprise. There is, nevertheless, one practice that comes close to living like a fish. It is called *udavāsa*, dwelling in water.³² The *Mahābhārata* (13.50) states that Cyavana lived in water for twelve years. He lay there like a stick without moving. Aquatic animals loved him and fish kissed him with joy. One day fishermen came and cast their nets. When they pulled their nets ashore they saw to their utter amazement Cyavana surrounded by fish. He was covered with moss. His beard and hair had turned green and shell-fish were attached to his body.

Imitation of wild animals is the basis for the classification of ascetics found in Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (7.15–17):

uñchena jīvanti khagā ivānye tṛṇāni ke cin mṛgavac caranti |
ke cid bhujāṅgaiḥ saha vartayanti valmikabhūtā vanamārutena ||
aśmaṇḍaprayatnārjītavṛttayo 'nye ke cit svadantāḥpatahānnabhakṣāḥ |
kṛtvā parārthaṃ śraṇaṇaṃ tathānye kurvanti kāryaṃ yadi śeṣaṃ asti |
ke cij jalaklīnnajāṭakalāpā dviḥ pāvakaṃ juhvati mantrapūrvam |
mīnaiḥ samaṃ ke cid apo vigāhya vasanti kūrṃmollikhitaiḥ śārīraiḥ ||

Some live like the birds by what they can pick up from the ground, others graze on grass like the deer, and others pass their time with the snakes, turned into anthills by the forest wind.

Some gain their subsistence by laborious pounding with stones, others eat only what has been husked by their own teeth, and some again cook for others and meet their needs on anything that may be left over.

Some with their coils of matted hair soaked with water twice offer oblations to Agni with sacred texts; others plunge into the water and dwell with the fishes, their bodies scored by turtles. (Tr. Johnston)

Indian folklore is full of stories with talking animals where the conduct of animals becomes the model for human action exemplified in the *Pañcatantra* (Olivelle 1997). In the Buddhist *Jātaka* tales the future Buddha is often born as an animal and in that condition becomes the model of courage and virtue. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the Indian ascetic literature animal motifs play an important role.

The principle underlying the imitation of animals, however, is rooted in the deeply anti-civilizational ideology of Indian asceticism. I have written elsewhere about the opposition between village and wilderness presented in the early ascetic writings.³³ If “village” is a metonym for civilization and society, then “wilderness” represents the ascetic ideology of rejecting civilized and social living. If civilized humans are the inhabitants of the village, then animals are the ideal-typical denizens of the wilderness. Just like living in the wilderness

³² See *MBh* 13.57.18. See also the *Buddhacarita* (7.17) passage cited below.

³³ Olivelle 1990; above pp. 43–62.

and the prohibition from entering a village underscore the anti-civilizational direction of the ascetic ideology, so the imitation of animals (whether real or imagined) signals that the ascetic has left human culture, society, and civilized living behind. He has freed himself from the ties that bind him to society and to repeated births, a freedom symbolized by his return to the wild state of animals.