

FACES OF A SĀDHU

**Encounters with Hindu Renouncers
in Northern India**



Dr. polit. thesis 2002

Department of Social Anthropology

Faculty of Social Sciences and Technology Management

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

Trondheim

by

Lise Bjerkan

ISBN: 82-471-5095-6

URN:NBN:no-2121

Plate 1



There can be no great and complete culture
without some element of asceticism in it;
for asceticism means the self-denial and self-conquest
by which man represses his lower impulses
and rises to greater heights of his nature.

(Sri Aurobindo [Ghose] 1953:85)

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION	ix
ILLUSTRATIONS	x
ENCOUNTERING THE HOLY – an extended preface	1
IN THE DOMAIN OF THE SAFFRON	3
SPEAKING ONE’S OWN MIND	5
HANDLING THE FIELD	8
To be one and to know one ...	8
The forgotten past	12
THE ART OF COMMUNICATION	18
Perceptions and descriptions of a reality	21
THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS	23
1. THE FIGURE IN SAFFRON	25
INDIVIDUALS AND OTHERS	26
LABELS OF SAFFRON	32
‘... AS THERE ARE STARS IN THE SKY’	35
ON THE FRINGES OF SOCIETY	37
INTERDEPENDENT WORLDS APART	40
BEYOND CASTE?	43
2. BEYOND DHARMA	47
FOUR STAGES IN LIFE	48
RITES OF PASSAGE	52
The art of dying	52
Liminality	53
The making of a Nāgā	63
THE FOURTH STAGE	65
Freedom from saṃsār and māyā	67
Freedom and eternal happiness	71
Mahāmāyā	76
Karma	78
3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE	81
IN SERVICE FOR THE MISSION	82
‘NOW I AM FREE’	88
IN SEARCH OF PERMANENCY	92
A SĀDHU IN SAṂSĀR	101
Peak of perfection	108
Serving his guru	111
Young boy – mature thoughts	115
A married man	117

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN	121
THE DAṆḌĪ SVĀMĪS IN MUMUKṢU BHAVAN	122
Daṇḍī Svāmīs	122
Mumukṣu Bhavan	123
The first meeting	125
‘Rām, Rām, Rām’	127
‘... the soul, ātmā, is always free’	129
In the mandir	135
Tea with Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth	138
‘... like the lines in the palm of your hand’	144
Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth	146
A disciple and his guru	152
COMMON DENOMINATORS	158
Inter-human relations	158
Eternal peace and happiness	159
5. ‘THIS WORLD IS NOTHING’	163
REASONS WHY	164
Matters of family	165
Matters of spirituality	168
Matters of escape and survival	171
GAṄĠĀ MĀ ASHRAM	173
ŚRĪ ŚRĪ BHOLĀGIRI ASHRAM	176
A year after	178
The next day	180
The last visit	182
THE MOTHER WHO FAINTED	184
SELECTED AS A SAINT	188
A HUMBLE MAHANT	190
A BIG BLISTER ON THE NOSE	192
MULTIPLE REASONS	193
THE STORIES PEOPLE TELL	196
Break and continuity	197
6. BEYOND IDEALS	201
DEVIATING FROM THE ‘IDEAL’	202
The saffron wave in politics	206
Crimes disguised	213
The case of Ayodhya	218
BELIEFS AND BIASES	222
Power	223
Discouraged	227
BLACK ON WHITE AND GLOSSY PRINT	231
A piece of news	231
Saffron in fiction and film	237

7. SACRIFICE	247
‘A BODY IS JUST A BODY’	248
Body and soul	248
‘Are you asking this body or are you asking me?’	253
‘This body is māyā’	255
REPRESSING DESIRES	258
Celibacy	258
Tapas	260
Penance and self-discipline	266
The disciplined body	267
SURRENDER	269
INTERNAL FIRE	274
8. FACES	277
INDIVIDUAL-OUTSIDE-THE-WORLD?	278
THE WEST AND THE REST	282
The Other	284
A CHARACTER WITH MANY FACES	288
EPILOGUE – The Kumbh Melā	293
‘A CELEBRATION OF DIVINE MADNESS’	294
IMMORTALITY	299
THE GREATEST SPECTACLE OF FAITH	300
17,000 TOILETS, 15,000 STREET LIGHTS, 7,000 SWEEPERS	309
VIRTUAL RELIGION	310
‘KUMBH POLITICS HOTS UP’	313
VIPs AND OTHERS	316
CLEANSING THE SOUL	323
SALVATION	324
Appendix: WHO IS WHO?	329
BIBLIOGRAPHY	335
GLOSSARY	345

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first and immediate feeling of gratitude goes to the sādhus that blessed me with their presence, their time and patience – and not least, their knowledge. Further, I have to express my heartfelt thanks to my field assistant and translator Vinita and her family who were always there for me when I needed them. Of great importance to my work has also been Cecilie Glomseth who has studied Hindi at the University of Oslo and at the Banaras Hindu University. Cecilie assisted me with translations, both in India and in Norway, and also guided me through matters within Hinduism and gave useful remarks to my writing as it progressed. In India, I also owe my regards to Govind Bābā, a former Canadian with more than twenty-five years' experience of living as a sādhu in India. Not only did he introduce me to sādhus, ashrams and temples, he also read and discussed with me drafts of my chapters. Varanasi hides more human jewels. One of these is Hanne, a Danish friend settled in Varanasi with her husband Santosh and their daughter Astha. Hanne assisted me in different and valuable ways. For instance, during my stays in Norway she gathered relevant articles from newspapers and newsmagazines for me, and she and her family have otherwise been of great support in good and bad times, during periods of illness and homesickness as well as in cheerful moments of pure happiness. I am grateful to Richard, or Nehru-jī (now also known as 'El Tropical', the Salsa King of Amager), manager of Amar Bhavan where I was staying during my research. In Varanasi, I also owe my thanks to Mrs. Kumar who gave me Hindi-lessons during the first months of field work. Last, but not least, I have to express my deep respect, admiration and gratitude to my dear friend Farooq, his beautiful daughters, his wife and the rest of his family. Ever since our meeting during my first field work in Varanasi in 1993 Farooq has been a close and dear friend, without whom Varanasi would have appeared in a quite different light.

At the different stages of thinking, planning, fieldworking, analysing and writing, I have benefited greatly from guidance and advice from my supervisors – Solrun Williksen, Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the Norwegian University of

Science and Technology (NTNU), and Harald Tambs-Lyche, Professor of Ethnology at the University of Picardie, Amiens, France. Without their constructive guidance and support, it would have taken me a lot more time and effort to complete this dissertation. I would also like to thank Head of Department of Social Anthropology at NTNU, Associate Professor Harald Aspen, for his kind cooperation.

There are also others who have provided valuable and useful remarks that in different respects have contributed to the dissertation's progression. I will especially express my gratitude to Knut Movik, who read a draft of the dissertation with great enthusiasm, and to my colleagues Linda Dyrliid, Anne-Sigfrid Grønseth, Hans Hadders and Malin Noem. I am also grateful to Bodil Fremstad who let me use some of her brilliant photographs, and to Nancy Frank for careful editing of my language.

It should also be mentioned that this dissertation would never have materialised without grants from the Norwegian Research Council and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Finally, I want to thank Erik – who in every imaginable way has been of invaluable support to me while working on this project. Without his company, assistance, advice, suggestions, corrections, admiration, and gentle massage of tense shoulders, it would not only have taken me a lot more time and effort to complete this dissertation, but it would hardly have been half the fun to do so.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In transliterating Hindi words and sentences, I have, because most of my informants spoke Hindi, generally applied Hindi forms rather than Sanskrit – which means that I have dropped the final ‘a’ in, for example, ‘Śiv(a)’, ‘Rām(a)’, and ‘Kumbh(a)’. I have mainly applied the pattern of transliteration given by R.S. McGregor’s *Hindi-English Dictionary* (1997). However, I have made exceptions as to Sanskrit words which today have become part of the common English language as, for example, ‘dharma’, ‘karma’, and ‘yoga’.

I transliterate the names of my informants, but I have chosen not to transliterate geographic names like Varanasi, Allahabad, etc.; I have chosen to transliterate the names of more mythological places as, for instance, the name of the most sacred part of Varanasi, Kāśī – the city of light.

The various methods of transliteration practised by different authors have produced a great variety of spellings of what is, in fact, one word carrying a determined meaning. For instance, while I write ‘svāmī’ (master, lord, king – one of the titles used to address Hindu ascetics), others spell it as ‘swami’; where I write ‘saṃnyāsī’ others write ‘sannyasi’ or even ‘sannyasin’, and ‘darśan’ is by some written ‘darsan’, etc.

Diacritical marks are applied both in the text and in the glossary, although I have chosen not to use italics to mark out transliterated words. Indian, transliterated words are pluralised in the text in the English manner by adding an ‘s’. The glossary is primarily meant as an aid to the reader not familiar with all the Hindi words in the text, and it offers a general explanation, often that given by McGregor (1997).

ILLUSTRATIONS

If not otherwise stated, both text and photo are by Lise Bjerkan.

Photographs

Cover page: From top left: Smoking sādhu in Pashupatinath, Nepal; Svāmī Rāmānand, Mumukṣu Bhavan; Mahākāl on his throne during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad; a sādhu contemplating in the old quarters of Varanasi; another sādhu enjoying a quiet moment during the hot mid-day hours in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu; Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) doing yoga; a colourful sādhu in Pashupatinath, Nepal; Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth, Mumukṣu Bhavan; sādhu at Durbar Square in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Plate 1: A young sādhu demonstrates some of his skills (Pashupatinath, Nepal).

Plate 2: An elderly man in a temple in Varanasi.

Plate 3: View of Varanasi's main bathing ghāṭ from the river.

Plate 4: During Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri's (Mahārāj) stay in Norway (spring/summer 2000), I recalled that I had seen him before – years ago. I looked through my slides, and found him smiling towards my camera in the streets of Varanasi during the last half of 1993.

Plate 5: A boat with Daṇḍī Svāmīs on the Gaṅgā in Varanasi. (Photo by Bodil Fremstad)

Plate 6: Mahākāl performs a fire-ritual during night.

Plate 7: Kaṭhiyā Bābā during pañc agni. (Photo by Bodil Fremstad)

Plate 8: Svāmī Śaśi Śekhara Bhārātī.

Plate 9: A sādhu with long, matted hair in an advanced yoga posture (Pashupatinath, Nepal).

Plate 10: Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (wearing ashes) with his son Rām in Varanasi.

- Plate 11: Vaiṣṇav sādhus in a tent during the Maghā Melā in Allahabad, January 1999.
- Plate 12: Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj).
- Plate 13: A picture of Ramakrishna in Dr. Dīdī's office.
- Plate 14: Two of Svāmī Ūmānand's disciples on the roof of his ashram.
- Plate 15: Svāmī Śaśi Śekhar Bhārātī.
- Plate 16: A cow tries to eat the mat I sit on during an interview with Svāmī Śaśi Śekhar Bhārātī.
- Plate 17: Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) and his son Rām in Oslo.
- Plate 18: Mahārāj with his wife and son on the roof of their ashram in Varanasi.
- Plate 19: Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth, Mumukṣu Bhavan.
- Plate 20: The daṇḍā.
- Plate 21: Īśvarmaṭh – the gate to the sādhus's residential area in Mumukṣu Bhavan.
- Plate 22: Svāmī Gaṅgānand in the middle.
- Plate 23: Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram reads out his answers.
- Plate 24: Ashok Pandey with Satyā Prakāś.
- Plate 25: Satyā Prakāś's room.
- Plate 26: Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth's daṇḍā on the wall of his room.
- Plate 27: Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth with his wooden cup and plate.
- Plate 28: Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth.
- Plate 29: Vinita with Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth and Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth.
- Plate 30: Rām Sanehi Trivedī.
- Plate 31: Svāmī Rāmānand.
- Plate 32: Svāmī Rāmānand with Govind Bābā and some young students.
- Plate 33: A smoking sādhu in Pashupatinaht, Nepal.
- Plate 34: Kāśīnāth.
- Plate 35: Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri, mahant of Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram.
- Plate 36: Svāmī Ānandānand, secretary of Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram.
- Plate 37: Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj, mahant of Sumeru

Maṭh.

- Plate 38: Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj.
- Plate 39: Mahant Itvār Giri.
- Plate 40: Two colourful sādhus in Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Plate 41: Illustration from *Outlook*, July 3, 2000:21.
- Plate 42: Illustration from *Outlook*, May 8, 2000.
- Plate 43: Miniature of the Rām temple displayed at the Kumbh Melā.
- Plate 44: Svāmī Jyotirānand in his office.
- Plate 45: Śārādā Hṛday.
- Plate 46: Śārādā Hṛday and some of the young girls who attend the ashram school.
- Plate 47: A young sādhu doing pañc agni during the hot hours of midday.
- Plate 48: The entrance of Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti Maṭh.
- Plate 49: Vinita and Rāmjī in his room.
- Plate 50: Kaṭhiyā Bābā and his disciples during pañc agni. (Photo by Bodil Fremstad)
- Plate 51: A colourful sādhu in Pashupatinath, Nepal.
- Plate 52: Two cheerful sādhus in Pashupatinath, Nepal.
- Plate 53: Mahākāl at his camp during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad.
- Plate 54: View of a small part of the bathing area during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad.
- Plate 55: Sādhus proceeding from the Saṅgam during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad.
- Plate 56: Crowds of pilgrims walking towards Kumbh Nagar.
- Plate 57: A part of the sandy melā area.
- Plate 58: Pilgrims drying their clothes in the wind after a bath.
- Plate 59: Devotees watching the 'royal procession' during one of the most auspicious bathing days; Maunī Amāvasyā.
- Plate 60: Scenes of the procession.
- Plate 61: Scenes of the procession.
- Plate 62: A triśūl (trident) planted in the sand at the melā ground.
- Plate 63: Glimpses of one of the immensely crowded trains we passed while going

from Allahabad back to Varanasi.

Plate 64: A Vaiṣṇav sādhu at the Kumbh Melā.

Plate 65: A sādhu contemplating in the old quarters of Varanasi.

Plate 66: A chat at the ghāṭs of the Gaṅgā in Varanasi.

Plate 67: An elderly sādhu enjoying a quiet moment during the hot mid-day hours in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu.

ENCOUNTERING THE HOLY



Plate 2

– an extended preface



Plate 3

What is it about India and Varanasi, this holy city on the bank of the Gaṅgā, that has made me return, again and again? It is definitely not the freezing cold temperatures during mid-winter, nor is it the dry heat at spring, or the wet and humid months of the monsoon. It also has nothing to do with the bottomless poverty – the beggars half-eaten by leprosy pushing what once was an arm through the open window of my cab. It is not the constant power failures, the dirt, the touts, the diarrhoea, or the souvenirs. What is it then? For ten years I've been asking myself this question without yet having come to know the answer. 'Mother India', I have realised, raises more questions than she provides answers, and it could simply be that it is this infinite roundabout of questions begging for answers that makes some of us return – over and over again.

India is a continent of paradoxes and contradictions – desperate poverty and immense wealth, purity and impurity, caste and class, heat and cold, monsoon and drought, mosques and temples, ahimsā and violence, secularism and fanaticism, sacred cows and holy men. Enigmatic customs and practices, raise an apparently never-ending line of questions with either no answers or a multitude of them.

In the pages to follow, I will try to shed light on one of the cultural and religious traditions that I find fascinating in this country of contrasts. What I have in mind is the practice of renunciation, a life-style adopted by men and women of all ages. These

holy figures, dressed in saffron (some also in white, red or black), have left the material world behind in order to devote their thoughts and actions – their beings – to matters of a higher spiritual nature and, in this way, to prepare themselves to leave their bodies. They have left behind the world of domestic demands, obligations and dependency and entered what is often described as a state of peace (śānti) and eternal happiness.¹

IN THE DOMAIN OF THE SAFFRON

During my stays in Varanasi, I have experienced a growing fascination with and curiosity as to the saffron-robed men and women who are so visible in the streets and on the ghāṭs of this city – sacred to Hindus. My curiosity concerns most of all their life experiences and personal histories, their individual turns and thoughts of life. In October 1998 I set out to explore this field in greater detail. I established Varanasi as my field base, as it had been five years earlier when I did a field research related to elderly Hindus' thoughts and perceptions of death and afterlife. Among the elderly Hindus I interviewed then, were some sādhus, and my encounters with them contributed to feed my curiosity about these saffron-robed figures. Although sādhus, in general, throughout my research, have become 'demystified' and gradually taken on more 'human' faces, I am still struck by the dignity and charisma visible in sādhus at peace with themselves and their surroundings. However, as I will also show in following chapters, it seems to be a fact that the sādhu way of life is chosen by some on the basis of pragmatic or even speculative, rather than spiritual, aims and biases. One of my aims has been to pass on a 'sober' image of sādhus, without removing 'the sādhu' from his elevated throne of respect and dignity. My main efforts have been directed towards moving behind stereotype images of 'the sādhu' in order to present this figure in all its diversity.

¹ These holy men and women, or renunciators, are called by a number of different terms. Sādhu is a common general term, as is svāmī, bābā, saṃnyāsī (fem. saṃnyāsini) (transcribed according to McGregor 1997). For further details see 'Labels of saffron' (chapter one).

My initial fieldwork started in October 1998 and continued for six – seven months. I spent most of the time in Varanasi, but I also visited the Maghā Melā in Allahabad in January 1999, and Pashupatinath in Nepal – sacred to Lord Śiv. During the spring 2000, I returned to Varanasi for a month to re-interview some of the sādhus I had known, and also to make a number of new interviews. My last stay, in order to complete the research for this project, took place before and during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad in January 2001.

Of great importance to my understanding of this complex field, were the months I spent in the company of Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) in Oslo, Norway. I first encountered Mahārāj in the Jūnā Akhārā in Varanasi at an early stage of my fieldwork (1998). Soon I also got to know Umā, who was to become his wife and the mother of his son. During the spring 2000, Mahārāj left for Norway, where his wife and son had settled. My luck in this way provided me with the unique opportunity of everyday life interaction with a sādhu and his family, in my own neighbourhood, for four rich and enlightening months.

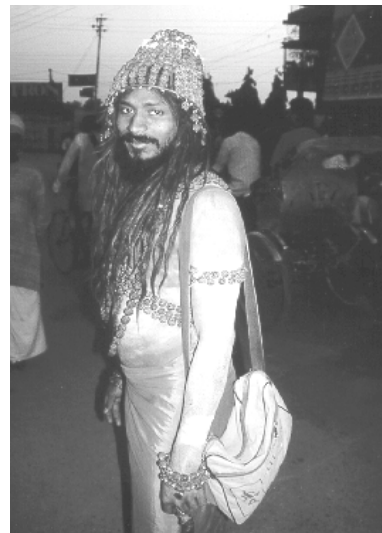


Plate 4:

During Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri's (Mahārāj) stay in Norway (spring/summer 2000), I recalled that I had seen him before – years ago. I looked through my slides, and found him smiling towards my camera in the streets of Varanasi during the last half of 1993.

SPEAKING ONE'S OWN MIND

Although India is a well-described field within the social sciences, the Indian *sādhus* still seem to be draped in a veil of mystery. Wendy Sinclair-Brull, author of one of the most recently published anthropological books on renunciation (1997), states that '[...] although Hindu society has been intensively studied by sociologists/anthropologists from the perspective of the householder, the *saṃnyāsīn* and in particular the *saṃnyāsīn* Orders have been almost entirely ignored' (Sinclair-Brull 1997:1).² According to Sinclair-Brull, the by now more than thirty-year-old theories and concepts of Louis Dumont about the Indian renouncer have until recently been left undisturbed 'through the power of the mystique surrounding the *saṃnyāsīn*, and the lack of ethnographical data of the *saṃnyāsīn* within his social context' (ibid.:2). Although I believe Sinclair-Brull is right as to the relative lack of ethnographical data on *sādhus*, there are yet a number of books that should be taken into consideration:

G.S. Ghurye's *Indian Sadhus* (1953) is a detailed book offering a clearly set out survey of Hindu asceticism and ascetics from its origin until the time of writing. Ghurye's book both introduced me to and guided me through the quite confusing landscape of renunciation within Hinduism. I found David M. Miller's and Dorothy C. Wertz's monograph about the monks and monasteries of Bhubaneswar in Orissa (*Hindu Monastic Life*, 1976), based on field research conducted by Miller in 1963-64, inspirational both in form and its content. As to form, I appreciated their use of life histories – 'in order to give the reader an idea of the great variety of lifestyles possible in Hindu asceticism' (Miller and Wertz 1976:17). The life histories presented in the book 'include some that typify traditional views about *sādhus* and some that are distinctly atypical as evidence that not all ascetics are bound by tradition' (ibid.:17). I found Miller's and Wertz' book especially inspiring as they apparently share my fascination with the great variety to be found among Indian *sādhus*. They declare that the most interesting aspects of Hindu monasticism 'are found in the varied types of

² By '*saṃnyāsīn* Orders' Sinclair-Brull refers to the formal structure and organisations among *sādhus*.

individual ascetics rather than in the social structures of the monasteries they inhabit' (Miller and Wertz 1976:17). Further, they remark that the emphasis put upon the individual search for salvation within Hindu asceticism, 'allows for almost as many lifestyles as there are persons searching for salvation' (ibid.:17). B.D. Tripathi's book *Sadhus of India. The Sociological View* (1978), is another book which has to be mentioned when speaking of Indian sādhus. Despite Tripathi's constant use of statistics, this book, based on an examination of 100 monasteries in Uttar Pradesh, offers quite some useful information even to someone like me (who shuns statistics). Robert Lewis Gross' book *The Sadhus of India* (1992) is based on his field research in North India from 1969-73. Through an examination of sādhus' life styles, religious beliefs, rituals and symbolism, Gross attempts to grasp and understand some of the essence of Hindu renunciation 'in its contemporary setting' (Gross 1992:5). Gross presents parts of ten ascetic life histories in order to give an idea of 'the human concerns prompting certain members of Indian society to opt for a life of renunciation' (ibid.:5).

Among the more recent published books about Indian sādhus, two beautiful books inspired me both by their pictures and their detailed ethnographic descriptions: Rajesh and Ramesh Bedi's book *Sadhus. The Holy Men of India* (1991), and Dolf Hartsuiker's book *Sādhus. Holy Men of India*. (1993). Rajesh Bedi is a photographer, and Ramesh Bedi is a journalist who for more than fifty years has been studying the way of life of sādhus. Dolf Hartsuiker is a Dutch psychologist with a fascination for Indian sādhus. Anthropologists have also made recent contributions related to renunciation. Some of these are: Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels* (1989); Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth* (1988), and Wendy Sinclair-Brull, *Female Ascetics* (1997). These books have all, in different respects, inspired me and been fruitful to my research and my writing. I found Narayan's book especially inspiring because of the close and sincere portrait it draws of 'Swamiji' – who throughout the book is only referred to by this generic term for a holy man, 'blurring certain markers that would identify and locate him' (Narayan 1989:10). Sinclair-Brull and Van der

Veer's books, and also Narayan's book, I found theoretically interesting as it seems to me they all share some of my desire to move beyond the 'ideal' notion of renunciation.

My own anthropological biases I recognise in Peter Van der Veer's argument that we, rather than limiting our research to values, should look at behaviour (Van der Veer 1988). I also appreciate the way he sees concepts ('purity', for instance) in a social context – as taking 'different meanings in different social and historical settings' (ibid.:xv), rather than being entirely determined by an elusive 'Hindu tradition' (ibid.). In a similar way I have tried to grasp sādhus' ideas of the brāhmaṇical interpretation of concepts like saṃsār, māyā, and karma, rather than taking them for granted. In this respect, I also embrace Roger M. Keesing's idea of knowledge as '*distributed and controlled*' (Keesing 1987:161):

Cultures as texts, I will argue, are differently read, differently construed, by men and women, young and old, experts and nonexperts, even in the least complex societies. An anthropology that takes cultures to be collective creations, that reifies them into texts and objectifies their meanings, disguises and even mystifies the dynamics of knowledge and its uses. (ibid.:161)

Both Keesing and Van der Veer hold the dimension of power to be essential to any understanding of religion; I support this view, as aspects of the ascetic, religious sphere in India today are quite heavily influenced by political power-games. Van der Veer is critical of Clifford Geertz' contribution to the study of religion for the reason that Geertz' work 'appears to be one of the best examples of the tendency to divorce the study of meaning from that of power' (Van der Veer 1988:45). Van der Veer's intention is, 'in a general and theoretical sense', to study 'the intricate texture of the changing relations between power and religious meaning' (ibid.:51). He sees religion as politically organised, and warns against divorcing the content of religious symbols from this political organisation as these (the religious beliefs and experiences) 'have in a way their own force and pattern of change which affect the organization of those who live by them' (ibid.:52). Although he agrees with Geertz about the importance of trying to find out 'what the actors think they are up to' (ibid.:52), he argues that in any

interpretation of their meaningful actions we ‘have to pay attention to their power and interests’ (ibid.:52).

I see my contribution to the existing literature on renunciation as an effort to let sādhus speak their own minds; only minor attention has been paid to the religious scriptures of Hinduism and brāhmaṇical interpretations of these. My main driving force has been curiosity about the lives of strangers and a desire to get access to their life-experiences, as these are interpreted and narrated by themselves in their own words. I have, to the best of my ability, reproduced the interpretations presented to me as these were worded.³

HANDLING THE FIELD

To be one and to know one ...

Vinita and I arrived Śrī Śārādā Maṭh, the female branch of Ramakrishna Mission in Varanasi, about 3.30 in the afternoon. We entered an office-like room where a middle-aged saṃnyāsin welcomed us. Vinita introduced me and explained the purpose of our visit. Soon a similar-looking (white-coloured, close-cropped hair), English-speaking saṃnyāsin entered the room. She refused to tell us her name but told us to call her Mātājī. When I explained to her that I was doing research on renunciation, she responded immediately: ‘You want to know about renunciation? Well, then you’ll have to become a renouncer yourself!’ For a few seconds she looked at me – seriously – until she burst into laughter and said: ‘I’m just teasing you!’ Her joke gave me an opportunity to take my message further. I said: ‘You are right. To be fully able to

³ Clifford Geertz has wisely expressed that anthropological writings ‘are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a “native” makes first order ones: it’s *his* culture.)’ (Geertz 1973:15). Geertz adds in a footnote that informants frequently construct what are called ‘native models’ – second order interpretations. This, along with anthropological works based on other anthropological works, may be said to have created a complex ‘order problem’ (ibid.).

understand renouncers, or even to be able to write about renunciation, I should have become a renouncer myself. However, I cannot do that. This would be a far too difficult decision for me to make, and that is why I am dependent on others – on those who actually have left the world behind. I am dependent on their agreement to involve me in their stories, their thoughts and experiences.’ She nodded, silently, and asked to see my questionnaire.

This particular *saṃnyāsin* was probably right. In order fully to understand renunciation and renouncers, perhaps I should have been one myself – despite what Geertz once said about not having to be one to know one (Geertz 1983). I will never know for sure. There were mainly ethical, but also practical, reasons why I never even considered the option of becoming ‘one of’ the renouncers I wanted to get to know. There are, however, anthropologists who have ‘become’ one in order to ‘know’ – in order to grasp the perspective of ‘the natives’. Robert Lewis Gross, for instance, was initiated into a group of *sādhus*⁴: ‘Ultimately’, he writes, ‘going on their “trip” led me to take initiation from a guru⁵ into an ascetic order’ (Gross 1992:91). As I doubt the ethical aspect of going this far – simply to get access to relevant data and to transform ‘experience-distant’ concepts into ‘experience-near’, I never considered such a trip as an alternative (Geertz 1983:57).⁶

Gross explains that the religious orders and sects of the *sādhus* were closed, and this was his reason for being initiated. He realised that in order to become one of the *sādhus* he was observing, he would have to achieve the same status. This, of course,

⁴ The Indian sociologist, B.D. Tripathi was also initiated as an ascetic, first as a Śaiva ascetic and later as a Vaiṣṇav ascetic, in order to ‘make the present work authentic and reliable’ (Tripathi 1978:7).

⁵ A guru is a guide or supervisor – mainly in spiritual, but sometimes also in practical matters. Any *sādhu* who has disciples (householders or *sādhus*), is normally addressed by these (and sometimes also by others) as ‘guruji’.

⁶ ‘An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, and ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims’ (Geertz 1983:57).

would only be possible via a ritual initiation. Gross was in search of access – access to desired information. He saw the solution of taking initiation from a *sādhu* as ‘a logical outgrowth of the direction in which I had been going and seemed to be a potentially effective research strategy’ (Gross 1992:92). At this point he had no guru, and this also bothered him as it made his status among the *sādhus* ambiguous. ‘I was tolerated but not fully accepted’, he declares (ibid.:91-92). During his first nine months in the field, he spent time with different *sādhus* in Varanasi, and he also visited other religious centres in India. Despite this interaction with *sādhus* he felt as an ‘outsider’ looking in: ‘I was perplexed about how to approach getting a closer and more of an “insider’s” perspective on the *sādhus*’ (ibid.:92). It seems as if Gross saw no other concerns regarding being initiated into an ascetic order than the way in which this would influence his research. He says: ‘I was, of course, ambivalent about doing this and speculated as to how it would affect my research’ (ibid.:92). As far as I can see, the ethical aspect is not taken into consideration. There are, in my view, more statements confirming this. Take for instance Gross’s reflections when Bhagwandas, a Vaiṣṇav *sādhu*, offered to give him *dīkṣā* and take him as his disciple: ‘Although I did appreciate Bhagwandas’ magnanimous offer, I was not sure exactly what was involved. Moreover, I really did not believe that I would live forever at his *asrama*, but the opportunity to directly experience an initiation ritual, become his disciple, and possibly develop deeper relationships with him and other *sādhus* in the sect strongly motivated me to accept’ (ibid.:94). Gross accepted – he took *dīkṣā* and became a Vaiṣṇav *sādhu*. This marked a major transition in his field research, but it also involved certain limitations and restrictions: ‘I would like to be able to admit that after my *rite de passage* into a recognized religious sect I had no more problems eliciting data from the ascetics and was fully accepted by them all as a *pakka* (“ripe”; “fully cooked”) *sādhu*. Unfortunately, this was not the case’ (ibid.:95).

The limitations and restrictions he was confronted with were mainly caused by the fact that he, as an initiate in one ascetic group, was restricted from interaction with *sādhus* belonging to other groups. The good part was that he now had access to more *sādhus*, and he could introduce himself to these by pointing at his affiliation with his guru, who

was a fairly well known sādhu. Gradually, as he also started to act more like a sādhu and in this way conformed to their expected role model, he was accepted more readily. His change of identity also had some material implications. It became for instance difficult for him to unite the sādhu role with any extensive use of his camera or tape-recorder, and it also seemed incongruous to take notes: ‘This was inconsistent with the image I was trying to project of myself as a serious aspiring sadhaka (one who is following a spiritual path), and it was diametrically opposed to the ideals of renunciation and the life style and value system of the Indian ascetics’ (ibid.:96-97). The way he clung to his possessions, his camera and tape recorder, made many of his fellow sādhus look upon him as an anomaly: ‘Many of them criticized that if I really was a sādhu and had renounced material life and possessions, why did I have an expensive camera and tape-recorder’ (ibid.:97). Sādhus who questioned Gross about his attachment to material items were told that he needed to take notes and pictures for a book he was writing on Indian religion. Gross summarises his two roles in the field by saying that he was ‘playing the role of an ascetic disciple at the same time being an ethnographer attempting to obtain data on the people who were giving spiritual instructions’ (ibid.:97). There were times when these two roles diverged – and there were times when this divergency was hard to hide. During the celebration of Lord Rām’s birthday in Ayodhya, Gross went with some sādhus to bathe in the sacred river that runs through Ayodhya. Several thousand pilgrims and sādhus had gathered to do the same. Gross took some pictures before he went into the river. While he was busy snapping good shots, someone in the crowd snatched his shoulder-bag from the ground:

I panicked and started to scream out, but it was too late to do anything. In the bag, besides my passport and all the money I had with me at the time, were several field notebooks filled with data, about two dozen research photographs with their negatives, and a number of ritual items given to me by the sādhus the day before. I was completely devastated. When the sādhus I was with returned from the river, they asked me what had happened. Their response is crucial. They laughed and said that the thief was Bhagawan (“Lord”) Rama who has come to give me blessings and teachings about my attachment to material things. Their interpretation of the

situation, unfortunately, was not very consoling to me since I was still very much attached, particularly to my notebooks. (ibid.:107)

The forgotten past

Svami Jaydevānand, who for thirty years has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan, said:

Everything happens according to God's wish. It is all in our luck. It does not depend on us, it all depends on God. Everything is decided by God, previous to our births. After birth we are actors in God's līlā, actors in a play. If you become a saṃnyāsī, God will fulfil all your wishes.

Before he came to Varanasi to take saṃnyās, Svami Jaydevānand had been a brahmacārī in Bihar. I tried to ask him about his childhood, about the life he had lived before he became a brahmacārī. Immediately he responded: 'You should not ask a saṃnyāsī about his family. If I tell you about my family, I will get disturbed. My concentration will be spoiled. My thoughts will be with my family, and I will feel sad. Never ask me about my family!'⁷ Also Svāmī Ūmānand and Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram warned me not to ask sādhus about matters related to their former lives. Yet, they both gave me glimpses of their own life histories. Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram said: 'A saṃnyāsī is not bound to tell anything about his former life. He will be angry if you ask him, but to satisfy your curiosity I will tell you something. I am a bachelor and my age is close to eighty ...' Svāmī Ūmānand told me about his former life and his decision to renounce the world, but at the same time told me that most sādhus would never have told me this much, or anything at all, about their family and former life. 'The life of a saṃnyāsī is regarded as a rebirth', he said, 'a new birth where the previous births are forgotten.'

⁷ (merā dhyān calā jāegā hamko dukh hogā)

The saṃnyāsins in Sant Ashram were more reluctant to let me know anything about the lives they had left behind. The first time Vinita and I visited the ashram, we rang the bell at the gate just before five in the afternoon. A man opened the gate and let us in. We were invited to sit down in the temple, and were soon accompanied by an elderly saṃnyāsin. When Vinita explained to her the purpose of our visit, she suggested that we ask the only English-speaking saṃnyāsin of the ashram to come and talk to us. We did, and a few minutes later a beautiful, middle-aged woman appeared. She was dressed in a white sari, under which she wore a woollen jumper. It was November and very chilly both outside and inside the ashram. The saṃnyāsin had a squint in her left eye and wore glasses. I told her, in English, about my research and showed her my questionnaire. She looked briefly through the first page and gave answers to some of my questions. I noticed that she was reluctant to reveal anything of personal character. She also refused to let me use my tape recorder because, as she said: ‘When you talk like this, so many unnecessary words are spoken.’ Vinita tried to explain to her the importance of her words: ‘The words may seem unnecessary to you, but they are not to her’ (she pointed at me), but arguments got us nowhere.

During our last visit to the Sant Ashram, one of the saṃnyāsins called Vinita outside and told her, in Hindi, that none of the saṃnyāsins wanted to discuss matters related to their ‘previous’ lives. Vinita replied that of course we would respect that and emphasised that we would be happy simply to get some knowledge of life in the ashram. The saṃnyāsin replied:

All day long we do pūjā, etc.; we are very busy and have no time even to go out of the ashram. Gurujī is very strict on the time; she always keeps a watch with her.⁸ ‘Guru-Mā’ is our mother, our father, our everything. We don’t go to see our family members. If they want to come to see us, they are welcome to do that. Myself, I have sisters, but I don’t think of them. We have left that life behind and forgotten about it.

⁸ I had actually noticed that she kept a big alarm clock in front of her in the temple.

‘The past is forgotten’ – this statement was repeated by almost every sādhu that I met. However, as my meetings with Svāmī Ūmānand and Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram indicate, some sādhus were more willing to recall some of this forgotten past than others.

The stories people told me about their lives became the main vehicle of my research – both in my methodological approach to the field and in the process of converting the field experiences into written text. In the completed text, these stories are allowed to emerge as pillars – or as girders, so to speak – through which I present my argument. Such a presentation of pieces of life histories is often described with the term ‘narrative’; Nigel Rapport describes these as ‘stories people tell about themselves and their worlds’ (Rapport 2000:74), and he applies a method which he calls to ‘describe-analyse’ the narratives he is told (ibid.:75). Although I find Rapport’s way of analysing narratives somewhat too systematic,⁹ I have been inspired by his approach and have also, to a certain extent, adopted aspects of it. I have also found a great deal of inspiration in the ideas of Mattison Mines (1994), who is aware of the values embedded in the stories people tell about their own lives. Mines says that the purpose of his research ‘has been to explore the nature of individuality in Tamil society’ (ibid.: 149); and, he argues, in order to grasp the interconnectedness and interaction among ‘the manifested public individual (what is known about the individual), the social being (the fabric of the individual’s social ties), and the inner voice’ (ibid.: 149) – which all are ‘components and dimensions of everyone’s individuality’ (ibid.: 149) – we have to listen to ‘the stories people tell about their own lives’ (ibid.: 149):

Each person carries these dimensions of private identity and must work out his or her own orchestration of social and private identification. If we ignore these personal stories, then we ignore the articulation of self, culture, and society that makes each person unique and individuation possible. But we also deny the active agency of the subject in the making of culture, society, and consciousness. (ibid.:149-50)

⁹ Rapport isolates different recurring themes in a narrative and numbers each of these themes, whereas I would have chosen a more literary way of presenting the analysis.

According to Gross (1992), the life history approach is necessary in order to learn about sādhus: ‘I realized that personal biographies would provide information about the sādhus not readily available in any other way’ (ibid.:97). This is in accordance with Anthony Paul Kerby’s statement saying that narrative emplotment ‘appears to yield a form of understanding of human experience, both individual and collective, that is not directly amenable to other forms of exposition or analysis’ (Kerby 1991:3). Kerby also says that because narratives ‘articulate not just isolated acts but whole sequences of events or episodes, thereby placing particular events within a framing context or history’ (ibid.:3), it is generally acknowledged that ‘our understanding of other cultures and persons is primarily gained from, and in the form of, narratives and stories about and by those peoples’ (ibid.:3). Gross, as I did, faced challenges in applying the life history (narrative) approach to the reality surrounding him. He admits that it was often both difficult and time consuming to gather life histories, and he says that he never managed to fulfil his ambition as to the number and quality of recorded biographies. According to himself, many of those he did record are ‘just brief sketches pieced together from various statements a particular sādhu told me about his life’ (ibid.:98). Gross further admits that it often took him several months ‘to find out anything about a sādhu’s past history; with a few it took nearly two years before they discussed lives in any depth; others refused to divulge anything about themselves’ (ibid.:98).¹⁰

Ideally, sādhus have renounced everything that could possibly attach them to their former identity. They have left behind their homes and families, performed their own funeral rites, changed names and clothes – in short, devoted their lives to extinguishing attachments, desires, and ego. Their superior aim is to terminate their attachment to the material, social world – the world of illusion (māyā), and to get mokṣ (release). In this perspective, it seems absurd to ask these men and women to memorise and regurgitate a life left behind, lived by a person with whom they no longer consider themselves to have any affiliation. Gross remarks: ‘My attempt to record their life histories and fix

¹⁰ Narratives, or life histories, will be further discussed in chapter five (see ‘Construction through narrative’).

their identities was completely antithetical to their commitment of a systematic dissolution of ego consciousness' (ibid.:99-100). Soon, he also discovered that it was inappropriate to probe into the sādhus' personal lives and affairs: 'In fact, it is a cultural convention *not* to inquire about the personal life and past background of a holy man or saint, and it is considered disrespectful to do so' (ibid.:98). However, it is also a fact that there are sādhus who have specific reasons for not wanting anyone to dig into their pasts. What I have in mind are those who are disguised in saffron in order to hide from a criminal record – and the police. In most cases, though, the unwillingness to talk about the past should be understood by reference to their efforts in detaching themselves from their egos. As Gross correctly states: '[...] the entire cultural complex of asceticism and renunciation, which is orientated toward the transcendence of ego consciousness, militates against attachment to a sense of personal history' (ibid.:100).

Research among sādhus also involves other challenges, whereof one concerns the sādhus' itinerant lifestyle. Gross tells that he faced no difficulty finding sādhus along the river bank or in a monastic institution, but difficulties 'arose in trying to structure interviews with them and in attempting to develop long-term relationships. Since many of them had no fixed residence and were highly mobile, there was the serious issue of having no "control" over the research population' (ibid.:84). To me, this raises interesting questions as to the idea of 'the anthropological fieldwork' – as it was created and baptised on an isolated island by Bronislaw Malinowski almost a century ago. I believe George Stocking is right in describing the works of Malinowski as 'mythopoeic', 'because they set out a grandly heroic and vivid image of fieldwork against which later anthropologists measured themselves' (Stocking 1983:110). Further, I applaud the following remark by Michael Carrithers: 'In sober fact, fieldwork can take as many forms as there are anthropologists, projects, and circumstances' (Carrithers 1998:229). My own fieldwork among sādhus in Varanasi,¹¹ both in terms of techniques and challenges, necessarily took on another character than a fieldwork like that, for instance, of Jean Briggs (1970) who spent seventeen months

¹¹ Only a few of my informants were itinerant – the majority were resident in local ashrams.

with a family group of Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, 150 miles from other humans – or, for that matter, that of Malinowski. As I never considered becoming a *sādhu* myself, the degree of participant observation practicable was naturally bound to be limited to certain contexts and occasions. Mostly, I relied on semi-structured interviews and informal talks with *sādhus* that I either simply happened to meet, or consciously searched for in an ashram. In order to follow them over some time, I tried to see some of the same *sādhus* during each of my stays in Varanasi in the period from 1998 – 2001. However, there were always someone on a pilgrimage or otherwise hard to locate, so this was not always practicable.¹² I estimate the total number of *sādhus* that I have had talks with to be approximately fifty – sixty. As some of these were only brief encounters, I have included the names of thirty-six of these in the appendix (‘Who is Who?’). Naturally, the majority of these are men, but I have also included five female *sādhus* (*saṃnyāsins*) in this overview – which, I believe, is a relatively high percentage compared to the actual proportion of male versus female *sādhus*. Among the number of brief encounters not listed in the appendix, are also female *sādhus* from two ashrams mentioned above (Śrī Śārādā Maṭh and Sant Ashram).¹³

Because the issue of gender was never emphasised as a matter of particular importance by the *sādhus* themselves, I have not paid specific attention to differences or similarities between female and male *sādhus*. Although there is no doubt that asceticism is a male-dominated arena, there are a number of female *sādhus* either living on their own, with their guru (male or female), or residing in a female ashram. Several monastic orders, as for instance the Ramakrishna Mission, have both a male and a female branch of ashrams. I also find it worth mentioning that in India there have been, and still are, a number of well-known female spiritual leaders and gurus.

¹² For instance, one of the *sādhus* I met in 1998, and had hoped to see again when I returned during the spring 2000, had left his ashram because he had made a woman pregnant. As none of the other *sādhus* in the ashram knew where I could locate him, I was not able to continue my talks with him.

¹³ See ‘To be one and to know one ...’ and ‘The forgotten past’.

Historically Ānandāmāi (1896 – 1983)¹⁴ and Śrī Ramakrishna’s wife, Śrī Śārādā Devī (Holy Mother) (1853 – 1920), are two of the most renowned.

THE ART OF COMMUNICATION

What sort of command of the local language should be expected from an anthropologist in the field? Bronislaw Malinowski in the early 1920s launched the ideal of intimate knowledge of the local language (1922), and Malinowski’s ideals of field behaviour still seem to be alive. I see these ideals as what they are meant to be – ideals, not practicable truths for today. It is no secret that it takes time to learn a local language properly. Today the circumstances under which most anthropologists work, unfortunately, indicate that only rarely can one find room for language proficiency within the limitations of allocated time and resources. My intention is not to underestimate the value of knowing the local language of one’s field. On the contrary, I want to stress that we should have so much respect for any local language that we stop believing it could be learned in a couple of months. As R.F. Ellen says: ‘Anthropologists are normally expected to “learn the language”, and while most try to do so, many of us feel we fail’ (Ellen 1984:178). Regarding the problem of fulfilling this language-ideal, Ellen remarks that ‘since this means failing to measure up to a publicly required occupational definition, anthropologists have often taken refuge in silence, instead of thinking critically about how to improve language learning in the discipline’ (ibid.:178). As a first step out of this difficulty, Ellen suggests that one tear down the illusory simplicity concerning ‘learning the language’ (ibid.:178):

This is not a single, albeit complex, activity. No “native speaker”, for instance, commands every style, dialect, technical jargon and so forth which is included in the English language. And we should not be narrow-minded about what constitutes a language. Sharing a supposedly common language with informants may sometimes give rise to unwarranted complacency concerning “understanding”. (ibid.:178-79)

¹⁴ For further information, see chapter five (‘Matters of spirituality’).

Ellen remarks that it is ‘as ridiculous to reject interpreters under all circumstances as it is to attempt literary criticism of medieval English literature from scratch, or argue with computer specialists without some preliminary work on their subject’ (ibid.:179). On the other hand, Ellen also sees the danger of having no common language at all – a situation which may create a huge distance between the anthropologist and his informants, no matter the talent of the interpreter. The will to learn the local language, then, is by Ellen characterised as the most important factor concerning the establishment of a close relationship to the informants. I fully agree, but I also see a danger in having an idea of ‘knowing’ the local language. In short, I fall in with Roger M. Keesing who argues that ‘the stuff of talk is deeply ambiguous, amenable to alternate readings’ (Keesing 1987:167). He points out how our intuition assists us in construing meanings in our own language – ‘although it is by no means clear how similar are the constructions we natives place on the same sequences of sound’ (ibid.:167). When communicating in another language than our mother tongue, in a language in which we are not native speakers, ‘the room we have for alternate interpretations expands greatly’ (ibid.:167).

I am not a native Hindi speaker – a fact which, to follow Keesing’s argument, indicates that even with a good command of Hindi I would have run a relatively big risk of misinterpreting aspects of what I was told in the field. For this reason, I never doubted that I needed an assistant – somebody to guide me, not only through the language, but also through the wider context of Hinduisim, which, like the language, is immensely complex. For cultural reasons I wanted this person to be a woman, and due to the nature of my research she needed to be a Hindu. In the neighbouring house I found Vinita, who not only was a woman and a Hindu (of the Brāhmaṇ caste), but who was also well-educated and had experience from similar work. On several occasions she had worked with scholars involved in research whose topics had been related to mine. Vinita not only knew the location of a number of ashrams in Varanasi, but she had also previously met some of the sādhus that we went to see. I believe the fact that these sādhus both recognised her and seemed to carry good memories of their previous

meeting, simplified my access to them on some occasions. These experiences also qualified Vinita in the sense that she was accustomed to being in the presence of sādhus, and knew how to behave with sādhus of different ranks and orders. Due to her experiences, Vinita was not only a translator but also a useful reference and guide for me within the complex Hindu cosmology of contexts and connotations.

I am aware that the fact that Vinita was a Brāhmaṇ could have had some influence on the sādhus' presentation of self. We all remember Gerald Berreman's self-ironic description of his experiences during working with interpreters of different caste and religious affiliation (Berreman 1962), and I can not know whether, or in what way, the stories sādhus shared with us would have been any different if Vinita were, for instance, a low-caste, a Muslim, or a man. My guess, however, is that the fact of Vinita being Brāhmaṇ included us in more settings than it excluded us from. I find it reasonable to believe that if she had been a low-caste or, not to mention, a Muslim, we would not have enjoyed the same kind of trust or patience among all the sādhus, and we would also have run the risk of being excluded from, for example, ashrams like Mumukṣu Bhavan, where only Brāhmaṇs reside. When this is said, I would like to add that a number of my informants had a good command of English. Some of these I visited without being assisted by Vinita, but cultural expectations indicated that scholars should be accompanied by a field assistant, and I therefore preferred to have her company during these meetings also.

Whenever possible, I used a tape recorder during the interviews. Most sādhus were comfortable with this, and it was a great advantage for me to not have to take notes or be worried about remembering what was said. During interviews in Hindi, Vinita continuously translated the essence of what was being said, and we established a routine of going through the tapes the following day to be sure we got details right.

Perceptions and descriptions of a reality

An anthropologist is a person with a distinctive personality – carrying preferences, sympathies, knowledge, and emotions which influence his or her choice of field, topic, and method. This will also influence how and in what way the anthropologist gets access to the social reality he or she wants to describe. A.N.J. den Hollander sees a parallel in the way a painter is reflected in his piece of art: ‘Every painting is to some extent a self-portrait of its maker, it will always contain a certain amount of self-projection. No extreme cases are needed to convince any reader of social descriptions that the authors among themselves show the greatest possible diversity’ (Den Hollander 1967:9). What an anthropologist perceives and understands in the field, and later passes on in the form of a written text, is highly influenced and determined by his personality:

[...] everyone remains dependent on his own personality which means that his descriptive work will always be somewhat like impressionist painting. Romantics will have a particular eye for what is exceptional in a culture whereas realists will note rather what is ordinary and most usual. But even the most realistic person will give a slanted picture of the people he describes. He, too, will achieve not so much the truth as rather a transposition of his own personality. (ibid.:11)

James Clifford has called ethnographies ‘fictions’ for the reason that: ‘It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive’ (Clifford 1986:6). Clifford argues that ethnographic writings can ‘properly be called fictions in the sense of “something made or fashioned,” the principal burden of the word’s Latin root, *fingere*’ (ibid.:6). Ethnographic truths are partial, he goes on to say, ‘committed and incomplete’ (ibid.:6). Clifford realises the threat of this argument to clear standards of verification, but he believes that ‘once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact’ (ibid.:7).¹⁵ Already in the early 1970s, Clifford Geertz described anthropological

¹⁵ What Clifford calls ‘representational tact’, is to me a reminder of the complexity of any interaction or social setting, and of the difficulty of reproducing this complexity in its true being. Clifford

writings as fictions, ‘in the sense that they are “something made,” “something fashioned” – the original meaning of *fictiō* – not that they are false, unfactual, or merely “as if” thought experiments’ (Geertz 1973:15). Geertz blames anthropologists for not always being ‘as aware of as they might be of this fact: that although culture exists in the trading post, the hill forth, or the sheep run, anthropology exists in the book, in the article, the lecture, the museum display, or, sometimes nowadays, the film’ (ibid.:16). ‘To become aware of this’, Geertz says – and here he seems to share some of the thoughts of Den Hollander (1967) – ‘is to realize that the line between mode of representation and substantive content is as undrawable in cultural analysis as it is in painting’ (Geertz 1973:16). According to Geertz, the ‘claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise’ (ibid.:16). This attitude necessarily raises what Geertz calls ‘some serious problems of verification [...] of how you can tell a better account from a worse one’ (ibid.:16). ‘But’, he adds, ‘that is precisely the virtue of it’ (ibid.:16):

If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, then the determining question for any given example of it, whether a field journal squib or a Malinowski-sized monograph, is whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. (Geertz 1973:16)

mentions a book by Richard Price (1983) as an example of such ‘self-conscious, serious partiality’ (Price 1983): ‘Price recounts the specific conditions of his fieldwork among the Saramakas, a Maroon society of Suriname. We learn about external and self-imposed limits to the research, about individual informants, and about the construction of the final written artefact. (This book avoids a smoothed-over, monological form, presenting itself as literally pieced-together, full of holes.)’ (Clifford 1986:7)

It has never been part of my anthropological desires to count the sādhus of Varanasi. Rather, I have been curious to catch a glimpse of the lives of these ‘strangers’ – to get an idea of, exactly, ‘what manner of men are these?’ – and, finally, to pass on my interpretations of it all, as a piece of ‘real life fiction’. In retrospect, looking back at my meetings with different sādhus, I see a mixed bag of characters – each one different and yet united by the act of renouncing the world. In some respects I see traces of a structure – a common idea, a superior aim. In other respects, all I see is an enigmatic variety – deconstructing any idea of ‘the sādhu’ as a somehow predictable figure. On the basis of my encounters with different sādhus, I have tried to outline an idea of sādhus in India today. This idea is created partly from observations and from articles in newspapers and newsmagazines – but mainly from my own interviews, talks, and discussions with different sādhus.¹⁶

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

In the following chapter (chapter one), I will give a more detailed outline of the ethnographical and theoretical aims and intentions of this dissertation. Chapter two explores the meaning of certain key concepts I use in my discussion. Guidelines to renunciation, as these are suggested in Hindu scriptures, will also be introduced here. As one of my main aims by writing this dissertation is to give a presentation of Hindu renunciates ‘in the round and not in the flat’ (Malinowski 1987:ix), chapters three, four and five describe some of the variety of personalities, destinies, and ways of life to be found behind the stereotype of ‘the sādhu’ – or ‘the renouncer.’ Chapter three consists of four different and quite distinctive life histories, whereas chapter four presents a description of Mumukṣu Bhavan, one of the Daṇḍī ashrams in Varanasi. A selection of the ashram’s resident Daṇḍī Svāmīs will be introduced through fragments of their life experiences and glimpses of their thoughts, ideas, and expectations – given me during our talks. Chapter five offers a closer and more systematic look at motives that may

¹⁶ The nature of the narratives I was presented, is further discussed in later chapters. See for instance chapter four (‘Common Denominators’), and chapter five.

precede the final act of renouncing the world. This chapter will be concluded by a discussion of the construction of life histories, or narratives. In chapter six, I have chosen to picture fragments of the context within which Indian sādhus move. My intention is to give an idea of how sādhus are perceived and imagined by their surroundings – their family and close relatives, the general householder, magazines and newspapers, fiction and film. Chapter seven deals with the role of the ascetic body as a means, or vehicle, to achieve mokṣ. Key words of this chapter are ‘sacrifice’, ‘penance’, ‘self-discipline’, and ‘surrender’. The last chapter, chapter eight, gathers thoughts and arguments in a conclusion regarding sādhus and their relation to Indian society. Finally, the epilogue is written as an effort to both summarise and mirror the issues discussed throughout the preceding chapters.

THE FIGURE IN SAFFRON



Plate 5

This world is nothing.

(Saṃsār kuch nahī)

(Vaiṣṇav sādhu, Māghā Melā, Allahabad, 1999)

INDIVIDUALS AND OTHERS

For quite some time I have been fascinated by people who make sudden, radical turns in their lives – people who put their relations, their identity, even their life and career, at risk in order to realise a dream or a longing. To me the Indian renouncer (the *sādhu*) represents such a figure, so the main theme of this dissertation has become Indian *sādhus*' presentation of self.¹⁷ The *sādhu*, ideally, has left behind everything that connects and attaches him to his former identity – the name given him at birth, his caste, his relation to relatives and friends, his profession, any material property, his bodily desires, etc. A break is imposed on his career; his life course has come to a halt. The person he used to be is no more. He has committed 'social suicide' in order to be reborn as a *sādhu*. Thoughts, ideas and practices preceding, surrounding and succeeding such a turn in life form the basis of this dissertation. In particular I have been concerned with *sādhus*' own descriptions of their break with *saṃsār*, the material and profane world, and their entrance into the ascetic 'sphere'. More specifically, I have tried to make *sādhus* describe and explain to me – in their own words – both their experiences of the ascetic life as compared to a life in *saṃsār* and the changes that took place with(in) themselves in the process of leaving the material world behind. My aim, in other words, has been to let *sādhus* speak their own minds. Because I see life histories, or narratives (the stories people tell about their own lives), as the methodological approach best suited both to gather and to convey this kind of information, I have let the *sādhus*' own stories play a major role in the presentation of the material in its completed form.¹⁸

An essential theoretical discussion in this dissertation relates to an ongoing debate within the social sciences concerning the existence of an Indian individual. In referring

¹⁷ By 'self', I mean – as does Anthony Paul Kerby – 'the distinct individual that we usually take ourselves to be, an individual, therefore, that also knows itself to be' (Kerby 1991:4).

¹⁸ I have already discussed my selection of these *sādhus* in the methodological part of the extended preface (see 'The forgotten past'). For a further discussion of life histories (narratives), see 'Construction through narrative' in chapter five.

to this debate I want neither to take sides nor to draw any conclusions, but simply to illuminate aspects of my own ethnographical findings and to place these in a relevant and meaningful context. I will, on the basis of my ethnographical descriptions, propose some reflections on this complex issue. In order to understand the complexities of this discussion one cannot avoid touching upon the theories of Louis Dumont, as these in a sense gave rise to the ongoing debate. I find Dumont's concepts and ideas concerning the renouncer as an 'individual-outside-the-world', released from and opposed to – but still dependent on – the all-encompassing hierarchy of caste, particularly interesting. According to Dumont, the *saṃnyās āśram* is the only refuge for the individual in the Indian holistic-collectivist world. He further characterises the renouncer as an 'individual-outside-the-world', opposed to the 'man-in-the-world' – the householder who is still interwoven in the hierarchy of caste (Dumont 1980:185). In Dumont's view, the householder, unlike the renouncer, is defined by his social existence and functions within the restrictions and boundaries of his social context – the caste system. It is the social restrictions embedded in the caste system which prevent the 'man-in-the-world' from being an individual – he 'exists purely in a network of social relationships, unlike the renouncer who has stepped outside this network' (ibid.:89). As the renouncer is no longer part of the interdependent relationship of caste,¹⁹ he is for Dumont an 'individual-outside-the-world', opposed to the attached 'man-in-the-world' 'who is not an individual' (Dumont 1980:275).

Dumont's theory and concepts have been, and still are, widely debated by scholars working in related fields. One of the scholars who have contributed to this debate is Peter van der Veer, who blames Dumont (and others) for seeing India in the 'orientalist perspective' that penetrates parts of 'the academic community'²⁰ (Van der

¹⁹ 'Now, if we bring together the society on the one hand and the renouncer on the other, we have a whole containing an equilibrium between quite different things: on the one hand a world of strict interdependence, in which the individual is ignored, and, on the other hand, an institution which puts an end to interdependence and inaugurates the individual. In the last analysis the system does not neglect the individual, as the description of the caste system alone would lead one to believe' (Dumont 1980:185-86).

²⁰ 'There can be no doubt that this picture has haunted social research on Indian religion and society from Weber to Dumont' (Van der Veer 1988:53).

Veer 1988:268). Van der Veer describes the orientalist perspective as a perspective stressing the ‘unchanging, transcendent realm of values which serves as a stable and reliable point of orientation’ (ibid.:268):

This realm of values is enshrined in the ancient Sanskrit texts. In the same way, a number of anthropologists also seem to derive their sense of direction from such a beacon. Through intense collaboration with their humanist colleagues, who assist them in the correct interpretation of the sacred texts, these anthropologists think they will succeed in constructing a model that will help them to rise above the maya of their fieldwork notes. (ibid.:268)

The orientalist perspective, Van der Veer goes on to say, ‘has above all led to a picture of Indian society as static, timeless and spaceless, and dominated by the brāhmaṇs as guardians of the sacred order of society’ (ibid.:53). Van der Veer has himself developed an argument contradicting the orientalist perspective. He admits that the study of textual Hinduism (Sanskrit texts) can serve as a tool, but in his view ‘nothing can replace the direct observation of religious practices, the competition in the various arenas and the shifts in the projection of religious identity, as major sources of anthropological information’ (ibid.:268). Peter van der Veer sees Dumont’s reference to the textual tradition within Hinduism as ‘extremely problematic’ (ibid.:56). One reason for this is that the texts chosen as reference ‘are generally taken from the Vedic and Classical periods of Hindu civilization, i.e. texts dating from about 1000 BC to AD 1200’ (ibid.:56). Van der Veer compares this with the study of modern Christianity and points to the foolishness of imagining someone making use of models derived from Biblical texts, interpreted by Saint Augustine, to study the actual behaviour of Calvinists in a Dutch village today. ‘Such a method is based upon the assumption that before the arrival of the Europeans, the traditional society was a kind of ‘frozen’ social reality, in which no changes of any importance occurred. This assumption is, however, entirely mistaken’ (ibid.:56). Another reason why Van der Veer considered Dumont’s reference to the textual tradition within Hinduism as problematic, is the lack of attention to ‘the nature of this material’ (ibid.:56). ‘A text is always a social text, written from a certain point of view which pertains to a certain social group. By selecting texts one may obtain a partial view on the historical

situation’, Van der Veer argues, and adds that Dumont is often accused of only presenting the brāhmaṇ ideology – at the expense of other ideologies, ‘in what Edmund Leach has called his ‘mixture of Vedic ideas and contemporary facts.’ (ibid.:56).

Among the critics of the western scholarship of India is also Ronald Inden (1990), who, as Mines (1994) puts it, has ‘disavowed aspects of his earlier interpretations of India which gave primary emphasis to the caste basis of that society and little credence to the Indian person as the agent of history. Today he prefers instead interpretations of Indian history that emphasize human agency’ (Mines 1994:10). Inden himself, in the introduction to *Imagining India* (1990), declares that one of the purposes of writing the book was to ‘criticize the knowledge of ‘Others’ that Europeans and Americans have created during the periods of their world ascendancy’ (Inden 1990:1):

The specific object of my critique is the Indological branch of ‘orientalist discourse’ and the accounts of India that it has produced since the Enlightenment, but it also takes on the other disciplines that have had a major part in making these constructs of India – the history of religions, anthropology, economics, and political philosophy. (ibid.:1)

As correctly pointed out by Mines, Inden in this book demonstrates a concern with ‘human agency’ – ‘the capacity of people to order their world’ (Inden 1990:1). He argues that the agency of Indians, ‘the capacity of Indians to make their world, has been displaced in those knowledges on to other agents’ (ibid.:5). He further argues that ‘the makers of these knowledges have, in the first instance, displaced the agency of the Indians on to one or more ‘essences’, and in the second instance on to themselves’ (ibid.:5). The essences on to which the agency of Indians has been displaced have, as Inden sees it, been ‘caste, the Indian mind, divine kingship, and the like’ (ibid.:5). The way in which the human sciences have ‘displaced human agency on to essences’ is what Inden sees as ‘the problem with orientalism’ (ibid.:264). Accordingly, the problem ‘is not just one of bias or of bad motives and, hence, confined to itself’ (ibid.:264). Inden reasons that these essences have been applied by western scholars to explain why India ‘lost out’ to the West:

1. THE FIGURE IN SAFFRON

Since the civilization of India has been governed, they assume, by these dubious essences from the moment of its origin, that civilization's place in the world has been, so to speak, predetermined from the beginning. Lacking the essences taken to be characteristic of the West – the individual, political freedom, and science – Indians did not even have the capacity on their own to *know* these essences. They did not, so one would have to conclude, have the capacity to *act* in the world with rationality. (ibid.:5-6)

In order to avoid the orientalist 'trap', Van der Veer suggests a behavioural approach to the field. He suggests that 'instead of limiting our research to values, we should look at behaviour' (Van der Veer 1988:xiv). Van der Veer criticises efforts to develop 'a sociology of values and ideas' (ibid.:55) that requires 'the indological interpretation of those texts in which the Hindu "system of meaning" is laid down' (ibid.:55). In Dumont's works, such efforts led to 'an excessively orientalist perspective which coincides – not to our surprise – with the perspective of the learned Brahmans who were the authors of these texts' (ibid.:55). Although I agree with Van der Veer's critique of Dumont, I find it important to have in mind that Dumont's ideas were developed under social and scientific circumstances quite different from today's. However, this does not imply that there were no critics of Dumont in his own time. In 1957, when Dumont and David F. Pocock started publishing *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, they argued that a co-operation with indologists was necessary in order to grasp the essence of the concepts to be explored within Indian civilisation. Dumont and Pocock brushed aside as naive any study of civilisation on the local level without a knowledge of the foundations of the high-culture (Tambs-Lyche 1996). Even at that time such arguments were not allowed to pass without criticism. One of the critics was F.G. Bailey. His comment to the position taken by Dumont and Pocock in their editorial in the first issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* was: 'If we concern ourselves with activities as well as with values, with what men do as well as what they think, there are certain advantages to be gained' (Bailey 1959:90). Van der Veer's objections to Dumont's theory bear a strong resemblance to Bailey's. In Van der Veer's view, the level of abstraction in Dumont's analysis prevents inclusion of what could be found by observing people's actual behaviour. This objection implies that

Dumont puts too much emphasis on ‘ideal’ categories of which the distinction between the householder and the renouncer is only one example. Van der Veer fears that this distinction, if analysed by Dumont’s structural analysis, simply becomes conceptual dialectics unable to include, for instance, important changes over time in the relationship between renouncers and householders. With reference to his own research among *sādhus* of the Ramanandi group in Ayodhya, Van der Veer argues: ‘[...] the distinction between householder and ascetic cannot in the case of the Ramanandis be interpreted as a static, conceptual opposition, but should be regarded as a changing boundary, affected by a process of sedentarization of *sadhus*’ (Van der Veer 1988:70).

This discussion will be continued in chapter eight, but already at this stage I confess my own theoretical preferences for the anthropological perspectives I find in the above-mentioned writings of Peter Van der Veer and Mattison Mines. Of decisive importance is the emphasis they both seem to place on the individual social agent as means to understand the greater Indian society. Also, I value their focus on actual behaviour rather than on ideological values. I am convinced that motivations and behaviour should not be understood as reflections of an imagined social order, but as a product of experiences accumulated throughout a person’s life – a life lived in a specific social, material and ideal (cosmological) context. This conviction implies that priority is given to the lives of individuals – as they are experienced and interpreted by the individuals themselves. In my somewhat tentative theoretical search based on this conviction, I have found inspiration not only in the India-based works of Van der Veer and Mattison Mines but also in the works of Nigel Rapport. Despite a different geographic orientation (Rapport writes mainly with reference to a European or Canadian reality), Rapport seems to share with Van der Veer and Mines a preoccupation with ‘the individual, liberal-humanist subject’ (Rapport 1997:7). In one of his essays, Rapport argues in accordance with Marc Auge (1995) that the individual remains the ‘anthropological concrete’ (Rapport 2000:90). In another essay he declares that he wants to outline ‘a liberal basis for social science which recognises individuals as universal human agents above whom there is no greater good, without whom there is no wider society, and in contradistinction to whom there is no cultural tradition’

(Rapport 1997:181). Rapport argues in favour of an idea of the individual liberal-humanist subject as ‘seat of consciousness, as well-spring of creativity, as guarantor of meaning’, and he forcefully opposes the Durkheimian, Structuralist and Post-Structuralist idea of the individual as dissolved, decentred, and deconstructed (ibid.:7). An overriding aim in writing this dissertation has been to convey an idea, or an image, of the individual creativity which characterises the way Hindu renouncers make their lives meaningful to themselves. I have, in other words, been concerned with individual creation of meaning. Secondly, I have tried to convert these individual references into a more general knowledge about Hindu renouncers within the Indian society today. With a sentence partly borrowed from Mines, I will put it this way: I have held as an ideal to present Hindu renouncers, or *sādhus*, as agents ‘in the fullness of social life’ (Mines 1994:9) – and, as guides along the way, I have found particularly valuable advice and support in the writings of the three authors mentioned above.

LABELS OF SAFFRON

When speaking of renouncers, one may apply a number of terms. Among these are: ‘yogī’, ‘guru’, ‘hermit’, ‘forest-dweller’, ‘mendicant’, ‘monk’, ‘sādhu’, ‘ascetic’, ‘svāmī’, ‘mahātmā’, ‘saṃnyāsī’ (fem. saṃnyāsīn), ‘tyāgī’, and ‘vairāgī’ (fem. vairāgīn).²¹ The term ‘saṃnyāsī’ (saṃnyāsīn) is by some restricted to those *sādhus* who are initiated into a śaiva order,²² whereas ‘vairāgī’ (vairāgīn) may be restricted to vaiṣṇav *sādhus*.²³ Among my acquaintances and informants in Varanasi, ‘sādhu’²⁴ was

²¹ Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri, a Nāgā saṃnyāsī who came to play an important role in my work, distinguished between saṃnyāsī, tyāgī, and yogī: ‘A saṃnyāsī is a person who has renounced everything. A tyāgī is a person who has no needs – who touches nothing, who asks for nothing, who says nothing. A yogī is a person who is so focused on his sādhnā that nobody can disturb him.’ When asked whether he experiences himself as a saṃnyāsī, a tyāgī, or a yogī, he laughed and said: ‘I am all three!’

²² Worshippers of Śiva and followers of Śaṅkarācāryā (788 – 820 A.D.).

²³ Worshippers of Vishnu and followers of Rāmānuja (1017 – 1137 A.D.).

²⁴ According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica: ‘Sadhu signifies any religious ascetic or holy man. The class of sadhus includes not only genuine saints of many faiths but also men (and occasionally women) who have left their homes in order to concentrate on physical and spiritual disciplines, as well

a common term used to denote a Hindu ascetic. For this reason I applied this term myself during my field research. ‘The etymology of *sādhu* goes a long way toward clarifying its meaning’ (Klostermaier 1994:346):

It is derived from the root *sadh-*, to accomplish, and describes someone who follows a certain *sādhana*, a definite way of life designed to accomplish realization of one’s ultimate ideal, be it the vision of a personal God or the merging with the impersonal *brahman*. As long as one has not yet reached the goal one is a *sādhaka*; the perfect one is called *siddha*, having achieved *sādhya*, the end to be reached. (ibid.:346)²⁵

In this text I will also apply the terms ‘renouncer’, ‘ascetic’, ‘svāmī’, ‘mahātmā’, ‘saṃnyāsī’, ‘yogī’, and ‘vairāgī’. The reason I choose to use another term than ‘sādhu’ in certain situations is that the person I refer to did so. In the text I will consistently make use of the term that was applied in the specific situation referred to. Consequently, I use the term ‘svāmī’ to refer to a specific dialogue with a sādhu, as this was used by both my interpreter and myself to address the sādhus that we interviewed. It seemed to me that among Indians, ‘sādhu’ was most commonly applied when speaking of other sādhus as ‘term of reference’ or of renouncers/renunciation in general, whereas to address a person with this term (or even use it to speak about a person who was present) could be taken amiss.

as hermits, magicians, and fortune-tellers, some of dubious religious intent.’ (<http://search.britannica.com>) I find it worth mentioning that although a sādhu ideally should be a celibate and live on alms and donations from householders, the term is also at times applied to householders who are characterised as selfless and pure. It seems, in other words, as if a householder while living *in* society can stretch himself/herself towards the ideal of saṃnyās and even be referred to as a sādhu. During my field research, I was often told that sādhu is a way of being, not a way of living. This implies that no one can simply adopt a sādhu way of life and expect to be regarded and respected as a sādhu – a holy man, a sādhu, is something one is from inside, a way of being. Another way of saying it is as Svāmī Bhārātī did while we were discussing whether all sādhus are ‘pure’ or not: ‘A sādhu is a person who is “soft”, not rough; it is a way of living, not a way to dress.’ I understand this as indicating that a sādhu is a sādhu because of inner qualities. It is not sufficient to dress in saffron or to adopt a sādhu way of life – it has to come from inside.

²⁵ Khushwant Singh has a slightly different idea of the etymology of ‘sādhu’: ‘The word sadhu derives from the Sanskrit *Sadhana* – to meditate’ (Singh 1967:102).

1. THE FIGURE IN SAFFRON

According to B.D. Tripathi, the word 'sādhu' is as old as the Sanskrit language itself. He says that 'sādhu', in Hindu religious terminology, is used to describe a man of high spiritual learning and high religious values: 'He is more than average; one who is virtuous in thought, word and deed' (Tripathi 1978:12). Tripathi adds that the word in 'common philosophical parlance' is also used 'to denote the fundamental universal value of Truth, Beauty and Goodness' (ibid.:12). Tripathi mentions that the word is known to have been used in the Ṛg Veda, 'in the sense of anything directly reaching the goal unerringly, like an arrow or thunderbolt' (ibid.:12). Bedi and Bedi refer to the same verse of the Ṛg Veda:

In the *Rig Veda*, the first of the four Veda texts, the seminal scriptures of the Hindus composed over 3000 years ago, the word 'sādhu' was used to denote that which reaches the goal unerringly. In later times the word came to mean a man endowed with spiritual learning, high religious values and being virtuous in thought, word and deed. The word sādhu also denotes one committed to and in search of the Truth, Eternal beauty and Righteousness. (Bedi and Bedi 1991:18)

Kirin Narayan says that the word 'sādhu' in a broad sense can be taken to mean 'good man' or 'virtuous man' (Narayan 1989:63). 'More specifically, *sādhu* stands for someone who has been initiated into an ascetic sect to devote himself to achieving release from the cycle of death and rebirth' (ibid.:63). The term is also commonly translated as 'holy man' or 'ascetic'.²⁶ There are, however, Narayan says, some difficulties in applying the word 'ascetic' as it may give connotations to, and expectations of, images of 'hair shirts, flagellation, and deprivations of all bodily appetites' (ibid.:63). Narayan argues that although severe austerities are practised by a number of sādhus, this is certainly not the case for all (ibid.). She mentions the Swamiji of her book as an example. Because he lives, in some ways, quite a comfortable life, she finds it difficult to call him an ascetic. 'How is Swamiji an ascetic?', she asks. 'He wears clothes, he sleeps on a bed, he eats at least once a day, he switches on a fan if it is too hot' (ibid.:64). The answer is that Swamiji is an ascetic

²⁶ See for instance Ghurye (1953).

‘because like most other *sādhus* he is celibate, detached from the material objects around him, and devoted to a spiritual life over one emphasizing bodily fulfillment’ (ibid.:64). Also Peter van der Veer finds the term ‘sādhu’ difficult to translate. To him this term ‘obscures the important fact that many sadhus do not live, or even profess to live, an ascetic life’ (Van der Veer 1988:8). He says that he would rather opt for the term ‘monk’ – ‘which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to a member of a community of men living apart from the world under religious vows and according to a rule’ (ibid.:8). I agree with the reasons Van der Veer gives for preferring the term ‘monk’ to that of ‘ascetic’, but as this term was never mentioned by any of my informants or by my interpreter during my research, I’m not comfortable with the idea of applying it in writing. My choice of terms is also anchored in the fact that I am writing about men and women who experience themselves as renouncers, *sādhus*, *swāmis*, ascetics, *saṃnyāsīs*, or *vairāgīs*. Whether they really live what above is described as an ‘ascetic’²⁷ life, is to me not a decisive factor.

‘... AS THERE ARE STARS IN THE SKY’

Robert Lewis Gross writes: ‘In the early censuses of India the renouncers were tabulated in terms of their numbers in a particular sect, and the ascetic sects were treated as if they were caste groups’ (Gross 1992:122). However, in recent censuses the renouncers are left out of the statistical enumeration and ascetic sects are no longer even recognised. The *sādhus* (i.e. ‘Religious Mendicants and Inmates of Monastic Institutions’) were earlier listed under the separate occupational category of professional religious specialists along with priests and temple service castes, but in the 1951, 1961, and 1971 censuses the categorisation of *sādhus* changed, and they were classified as non-productive workers, lumped together with beggars and vagrants

²⁷ I have in mind the kind of connotations to ‘ascetic’ mentioned by Narayan (‘hair shirts, flagellation, and deprivations of all bodily appetites’).

(*ibid.*). Furthermore, *sādhus* residing in religious institutions (i.e. *maṭhs* and *ashrams*²⁸) were included in the same category as inmates of mental asylums and jails. Gross finds evidence for this in the 1961 U.P. State Census (Vol. XV, Pt. I-A (i), p. 294) which states: ‘For beggars, vagrants, etc., including religious mendicants and inmates of [mental and religious] institutions including convicts, it would be better to consider absolute figures rather than proportions’ (Gross 1992:122-23).²⁹ I visited the census office in Varanasi to check whether Gross was right. Here I met a young, very computer-knowledgeable man who did his best to satisfy my curiosity. Despite the best of efforts, all he had access to was the 1991 census, as at the time this was the only computerised census. In this computerised census the Indian population was categorised into rough categories of male and female ‘workers’ and ‘non workers’. The *sādhus* were, as correctly stated by Gross, grouped among the ‘non workers’ (‘lumped together with beggars and vagrants’ (*ibid.*)).³⁰ The changes in the way the censuses are conducted make it impossible to separate the number of *sādhus* from the number of beggars, vagrants, and inmates of mental asylums and jails. Accordingly, these censuses no longer give any indication of how many *sādhus* there are in India. One of my informants suggested the number to be 400,000, whereas one of Gross’ informants claimed that ‘there are as many *sants* (i.e., holy men) as there are stars in the sky’ (*ibid.*:123). According to Gross, the older census data compiled by the British indicate that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were about three million *sādhus* in India (*ibid.*). Others suggested higher numbers. One of these was Svāmī Rām Tīrth, according to Gross ‘a respected and well-known holy man’, who in 1902 estimated the number of *sādhus* as somewhere above five million.

²⁸ ‘Ashram’ in the sense of abode/hermitage should, according to McGregor (1997), be transcribed as *āśram*, as in the sense of stage in life (of which there are four). To distinguish the two different meanings of this word I have chosen the form ‘ashram’ for abode/hermitage, as this is now a familiar term in the English language.

²⁹ Govind Bābā, a Canadian who has been living as a *sādhu* in India since the early 1970s, made the following remark: ‘You could say this statement was probably made by a governmental bureaucrat in a well-padded office who never met a renouncer or visited a penal institution in his life. Seems like a stupid categorisation.’

³⁰ The helpful and service minded young man at the census office told me I might be able to find more detailed information at their office in Lucknow, where they keep richer, non-computerised data. However, as I expected Gross’ observations to be correct, I did no further research on this.

Another was E.A. Havell, an English civil servant, who in 1905 published a book in which he claimed that the number of sādhus in India was about five million. Somewhat later, in 1962, Svāmī Agehānand Bhārātī in one of his books suggested the number was somewhere between four and five millions (Gross 1992). In 1967 Kushwant Singh reduced these numbers considerably in an article on the holy men of India in the New York Times Magazine:

The earlier census reports put their number at 5 million. The present figure is under a half-million. The British were eager to swell the figure to prove the Indians' reluctance to work. Free India's rulers are equally eager to destroy the image of India as yogi-land. (Singh 1967:43)

Gross finds Singh's suggestion extremely conservative, and states that it 'is probably based on unofficial government conjecture' (Gross 1992:123).³¹ He argues that the figure should more likely be well over a million, and says that it could just as well be close to three million or even more (ibid.). If the correct number of sādhus was between three and five million, the percentage of sādhus at the time of Gross's calculation would have been between 0,5% and 1%.³² 'This small percentage, however, is certainly not insignificant in relationship to India's present population of almost 600 million people' (ibid.:124). If we presuppose that the percentage has been relatively constant, this would imply that in India today there are between five and ten million sādhus as the total population is now more than one billion.

ON THE FRINGES OF SOCIETY

Renouncers are 'dead' to the social world. 'Sannyās involves a symbolic death: renouncing all personal ties and possessions, the *sannyāsī* must devote himself to

³¹ Govind Bābā also expressed scepticism to Singh's indication of the number of sādhus to be half a million: 'How does he know? He met them at the Delhi Golf Club?'

³² Dolf Hartsuiker (1993) suggests that the sādhus in India constitute about half a per cent of the total population, a percentage which in the early 1990s implied a total number of four to five million sādhus.

1. THE FIGURE IN SAFFRON

contemplating the Inner Self' (Narayan 1989:68). Narayan describes this as 'standing aside from the world', 'reminiscent of Victor Turner's conception of liminality as a state in which an individual or group leaves society to be suspended "betwixt and between" social categories' (ibid.:75):

The *sannyāsī* does indeed appear to be in a permanent state of liminality, standing on the threshold between humans and deities, between caste society and the religious transcendence of society, between the living and the dead. (ibid.:75)

As I wrote a few years ago:

Varanasi is for me a city in lack of absoluteness, a city where apparently contradictory elements coexist and take part in each other. Such a crossing of borders creates room for liminality, for marginal states or beings with one leg in each of the distinguished domains. This whole complexity is highlighted by the renouncer, the 'individual-outside-the-world'. He is a sacred being, and has renounced the profane world which he nevertheless still is surrounded by, and dependent on. Accordingly, with one leg in the profane world and the other in the domain of the sacred, he may stand as a symbol of both the sacred and the profane part of the Hindu world. (Bjerkas 1994:97)

Svāmī Dhruvad Brahmachari-ji, one of the *sādhus* that Drew Stuart encountered during his field research, stressed the importance of the presence of a renunciant subculture within the wider culture. He claimed that any culture would need a liminal space for more profound exploration: 'Within a society, there must exist the option for a lifestyle that allows one to seek what the typical programs of society cannot offer' (Stuart 1995:46-47). In this perspective, the institution of *saṃnyās* and the presence of *sādhus* is essential also in maintaining the health of the wider culture (ibid.). The institution of *saṃnyās* can further be perceived as an escape valve for those who feel misplaced in their position in the 'mainstream society' – whether as 'son', 'daughter', 'husband', 'wife', 'father', 'mother', etc. As Stuart writes: 'If for whatever reason, you aren't making it or things aren't working in the family or community sphere, you can take off and become a sadhu' (ibid.:7). This leads Stuart to characterise the *sādhu* subculture as 'not only a mystical/ascetic tradition', but 'also a part of the complex

interplay of Indian society' (ibid.:7). Another of Stuart's informants, Shivbadri-ji, emphasised the importance of liminal individuals – those who have reached profound states of spiritual realisation:

[...] as long as these great-souled beings were doing their puja and *bhajan* (worship), and *hawan* (offerings to the sacred fire), the cosmos would continue to function without the direct intervention of the Divine, regardless of how bad things were in the world at large. But as soon as these sacred activities and rituals were threatened or disturbed by demonic forces, then God would be forced to take incarnation, entering the degenerate world as an *avatar*. (ibid.:47)

Gross says that among pious Hindus it is widely believed that it is 'physically, emotionally, and spiritually beneficial to merely sit in the company of a holy man' (Gross 1992:198). He also mentions that as the *sādhus* are believed to be detached from worldly concerns, 'they serve as mediators reconciling social conflicts' (ibid.:198):

Householders are attracted and dependent on the *sādhus* not only because they represent individuals who have attained inner peace as men but also because they are members of the society who can be turned to in times of need. (ibid.:198)

Some would argue that *sādhus* should be more involved in what is going on in the material world of householders. I once heard a Dutchman ask for Svāmī Bhārātī's opinion of whether *sādhus* could benefit society by being more involved in the profane order of things – for instance by teaching people to be less selfish. Svāmī Bhārātī said: 'You have come to me to gain knowledge because of the fruits of your karma. People who don't come to me, have other destinations. All people have their own way to go and their own karmic fruits to reap. The well is here – and there is water in the well, but the water will not go to the people. The people will go to the well when they are thirsty and in need of water.'

INTERDEPENDENT WORLDS APART

During the Maghā Melā in Allahabad in 1972, a sādhu explained to Gross the main difference between the life of a sādhu and the life of a householder: ‘A Sādhu’s whole life is pūjā [“worship”], but a householder must set aside time to remember God. The householder has many other concerns...’ (Gross 1992:111). To be able to live a life in pūjā, sādhus are dependent on householders for economic support. ‘Householders make the ascetic enterprise possible by providing material support. A *sādhu* receives offerings such as food, cloth, and cash from lay visitors’ (Narayan 1989:79). As some of the goods they receive are distributed to poor householders, sādhus to some extent contribute to a redistribution of goods within the Indian society. The food may be redistributed as prasād, the clothes and the cash as gifts to the needy. Another way sādhus can benefit society is by giving blessings, teachings, and advice – all aspects of a sādhu’s mission. Sādhus are also asked to contribute with solutions to mundane matters, ‘ranging from sexual dysfunction to economic decisions’ (Narayan 1989:79):

Many are folk healers and astrologers. As impartial third parties they may be asked to settle disputes. A *sādhu*, in short, is someone who may be turned to in times of need, and who serves as spiritual advisor, doctor, lawyer, political commentator, councillor, entertainer, and psychotherapist all rolled into one. (ibid.:79)

The presence of sādhus contributes also indirectly to the well-being of Hindu householders, as the dharma of householders indicates that they should give bhikṣā (alms) and dān (charity, ritual donation) to holy men. According to Gross, it is widely believed that in return for giving money and food, a householder receives puṇyā (religious merit) (Gross 1992). Householders not only give donations to individual sādhus but also to monastic institutions housing sādhus.³³ Regular support is often given to such monastic institutions from lay disciples of ascetics residing there. Such householder disciples can often trace their connection to a particular monastic institution through several generations. Gross relates that a number of Brāhmaṇ castes

³³ Mumukṣu Bhavan in Varanasi is one such institution.

in North India have had this type of continuous relationship with some of the Daṇḍī maṭhs in Varanasi. ‘Entire families are associated with a particular math; all the adults in a family take dikṣa (“initiation”) and receive istamantra³⁴ from the mahant of the monastic institution and are in this way “bound” to the monastery through religious and economic ties’ (ibid.:162). In return the resident ascetics visit their lay disciples on special religious occasions in order to guide them through ceremonies and perform rituals. More frequently, perhaps, householder-disciples go to visit their guru’s ashram. ‘On these occasions the householders spend time with their guru, take darsan of the sectarian tutelary deity enshrined in a temple located in the monastery, and liberally give ritual donations to the institution’ (ibid.:162).

Some sādhus travel extensively throughout India in order to give religious lectures and to collect contributions from householders. One of these is Brahmaçārī Satyā Prakash, a musician living in Mumukṣu Bhavan. When I first met him he was about to give a performance in the temple of the ashram. Householders from Varanasi and nearby towns and villages had gathered to listen to him. He combined music, song and talk, and the theme of the evening was based on the Rāmāyaṇ. A few days after this performance he went to Punjab to hold similar performances. ‘Many sādhus devote considerable time to these tours and expose their ideologies and personalities to an enormous number of people; they are able to accumulate in this way appreciable income for themselves and their monastery’, Gross writes (ibid.:163). Gross also states that quite a few sādhus give formal religious discourses that normally are ‘elaborate commentaries based on some portion of a popular sacred text such as the *Ramayana* or the *Bhagavat Purana*, dealing with the life and exploits of Rama and Kṛṣṇa’ (ibid.:168). These discourses ‘attempt to convey some religious or moral truth and serve as vehicles for the transmission of traditional religious values and the teaching of ethical principles’ (ibid.:168).

³⁴ An ‘istamantra’ (īṣṭ mantrā) is a favoured mantrā.

Sādhus are used by householders as advisors in both spiritual and profane matters. Profane matters may involve financial problems or conflicts within the family. From time to time frustrated householders with a desire to take saṃnyās come to ask a trusted sādhu for advice. Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth in Mumukṣu Bhavan is for some householders such a trusted sādhu. To me he mentioned one of these in particular:

One person, a retired man who weekly has been coming to see me, told me one day that he wanted to become a saṃnyāsī. He explained to me that he was very frustrated due to his family, and that he wanted to leave them and take saṃnyās. He has three sons. Whereas one of these lives in America, the other two live with their father in Varanasi. The oldest of his two sons in Varanasi abuses alcohol, and this is why the father is so frustrated. I told him to go back to his family to sort out his problems rather than trying to escape them by taking saṃnyās. When he has completed his obligations as a householder, he can take saṃnyās. If he had taken saṃnyās now, he would have brought his frustrations with him into his ascetic life. This would have done no good for anyone. To take saṃnyās, you have to be very determined. I can not accept anybody's wish to take saṃnyās, only to let them enjoy this life for a while and then run the risk that they will regret their decision after a while – or even be unable to follow the saṃnyās way of life at all.

Śārādā Hṛday in Śārādā Ashram is in a similar way sought out by girls with a desire to take saṃnyās: 'The girls often come because they have some family problems. I normally tell them to fulfil their responsibilities towards their family before they consider taking saṃnyās', Śārādā Hṛday said.

My experience indicates that Gross is right in suggesting that 'the social and economic interaction between Indian sādhus and householders constitutes a complex system of reciprocal exchanges' (ibid.:160). I also agree with Gross in seeing what he calls 'the functional importance' of sādhus as an explanation of why sādhus are still both respected and economically subsidised by householders and lay pilgrims (ibid.:160).

BEYOND CASTE?

Ideally, the *sādhu* is beyond caste – caste was part of the identity that was left behind at the time of taking *saṃnyās*. As Narayan writes: ‘With initiation, an ascetic dies to the world, renouncing the previous identity defined by kinship and caste’ (Narayan 1989:74). Narayan quotes Swamiji, who says: ‘To accept all castes (*jātī*) as your own is a *sannyāsī*’s *dharma*. The same Bhagavan is in all of them as in you’ (*ibid.*:75). What then about the numerous times Daṇḍī Svāmīs explained to me that only Brāhmaṇs are granted initiation into the Daṇḍī community? Such experiences made me aware of the importance of caste as a social indicator even among *sādhus*. Also Narayan expresses doubt as to the general truth of the supposition that *sādhus* are beyond caste; she suggests that Dumont has ‘popularized a view of renunciation as the dialectical opposition to caste society’ in arguing that the renouncer ‘is an individual outside the world in an otherwise relationally oriented hierarchy’ (*ibid.*:74). Narayan admits that she finds Dumont’s dialectical opposition between the renouncer and the world of caste ‘compelling in its elegance’ (*ibid.*:75), but she still raises a critical voice because this division, ‘like all simplistic divisions’, ‘illuminates broad patterns even as it obscures the messy variations in lived behavior’ (*ibid.*:75). Although caste ideally should be renounced at the time of taking *saṃnyās*, it is, as Narayan argues, a fact that all Indian *sādhus* after all were ‘born into a particular caste, and the indoctrination of upbringing does not altogether vanish with initiation’ (*ibid.*:77). She mentions Swami R. and Swamiji as examples. Swami R. expressed that he felt an affinity with Swamiji’s values since they belonged to the same caste (*varṇ*). They were both Brāhmaṇs, but from different parts of India (*ibid.*). On some occasions Narayan noticed that Swamiji, too, kept acting on the basis of Brāhmaṇ values:

Watching Swamiji, it struck me that in certain arenas of interaction he did indeed continue to act like a Brahman concerned with purity: his small kitchen was always scrupulously cleaned, and though he welcomed people from low castes he nonetheless saw menstruation as polluting and asked that women not touch him, his food, or his altar when they ‘sat apart’ (a common euphemism for menstruation). (*ibid.*:77)

On the whole, in Narayan's perspective Dumont's opposition between caste society and renunciation fails to match the real world. Ascetic orders can, for instance, be ranked in terms of relative purity, mirroring the caste order: '[...] the necrophagous Aghoris for example, can be compared to Untouchables, while the militant Nagas and Gosains can be likened to the warrior Kshatriyas' (ibid.:77). Narayan further mentions that in certain monasteries the sādhus of different castes sit in separate lines for feasts. And as to the itinerant Ramanandi sādhus, she claims that caste is ignored only when they are in the jungles, whereas distinctions are resumed whenever they enter a village or pilgrimage site (ibid.). In the inner sanctum of the temples, the settled Ramanandis allow only sādhus of the three upper castes (twice-born³⁵) to enter (ibid.). Raymond Brady Williams (1984) describes how caste is an indicator of rank also among sādhus of the Svāmīnārāyaṇ religion.³⁶ According to the traditional practice, male renouncers are divided into three classes: the first class are initiates from the Brāhmaṇ caste; the second class are those from the non-Brāhmaṇ, twice-born castes, and the third class are initiates from the lowest of the four varṇas, or castes (Śūdrā). The different classes are distinguished by the colour of their clothes and are told to follow different rules. Those belonging to the third class do not receive full initiation as sādhus. As opposed to the sādhus initiated into the first and second class, those initiated into the third class wear white clothes – not saffron, which is a colour signifying renunciation of the world (Williams 1984:92-93).

Although Narayan finds it hard to understand why the opposition between the renouncer and the caste society has had such a powerful hold on anthropological theories of renunciation for so long, she sees the fact that 'indigenous Brahmanical theory itself depicts renunciation as the antithesis of caste society' as one possible explanation (ibid.:75). I believe this must also have been how Dumont was inspired to adopt this perspective in the first place. I agree with Narayan, and I also believe she is

³⁵ 'Twice-born' are those who have passed through the upānayan-ritual – an initiation given only to members of the three upper castes (usually also only to boys).

³⁶ The Svāmīnārāyaṇ religion, which originated in Gujarat in India, was founded by Svāmī Sahajānand. For further information, see for instance Williams (1984) and Tambs-Lyche (1992).

right in her concluding remarks where she argues that what distinguishes *sādhus* from other people is ‘not an outright rejection of the values of caste so much as an alternative life-style pivoting around spiritual concerns’ (ibid.:77).

Declan Quigley is another critic of Dumont who has reasonable arguments regarding the influence of caste among *sādhus*. He suggests that India, more than any other region, ‘has become increasingly opaque to non-specialists in spite of the huge amount of material that is available’ (Quigley 1997:107). Although he does not blame this solely on Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*, he identifies this as ‘the most influential villain’ (ibid.:107).³⁷ Quigley’s main concern in this rather critical article is caste – one of the apparently unavoidable concepts for every anthropologist involved with India. Quigley finds it difficult to swallow a theory of caste as a system of linear, ladder-like hierarchies, as these ‘obscure the fact that *Brāhmaṇ* and Untouchable castes often have more in common with each other than with other castes and, in this sense, are not ‘poles apart’ as conventional models suggest’ (ibid.:115). Rather, he advocates a more dynamic model of caste, ‘which allows for the ambiguous relations between different groups and which shows the structurally similar positions of caste that perform analogous priestly functions – as Barbers and certain *Brāhmaṇ*s are often reported to do’ (ibid.:116). Quigley concludes the article by admitting that although Dumont’s representations of India, of Hinduism, and of caste, amounted to gross misrepresentations, his misrepresentations nevertheless had certain virtues. Quigley, I believe, is right regarding the need for a more dynamic model of caste. On the whole, I see a need of a dynamic outlook on most aspects of Indian society – also renunciation. The ‘man-in-the-world’ and the ‘individual-outside-the-world’ are, in my view, less differentiated and have more in common than Dumont’s model indicates. This will be further discussed in the following chapters.

³⁷ Quigley writes: ‘A theory which claims as one of its main virtues that it is contradicted by the facts is not guaranteed to make much sense to non-specialists. Yet it possessed unparalleled appeal for a generation of South Asianist anthropologists and some still cling to the theory’s basic premises in spite of the clear demonstration that these inevitably lead to unsustainable conclusions. This is an intellectual puzzle worthy of a Ph.D. thesis in its own right: i.e. why is it that Dumont’s nonsensical theory exerted such influence for so long?’ (Quigley 1997: 107).

BEYOND DHARMA



Plate 6

Wisdom is opening and light.
Ignorance is cover and darkness.

(Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī) (Sarasvatī 1978:37)

FOUR STAGES IN LIFE

Prescriptions for the four stages in life (*āśram*) are given in the Dharma Sūtras and in the slightly later group of texts called the Dharma Śāstras.³⁸ The names of these texts indicate that they are concerned with ‘dharma’, derived from the Sanskrit root *dhri*, which means ‘to hold together’, ‘to support’, and is ‘that which aligns the individual with the group and eventually the workings of the universe’ (Narayan 1989:34). When translated to English dharma is often rendered as ‘duty’, a unfortunate translation which, according to Karl H. Potter, ‘suggests to many people a rather stiff, perhaps even harsh, attitude, from which one tends to withdraw to something halfway between possessive love and “righteous” minimal concern’ (Potter 1991:8). Rather, Potter sees the attitude of dharma as ‘an attitude of concern for others as a fundamental extension of oneself’ (ibid.:8). Regarding the challenge of translating ‘dharma’ into a western language, Gavin Flood writes:

The term ‘*dharma*’ is untranslatable in that it has no direct semantic equivalents in any western languages which convey the resonance of associations expressed by the term. It has been variously translated as ‘duty’, ‘religion’, ‘justice’, ‘law’, ‘ethics’, ‘religious merit’, ‘principle’ and ‘right’. (Flood 1997:52)

According to the Dharma Sūtras there are three sources of dharma: ‘revelation (i.e. the Veda), tradition (*smṛti*), and the customs or “good custom” of the virtuous or those learned in the Veda’ (ibid.:53). What is commonly referred to as the most influential of all Hindu codes, Manu’s law (Manu Smṛti),³⁹ adds ‘what is pleasing to oneself’ (‘conscience’) to these three sources of dharma (ibid.). ‘These texts contain a doctrine of *dharma* as a universal, all-encompassing law, which is yet flexible and adaptable to different circumstances and a variety of situations’ (ibid.:56). The adaptable capacity

³⁸ ‘The rules of *dharma* in the Dharma Śāstras merge into jurisprudence and they become important texts in Hindu legislation and litigation, even during the period of British rule in India’ (Flood 1996:56).

³⁹ Manu Smṛti (Mānava Dharma Śāstra) is the oldest and most important text of this genre, composed between the second century BCE and third century CE, and was one of the first Sanskrit texts that were ‘discovered’ by the British in India during the British rule.

of dharma refers to the same relative quality as Wendy Doniger has called ‘context sensitive’ (Doniger 1991:xlvi). Dharma is particularly sensitive to two concerns – one’s position in society (*varṇa*) and one’s stage in life (*āśram*). The life stages are ‘codifications of different elements present in vedic society and an attempt to integrate them into a coherent system’⁴⁰ (Flood 1997:61-2). The four stages are: ‘[...] that of the celibate student (*brahmacārya*), householder (*gṛhastha*), hermit or forest dweller (*vanaprastha*), and renouncer (*samnyāsa*)’ (ibid.:62). In the Dharma Sūtras each of these four stages in life was regarded as a permanent choice, and not until the Dharma Śāstras were they seen as successive stages through which a ‘twice-born’⁴¹ man should pass. ‘As with the *varṇa* system, the *āśramas* are a model, this time concerned not with the ordering of society but with the diachronic ordering of the individual’s life: they are a paradigm of how the high-caste man should live’ (ibid.:62).

Manu’s law (Mānava Dharma Śāstra) gives detailed descriptions of rules and duties for Hindus in all stages in life (*brahmacary*, *gṛhasth*, *vānāprasth*, *saṃnyās*) and also elaborates possible consequences of opposition to this prescribed behaviour. Manu’s law consists of twelve books of which four deal with the four stages in life (Klostermaier 1998). During the first stage in life, the student should be celibate and educate himself to handle the challenges of life. The householder’s obligations lie in the field of marriage and family life; he should work to support the family and maintain his place in the community. Only when his children are grown, and have their own children, may a man enter the third stage in life, that of the forest dweller. During this stage in life one should concentrate on meditation about spiritual matters, whereas responsibilities concerning matters related to family-life and the profane domain in general should be taken over by grown-up children. Manu’s Law says:

⁴⁰ ‘The *āśrama* system arose during the fifth century BCE as a result of changes within the brahmanical tradition. Initially the term referred to a ‘hermitage’ (*āśrama*, the source of the anglicized ‘ashram’) and came to be applied to the style of life of those Brahmins who lived there. [...] The meaning of the term came to be extended, referring not only to the place where the brahmanical householder-hermits dwelled, but to the style of life they led, and eventually came to refer to other brahmanical styles of life as well’ (Flood 1996:62).

⁴¹ ‘Twice-born’ (*dvijāti*) is a name of the three higher castes (Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya), whose initiation (*upanayana*) is seen as ‘second birth’, which entitles them to study the scriptures and participate in ritual activity’ (Klostermaier 1998).

2. BEYOND DHARMA

[1] After he has lived in the householder's stage of life in accordance with the rules in this way, a twice-born Vedic graduate should live in the forest, properly restrained and with his sensory powers conquered. [2] But when a householder is wrinkled and grey, and (when he sees) the children of his children, then he should take himself to the wilderness. [3] Renouncing all food cultivated in the village and all possessions, he should hand his wife over to his sons and go to the forest – or take her along. [4] Taking with him his sacrificial fire and the fire-implements for the domestic (sacrifice), he should go out from the village to the wilderness and live (there) with his sensory powers restrained. (Doniger 1991:117)

Finally, there is a fourth stage in life: that of the renouncer. 'This is not for everyone, but if one feels the desire to seek liberation from rebirth, one can leave the family, give up all social connections, and become an ascetic' (Shattuck 1999:32). Manu's Law says:

[33] And when he has spent the third part of his lifespan in the forests in this way, he may abandon all attachments and wander as an ascetic for the fourth part of his lifespan. [34] A man who has gone from one stage of life to another, made the offerings into the fire, conquered his sensory powers, exhausted himself by giving alms and propitiatory offerings, and then lived as a wandering ascetic – when he has died, he thrives. [35] When a man has paid his three debts,⁴² he may set his mind-and-heart on Freedom; but if he seeks Freedom when he has not paid the debts, he sinks down. [36] When a man has studied the Veda in accordance with the rules, and begotten sons in accordance with his duty, and sacrificed with sacrifices according to his ability, he may set his mind-and-heart on Freedom. [37] But if a twice-born man seeks Freedom when he has not studied the Vedas, and has not begotten progeny, and has not sacrificed with sacrifices, he sinks down.' (Doniger 1991:120-21)

Regarding the last stage in life, Klostermaier writes: '[...] all attachment to home and possessions, including family, are to be given up' (Klostermaier 1998:162). He adds that the ideal schema of the four stages in life 'never corresponded in its entirety to the reality of Hindu life' (Klostermaier 1994:345). The oldest law books state for instance that the last stage in life is only for Brāhmiṇs who have already passed through the

⁴² The three debts are: To study the Vedas; to perform rituals to the gods, and to beget sons to make funeral offerings to the ancestors (Flood 1997).

three preceding stages in life, whereas Hindu practice, ‘for as long as we know’ (ibid.:345), has been less strict. ‘Many Brahmins chose *saṃnyāsa* right after *brahmacarya*, as its continuance and perfection and many non-Brahmins took up this mode of life as well’ (ibid.:345). As Klostermaier remarks, despite such deviant traits this ideal schema ‘institutionalizes a very strong current within Hinduism: the desire to make religion one’s whole life rather than just one of the many things in life’ (ibid.:345).

In order to become a *saṃnyāsī(n)*, an initiation ritual is normally required. This ritual marks the symbolic death of one’s former social identity: a symbolic self-cremation. A new name is given, and one is also often incorporated into the ‘lineage’ of one’s guru, which from now on is substituted for one’s previous lineage of relatives. Another important aspect is the renunciation of fire, by Flood described as the significant difference between the third and fourth stage in life:

The renouncer has gone beyond the vedic injunctions of maintaining his sacred fires; living entirely by begging he does not cook his own food. If fire and cooked food are symbols of culture and raw food of nature, as Lévi-Strauss has suggested, then the renouncer in relinquishing fire has, in a sense, relinquished culture; he is attempting to transcend culture for a pure, trans-human realm of spiritual liberation. (Flood 1997:63)

Stephen A. Tyler describes renunciation of fire as an internalisation of the sacred fire: ‘When a man enters the final life stage (*sannyāsin*), he completely abandons the things of this world and is beyond dharma. Having taken the sacred fire into himself, he should become a celibate, wandering alone, indifferent to everything, meditating and concentrating his mind on *brāhman*’ (Tyler 1986:90). Related, and in a sense opposed, to the ‘outer fire’ that is renounced at the time of taking *saṃnyās*, is *tapas* – the ‘inner fire’, or ‘inner heat’ created through the practice of austerities (*tapasyā*). Through *tapasyā* the renouncer internalises the sacrificial fire, ‘in fact’, Dolf Hartsuiker says,

‘he becomes the sacrifice; he burns within, increases his inner heat and thus his spiritual power’ (Hartsuiker 1993:109).⁴³

RITES OF PASSAGE



Plate 7

The art of dying

By taking *saṃnyās*, a person dies to the social world. The person whom family and friends used to know, the one they related to and perhaps depended on, is no more. Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, one of the residents of Mumukṣu Bhavan – an ashram for Daṇḍī Svāmīs in Varanasi – was eighty years old when I first met him in 1998. Nine years earlier he had taken *saṃnyās* and by this act had given up, or sacrificed, his relationship to family and friends. When Svāmī Kapileśvarānand had made up his mind to take *saṃnyās*; he gathered his friends and relatives in order to inform them about his decision and its immediate consequences. ‘From now on – don’t think of me, don’t build your lives on me, don’t let anything depend on me. I am going to take *saṃnyās*.’ These words, so immense despite their simplicity, give an idea of the absolute and final character of the act of renouncing the world. Svāmī Kapileśvarānand’s way of informing his friends and relatives made it somehow clearer to me why *saṃnyās* is sometimes spoken of as a social suicide.

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth, another of the elderly svāmīs residing in Mumukṣu Bhavan, left his home on the pretext of going on a pilgrimage. What he narrated, gives an idea of some of the emotional hardship involved in leaving behind what for years

⁴³ The practice of *tapas* will be further discussed in chapter seven.

has been part of your life: ‘I used to be so attached to my house; I had invested a lot of work in it; it was in many ways my life-work. Now I don’t even want to see that house, I don’t want to go there. My family members cry for me. I had a big house and a nice family. Once I did not want to leave these surroundings. Now I no longer want to see them before my eyes. Neither my family nor my house.’ Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth has no disciples: ‘I don’t want to be somebody’s guru, I want to be alone. I have left my wife and my children to avoid being affectionate with them any longer. To have disciples, to me, would be similar to having children. They would do service to me, and I am afraid I would become very much affectionate with them. It would be just like having a family. I don’t want that to happen. I have left my family in order to extinguish these affectionate feelings.’

In the following, I will describe in further detail what happens when a person takes saṃnyās.

Liminality

In his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960), Arnold van Gennep describes ‘ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined’ (ibid.:3). These rites, by Van Gennep called ‘rites de passage’, were defined as ‘rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age’ (Turner 1991:94). I mentioned above that the act of renouncing the world implies a sort of social suicide. When initiated into the saṃnyās āśram, a person ‘dies’ to the social world and is, at the end of the rite, ‘reborn’ as a sādhu. The initiation ceremony is meant to separate the novice from all aspects of his former life – his name, his caste, his relatives and friends, his personal belongings, his memories, even his former bodily and sexual desires – in short, his former identity and being. After having undergone the full ritual, he is regarded as reborn as an entirely new person with a new identity, a new name, a new appearance (his hair is shaved off and his clothes are changed). Ideally, he is now no longer part of any caste or class,

and he can no more be identified as belonging to his former group of relatives. One may, as Raymond Brady Williams (1984), suggest that renunciation of family ties, to the renouncer himself, involves ‘cutting himself off from all social status resulting from birth and from past achievements in the family’ (Williams 1984:131). Yet, he is not totally on his own as he is included in his guru’s group of ‘relatives’. As Gross writes, ascetic initiation ‘is structurally a “rebirth” into a new corporate group’ (Gross 1992:159):

The ascetic disciple receives a new ‘father’, the guru, and is absorbed into an alternate ‘family’ and ‘extended kin unit’, the sectarian ascetic community. The initiated *sādhu* also becomes vertically linked with the ‘ancestors’ of his sect, i.e., the spiritual lineage or descent group composed of a line of gurus tracing their descent from the Adiguru, the original founder-guru of the sect. (ibid.:159)

The renouncer has, as mentioned above, committed a sort of social suicide and has also performed his own death rites. In this way, Narayan writes, ‘[...] a *sannyāsī* symbolically dies to the world even before the body is ready to go. This is a social death preceding a biological one, and since it can be controlled through human actions, it represents a triumph over death’ (Narayan 1989:184). Svāmī Devendrānand Giri described some of his experiences with this process and its challenges by saying:

When I was born, some name was chosen for me by my parents. To forget this name, to forget these memories of ‘home’, we are given new names. From then onwards, there is no memory, no more thoughts of our past life. Still, the memories of my parents have not vanished. To me, they are immortal. I have spent twenty years in that home, with my sister and my brother. That is unforgettable, unforgettable.

Svāmī Bhārātī described some of the practical consequences of letting one’s former personality ‘die’ by taking *saṃnyās*: ‘When I took *saṃnyās*, I gave away all my savings as donations. My former name was also renounced, and in public registers it is replaced by my *saṃnyāsī* name. The person I was before is dead.’ I asked Svāmī Bhārātī whether he, as a renouncer, has the right to vote at elections. He said: ‘We can vote at elections, but we should not. *Saṃnyāsīs* are actually speaking dead and should

not have any material interests.’ I further asked him whether he read newspapers and kept himself updated with the news of the world, or whether this was part of what he had renounced. He admitted that he did read newspapers, ‘[...] because I have not fully renounced’:

I have not conquered the *prāṇ* [the vital breath]. In fact almost all *saṃnyāsīs* are like me – they have the same feelings as every other man. An authentic *saṃnyāsī* should be just like a child, just like a mad person, a person possessed by demons, a person in deep sleep. He should not feel hunger, thirst, cold or heat; he should not have the ability to be angry, happy or depressed. Such *saṃnyāsīs* are hard to find.



Plate 8: Svāmī Śaśi Śekhar Bhārātī

The initiation into *saṃnyās* may also be understood in the perspective Victor Turner (1991) has of Van Gennep’s theories. Turner focuses on ‘the nature and characteristics of what Arnold van Gennep (1909) has called the “liminal phase” of *rites de passage*’ (Turner 1991:94). Although the renouncer is said to be dead to the social world, he still lives in the world and, to some extent, also depends on it. He is socially dead, yet

he plays a part in the social world – like a ‘living dead.’ In my view, he seems to qualify for what Turner describes as ‘liminal entities’ (Turner 1991): ‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’ (ibid.:95). The relevance of applying liminality as a means of understanding the Indian renouncer is obvious also in other ways. Liminality, for instance, is likened to death,⁴⁴ and as mentioned above death is a central symbolic issue in renouncing the world. The novice not only symbolically dies during the initiation ceremony – he is also ‘reborn’. Despite the variety of ways in which the initiation ceremony is conducted among the different monastic groups, they all seem to have in common a strong symbolic focus on rebirth. Dolf Hartsuiker describes how the novice at the time of initiation ‘severs all ties with family, clan or caste’ (Hartsuiker 1993:63), symbolically dies ‘from his former earthly life and is ‘reborn’ into the divine life. Any talk or thought about the former life is discouraged: it is irrelevant now and age is reckoned from the new birthday. The visible symbol of this rebirth is the shaven head, bald as a baby’s’ (ibid.:63). Further, liminal persons, or ‘threshold people’ (Turner 1991:95), are often represented as being naked, having no possessions and no status, ‘[...] in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands’ (ibid.:95): ‘It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life’ (ibid.:95). Liminal entities are also described as carrying ‘ambiguous and indeterminate attributes’, ‘expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions’ (ibid.:95). Turner mentions bisexuality as one such ambiguous and indeterminate attribute (ibid.), and this makes me reflect on the Indian renouncer’s sexuality – a contradiction in terms as, by leaving the earthly

⁴⁴ Emile Durkheim, for instance, argues that a person ‘dies’ when, during an initiation rite, he is transformed from one social status to another: ‘It is said that in this moment the young man dies, that the person that he was ceases to exist, and that another is instantly substituted for it. He is re-born under a new form’ (Durkheim 1965:54). Also Victor Turner sees liminality and the ‘ambiguous and indeterminate attributes’ of liminal entities as ‘frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon’ (Turner 1991:95).

existence behind, one is supposed to be beyond the reach of material and bodily desires, beyond the reach of the temptations of *saṃsār*. In this perspective, the *sādhu* is beyond sexuality. Some (mainly *sādhus* belonging to Śaiv orders), demonstrate this through extreme forms of austerities (*tapas*), for instance the pulling of cars and lifting of heavy stones with their penises. A number of *sādhus* (most common among Vaiṣṇāv orders) also wear chastity belts as an aid to mental control of their passion. Most *sādhus* have their sexual organs intact, and their sexual desires – as any other desire – have to be continuously repressed. Through *tapasyā*, sexual energy can also be transformed into spiritual energy. These aspects will be further discussed in chapter seven.

In *saṃnyās āśram*, the ritual symbolism seems almost entirely focused on body symbolism. Hair, either close-cropped or long and matted (*jaṭā*), nakedness, and the use of ashes (*vibhūti*) are perhaps the most obvious of these symbolic aspects. According to Robert Lewis Gross, matted hair, nakedness, and the use of ashes, are ‘primarily overlapping symbols of Hindu ascetic status as well as of liminality that physically and ritually separates the *sādhus* from non-ascetic members of Indian society’ (Gross 1992:303). Gross describes these three characteristics as providing ‘an important sacred cluster delineating ascetic liminality’ (*ibid.*:303), and as cultural symbols they are ‘multivocal and multireferential’ (*ibid.*:303); they possess, in other words, ‘manifold interrelated and even contradictory levels of meaning’ (*ibid.*:303).

According to Gross, the *sādhu*’s hair, whether long and matted (*jaṭā*) or close-cropped, is a symbol of ascetic status and liminality, and both of these extremes communicate a disregard for personal physical appearance. At the time of our first meeting Svāmī Devendrānand Giri in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram had let his hair and beard grow – although neither of them were yet very long. Svāmī Devendrānand Giri told me that within his monastic order, *sādhus* were allowed either to let their hair and beard grow or to have both face and head clean-shaven. If one decided to let his hair and beard grow, no trimming was allowed because, Svāmī Devendrānand said, ‘that is what the

2. BEYOND DHARMA

ordinary people do.’ This, in other words, is one of the symbolic aspects contributing to distinguish sādhus from householders.⁴⁵

Within Hinduism a jaṭā also carries a mythological meaning linked to Lord Śiv, who, with the help of his long, coiled up jaṭā, managed to stop the Gaṅgā from inundating the world. This is why Lord Śiv is often depicted with the Gaṅgā flowing out of his matted locks. As Gross remarks, this suggests that the jaṭā symbolises control and power over natural and physical forces (ibid.:304). The jaṭā is also seen as the ‘seat’ of a sādhu’s siddhis (powers), and the length of a jaṭā is often considered important in measuring prestige and rank among sādhus. ‘In short’, Gross concludes, ‘the jaṭā symbolizes non-attachment to the ego and to the world, the practice of tapas, the possession of supernatural powers and yogic control, rejection of conventional social rules, other worldly concerns, and renunciation of worldly life’ (ibid.: 304-5).



Plate 9

⁴⁵ Svāmī Devendrānand explained to me that sādhus use some sort of soap rather than shampoo to clean their hair. This is one of their efforts to differentiate themselves from ‘the general people.’ Svāmī Devendrānand also said that sādhus previously used to wash themselves with clay from the Gaṅgā. While saying this he made faces in disgust, clearly proving that he would never have adopted this practice himself. Svāmī Devendrānand said he no longer bathes in the Gaṅgā. He used to do so, but after he got some sort of skin infection from the water, he stopped this practice. Now he only touches the water with his hands and sprays some over himself. This he does every day.

The symbolic impact of hair is thoroughly discussed in Edmund Leach's classical paper 'Magical Hair' (Leach 1958), and later in Gananath Obeyesekere's essay from Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere 1981). Leach sees hair as a public cultural symbol; in his view, this implies that it bears no unconscious motivational significance for the individual or the group. Rather, Leach argues, the renouncer within the Indian context acts with reference to conscious elements embedded in this particular religious and cultural doctrine: 'The correct hair behavior – and also the correct sexual and excretory behavior – of Indian ascetics was all laid down in the *Nārada-parivrājaka Upanishad* over 2000 years ago' (Leach 1958:56). In Leach's view, anyone who has grown up in such a society will possess a conscious knowledge of the symbolic meaning embedded in hair and sexual behaviour: '[...] it is inevitable that that the one shall be "a symbol for" the other' (ibid.:156). 'Matted hair', Leach goes on to say, "means" total detachment from the sexual passion because hair behavior and sex behavior are consciously associated from the start' (ibid.:156). The renouncer's behaviour should therefore, according to Leach, be understood in the context of tradition and custom.

Obeyesekere disagrees with these ideas, and claims that Leach is wrong in seeing hair as a public symbol: 'Leach's view is that the symbols are publicly and overtly recognized; they are laid down in sacred books; therefore they cannot have unconscious significance. This seems to me an illogical inference, since there is no intrinsic contradiction between custom and emotion' (Obeyesekere 1981:20).⁴⁶ Obeyesekere stresses the emotional and complicated aspects related to the act of renouncing the world, and attacks Leach's apparently rational and simple explanation of renunciation as an act described in the religious books and, therefore, a question of conscious adaptation to custom and tradition. 'That ascetic experience is a complicated matter is easy to demonstrate', Obeyesekere says (ibid.:21), and further elaborates his argument:

⁴⁶ For further discussion of the meaning of hair, see also Marine Carrin's article 'The Sacrifice of Fertility: Female Sacredness at the Hindu/Tribal Frontier in Bengal' (1999).

2. BEYOND DHARMA

The person who in late life withdraws from the social world, forsaking family and friends, cutting himself loose from his social moorings, is not just any ordinary person consciously and rationally following the ancient Upanishadic instructions. If such withdrawal were an easy matter, the Indian world would be cluttered with ascetics. Fortunately, though ascetics are conspicuously visible, they are rare creatures. Leaving the world has not been for them a rationally calculated, deliberate act: it has been precipitated by complicated personal and social factors, often of a highly emotional sort. (ibid.:21)

According to Gross, the second kind of body symbolism, nakedness or ritual nudity, can be understood as symbolising rebirth and transition, but it may also be seen as signifying ‘the absence of possessions, status, and rank as well as certain philosophical orientations regarding the non-clinging to material existence so basic to the sādhus world view and renunciant life style’ (Gross 1992:303). Further, as pointed out by Gross, nakedness among sādhus symbolises ‘the rejection of physical comforts and the transcendence of attachments to the body’, as well as ‘simplicity, innocence, and a state of oneness with nature and all of creation’ (ibid.:303):

Ultimately, ritual nakedness graphically symbolizes the sādhus’s separate identity and their formal renunciation of the mundane social world, which encompasses such things as class/caste distinctions and hierarchically based inequalities characteristic of the social relationships and the consciousness of the more fully clothed members of Indian society. (ibid.:303-304).

The third kind of body symbolism that Gross suggests as characteristic of sādhus’ liminal state of being, is the use of vibhūti⁴⁷ – ashes, which are often taken from the sacred fires (dhūnī) kept by sādhus. Some sādhus cover their entire body with vibhūti, whereas others only use it to make tilak marks on parts of their bodies. Gross describes the symbolic effect of covering the body with vibhūti as operating in much the same way as nudity and matted hair – ‘covering the body with vibhūti effectively distinguishes and separates the ascetic segment of Indian society from the Hindu laity’ (ibid.:305). However, some differences can be traced because ‘contrary to the

⁴⁷ Another commonly used word for ashes is ‘bhasm’.

symbolism of (re)birth associated with nudity, ashes convey a sense of death and the dissolution of the material world, the ego, and conditioned consciousness’ (ibid.:305). On the other hand, both the vibhūti and the jaṭā communicate a lack of regard for the body and its beauty, and the use of vibhūti contributes symbolically to distinguish renouncers from householders. Gross points to the fact that ‘the wearing of ashes stands in sharp opposition to the use of scented oils and other cosmetics by the more worldly caste Hindus, who by doing so apparently are clinging to the body in an attempt to make it more attractive’ (ibid.:305).



Plate 10: Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (wearing ashes) with his son Rām in Varanasi.

I share Gross’s understanding of matted hair (jaṭā), nudity, and ashes (vibhūti) as ‘primarily overlapping symbols of Hindu ascetic status as well as of liminality that physically separates the sādhus from non-ascetic members of Indian society’ (ibid.:303). However, I find it important to emphasise that, with the exception of ritual baths (taking place at melās and on other auspicious occasions), only a limited number of sādhus are digambar (naked) on a permanent basis. I also find it important to keep in mind that many sādhus keep their heads and faces clean-shaven or close-cropped and that far from all sādhus apply ashes to their bodies. With these exceptions, I find it

2. BEYOND DHARMA

justifiable to support Gross's view of nudity, matted hair and ashes as symbols of liminality, distinguishing sādhus from householders.

Although the Indian sādhu has been described as a liminal entity, this does not only apply to the transitional phase of initiation into samnyās āśram but also to what Gross calls 'a more or less permanent state of liminality' (ibid.: 301):

While ascetic initiation places the sādhus in a marginal, sacred domain separate from the world of men making them 'threshold people', Hindu ascetic ritualism, various clusters of sacred symbols, and their entire life style of renunciation transforms the transitional phase of initiation into a more or less permanent state of liminality. Hindu asceticism, thus, represents an instance of 'institutionalised liminality' in which the liminal phase becomes a total way of life. (ibid.:301)

Turner explains the presence of such institutionalised states by referring to the increasing specialisation of society and culture: '[...] with progressive complexity in the social division of labor, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities "betwixt and between" defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalized state' (Turner 1991:107). In other words, Turner suggests that in societies other than tribal societies the liminal state of transition has become a permanent condition, and, he says, 'nowhere has this institutionalization of liminality been more clearly marked and defined than in monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions' (ibid.:107).

The making of a Nāgā

To become a Nāgā,⁴⁸ one of the gurus pull our penises. We are told to focus on the flag symbolising Dattātreya⁴⁹ flying in the top of a flagstaff, and then he pulls ... three times. Some pull very hard; there may even be bloodshed, whereas others are more careful. My guru did not pull very hard; he was very nice [merā guru bahut sundar hai] – he only gave a small ‘blessing’.

In this way Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) described how he became a Nāgā during the Kumbh Melā in Haridvar in 1986. The time when the Kumbh Melā is arranged is regarded as very auspicious, and it is therefore also seen as a very auspicious occasion to take saṃnyās. Mahārāj said:

All the Gods come to the Kumbh Melā. The forces [the siddhis] of the Gods may cause wonders to happen. These forces are what draw people from all the world to the Melā. The Kumbh Melā is the only time when Nāgās can take saṃskār, and for this reason the Kumbh becomes especially important to us. It is, however, important also to others, as it is in fact only during the Kumbh that one can take final leave of saṃsār.

Mahārāj explained that taking saṃnyās implies to die from saṃsār; also, the rites used in this saṃskār are similar to the rites arranged at the cremation of a householder. The idea is basically the same: one dies from, and leaves, saṃsār. One is, in other words, dead to the social world. When the Nāgās, the warrior sādhus, leave saṃsār, they take an oath to be soldiers defending sanātan dharma – the eternal truth. Further, they will fight for truth and goodness and protect human beings against all evil and lead a dharmic life. The Nāgās have their own priests (brāhmaṇs) who perform saṃskār, the rite by which novices are transformed into sādhus. As the rite, called vidyāhavan, varies from akhārā to akhārā, each akhārā has their own brāhmaṇ. This brāhmaṇ brings

⁴⁸ Nāgā is the general name of ‘naked’ ascetics, who are found within both Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. The initiation ritual described here is the ritual performed by the Nāgās belonging to the daśānāmi – the ten orders of samnyāsis founded by Śaṅkarācāryā – more precisely, the rites performed by the Jūnā Akhārā, ‘the old akhādā’ (Ghurye 1964:103).

⁴⁹ Dattātreya is the iṣṭādev of Jūnā Akhārā.

other brāhmaṇs with him to assist him in performing the vidyāhavan. Piṇḍ dān,⁵⁰ a rite similar to that performed when a householder dies, is also performed. The novices gather at the river bank in the morning and are seated in a line. From barley, sesame, turmeric, rorī, milk and curd they make a batter, which they smear all over their bodies. Next they make a piṇḍ of barley and water from the Gaṅgā. The piṇḍ symbolises one's dead ancestors (pitṛ). The novices also make a piṇḍ symbolising themselves – 'I am also dead', distinguishes this rite from that performed for a dead householder, in which it is the householder's relatives, not the deceased himself, who perform his death rite. Characteristic of the novices' way of performing the piṇḍ dān is the fact that they let all their relatives 'die'. They make a piṇḍ for all their relatives – whether deceased or still alive – and sacrifice this to the Gaṅgā. This rite is performed eleven times. Eleven piṇḍs are sacrificed for each relative, and between each of these eleven times the novices bathe in the Gaṅgā (which, especially in Haridvar, is extremely cold at the time of the Kumbh Melā). The performance of piṇḍ dān goes on from early morning until the afternoon. The brāhmaṇs administer the rite, recite mantrās and guide the novices through the rite. In the evening all novices belonging to the Jūnā Akhārā gather under a huge flag, symbolising Dattātreya, flying from the top of a flagstaff. The whole following night they do jāp at their troop's dhūnī, and at four o'clock in the morning the head of the Jūnā Akhārā arrives in the camp. He asks all the novices to approach the Gaṅgā. On the river bank he recites a mantrā and sacrifices a daṇḍā and a kamaṇḍal to the Gaṅgā. The novices then take 108 holy dips in the cold waters of the river. By this act they do tyāg and become proper sādhus of the Jūnā Akhārā. Some of the sādhus choose to go through another ritual in order to become not only sādhus of the Jūnā Akhārā, but also Nāgās.⁵¹ They may then remain seated at the Gaṅgā in order to go through the Nāgā rite later the same day. Those who will only

⁵⁰ Piṇḍ: 'A small ball made of cooked rice, offered to the ancestors in connection with the last rites by the nearest (male) relation.' (Klostermaier 1998:138-39). Piṇḍ dān is the name of the rite where these small balls are given to the departed souls of one's nearest relatives.

⁵¹ There is, among the Nāgās, an ongoing discussion as to whether you can become both a sādhu and a Nāgā at the same Kumbh. Some claim that after you have taken saṃskār and become a sādhu, you should wait till the next Kumbh to become a Nāgā. Mahārāj, however, became a sādhu and a Nāgā at the same Kumbh.

take saṃskār, are now finished and are regarded as proper sādhus of the Jūnā Akhārā.⁵²

Mahārāj, who became a sādhu and a Nāgā during the same Kumbh, admitted that he had been a little scared before the Nāgā ceremony. He had previously observed this rite and seen sādhus running away from the initiation site bleeding heavily. He had also heard stories of people who had been mutilated and even had died from the rite. Others, he knew, felt pain for years, whereas others again felt pain only for a few days after the ceremony. The only way to tell the difference between the sādhus and the Nāgās in the Jūnā Akhārā is by their kind of underwear.⁵³ According to Mahārāj, the difference may also have a somewhat more explicit implication as only Nāgās, at least in a formal way, can make a career within the Jūnā Akhārā. However, if one does not meet the formal requirements there are, as in the rest of the Indian society, always ways in which the formal bureaucracy can be evaded.

THE FOURTH STAGE

During my first fieldwork in Varanasi, in 1993, Svāmī Śiv Āśram, a Daṇḍī Svāmī I encountered briefly, said to me:

There are four stages in life; childhood, puberty, grown-up, and old age. According to our religion all Hindus should become a saṃnyāsī in the fourth stage in life. During the three first stages you should finish your responsibilities related to family-life. In the fourth stage, family, property, and all other secular aspects should be sacrificed and renounced. My money and material property will not help me or go with me to Heaven, but the religious work that I am doing now – in my last stage in life – will bring me to Heaven and give me peace. (See also Bjerkan 1994:51)

⁵² Some, as for instance Mahārāj's uncle-guru, Itvār Giri, choose only to become sādhus of the Jūnā Akhārā, not Nāgās.

⁵³ While the Nāgās of the Jūnā Akhārā use what is called a nāgphanī, the ordinary sādhus of the Akhārā wear what is called a laṅgoṭ.

Renunciation in the Hindu context means the renunciation of *saṃsār* – ‘the cycle of reincarnation’ (Flood 1997:86), ‘the transient world, the cycle of birth and rebirth’ (Klostermaier 1998:163), ‘the world one experiences when identified with the ego’ (Stuart 1995:8). To be free from the cycle of reincarnation implies in most Hindu traditions *mokṣ*⁵⁴ – release, salvation, or liberation. *Mokṣ* is in Hindu scriptures characterised as one of the four *puruṣārths* (aims/purposes of man): *arth* (wealth and power); *kām* (pleasure, sexual/sensual enjoyment); *dharma* (religious and familiar duties, righteousness), and *mokṣ* (release, liberation, complete freedom). ‘The route to superior control, to the fourth and most worthwhile kind of attitude, *mokṣa* or complete freedom, lies in the mastery of attitudes of greater and greater concern coupled with less and less attachment or possessiveness’ (Potter 1991:10).

The *sādhus* I encountered seemed, despite their varied backgrounds and highly individual personalities, to share some common denominators as to thoughts preceding, surrounding, and succeeding the act of renouncing the world. I noticed, for instance, that so to speak all of them emphasised a desire for freedom – a desire to be free from *saṃsār* and *māyā*, free from worldly obligations and relations. With great satisfaction, a number of *sādhus* described to me their experience of being in an ideal mental state of freedom and eternal happiness – or permanency, as one put it. This state was often also described by the word *śānti* – peace. Further, if I asked a *sādhu* whether he could explain why he renounced the world, he would often refer to his *karma*. Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth said, for instance: ‘I have become a *saṃnyāsī* due to my past lives, my *karma*.’ If, then, I were to list a number of common denominators among the *sādhus* I encountered, this would include *saṃsār*, *māyā*, *mokṣ*, *karma*, *śānti* (peace), freedom, and eternal happiness (or permanency). I will both below and in the following chapters approach these concepts in order to ‘describe-analyse’ (Rapport 2000) the ways in which they were applied to explain turns in, and ways of, life in my conversations with *sādhus*.

⁵⁴ See also Bjerkan 1994.

Freedom from saṃsār and māyā

Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj, the head of Sumeru Maṭh in Varanasi, tried to explain to me the content of māyā:

A rope, for instance, may look like a snake from a distance, but when you come closer you realise that it is a rope. If you see your family at a distance, you think ‘this is my family, these are my responsibilities’, but if you take a closer look, you will see that this is nothing. At a distance we can not see through the curtain of māyā, but if we take a closer look we will see through māyā. Māyā is just like a curtain. When we see the curtain at a distance, we believe that there is something behind it. If, however, we go closer and look behind the curtain, we will see that there is nothing there. Māyā tries to catch you – māyā is all the things that we get attracted to. The work of brahm is to raise the curtain.

A temple priest I met in Machlī Bandar Maṭh in Varanasi, described māyā as mithyā – false, incorrect, untrue:

Māyā is mithyā [false, incorrect, untrue] – the ‘showy’ things. Māyā is that which is not true. This life [saṃnyās] is true, because in this life there is no show off. In saṃnyās you live in a natural way. If you talk with the big industrialists, the rich persons of this country, you will find that what they are really longing for is peace – and peace, you can not buy.

A Daṇḍī Svāmī I met in Assi ghāṭ in Varanasi expressed himself in similar terms: ‘In my former life there was nothing. It was all a lie; everything was like a performance. Ultimately man is alone – all relationships are only formalities.’

One of Stuart’s informants described māyā as a dream-like state:

[...] Swami-ji began by describing the dream-like nature of our present mode of living. The world is a dream, the dream of selfishness, (of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, the sadhu said), that we will know to be illusion when we wake. To awaken from the dream of maya, Swami-ji said, we must say the Name of God. (Stuart 1995:13)

‘There is no clear definition of Maya or of the mind’, the Allahabad-based Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī⁵⁵ explains in a booklet:

Maya creates the illusive universe, maintains, destroys and recreates it by Her juggling power. This cosmic illusion is nothing but Maya Herself. Whatever the mind perceives and wherever it runs is called Maya (illusion or hallucination). Mind is the manager of Maya. Maya is a mere appearance. This universe is Maya Herself. It is not real because it is changing. It is not unreal because it is perceived: neither is it real nor unreal, nor real and unreal mixed. What is permanent must be real. What is changeable must be unreal. (Sarasvatī 1978:35-36)

The term ‘māyā’ may be translated into English as ‘deceit’, ‘fraud’, ‘illusion’ or ‘deception’ (Klostermaier 1998:116). In Vedānt, and especially in Advait,⁵⁶ māyā comes to mean ‘the universal illusion that veils the minds of humans’ (Klostermaier 1998:116). The term Advait, which means ‘non-dual’, refers to the Advait Vedānt’s absolute monism. According to Flood this monism ‘maintains the reality of the one over that of the many’ (Flood 1997:239). Śāṅkarācāryā is regarded as the most famous Advait thinker and, by some, as the most famous Indian philosopher ever (ibid.). Some of what is known about his work is that he developed a theology ‘in which he tries to establish that spiritual ignorance (avidyā) or illusion (māyā) is caused by the superimposition (adhyāsa) of what is not the self onto the self’ (ibid.:241). To Śāṅkarācāryā the whole phenomenal universe, the gods included, was unreal – ‘the world was Māyā, illusion, a dream, a mirage, a figment of the imagination’ (Basham 1996:328). For a person to realise the ‘truth’ – which is to realise the individual soul (ātmā) as identical with the absolute (brahm) – this spiritual ignorance or illusion has to be chased away by removing the superimposition: ‘The removal of superimposition is the removal of ignorance and the realization of the self (*ātman*) as the witnessing

⁵⁵ Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī left his body a few years ago, and Svāmī Ūṃānand, one of his disciples, has now inherited his seat.

⁵⁶ Advait (Advait Vedānta) is a school of Vedānta founded by Śāṅkarācāryā, which teaches ‘non-duality’ – i.e. ultimate identity of brahmā and ātmā (Klostermaier 1998).

subject identical with *brahman*. Such knowledge is liberation (*mokṣa*)’ (Flood 1997:241).

Another great tradition within Hinduism is Vaiṣṇavism, where Rāmānuja (1017 – 1137) is a central figure. Rāmānuja rejected Śāṅkarācāryā’s idea ‘that the world of manifold experience is illusion (*māyā*) caused through ignorance [...]’ (ibid.:244). According to Rāmānuja, the content of liberation is a deep understanding of the Lord’s nature – not the removal of ignorance or illusion. ‘For Rāmānuja there is real separation of a distinct self from the Lord until such a time as that self is liberated. This liberation is the removal of past karma, not the removal of ignorance’ (ibid.:245). The idea of Śāṅkarācāryā was reproduced by Svāmī Bhārātī:

Śāṅkarācāryā says the world is present only to those who see, not to those who are in deep sleep, who are in samādhi.⁵⁷ For those who are in the deep trance-state of samādhi, the world is not present. How come? If the world really was present it should be visible and available even in the trance-state of samādhi. How come it is not? The answer is that the world is really a myth; it is māyā. It is actually not present. This is the reason it is not visible for those who are in trance, for those who are in samādhi.

This distinction between the theology of Śāṅkarācāryā and Rāmānuja seems to me to be of little concern to the average sādhu. A Vaiṣṇav sādhu I met during the Maghā Melā in Allahabad in 1999 illustrates how speaking of māyā in terms similar to Śāṅkarācāryā is consistent with being a Vaiṣṇav, a follower of the tradition of Rāmānuja. To my question of why people renounce the world, he responded:

When we stay in a family, we have many worries related to our surroundings, especially to the family. To get rid of these worries we should renounce the family. In this way we can become śānt and get mukti. When we live a family life, we are suspended in the net of māyā – just like a spider that is suspended in the net it spins. This world is based on false love, on selfishness, attachment to family members and individual needs. When you surrender yourself to God, it is as if you say: ‘Love me or hang me, I am all yours.’ This is complete surrender.

⁵⁷ ‘Samādhi’ is often used both in the sense of an ascetic’s tomb and of the state of the ascetic in the tomb. Svāmī Bhārātī himself translated the term into English as a ‘trance-like state’.



Plate 11: Vaiṣṇav sādhus in a tent during the Maghā Melā in Allahabad, January 1999.

Svāmī Devendrānand Giri, a follower of the tradition of Śaṅkarācāryā, gave a similar answer:

According to our philosophy the whole universe is ultimate falsity: ultimately wrong, ultimately false. The authentic, the supreme, is brahm – the authentic God. To achieve mokṣ, I have dedicated myself to Him. My goal is to leave this material world. To succeed in this I have to complete the life that I have chosen – as a saṁnyāsī. This is the direction in which I want to continue my life. I have to improve my philosophical knowledge and ideas, so I study ancient books like the Upāniṣads and the Vedas. Proper guidance can be gained from these books.

According to Mahārāj, to take saṁskār and become a sādhu implies a death from saṁsār – ‘life in this world; worldly concerns; illusion as to worldly reality’, as McGregor puts it (McGregor 1997:970). Karl H. Potter describes saṁsār as a ‘round of habits breeding habits’; ‘This round of habits breeding habits is a part of what is called in Sanskrit saṁsāra, the wheel of rebirth, which is governed by karma, the habits themselves’ (Potter 1991:11). The building of habits, he says, is required to succeed in the affairs of the world; ‘habits which enable him to overcome the obstacles which lie in the way of material success’ (ibid.:12). These habits, or skills, are what

enable us to manage tasks that we encounter in our daily lives, but they also ‘constitute a source of bondage’ (ibid.:12):

For as one becomes more and more successful through the development of these habitual responses, he tends to become less and less capable of adjusting to fresh or unusual contingencies. Insofar as this hardening of habits does take place, one comes to be at the mercy of his habits, as he will find out to his dismay when a fresh or unusual situation does occur. And to be at the mercy of one’s habits is to be out of control, that is to say, in bondage. (ibid.:12)

Potter is here concerned to show how man’s habits constitute a source of bondage and inflexibility which ‘renders a man unable to respond emotionally to some degree, and this is a limitation of his freedom. He has lost control of the sources of attractiveness within him; his *buddhi*, his discrimination and power to act appropriately and incisively, has been muddied over by habit’ (ibid.:12). Habits may be good, bad, or indifferent, but they all have the capacity to bind man. As long as man is bound by habits, neither success nor suffering and frustration can by themselves enlighten him. Potter uses the term ‘enlighten’ deliberately ‘for the truly free person, the soul which has been stripped of its *karma* and its load thus lightened’ (ibid.:13). This, Potter says, is ‘the truly free, masterful, powerful, controlled-and-controlling Self which constitutes the real, though usually hidden, goal of our attempts to meet challenges’ (ibid:13).

Freedom and eternal happiness

Potter describes ‘the ultimate value recognized by classical Hinduism in its most sophisticated sources’ as ‘not morality but freedom, not rational self-control in the interests of the community’s welfare but complete control over one’s environment – something which includes self-control but also includes control of others and even control of the physical sources of power in the universe’ (Potter 1991:3). He emphasises the tales of ancient India, the art of yoga, and the attributes of a guru as

2. BEYOND DHARMA

examples of how there can be no doubt about the ‘supremacy of control and freedom over morality among Indian ideals’ (ibid.:4): ‘The hero, the *yogi*, and the *guru* exemplify superior mastery over themselves and their environment; they, among men, most closely approximate the ideal of complete control or freedom’ (ibid.:5).

All of my informants, in one way or the other, described *saṃnyās āśram* as a state of freedom and eternal happiness. A *sādhu* I met at the festival ground during the *Maghā Melā* in Allahabad said, for instance: ‘Now I am free, there is no need to do anything. I feel more free now than I did as a householder.’ *Daṇḍī Svāmī Devsvarup Āśram*, an itinerant *Daṇḍī Svāmī* I happened to meet in Varanasi, told me that he was very happy: ‘I have no worries. I get food easily wherever I am, and I am not very much affectionate with this world. I have no family, so why should I be affectionate with anybody? I am free, so I am very happy!’ *Svāmī Bhārātī*’s desire for freedom and eternal happiness motivated him first to make a vow not to cross the borders out of Varanasi, later to take *saṃnyās*. To him, a reduced choice in ways, and places, of living implied a greater sense of freedom – freedom *from* worries as to how, and where, he should live his life. As he has now promised in front of God not to leave Varanasi and to live as a *saṃnyāsī*, he is protected by God himself. If only he keeps his promises, God will provide him everything he needs:

My life is now more free than it was before. Before I had to worry about food, lodging, the future, etc. I am still concerned about how to get food and how to collect money to pay my room rent, but now I have no worries concerning the future. I have decided to stay within the borders of Varanasi, so I need not think of where to stay. The only thing I have to be concerned of, is my present life – how to live my present life. Well, in fact there are two matters that I have to think of. The first is how to live my present life; the second is how to conquer my *prāṇa*. However, as I have decided to stay within the borders of Varanasi, I am ensured liberation at death even if I don’t manage to conquer the *prāṇa*. Yes, I feel more free now than before.

Svāmī Bhārātī rents two rooms for a total rent of Rs 800 a month. This implies that every month he has to collect this amount of money only to pay his rent; in India this

is a considerable amount, especially so for somebody without any regular income. Svāmī Bhārātī seems, however, not to be concerned about his financial situation: ‘That is managed by Lord Viśvanāth [Śiv]. He brings me people who give donations.’

‘Dr. Dīdī’, a medical doctor, has devoted her life to doing voluntary work for the Ramakrishna Mission. When I met her she worked at the Ramakrishna Mission’s hospital in Varanasi. Dr. Dīdī left her family to do service to Ramakrishna, ‘Holy Mother’ (Śrī Śārādā Devī), and Svāmī Vivekānand. During our talk I asked whether she experienced a greater sense of freedom after she left her family. ‘Yes’, she responded immediately:

When I worked as a doctor in Calcutta and in all respects was at the peak of my family life, I felt unsatisfied. I simply could not stay in that jail any longer. I wanted to be free from it – leave it. I earned a lot of money at that time – too much. I used to drive a foreign-made car, one of very few cars of this kind in India. I even had two cars – I always used to have one for my children and one for myself. Still I felt dissatisfied. I was not at all satisfied. I just wanted to get rid of everything, I wanted to be free from everything. I meditated and read Thakurjī’s [Ramakrishna] and Mā’s books. I thought that my duty towards my family was about to be completed – my daughter would soon be married, and my son would soon finish his education. I also wanted to arrange his marriage to a girl that I knew very well from her childhood. My idea was to complete this in order to, secondly, renounce all such worldly affairs – get rid of everything.

Now, approximately fifteen years later, she has completed her idea; she is free from ‘worldly affairs’, free to serve God through her work at the Ramakrishna Mission’s Hospital.

Practically all the sādhus with whom I discussed the question of freedom claimed to feel more free after they renounced the world – free from obligations, desires, attachments, and dependency. There was, I believe, only one exception – a young man of thirty-one. His name was Svāmī Devendrānand, and he lived in Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram in Varanasi. Svāmī Devendrānand expressed that he had enjoyed a greater sense of freedom before he became a sādhu:

2. BEYOND DHARMA

Before I became a renouncer, I used to pass my time with friends. We went to the cinema, etc. Now there are many restrictions to follow and all my actions are organised according to a strict time schedule. I cannot do whatever I want, whenever I want – I have to follow the regulations of the ashram. My lifestyle has changed completely, and a big portion of self-discipline is required to handle this. Without discipline, you cannot change your lifestyle – discipline is most necessary. Previously I could meet with my friends whenever I wanted to; now I have to inform the ashram if I intend to deviate from any of my daily routines. If I want to travel anywhere, to Uttarkashi for instance, I have to apply for a permission. Discipline is required. To improve your aims you have to practice self-discipline. Meditation means to focus the mind – and discipline is like that. If, during meditation, you start thinking of your family, etc., it is not proper meditation. My previous life was more free, but I am happy in this life.

Svāmī Devendrānand was concerned about his loss of freedom *to* – freedom to go to the cinema with friends, etc. I am tempted to suggest that this concern, perhaps, may explain some of the reasons why, a year later, he had left the ashram in order to live with the woman who carried his child.⁵⁸

Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī, whom I met during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad in January 2001, had just published a book which I bought from him. The title of the book is *Are you free?*. Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī here discusses the content of freedom and introduces what he calls ‘the mystical wisdom of “non-doing”’ (Sarasvatī 2001). According to the author, the book is not about ‘freedom in the sense of doing whatever we want, but in the sense of discovering our true nature, which is never involved in any kind of doing or not doing and is already free’ (ibid.:10). To Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī, man is ultimately free when he realises his lack of influence on his own existence – when he comes to know that ‘life unfolds as it does, and we have no power to change its course’ (ibid.:15). These thoughts, I find, are related to Karl H. Potter’s understanding of the idea of ‘complete freedom’ within Hinduism as equal to

⁵⁸ Svāmī Devendrānand and versions of his life will be introduced in greater detail in chapter five.

mokṣ, the final of man's four main aims of life, 'the fourth and most worthwhile kind of attitude' (Potter 1991:10):

When one attains freedom, he is both not at the mercy of what is not himself, that is to say, he is *free from* restrictions initiated by the not-self, and he is also *free to* anticipate and control anything to which he turns his efforts, since the whole world is considered as himself in this orientation. The freedom-from corresponds to his lack of attachment, and the freedom-to to his universal concern. (ibid.10).

The concept of freedom seems within Hinduism to refer to a mental state where there is no bondage, as, to once more quote Potter: 'With bondage one cannot remain permanently satisfied. Bondage breeds frustration and sorrow' (ibid.:13). Svāmī Bhārātī once told me that the great Śaṅkarācāryā had said to his devotees: 'Come back to your Self, know thyself! Who are you, doing all the things you are doing? Do you think that these things are permanent? Do you think that you can stay for infinite time? Why are you suffering? Why do you make other people suffer? Don't do it! Come back and think of your Self. Then you can experience an enormous, unlimited happiness.' I asked Svāmī Bhārātī whether he himself experiences a greater happiness today, as he has now fully surrendered to these ideas, than he did before he renounced the world:

You ask whether I am more happy now than before. Actually the answer is that there is no difference. How? Previously I thought 'I am the body'. That thinking was a myth [māyā]. Actually I am the happiness, I am not the receiver of happiness – I am the original happiness, I am not the one who experiences happiness – I am the happiness. 'Feeling', 'feeler', and 'what is being felt' – if these three are all present, there will be relativity, but the Vedas told that there is no relative state – I am one.

I wondered whether this also implied that he 'is' the sorrow: 'No, no, no!', he responded almost shocked: 'Happiness can not be compared. Happiness is not a feeling, it can not be felt by the mind – it is the original substance. Like golden ornaments can be compared with another ornament; this is nice this is not, whereas a

piece of gold can not be compared with another piece of gold. Gold is gold, and happiness is happiness.’

Mahāmāyā

Śaktism, worship of the goddess (Devī) is, along with the more dominant traditions of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, an important part of Hinduism. ‘The Goddess is a contradictory and ambivalent figure in Hinduism. On the one hand she is the source of life, the benevolent mother who is giving and overflowing, yet on the other she is a terrible malevolent force who demands offerings of blood, meat and alcohol to placate her wrath’ (Flood 1997:174). Klaus K. Klostermaier explains that some of the philosophy of Śaktism forms an integral part of certain schools of Śaivism:

Śiva and Pārvatī are considered to be ‘world parents’: their mutual dependence is so great that one cannot be without the other. In the figure of *Śiva ardha-nārī*, Śiva and his consort are combined into one being manifesting a dual aspect. It is often only a matter of emphasis whether a certain philosophy is called Śaiva or Śākta. The roots of this thinking may be traced back to the sources of Vedic religion. Fully developed Tāntric philosophy is characterised by its acceptance of the material world as the basic reality and its emphasis on the real existence of *māyā*. Śakti is often called *ādyā* – or *mūla-prakṛti*, primeval matter (associating *matter*, as the Latin word does, with ‘mother’!) and *mahā-māyā*, the great illusion.⁵⁹ (Klostermaier 1994:291)

Klostermaier states that today, ‘almost all schools of Hinduism have strong elements of Śaktism blended with their teaching’ (ibid.:292). Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj), who is a daśānāmi Nāgā saṃnyāsī, may represent this blend. Mahārāj introduced the concept mahāmāyā as he was explaining for me the content of māyā. ‘Māyā is what gives you challenges on your way to mokṣ – mahāmāyā,’ he said and

⁵⁹ Gavin Flood has also translated mahāmāyā as ‘the great illusion’. The term appears in Flood’s description of one of the early Purāṇas, dated between the fifth and seventh century, where ‘the text presents a picture of the ultimate reality as the Goddess, who is also Mahāmāyā, the great illusion’ (Flood 1997:181).

added: ‘Māyā is the female forces of the universe. Through women you get children, and the woman demands that you give priority to her and the child. All this is saṃsār (māyā) – what has claims on you before you can concentrate on God. Above māyā is mahāmāyā, a force (śakti) immanent in all creations of the world. Mahāmāyā is the universal spirit. To become part of mahāmāyā is equal to mokṣ.’ In order to succeed in this, one has to escape the tight grip of māyā: ‘If a fish is caught in a net, it has to transform the net into water to have any chance of escaping. It is just as difficult for a human being to escape the grip of māyā as it is for the fish to transform the net in which it is caught to water. This ‘net’ is the main barrier between man and mahāmāyā.’ According to Mahārāj, there is only one way to reach mahāmāyā and mokṣ – through the practise of bhajan and jāp. Mahārāj himself does jāp – meditation. He explained to me that certain conditions have to be met in order to ensure this as a successful way. ‘One condition is satsaṅg – your circle of acquaintances. If you have satsaṅg – if you are in the company of good and true people, it is likely that you do bhajan. If, however, your company is of a different kind it is a lot more difficult to do bhajan.’ Mahārāj further explained that only a real yogī will not be disturbed by his surroundings: ‘A yogī can be involved in activities in saṃsār and still have his mind focused on God. His soul will be with God even if his body has obligations in saṃsār. You can donate your body to māyā, but you have to keep your soul free and focused – on God.’

Karma

Although virtually all Hindu schools have developed their own theories of karma, some elements are commonly agreed upon (Klostermaier 1998). One agreement concerns the derivation of the word ‘karma’ from the Sanskrit root ‘kr’, which means ‘to act’/‘to do’. Karma literally means ‘that which is done’, or ‘action’. There is further agreement as to the incompatibility of karma and liberation (mokṣ/mukti). Klaus K. Klostermaier writes:

The notion first occurs in the Upaniṣads where *karma* is seen as responsible for enmeshing a living being in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Attainment of *vidyā*, or *jñāna* (knowledge) is considered the only means to gain liberation from *samsāra*. In addition to the *karma* one accumulates from one’s own actions in the present life, there is *prārabdha karma* with which a person is born and which has to run its course. The *Bhagavadgītā* teaches that actions performed without selfish desire do not yield *karma*. In the Puranas the intervention of God absolves devotees from having to suffer from their *karma* and God’s grace nullifies *karma*. (ibid.:95)

‘Karma is what propels the individual soul forward on the roundabout of *saṃsār*, both in terms of “worldly” life and of rebirths’ (Narayan 1989:171). Karma is created by actions; good actions create good karma whereas bad actions leave a person with bad karma. Good karma will make your next life better than the present, bad karma may give you a birth as an animal:

Karma is carried forward from past lives and created through actions in this one. Yet karma is not sealed in the destiny of one individual. It can in fact be exchanged between people who are closely connected: a wife may take on her husband’s karma, a son may carry his father’s karma, and so on. Karma can also be neutralized through the grace of a deity or holy person and by the performance of pious actions which include telling and listening to religious stories. Disciples of a Guru often feel that he or she has the power to absolve their bad karma. (ibid.:172-73)

By renouncing the world, the renouncer detaches himself from the fruits of his actions. Such a detachment allows him to act without manufacturing fresh karma – ‘the world, to him, is a spectacle, a “play” (līlā)’ (ibid.:173):

Although old karma propels the enlightened one’s body forward, new karma is not created.⁶⁰ So when a *sannyāsī* dies, there is no longer any impetus of karma remaining to throw the soul out into a new body. The enlightened holy person is said, at death, to achieve ‘union’ (*samādhi*). (ibid.:173)

Klostermaier has suggested that many Hindus, on a popular level, are ‘inclined to attribute everything that happens to them, fortune as well as misfortune, to their karma’ (Klostermaier 1998:95). The idea of ‘the law of karma’ – the belief that everyone sooner or later will reap the fruits of his actions, good or bad, also struck me as having a great impact on the lives of the renouncers that I met. Almost every turn of their lives seemed to be explained with reference to their karma. Daṇḍī Svāmī Rām Kinkar Āśram in Varanasi explained to me the logic of karma as to who may become sādhus. ‘If a person who was a sinner in his previous life tries to take saṁnyās, he won’t succeed. His karma will not allow it to happen.’ Ninety-year-old Śrī Daṇḍī Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth in Mumukṣu Bhavan expressed firm belief in predestination: ‘Everything we do in this life depends on what we did in our previous life – depends on our previous karma’. He himself completed his duties as a householder at the age of sixty-three in order to take saṁnyās. ‘I had seen that it was “written”’, he said. He was predestined to take saṁnyās: ‘Nothing happened in my family. There were no fights, no disturbance. Nobody pressured me. I had seen what was written, and I have experienced that what is written, will happen.’⁶¹ He went on to say:

⁶⁰ Govind Bābā said: ‘When you renounce the world, you stop producing new karma. Yet the karma which is already produced will still influence your life. You may compare this with the way a fan works. Imagine that you turn off a fan, although the fan no longer receives power it will still make a few rounds before it finally stops.’

⁶¹ (Lekh ko hamne dekā hai)

2. BEYOND DHARMA

Nobody is to be blamed for happiness or sorrow.⁶² Only the work that is done by oneself can benefit to save everything.⁶³ We live according to our karma – our karma determines our lives.⁶⁴ You will reap the fruits of your karma.⁶⁵ Everything will happen according to my karma. If I do good things, good things will happen to me. People sometimes complain that their life is not very good, and they blame their bad luck. This is not so. It is all due to karma. We suffer according to previous actions – previous karma.

At Assi ghāt in Varanasi, I met Kaṭhiyā Bābā – a Vaiṣṇav sādhu in his mid fifties. During our chat at the ghāt, I explained to him how fascinated I was with people who make radical turns in their lives – as for instance those who renounce the world and take up a living as a sādhu, or, as Kaṭhiyā Bābā himself had just put it, ‘sacrifice their soul to God’. I asked him whether his decision of renouncing the world had developed gradually or whether it had been a sudden decision. He replied:

No, no, this is not a decision. If you want to decide, then the time speaks for that – time ultimately makes this decision, time is the factor. But our life is not something we can decide. Our life has developed out of memory and company. We have a strong memory from our previous births, and we also have good company in our parents who brought us up. I never questioned whether or not I should adopt a sādhu life, I simply thought ‘this is my life’. It never came by logic.

Kaṭhiyā Bābā’s criticism of the way in which I had formulated my question, may be seen as representing the attitude of most of the sādhus I met – as to their faith in karma. We shall, in the following chapter, meet four sādhus – each holding distinctive life-experiences. Despite the differences distinguishing these four sādhus, their stories are united by the fact that their faith in karma stands out as a foundation stone in the construction of their narratives.⁶⁶

⁶² (Koi nahi sukh-dukh kar detā)

⁶³ (Nij krit karma bhog sab trātā)

⁶⁴ (Karma pradhān detā jas rakhā)

⁶⁵ (Jo jas kar āi jo jas phal chakā)

⁶⁶ For a further discussion of these topics, see also chapter four and five.

FOUR PATHS OF LIFE



Plate 12

Sādhus are free.

(Rādhe Śyām Dās, Varanasi)

IN SERVICE FOR THE MISSION

‘We don’t have any free will. Whatever “they” (Thakurjī and Mā) want will happen.’ This statement was uttered by ‘Dr. Dīdī’, Dr. Archana Aditya, a medical doctor who has now devoted her life and her work in service to the Ramakrishna Mission.⁶⁷ Previously, she had her own successful practice in Calcutta, but she gave this up in order to serve the Mission. When Vinita and I met her, she lived and worked at the Mission’s Hospital in Varanasi. We met in her room one afternoon. She welcomed us warmly and offered us sweets as we sat down in her tiny, cosy room. The room was furnished with a bed, a table, a couple of chairs, and a gas ring. She asked us not to touch her bed – it should be kept pure as this is where she sits when she does pūjā and meditates. In front of the bed was her pūjā-altar where she keeps photographs of Ramakrishna, Svāmī Vivekānand and Śrī Śārādā Devī (Holy Mother). Dr. Dīdī was dressed in a sari. She had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders and wore socks on her feet – the cement floor in her room was very cold. She told us that her native place is Calcutta. In Calcutta she was educated as a doctor and for many years had her own practice:

I worked there for a long, long time. I was married and had a husband and two children, one son and one daughter. Now my daughter is married and has two children, two cute kids. My son is no more. My family is still in Calcutta, but I have left Calcutta for good. I first came to Haridvar to join the Ramakrishna Mission’s hospital. I stayed there for seven years. After these years I had to go back to Calcutta for some time. For two-three years I was in Calcutta, and after that I came to Benares to join Ramakrishna Mission’s Hospital. Here I am offering my service – totally free and dedicated. I don’t take a single paisa for my work, I don’t even accept free board and lodging – nothing.

⁶⁷ The Ramakrishna Mission was founded by Svāmī Vivekānanda (1863-1902) – a disciple of Paramhansa Ramakrishna (1836-1886). ‘The *Ramakrishna Mission* is a well-organized community today, with some 700 permanent members and a large number of associated workers, maintaining several colleges, high-schools, hostels, hospitals, and publishing an impressive amount of religious literature’ (Klostermaier 1994:437). ‘The Ramakrishna Mission, as is well known, not only promotes a nonsectarian (neo-) Hinduism but also a kind of religious universalism. Ramakrishna is the source of the widely accepted “all-religions-are-the-same” theory. Accordingly, the Ramakrishna Mission not only spreads Hinduism in the West but also invites representatives of other religions to its temples and centers in India to speak about their own traditions’ (ibid.:438).

Dr. Dīdī's relationship to the Ramakrishna Mission started when she took dīkṣā from them, forty years ago. During the last seventeen years this relationship has grown more intense: 'For seventeen years I have been 100% affiliated with the Ramakrishna Mission – seven years in Haridvar, seven years here in Varanasi, and in between Haridvar and Varanasi I spent two or three years in Calcutta.' When asked why she decided to join the Ramakrishna Mission she replied:

Actually I don't know why ... But, during the last years I was living with my family, when I was forty-six – forty-seven years old, I was not feeling very comfortable with the kind of life I was living. I felt a desire to be free from everything, to go somewhere else and do a job for the Ramakrishna Mission. Already when I took dīkṣā, forty years ago, the present President of the Ramkrishna Mission told me to join them as soon as I finished my studies. I did not join them at that time, but I was very much devoted to the Ramakrishna Mission – too much, maybe. This devotion started when I was about eight – nine years old. When I turned fifteen – sixteen, I started reading Svāmījī's [Ramakrishna's] books, although I could not understand anything at that time. Still, I enjoyed reading these books and used to go to the library in the Ramakrishna Mission's headquarters. Later, when I graduated from the medical college, the President of the Ramakrishna Mission asked me to join their hospital in Haridvar. At that time I did not come. Instead I married and had a son and a daughter. Later, sitting there with a huge residence – a multi-storeyed building – and with a rolling, successful practice, I was incredibly dissatisfied with my life. More and more often I was thinking 'no more!', but I still had obligations to fulfil as a mother and could not simply run away. I owed my daughter and my son to arrange their marriages. For a temporary break I went to Vrindavan to work in Ramakrishna Mission's gynaecological hospital. I am a gynaecologist. In Vrindavan they advised me to choose between a life in service to the Lord and in service to my family. 'Don't put your feet on two boats', they said. I agreed, and told them that I wanted to finish my family affairs, fulfil my family duties. Within three years I had finished my duties towards my children and joined the Ramakrishna Mission totally. After Vrindavan, I returned to my family. I asked my son whether he had any objections to my decision of devoting my life and my work to the Ramakrishna Mission. His answer was: 'Why not? You are going to do a good job for them and you have done so much for us up to now. Now it is time for you to serve Thakurjī [Ramakrishna]. You have to go there! You will be there and we will be here; whenever we want to meet we will meet.' I was so happy that he said this, happy that he did not care at all about the ransom money I was earning.

I asked her whether she ever discussed these thoughts with her husband:

To some extent, but he was not of that kind. Up to now he is not of that kind. He stays with his parents, and he still quarrels with me to get what he regards as his part of our shared property. Besides, he drinks too much. There are so many bad things about him, all the nonsense things. In the beginning of our marriage he was very good; but afterwards, when he started earning lots of money as a businessman, he started drinking. He also started to take some drugs. After some time he had changed so much that I did not have any common understanding with him. I talked to him about my longing to leave, but I did not ask him to give me permission to go. No, not like that. I took permission from my son, because he was also staying with me. I just talked to my son, told him that I wanted to go away.

By February 1981 my daughter got married, and in November my son appeared for the final year in his studies to be an engineer. However, one day he was involved in a minibus accident and left forever. He was such a good boy, very good. All the people in our neighbourhood still remember him and talk about him whenever we meet, even now – seventeen years after his death. Within twenty days after his death I left everything behind and joined the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Haridvar. In 1958 the President of the Ramakrishna Mission told me to join the Mission, but only twenty-three years later I did. First I spent about seven years in the hospital in Haridvar. At the end of these seven years, some family problems forced me to return to Calcutta for two – three years. The problem was that my husband, my daughter, and my son in-law wanted to have the whole family house for themselves. They wanted to have the whole property, including my part. They even started ‘torturing’ me to force me to leave the house. I told them that I would give them 50% and keep 50% for myself. In the end the dispute was settled and I could leave for Varanasi, this was in 1991. I also owned a plot of land in Calcutta that I sold for a very low price to a cancer institution. I wanted to donate it, but I needed some money at that time and had to sell it. The money that I got for this plot of land I have given to the Mission to cover my board and lodging. The money I get in rent for the flat that I own in the family-residence, I keep for my pocket money – that is all.

My husband and my daughter are still in Calcutta, but I hardly talk to them. If I go to Calcutta I stay with my auntie, not with them. Really, I don’t want to live with my family any more. I renounced that life because I don’t like it – so I don’t want to stay with them. Here, I am very happy. I meditate, I have my breakfast, and after that I go to the hospital. I come back here at about 1.30 – 2 in the afternoon, then I have my lunch. It is kept ready for me here in this hot

case. After lunch I take rest for some time until it is time to visit the elderly ladies who live in this house, there are about forty-five of them. In the evening I meditate again. Only on Saturdays I go to the shrine [the temple]. I go in the evening to take part in the evening āratī; it is a very good worship with bhajan and everything. If I should go to the shrine every day, I would have to finish my meditation within half an hour. To me that is too little time. I want to take at least two hours time for my meditation. When for some time you have been sitting for meditation, you develop such a good feeling inside. After getting up from meditation you feel that everything is so soft, so nice, so joyful ... If I have some tension – after meditation it is gone. It is so nice! [She laughed heartily]. I meditate over Thakurjī and our Mother.



Plate 13: A picture of Ramakrishna in Dr. Dīdī's office.

I was curious to know whether she now experienced the happiest time of her life. She replied:

Almost, I will say. I was at times happy while staying with my family as well; it is not that I continuously was in sorrow. Now, whenever I remember the happy happenings in my life, I always see it as happenings caused by the grace of Thakurjī and Mā. It is of course due to their grace that my family life did not last – for some time only it did, and after that it vanished. I could not catch a permanent hold of it. In my family I could be in very good mood, very happy, for a whole month, but not more. Here I feel different. Of course, also here there are

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

some politics, etc. There are so many things, no doubt about that; but in spite of that, whenever we are seated for Thakurjī and Mā in meditation, there are no times happier than that – really. After meditation I feel so good, I can not describe it [she laughed again] – all the tension is gone, all the unhappiness is gone, and you feel in such a good mood.

Was her family affiliated with the Ramakrishna Mission when she was a child? ‘No’, she replied and went on to say:

It was something wonderful, you know. In 1941 – 1942, when I was eight or nine years old, I used to run to the Ramakrishna Mission, but none of the others in my family did. Only my grandmother [mother’s mother] used to go to the Ramakrishna Mission, and a few times I used to go with her. From that age onwards I used to be so attracted that I could not resist going there. Not until 1951 – 1952, my mother, my aunt, and other relatives started taking dīkṣā [initiation] from the Ramakrishna Mission. I took dīkṣā in 1958, after my graduation from the medical college. I was then twenty-four years old.

Did the dīkṣā mean that she had to follow any restrictions or regulations?

You know, for all religions there are some restrictions. But for us the dīkṣā only means that you have to meditate on Thakurjī. In Ramakrishna Mission we regard the inside, the inner world, as important. When you go to a temple, you see people doing pūjā – they stress outward practice. For us, the mental activity is the most valuable – the activity of the mind. Our activities are determined by our mind only, aren’t they? Our mind, you know, has the maximum speed in the world. Even if we run we can not catch hold of it. That’s why, during meditation, we aim at controlling our mind so that it doesn’t run everywhere. That’s why, for us, there are not so many rules or regulations to obey. The only thing is that we sit down in the evening for meditation, and that, if possible, we also sit down for meditation in the morning. To meditate we should be sitting in a solitary corner and keep our mind focused on Thakurjī and Mā – full of respect, full of love. Love is the main thing. I want to love them. In my prayers to them, I say: ‘You love us so much, and we can not give anything except our love in return – our love and respect.’ By offering them our love, our pure love and respect, we submit ourselves totally to them. Whatever they wish will come true. Thakurjī and Mā know what is best for me. They (Thakurjī and Mā) are like our parents, they are our ‘everything’, our philosophers and our guards – everything. Mā said: ‘I did not give you birth, I am not your Guru Mā, but I am everything to you – truly your mother. Not only for this birth, but for all

the births. Truly your mother.’ So, you see, they love us so much, so much love I get from them, but in return we can not give them anything except our true love and respect.

Does she want to stay in Varanasi?: ‘Oh sure, oh sure, but that is also up Thakurjī and Mā, but I think they will keep me here. I don’t think they will let me go.’ The decision as to who will stay where for how long is given by the Ramakrishna Mission’s headquarters in Calcutta, ‘but’, Dr. Dīdī said:

Thakurjī and Mā make the decision. Nothing is up to me. If they want they will keep me here, if they don’t want they will send me somewhere else. What I do know is that I will never return to my family; there will be no more family affairs for me. Thakurjī and Mā know that I want to stay here, they know it very well, but we have to realise that we have no free will; we can just pray and through our prayers involve them in our dreams and wishes.

Is everything that happens to us karmic?

Oh sure, sure, sure. You see, I lost my son, and I had to go through with so much trouble and torture while living with my family. This all took place because of my karma. Thakurjī and Mā showed me the right way through the Svāmī who in 1958 told me to join Ramakrishna Mission’s hospital in Haridvar. If I had followed his suggestion, a lot of things would not have happened – would not have happened at all. But I did not follow this advice. Instead I fell in love with that man, and I married him. I later told the Mission that I had been advised to join them in 1958, but that only now, after twenty-three long years, I had come. If I had listened to the Mission that time, I would not have had to face so much trouble. But you see, this trouble I had to face, they are karmic fruits of my previous actions, fruits that I had to eat.

While living with her family in Calcutta, Dr. Dīdī experienced a growing dissatisfaction. She was longing to be free – free to devote herself in service to the Ramakrishan Mission. Years later, she explained these endless years of longing as karmic fruits of her previous actions. Understood in this perspective, no suffering is pointless and nothing happens without a cause; rather, it should be seen as a part of a greater and consistent whole. Dr. Dīdī stands out as a remarkable woman – strong, independent, and determined to implement her dreams and ideas. Dr. Dīdī gave me the immediate impression of being in peace and at ease with herself and her mission. The

years she spent longing for freedom have now been rewarded by a life in peace – in service for God through humanity.

‘NOW I AM FREE’

As discussed in chapter one, the search for a state of freedom and eternal happiness – release from bondage, and the frustrations and sorrows that bondage breeds – seemed to be of main concern to most of my informants. Svāmī Ūmānand, in charge of the ashram named Yog-Vedānt Kuṭīr in Allahabad, was one of the sādhus I met who had obviously thought this over. Govind Bābā introduced me to Svāmī Ūmānand during the Maghā Melā held in Allahabad in January 1999:

Svāmī Ūmānand welcomed us with a smile. He was dressed in white and sat on a chair below pictures of his guru, Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī, who had left his body the previous year. We were invited to take a seat, and soon we were served salt snacks and bananas by some of the young boys who lived in the ashram. The bananas had just been offered to Svāmī Ūmānand by one of his devotees, an elderly lady. On his own initiative, Svāmī Ūmānand started lecturing about philosophical ideas within Hinduism. His first topic was related to śānti:

Śānti – peace, calmness – everybody wants peace but most people don’t know where to find it. We keep going to places where there is no peace, only after some time to realise that we have again come to the wrong place. If you want eight rotis and you come to a place where there are only two, you leave that place. Here, in the ashram, there are 108⁶⁸ rotis! [He laughed] Whatever we do, good or bad, we do to achieve śānti. If a person can’t find śānti while surrounded by his or her family, the person will leave the family. I renounced the world to find śānti, but I believe it is possible to find śānti everywhere – some find it surrounded by their family, others while in saffron robes. I was śānt when I lived with my family, but for me the path of saṃnyās is most śānt.

⁶⁸ Within Hinduism the number 108 regarded as sacred.

Svāmī Ūmānand mentioned the fact that people sometimes perform extreme actions to find śānti: ‘People even commit suicide to renounce not only their family, but also their body.’ Svāmī Ūmānand focused on the benefits of meditation in order to find śānti. ‘A lot of problems can be solved in this way’, he said, referring to the Bhagavadgītā (often referred to as ‘the Gītā’):

The Gītā is to sit in peace, to have peace inside. In this way even illiterate persons can know the Gītā. There are many ways to achieve śānti: meditation, jāp, jñān ... Which way you choose depends on your individual choice. By concentration, by controlling the senses, you will become master of your senses. All the great scientists, for example, have to think and concentrate in order to find their inner power – the power to create and to think great thoughts. They have to detach themselves from their surroundings, also their families, and concentrate fully on their ideas – on what has become their mission. When you have found śānti, there is no need for satisfaction from your surroundings. A person who has found śānti gets a satisfaction from inside that demolishes any need of external satisfaction.

For twenty-five years Svāmī Ūmānand has been living in Uttar Pradesh, the last ten – twelve of these in the ashram called Yoga-Vedant Kutir. Originally he is from Orissa, though he no longer speaks correct Oriya: ‘I have been away from Orissa for too many years. I also don’t know Hindi very well, or English ...’. Before he came to Allahabad, he stayed in different ashrams in Haridvar and Rishikesh. In Haridvar he started doing service as a brahmacārī when he was approximately twenty years old. He is now forty-five. Ten years ago, when he was thirty-five, he took saṁnyās.

He renounced the world to find śānti. I was curious to know more about the circumstances of this turn in his life. Svāmī Ūmānand lifted a lock of hair and made visible a scar on his forehead. He started narrating:

One day I was on a scooter with some of my friends. I was doing social service and moved from one district to another by my scooter. This particular trip we made at night. It was dark, and we had an accident. I fell unconscious and remember very little from the accident or from the time that followed. People later told me that a truck had picked me up and brought me to a hospital. During the time I was in hospital, I remember thinking: ‘If I die now, where will I

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

go?’ I started searching for God. While I was in the hospital, I also realised that the local people that I had been doing social service for most probably would have showed me no sympathy if the accident had left me disabled. I soon noticed that my memory was reduced; I forgot where I had put things, etc. I remember thinking: ‘If I go mad, people will harass me.’ All these thoughts made me question myself: ‘Why should I give service to these people? I should rather do service to God!’

Svāmī Ūmānand took saṁnyās but after some time he started facing problems:

I was worried about my mother, and felt a strong desire to see her. At the same time I was afraid that if I went to see her, I would never be able to leave her again. In the end I decided not to go. A bit later, by accident I came across a friend of my younger brother. He was doing service near the ashram in Rishikesh where I was staying at the time. He told me that my mother wanted to see me. I replied: ‘No. I have taken on the saffron dress. Tell my mother that I am living here in an ashram and that I am continuously repeating the name of God.’ This friend of mine informed my brother where I was staying. Shortly after, my brother came to see me. At that time I had already moved to Allahabad, but he still managed to find me. He stayed here for three days. When he left, I gave him a statue of Lord Śiv for my mother. I wanted my mother to ‘see’ me in that statue and to find comfort and gather strength from it.

My Gurujī, Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī, one day told me that he wanted to see my mother before he died. He said that this was of great interest to him and told me to write my mother and tell her to come to the ashram. Despite my Gurujī’s instructions, I simply could not do this. What happened, however, was that my mother and my brother were going to Delhi by train to see my sister who was doing service there. Because this is a very long journey, they were allowed to break it in one place. In this way it happened that twenty days before Gurujī left his body, they came to this ashram. My mother appeared as I was sitting like I do now, eating. She and my brother stayed here for two days. I talked to my mother as if I was giving her a lecture in philosophy. We discussed questions like: ‘What is the world?’. To make her understand and feel comfortable with my choice of taking saṁnyās, I said to her: ‘If I had died in that accident, where would you have gone to see me? Now I am alive. God saved me, and you should feel grateful to God.’ My mother said: ‘OK, I respect your wish to stay here, and I hope you will have a good life.’ From then on, I have not felt concerned for my mother. Now I am free, free from this concern.

The desire for peace (śānti) and freedom seems to have been a major motivating force behind Svāmī Ūmānand's act of renouncing the world, and he is now free to isolate his mind from domestic affairs and worldly worries. The accident he met with seems to have been the provoking incident – the incident that made him realise he should renounce the world in order to serve God. I find that Svāmī Ūmānand's description of how he worried about his mother, and how he longed to see her but never dared to, demonstrates some of the implications it may have to expose one's life to such changes. Svāmī Ūmānand made me understand that much strength and determination is required to get onto, and in a proper way stick to, the path of saṁnyās.

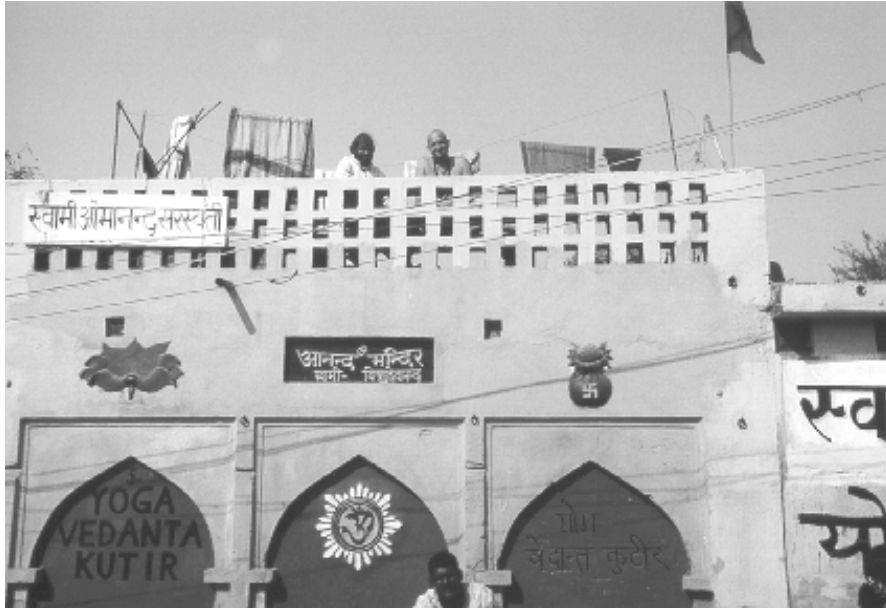


Plate 14: Two of Svāmī Ūmānand's disciples on the roof of his ashram.

IN SEARCH OF PERMANENCY



Plate 15

On an early afternoon in December, Vinita and I passed through the gate of the Jūnā Akhārā in Hanumān ghāṭ in Varanasi. The last time I had visited the akhārā the Nāgās had been playing cards in the courtyard; this time a tourist couple and a relatively young English-speaking sādhu occupied the courtyard. A number of Nāgās had gathered in a corner of the ashram ground. The English-speaking sādhu had a saffron robe wrapped around his body. He had applied ashes in horizontal stripes on his forehead, his upper arms, and on the upper portion of his back. A thread with a bronze figure fixed to it was wrapped around his right upper arm, and around his neck he had a necklace with seven beads on it. We sat down with the sādhu and the tourists. The first half-hour I spent listening to their conversation. They discussed matters that were of interest to me, so after some time I got involved in the discussion. The sādhu seemed to possess an immense knowledge of Hindu philosophy. He also expressed himself in very clear English. When Vinita and I joined the three of them, he was about to explain the eight steps of Patanjali's Yoga System, leading to samādhī. Samādhī is the eighth and final step – the highest state of meditation:

In samādhī you are in a trance-state of enlightenment – you are omnipresent; you have become God. The main enemy, the biggest obstacle, for a person in desire of enlightenment is his ego: pride; selfishness. Your ego is the main enemy along your way towards enlightenment. Your ego is what pulls you back from omnipresence because of the borders it draws around you. When enlightened, you know the answer to the most important question: ‘Who am I?’ The path to enlightenment is given in the sacred scriptures. The content of the scriptures is scientifically true. Because the path to enlightenment is very hard, full of temptations and difficult choices, an enlightened guru is required to guide you.

His name is Svāmī Bhārātī. He is South Indian, and his family still lives in Hyderabad in the south of India. Svāmī Bhārātī will never see his native place again: he has made a vow, a promise to the Lord, not to cross the border of Varanasi (the rivers Varuna and Assi). Svāmī Bhārātī explained that a consequence of his vow is that the Lord will provide for him everything he needs as long as he keeps what he has promised. He made this vow fourteen years ago.

While we were sitting in the courtyard of the Jūnā Akhārā, Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri came by. He recognised me from an earlier meeting and greeted me with a smile. He wore his tiger skin and his flower-decorated crown of rudrākś. He sat down with the other Nāgās and took off his garlanded crown. Svāmī Bhārātī talked about patience, about withstanding difficulties: ‘Saṃnyāsīs should experience difficulties. A saṃnyāsī has to be determined to experience and withstand difficulties. By practices like sitting in heat or cold, standing in cold water, or standing on one leg – while concentrating on God, the saṃnyāsī develops patience.’ Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri snapped his fingers to catch my attention. Then he dragged a bag of Norwegian caramels (‘Smørbukk’) out of his bag! He distributed the sweets among all who were present. A few minutes later, again he snapped his fingers. This time, as his face broadened into a grin, he took half kilo of Norwegian brown cheese out of his bag. The items, I later got to know, were brought to him by a Norwegian friend. Just as I had managed to resume my concentration, a wedding party entered the akhārā to worship at the Hanumān temple. They made so much noise that we all moved out on the balcony facing the Gaṅgā. However, the majority of my meetings with Svāmī Bhārātī

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

took place in his room, located close to the Jūnā Akhārā. The room faced one of Varanasi's narrow alleys. It was tiny and simple and was dominated by packages of incense and pictures of Hindu gods. The only thing that reminded me of furniture was the typical Indian metal-cupboard. On top of this his daṇḍā (a stick symbolising God) was placed. The daṇḍā is the symbol of Daṇḍī Svāmīs, a group of sādhus recruited only from the 'highest' caste – the Brāhmaṇs.⁶⁹ However, as Svāmī Bhārātī told me himself, 'Not everybody accepts saṃnyāsīs of the Bhārātī group as Daṇḍī Svāmīs. That is why I don't take the daṇḍā with me outside.' He put out some straw mats for Vinita and me to sit on. The room was freezing cold. There was no heating inside, and, as the entrance door facing the narrow alley outside was open, the inside temperature could not possibly be any higher than the temperature outside. Cows passing by constantly popped their heads through the open door. One of them also tried to eat the straw mat I was sitting on. Quite amusing!



Plate 16

Svāmī Bhārātī explained to us the meaning of saṃnyās:

Saṃnyās is open for those who are capable of living this kind of life. To take saṃnyās means to renounce your mental occupation with the material world, with affections, wealth, etc. You have to renounce the feelings that are present in your mind – feelings for society, for the

⁶⁹ For further and more specific information about the Daṇḍī Svāmīs, see chapter four.

world, for women, for birds, for childhood and many other things like ego, anger, hunger, and jealousy. All these feelings have to be renounced. Once you have renounced the world, social customs will not accept that you return. You can perform the act of renunciation in any place. To renounce the world is a mental action, determining every physical action.

I asked Svāmī Bhārātī whether this means that he could have stayed in South India with his family and still have gone through the same mental process of renunciation:

No, no! In South India I did not know about renunciation. Still, that was where I did the mental act of renunciation – where I mentally left everything behind. I left everything behind and came here. Actually, I came here to search for the Supreme Self, but today I don't think of that as something that had to do with renunciation, samṇyās, or anything like that. Only after coming here these words, this vocabulary came to me. It came to me through learning. My motivations to renounce the world can be found in my search towards permanency. I was searching – asking: 'What is the permanent thing:, what is permanency?' I renounced my parents, my sisters, my brothers, my wealth, etc., in order to search for permanency. What I had before was not permanent; not even what I have now is permanent – this body is not permanent; it will have to go. Everybody has to renounce this world, has to leave this world at some point, but renunciation takes place when you consciously choose to do this. Most people can renounce their house, their family, etc., but they can not renounce their body; they can not renounce their mind – their life. To leave your material belongings behind is no great action, but to leave the body and the mind behind is a great act. That is renunciation.

Svāmī Bhārātī recalled having reflected on his self and his body since he was about seven-years-old, although none of his family members influenced or inspired him to develop such thoughts. He described his family as wealthy and explained that his mother, in particular, is very attached to her wealth: 'She is very fond of her wealth; she loves wealth!'. Svāmī Bhārātī believes that it was books he read which inspired him to start questioning his existence. Little by little these books led him onto the idea of renunciation. Gradually, he realised that in order to live the kind of life he really desired, he would have to renounce the world – simply to find sufficient peace and time:

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

When I had decided to leave home, I told my family that I was going away to search for permanency. At that time my paternal uncle, who lives in Delhi, had arranged my marriage to a director's daughter. They had agreed on dowry and everything. I was going to get a mansion, etc. My uncle advised me to accept this marriage. 'Then you will get a very good life', he said. I remember that I confronted him on these matters: 'My dear uncle, you are married and you earn lots of money. You can have whatever you want. Are you happy? Are you ever happy?' Because I knew him, I actually knew whether he was happy or not. Every day he was yelling at his children – he faced a lot of difficulties. My uncle answered me by saying: 'No, I am not happy.' 'Why are you not happy?', I asked him. 'You can have everything you want; you have a good wife, good children, etc. Why are you not happy?' When a person is very happy about something, he wants to have that thing forever. Is it not so? If you are happy with your wife you should stay with her always, twenty-four hours a day. My uncle cannot stay even one hour in his house with his wife! He is running around doing this and that. My uncle said: 'All these things will happen in life.' I replied: 'That is why I am going to search!'

I wonder, why are people who can have whatever they want still not happy? This is the main question of anthropology! Why is mankind not truly happy? Even if they have whatever they can think of, they are not happy. This is because they desire the 'unhappy' things, the impermanent things. I told my uncle that I wanted to go searching; I told him that I wanted to go to the forest and do penance. He warned me, saying: 'Oh, now you think that the life as a saṃnyāsī is very good, but you will see that it is a very difficult life! After some time you will think that the gṛhast life is very good, and that the life as a saṃnyāsī is not. That time our door will be closed for you.' I replied: 'I won't come back, even if I am very sad and in a difficult situation. My body will not stay for many years, after 100 years it will go.'

Svāmī Bhārātī defied his uncle's advice and left for Varanasi to continue his search. His marriage was cancelled. The spiritual thoughts that for a while had been latent within him now increased in force – it was particularly the question of permanency that occupied his mind. In Varanasi he met a saṃnyāsī whom he accepted as his guru:

I told him that I wanted to search for permanency. He replied: 'No, no. You will go and do some work; you can not do this search now'. I went to find a job. I worked as an auditor for the big hotels in Varanasi. At that time I also had to audit my own life in order to decide whether I should continue or terminate my business career. By coincidence I heard a person read from the Kāśīkhaṇḍa. He read that if you stay in Varanasi you will get mokṣ. This point I

caught and kept, and soon, without conferring with anyone, I made a vow [kṣetr vrat]⁷⁰ not to cross the borders of Varanasi. This was on the 18th October 1984. [He laughs while telling me this]. I was studying a book on my way to work this particular day, and while reading I suddenly got the idea that I should never again cross the borders out of Varanasi. I told the driver to stop the car and go another way to avoid crossing the border. The driver told me that this was impossible. I replied that I then would go by foot.

Later, the Managing Director of the hotel where Svāmī Bhārātī was working at the time told him that he wanted to transfer him to Puri in Orissa:

I would be given a well-paid position, a house, a car, and whatever I could possibly need. I remember thinking: ‘This is not in accordance with my decision ...’ The next thing I did was to go to another room and write my resignation. When I gave my resignation to my boss he exclaimed: ‘Why, why do you resign? I don’t want to let you go!’ I told him that I was serious about my decision, and I gave him my reason to act the way I did. My boss then said that he both understood and respected my decision. He advised me to try to get a job with some other firm, located within the borders of Varanasi. So I did, and soon I had a new job. After a few days in my new job my boss told me that I had to go to the High Court in Allahabad to attend a tax case. I explained to him that I could not leave Varanasi and told him that I wanted to resign. He said: ‘No, no, we need you to solve these tax problems’. I told him that the person causing them these difficulties soon would be transferred, I just knew that this would happen. After ten – fifteen days, this person was actually transferred! My boss said: ‘You told me that he would be transferred, and really he was! You have to work for us!’ Still, I resigned. Again I went to see my Guru. I told him that I wanted to do a fast. Again he did not agree with my decision. For three days I did not take any food. Then I had a dream – in the dream the Goddess came to me. She said: ‘You must learn the Vedas’. The Goddess also related for me my guru’s name. I didn’t know his name until she told me. The same day I went to see my guru, and I addressed him by his ‘secret’ name. He was obviously surprised, and asked me how I had come to know his name. I told him that it came to me in my dream. He said: ‘Oh...!’ and told me to follow the Goddess’ advice.

Svāmī Bhārātī describes the learning of the Vedas as a God’s grace:

⁷⁰ ‘area vow’

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

Through them the meaning itself came to my mind. It was really a God's grace. After I had studied the Vedas, I took saṁnyās. Actually, I was thinking that I also should study yoga and that only after samādhi I would take saṁnyās, but one person, who is a saṁnyāsī in the Śāṅkarā way, misguided me. He told me that without taking saṁnyās, I would be unable both to study and to fully understand these things. I had faith in him and took saṁnyās 19th April 1988. Afterwards I have studied different religious books – the Śāṅkarāvedānt books, and other books also.

Before Svāmī Bhārātī took saṁnyās, he wrote a letter to his parents to inform them about his decision. 'They came all the way from South India to stop me from doing it; they had no sympathy with my decision. My mother cried a lot, so I told her: "If you don't want me to take saṁnyās, then stay here – don't go back to South India." I knew she was too fond of her wealth to leave it, so I confronted her by saying: "If you leave me, I will take saṁnyās." Then she kept quiet, and I took saṁnyās.' Later, however, Svāmī Bhārātī realised that his parents' objections had been well-founded:

I should not have taken saṁnyās. Without doing yoga, without knowing how to conquer the prāṇ, you should not take saṁnyās. Everyone should not take saṁnyās; that is the main thing. When the prāṇ is conquered, saṁnyās can be taken. Until you know how to conquer the prāṇ you are dependent on society, and a person who is dependent should not take saṁnyās. Saṁnyās is an independent stage; a saṁnyāsī should not be dependent on anyone – then only you can take saṁnyās. If you are dependent, even on your body, you should not take saṁnyās.

So, what happened? Did he have a hard time in the beginning of his career as a saṁnyāsī?

Yes, really! I had many difficulties. I can't give the details, but there were difficulties concerning food, lodging, etc. – many difficulties! Despite these, I have to live as a saṁnyāsī. I have renounced the world and can not return. I am still searching for the person who can teach me yoga, teach me how to conquer the prāṇ – which is very difficult. After I took saṁnyās, I have studied many books about yoga and other things – about the supreme self and everything. I have got the knowledge, all the theoretical knowledge, but to gain the practical knowledge I have to conquer the prāṇ and the mind.

Svāmī Bhārātī is still in search of a guru competent in yoga and prāṇāyām (breath-exercise) to guide him towards the required knowledge of how to control the breath (prāṇ), but he finds it difficult to find a competent person: ‘They all seem to be crooks – dressed in saffron robes.’ He still finds saṃnyās life difficult: ‘It is very difficult! Without conquering the prāṇ you can not live as a saṃnyāsī.’ I confronted him with the fact that by then he had been living this kind of life for ten years. He nodded his head and said:

Yes, but that is just maintaining – it is just maintaining ... The feelings, hunger, cold – everything – all these feelings come from the prāṇ. The mind and the prāṇ are two sides of the same coin. To conquer the mind you have to conquer the prāṇ, and to conquer the prāṇ, you have to conquer the mind. To achieve this you should first purify your body.

Out of curiosity I asked him whether he ever reads newspapers to keep track with incidents taking place in the world – or whether this was part of what he had renounced. He admitted that he does read newspapers:

I have not fully renounced – I have not conquered the prāṇ. All sādhus are like me; they have feelings similar to those of every other man. An authentic saṃnyāsī should be like a child, like a mad person – a person possessed by demons, a person in deep sleep. He should not feel hunger, thirst, cold or heat; he should not have the ability to feel angry, glad, or depressed. Such saṃnyāsīs are hard to find.

When I met Svāmī Bhārātī again two years later, some changes had taken place in his life. He had started doing some guiding for Indians and foreigners visiting Varanasi, and he also told me that he now reads horoscopes. In this way he makes some money to cover his daily expenses. Besides, he had moved and was now living in the same building as his mother who had come for Kāśīvās.⁷¹ Svāmī Bhārātī explained that, after she became a widow, he had told her about the benefit of living and dying in Kāśī. She had faith in him and moved all the way from Hyderabad to Varanasi. Due to

⁷¹ ‘Kāśīvās’ means to reside, to take up residence, in Kāśī.

her advanced age (she is eighty years old) and because she speaks only Telugu,⁷² Svāmī Bhārātī now helps her in her daily life. To my question whether he, as a saṃnyāsī, saw any difficulties in living so close to his own mother, he replied: ‘No. I don’t consider myself as any great saṃnyāsī, so that is of no difficulty to me.’ I presumed his mother was happy to see him again after all these years apart, but Svāmī Bhārātī said: ‘No, as a saṃnyāsī she is not happy to see me. She came to Varanasi because I told her that if she dies here, she will not be reborn.’

I believe Svāmī Bhārātī was the one of the sādhus that I knew who had renounced the most – in terms of material and economic benefits. He was brought up in a wealthy family; he was offered a financially favourable marriage, and he had created for himself an apparently solid and prosperous career. He left behind all these benefits to search for eternal happiness and permanency. Svāmī Bhārātī is obviously very learned in the theoretical field of yoga and Hindu philosophy, whereas he lacks the practical knowledge of yoga and of how to control the breath. He did not know, as he put it himself, ‘how to conquer the prāṇ’. Despite the hardship of the saṃnyās way of life, Svāmī Bhārātī seemed determined to continue living this kind of life. According to him, he also does not have much choice, as social customs will not allow him to return to the world of saṃsār. Svāmī Bhārātī once seemed to have every material advantage at hand, but he gave up all this. He had first-hand knowledge of a lifestyle most of his countrymen would envy him, but he also knew better than most that wealth does not necessarily breed happiness – and happiness, eternal happiness, was the only thing Svāmī Bhārātī really desired.

⁷² Telugu, a Dravidian language, is the official language of Andhra Pradesh.

A SĀDHU IN SAṂSĀR

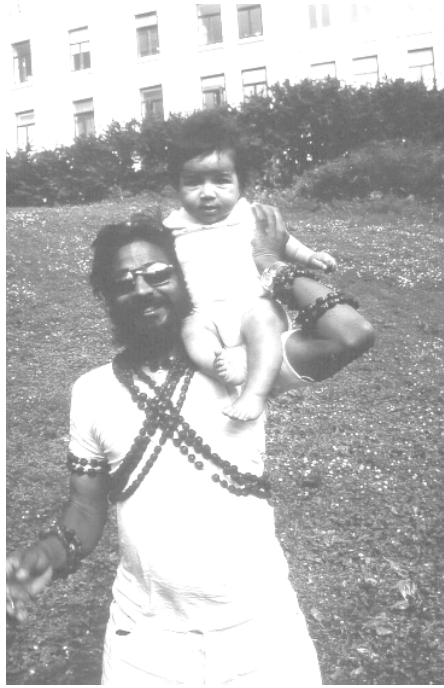


Plate 17

I have gained so much experience that does not belong in this world. I feel that I should have written it down – all these experiences and the wisdom that I have gained from inside. I should, but I don't know how to write. I have a lot to tell – from the time when I was a young boy who experienced tyāg and left everything behind, until today. A variety of reasons may evoke the feeling of tyāg. Some feel that tyāg [renunciation] is the solution to their problems – tyāg becomes a mean to escape. This was not how it happened to me.

In this way Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri opened his narrative – the story of his life. We sat in his wife Umā's⁷³ flat in Oslo. Their son, Rām, born on Lord Gaṇeś's birthday, was happily playing in his father's lap. Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri, or Mahārāj as he is often addressed (also by his wife), continued his story:

My father was a very religious man. If he had not taken snān [bath] and seen the sun rise, he would not eat. He meditated, did pūjā and jāp and went daily to the Śiv temple in front of our house, but he never ordered me to do the same. Still, of my own free will, I used to get up with

⁷³ Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri has given his wife the name Umā – another name of Satī, Śiv's consort.

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

him – take bath and do pūjā with him – simply because it gave me happiness to do so. Then, suddenly, my father died.’

At the time of his father’s death, nobody except Mahārāj was at home with him. His mother had gone to Varanasi on a pilgrimage, and his brothers were living and working in Bombay at the time:

My father died in the evening. Our neighbours took me and my father’s body to Varanasi. We travelled all night and reached Varanasi in the morning. My father had been ill for some time, but there was no proper medical doctor in the village so we don’t know exactly what was the matter with him, or what he died from. I was the chief mourner. I had to do the kapāl kriyā – break my father’s skull with a stick. I had to hit the skull five times in order to let the last of the prāṇas out of his body. I was terribly sad, and there was nobody there that I could cry with – except God. I remember that I felt as if there was no more happiness on earth. I searched for God, and I asked him: ‘Why – why did you take my father away?’ Some people develop a gradual desire for vairāgyā. They do bhajan for years, and little by little the desire for vairāgyā develops. For me it was different. I got this intense feeling of vairāgyā during the cremation of my father. I felt a strong desire to find God and to be free from saṃsār. I could see no meaning in the life in saṃsār.

The calling of renunciation (vairāgyā) came to Mahārāj when he was at the cremation ground (śmaśān) in Varanasi with his father’s dead body. In this emotional and distressing situation he experienced śmaśān vairāgyā – he was overwhelmed by questions like: ‘What is the meaning of saṃsār? Is this all there is to it – my father died, and that is it?’

After the cremation, a telegram was sent to his brothers in Bombay to inform them about their father’s death. They came to the village and performed all the prescribed rituals to complete the mourning. As the whole family was now gathered at home, they started discussing the arrangement of Mahārāj’s marriage. He was very young at this time, probably around nine years old, but child marriages were, and still are, common in the Indian countryside. Mahārāj did not appreciate these plans and found the time right to leave home. He told his brothers to take care of their mother, as he had decided

to go to search for God. Without asking for anyone's permission, he left home saying: 'I'm leaving!' When he left, he wore two pieces of saffron cloth that he had coloured himself. One of the pieces he tied around his waist, the other he draped around his shoulders.

When I left home, I felt such a beautiful *vairāgyā*. I fully believed and had faith in God's omnipresence. I searched for God in all things, in every house and temple. Before I left home I felt as if the walls of the house grabbed at me, and I felt a violent dislike for everything related to my home – my family, the house, and the whole *saṃsāric* society. The feeling was so intense that I knew I had to leave.

To the young boy who left his home, the world was nothing but a dream, an illusion (*sapnā*). The only truth for him was to do *jāp* and *bhajan* for God (*bhagvān kā bhajan*). This wisdom had been given him by his father in a *bhajan* that he used to sing for him. The *bhajan* was a verse from the *Rāmāyaṇ* where Śiv teaches Umā the meaning of truth. Mahārāj recited it for me: 'Umā, I tell you from my own experience: The only truth is to do *jāp* to Bhagvān [*bhagvān kā jāp*]. The world is just a dream.'⁷⁴ This was the point of departure on Mahārāj's spiritual journey. Carrying this wisdom he left home in search of God.

Mahārāj walked from his home into a jungle close to his village. His father had shown him a cave in the jungle where a great *mahātmā* once stayed. Mahārāj lived in the cave for some time, until he decided to go to Ayodhya to celebrate *Rāmnāvmī* (Rām's birthday). He walked towards Varanasi and caught a train to Ayodhya. He was now determined to become *saṃnyāsī* – a Śaiva *sādhu*.⁷⁵ He wanted to worship Śiv. He also had a very clear idea of what it meant to be a *sādhu*. To him this was to be a *Nāgā*, to be *digambar* – 'having the regions (i.e. space) as clothing' (McGregor 1999:494).

⁷⁴ (*Umā kahūm mairiṃ anubhav apnā sat hari bhajan jagat sab sapnā*)

⁷⁵ Mahārāj has always had a strong affection for Lord Śiv. In his home they had a picture of Lord Śiv meditating on the Kailās mountain. The picture was brought from Bombay by Mahārāj's older brother. From a very young age, Mahārāj used to sit in front of the picture and imagine himself as Śiv.

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

Mahārāj explained that ‘nāgā’ means ‘naked’, not only in the sense of wearing no clothes but also in the sense of having no possessions:

The Nāgās are known as ‘warrior sādhus’ and are entitled to use power in order to protect God. As the Nāgās have no possessions, they have no reason to develop pride and no other reason to use power than to protect God. If a person with possessions uses power in order to protect God, his motivations may be misunderstood. It may seem as if he is acting on behalf of his property rather than on behalf of God. This is why Nāgās should be digambar.

When he arrived in Ayodhya, there were only Sītā Rām (Vaiṣṇav) sādhus there – worshipping Rām. He saw that they were initiating young novices, and became afraid he would be grabbed by a Sītā Rām and turned into a Sītā Rām sādhu. To avoid this, he took his bath surrounded by householders (gṛhast people). He left Ayodhya, and for the next two years he travelled through parts of India on his own (manmuki); he had not yet met his guru. After two years of extensive travelling, he returned to the cave close to his village and settled here for some time.

Meanwhile, a mahātmā visited Mahārāj’s village, where he had several gṛhast disciples. When he arrived in the village this year, he was told that a young boy had taken tyāg and was staying in a cave nearby. The mahātmā searched for Mahārāj but failed at his first try as Mahārāj was out searching for God. ‘At that time I was a little “crazy” in my head’, Mahārāj explained:

I searched one temple after the other to find God. I sat down at the temples and meditated and prayed to feel if God was present. I was kind of crazy [ek tarah kā pāgal]. When you really love God, you become a bit crazy. I was attacked by a craziness beyond this world – not the kind of craziness that makes you pick up garbage from the street, but a craziness that makes you focus on God only. In such a mental state, nothing in this world matters to you – nothing except the search for God.

When Mahārāj returned to his cave, he met the mahātmā: ‘At the second try, guruji found me and brought me to Varanasi where I took dīkṣā from him. Other people have to search for their guru, whereas my guru came to me. That convinced me he was to be

my guru.’ The mahātmā’s name was Śrī Mahant Bal Ānand Giri. He took Mahārāj to the Jūnā Akhārā⁷⁶ in Varanasi. As Śrī Mahant Bal Ānand Giri spent most of his time travelling, he was not able to take full responsibility for Mahārāj. In his place, one of his guru-bhāīs, Śrī Mahant Thānāpati,⁷⁷ took on the responsibility for the young brahmacārī.

I was curious to know how the environment of the akhārā was experienced by a young boy, and Mahārāj’s face brightened as he exclaimed: ‘Very, very good!’. He explained that approximately ten other brahmacārīs of his age were living in the akhārā with him. They had all taken dīkṣā at about the same time. ‘I don’t know where any of them is now’, he said, and explained that most of them had run away from home – either because they had been beaten or had failed at an exam, because they wanted to get away from school or because they had been fighting with somebody and felt it safe to be away for a while. When Mahārāj took saṃskār three years later, most of his fellow brahmacārīs had disappeared. He believes the whole thing most probably had been a youthful rebellion for them, and that it seems very likely that they have returned to their families.

During his first year as a brahmacārī, Mahārāj spent some time in the ashram of one of his guru’s guru-bhāīs (Mahārāj’s uncle-guru). One day he was told by his uncle-guru to go out in the streets to beg. Mahārāj was, according to himself, quite well-fed at the time, and people who passed him as he was begging in the streets remarked that he looked healthy enough to work for a living. These remarks made Mahārāj sad and embarrassed. He returned to the ashram and told his uncle-guru that he was unable to continue begging. ‘I became a sādhu to pray to God – not to beg’, he explained to his

⁷⁶ According to Mahārāj, the Nāgās are divided into seven akhārās (Movik 2000): ‘An “ākhāḍā”, which word is sometimes translated as monastery, must be distinguished from the latter in so far as the former is a centre where only the Nāgā Samnyāsis are inmates. Further only those Nāgā Samnyāsis who are attached to particular “ākhāḍā”s can be the inmates of their respective “ākhāḍā”s. A Nāgā’s specific status depends on his “ākhāḍā” and has no reference whatever to the particular order of the Dasanāmis he belongs to. It is better to render “ākhāḍā” by the military term regiment.’ (Ghurye 1964:103)

⁷⁷ His full name was Śrī Mahant Rāmeśvarānand Giri.

uncle-guru. ‘If I pray to God, he will provide whatever I need. I don’t have to beg.’ His uncle-guru got angry with him and told him to do as he was told. Mahārāj could not accept this and left the ashram. He had heard of Jhansi and knew that his guru was there at the time. He went there. In Jhansi there is a big Devī-temple where goats are sacrificed in great numbers. Mahārāj had grown up in a brāhmaṇ-village and had never before seen animals being slaughtered. He was shocked: ‘I could not watch all the blood and the slaughtered animals. One morning I got up very early and ran away from it all, back to Kāśī.’ He returned to the Jūnā Akhārā. When he arrived, their pujārī (temple priest) had just left. Mahārāj appeared just in time to be offered permission to stay in the akhārā on the condition that he was willing to take over the pujārī’s duty. He accepted.

Somewhat later, the Kumbh Melā was arranged in Haridwar. This was in 1986. During this Kumbh, Mahārāj took saṃskār – an initiation that for the Nāgās takes place only during the Kumbh Melā. His guru, Śrī Mahant Bal Ānand Giri, was not there, so his uncle-guru, Śrī Mahant Thānāpati, gave Mahārāj this final initiation and became Mahārāj’s sagā guru, his true guru. Mahārāj was now a Digambar Nāgā Bābā as, in contrast to the great majority of Nāgās, he decided to wear no clothes at all. This was to be a part of his tapasyā. The only thing he wore were his mālās of rudrākś (strings of beads). In the Śiv Purāṇ it is written that he who carries 1100 rudrākś takes the form of Śiv. Mahārāj had heard this and asked a sādhu who was going to Nepal to bring him this many rudrākś. From the rudrākś, Mahārāj made himself several mālās. He used copper-thread to make himself a crown of 500 of them. From the rest he made mālās which he carried on his body. In Varanasi, Mahārāj is still known as the rudrākś-bābā.

After the Kumbh Melā, Mahārāj returned to Varanasi where he intended to start his tapasyā. When he arrived Varanasi he was, however, requested by his guru to continue his duty as a pujārī for Hanumān⁷⁸ in the Jūnā Akhārā. Mahārāj accepted the request.

⁷⁸ A ‘pujārī’ is the one who is responsible for doing pūjā (ritual worship) to a God – in this case the monkey-god Hanumān.

One day a woman donated some money to the akhārā. She requested that they used the money to buy a new crown for the statue of Lord Hanumān. As the old crown had beautiful carvings, Mahārāj decided to have the old crown repaired rather than buying a brand new one. Without informing the akhārā, he brought the old crown to a goldsmith. What he forgot, however, was the rule of the akhārā saying that it is forbidden to take any of the akhārā's property out of the akhārā without permission from the mahant (head of the ahārā). Mahārāj's mistake became known to his guru, who called for him. The guru told Mahārāj that he could no longer trust him. He was also told that he could stay on in the akhārā, but he would not be allowed to continue as Hanumān pujārī. Mahārāj refused the offer: 'Either I am the pujārī, or I leave.' At three o'clock the same night he left. He first went down to the Gaṅgā where he threw all his possessions into the water and imposed himself maun (silence). He walked along the Gaṅgā to Assi ghāṭ where he sat down and meditated – silent and naked. After five days, a man who daily passed him on his way to his morning bath approached him: 'You don't eat anything, you don't say anything – can I bring you something?' Mahārāj remained silent, but shook his head to communicate that he desired nothing. The man still went to fetch him some juice made from the bel fruit.⁷⁹ Mahārāj accepted the juice. When he had finished the juice, he decided to move on. He crossed the Gaṅgā and climbed the hill to the residence of the Rājā of Varanasi – the Rām Nagar Fort. He wanted to request the gift of a tiger-skin (bāgham̐bar) – similar to Śiv's – from the king. Carrying his 1100 rudrākś and a tiger-skin, he would have completed the form of Śiv. For four days he sat outside the main gate, naked, waiting to see the Rājā. 'I will not drink water until I have got the tiger-skin', he told the guard, and asked him to pass on his message to the king. He saw nothing of the king, and suddenly he felt a strong aversion towards his own idea. 'Why do you sit here begging?', he asked himself. 'I have everything I need, I don't need anything. God provides me everything I need, and here I sit begging! I don't need anything.' Mahārāj got up, left the gate, and walked down to the shore of the Gaṅgā. That night he returned to Varanasi and established himself in a small temple in Chameśvar ghāṭ –

⁷⁹ The bel fruit is associated with Śiv.

overlooking the Gaṅgā. This small temple, holding three statues of Lord Śiv, was to be his home for the next decade – a decade of tapasyā (practise of austerities).

Peak of perfection

‘Tap’ means heat. If you put gold into fire, it will start shining. The same thing happens to the body. When the body is heated up through the practice of ‘tapasyā’, the śakti in the soul will be evoked and make the body shine. The aim of tapasyā is to achieve control over, and finally extinguish, all desires. When you manage to control your desires, you will experience that they disappear.⁸⁰

In this way Mahārāj explained to me the meaning of tap and the practice of tapasyā. He added: ‘When it is hot, most people long for an opportunity to cool down, and when it is cold, you want to feel warm. To do tapasyā means to work against such natural desires – when it is cold you stay in the cold; when it is hot you stay in the heat.’ According to Mahārāj, all desires can be controlled through such practices. ‘In the beginning it is very difficult, but after a short time it will be easy’:

It gets easier because tapasyā increases – stretches – your level of tolerance [sahn śakti] and makes you capable of bearing more pain. In sahn śakti there is a light [prakāś] which gives happiness, knowledge and wisdom. This wisdom brings an enormous happiness, and the happiness gives you a desire to continue – to achieve more and more happiness. The main aim is to become one with God, and when you experience this you feel that you can achieve whatever you need because everything is within you. The light which is provided by sahn śakti brings you the ultimate happiness. If you experience this, you don’t need anything from saṃsār. You can turn your back to saṃsār because you don’t need it. You will only desire to do bhajan and jāp for God. This state involves an extreme, ultimate feeling of freedom and happiness.

⁸⁰ Khushwant Singh describes tapas (penance) as ‘the heat which burns out impurities from the soul and the body’ (Singh 1967:104).

Mahārāj explained that the practice of tapasyā is part of the process which involves becoming like God (nar se Nārāyaṇ)⁸¹:

By doing tapasyā you can become like God – you can convert yourself from being a human being in saṃsār to be God. In this sense the body is important – it is the vehicle to find God. To me, doing daily yoga āsanās has always been very important. Only with my body I can do tapasyā, and therefore I have to take care of my body – to make it fit for tapasyā. Ultimately, a body will get old and die. This happens even to great mahātmās. There are, however, certain practices [kriyā] that will serve to continually renew the body and ultimately make it eternal. This is the principle of natural renewal – similar to the way a tree substitutes old leaves with new.

Mahārāj settled down in the small temple in Chāmeśvar ghāṭ, and in front of God he made a vow to stay in this temple while he was doing tapasyā. He also promised not to touch money, not to wear clothes, and to become phalhār – which, according to Hindu rules, implies that he would only eat curd, fruits, and nuts. A phalhāri should not eat any cooked food, no salt, and no rice, wheat or dāl. Mahārāj intended to keep these vows for twelve years, as this in the Hindu scriptures is described as an ideal. Mahārāj's main practice during these years of tapasyā was to do jāp for Śiv. For a decade he continuously repeated the mantrā 'Ūṃ nama Śivāyā' – night and day, while doing his daily routines, bhajan, yoga, etc.

When I close my eyes and meditate on God, I get such a wonderful feeling inside. I feel reluctant to open my eyes – only to find myself again in saṃsār. Some times, when I open my eyes and see people in front of me, I think 'no' and immediately close my eyes again. The greatest happiness is inside.

Through all these years, Mahārāj strictly followed his daily routines. Every day at four o'clock in the morning he took a boat to the other shore of the Gaṅgā. Here he took his morning bath and did yoga. 'Nobody has taught me to do yoga. The knowledge came from inside – it has to be a wisdom from previous lives. I have done yoga every day

⁸¹ 'from human comes God'

since I was a very young yogī. Only years later, somebody showed me books where the postures that I had been practising for years were pictured.’ Another of Mahārāj’s daily routines was to go for darśan in a temple on Kedār ghāṭ, only a few hundred metres from where he was staying. Except from his trips to the other shore of the Gaṅgā, the temple in Kedar ghāṭ was the only place he visited during tapasyā. The rest of the time he did jāp – if not at his dhūnī, then sitting on the banks of the Gaṅgā, surrounded by fired cow-dung (pañc aṅni), or standing in cold Gaṅgā water:

I used to do pañc aṅni [the five fires tapasyā] in the summer, whereas in the winter I stood in waist deep, cold Gaṅgā water for two-three hours every day. In the summer I often took a boat to the other side of the Gaṅgā, at mid-day when the sun was at its hottest. In the middle of the deserted, open sandbanks on the shore of the river, I did tapasyā. The heat was extreme and gave me a feeling of sleeping in Mātāji’s lap.

Mahārāj wore no clothes during these years, not even in the cold winter-months. He also had nothing to cover himself with at night, and no mattress to sleep upon. The few times he actually lay down to sleep, he lay on the bare and cold brick floor. In this way he continuously imposed pain on his body and challenged his mental and physical limits – in order to find God.

Devotees came to see him and presented him with fruits and nuts. A man of the milkman-caste came daily to give him a half kilo of curd. Even today Mahārāj can not pass by this man’s shop without being presented with this gift of devotion.

Through the number of years of tapasyā, Mahārāj developed a strong desire to meet God – he was even prepared to give his life for this sake. He imposed himself maun (silence) and started doing yāg (offering, sacrifice) to Dattātreya, the iṣṭādev (the favoured deity) of the Nāgās in Jūnā Akhārā. For nine days he sat at the fire, repeating Dattātreya’s mantrā and sacrificing ghī (clarified butter) to the fire. For nine days he did not move. In this period he drank and ate nothing, nor did he have any physical needs. Rumours started wandering and crowds of people gathered to watch him. Ghī for the fire kept coming. On the ninth day, Mahārāj had a darśan (‘view’) of

Dāttatreya: ‘Dāttatreya came in front of me. He talked to me, and stayed with me for some time. I didn’t say anything. I just cried. Suddenly he disappeared.’ Mahārāj was unable to stop crying. He was in a state of extreme happiness and cried for several days. Even today, talking about this experience makes him cry. The darśan was a blessing from God, and Mahārāj was now considered a great saint. Crowds of people came to see him and to consult him about their problems. Dattātreyā had granted Mahārāj a siddhi (power) – what he said would come true. When he told people that their problems would be solved, this really happened. He also had the power to heal people by giving them ashes from his dhūnī (sacred fire).

His goal was now completed. What he had been yearning for all his life was now achieved. What could possibly follow? Some time passed by and Mahārāj noticed that his inner peace gradually diminished. ‘I became sādhu to find God. Now my goal was completed – there was no longer any reason for me to do tapasyā.’ He grew more and more restless and, in the end, travelled to South India to see the famous temples in this, to him unknown, part of India. He travelled completely naked – with no possessions and no money. When he felt that his journey was completed, he went to see his guru, Śrī Mahant Thānāpati, who had retired to his ashram in Nasik.

Serving his guru

I used to massage my Gurujī’s feet until I fell asleep – content and happy. I loved sleeping at my Gurujī’s feet. He was strict, but he never beat me.

Śrī Mahant Thānāpati was known as a great mahātmā. When he had completed thirty-six years of tapasyā in a cave in Nasik, in northern Maharashtra, he was brought to the Jūnā Akhārā in Varanasi and appointed mahant for the Nāgās. It was here he met Mahārāj when he came from his village accompanied by Śrī Mahant Bal Ānand Giri.

Śrī Mahant Thānāpati became Mahārāj's sagā-guru⁸² and his main spiritual guide. Mahārāj was his guru's only samnyās disciple, and their relationship was like that between a father and his son. They both had strong personalities, and, although they loved and respected each other, they could not stay for long under the same roof. I wondered whether the guru was in some way a father figure to him:

Yes, he became a kind of substitute for my father. He told me to rise early to do jāp and bhajan, but I was already used to this so there was no need to instruct me. He never forced me to do anything; he was not strict with me – I could only feel love. He was never angry with me. He knew I would not lie – he knew that I was completely innocent, that I was not the kind of boy who would do mean things or cheat others. Even when I was pujārī and did the mistake of taking Hanumān's crown outside, he knew that I had no intentions of breaking any of the rules of the akhārā. He knew my nature was good.

When Mahārāj arrived at his guru's ashram in Nasik after his trip to South India, he was told that he had to wear clothes if he intended to stay. He obeyed, but stayed only for a short time – 'I could not live in bondage.'⁸³ Mahārāj started living in a temple in Nasik town, from which he visited his guru's ashram from time to time. While he was living in this temple, a group of disciples started following Mahārāj. They were mostly young men, who were later followed by their families. After some time these disciples built an ashram for Mahārāj by their own means. The ashram is still there.

In his old age, Śrī Mahant Thānāpati got cancer and needed all kind of assistance. Mahārāj nursed him in the months before he left his body. 'I cleaned him like a little baby, but I never felt disgust. Gurujī begged me not to have hatred of him and kept asking why he had to suffer like this – what great sin he had committed.' On his deathbed, Śrī Mahant Thānāpati said to Mahārāj: 'Look, only you are staying with me until the end; all the others have left me, and I have not done anything for you.' In his will he had left all his property to a trustee – Mahārāj was not mentioned. Śrī Mahant

⁸² A sagā-guru is the closest and most important guru – as close as if the guru and his disciple were related by blood.

⁸³ (Mairī bandan meṁ nahīṁ rā saktā hūm)

Thānāpati was a wealthy mahātmā, as among his gr̥hast disciples were several well-off men who had shared their wealth with their guru in terms of donations. As a last gesture Śrī Mahant Thānāpati took his gold watch off his wrist and presented Mahārāj with this as a last memory.

Mahārāj was alone with his guru when he left his body. He sent telegrams to his uncle-gurus to inform them that Śrī Mahant Thānāpati had left his body, and invited them to come to the ashram to take part in the prescribed rituals. Sixteen days later they were all gathered at the ashram in Nasik where a big bhaṇḍārā was held. During the day everybody spoke as if Mahārāj was to become the new mahant of the ashram, but in the evening, when they began to distribute the guru's property, all of a sudden everything changed. There was now a widespread agreement that Mahārāj was unfit for this responsibility because he seldom stayed for long in one place. In the end one of Mahārāj's uncle-gurus was appointed as the new mahant of the ashram. As if this were not enough, Mahārāj was blamed by his uncle-gurus for having stolen the guru's gold watch from his dead body. They also argued that the new mahant of the ashram should be the owner of the watch. Mahārāj left Nasik in rage, and returned to Varanasi with an intense desire to run away from everything. He was absolutely devastated and questioned every aspect of his existence – even his life as a sādhu. All that until now had meant everything to him was suddenly of no value. His guru was dead, and his uncle-gurus had mistrusted him.

These incidents took place during the summer of 1996. In the autumn he met Umā, who was later to become his wife. Mahārāj started teaching Umā yoga, and on Dattātreya pūrṇimā in 1996 he became her guru. Umā knew Hindi, so they could communicate. After some time warm emotions started developing between them. Umā knew very well that it was unacceptable for a sādhu to have a relationship with a woman – especially to a foreign woman. She was afraid to get involved with him because if it did not last, it would stigmatise Mahārāj for life. She was also unable to see how they could make a future together. It was all too complicated. Umā left Varanasi and Mahārāj. The fact that Umā left was most distressing to Mahārāj. He was

confused and had no idea of what to do. In despair he crossed the Gaṅgā and started walking. He walked all the way to his childhood home. Here, for the first time since he left home, he was reunited with his mother.

Mahārāj and Umā were not meant to be apart. Umā returned to Varanasi, and they became a couple. As a couple they had to face all kind of problems and were repeatedly reminded that their relationship was opposed to cultural norms and conventions – not only in Varanasi. Together they wanted to fulfil a dream that Mahārāj had carried since he did the yāg for Dattātreya. The dream was to do a Devī-pūjā.⁸⁴ For forty-five days Mahārāj did a ‘mahā-Lakṣmī yāg’⁸⁵ on the shore of the Gaṅgā. Umā helped him during the yāg, and afterwards Mahārāj fulfilled his promise to Umā of showing her the twelve jyotilingas.⁸⁶ Their pilgrimage lasted for three months, and they visited places all over India – from Badrinath and Kedarnath, in the north, to Rameshvar in the south.

Mahārāj and Umā joined the Kumbh Melā in Haridvar in 1998. Here Mahārāj met his uncle-gurus again; this was first time since the bhaṅḍārā in Nasik. Umā recalls that their encounters daily ended up in arguments. During the melā Mahārāj also met one of his ‘nephews’ – a disciple of one of his uncle-gurus. This nephew had been present during the bhaṅḍārā in Nasik and had observed everything that happened here. In

⁸⁴ A pūjā to the Goddess.

⁸⁵ A big sacrifice to the goddess Lakṣmī.

⁸⁶ According to Gross, the most important Śaiv pilgrimage centres visited by Nāgā sādhus (and other Śaiv sādhus) are the twelve jyotilingas: ‘The places where these lingas have manifested are called *dhāmas*, “abodes” mythologically ascribed to a specific deity. The twelve dhāmas of Siva have an all-India significance and include: Somnāth in Kathiawar (Gujarat); Mallikārjuna in Mysore; Mahākāleśwar in Ujjain (M.P.); Omkāreśwar on an island in the Narmada river; Kedarnāth in the Himalayas in northern U.P.; Bhīmaśaṅkara at the source of the Bhīma river near Poona (Mahārashtra); Triyambaknāth (“three-eyed lord”) near Nasik; Baijnāth in Bihar; Nāgānāth (Nāgeswara, “lord of the Nāgās, snakes”) near Ahmednagar; Rāmeśwara on an island off the southern coast of Madras; Ghṛṣṇeswara at Ellora (Aurangabad District, Mahārashtra); and Amarnath in the Kashmir Himalayas’ (Gross 1992:127). When compared with Gītā Press’ *Dvadaś Jyotirling-Darśan*, Gross is wrong in two major aspects: The minor of the two faults is that Mallikārjuna is not located in Mysore but in Andhra Pradesh, whereas the major fault is that Varanasi’s ‘golden temple’ – Kāśhī Viśvānāth (the lord of the world), is left out. Instead Amarnath is incorrectly listed among the twelve jyoti liṅgas.

silence he had supported Mahārāj, but the circumstances made it difficult for him to speak out. Later, to let Mahārāj know about his support, he had bought Mahārāj a gold watch similar to the one he had got from his guru. He presented Mahārāj with this watch during the Kumbh Melā.

Mahārāj now feels free from his uncle-gurus. He has his own ashram, and has no desire to have anything to do with them in the future:

In my soul I am a sādhu, and what I have experienced – my spiritual experiences – is within me. Now, all I wish is to do jāp and bhajan. What I don't possess is ahaṅkar [egoism, pride]. Ahaṅkar is what brings you towards destruction, what takes you away from God and towards nās [destruction].⁸⁷ That is the worst enemy. Now I just want to live in peace, to live for God.

The disappointments following in the wake of his guru's death had no influence on Mahārāj's affection for his guru:

My Guru is my God. He is the one who has shown me the way. Although he has now given up his body, he still shows me the way. His ātmā and my ātmā still meet. Although he is no longer in saṁsār, he is still my guide. I talk with him, I ask for his advice, I meditate on him, I do pūjā to him on guru pūrṇimā. He will always be my guru.

Young boy – mature thoughts

Mahārāj has hardly gone to school, and is practically illiterate. I was curious to know from where he had gained his knowledge and his ability to share this with outsiders – like me. It was obviously not from school. He said:

It can't be learnt. It comes by itself. At first I felt that everything that is part of saṁsār is destruction – whereas the true and real is God. When I started doing bhajan, all the wisdom came from inside. The more you meditate, the more jāp you do, the more wisdom will come

⁸⁷ (nās ke prati): towards destruction

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

from inside. This wisdom is *nivṛtti* and implies release, release from rebirth. God himself taught me how to read. It made me sad to see other *brahmacārīs* read and write. One night I got so angry that I threw the *Rāmāyaṇ* on God and asked him why he was so unfair. The next day I could read.

In India children begin school when they are five years old – so did Mahārāj. He went to school for two years, but learnt nothing: ‘I didn’t understand anything. The others in my class tried to show me how to do things, but I simply could not make it.’ One day, some of the teachers had planted flowers in front of the school. Mahārāj saw the beautiful flowers and wanted to take some of them home to put on the family’s *pūjā*-altar. He picked some of them, but was observed by his teacher and punished for ‘stealing’ flowers. From that day onwards Mahārāj refused to go to school. His parents had no objections as they were in need of someone to watch the labourers on their farm.

A couple of years later, after his father’s death, he left home. He could not have been much more than nine years old. I was impressed by the mature thoughts he seemed to have had at such a young age and asked him how he at this young age was able to reflect in that way. He said: ‘The ability to think such thoughts comes from past lives. Such thoughts and emotions were latent inside me due to experiences in past lives. I have carried this wisdom inside me, in my soul, from my past. Experiences from past lives may create a desire to leave *saṃsār* – to become a *sādhu*.’ Mahārāj believes that he belongs to a rare group of *sādhus* – those who renounce the world while they are still young boys and don’t have any obvious or well-founded reason to do so. Within others, the desire to renounce the world may develop in old age – for instance, as one gradually realises that the only thing which carries any true meaning is to serve God. However, Mahārāj believes that the majority of *sādhus* renounce the world to escape something – either problems related to family matters or other apparently insoluble problems.

I was curious to know whether Mahārāj was ever afraid, for instance when he was alone in the cave close to his home. ‘That is also what I ask myself’, Mahārāj

responded. ‘What happened?’ Umā added that Mahārāj’s sisters have told her that Mahārāj as a child was very attached to his mother. He was breast-fed until he started school, and as far as they can recall he was in no respect a boy who was used to, or able to, manage things on his own. Mahārāj said: ‘Fear, loneliness, hunger – everything – was gone when I got this very strong vairāgyā. Today I cannot understand how this vairāgyā could be so strong that it extinguished all my fears. I don’t know what happened. For instance, I used to be very scared of lightning – incredibly scared.’

A married man



Plate 18

Mahārāj and Umā got married in 1999, and nine months later their son Rām was born. In less than a year Mahārāj’s life and social status had taken a radical turn. In the beginning he was reluctant to get married because of his dependency on the Jūnā Akhārā. ‘I’m not independent, I am dependent – dependent on the Jūnā Akhārā. I can’t live on the street’, he used to tell Umā. After some time they bought their own house

which became his ashram. Mahārāj was now independent and could take Umā as his wife.⁸⁸

Mahārāj loves his wife and his son, but he was not prepared for the challenge of combining gr̥hast life with a life in prayer. Suddenly he had to handle and relate to everyday matters that never had been part of his universe. ‘I never needed anything as everything kept coming to me. Now I need both money and knowledge of the world – saṃsār, a world I never used to pay any attention to.’ Mahārāj explained such happenings as part of life’s ‘sukh’ and ‘dukh’ – happiness and sorrow. ‘God is everything to me. It was God’s will to let me experience human love too. God opened my heart not only to Umā but also to my family.’

Bedi and Bedi (1991) describe how a Nāgā who returns to family life is regarded as a patit – a fallen, a sinful or degraded person, an outcast who is boycotted by his akhārā. Mahārāj confirmed this, but explained that although he himself has now become a gr̥hast, he will always be a śiṣyā, a disciple, of the Jūnā Akhārā: ‘A śiṣyā of the Jūnā Akhārā will always remain a śiṣyā of the Jūnā Akhārā, even if his life situation changes. Although you change your dress, guru will always be guru – even so if he stops being a saṃnyāṣī.’

One of the practical matters a sādhu who returns to saṃsār has to face is a loss of rights in property which he has inherited from, for instance, his own guru. He is, however, free to donate this property to his own disciples as the intention is not to let them suffer from their guru’s changed life situation. I asked Mahārāj how his disciples had reacted when he, their guru, got married. At first Mahārāj denied that any of his disciples had mentioned this matter at all: ‘A guru can do anything. Whether the water of Gaṅgā is clean or dirty, it is still holy. The sun shines both on good and bad things.

⁸⁸ Mahārāj knows several sādhus who have got married. Even his own granduncle-guru did so – he could do this because he was independent and because he enjoyed a lot of respect from his followers. He had his own temple, his own ashram, and he held land. He was not dependent on the blessings of others to do what he did. He had four or five children, but he still perceived himself as a sādhu.

Everything the guru does is holy. This is the rule.’ Of this reason, none of his disciples had made any negative remarks, or any remarks at all, about his wedding. However, a little later he adjusted his answer and admitted that his marriage probably had made some of his disciples sad. ‘They lost happiness’, he said:

They were used to come to me, whenever they needed to, with all their complains and sorrows. By talking to me, they converted their sad thoughts into happiness. I gave them comfort and śakti. When I got married, they felt that something changed – that I was less available to them than I used to be. They thought that I had lost my śakti. However, it is my belief that for me to become happy, they had to become a bit unhappy. I am happy now as I have got somebody to share my life with, somebody to gain happiness from, someone to share my sadness with. Yet, to know that some of my disciples are unhappy, makes me sad.

As a married man, there are times when Mahārāj finds it challenging to avoid getting stuck in māyā. This was especially hard for him during his four months in Norway. ‘In India the pressure from the public, from neighbours and others, helps me keep the discipline. If I rise after sunrise, people will say “this is no good sādhu.” In India I also have to be an inspiration to my disciples – pray, do pūjā, jāp, etc. In the West I can not even keep track of the moon and the festival days.’ During his stay in the West, there were times when he was afraid of losing his meaning of life – which is not māyā but mokṣ (mahāmāyā). He experienced that māyā intervened as an obstacle between him and mokṣ. Mahārāj has realised that he has to be aware in order to avoid being trapped in māyā. Not long ago, his only thought was to go on with the kind of life he had always lived. To him, this was the only way of life. Mahārāj has always told his disciples that the greatest yogī is the one who manages both to live in gṛhast āśram and to do bhajan. Now he himself knows how challenging this is: ‘It is very difficult. No, as a matter of fact it is impossible. No – it is possible. I want to try. It is all up to me. I experience now how difficult it is to unite life in saṃsār with a life in prayer.’ He compared saṃsār with a quagmire:

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

If you manage to get one foot out, the other foot will only be dragged deeper into it, and it seems impossible to get out. To get out of a swamp is possible, but to get out of a real quagmire is not, unless you are extremely determined to succeed.

Mahārāj told me he has a dream. He wants to share his wisdom with others – make people’s bodies and souls healthy through yoga and prāṇāyām, and give them peace.

Mahārāj is a sādhu and a yogī – and yet also a husband and a father. He seems to have gone his own way always – from early childhood, when he skipped school from the day his teacher punished him for picking flowers for the family’s pūjā altar, to his mature manhood when he left the Jūnā Akhārā for Umā. By sharing glimpses of his life with me, Mahārāj has made me understand more of the meaning embedded in being a sādhu. Mahārāj’s ideal is the yogī who manages to unite a life in saṃsār with a life in prayer. From his experiences of living in Norway, he knows by himself the challenge in this – especially in a foreign and secular context. While in Norway, Mahārāj kept up his routine of doing yoga and jāp daily, and he also sung bhajans for his son. There were times, though, when he was observed meditating in front of the TV – holding his mālā in one hand and the remote-control for the TV in the other. On several occasions he did pūjās and held satsaṅg for friends he knew from Varanasi and Indians settled in Norway. Among these, Mahārāj was known and respected as a great yogī and sāṃnyāsī, and it was obvious to all who observed him on these occasions that here he was in his true element.

When Mahārāj returned to Varanasi after four months abroad, he was welcomed home by a number of his disciples. It happened to be guru pūrṇimā – a festival which occurs on the full moon in July where gurus are celebrated by their disciples. Mahārāj celebrated the day and his return by standing for several hours, waist deep, in the Gaṅgā – meditating. He was at home.

MUMUKṢU BHAVAN



Plate 19

From now on – don't think of me,
don't build your lives on me,
don't let anything depend on me.
I am going to take saṃnyās.

(Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, Mumukṣu Bhavan)

THE DAṆḌĪ SVĀMĪS IN MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

During my research I ended up spending quite a lot of time in Mumukṣu Bhavan, an ashram for Daṇḍī Svāmīs located in Assi ghāṭ in Varanasi. As I was living very close to Mumukṣu Bhavan, it was convenient for me to drop by, either for an appointment with any of the svāmīs or simply to see some of them by chance. In order to give some ideas of the thoughts and motives that may precede a drastic change in life like that of taking saṃnyās, I will relate below the stories told to me by some of the resident Daṇḍī Svāmīs in Mumukṣu Bhavan. First, however, it is appropriate to explain who the Daṇḍī Svāmīs are and where they are to be found within the myriad of ascetic groupings.



Plate 20

Daṇḍī Svāmīs

Daṇḍī Svāmīs constitute a group of Śaiva ascetics⁸⁹ easily recognised due to their characteristic carrying of a dandā (staff).⁹⁰ Like their founder, Śaṅkarācāryā, they are known as advocates and defenders of the conservative Hindu textual tradition (śāstrā) which involves strict caste divisions – only men of the brāhmaṇ varṇ are allowed to become Daṇḍī Svāmīs. ‘Even among Hindus of other sects, Dandis are referred to as *rudhivadi* (orthodox). Because of this reputation, they enjoy wide prestige among

⁸⁹ ‘Dandis, Paramhansas, and Nagas form the three main branches of the Shaiva *sampradaya* (sect) of ascetics, that is, ascetics traditionally associated with Shiva’ (Sawyer 1998:162).

⁹⁰ A ‘dandā’ is the bamboo staff carried by Daṇḍī Svāmīs. It is regarded as a manifestation of God and is also worshipped as such.

conservative Hindus, influencing their attitudes and behavior' (Sawyer 1998:6).⁹¹ Varanasi is known as the most important centre of Daṇḍī monasticism in India, Dana W. Sawyer states that one-quarter to one-half of the Daṇḍīs in India can be found in Varanasi at any given moment. The majority of Daṇḍī Svāmīs have completed the three preceding life stages (āśram) before they take saṃnyās. As remarked by Dana W. Sawyer, there are exceptions to this, although young Daṇḍī Svāmīs are far less commonly encountered than young Paramhaṃs or Nāgās.

Mumukṣu Bhavan

Mumukṣu Bhavan, Varanasi's largest Daṇḍī monastery, is a trust run by donations with the purpose of housing individuals from all four stages in life. According to the manager, Kailāspati Pandey, distribution of food to beggars and homeless people is also included in the trust's mission. Wealthy business people regard it as part of their dharma to give donations to religious purposes like Mumukṣu Bhavan, and also ordinary householders from time to time come to distribute food or clothes to the sādhus living here. Festival days are especially auspicious occasions for such donations. The ashram is divided into four different areas: one for the students (brahmacārī); one for the householders (gṛhast); one for the hermits (vāṇāprasth); and one for renunciators (saṃnyāsī). The brahmacārīs studying in Mumukṣu Bhavan are educated according to the gurukul system, an old system where young boys leave their parental home for a few years in order to live with a guru. When their education is finished, they return to their family. Householders normally spend only a few days in Mumukṣu Bhavan as part of a pilgrimage. Vāṇāprasths who come to the ashram to live are either elderly couples or widows/widowers who have come to Varanasi to await death and mokṣ. Drew Stuart describes the ashram as 'a large complex which houses many Dandi sannyasis, as well as students, retired individuals devoting their time to

⁹¹ 'The four Shankaracharyas ("teachers of Shankara's philosophy") are always Dandis, and as representatives of orthodoxy, are often asked to speak at pan-Hindu religious festivals to increase the general auspiciousness of these events' (Sawyer 1998:159).

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

religious pursuits, and pilgrims passing through Kashi [...]’ (Stuart 1995:14). He describes the atmosphere as sharing some of the lazy, gentle collapse that touches much of Varanasi:

In many ways, the sense of quiet disorder reflects the sadhu tradition as a whole; sadhus sit within or outside of their rooms reading religious texts, linger in groups, many of them working with their concealed *malas* (strings of beads used in prayer or mantra practices) as they share chai or *pan* or casual conversation with their fellow sannyasis. Clearly little order or discipline is being imposed on their lives by any system of authority; they have the freedom to shape their spiritual lives and to spend their time in whatever way they please. In some ways, the situation is also reminiscent of that of an old age home. (ibid.:14-15)

The manager of Mumukṣu Bhavan, Kailāspati Pandey, has been working here since 1975. He told me that the ashram was established in 1929 by Svāmī Gaṇeśyamānand. One of India’s big businessmen, Mr Birla, constructed it on request of a local king who had noticed the shortage of hermitage for sādhus in Varanasi. The ashram today has room for 120 Daṇḍī Svāmīs. The sādhus who live in Mumukṣu Bhavan receive light meals in the morning and in the evening. Their main meal is served in the middle of the day. Breakfast and supper consist of half a litre of milk with sugar. In the morning they also get tea and some light food. Most of the sādhus who stay here have reached old age. Kailāspati Pandey said: ‘Tyāg [renunciation] is very difficult and seldom takes place in a person of young age.’ Throughout his twenty-five years in Mumukṣu Bhavan he has had the opportunity to observe a number of sādhus come and go. When asked to give his idea of why people take saṁnyās, rather than suggesting a spiritual desire or a divine quest, he mentioned inter-human relations as a source of explanation. He said: ‘People may be hurt by someone, for instance by their family.’ To give an example, he mentioned the story of the ninety-nine year-old Gaṅgā Svāmī (Svāmī Gaṅgānand), the oldest of the present-living Daṇḍī Svāmīs in Mumukṣu Bhavan:

He used to work as a justice in Delhi during the British period, but one day something must have happened. He might have been hurt in some way by someone. That very day he left for Varanasi and came directly to Mumukṣu Bhavan. After a long time his family members came

searching for him, but he did not want to meet them and told them to go away. In all these years he has never left Varanasi. Nobody knows why he left saṃsār – what exactly happened.⁹²

The first meeting

At the occasion of my first visit to Mumukṣu Bhavan in October 1998, I happened to be accompanied to the gate by an old lady. When she left me there at the gate, I felt insecure as to whether I should, or even could, enter. Something about the atmosphere of the place made me wonder how to approach. Obviously this was not a place to rush into. I ended up asking the policeman who was guarding the entrance whether I was allowed to enter or not. He spoke no English but waved me in through the gate. I walked a few metres, slowly. In front of me I could see a green garden. The atmosphere was very peaceful. Sitting on top of a low wall were three or four saṃnyāsīs – dangling their legs. I addressed them in Hindi and asked whether they spoke any English. None of them did. I asked whether they knew any other saṃnyāsīs in the ashram who did speak English, and I understood that there was supposed to be at least one who did. The svāmīs waved their arms, apparently to let me know that I should feel free to explore the area. I felt confident enough to continue and walked through the gate marking the area of the saṃnyāsīs (Īśvarmath).⁹³



Plate 21

⁹² I was later told another version of how it happened that Svāmī Gaṅgānand left Delhi for Varanasi and Mumukṣu Bhavan. This will be narrated below (See: ‘Rām, Rām, Rām’).

⁹³ This part of the ashram was called Īśvarmath, or, in English, something like ‘residence of masters’.

I soon found myself at the end of the ashram, inside the garden. Next to me a svāmī was doing some gardening. He was dressed in saffron clothes, a T-shirt and a somewhat darker saffron coloured luṅgī. His clothes were a bit brighter than the robes of the other svāmīs I had just met, and for a while I thought he was simply a gardener, employed by the ashram. I was wrong. Suddenly he addressed me in English, and started telling me about the ashram, about Daṇḍī Svāmīs, and about saṃnyās in general. He also told me that until he renounced the world, he had been a highly thought of homeopathic doctor. He added: ‘When I told my older brother about my decision, he cried.’ The Daṇḍī Svāmī I had just met was Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram. When I told him that I was doing research for my Ph.D. in social anthropology, he suggested that we sit down in front of his room to have a talk.

When we sat down, he first showed me the two mālās that he uses for meditation. Next, he told me that there are three different kinds of Daṇḍī Svāmīs: Āśram, Tīrth and Sarasvatī. He himself belongs to the Āśram group, whereas his younger brother, who is also a saṃnyāsī and a resident of Mumukṣu Bhawan, is a Sarasvatī. These three groups, he explained, are three of the totally ten monastic orders founded by Śaṅkarācāryā (daśānāmi). As we had been talking, a group of svāmīs had gathered in a cluster next to us. They were amused by my Hindi and kept repeating my words. In front of me eighty year-old Svāmī Tarakeśvar Āśram was now studying my research proposal and my questionnaire. While he was reading I could hear him mutter to himself, ‘hm, hm ...’. The afternoon sun turned the saffron robes and red brick walls around me into golden fire. I felt peaceful in the middle of this glowing silence.

As the sun said good-night, Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram brought our talk to a close and asked me to return in two days. He added: ‘I will give you all the help you may need.’ Relieved and filled with gratitude I left ‘the residence of masters’.

‘Rām, Rām, Rām’

Two days later I found Svāmī Tarakeśvar Āśram waiting for me where I last left him. That day I had expected him to tell me about his life, but he seemed to be of a different opinion. He suggested that we go to see the ninety-nine year-old ‘senior’ among them, Svāmī Gaṅgānand (Gaṅgā Svāmī), who has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for fifty years.

Svāmī Gaṅgānand was sitting on the ground outside his room. He was in the company of another svāmī, and together they were reading what he called ‘the Bible of Hinduism’ – the Rāmāyan. He welcomed us with a smile and was more than willing to talk. Despite his fluency in English, his reduced hearing made any extensive conversation impossible. However, he told me that he had taken saṁnyās fifty years ago and that in all these years Mumukṣu Bhavan had been his home. ‘The climate of this place is very suitable for me. I do not leave this place. I do not leave this place, it is very suitable’, he said with passion:

I am happy with this life; the life of a saṁnyāsī is a very peaceful life. I spend my days with other ascetics, reading the books of Hinduism. I do not go in any other society; I do not spend time with householders; I do not join them. I do not spend time with householders, only with saṁnyāsīs. Householders have no character – bad character. I do not talk to them.

When I asked him what had motivated him to take saṁnyās, he replied:

Without renunciation man will not attain peace. Man will not be completely happy unless he renounces everything. That’s why I chose to become a saṁnyāsī. I don’t like worldly affairs, I hated all family affairs. The domestic life – the worldly life – is nonsense.

Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram requested Svāmī Gaṅgānand to tell me how he has managed to control his passion through these fifty years. Immediately, Svāmī Gaṅgānand replied: ‘Rām, Rām, Rām, Rām – God, God, God, God, God, God – Rām, Rām, Rām.’ He laughed and started all over again: ‘Rām, Rām, Rām, Rām, Rām. One has to repeat

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

God's name continuously not to forget it. God is one, God is true, God is great, God is almighty. May God bless you with long life, good health and prosperity.' He told me that he held an MA in English and that his father had been a stationmaster at the railway. It appeared that he was originally from Punjab: 'I am Punjabi. I came as a pilgrim to Varanasi, as a visitor. I loved this city – the nice climate, the society, the holy water of Mother Gaṅgā. Kāśī is a heaven on earth.' I asked him whether he ever went back to Punjab after this pilgrimage to Varanasi. My question seemed to cause tremendously strong reactions within him – he covered his ears while he almost screamed: 'Don't speak the name of Punjab! This is heaven on earth and who wants to leave heaven?' For a while I was afraid that by mentioning Punjab I had insulted him in some way, but his face was soon restored in a big smile. Laughingly, he repeated: 'Kāśī is heaven on earth. Here you get mokṣ, the climate is nice, the society is nice, Mother Gaṅgā is nice, and the vegetation is nice. Here I can drink holy water from Mother Gaṅgā. Kāśī is a heaven on earth!'

As the afternoon light gave way to darkness, I expressed my gratitude for having been allowed to share some of his time and left him to his 'Bible'.



Plate 22

Later, back in Norway, I showed the pictures I had taken of Svāmī Gaṅgānand to Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj), who immediately recognised the old svāmī from his own childhood as a brahmacārī in Varanasi. Mahārāj had, just as the manager of Mumukṣu Bhavan, heard that Svāmī Gaṅgānand had been a justice in Delhi. He had also heard that he had been a very religious man and that one day, on his way to work, he had come across a temple where a religious discourse (satsaṅg) was held. He had stopped to listen for only a short while, but ended up staying there for two hours. When he finally arrived at his office, two hours late, he noticed that his work had been completed. Surprised, he asked his secretary what had happened – who had completed his work. ‘You did that yourself this morning!’, the secretary remarked. The justice then understood that it obviously was God who was the architect behind this wonder. Of course this was God’s way of telling him how he should live his life. The same day, the story goes, he quit his job and left for Varanasi to become a saṁnyāsī.

Although the story is sweet, it is hard to tell whether this is what exactly took place that time, fifty years ago – or whether, as Kailāspati Pandey suggested, the actual reason behind his departure from Delhi was that he had been hurt by someone. The ‘truth’, most probably, is known only by Svāmī Gaṅgānand himself.

‘... the soul, ātmā, is always free’

The day of my first meeting with Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram, he looked through my questionnaire and later asked if he could keep it for a couple of days. His intention was to write down his answers in English in order to present them to me when we next met. He also suggested that he could read his answers out loud while I recorded them.

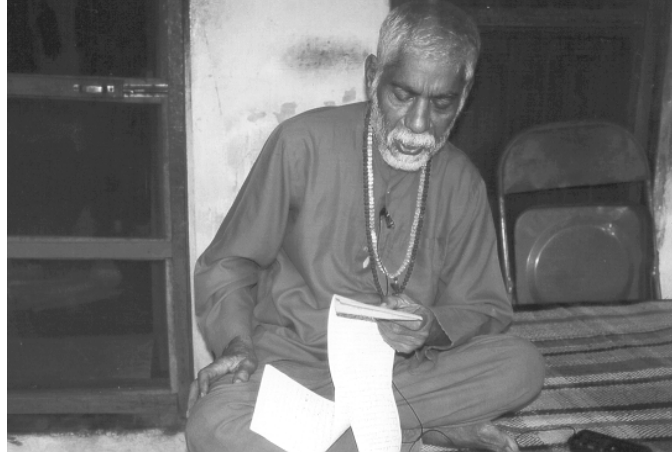


Plate 23: Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram reads out his answers.

When I arrived two days later, he still had not finished writing down his answers. He told me to sit down on the bench outside his room while he completed his work. Ten minutes later he announced that he was prepared to read out his answers to me. He read them twice. The second time I recorded his answers. The tape starts as follows:

Being a saṁnyāsī, I am very glad to know about your curiosity concerning the motives behind renunciation among Hindus in India. I will try to enlighten you about this matter. My present name is Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram. There are three types of Daṇḍī Svāmīs: Āśram, Tīrth and Sarasvatī. There are some rules and restrictions in the order of Daṇḍī Svāmīs, as there are in other orders of saṁnyāsīs. Without control, rules, and restrictions, even the domestic society can not be maintained. Daṇḍī Svāmīs are vegetarians, do not drink alcohol, should not stay with women, are not allowed to go to their families, are not allowed to earn money, and are not allowed to take meals from others than brāhmaṇs.

I took ascetic dīkṣā ten years ago. After taking saṁnyās I have been living permanently in Benares, because this is a sacred place. Some saṁnyāsīs travel to different holy places. I normally get up between three and four a.m., and after bathing I do pūjā to the daṇḍā, as the daṇḍā is Nārāyaṇ [God]. Afterwards I read the Gītā [Bhagavadgītā] or any other religious book, and I do jāp and meditation. We eat one meal a day, at 11 a.m., and at night we drink a half litre of milk. I generally spend my time alone or with other saṁnyāsīs, but if anyone comes to me to discuss spiritual questions, then I talk with them as I am now talking with you. Domestic and political affairs are invalid to me. At present my life is very easy.

To my question as to his motives to renounce the world he gave a quite vague reply: ‘Everybody will not choose to become a saṃnyāsī in old age, but the man who in early life worships God in his domestic life will often, if possible, try to become a saṃnyāsī in his old age.’ I asked him whether he had ever regretted that he became a saṃnyāsī: ‘This is not a questionable thing. Life is nothing but a struggle, without struggle nothing can be settled neither in domestic life nor in saṃnyās.’ When I tried to make him tell me about his life before he became a saṃnyāsī, he first seemed unwilling to tell anything: ‘A saṃnyāsī is not bound to tell anything about his former life, he will be angry if you ask him.’ Soon he softened up a bit and said: ‘... because of your curiosity I will tell you something. I am a bachelor, and my age is about eighty. I have studied homeopathy and chemical engineering. I was working as a doctor and I was a chemical manager of a reputable chemical company. There are many engineers, doctors, government officers and police officers among saṃnyāsīs.’⁹⁴

Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram told me that he had experienced great changes in his life after he became a saṃnyāsī:

As I am now free from all obligations, there are many differences between my former life and my life as a saṃnyāsī. At the time of taking saṃnyās, a man will renounce his family, his house, and his wealth. He will renounce his attachment to all things. This is necessary for attaining a vacant and peaceful mind. Without a vacant and peaceful mind, it is not possible to meditate deeply. After practising meditation for a long time, a saṃnyāsī will be able to abolish his self and reach samādhi [realisation] and he will become a living God. This position is not attainable for all – just as people in Western countries try very hard to become multimillionaires, which is also not possible for all. Ramakrishna once said: ‘What happens to a doll made of salt if you put it into the ocean? It becomes one with the ocean.’ In samādhi the mind of man stays in this condition. The individual mind is no more – it becomes one with brahm.

⁹⁴ Mark Tully (1991), in a chapter of the Kumbh Melā, indirectly suggests that a number of sādhus seem to be recruited from the Indian police force, especially in Uttar Pradesh: ‘When the crowd had quietened, a former head of the state police force who had turned sadhu – it seems to be a tradition in Uttar Pradesh – read out a statement on behalf of the baba’ (ibid.: 100).

The following day I returned to Mumukṣu Bhavan to let Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram listen through the tape. He was obviously happy that I brought the tape, and while he was listening to it he waved other svāmīs towards us to let them listen as well. While pointing to the tape recorder, he proudly informed everybody that it was his voice they heard. I was greatly amused by witnessing the eighty year-old saṃnyāsī's childlike happiness as he listened to his own voice coming out of a tape recorder. There were parts of the tape with which he seemed to be especially proud; during these he nodded his head to stress the important phrases. He continuously watched me, as if he would make sure I was following him.

When the tape was finished, Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram suggested that I meet Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, who on his request had agreed to let me interview him. He brought me along to a room opposite his own and told me to sit down on a wooden bed outside. Soon Svāmī Kapileśvarānand appeared. He arranged a bamboo mat on the floor for me to sit on, whereas the two svāmīs sat above me on the bed. Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram had my questionnaire in front of him and asked my questions in Hindi. Svāmī Kapileśvarānand at first glance looked old and frail, but as soon as he started speaking the frailness vanished – or was transformed – into some kind of power. Despite his advanced age he sat with his back straight and his legs crossed throughout the whole interview. From my position on the floor I was literally looking up to the two proud characters on the bed above me. Once again, the afternoon sun made saffron robes glow.

The story narrated by Svāmī Kapileśvarānand that afternoon was as follows: During the 1989 Kumbh Melā he took saṃnyās. Already at the age of eighteen he had been affectionate with Svāmī Karpatrijī,⁹⁵ who had an ashram in Haridvar, not far from

⁹⁵ Svāmī Karpatrijī, or Svāmī Hariharānanda Sarasvatī, was born in 1907 in Uttar Pradesh. 'His original name was Har Narayan Ojha. He was unique from his childhood and did not take any interest in worldly affairs. He spent hours in meditation' (Tripathi 1978:224). 'Until his death in 1982, Karpatri was the most influential Dandi in Banaras, in fact, in all of India. Sinha and Saraswati (1978:223) refer to him as "the most learned, the most loved and the most controversial Sanatani [orthodox] ascetic of post-Independence India," and Tripathi calls him the "leader of Dandi Swamis"' (1978:64). (Sawyer 1998:170)

Svāmījī's childhood home. Svāmī Kapileśvarānand explained that every member of his family used to visit Karpatrijī during his annual visit to Haridvar:

From the age of eighteen I was very affectionate with Swami Karpatrijī. He was superior; he was the king of our religion.⁹⁶ He was the most superior of all saṁnyāsīs.⁹⁷ From the age of eighteen I was affectionate with him and paid respect to him by touching his feet.⁹⁸ It was my good luck that I could do service for him; I was lucky to get this opportunity.

I asked him whether he would agree with me in seeing the desire for freedom as one possible reason why people take saṁnyas:

Humans will always depend on other persons. I wanted to abolish, end, my dependence on other persons, and that is why I decided to become a Daṇḍī Svāmī. I wanted to become like Nārāyaṇ [God], and with the daṇḍā I am. When I got this daṇḍā, I became like God.⁹⁹ Before I got the daṇḍā I was a normal person, but with the daṇḍā I am superior – like God. When I was a householder I was confident with that kind of life. I believed it was part of my karma. I also believe it is due to my karma that I am now living as a saṁnyāsī. For me the soul, ātmā, is always free. The body is dependent on others, but my inside, my soul, is free. No one can tie up my thinking – decide for me what to think. We become saṁnyāsīs because we want to renounce the dependent life – renounce our obligations to others. This takes place when we receive the daṇḍā, then we become superior – like God.¹⁰⁰ The meaning of saṁnyās is to extinguish the focus on self – the selfishness. When you succeed in this, you become like Lord Śiv.'

Svāmī Kapileśvarānand 'takes the name of God' (jāp) every morning before he rises from bed. Afterwards he takes a bath before he goes to the Gaṅgā to pray at the ghāt:

⁹⁶ (Ve sarv śreṣṭh śiromani dharmasamrāt the)

⁹⁷ (Ve saṁnyāsīorṁ merṁ sarv śreṣṭh śiromani dharmasamrāt the)

⁹⁸ (Svāmījī ke charno merṁ, Karpatrijī ke charno merṁ athārā varṣ se merā anurāg thā)

⁹⁹ (Mairṁ nar se Nārāyaṇ banne ke lie ye daṇḍā dhāraṇ kar liyā)

¹⁰⁰ Govind Bābā, somewhat annoyed at the self-imposed superiority of the Daṇḍī Svāmīs, made the following remark while reading a draft of this chapter: 'If the daṇḍā makes him superior, then I'm going to carry around a tree.'

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

I say the Guru mantrā, and I do pūjā at the ghāṭ. Being a saṃnyāsī your heart should be pure. You should not hurt anyone – you have to do good things. You always have to think good things about other persons. You always have to remember God; he is always your well-wisher. In this life I have realised God, and I have realised that God is pleased with me. If God was unhappy with me, I would not have been granted the opportunity to live this kind of life – to be a saṃnyāsī.

Although I thought Svāmī Kapileśvarānand had been very precise about his motives for renouncing the world, at this point of the interview he described in even greater details his own approach towards saṃnyās:

Thirty-two years ago I left my home and went to see Svāmī Karpatrijī in Haridvar. I wanted to take saṃnyās. However, Karpatrijī told me that I was not yet ready to do so, and refused to give me saṃnyās. He blessed me, but he did not give me saṃnyās. He promised he was going to give me saṃnyās somewhat later though. For two days I was crying. I returned to my home and stayed with my family until I finally left them and took saṃnyās. This happened nine years ago, when I was in my early seventies.¹⁰¹ When I had decided to take saṃnyās, I first fasted and did pūjā. The next thing I did was to gather my family and my friends to inform them about my decision. I told them not to think of me as one of them any more. I said: ‘From now on – don’t think of me, don’t build your lives on me, don’t let anything depend on me. I am going to take saṃnyās.’

Svāmī Kapileśvarānand has never regretted that he renounced the world: ‘I will never regret what I have done. This life is a blessing from God. It was my guru’s and God’s will. It was my luck.’

¹⁰¹ Svāmī Karpatrijī left his body in 1982, whereas Svāmī Kapileśvarānand took saṃnyās in 1989. This implies that Svāmī Kapileśvarānand must have taken saṃnyās from Karpatrijī’s successor (whose name I have yet not been able to trace).

In the mandir

At 3.45 p.m. Brahmācārī Satyā Prakāś started his performance in the mandir (temple). Ashok Pandey, one of Varanasi's most famous tablā players, accompanied him with great enthusiasm. When I arrived, the mandir was filled with singing and applauding women in colourful saris. Outside, and in the back part of the mandir, the men had gathered. Among the audience were also a few saṁnyāsīs. Four of them sat on a bench just outside the mandir. They were all dressed in rich-coloured saffron robes. One of them snapped his fingers to the rhythm of the music; another was busy doing jāp on his mālā which was covered by a saffron coloured piece of cloth. The audience sang 'Sita Rām, Sita Rām' with Satyā Prakāś, while Ashok Pandey ran wild on his tablā. The following applause was overwhelming.

Satyā Prakāś was dressed in white. His long, grey hair was gathered with an elastic at his neck. He had painted tilak marks on his forehead, and around his neck hung three mālās. His first message this afternoon was based on a religious song well known to Hindus, describing how everything depends upon God – that He is the one who decides what we should do, how we should behave, and what will finally happen to us. Later he recited a story from the Rāmāyaṇ:

Rām was fifteen years old, and he took no interest in food, nor did he enjoy worldly affairs a lot. He was dissatisfied and lonely, despite having in his possession all the material things he could dream of. Day by day he became more and more pale and weak. After some time his father called a saint. Rām's father told the saint about the changes he had seen taking place with his son. The saint said: 'I know what is happening to him; there sometimes appears to human beings a question of why one has come to this world – a desire to know the aim of life. Is this aim to sing and dance, eat and sleep? No, this is not our aim. This even animals can do!'

Rām grew up and was sent to exile. Satyā Prakāś and his audience cried out loudly: 'Sītā Rām, Sītā Rām', whereas Ashok Pandey did a solo performance on his tablā. He

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

made it ‘sing’ ‘Sītā Rām, Sītā Rām’, while the audience applauded enthusiastically. The story continued:

In exile Rām offered his service to different saints. Nowadays people don’t go in exile to do service to the saints. It is not necessary, as there are many saints living close to our homes. Here in Mumukṣu Bhavan, for instance, many saints are staying [Vinita laughed as she translated this].



Plate 24: Ashok Pandey with Satyā Prakāś

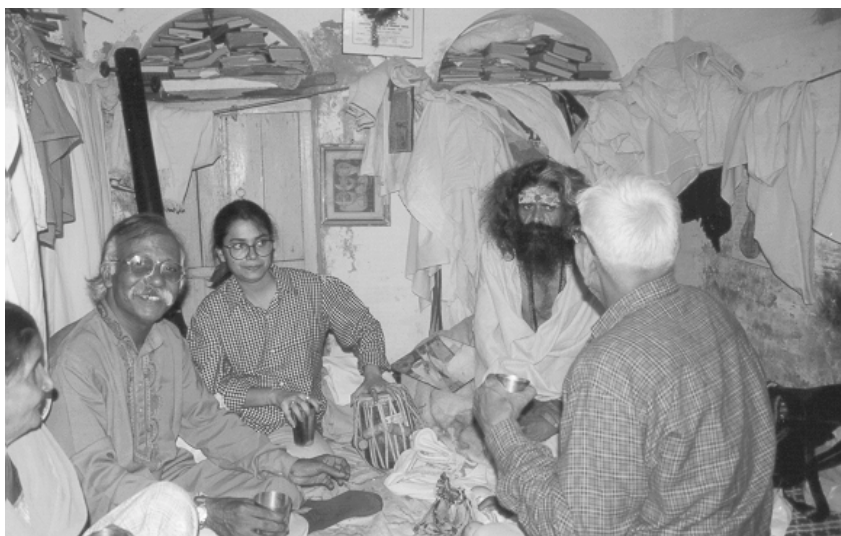


Plate 25: Satyā Prakāś’s room

A few weeks after this performance, we met Satyā Prakāś for an interview. He had recently returned from a tour to the north of India and gave us time in between his lectures at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) where he was doing a Ph.D. in music. Satyā Prakāś welcomed us into his room – a room which was filled by a big bed, the only piece of furniture. His musical instruments occupied approximately half of the space in bed. Vinita and I found some free space where we sat down, while Satyā Prakāś found space for himself in between his instruments.

Satyā Prakāś told us that his name was changed when he became a brahmacārī: ‘My previous name was Sushil. The name Satyā Prakāś was given me by my Gurujī.’ His guru lives in Mumukṣu Bhavan, and this is the main reason Satyā Prakāś chose to live here when he came to Varanasi to study music and philosophy at the BHU in 1986.

Satyā Prakāś was born in 1955 and grew up in a village in Uttar Pradesh, not far from Varanasi. His parents still live there, whereas his brother lives in Delhi: ‘My father is a knowledgeable person. He gave lectures in Hindu philosophy: the Gītā, Rāmāyaṇ, etc. Through him I got familiar with a religious atmosphere.’ However, when Satyā Prakāś decided to become a brahmacārī he received no support from his family: ‘They told me not to do this. They wanted me to get married. We argued, but it was no use arguing with me.’ Satyā Prakāś seems to be happy with the life he has chosen. He finds the ashram life a lot easier than the life he used to live before: ‘I am happy with this kind of life. My concentration is very good now. In the worldly life there is sometimes happiness, other times sorrow. In this life there is only happiness. Now I have more stability, more patience, more time to study.’ What about taking saṃnyās? ‘I should take saṃnyās, but I have not decided yet. Not everybody can take saṃnyās; most people choose family life. You have to take a lot of things into consideration before you take saṃnyās. Now I have studies to complete, but I will try to follow all the restrictions of saṃnyās. If I succeed in this, I will take saṃnyās.’

He enjoys living in Kāśī, the city of light:

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

Here there are many facilities that can guide you towards mokṣ, so many scholars live here. In the whole world there is no place like Kāśī. Lord Śaṅkar (Śiv) is the god of knowledge; without knowledge there is no mukti. If you go to other places it may be hard to find knowledgeable persons, but in Varanasi knowledgeable persons are everywhere. Here everybody has knowledge; if you ask the boatmen they also have knowledge. Kāśī gives light to the soul. To know the great soul, paramātmā, is mokṣ.

Man holds three desires, Satyā Prakāś explained: Lok-trṣṇā, putr-trṣṇā, and vitrṣṇā. Lok-trṣṇā is the desire to become an important person in the world; putr-trṣṇā is the desire to see your sons become important persons, and vitrṣṇā is the desire for renunciation. Vitrṣṇā appears when you have reached beyond lok-trṣṇā and putr-trṣṇā – when you have realised that ‘I am not the body – I am the soul.’ ‘What is the difference between a ring and the gold of which it is made?’, Satyā Prakāś asked. He gave the reply himself: ‘The ring is just shape and name. What really is is gold. Ātmā is gold, but the body is just like the ring – it is nothing without the ātmā. I am now free from all bonds.’

Tea with Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth

During several visits Vinita and I had got to know Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth quite well. Our visits had soon adopted a certain pattern: Vinita and I would sit down on the floor, while Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth sat on his bed. We would chat for some time until Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth asked whether it was all right with us if he took a shower. When he came back from the bathroom, he would always encourage Vinita to make us some tea. Of course she always did.

The rooms in Mumukṣu Bhavan have a standard size of around ten square meters. Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth’s room was always very clean and tidy. The only furniture in the room was a bed and couple of bookshelves. Everything, even his sheet and pillowcase, was coloured in saffron. A wooden rack to keep religious books on while studying leaned against one of the walls. In his bookshelves books were stored in neat

piles, and on top of two of the piles he kept his mālās. In one of the bookshelves he also exhibited some of his photographs. One of the photographs pictured Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth with his guru-bhāī. The picture was taken in a cave in Gangotri in the north of India. On the wall above his bed, in front of a map of India, his daṇḍā was placed on a rack.



Plate 26: Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth's daṇḍā on the wall of his room.

With his forty years of age, Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth was the youngest saṃnyāsī in Mumukṣu Bhavan. He became a saṃnyāsī at the age of thirty, but has only lived in Mumukṣu Bhavan for the last two years. Before he became a Daṇḍī Svāmī (Śaiva saṃnyāsī) he was a Vaiṣṇav vairāgī:¹⁰²

For four – five years I was a Rāmānandi [Vaiṣṇav] vairāgī. Vaiṣṇavs and Śaivas follow different mārgs, different paths of learning. For a while I was a Vaiṣṇav sādhu; now I am a saṃnyāsī. The mārg followed by Vaiṣṇav sādhus [vairāgīs] is called upāsānā, whereas the mārg of Śaiva sādhus [saṃnyāsīs] is called sādhnā. Upāsānā, to do worship [pūjā] to the elders, is always practised in a temple. Sādhnā, which consists of being in deep concentration,

¹⁰² Ascetics belonging to the Vaiṣṇav order worship Viṣṇu and frequently title themselves vairāgī, whereas ascetics belonging to a Śaiva order hardly ever title themselves vairāgī, but saṃnyāsī.

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

deep meditation, can be practised anywhere. This is a personal practise. The aim of sādhnā is to strengthen one's self control, to discipline the mind.

Before Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth became a vairāgī, he served as a temple priest in Patna in Bihar. Here he met knowledgeable mahātmās who taught him a lot: 'The knowledge I gained through these encounters made me think of taking saṃnyās. From my childhood I was aiming towards this religious life. My mother was very religious. She often fasted, and she used to bathe in the Gaṅgā. I think I was influenced by her. Since my childhood I have had a religious desire within me.'

Vinita and I decided something was missing in his story – we could not see that he had made us understand why he left home in the first place. We suspected there were matters he was reluctant to reveal for us and chose to approach the matter in a very discrete manner. Yet Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth soon realised what we were after. He laughed in a somewhat resigned manner, and started narrating his story:

My birthplace is near my Gurujī's place, between Lucknow and Varanasi. I have one brother and four sisters, three of my siblings are older than me, two are younger. Because there were no boys in my grandmother's house, I spent most of my childhood here. I was twelve years old when my marriage was arranged. It was a child marriage. When I grew up and started living with my wife, I soon realised that I was not satisfied with her. Later it turned out that she was barren, and we divorced. Because my wife would not be able to increase my family, I thought I should leave her. My family arranged a second marriage, but I disagreed. After the divorce I went to Patna where I worked as a priest in a temple. I also worked as a priest in Vrindavan for a while. During this time I read many sacred books, met some people, and got some knowledge. Little by little, I separated myself from my family. I spent more and more time with mahātmās [great souls], and through them I gained knowledge about the ascetic way of life. Gradually my mind deviated from the norms of family life.

Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth's family did not support his desire to take saṃnyās: 'A family will never appreciate that one of the family members takes saṃnyās. Very few families will feel happy about this. My family tried to stop me from doing it, but I was determined to do it. My father told me not to take saṃnyās; in fact the whole family

opposed my decision – none of them supported me.’ This is now fourteen years ago. Through all these years Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth has had no contact with his family.

To become a saṃnyāsī, you have to perform your own death ritual. From that day you forget your past life, your name is changed, the janeū is renounced, etc. While still alive, I performed my own death ritual ... It was just like entering a new life.

Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth took saṃnyās dīkṣā at his guru’s ashram near Gangotri, close to the source of the holy river Gaṅgā in the Himalayas. I asked him whether he felt that he became a ‘new’ person after he had taken dīkṣā: ‘Yes, it was as if my personality changed when my name was changed.’ He explained this in greater detail by giving an example: ‘I imagine that a medical doctor experiences that he is a different person when he is at home with his family than when he is on duty. I felt, in a way, as if I was turned into a medical doctor on duty – and my duty is to help and serve other people.’ I asked him whether he experienced this as a gradual or a sudden change: ‘I already knew the life of sādhus, I knew the content of the saṃnyās āśram as I had been a vairāgī for some years and because I had worked as a priest in a temple where I met many sādhus. In this respect, I believe the changes came gradually.’

When Vinita and I came to say good bye to Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth at the end of my first field work, we found him sitting on his bed studying astrological charts. Spring had arrived with an unbearable heat and Svāmījī was trying to map auspicious dates for travelling. He was planning to go to Gangotri for the summer, as he usually does. After the monsoon he returns to Varanasi. From time to time he also does pilgrimages to other places. Last year he went to Vaiṣṇavī Devī in Kashmir. At the entrance he had been stopped by the police who told him he was not allowed to bring his daṇḍā inside. As it was unthinkable for him to go anywhere without his daṇḍā, he managed to arrange a special permit to bring it along. Fear of terrorists has made Vaiṣṇavī Devī a strictly guarded place. Vinita explained that not even coconuts, a common item to bring as an offering to Hindu temples, were allowed inside. Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth served us mango juice and papaya, and we discussed the future of the saṃnyās āśram.

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

According to Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth, not even the very orthodox Daṇḍī Svāmīs are of the same quality as they used to. He explained that a number of restrictions and regulations should be followed by Daṇḍī Svāmīs. These days, however, only a minor number of svāmīs are able to follow these strict regulations in detail, and for this reason changes do take place even among the Daṇḍī Svāmīs. Customs and regulations are adjusted and moderated. One of the rules Daṇḍī Svāmīs should follow is to eat only from wooden items. During our visits to Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth, we noticed that he seemed to follow this restriction as he always drank from a wooden cup and ate from a wooden plate. Daṇḍī Svāmīs should also observe fast, and Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth told us that he fasts every summer – ‘this is part of how I develop my self-control’, he explained.

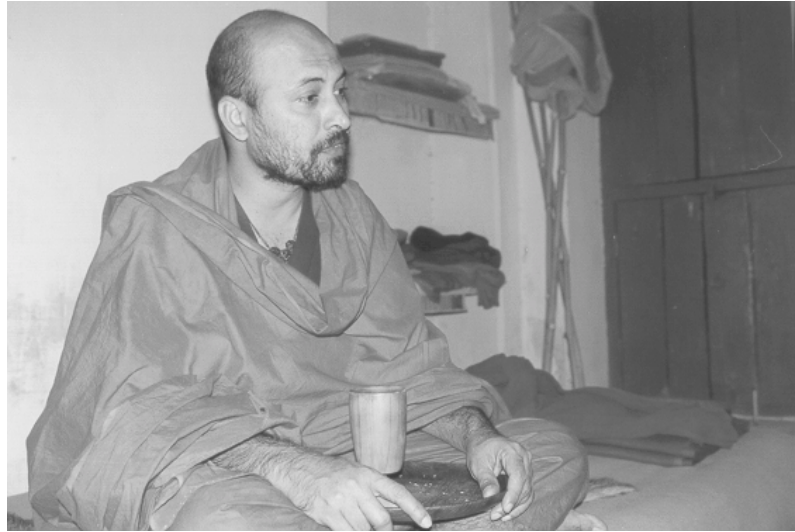


Plate 27: Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth with his wooden cup and plate.

Vinita asked him whether he felt that he had extinguished all his desires for worldly pleasures. He confirmed this, and explained that this is what saṁnyās is all about:

‘Nyās’ means ‘separation’, and ‘saṁ’ means ‘with’ – accordingly, ‘saṁnyās’ means ‘with separation’. To develop self-control, to learn how to control the mind, is an important part of being a renouncer. By controlling the mind one is able to control behaviour. Behaviour and ideas will be identical; whatever we do is decided by our mind, our ideas. The person who

wants to become a saṃnyāsī has to be very determined. You have to renounce thoughts like ‘this is mine; this is my family’ etc. You have to think good about other people.

From time to time householders desiring to take saṃnyās come to ask Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth for advice:

My Gurujī gave me one main rule to guard me through life. He told me not to misguide any of those who come to see me. Sometimes when people come to see me, they tell me that they want to become a saṃnyāsī. In such cases, the first thing I do is to ‘test’ them. I try to find out whether the person is really determined to renounce the world and to live the life of a saṃnyāsī: Is he motivated enough? Does he have the required patience? Does he have the potential to control his mind, his self, etc.? One person, a retired man who has been coming to see me every week for some time, one day told me that he wanted to take saṃnyās. He told me that he was very frustrated by his family, and that he wanted to leave them in order to take saṃnyās. He has three sons, one who lives in America and two who stay with him in Varanasi. The younger of the two sons in Varanasi is a student, whereas the older abuses alcohol. The latter was the main reason of this man’s headache. I told the man to go back to his family to sort out his problems. An escape into saṃnyās would mean only a very temporary solution to his family problems. When he has completed his obligations as a householder, he can take saṃnyās. If he had taken saṃnyās now, while carrying all these frustrations, he would have brought his frustrations with him into his ascetic life. This would not do any good for anyone. You have to be very determined to take saṃnyās. I can not accept anybody’s wish to take saṃnyās only to let them enjoy this life for a while and then run the risk that, after some time, they will regret their decision – or even not be able to follow the saṃnyās way of life at all.

As to his own destiny of becoming a saṃnyāsī he said:

I have become a saṃnyāsī due to my past lives – my karma. I want to stay in Varanasi for the rest of my life. In that way I will not be reborn. According to Hinduism you should be happy with whatever God has given you, but actually only a few people are śānt – santoṣ. Most people want more – always more. Very few people are satisfied with what they actually have. I will not think of or even remember my family or my native place. I have fulfilled two of the four aims of life – arth [wealth] and kām [desire]. What is left is dharma [religion] and mokṣ [release]. The way of nivṛtti – to stay away from arth and kām, to feel free from all earthly desires, that is the way of saṃnyās.

‘... like the lines in the palm of your hand’

Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth, a Daṇḍī Svāmī in his early 60s, always greeted me when we met in the street. His face was partly covered by his long hair and beard, so I could hardly see more than his smiling eyes. I did not know where he was staying until, during one of our visits to Mumukṣu Bhavan, Vinita and I ran into him. He was sitting on the ground outside his room, busy making mālās of rudrākś. We sat down with him, and soon we were also joined by Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth, another elderly svāmī living in Mumukṣu Bhavan.

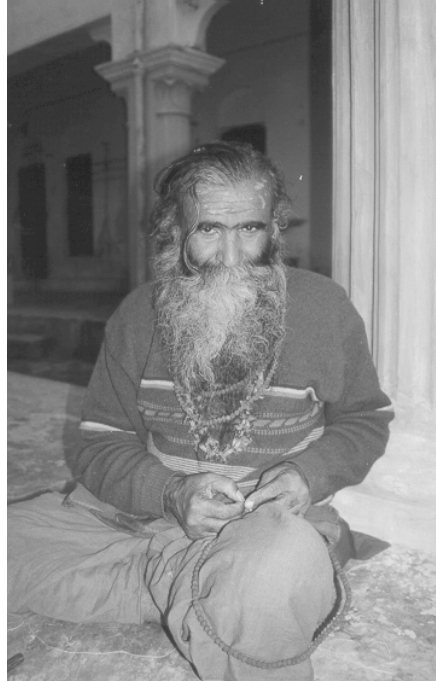


Plate 28: Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth

Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth told us that he has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for the last twenty years. He was born and raised in a village close to Allahabad, where his brother was still living. Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth sometimes goes to see his brother and his family: ‘It is a matter of property, that’s why I go. However, I don’t take much interest in this property’, he explained. Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth, or Jamuna Prasād as he was previously called, was a farmer before he took saṃnyās. His father died when

Jamuna Prasād was very young, and the boy had to start working in the fields to help support his family. Due to this he did not get the opportunity to go to school for more than a few years. He never married.

Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth was 65 years old. Sixteen years ago, he left his home in Chitrakut, near Ayodhya, and came to Varanasi to take saṁnyās. His wife had been dead for a long time, and he never remarried. He told us he had two children who were both married. His children had tried to persuade him not to leave home, but he would not let them stop him from fulfilling his desire. At night, without informing anyone, he left the house. He admitted that, in the beginning, he did not feel very happy in Mumukṣu Bhavan. However, gradually he had adjusted to the ashram life¹⁰³:

I am very happy – every age has its own charm. When I was young, I was happy living a different life. Now I am old, and at this age the saṁnyās life is very good for me. As a saṁnyāsī there are certain rules and regulations you have to adjust to and follow, but they don't bother me any longer. I am accustomed to this kind of life now. Before taking saṁnyās I also experienced happiness, but that happiness was only temporary – it lasted only for a brief moment in time. After taking saṁnyās, I experience happiness all the time – simply because I continuously remember God. The happiness that lasts for only a brief moment is painful, but the happiness that I experience now is a permanent and true state of happiness. I have never faced any difficulties in my life, not before and not now. I hope difficulties will never come. Some minor difficulties were there, but they are gone by now. Abolished. Life is just like the lines in the palm of your hand – somewhere the line is straight and somewhere there is a break on the line, giving notice of changes that will come. Everything that I did before I took saṁnyās was erased during the dīksā ceremony – all my sins, everything. But if we commit sins during saṁnyās, they will never be erased. There is no way in which you can erase sins committed during saṁnyās.

Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth and Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth both came to Kāśī in search of mokṣ (mukti). Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth said: 'In Kāśī Śiv gives the tārak mantrā to everybody who dies. This is why everybody, even the ant, gets mukti here.' Svāmī

¹⁰³ As we were chatting, a local woman came to distribute prasād to all the svāmīs of the ashram. They each received two bananas and one apple.

Jamunānand Tīrth nodded as he counted the beads on the mālā he was working on. He counted 108 beads (rudrākś) – the mālā was complete.¹⁰⁴

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth

During one of our visits to Mumukṣu Bhavan in the spring of 1999, Vinita and I noticed an elderly svāmī in the afternoon sun. He sat on a wooden bed outside his room. His name was Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth. He was dressed in a saffron loincloth and wore a rudrākś mālā around his neck. His hair was grey and close-cropped and he had a beard. He gave the immediate impression of being a peaceful, harmonious person. This impression was confirmed through our later meetings.

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth left his home in Allahabad and came to Varanasi in 1994. In January 1995 he took saṃnyās. I asked him to describe how he came to know that he would take saṃnyās:

Nobody encouraged or directed me to take saṃnyās. I realised that I would take saṃnyās when I retired from my job as a clerk at an account office. My karma from previous lives explains why I have become a saṃnyāsī. Not until I retired did the idea of taking saṃnyās appear to me. Until retirement I was living a happy and busy life with my family. However, at some point I changed my mind – it happened suddenly, but I did not have a specific reason.

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth's guru is also from Allahabad. Because the guru's father was Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth's grandfather's best friend, Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth has known his guru since childhood: 'He had taken saṃnyās before and was living in Varanasi. In fact I did not know that he was here, but by coincidence I happened to meet him.'

I asked him to describe the benefits of taking saṃnyās in old age:

¹⁰⁴ The mālās should have 108 rudrākś as this is an auspicious number.

When you become saṃnyāsī, all your affections for the world are gone, all attachments. That is the benefit. I used to be so attached to my house; I had invested a lot of work in it; it was in many ways my life-work. Now I don't even want to see that house, I don't want to go there. My family members cry for me. I had a big house and a nice family. Once I did not want to leave these surroundings. Now I no longer want to see them before my eyes. Neither my family nor my house. Some of my children sometimes come to see me, but my wife never comes.¹⁰⁵

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth was familiar with sādhus from early childhood, as they used to come to his home to get food. Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth, who has grown up in the same area as Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth, added: 'He was doing kalp vās'¹⁰⁶ Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth explained: 'Annually, the last twelve years before I took saṃnyās, I used to attend the Maghā Melā. When my mother was still alive, I went with her. The saṃnyāsīs I got to know at the melā, and their way of life influenced and inspired me.' When Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth realised that he had to leave home, he did so without informing any of his family members of what he was up to. He simply told them that he would do a pilgrimage for two – three months. His 'pilgrimage' started and ended in Varanasi and has now lasted for more than five years. According to Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth, Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth had been especially close to one of his brothers. Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth, who knows Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth's family in Allahabad, said: 'If he [the brother] had known that your intention was to settle in Kāśī, he would never have let you to leave in the first place! When he [the brother] got to know that his brother had left home for good, he cried out loudly in despair: "My brother has run away from the house!"' Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth happened to be the one who informed Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth's family about the whereabouts of their missing husband, brother, father, and grandfather. He had been in

¹⁰⁵ Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth later explained to me that his wife is the same age as he and that she lives with their sons and is busy with their grandchildren: 'She is fine where she is. She has no problems. She also has money as she receives my pension. Those who have money will not face any problems. Because she has money, she is respected by everybody.'

¹⁰⁶ (Kalp vās): 'residence as an ascetic on the banks of the Ganges during the month of Māgh' (McGregor 1997:179).

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

Allahabad to attend the Maghā Melā when, by coincidence, he came across Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth's brother. In that situation he had felt compelled to give the brother this long desired information.



Plate 29: Vinita with Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth and Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth.

‘Are you happy? Do you enjoy staying here?’ we asked Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth. ‘Yes’ he said and explained that, because he is truly happy from inside, he has no affection or desire for the outside world:

Those who have no inner satisfaction and search for satisfaction from outside will never experience any complete satisfaction. You have to be satisfied from inside. If you realise God inside you, there is no need to search for God outside.¹⁰⁷ If you have all kind of happiness inside (if your heart is like an alley full of joy), what is the need of going to the market to search for it (joy/happiness)?¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ (Nij ko jñān hai, to jānā kahām hai. Khud hai khuda to pana kahām hai): If you know yourself there is no need to go any other place. If I know that ‘I am God’, why should I go to find him anywhere else – outside. If you know that God is inside you, you don’t have to go to the temple to search for him.

¹⁰⁸ (Jab dil ke galī meṁ raunaq hai, bazar meṁ jākar kya dekh āom): When your heart is like a street (an alley) full of joy, what is the need of going to the market in search of happiness?

He described his days as easy and peaceful: ‘I spend the whole day very easily. The whole day passes by very smoothly. This is an easy, peaceful [śānt] life.’ He told us that in the morning he gets up at 2.30. He then takes a shower, drinks a cup of tea, and does pūjā. I asked him whether any of his motives to take saṁnyās was rooted in a desire for more time to do pūjā? He shook his head and said:

No, no, no! There is no need of time! You don’t understand what I am saying. What you do from inside, what you think of, that is the real pūjā. Beyond that there is no need for pūjā. To do pūjā does not necessarily take time – pūjā is what you think inside. Our bodies only consist of flesh and bone and will be left on earth when we leave the body. What remains to keep, is the soul. To have knowledge of this, is the real worship. You have to know yourself – that is my worship. If you succeed in this, if you understand yourself, then you are really worshipping. Pūjā is to realise that the body is nothing – that it is simply an outward appearance, just like the world. The world is nothing – the world is māyā. The only thing that really is, is the soul. If you know yourself, you will know that this body is nothing.

Does he find that his life has changed a lot after he became a saṁnyāsī?

Big changes took place during the first two – three years, and changes are still taking place. Before, when I was living with my family, there were lots of problems – lots of challenges that I had to face. At that time the important parts of my life were my job, my family, and my body. I remember I was thinking ‘this body is everything’. Now I am free, now I know that this body is nothing. Still, little by little, I am changing.

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth expressed that he experiences a greater sense of peace now than he did as a householder:

I am very peaceful [ham bahut śānt]. You can feel that it is very peaceful here in this place. When you realise this, your soul will mix with God, and you will also know that all gods are the same. Before I came here, I had to face all kind of family problems, responsibilities, and obligations. Here there is nothing of that kind – only peace.

What exactly did he renounce by leaving his former life behind?: ‘My family and my home, and also desire [kāṁ], anger [krodh], greed [log], and affection [moh]. It is not

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

real tyāg [renunciation] unless you leave these things behind.’ Not all sādhus follow this path: ‘Some saṁnyāsīs keep in touch with their families; others have money and are still affectionate with the material world.’ ‘But’, Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth stressed, ‘those who think that way will never find peace.’ I asked Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth whether he experienced himself as a different person after he had taken saṁnyās: ‘In the beginning I did not feel like that, but little by little I started feeling different. Now, when I sign the papers in the bank to get my pension, I still sign with my old name, but if somebody asks for me by my old name here in Mumukṣu Bhavan, nobody will know who I am.’

How does he manage financially?:

I am now seventy-five years old. I still get my pension, and I will continue to receive a pension as long as I live. After my death my pension will be given to my wife. I go to Allahabad every five – six months to collect the pension and to transfer it to my wife’s account. I don’t need the money here in Mumukṣu Bhavan. Here I am given food and lodging; what else do I need?

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth wants to live in Varanasi until he leaves his body: ‘Previously I travelled a lot. I did pilgrimages. Now, after having taken saṁnyās, I don’t travel. I don’t feel any urge or desire to go anywhere, not even to the Maghā Melā. I receive invitations from different people, but even then I don’t go. I have realised that Kāśī is inside me [Kāśī mere bhītar hai].’ He put his hand on his heart and looked sincerely at us: ‘I can not tell how much Kāśī means to me!’ For a brief moment he was silent; then he said: ‘To stay in Kāśī you need some self-knowledge, some self-realisation. My self-realisation has changed. From seeing myself as equal to the sum of my body, my family, and my house, I have now realised that “I am nothing”.’ When a saṁnyāsī leaves his body, the body is buried – in earth or water – not cremated. Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth explained that this is similar to the practice followed at the death of a young child:

Young children don't have any concept of 'me' and 'mine' – they have no pride, no affection. Such things are not developed in their minds; they don't know the meaning of 'I am'. Saṃnyāsīs too are like that – we have no affection, no pride. Due to this, no purifying rituals are required when we leave the body. If you have no affection for the fruits of your actions, no karma will develop. If this affection is removed from your mind, removed from your body – there will be no karma. In that case, you have reached above these concepts.

In January 2001, Vinita and I paid the last visit to Svāmī Jñānesvarānand Tīrth. We found him where we always did – on the bed outside his room. Alone, in the dark which he shared only with the mosquitoes, he sat humming a part of the Rāmāyaṇ.¹⁰⁹ Most of the svāmīs of Mumukṣu Bhavan were at the time at the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad. Svāmī Jñānesvarānand Tīrth had no desire to take part in the melā: 'I prefer to stay here. I have no desire to move around. My mind is calm. Only if your mind is not controlled, you might feel a desire to move around.' He explained to us that people go to the Kumbh Melā in order to be purified – to have their sins washed away. Before he took saṃnyās he used to join every Kumbh Melā in Allahabad. He brought his mother, and together they stayed through the whole melā from its very beginning. Now he has no desire to go. He also no longer bathes in the Gaṅgā. When he was a householder, for forty years he went to the Gaṅgā daily to bathe at four a.m.

Although all his neighbours were absent, Svāmī Jñānesvarānand did not feel lonely. He said he was content in his own company, satisfied by simply being – preparing himself, his soul, for eternity: 'When I close the door to my room and am all alone, I feel very happy. My childhood and my young age is finished. My old age is also soon finished. My body is just like a dead body. When my body is finished, I will not die – my soul will not die.'

¹⁰⁹ Lord Rām's brother Bali is killed and his wife Tara is crying over her deceased husband. Lord Rām told Tara not to cry over her husband's dead body. 'The truth is that your husband's ātmā is still alive', Lord Rām said. 'Your husband is still alive. This dead body is not your husband. Your husband's ātmā was – and still is – your husband, not this body.' Tara finally understood and did prāṇām to Lord Rām. Svāmī Jñānesvarānand Tīrth related the same story for us at another occasion when we were discussing the relation between body and soul. (See 'This body is māyā' in chapter seven).

A disciple and his guru

Eighty-five-year-old Rām Sanehi Trivedī had several reasons to come to live in Mumukṣu Bhavan. One of these was that Mumukṣu Bhavan has been the home of his guru, Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth, for twenty-seven years. Vinita and I met Rām Sanehi Trivedī in his very basic room in Mumukṣu Bhavan only a few weeks before he was going to take saṃnyās and become Svāmī Rāmeśvarānand Tīrth. He was dressed in yellow, and his hair looked as if it had recently been shaved off. We all sat down on the concrete floor of his room, in which there was only a fan and a bed.



Plate 30: Rām Sanehi Trivedī

Rām Sanehi Trivedī was all smiles and kindness, and it felt nice to be in his presence. He willingly told us about his life – his family and his village, located near Chitrakoot in Madhya Pradesh. Until retirement he had been a teacher of Hindi at a Junior High School in Bhopal. His spare time he devoted to his hobbies: astrology and herbal medicine. His wife died two years ago; together they had a son who is now forty-five years old. The son is married and also has a son himself.

One year ago, Rām Sanehi Trivedī went to Varanasi and started living in Mumukṣu Bhavan. He wanted to take saṃnyās. Friends and neighbours warned him it would take quite some time to be allowed to take saṃnyās. Rām Sanehi Trivedī did not take any notice of the warnings. He was determined and left for Varanasi to fulfil his desire. He was familiar with sādhus and had always thought of renunciation as a natural part of life. From a relatively young age he had been familiar with the idea that one day this could also happen to him. Since 1954 he had taken part in every Kumbh and Maghā Melā, staying in the tent of a great mahātmā from Chitrakoot throughout the whole melā. His wife used to come with him – they both enjoyed taking part in the religious atmosphere of the melās. His desire to take saṃnyās probably developed gradually but seemed to have reached a decisive peak after his retirement: ‘After I retired, people continually came to ask me for advice. They asked about different matters related to astrology and herbal medicine. I realised that I had to go to the bank of the Gaṅgā to have some peace – to be śānt.’ However, Rām Sanehi Trivedī regarded his previous karma as the main reason he was gifted with the desire to take saṃnyās. He left for Varanasi and went to see his guru in Mumukṣu Bhavan. His son had already given him his blessings: ‘It is all up to you. You can do what you like. From my side there is no problem.’

Rām Sanehi Trivedī told us that he has become very peaceful since he arrived Mumukṣu Bhavan:¹¹⁰ ‘This is very good for me. When I came here, I immediately realised how peaceful this place is. I can go to the Gaṅgā and bathe; I get food in the ashram, and whenever I have time I can read. I enjoy this life very much.’ Mumukṣu Bhavan also holds facilities which he appreciates, like a kitchen which serves food to the residents. This means that the residents don’t have to leave the ashram if they don’t want to. For someone of Rām Sanehi Trivedī’s age, this naturally is a facility of major importance.¹¹¹ I asked him whether people still come to him to have their problems solved, either by means of herbal medicine or astrology. We all laughed with his reply,

¹¹⁰ (Ham bahut shanti mili hai): ‘I have become very peaceful, I have found peace’

¹¹¹ Mumukṣu Bhavan is run by donations, and Rām Sanehi Trivedī donated Rs. 5000 when he moved into the ashram.

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

which seemed to come straight from his heart: ‘Yes, some people still come here, and I don’t like that!’ He told us that he gives only limited time to his visitors, as his main task is now to find peace within. He wants to spend the rest of his life in Mumukṣu Bhavan: ‘I will not go anywhere. I have a very short life left, so where should I go?’

Ram Sanehi Trivedī’s guru, Śrī Daṇḍī Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth, is a ninety-year-old, very charming man. Before he settled in Mumukṣu Bhavan, he used to live in Chitrakoot, in the same area as his disciple, Ram Sanehi Trivedī. He was married, and he and his wife had five sons and one daughter. Śrī Daṇḍī Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth has completed all his responsibilities in saṃsār, and none of his family members opposed his decision to take saṃnyās. His wife now lives with their children: ‘I have told my wife that there is no need for her to come to Varanasi – why should she come? She has to stay with our children. I have already taken her to many pilgrim sites. On the spiritual path there is nothing left for her to do. We even used to go to the Maghā Melā every year.’ Śrī Daṇḍī Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth explained to us that his karma was what brought him to Varanasi (Kāśī): ‘I came to Kāśī because my mind is with God. It was decided. I had seen what was “written”. I understood what I was meant to do. That is why I came to Varanasi.’

When Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth left his village, he came directly to Mumukṣu Bhavan. He had previously visited his cousin-brother in Varanasi, so he knew the city and he also had some knowledge of Mumukṣu Bhavan and its good facilities. He appreciates the ability to have food in the ashram, and, as a positive aspect, he also mentioned that there is no mahant or head-svāmī here. The ashram is run by a committee, and all the resident sādhus have equal status.

Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth has many disciples, and I was curious to know how he can tell whether a person is prepared for saṃnyās:

If somebody comes to me and tells me they have a desire to take saṃnyās, I say to them: ‘If you have come to me because there has been some trouble in your family, then you go back to

your home and take care of your family.’ I also ask them whether their children are capable of taking over all the family responsibilities. ‘Why have you come?’ I ask. ‘Because of this or that problem?’ One should not take saṁnyās before the age of fifty or sixty. Sometimes people take saṁnyās only later to realise that there were things they should have completed while they were still householders. They end up regretting their decision. Nobody should not take saṁnyās before they have completed all their duties in saṁsār, otherwise they might end up regretting their decision.

Śrī Daṇḍī Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth related a story to serve as an example:

A man became saṁnyāsī while he was still a bachelor. One day, while he was with some friends, he saw a marriage procession. He thought: ‘I should also have been married ...’ That night the same man slept near a well, and in his dream he saw himself getting married and sleeping with his wife. During sleep he turned from one side to the other, and in the end he fell into the well. [Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth laughed heartily at this point]. Some people saw what happened and helped him to get out of the well. This is what can happen when your mind is diverted!

As we were about to say good bye, Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth asked us whether we had seen the colour of God? He gave the reply himself: ‘Nobody knows the colour or shape of God. It is all created by our ideas – our imagination. Who is God? What is God? God is without shape, but we create his form, and we give him a colour.’

During my last field work in India, the Kumbh Melā was taking place in Allahabad – only three – four hours by bus or train from Varanasi. For this reason, quite a few of the resident sādhus in Varanasi were in Allahabad at the time. Still Vinita and I paid a visit to Mumukṣu Bhavan to see some of those who had remained in Varanasi. We first went to see Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth, and as usual we found him on the wooden bed outside his room. He seemed truly happy to see us again, and both Vinita and I shared this happiness. We knew he would not be at the melā as his painful knees make it hard for him to move around. Laughingly, he explained to us that Lord Śiv had advised him to stay in Mumukṣu Bhavan because of his aching knees. The svāmī next door had not gone to the melā either. He had a different reason; at the time of taking

saṁnyās he had made a vow not to leave Varanasi. Allahabad was obviously out of question. Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth told us that he had been to the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad only once. He figured out that he must have been thirty-five – forty years old at the time.¹¹² During this melā a lot of people were stamped to death. Svāmī Rāmānand recalled how people were cremated at the melā ground. As no medical facilities were available, even people who were seriously hurt but alive were cremated. Only death could give them relief from their pains. After this experience Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth has never felt any urge to go to the Kumbh. However, many people do go, and, according to Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth, they do so because they follow the guidelines and rules of the Purāṇas: ‘In the same way as we follow the guidelines given by our parents, we follow the guidelines given by the scriptures.’

Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth was eager to tell us that last time we had come to see him, he had bathed in order to give us prasād.¹¹³ However, when we arrived he had eventually forgotten all about it: ‘Sometimes I forget things. I sometimes lose my line of thoughts.’ He declared that this time he wanted to give us prasād, although he had not prepared in the same proper way. He gave us the prasād and blessed us by laying his hand on top of our heads. Then, with true passion, he told me how dearly he wanted to do something for me. I had to swallow hard to keep my tears back, and then I told him that if only he would keep me in his mind, I would be deeply grateful. It was time to say good-bye. Vinita made the pain easier to bear by promising Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth that she, despite my absence, would come to see him whenever she got time. To me Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth represents one of those rare souls whose hearts are bursting with love. Simply meeting him and being in his presence has been a blessing.

¹¹² I believe this must have been the Kumbh Melā in 1954, the first Kumbh Melā held in Allahabad after India’s independence. During this melā it is estimated that the number of visitors was six million, whereas the previous melā in Allahabad (in 1942), due to the Second World War, had gathered only 1,2 million devotees. The 1954 melā was a success due to the large number of visitors but was turned into a tragedy as 400 people were stamped to death during one of the royal processions. A consequence of this tragedy was that the different akhārās have been persuaded not to use elephants in the processions on the auspicious days of the so called ‘royal baths’ (śāh snān) (Bedi and Bedi 1991:114, 126).

¹¹³ Prasād is food that is first offered to God, then distributed as God’s gift and blessing.



Plate 31: Svāmī Rāmānand



Plate 32: Svāmī Rāmānand with Govind Bābā and some young students.

COMMON DENOMINATORS

Although I have made myself a spokesman on behalf of the great variety among Indian sādhus, there are, as I have suggested in previous chapters, certain aspects regarding their thoughts preceding, surrounding, and succeeding the act of renouncing the world that I believe can be sorted out as common denominators. On the basis of the extracts from the life histories narrated above, I have below described what I see as the main common traits among them.

It was suggested that the senior among the Daṇḍī Svāmīs in Mumukṣu Bhavan, Gaṅgā Svāmī (Svāmī Gaṅgānand) renounced the world because he was hurt by someone, possibly by a family member. Another suggestion was that he had been led to Kāṣī by a religious ‘calling’ – a divine quest. Gaṅgā Svāmī himself explained his motive to renounce the world by stressing his desire for peace and his hatred of family affairs and the domestic life, which he described as ‘nonsense’. He explained that man can neither attain peace nor be completely happy without renouncing the world. These three versions may illustrate some of the difficulties in being precise about what makes a person renounce the world. To me, however, there seem to be two main motivating sources provoking such a turn in life: problems related to inter-human (family) relations; and/or a desire to satisfy a divine quest or a spiritual desire – a desire for eternal peace and happiness.

Inter-human relations

Problems related to inter-human relations were mentioned to me by a number of the sādhus I encountered. However, rather than relating this to their own story, they suggested it as a reason for others to renounce the world, or desire to do so. Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth mentioned one man in particular who wanted to take saṃnyās due to frustrations within his family. He had ended up telling the man to return to his family and sort out his problems, as, he explained, an escape into saṃnyās only would have

guaranteed him temporary happiness. To achieve eternal happiness, he would have to solve his family problems before renouncing the world – as this, Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth said, was to be regarded as part of his dharma: his religious and moral duty. As Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth put it himself: ‘I can not accept anybody’s wish to take saṃnyās only to let them enjoy this life for a while and then run the risk that, after some time, they will regret their decision – or even not be able to follow the saṃnyās way of life at all.’ Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth also mentioned family problems as a reason why people want to take saṃnyās. Those who reveal for him a desire to take saṃnyās are warned that, if family problems are their main motive to renounce the world, they should return to their home and take care of their family. ‘You should not take saṃnyās before you have completed all your duties in the world’, he said.

It seems to me as if the act of renouncing the world is a rather commonly desired solution to problems related to family-matters.¹¹⁴ However, not all those who, as a consequence of family disputes or deceit are tempted to renounce the world, necessarily go that far.

Eternal peace and happiness

Svāmī Gaṅgānand has found his ‘heaven on earth’ in Kāśī and explained to me that without renouncing the world man will not attain peace of mind: ‘Man will not be completely happy unless he renounces everything. That’s why I chose to become a saṃnyāsī. I don’t like worldly affairs, I hated all family affairs. The domestic life – the worldly life – is nonsense.’ A desire for happiness – eternal happiness – was emphasised by both Brahmācārī Satyā Prakāś and Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth as their main motive to renounce the world. ‘In this [saṃnyās] life there is only happiness,’ Brahmācārī Satyā Prakāś said. Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth explained that before taking saṃnyās he had experienced only temporary happiness. Only after renouncing the

¹¹⁴ For a further discussion of matters related to family life, see chapter five (‘Matters of family’).

world had he experienced eternal happiness – ‘simply because I continuously remember God.’ Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand emphasises the peaceful state of mind he has achieved after renouncing the world: ‘I am very peaceful’ [ham bahut śānt]. [...] Before I came here, I had to face all kind of family problems, responsibilities, and obligations. Here there is nothing of that kind – only peace.’ Rām Sanehi Trivedī described how he had come to realise that in order to find peace, to be śānt, he would have to go to the bank of the Gaṅgā. He is now settled in Mumukṣu Bhavan, where he has found peace: ‘This is very good for me’, he said. Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, who emphasised both his long-lasting affection for Svāmī Karpatrijī and his desire to become like Nārāyaṇ (God) as reasons for his attraction to the saṃnyās life, also expressed satisfaction and happiness towards his life as a saṃnyāsī: ‘I will never regret what I have done. This was a blessing from God. [...] It was my luck,’ he said. Like Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth also described how he had been aiming towards a religious life from early childhood on. He said he believed this spiritual desire developed from inspiration he got from his very religious mother. He mentioned that although according to Hinduism you should be happy with whatever God has given you, only a few people are actually śānt or santoṣ – peaceful and filled with satisfaction: ‘Most people want more – always more. Very few people are satisfied with what they actually have.’ Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth, like the other svāmīs in Mumukṣu Bhavan, told us that he has renounced this desire for achieving more and more. Free from such desires, they all claim to be happy – to have found eternal peace and happiness, a precondition for mokṣ, the ultimate release.

Although every single one of the svāmīs in Mumukṣu Bhavan has his own individual reasons for choosing this path of life, they all seem to agree in seeing karma as the main architect behind the turns their lives have taken. Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, for instance, emphasised his karma as the main reason why he actually came to live as a saṃnyāsī: ‘When I was a householder I was confident with that kind of life. I believed it was part of my karma. I also believe it is due to my karma that I am now living as a saṃnyāsī.’ Also Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth said that the reason he actually ended up taking saṃnyās is to be understood by reference to his karma: ‘I have become a

saṃnyāsī due to my past lives – my karma.’ The karmic dimension was also emphasised by Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth: ‘My karma from previous lives explains why I have become a saṃnyāsī.’ Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth stressed that everything we do in this life depends on what we did in our previous lives – depends on our previous karma. Almost thirty years ago he completed his duties as a householder and took saṃnyās because, he said: ‘I had seen that it was “written.” Nothing happened in my family. There were no fights, no disturbance. Nobody pressured me. I had seen what was written, and I have experienced that what is written will happen.’

In the following chapter, this discussion will be continued and an attempt will be made to summarise the main arguments.

‘THIS WORLD IS NOTHING’



Plate 33

This world is nothing. That's why I renounced.

(Svāmī Bhārātī, Varanasi)

REASONS WHY

In an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1967, Khushwant Singh describes his meeting with Svāmī Ānand, the secretary of the Bhārat Sādhu Samāj in New Delhi:

He sat down on his swivel chair and brushed his beard. Sadhus are reluctant to talk about themselves, but I took the chance and boldly asked him: 'Svamiji, why did you become a sadhu? You are obviously well-educated. You speak excellent English. You could have got a good job anywhere.' Svamiji graciously accepted my compliments. He ran his slender fingers over his locks and replied, 'English literature was my favourite subject at the university. I used to stand first in my class.' (Singh 1967:108)

Singh ventured to ask Svāmī Ānand whether he was from Bengal. Not all sādhus are willing to reveal their place of birth, and Svāmī Ānand was also not happy about Singh's innuendo about his accent. He responded: 'I am from India ... from the world. Hinduism is not like Christianity or Islam, restricted to followers of Jesus Christ or Mohammed. Hinduism is a universal religion' (ibid.:108). Svāmī Ānand 'closed his eyes and rocked in his chair' (ibid.:108). Khushwant Singh repeated his question: 'Why did you become a sadhu?':

He opened his large eyes. 'Why? That is an interesting question.' After a short pause he continued, 'Because I wanted to realize the truth about myself. All our holy books tell us that the aim of life should be self-realization.'

Svāmī Ānand was inspired to become a sādhu by his teacher in English, an American missionary. This 'Christian *Sannyasi*' (ibid.:108) taught him to love Jesus Christ – 'I began to love Christ so much that whenever I thought of His crucifixion, I used to weep like anything. Well, it was this American missionary who said to me, "Go and serve the people"' (ibid.:108). Svāmī Ānand first joined the Ramakrishna Mission, but he soon left because he disliked the way they worshipped Ramakrishna as God. For years he travelled from one sacred place to another. He also spent several years meditating in the Himalayas, until he felt that he was 'ready to become a full-fledged sadhu' and, finally, was initiated into saṃnyās (ibid.:108).

The road leading to the act of renouncing the world may, as we have seen glimpses of in previous chapters, be straight and smooth or full of curves and bumps. Individual motives to get onto that road may vary accordingly. No research or survey can possibly capture the total variety gathered within the sādhu fold in India; as G.S. Ghurye states, it has in fact been 'impossible to make a statistically satisfying survey of the reasons and motives that impel individuals to renounce ordinary life in favour of asceticism' (Ghurye 1964:222). However, as I suggested in the previous chapter, I believe that despite this obvious diversity it is possible to indicate some common, underlying explanations of the act of renunciation. In the two previous chapters, a selection of sādhus have expressed some of their thoughts concerning their turn towards asceticism. In this chapter I will present more sādhus who speak their minds and give their versions of their lives. By doing so, I will, in even greater detail, describe the variety of motives that may give rise to a desire to renounce the world.

Matters of family

I suggested in the previous chapter that I see two main groups of motives possibly provoking a turn towards asceticism. One of these I described as problems embedded in inter-human (family) relations, as problems related to matters within the Indian extended family quite often are referred to as reasons why people renounce the world. Aileen D. Ross remarked in the early 1960s that for those who fit in, it will be no problem to adjust to the conformity necessary to live in a large family unit. However, Ross added, it may 'be a great problem for the deviant member since the penalty for non-conformity is high' (Ross 1961:17-18). Ross quotes Irawati Karve, who ten years earlier suggested a connection between asceticism and the traditional family form:

The philosophical urge towards asceticism and realisation of complete freedom may be a reaction against the thousand chains by which the joint family and the kindred hold the individual in terrible imprisonment. (ibid.:18)

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

Several scholars have later reflected along similar lines. One of these is Harald Tambs-Lyche. In the article 'The Son's Burden' (1995), Tambs-Lyche suggests that the desire towards renunciation can be seen as a consequence of the tight bonds within the Indian family. He writes:

[We may construct a similar list of reference categories for most complex societies, but in India they are linked with organizational groupings in the way peculiar to the Indian 'caste system'.] Moreover, and that is our main point here: the householder/father is the node that links them all together. So solid is this link, that the dream of escaping from it is a constant presence, through the alternative of renunciation. (Tambs-Lyche 1995:139)

Tambs-Lyche suggests that the final and radical solution to the son's burden may be to renounce the world and become a *sādhu*. By renouncing the world, the cycle of reproduction, 'which here seems to be assimilated to the general cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*), is finally transcended, and the son becomes, as Dumont (1966) would have it, "an individual"' (ibid.:156). Tambs-Lyche narrates a story of two farmers to illustrate how the cycle of reproduction is actually transcended. The story dates back to the early 19th century when the two farmers, Krishnaji and Mulji, became disciples of Svāmī Nārāyaṇ. The two farmers realised that their guru was an incarnation of God and felt a strong urge to become renunciators and be in service of his sect. However, as their parents protested, Svāmī Nārāyaṇ refused to accept them. 'They then castrated themselves, and began to serenade their Guru at night. The Svami, who realized that they had, indeed, cut their ties to the world in a most decisive fashion, finally accepted them' (ibid.:157). Drew Stuart in a paper suggests that the *sādhu* subculture may serve as an escape valve for some of the pressures that accumulate in mainstream, *gṛhast* life – in particular within the Indian family, which, he suggests, 'can be a very demanding place to live' (Stuart 1995:6): 'If for whatever reason, you aren't making it or things aren't working in the family or community sphere, you can take off and become a *sadhu*' (ibid.:6-7). Similar motives behind the act of renouncing the world are suggested in Paul G. Hiebert's story of Patabi, a middle-aged villager 'whose high-caste status prevented him from divorcing his intolerably domineering wife' (Hiebert 1981:218). To escape from his wife, Patabi

'announced that he would become a mendicant, take up meditation, and seek *moksha*. Donning an ochre robe and tying his hair on top of his head, he left the village to tour the important religious shrines of India' (ibid.:218). Five years later he came to know that his wife had moved to her parents' home in a distant village. She had finally given up the hope of her husband's return. Patabi then returned to his village, 'reopened his shop, cut his hair, and took a low-caste Shudra mistress' (ibid.:218). Hiebert concludes the story of Pataibi by saying:

The villagers were critical of Patabi's motives in becoming a mendicant – as in fact they are of the motives of most wandering mendicants who periodically pass through the village. But Patabi did not care. He had taken advantage of a religiously sanctioned course of action in order to achieve the goal of escaping from a burdensome marriage. (ibid.:218)

The case of Patabi shows how private conflicts may be solved under cover of religiously sanctioned action. As Stuart remarks, to take up a life as a *sādhu* 'is one option if one cannot meet the demands of the network in which one finds oneself' (Stuart 1995:7). B.D. Tripathi's sociological research analysis from the 1970s, based on interviews with 500 *sādhus* in Uttar Pradesh, insinuates that as much as 41.6 % of the *sādhus* take to asceticism due to socio-familial factors. Tripathi makes the following comment:

Constant quarrel and rebuke from elders and rivals drive many to quit their homes and take to asceticism. The situation may remain tolerable when elders rebuke one for some commissions and omissions, but when younger members particularly wives and daughters-in-law taunt their husbands and fathers-in-law, the situation hots up. In extreme cases the members in question even commit suicide or if somehow the catastrophe is averted, they turn to Sadhuism, cutting themselves clear from the unwholesome environment of the family. Such cases are common in large and small joint families. (Tripathi 1978:96)

None of the *sādhus* I encountered admitted that family disputes or demands were the main reason why they renounced the world. Although, as I mentioned in the preceding chapter, problems related to inter-human (family) relations were discussed a number of times, this always concerned others – most likely householders who wanted to solve

their frustrations related to family matters by taking *saṁnyās*.¹¹⁵ However, to use *saṁnyās* as an escape valve from such frustrations was considered inappropriate by most *sādhus*, and they defended the ideal of having problems related to life in *saṁsār* sorted out before taking *saṁnyās*.

Matters of spirituality

The second source of motivation I suggested as possibly provoking a turn towards renunciation, was a (karmic) desire to satisfy a divine quest or spiritual desire – a desire for eternal peace and happiness. In my view, the four life histories narrated in chapter three may all be understood in this perspective. Dr. Archana Aditya, or Dr. Dīdī, said she gradually developed a desire to change her way of living and the content of her life. She was not at all comfortable with the kind of life she was living and had gradually developed a desire to be free from it all. She wanted to leave her family and, rather, devote her life to do service for the Ramakrishna Mission. Dr. Dīdī explained the turns of her life as karmic fruits of her previous actions – fruits she had to 'eat'. She was prepared to suffer, if in the end only this would allow her to renounce everything to which she was now attached. In some respects, Svāmī Ūmānand's story is different from Dr. Dīdī's, but their stories also share some common traits. For instance, they both developed a desire to donate their time and energy to serve God. Svāmī Ūmānand survived a serious traffic accident without permanent injuries. Because God saved him from disability, or even death, he renounced his life in *saṁsār* as a sacrifice to God. Both Dr. Dīdī and Svāmī Ūmānand reveal a realisation of values of a higher quality than those accessible in *saṁsār*. The same can be said about Svāmī Bhārātī's motives for leaving home. Svāmī Bhārātī left home to devote himself to his

¹¹⁵ As I wrote in chapter three, Mahārāj spent his first years in the Jūnā Akhārā with approximately ten other brahmacārīs at his age. Most of them had run away from home – either because they had been beaten or had failed at an exam, because they wanted to get away from school or because they had been fighting with somebody and felt it safest to stay away for a while. When Mahārāj took *saṁskār* three years later, most of the other young brahmacārīs had disappeared. Looking back, Mahārāj believes these boys became brahmacārīs as part of their youthful rebellion, and he sees it as very likely that by the time he took *saṁskār* they had returned to their families.

search for permanency, or eternal happiness. He confronted his uncle, who was about to arrange his marriage, by asking him whether he was happy. The uncle replied: 'No, I am not happy.' 'Why are you not happy?' Svāmī Bhārātī asked: 'You can have everything you want – you have a good wife, good children, etc. Why are you not happy?' Svāmī Bhārātī explained that mankind is unhappy because they desire the 'unhappy' things, the impermanent things. He refused to accept the marriage arranged by his uncle and continued his search for permanency. The last of the four sādhus introduced in chapter three was Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj). At an early age he lost his father, and soon after he was overwhelmed by a desire to find God. During the emotionally distressing cremation of his father, he experienced what is called śmaśān vairāgyā; a strong desire to renounce everything came to him at the cremation ground. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by questions concerning the meaning of saṃsār – the meaning of life. He asked God: 'Is this all there is to it? My father died, and that is it?' Soon after this incident, Mahārāj left home to search for God. He was then eight or ten years old. With him he carried a precious truth, passed on to him by his father: The world is just a dream. The only truth is to do jāp to Bhagvān.

In the Śārādā Ashram in Varanasi, Vinita and I met Junnā, a brahmacārin. She explained her desire to renounce the world by pointing to her fascination with Buddha: 'I read many stories about Buddha and felt very inspired by him. I thought: "I will also renounce the world. This life is nothing".' Junnā kept silent for a while. Then, as if she had to unload her heart and mind, she continued her story. She explained that when her sister's children died (she did not describe the circumstances of their death), she had finally been convinced of the nothingness of this world.

In the Ānandāmāi¹¹⁶ Ashram, Vinita and I met Kanti Gutu, a retired teacher and resident of the ashram. At the time she looked a bit miserable due to an accident that

¹¹⁶ Ānandāmāi (1896 – 1983) was a female saint. Klaus K. Klostermaier says that people considered her to be the incarnation of the Goddess, whereas Ānandāmāi herself 'refused to describe herself in

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

had taken place the previous evening. The electricity had been out, and she had stumbled and fallen down the stairs in the dark. Both her arms were plastered, and she had a wound on her upper lip. Despite this, she greeted us warmly and introduced us to some of the incidents that had taken place in her life – all in well-articulated English. Kanti Gutu had been a resident of the ashram for approximately forty years. Her family was familiar with Ānandamāyī and her ashram in Varanasi, and Kanti Gutu soon became a follower of this female saint. Kanti Gutu was born and grew up in Lucknow but moved to Varanasi to study at the Banaras Hindu University. From childhood she had been what she herself described as 'a very simple girl'. She had never had any desire to dress up, and she never felt any affection for material things. As a student, she always used to wear a plain, white sari. She recalled that the other students used to call her 'the lady in white'. She said she had always experienced herself as some sort of renouncer. There are, she went on to say, two kinds of renunciation – one caused by a true, inner, spiritual desire, and another that is simply an outward appearance, simply a matter of dress.

Kāśīnāth, an elderly sādhu dressed in saffron, told me that he was pleased to live alone – away from his family: 'I appreciate to live separate from my family. I enjoy the free life, not the jail of the family.' When he is not in his native city Calcutta or in Delhi with his wife and his youngest daughter, he is always to be found on one particular spot at the entrance to Assi ghāṭ in Varanasi. Here he sleeps, eats, and begs for alms – alms to uphold his living and to save up dowry for his youngest daughter. Although most people in the area seemed to look upon him as an ordinary beggar, only dressed in saffron, he spoke of himself as a sādhu. He told me that when his daughter's marriage is arranged, he will stay permanently in Varanasi: 'I will not go to my wife in Delhi. If my wife has problems, she can come to Varanasi and I will help her solve her problems, but if I have problems I will not go to her place to make her solve mine. I am a sādhu.' Kāśīnāth told me that he decided to become a sādhu during his first visit to Varanasi. This happened ten years ago, when he arrived from Calcutta with his wife

any way other than by saying: "I have always been the same, and I will always be the same. This body is illusion, and everything connected with it is just *līlā* (God's play)" (Klostermaier 1998b: 160).

and daughters in search of work. His wife and daughters soon found work as domestic servants and maids, but he could not find anything to do for a living. The only thing he could think of was to become a sādhu. Later in our conversation, he explained that the temples in Varanasi had made such a strong impression on him that he could think of nothing else than becoming a sādhu: 'The temples made me think "this is God, God, God", and suddenly I experienced a strong desire to renounce the world.'

To me, Kāśīnāth's motives to become a sādhu seem somewhat unclear – apparently provoked by a mixture of spiritual desires, dissatisfaction with his family situation, and practical needs. I doubt that he is the only sādhu motivated by such mixed motives.



Plate 34: Kāśīnāth

Matters of escape and survival

Robert Lewis Gross understands renunciation and formation of ascetic sects as 'culturally specific socio-religious reactions to endemic stress conditions existing in the society through time' (Gross 1992:vii). He describes Indian society as a rigid and stratified caste society in which asceticism provides 'one of the few means of individual mobility' (ibid.:viii). On the basis of this, he claims that 'asceticism provides a viable alternate life style for individuals living within the rigid hierarchically stratified system of the caste society' (ibid.:415). In Gross's view, renunciation represents 'a meaningful religious outlet' as well as 'a constructive release from oppressive social and psychological conditions' (ibid.:415-16). He adds

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

that in a society 'where individual choice is limited by many factors, a life of asceticism is the only realistic alternative for many' (ibid.:416). In fact, he calls the life of asceticism 'a convenient and socially recognized "escape" from the stigma of indebtedness, poverty, and material failure' (ibid.:416). None of the sādhus I encountered admitted that they had renounced the world to escape endemic stress conditions. Yet, there is no reason to exclude this as a possible (partial) explanation of why some people renounce the world. Not surprisingly, none of the sādhus I encountered admitted having chosen saṃnyās āśram as an escape from a criminal record. It is, however, a well-known fact (also among the Indian police) that the sādhu subculture in some cases serves as 'a "no-man's land" into which criminals can disappear' (Stuart 1995:38). Another reason for some to choose the life of saṃnyās is access to material benefits like food and housing: 'Anyone who chooses to enter this subculture is relatively assured of finding free food and residence, especially in pilgrimage centers like Banaras' (ibid.:6). Financial profit may for some be yet another tempting possible benefit of saṃnyās.

D. F. Pocock recalls his first sight of sādhus and says that this 'corresponded perfectly to the average Westerner's expectations' (Pocock 1973:97):

Three such visited Sundarana, their long hair piled high on their heads, their loins girt with saffron-coloured cloth, their sturdy well-fed bodies marked with the insignia of Shiva. They wore heavy rosaries round their necks and carried strangely twisted staves. They were received, initially, with a cautious respect but, within forty-eight hours they were beaten up and chased out of the village. What they had done I could not clearly elicit, but it had something to do with women. (ibid.:97)

While recognising that such things can happen, Pocock states that 'two qualifying observations must be made':

First of all, in a country where poverty is still so prevalent, who can blame those who, having no alternative but beggary, practise it in its most profitable garb? Secondly, my experience does not lead me to support a belief, common in some urban circles, that all sannyasis are rogues. No one who has experienced that quality of serenity and power, which is felt almost as

a physical emanation from the true sannyasi, could suppose that this tradition is finally decadent. (ibid.:97)

I am not entitled to judge whether a sādhu's reason to renounce the world is acceptably pure or not – rather, I have simply attempted to get some insight into some of the multitude of motives present. In this respect, I agree with Pocock's liberal and tolerant attitude towards the less authentic renunciators. Poverty forces people to find alternative ways of survival – for some a saffron robe may be a way of escaping hunger.

In the following a few more sādhus, ashrams, and life histories will be introduced. My intention with this presentation, and also the form in which it is given, is to introduce another part of the great variety made up by the life experiences, world views, thoughts, motives, and ideas of sādhus.

GAṄGĀ MĀ ASHRAM

The first time Vinita and I visited the Gaṅgā Mā Ashram in Varanasi we met two of the resident saṁnyāsins in the ashram's office. They were dressed in similar saffron-coloured sārīs, had close-cropped hair, and had saffron coloured shawls wrapped around their shoulders to protect themselves against the cold weather. Vinita, who had previously visited the ashram with another research scholar, introduced me and briefly explained to them, in Hindi, my project and the purpose of our visit. Brahmācārin Kalyani Devī agreed to give an interview.

Brahmācārin Kalyani Devī told us that she had been living in the ashram since 1964. When she arrived here, her name was Kalpana Bannerjī. She was then ten years old:

My Gurujī's name is Gaṅgā Mā, and my father is a guru-bhāi of Mā [Gaṅgā Mā/Guru Mā]. They were initiated at the same time by the same guru. [She shows us Gaṅgā Mā's picture.] From my childhood I heard of Gaṅgā Mā, and gradually I developed an affection for the

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

ascetic way of life. I spent most of my time thinking of her. I never took much interest in studies, in eating, or in sleeping.

From early childhood Brahmācārīn Kalyāni Devī experienced herself as different from other girls of her age. She never took any real interest in the 'worldly' things that occupied the minds of her school mates. This made her family worried about her:

They wondered what to do for me. My father went to Guru Mā [Gaṅgā Mā] and told her about me. She told him to bring me to her so that she could talk to me. When I first met Guru Mā I realised that what I had been thinking of, and even seen in my dreams, was her. She was the one I had seen in my dreams. I told Gaṅgā Mā that I had a desire in my heart to become a brahmācārīn. I told her that I felt no joy being in the world, and that I wanted to live an ascetic life. Guru Mā accepted this, and gave me a mantrā and a tulsī mālā [a necklace made of tulsī tree]. The necklace is a symbol of belonging. Suppose that you have a pet dog. Because the dog can get lost, you provide him with a necklace. That is also why we wear the tulsī mālā – not to get lost.¹¹⁷ When we are wearing this necklace, our Guru will always recognise us. The necklace is the symbol of God. By wearing this mālā, we become like God.

Brahmācārīn Kalyāni Devī has three sisters and five brothers. Two of her siblings have also adopted the path of renunciation. They are both settled in Vrīndavan, Lord Kṛṣṇ's birthplace. I asked Brahmācārīn Kalyāni Devī whether it was hard for her parents to send her to Varanasi at the age of ten: 'It was, but they were convinced that this would do me good, that it was a good place for me to be, and that I would be taken good care of':

Gaṅgā Mā was a lady of high standards. In earlier times marriages took place in very young age. Among Hindus, girls were sometimes only seven or eight years old when they got married. Gaṅgā Mā was married at the age of ten, but only one year later her husband died. According to Hindu religion a girl can not remarry. Gaṅgā Mā was sent to her mother's native place to study. Meanwhile, her father wrote a letter to his guru where he asked what he should

¹¹⁷ The President of the Ramakrishna Mission in Varanasi, Svāmī Jyotirānand, spoke in similar terms: 'We are always dressed in saffron, the sign of renunciation. The saffron robe also has a protective function – it reminds me that I am a religious man who has renounced the world. When I go outside and mix with family-men, the saffron robe works like a dog's necklace and tells me and others where I belong – what I am.'

do for Gaṅgā Mā now as her husband was dead. His guru replied that he should send his daughter to him. So he did, and from him Gaṅgā Mā got knowledge about Hindu scriptures and learned to meditate. She also took dīkṣā from him. Later her guru died, but before he died he said to her: 'What I have told you about Indian ideals, you should tell to others. You shall serve Indian culture by starting an organisation where you teach people what I have been teaching you. What I have given you, you shall distribute to others. Your knowledge should be passed on.'

During her thirty-five years in the ashram, Brahmācārīn Kalyani Devī said she only once has felt doubt as to the way of life she has chosen:

Two – three years after my arrival, I did not feel very happy. In fact I was for a while considering to leave. One day I wanted to leave; the next day I wanted to stay ... I called my Gurujī [Gaṅgā Mā]. She leaned her head towards mine and comforted me. 'Whenever you feel doubt like this, try to remember God and know that he will make sure everything will be all right', she said. From then onwards, I have never felt doubt.

Gaṅgā Mā, Brahmācārīn Kalyani Devī's guru, is now dead. Her successor is Gauri Mā, and Vinita and I were allowed to meet her during her visit to Varanasi in December 1998. Gauri Mā was a beautiful and mild woman. She sat on a chair, relaxed, surrounded by a number of the young girls who attend the ashram's school. She was dressed in a light yellow sari and had a shawl wrapped around her. She also had sindūr (vermilion) in the parting of her hair and a bindī on her forehead. I noticed in particular the sindūr, as this indicates that a woman is married. Gauri Mā's age was fifty, but she looked a lot younger. She told us that her father had died when she was ten years old, and that her mother had been worried about the upbringing of the daughter. She asked Gaṅgā Mā's guru-bhāī, a friend of the family, for advice. He suggested that she bring Gauri Mā to Gaṅgā Mā's ashram in Varanasi for education. This she did. Gaṅgā Mā developed a great sense of responsibility for the young girl, as she was sent to her by her guru-bhāī. One day, while Gaṅgā Mā was doing pūjā in the temple, Lord Kṛṣṇ appeared for her and said: 'Don't worry about the girl. You can arrange her marriage to me.' The marriage was arranged when Gauri Mā was twelve years old. It was held in a traditional Hindu style with lots of guests. That Gauri Mā is

in fact married to Lord Kṛṣṇ explains both the bindī on her forehead and the sindūr in the parting of her hair.

ŚRĪ ŚRĪ BHOLĀGIRI ASHRAM

Svāmī Devendrānand Giri stayed in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram, one of Varanasi's numerous Bengali ashrams. I was introduced to him by my local Danish friend, Hanne, who had become familiar with him through some acquaintances. Hanne accompanied me to our first meeting. At the gate we were met by the sādhu in charge of the ashram. He called for Svāmī Devendrānand Giri, and a few moments later a young, handsome and smiling sādhu, dressed in a deeply saffron loincloth and a similarly coloured T-shirt, came to receive us. Until we arrived he had been repairing broken light switches, and as we crossed the threshold to his room he picked up some screws and electric light switches. We asked him whether he was the technical handyman of the ashram, he nodded and said (while laughing): 'Technical, but not so practical!' Well into the room, Hanne exclaimed in surprise: 'I had an idea that all sādhus who live in an ashram have small and sad rooms with only a tiny bed in it, but your room is really nice!' The room was not very big, probably about ten square meters. There were three posters on the walls, and a tape recorder was placed between the books in the bookshelves. Svāmī Devendrānand Giri had got the posters from the market, and he had chosen these three because they had some appeal to him. He pointed at one of the posters, a photograph of a young clown holding a rose in his hand. The clown looked cheerful but at the same time inquiring. This was his favourite poster. In the room there were two beds. Svāmī Devendrānand Giri asked us to sit down on one of them, whereas he took seat on the other bed placed at the opposite wall. The beds were wooden and had only a straw mat on top. There were also a small table and a chair in the room. In one of the corners of the room, some saffron robes hung over a string.

Svāmī Devendrānand Giri sat down with his legs crossed and started telling us, in English, why he became a sādhu:

When I was sixteen years old I chose my goal. At that time I prepared for the exam of class ten. Later I completed Bachelor of Science in Physics at the Calcutta University. During that time I chose my ultimate goal; I decided what I had to do. In a biological sense life is only a biochemical process, and what is that? They say that the end of this process – which could last for sixty years, forty years, or seventy years for a particular man or woman – is death. Death is superior to us. What is the ultimate death? What is death? In the light of this quest, I have chosen this life. I have chosen this life to achieve my ultimate goal, which is called mokṣ. I chose this when I was sixteen, but I did not leave my home until I was twenty-one years old. I knew the kind of life I desired would change my life completely. This was a very difficult time in my life. If, at the time of making this decision I was misguided, I would have spoiled everything – spoiled my whole life. I had to be sure I chose a life that I would be able to live properly. Mokṣ is the goal of human beings. Mokṣ means the end of every aspect of the conventional life. That she is my sister, he is my father, she is my mother, etc., is for everybody the conventional life, but in these surroundings I can not reach my goal. Most people choose to live in a conventional way, but every man can not. Every man has to make his own choice; every man's choice is different. The choice of eating, the choice of drinking, is different from man to man. [He pointed at Hanne's Indian husband, who had just arrived, and said:] He could eat what I could not. Suppose she [he pointed at Hanne] will buy a chapati. She buys only one chapati, that is her meal, while I want two chapatis. We choose this according to our hunger, according to our capacity. The choice is different from man to man.

I asked him whether he believes this has to do with karma:

Yes, because I have to complete my work, just like I was repairing the electric switches when you arrived [he laughed]. I do a lot of different work in my leisure time: I repair telephones [he laughed again] and other things in the ashram. Because I am a student [he was a student of Sanskrit at the Benares Hindu University], I have a tendency to study my books and do my homework, but whenever I have time I also do this kind of work for the ashram, or for people outside the ashram. This work is not my final goal, but as a social being I have chosen to do it. I like to contribute to the welfare of the society, the welfare of particular homes. These are my hobbies, something that helps me to pass my time when I feel bored. However, my final goal is not embedded in this kind of work. According to our philosophy the whole universe is ultimate falsity. The authentic, the supreme, is brahm, and I have dedicated myself to brahm to achieve mokṣ. My goal is to leave this material world, and to succeed in this I have to complete the life that I have chosen – as a saṃnyāsī. This is the direction in which I want to

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

continue my life. I have to improve my philosophical knowledge and ideas, so I study ancient books like the Upaniṣad and the Vedas. Proper guidance can be gained from these books.

Svāmī Devendrānand Giri has been living in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram for the last ten years. When he first came here in 1989, he was about twenty-two years old. According to himself, his family accepted his decision of renouncing the world. From the time he left home in 1989, three years passed before he again saw his family:

The next time I had any contact with them was in 1992, when my father was ill. He had a serious heart attack at that time. My brother informed me about this and asked me whether I would come to see him. He did not say I had to come. My brother called me again this year [1998] on 11th June, to inform me that my father had passed away three days before. Again I went to my home. My father's death ceremony was already performed, but I went to my home to console my mother. I love her very much. I also love my sister; she is very loveable to me. She has completed a master's degree at the Calcutta University; she is mature and quite fit for marriage. She is very affectionate to me. Because of this I went home, but I only stayed for three – four days. After consoling my mother I came back to Varanasi.

A year after

During my second fieldwork, I again returned to Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram to see Svāmī Devendrānand Giri. The head of the ashram (mahant) came to the gate and told me that Svāmī Devendrānand Giri had left the ashram two – three months earlier. He also explained that nobody in the ashram knew where he had gone. This news surprised me a lot, and a few days later I returned to the ashram with Vinita to try and get some more information about what actually had happened. It was again the mahant who came to the gate. He guided us into his room where he sat down on the floor behind a low table. The table was covered with an embroidered tablecloth on which there were piles of paper and envelopes. On the floor behind the mahant, piled up against the wall, were pillows covered with saffron pillow cases.



Plate 35: Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri

Heaps of books covered the floor all the way to the mahant's bed (which was also covered by a saffron sheet). The humming of a TV could be heard from a neighbouring room. Apart from that the ashram was quiet – very quiet. We asked the mahant if he would allow us to take fifteen minutes of his time to ask him some questions. He smiled and invited us to sit down. I asked him whether he could tell us in any greater details what had happened to Svāmī Devendrānand Giri. The mahant responded that, as he had been absent when Svāmī Devendrānand Giri left the ashram, he was not able to tell much. The only thing he knew for sure was that Svāmī Dvendrānand Giri had left the ashram two – three months earlier, and that nobody in the ashram knew where he at present was to be found. Rumours said that he was observed in Varanasi, and according to these rumours he was still in 'lāl kapṛā' (saffron robes).

The mahant's name was Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri. We asked him whether the Bholāgiri Ashram is an ashram for Śaiva or Vaiṣṇav sādhus. 'Saṃnyās hai', he responded and explained that they belong to the ten orders of saṃnyāsīs founded by Śaṅkarācāryā (daśānāmi). If one knows the meaning of the ashram's name this is obvious, as 'bholā' is a name of Śiv and 'giri', which means mountain, is the name of one of the ten orders of saṃnyāsīs founded by Śaṅkarācāryā. Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri, who was sixty-three years old, told us that he has been a saṃnyāsī

for forty-five years. For the last eighteen – nineteen years he has been living in the Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram. He also told us that his native place is in Bengal, not far from Calcutta, and that in his childhood he had spent time with saṃnyāsīs living in his neighbourhood. He said he believes the time he spent with these saṃnyāsīs inspired him to adopt this way of life himself. 'No one pressured me to take saṃnyās' he explained. He had five brothers and three sisters, some younger and some elder. He informed none of these, nor his parents, about his decision of leaving home. After he left he sent letters to his family, but he never told them where he was staying. A friend of his managed to trace him after four years, and this friend also told his family where he was staying. However, at this time Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri was still a brahmacārī, to which his family had no strong objections. Later he took saṃnyās.

'Why do people take saṃnyās?', I asked: 'There are so many reasons ... Some become saṃnyāsīs due to their previous karma, others due to family problems.' I confronted him with rumours saying that thieves and murderers take saṃnyās in order to escape from the police. He nodded thoughtfully and admitted that he knew one sādhu with such a background from an ashram in Haridvar. Apparently, this sādhu had lived in the ashram for ten years before the police finally traced him and had him arrested.

The next day

Vinita and I returned again the next day in order to interview a few more of the sādhus living in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram. It appeared, however, that most of the sādhus had gone to a temple nearby. Only Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri and two others had remained in the ashram. One of these was very old and hard of hearing. The other was the somewhat younger accountant of the ashram. With Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri's permission, we approached the accountant's room.

He stood at the window with his back turned towards us. We addressed him, and he turned around and revealed a half-eaten orange in his hand. He smiled and asked us to

sit down. We all sat around his big desk, which was covered by papers and small rupee-bills. He sat in his bed which was covered with a saffron sheet and saffron towels. Vinita and I sat in chairs at the table. In the room was another bed which seemed to be used for storage. The accountant introduced himself as Svāmī Ānandānand Giri. Vinita introduced me and started by asking a direct question regarding the destiny of Svāmī Devendrānand Giri. Whispering, Svāmī Ānandānand Giri revealed to us that there had been a Bengali girl who used to come to see Svāmī Devendrānand Giri in the ashram. After some time rumours said that she was pregnant, and soon it was known that the father of the child was no other than Svāmī Devendrānand Giri. Svāmī Devendrānand Giri applied for permission to leave the ashram. The mahant, Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri, had been out of station at the time, and the accountant, Svāmī Ānandānand, had been his deputy. Thereby, it was up to him to accept or refuse Svāmī Devendrānand Giri's application. He accepted. This was as much as he could tell as the matter was, he said, 'highly confidential'.

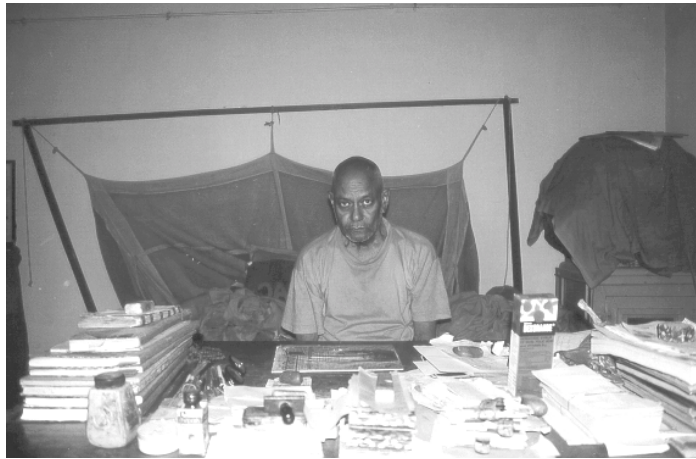


Plate 36: Svāmī Ānandānand

We left the topic of Svāmī Devendrānand Giri for Svāmī Ānandānand himself, who, before he took saṃnyās, had worked as a clerk in a shipping department at the Calcutta port. He was married and had children. At the age of sixty he decided to take saṃnyās: 'As I had almost completed my duties as a family man, I thought it was time I did

something for myself. I had to do something else – I had to take saṃnyās.’ Already he knew some saṃnyāsīs, and he was also familiar with the Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram. During the next couple of years he fulfilled his duties as a husband and a father. His children cried when they were told about his decision. His wife – or ‘ex-wife’, as he preferred to call her – had no objections to his decision if only he first completed his duties towards her and their children.¹¹⁸ Two years later he had completed these duties, and it was time for him to leave. He provided for the economic well-being of his family by leaving them some money in the bank. Today, the interest on this amount of money partly cover their daily expenses. Annually Svāmī Ānandānand travels to Calcutta, ‘to show my face in the bank – to let them know I am still alive.’ Normally he calls his family from the bank and asks them to come and see him there. He gives them some money, and his wife normally starts crying. She often tries to convince him to take some of the money for himself, but he always refuses. He normally says goodbye and leaves them in the bank. His wife often asks if she can accompany him to the station. He accepts this if she promises not to cry. ‘Previously I had a lot of affection for my wife, but there is less affection now – that is why I think it is better that we live separately.’ In 1992 he took saṃnyās.

The last visit

During our last visit to the ashram, we met two young brahmacārīs who were staying there at the time. They both agreed to being interviewed, and the interviews took place in the presence of their guru, Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri. They were both very sweet young men. The youngest of the two was twenty-five years old, and had already been living in the ashram for six years. He had not yet taken full saṃnyās, although he claimed to be prepared to do so. ‘I have come here to prepare myself for saṃnyās’, he said. He told us that once during his childhood in Calcutta, he believed he must have been approximately eleven years old, he had observed the performance of a sacrifice

¹¹⁸ She expected him to arrange his children’s marriages and to provide (financially) for her future.

that had inspired him to enter the ascetic way of life. He also mentioned that he had some conflicts with his parents while he was living with them, but it was not clear to me to what extent this had provoked his decision of leaving home. When he left, he did so without informing his family. He also did not write them until two or three years had passed by. Not even then did he let them know where he was living. I asked him whether it would have been possible for him to leave his parents like this if he had been their only son: 'That would not have been my problem', he replied. His guru, Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri, added that he knew a medical doctor who had joined the Ramakrishna Mission as a saṁnyāsī despite being his parents' only child. He had, however, arranged for his parents to live in the Ramakrishna Mission's guesthouse, and in this way he could still provide for them. 'Whether one can take saṁnyās or not depends on one's previous karma', Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri explained. The young brahmacārī told us that he felt no desire to see his family again. He also admitted that in the beginning he had found it hard to adjust to the ashram life, but, he explained, 'it is a question of habit. Now I don't find it problematic at all. On the contrary, I feel very at ease with this way of life.' The other brahmacārī had been listening patiently while he waited to be interviewed. He was thirty-five years old, and told us that he had been living in the Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram since 1991. When he left home at the age of twenty-one, he had first joined another ashram. He said he had grown up in a religious atmosphere where sādhus were a natural part of daily-life interaction. Some of his family members and several other villagers had taken guru mantrā from a sādhu.¹¹⁹ As a youth he was inspired by these sādhus to adopt this kind of life himself. He told us his present name, but when we asked him whether he could also tell us his previous name, he simply stated: 'This life is "real" [with essence, substance], my previous life was "unreal" [insubstantial, inessential].'¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ This implies that they, as householders, had become disciples of a sādhu.

¹²⁰ (Ye jīvan vastu hai, vah avastu thā)

THE MOTHER WHO FAINTED

At four in the afternoon, Vinita and I entered the Sumeru Maṭh in Assi ghāṭ. In the courtyard a sādhu sat reading in a simple chair. The maṭh (ashram) was very peaceful. The only sound of life was made by a puppy who seemed to belong to the ashram.



Plate 37

The sādhu greeted us with a warm smile and welcomed us as if we were expected. We soon found out we had just met the head (mahant) of the maṭh, Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj. He was dressed in saffron and had three horizontal stripes painted on his forehead. His hair was half-long and he had a beard. He let us into his room which was painted in a saffron-like colour. He seated himself on a bed, which was also covered by saffron pieces of cloth. In front of the bed, on a small table, there was a silver plate on which a pair of silver sandals was placed.¹²¹ A few bills and some coins were spread out on the plate. As we passed the plate on our way into the

¹²¹ The sandals were placed here as a symbol of the Ādi Śaṅkarācāryā.

room, Vinita bent down and touched it to pay her respect. Too late, I realised what I had been supposed to do.¹²²

Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj left home at the age of eleven. He soon became a brahmacārī and travelled to a number of different places – Haridvar, Chitrakut, and other sacred places. He took saṃnyās during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad in 1989. From 1992 onwards he has been the mahant of Sumeru Maṭh. I was curious to know why somebody would leave home at the age of eleven and asked Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj whether he could recall any of his thoughts from that time. He explained that close to his school had been a Śiv temple where saṃnyāsīs used to come. When he came from school he used to stop at the temple and spend some time with the saṃnyāsīs. Their philosophy and way of living had some influence on him, and at the age of eleven he decided to leave home in order to join the sādhus: 'This happened because of my previous karma. A person may have a desire to do something particular, but if that is not in accordance with his karma he will not be able to fulfil this desire. Previous karma determines every turn in life.' When he left home, his family and other villagers came to see him off. He recalls that during the first kilometre he was accompanied by thousands of people. Not all of them were happy about his decision: 'My mother, for instance, was not in her sense. She fainted.' Since he left home that day almost thirty years ago, he has not seen his family.

'What is the meaning of saṃnyās?', I asked Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj during our next visit:

Saṃnyās means tyāg, to leave behind. Saṃnyās is the fundament of mokṣ. We take saṃnyās because we desire mokṣ. As a saṃnyāsī a new life starts – the old karma is finished. Imagine a house. This house is you before taking saṃnyās. Then, imagine the same house fully reconstructed. That house is you after you have taken saṃnyās. When you take saṃnyās, you

¹²² By the time we were leaving the room, I had learned my lesson and copied Vinita's behaviour. I also left some money on the plate as a donation.

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

leave previous karma behind and a reconstruction takes place. In saṁnyās, no karma is produced.

Previous karma is terminated during a three-day-long initiation ceremony. At the conclusion of these three days a new saṁnyāsī is born – a new person with a new name, a new social status, and a new appearance: 'During these three days we do pūjā. To develop patience, we are not allowed to eat anything. The only thing we are allowed to consume is a glass of water mixed with barley flour. During these three days of pūjā, thirty-three crores¹²³ of gods and goddesses are worshipped. They are all counted by their names. Certain Brāhmaṇs are present to do the worship.' 'If a son is the oldest and maybe the only son of his family, will it be possible for him to take saṁnyās?', I asked Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj. He replied: 'I would advise these kinds of persons not to take saṁnyās. They should stay with their family and take care of their parents.' I mentioned that quite a few of the saṁnyāsīs that I have met have told me that their parents opposed their decision of taking saṁnyās. He replied:

The family should not oppose such a desire in their child, but parents often have faith that their children (i.e. sons) will serve them in their old age – that they will earn money, get married, and give them grandchildren. The parents think about themselves; they become selfish. They don't think of that fellow who desires to take saṁnyās. They are not able to think that their son or daughter will do some good things as a saṁnyāsī(n). This is the main problem and the reason family members oppose a son's or a daughter's desire to take saṁnyās.

Several, if not all, of the saṁnyāsīs I met told me they were 'bahut śānt' (very peaceful). I asked Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj whether he believed the desire for such a peaceful state would motivate people to take saṁnyās:

People take saṁnyās because they want a peaceful life. If you are tired by all problems, this means that you are not peaceful, not satisfied [aśānt]. To take saṁnyās means to go into and

¹²³ One crore is ten million.

follow peace.¹²⁴ If you feel attracted to something, this means that you are not in peace. If you leave this attraction behind and take saṁnyās, you will get peace – śānti.

As we were about to leave Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj, Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth from Mumukṣu Bhavan came by. Vinita and I both remembered that he had told us that from time to time he would come here to visit. I took the opportunity to ask them both what saṁnyāsīs normally talk about when they meet. They immediately replied: 'We discuss the scriptures [śāstrā], the nature of the universal consciousness – the all-pervading spirit of the universe [brahm], etc.' 'So you don't discuss politics?', I asked. They both laughed heartily and explained that because saṁnyāsīs have left moh (delusion, ignorance), māyā, and all other worldly things behind, they should not take active part in politics.

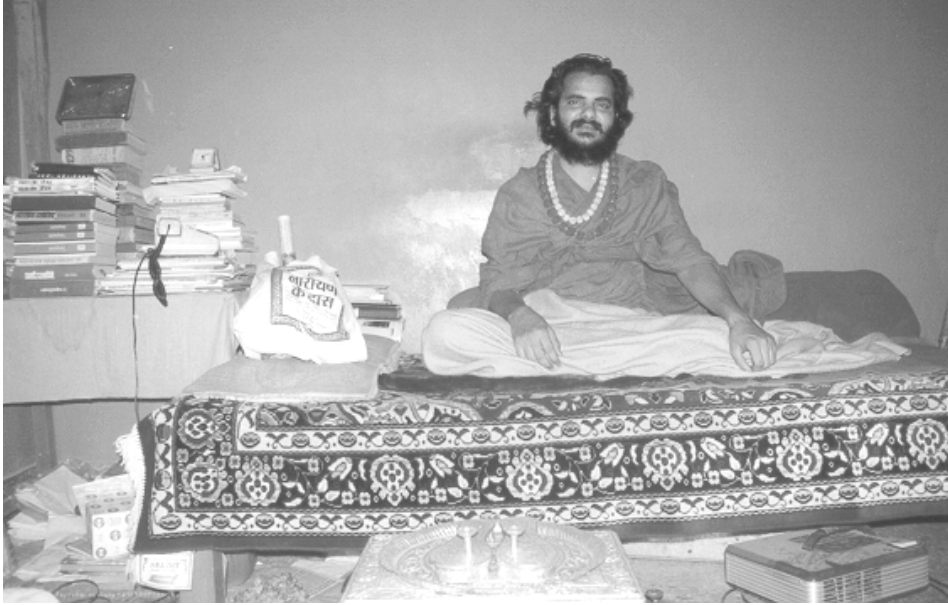


Plate 38

¹²⁴ (tyāg se śāntī miltī hai)

SELECTED AS A SAINT

One day Govind Bābā walked me to the Machlī Bandar Maṭh, yet another ashram for Daṇḍī Svāmīs in the Assi area of Varanasi. We were well taken care of and guided around by one of the elderly svāmīs of the ashram. The mahant, Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram, was not present, but he was expected to return the next day. The ashram was very well kept, and renovation work was actually taking place while we were there. The paint on one of the temples was so fresh that we could smell it. Grazing cows on the ashram's two pieces of green land made the area look both peaceful and idyllic.

The next afternoon Vinita and I returned to the ashram and found Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram seated in a room close to the ashram's entrance, surrounded by a group of young men. We sat down with them for a while but were soon taken to Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram's room, located in the middle of the ashram. The young men left. We were accompanied by a temple priest who did a lot of the svāmī's talking as the latter was not feeling too well.¹²⁵ The room was quite long and narrow and was painted in a faded green colour. In some places the paint had flaked off. The only furniture in the room was the svāmī's bed. Behind his bed there was an altar with pictures of the previous mahants of the ashram. I had brought some fruit for Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram, and some of this was sacrificed to the previous gurus, while the rest was distributed as prasād. Vinita recognised one of the saṃnyāsīs in the pictures as her deceased grandmother's guru. Vinita told us that her grandmother had come to this ashram regularly to see her guru. It soon appeared to us that Vinita's grandmother's guru was Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram's father. It turned out that the ashram had actually belonged to the same family for four generations. Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram's great grandfather had been the first mahant of the ashram. When he left his body, he was succeeded by his son, who was later succeeded by his son, who was again succeeded by his son – Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram. 'It is a question of being selected to this position',

¹²⁵ The svāmī's younger brother, a medical student, later informed us that the svāmī suffered from hepatitis.

Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram explained. In other words, it is not a position that is inherited. Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram explained that the reason fathers have selected their sons as their successors for four generations was that they had seen an ability – a gift – in them. Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram was a married man and a father when he was selected to be his father's successor. When Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram himself in the future will have to find his successor, he will also choose one of his sons or, if neither of them is believed to be capable of handling the responsibilities of the ashram, he will have to choose somebody from outside. However, to give the responsibility away to somebody from outside will, as far as I understand, mean that the whole property is lost from the family's hands, and I have to admit that I doubt whether Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram will let this happen. Most probably, a son will again take his father's place.

Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram is still young, somewhere in his late thirties. He spent most of his childhood in the ashram, and in this way he became familiar with ashram life in early age. Already as a child he enjoyed staying in the ashram. In fact, he enjoyed it so much that he preferred the ashram to his village. His father, of course, appreciated this attitude. I wondered how his wife reacted when she was told that her husband and the father of her children was to be the new mahant of the ashram? Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram replied: 'Anyone can imagine that at first she felt a little bit sad.' My last question concerned whether he felt a greater sense of freedom as a saṃnyāsī than he did as a householder. Now, the temple priest answered on behalf of Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram:

Anyone who lives this kind of life will be happier than he was as a householder. Compared to the life of a saṃnyāsī, a householder's life is like a prison. This world is more true [satyā] than the worldly life. Worldly life is like a show off. Only in this life [saṃnyās] you can realise true happiness.

A HUMBLE MAHANT

Mahant Itvār Giri, a quiet and humble mahātmā in his early seventies, explained how the idea of renouncing the world had appeared to him:

When my childhood was over and I gradually developed an independent way of thinking, I understood that saṃsār is worthless [saṃsār bekār]. The way of life of householders did not seem attractive to me. It was not that kind of life I wanted to live. What I enjoyed most in life was to do bhajan to God. This was how I felt.

When he was twelve – thirteen years old, his mother died. Shortly after, his father also died. His youngest brother was only six months old at the time. He and his siblings started living with their uncle. When he was eighteen or twenty years old, his uncle told him he should marry. He would take care of the arrangements, he said. Itvār Giri protested and said he did not want to get married, but his uncle was determined and told him he had to in order to avoid getting a bad reputation (badnāmī). His uncle threatened him, but Itvār Giri could not accept his uncle's demands and left for good. He went to a big maṭh close to Mirzapur where he already had spent quite some time with the mahant, whom he respected and regarded as his guru. When Itvār Giri arrived this time, he asked his guru for dīkṣā, but the guru explained to him that he never accepted celās (disciples). Despite this, Itvār Giri settled in the maṭh to do sevā (service) to the guru. During the following Kumh Melā in Allahabad, Itvār Giri was given dīkṣā by his guru, and he also took saṃnyās (saṃskār).

Itvār Giri recalls that while his parents were still alive, a number of mahātmās (sādhus) used to come by their home: 'That time sādhus had a much more pure soul. The only thing they desired was something to eat. Nothing else. They were satisfied simply by getting food. They desired nothing more. Sādhus also often had cows, to whom they did gāy [cow] sevā and from whom they got milk. That time both the mahātmās and the cows looked great. They were not greedy as they are today.' Itvār Giri has no patience with greed. If somebody starts arguing or fighting in his presence, he simply

takes his bag and leaves. He does not want to witness any such behaviour. According to Itvār Giri, people in general have lost some of their faith in sādhus: 'A lot of people have experienced that sādhus they have let into their homes have stolen things from them, etc. Previously we were always welcomed with respect, but this has changed. Today people are more reluctant to receive sādhus, and for this reason many sādhus have converted their itinerant life style into a more settled way of life. Either they stay in their ashram, or, if they travel, they travel by car to protect themselves against people's distrust.'

I was curious to know how he manages to cover his basic needs. His explanation was as simple and humble as his person:

If I did not get what I need, how would I then be alive? When I stay here [he was at the time staying in the ashram of Mahārāj and Ūma in Varanasi], I get everything I need from them. If, when I am in Mirzapur [where he stays], I have no food, I usually go to a nearby village where I sit down in front of the mandir. I always bring some sweets to distribute as prasād to those who come by the temple. When rumours about the prasād start flying, the children come – soon also their mothers come and ask me if I am hungry. In that case I always get something to eat. I have never starved. If I am hungry at the end of the day, I make some chapatis and eat them with sugar before I go to bed.



Plate 39: Mahant Itvār Giri

A BIG BLISTER ON THE NOSE

'My nose is the reason I became a sādhu', the white-haired saṃnyāsī said. Most of his nose was gone – it had decayed years ago due to an infection from virus in a blister.

Every morning his straight back and his long white hair can be observed at the 'boatmen's ghāṭ' in Varanasi. His name is Rām Khelavan, but everybody calls him Nārad Bābā. He is approximately eighty years old, and for the last thirty – forty years he has been living as a sādhu. At the age of forty he took saṃnyās. Vinita and I found him on a nice terrace overlooking the Gaṅgā. There he was, surrounded by his grandchildren and their friends, eating a cucumber. The terrace and an attached room belonged to him and his family – this was their home.

Nārad Bābā told us that his parents had died before his marriage was arranged, but their neighbours had helped him with the marriage arrangement. Only a few years after he got married, a blister started growing on his nose. He went to different places to have a medical check-up and treatment, but everywhere he was told that there was nothing to do. His wife left him because of the blister, and he had no one around him for support. He asked himself who would be there for him in this difficult situation when not even his wife would be by his side. Soon he met Avādhūt Bābā (Avādhūt Rām), an Aghor sādhu who instructed him to do pūjā every night to heal his nose. So he did – sometimes at one o'clock, sometimes at three o'clock in the night. In the morning he took a bath in the river, and again he did pūjā for one or two hours. The rest of the day, whenever he had time, he did pūjā. After four years his wife returned. Together they now have five sons. Despite this, Nārad Bābā still considers himself a sādhu. Daily he can be observed on the ghāṭ doing pūjā. His nose, however, seems to be forever gone. 'I became a sādhu because I had a big blister on my nose ...', he repeated as we said goodbye.

MULTIPLE REASONS

As to motives for renouncing the world, Miller and Wertz (1976) stress the importance of psycho-social factors: 'In some cases ascetics have so reinterpreted their pasts that they remember only the positive religious quest that resulted from a socially embarrassing or economically hopeless situation' (ibid.:77). They recall from their material that a number of the life histories indicated that the narrator had 'displayed in adolescence positive talents for religious practices that were actively encouraged by relatives or teachers' (ibid.:79). Others entered monasteries 'primarily because they feared sexual experience and marital responsibility, though all gave "religious" explanations for their behaviour' (ibid.:79). Miller and Wertz argue that to a youth 'unaccustomed to intimate relations with women and unsure of his ability to sustain a potentially growing family economically or emotionally, a marriage arranged by his parents may present a major crisis from which he is only too happy to escape' (ibid.:79-80). One of Miller's and Wertz' informants expressed his thoughts concerning marriage:

I have never thought of marriage, because to think of marriage means to deviate from the peaceful life of a *sannyāsin*. A man may not get a full meal every day in the ascetic life, but there is peace of mind if he is devoted to God. A man will forget his hunger and thirst if he can fully concentrate on God. It is better to remain away from the family. A lonely life leads to full satisfaction of one's religious aims. When I first became a *sannyāsin* I took a vow that I would not marry, and that vow is now stronger than ever. (ibid.:80)

Nine of Miller's and Wertz' informants,¹²⁶ ranging in age from seventeen to thirty, said that they renounced the world 'out of fear of a worldly occupation' (ibid.:80). Another explained his desire to renounce the world with reference to the poverty he experienced in his childhood: 'I had witnessed my father's futile attempts to feed his family on a handful of rice per day. I thought it was painful to remain in such a condition, surrounded by the sufferings and sorrows of others. Thus, at the age of

¹²⁶ They had altogether forty-one informants.

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

twenty-three I renounced all worldly ties and took the vows of a *sannyāsin* (ibid.:80). Yet another, a goldsmith's son with defective eyesight, was unable to continue the family business and went to Puri with his father to seek a cure from Lord Jagannatha: 'When this failed, he dedicated himself increasingly to Jagannatha in order to rid himself of his eye troubles. In this process his attachment to Jagannatha became closer and closer. Eventually he dedicated himself completely to the deity' (ibid.:81). The majority of Miller's and Wertz' informants who renounced the world while in their thirties 'had failed either in marriage or at earning a living or both' (ibid.:81). One of them, a man aged thirty-two, 'became tired of the endless, petty quarrels that had turned the whole of his extended family into "a den of snakes." Consequently, in order to gain peace, he renounced all family relationships including his wife and became an ascetic' (ibid.:82).

Miller and Wertz mention that entrance into ascetic orders is often considered as 'the socially acceptable way out of marriage in a country where divorce is still associated with scandal and where the difficulties of providing a livelihood may become intolerable' (ibid.:82). Seven of Miller's and Wertz' informants had previously been married and had left their wives and children behind. Of these, five waited until retirement¹²⁷ when their children were already grown up, whereas two had left their wives with small children. Fourteen of Miller's and Wertz' informants claimed to have renounced the world 'on account of conversions occurring at a wide variety of ages ranging from fifteen to fifty-two' (ibid.:83). Most of these experiences paralleled the conversion of the Buddha 'in reporting incidents that led to a weariness of the world and a search for the eternal' (ibid.:83). Miller and Wertz report that in most cases 'oppressive social factors or the individual's failure' led him to seek escape in the religious life (ibid.:83). Later, these factors were interpreted as conversion. However, in two of these fourteen cases Miller and Wertz believe the conversions had authentic religious origins: 'One informant reported a sudden conversion upon hearing of some misery totally unrelated to his own family, as if the shock of someone else's death had

¹²⁷ There was a total number of seven of Miller and Wertz' informants who renounced the world upon retirement.

suddenly brought home his awareness of the passing character of all visible reality' (ibid.:83):

During the Second World War I became a close friend of a British officer in charge of a company of Tata. One splendid morning while we were taking breakfast together, this British officer received a telegram that announced that his eldest son had been killed in an air battle over Germany. It was then about 6:00 A.M. At about 1:00 P.M. this same officer was presented with another telegram which stated that his middle son had been killed in North Africa. Later in the day he received word that his home in England had been totally demolished by German bombs. Utterly heartbroken and totally demoralized, the British officer died at 6:00 P.M. I was terribly shaken by the death of my friend and became convinced that attachment to one's family ultimately leads to grief. Consequently, I broke all ties with my family and renounced worldly affairs to become a *sannyāsin*. My wife, my brother, my grandson, and my great-grandson have all remained at my home village, but I no longer go there. Thus I became a *sannyāsin* at the age of fifty-two. (ibid.:83-84)

Miller and Wertz (1976) also describe how their informants enjoyed storytelling for its own sake and for this reason tended to 'exaggerate or at least to stress their childhood misdeeds, the hardships of the ascetic life, and the importance of dreams or divine interventions' (Miller and Wertz 1976:75). They often experienced that the same story changed considerably over the course of four or five interviews – 'later versions of a story, though more elaborate, were not necessarily more accurate' (ibid.:75). Miller and Wertz do not see this as a product of conscious lies, but rather believe the author of the story simply 'confused the ideal and the real' (ibid.:76). For instance, they refer to one *sādhu* who listed all the medicines in his homeopathic dispensary for them, however, when actually checking the shelves of his dispensary they found 'only aspirin and a few patent medicines' (ibid.:75). 'The same ascetic claimed that his dispensary served 150 patients a day, representing his ideal, while the resident homeopath claimed thirty patients, and the true number was probably even fewer' (ibid.:76). Another *sādhu* had listed for them the books of his personal library – in actuality, however, the library turned out to consist of almost no books at all. Besides, the *sādhu*'s level of reading turned out to be newspapers and popular books. However,

Miller and Wertz explain that neither of the ascetics had been lying by his own standards; 'both had simply confused the ideal and the real' (ibid.:76).

THE STORIES PEOPLE TELL

I started this chapter by describing the road leading to the act of renouncing the world as either straight and smooth or full of curves and bumps. I also suggested that individual motives to get onto this road may vary accordingly. I believe the pieces of life histories presented above have confirmed this statement. However, I also find it important to have in mind that life histories are bound to exist in a provisional form – subject to constant revision and alterations. 'We humans are temporal beings', Rapport and Overing write, 'in short, with our perceptions, understandings and identities embedded in an ongoing story' (Rapport and Overing 2000:285). They quote Kerby (1991) who describes narratives as 'a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves.... It is in and through various forms of narrative emplotment that our lives – ... our very selves – attain meaning' (Kerby 1991:3ff., in Rapport and Overing 2000:285). Rapport and Overing describe this as 'a never-finished project' and, they add, 'our conscious lives are taken up with self-narrating, with continuously rewriting, erasing and developing the definitions of our own stories' (ibid.:285).

The stories people tell about their own lives refer to a reality that is first subjectively experienced, later recalled and narrated for a listener. Obviously these stories are bound to be of a highly transient character, subject to time and place and audience. I agree with John Chr. Knudsen in seeing a life history as 'a situationally conditioned construct, a cognitive chaining of selected elements from the past, present and future, simultaneously' (Knudsen 1990:122). Knudsen, who has been doing research among Vietnamese refugees, remarks that both subjects (the narrator) and investigators (the audience) are 'active constructors of reality; subjects select and reconstruct their past in the course of reflections about the present and projections concerning the future;

investigators also contribute to the ordering of the images of reality through their formulating of questions' (ibid.:122). In my own research, the sādhus who agreed to share stories of their lives did so to a relatively young western woman, often accompanied by a female Brāhmaṇ interpreter. It would be naive to claim that our presence had no influence on the shape and content of the stories that were told, but exactly in what way I am not able to say. I believe the stories people tell about themselves and their lives can be understood as subjective variations over a true theme. Every little part of a lived life is subject to interpretations, and the interpretations may take different directions in front of different audiences. People ask different questions and accordingly get different answers. When I interviewed sādhus, there were certain questions, or topics, to which I tried to make each of them respond, and I realise that this may have contributed to imposing a similar structure upon the narratives. However, whenever a sādhu made relevant other topics than those I had prepared for, I took this as an indication of something this particular sādhu considered important and tried always to give priority to this. Another important aspect to bear in mind is that I have not only interviewed the sādhus; I have also edited their histories into their present form and in this process run the risk of shaping the narratives beyond the intention of the narrators themselves.

Break and continuity

Hindu renouncers leave their former lives behind and are symbolically reborn as sādhus.¹²⁸ This implies a break in their life careers, and their past and their present should from now on not be connected. Yet, in their presentation of their life histories, a continuity was created. What from an outsider's point of view may seem like a break, is not necessarily experienced in this way by the renouncer himself. In fact, a person might have prepared for an entrance into saṃnyās āśram for years – maybe even been longing for an opportunity to break with life in saṃsār. This resembles the discussion

¹²⁸ The sādhus sacrifice their former, individual identity for a collective identity as 'sādhu' – one of the means through which any aspect of individuality and sense of self is demolished.

between Edmund Leach and Gananath Obeyesekere which was referred to in chapter two.¹²⁹ Here Leach argues that within the Indian context the renouncer acts with reference to his particular religious and cultural doctrine (Leach 1958), and the renouncer's behaviour should therefore, according to Leach, be understood in the context of tradition and custom. Obeyesekere (1981), on the other hand, argues that there are emotional and complicated aspects related to the act of renouncing the world and attacks Leach's apparently rational and simple explanation of renunciation as an act described in the scriptures and, therefore, a question of conscious adaptation to custom and tradition. Personally, I find it hard to generalise over these matters, as I see a number of aspects that may possibly influence an act of renouncing the world – some less complicated and emotional than others. However, my encounters with sādhus have left me with their stories of their lives – their reasons why their lives have taken the turns they have. What strikes me about these stories is the way in which they are inscribed with an apparent continuity. According to John Chr. Knudsen, 'what is presented by the subject in the form of a life history is selected information; information that varies over time, with regard to the situation and to identity management strategies vis-a-vis various sets of significant others' (ibid.:122). 'Thus', he goes on to say, 'given its situationally constructed nature, a life history is not a story of life but rather a conscious, or even unconscious, strategy for self presentation, a legitimization of moves and counter-moves and of projections for the future' (ibid.:122). The way one has lived one's life should be legitimated in one way or another – for others, but maybe most of all for oneself. In every social setting, there are certain standards as to how life should be lived. One way of adding continuity to the story of one's own life is by relating this story to ideals embedded in specific social, cultural or religious guidelines. Criteria for a good, honest, or just life vary from one ideological setting to another. For Hindu renouncers, the legitimating ideology is to be found in the ideals embedded in the holy scriptures of Hinduism. As already suggested,¹³⁰ most of the sādhus I got to know explained their destiny (or their luck) with reference to karma. This, in my view, makes karma appear as one of the

¹²⁹ See 'Liminality, in chapter two.

¹³⁰ See chapter four and the beginning of this chapter.

means by which one's life is integrated as a continuous whole – one of the structuring principles in Hindu ideology (Jaer 1987). As Øyvind Jaer put it: 'Karmic ideology informs its believers that from earlier lives the soul is imprinted with a karmic residue, that is a moral account which explains the destiny of the lives of men' (Jaer 1987:557):

Karmic ideology does not only justify a person's socio-existential conditions, but (like other ideologies) it also offers a cultural repertoire of answers to existential questions which may give hope and meaning to its believers. (ibid.:557)

Anthony Paul Kerby stresses that self-narration is 'an interpretive activity and not a simple mirroring of the past' (Kerby 1991:7). He further argues that when it comes to our personal narratives, "truth" becomes more a question of a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning of the past than of a historically correct representation or verisimilitude' (ibid.:7). This argument is in accordance with Knudsen's description of the constructed nature of life histories as 'more than reflections of past and present experiences; the stories are more than future expectations and worries; they are simultaneously stories about self, identity, and personality (Knudsen 1990:123). In my view, this also involves ideological aspects which either explicitly or implicitly govern the structure given to a life history. Hindu renouncers will naturally seek to explain and legitimate their lives with reference to Hindu values and guidelines. In this respect, the life histories presented to me by sādhus should be understood not only as stories of a particular individual's life, but also as stories of how life should be lived according to Hinduism. Individual karma and a desire to reach a state of eternal peace and happiness – preconditions for mokṣ, a state of complete freedom (Potter 1991) – were the most commonly repeated reasons I was given as to why the world had been renounced. Although I have no reason to doubt the authenticity of these explanations, I do suppose there is reason to believe that in my meetings with sādhus such ideologically highly valued references were over-communicated whereas other, possibly less ideologically anchored reasons, were under-communicated or even

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

suppressed.¹³¹ As Knudsen remarks: 'If we do not understand the position of the life history as a construct, we may easily end in an abstract debate about the split between fiction and reality' (Knudsen 1990:131). What Miller and Wertz described as a confusion of the ideal and the real, should be understood as an effort to create a meaningful continuity within the fragments of a life. A life history, in this view, is the product of a narrator's efforts to legitimate and explain the kind of life he has lived – to himself as well as to others.

¹³¹ One may, of course, also speculate in whether the fact that my translator (Vinita) was a Brāhman had any influence on this.

BEYOND IDEALS

Plate 40



An inadequate world can only give us inadequate experience.
The objective world is inadequate, incomplete and not trustworthy.

Do not expect permanent value from impermanent sources.

Do not expect Eternal Happiness from mortal sources.

Do not mistake the shadow for the Substance.

(Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī) (Sarasvatī 1978:12)

DEVIATING FROM THE ‘IDEAL’

Sādhus have been, and to a certain extent still are, presented as morally ideal role models for the Indian Hindu population. According to Tripathi, sādhus are ‘expected to spread religious precepts among the masses’ and are ‘conceived as mobile propaganda units of Hindu religion’ (Tripathi 1978:124). The sādhus themselves, however, are not always too eager to meet these expectations. Tripathi noticed this discrepancy more than twenty years ago: ‘Sadhus today are not very serious about this duty of spreading religious precepts among the masses’ (ibid.:124). He remarks that the successful sādhus who ‘exercise influence on the masses [...] tend to become inactive and live in luxury’ (ibid.:124), whereas the more ordinary sādhus, whose lifestyles are far more sober, in general are too busy in striving to make both ends meet and hardly find any time to be ‘mobile propaganda units’ (ibid.). In 1967 Khushwant Singh stated that the ‘educated, Westernized Indian’ was provoked by the fact that sādhus simply concern themselves ‘with achieving peace of mind’ (Singh 1967:106), rather than involving some of their precious time in doing some kind of social work. Singh writes:

The floods, epidemics, earthquakes, droughts and famines which visit this unfortunate country with tragic regularity are not allowed to disturb the tranquil atmosphere of the sadhu hermitage or ruffle the serenity of the holy man in his *samadhi* (meditation). Rarely does one see a saffron-clad volunteer in any relief camp. (ibid.:106)

Social work, Singh declares, is ‘largely the monopoly of one mission, the Ramakrishna’ (ibid.:106).¹³² He adds that even the officially inspired Bhārat Sādhu

¹³² Although there are also other organisations where sādhus are involved in social work (for instance those belonging to the Svāmīnārāyaṇ group and the Aghoris), Singh’s observation is in accordance with my general impression. I had this proved once again on the occasion of the earthquake that struck Gujarat on 26th January 2001. During a visit to the Ramakrishna Mission in Varanasi a few days after the quake, the svāmī I interviewed received a fax concerning a fund-raising campaign initiated by the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission. However, in all fairness, this quake also made other organizations of sādhus demonstrate a social conscience. In the newspapers, one could for instance learn that saffron-robed sādhus from an organization called BAPS were involved in directing truck-loads of fresh cabbage to the relief camp in Bhuj, a town that was completely devastated by the quake. From their camps, these sādhus also served hot meals to the victims of the quake (*The Times of India*,

Samāj, founded in 1956, restricts its activities to ‘the promotion of religious and social progress, building of national character, development of virtues and renunciation of vice, safeguarding religious institutions and sanitary conditions at places of pilgrimage’ (ibid.:106).

Bhārat Sādhu Samāj is, as far as I know, the only official registry of sādhus in India.¹³³ Yet, none of the sādhus I met in Varanasi seemed to know this society. Only by coincidence did I find its address in a book by Muz Murray (1998), where it is described as an ‘official registry of *sadhus* and *swamis* in India, directed by Swami Ananda’ (ibid.:350). It also says that the society is ‘used as a postal address by wandering saints or central base for various movements’ (ibid.:350). I visited the society during one of my stays in Delhi, but all I achieved was to purchase a book where a number of the Samāj’s members were pictured. Khushwant Singh visited the Samāj approximately thirty years before I did. He gives detailed description of his visit:

It was with my now-obvious anti-sadhu bias that I went to see the secretary of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj. The organization has a spacious double-storied building in Delhi’s most select residential area, the Diplomatic Enclave, where all the embassies are and where the local millionaires reside. I had made no appointment but was welcomed and asked to wait. It was a large, cold room divided by a six-foot high wooden partition. On the partition was a calendar with a picture of Pandit Nehru wearing a caste mark (he never wore one in his life). There were also three large posters in Hindi announcing the cow-protection rally of Nov. 7. Alongside one of the posters was a map of Delhi with the route of the procession marked in red ink. (ibid.:106)

Soon, Singh heard ‘the clip-clop of sandaled feet come down the stairs and enter the room’ (ibid.:106). It was the secretary of the samāj, Svāmī Ānand, ‘a handsome man in his fifties – long gray hair curling about the ears, large bright eyes and a wispy beard

February 7, 2001). I was also told that sādhus who were at the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad at the time had initiated a fund-raising campaign.

¹³³ Although there seem to exist a number of private or semi-official organisations for sādhus in India today.

covering his Adam's apple' (ibid.:106). Svāmī Ānand told Singh how, in 1956, 'Gulzari Lal Nanda, then Minister of Planning, had persuaded him to become secretary of the Sadhu Samaj' (ibid.:110). He further informed Singh that the samāj had 10,000 members – from all sects. 'One day', the svāmī proclaimed, 'all sadhus will join this organization and help to raise the moral standards of the world' (ibid.:110). Judged from my encounters with sādhus in Varanasi, it seems as if some more advertising is required before Svāmī Ānand's prediction is fulfilled.

According to Klaus K. Klostermaier, 'Gulzarilal Nanda, a former Home Affairs minister of the central government in Delhi and a devout Hindu, in 1962 established the Akhil Bhāratīya Samāj, the All-India Society for the *sādhus*,¹³⁴ with the aim of organizing and controlling the rather confusing variety of movements and utilizing the moral authority of the *sādhus* for the general uplift of Indian society' (Klostermaier 1994:357). As a 'considerable number of criminals try to escape from the clutches of the police by donning a "holy robe" and numerous vagrants misuse the respect people still have for the *sādhus* to live a relatively easy life without having to work', Mr Nanda wanted to enforce registration and issue identity cards for the genuine sādhus to distinguish these from the fake ones (ibid.:357). He also tried to employ sādhus in an anticorruption campaign run by the government – without much success. Apparently, only a few thousand enlisted with the 'sārkarī sādhus', the government monks, 'which they were sarcastically called by the independent sādhus' (ibid.:357). An attempt to establish centres of training in standard theological education for the sādhus was also initiated but has not yet produced many results (ibid.). It seems as if the establishment of the All-Indian Society for sādhus has failed to have any major influence on the ordinary masses of sādhus; nor has it managed to remove the presence of fake sādhus.

¹³⁴ Singh and Klostermaier refer to two different organisations, whereof (according to one of the svāmīs in Ramakrishna Mission in New Delhi) only one (Akhil Bhāratīya Samāj) was founded by Gulzarilal Nanda. There are today a number of similar organisations that in different ways try (or pretend) to serve the interests of sādhus.

There seems still to be a gap between ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ sādhu behaviour. There are also still numerous complaints against sādhus: ‘some of them commit criminal acts, others irritate their fellow men through their aggressive begging and their uncivilized behavior’ (ibid.:359). Despite this, Klostermaier remarks, ‘even Hindus critical of some of the practices of presentday *sādhus* would defend *samnyāsa* as something essential to Indian culture’ (ibid.:359). One of these is a writer in *Seminar*, ‘a decidedly progressive and unquestionably secular monthly’ (ibid.:359). After first highlighting ‘some of the more common complaints’ against sādhus, this writer goes on to defend them ‘against government regulations and public condemnations alike by stating that “the *sādhu* is in our blood and cannot be excised from the total Indian community.... So long as the Indian people wish to maintain their *sādhus* the *sādhu* will survive. And so long as India is an India with heart, *sādhus* will be maintained”’¹³⁵ (ibid.:359). The writer also defends the sādhus against those who see them as parasites on society – stressing that although the sādhu pays no taxes, he is also a citizen of no economic burden: ‘If he is not gainfully employed, he neither competes for employment nor seeks poor relief’ (ibid.:359). Another aspect of most sādhus’ way of life is their sexual abstinence, which, the author remarks, is a benefit to an overpopulated country. The writer also pays homage to the moral standard of the sādhus: ‘Where greed and corruption are rife the true *sādhu* demonstrates a life based on honesty, truthfulness, and self-restraint.’ (ibid.:359)

It is my impression that the attitudes expressed by this writer in *Seminar* may be taken to represent those of a great number of contemporary Indians. There is no doubt as to the existence of sincere sādhus, although it seems wise not to take for granted that they all are.

¹³⁵ Govind Bābā read this and exclaimed: ‘Good! I am hungry.’

The saffron wave in politics

Also to sādhus politics has come to represent a tempting way of obtaining prestige and material benefits. I believe there are reasons to argue that in recent years the ‘ascetic sphere’ has become politicised. As Drew Stuart writes, many sādhus themselves ‘mourn the extent to which the energies of the renunciant community are caught up in the very struggles for power, and for material and sensual satisfaction that the models of Hindu asceticism reject’ (Stuart 1995:26). Articles from the 1998 Kumbh Melā¹³⁶ in Haridvar made me reflect on the influence of politics among sādhus. During the melā there had been fights between groups of sādhus.¹³⁷ The Indian newsmagazine *Outlook* used the heading ‘Hardwar’s Holy Wars’ for the incidents that took place (*Outlook*, May 11, 1998). The subheading said: ‘Politics, factionalism, violence – the temple city seems to have little time for prayer.’ *Outlook*’s article introduces us to some of the sādhus who were involved in the tumults at the melā. One of those who was attacked by a mob of rioting sādhus was the ‘doleful Pandit Badri Prasad Sharma, Sangathan Mantri of the Akhil Bharatiya Brahman Parishad’ (ibid.:54):

I renounced the world and became a sadhu, now after being beaten up by fellow sadhus till I bled and fainted, I want to renounce being a sadhu! The groupism, the casteism in Hardwar is terrible. It makes me feel ashamed of being a part of the sadhu samaj – men of God who disgrace God by being so demonic [...]. (ibid.:54)

‘When men of God sin, the world can’t be saved,’ Pandit Badri Prasad Sharma said. His money and meagre belongings were snatched away from him, and even his slippers were taken off his feet when he fainted: ‘They kept beating me with lathis even as I was yelping with pain. And God allowed it! I can’t believe it happened!’ (ibid.:54). Pandit Badri Prasad Sharma could report that sādhus had set fire to vehicles

¹³⁶ A big religious festival that takes place four times over a twelve year period in four alternating cities (Nasik, Allahabad, Ujjain, Haridvar).

¹³⁷ According to Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri and J.E. Llewellyn the fights which took place were between two groups of Nāgās, the Jūnā Akhārā and the Niranjani Akhārā (<http://www.smsu.edu/relst/riot.html>).

in the ashram where he stayed during the melā. ‘A line of burnt cars, scooters and cycles in Hardwar’s Keshav Ashram are painful reminders of events that saw the politics of religion overthrow religion during the Kumbh’ (ibid.:55):¹³⁸

A crude casteism and dangerous groupism have gripped Hardwar’s sadhu samaj. The Dandi Sadhus, who are mostly Brahmins, speak condescendingly of the ‘lower’ Naga sadhus: ‘They wear nothing on their bodies and have nothing in their brains. They smoke ganja and they loot. They’ve ruined the spiritual atmosphere here. They were traditionally meant to be warrior sadhus for our protection but they have started thinking they are our equals.’ The Nagas, on the other hand, consider themselves *dharam rakshaks* (protectors of religion), take pride in being wild and smirk at the Dandis for ‘politicking more than praying’. (ibid.:55)

Paramānand Sarasvatī, leader of the militant Jūnā Akhārā (Nāgā sādhus) is quoted as proudly proclaiming: “It is in the tradition of sadhus and their duty to debate and die for principles. And to take up the trishul to protect Hinduism’s honour” (ibid.:55). The president of the newly formed faction Khaddarśan Akhārā Pariśad, Svāmī Govindānand, justifies the rival groupism among sādhus ‘by philosophizing about Life’s Truths’ (ibid.:56):

Nothing is ideal anymore. Son hates father. Husband and wife divorce. Women don’t breast-feed their babies. Sādhus are politicized. Why blame the sādhus alone? The BJP, VHP, SP – are all vying for our support. They want the Hindu vote, they want the sādhus and the saints. How long can a lotus remain unsullied by the mud that it grows in? Look at the BJP, now that it is in dirty power politics, it seems to have discarded its commitment to the Ram temple! (ibid.:56)

Outlook sees significance in the name dropping of political parties that took place during their conversations with sādhus:

A deep awareness of the wheeling-dealings at the Centre and a proud consciousness of the importance of their support in the vote-bank politics is reflected in all the stances and postures

¹³⁸ Govind Bābā remarked: ‘This all did happen, true, but it probably made more news than it was worth – as most violence does.’

6. BEYOND IDEALS

of various groups within the holy community. Unabashed name dropping, both to show strength and to justify weakness, is very common. (ibid.:56)

The publicly known incidents that took place during the melā will necessarily influence lay people's attitude towards renouncers. *Outlook* states that 'many a heart's belief in the Men of God' seems to have been killed due to the riots:

At twentysomething, phone booth owner Sandeep Bhardwaj at Hardwar's Aryanagar Chowk¹³⁹ is annoyed at his own town's vulnerability to the wild sādhus. [...]: 'During Kumbh I wouldn't let my sisters step out of the house with these madmen on a rampage. I always accompany them to temples. To think we can't trust the sants of our community with our women.' (ibid.:57)

In the queue to make a phone call, *Outlook* met the older and more conservative Asha Bhatnagar: 'All sants aren't bad, only some are' she said, and argued that the sādhus cheat people of relatively meagre amounts compared to 'the scamster politicians' (ibid.:57). 'So long as they don't burn things or harass people, why should it matter to me why or how people are fighting to be the Shankaracharya.¹⁴⁰ I'll offer my pranams (greetings of respect) to whoever wins. God would have seen him through' (ibid.:57). 'That is clear faith in a holy mess' *Outlook's* journalist concludes (ibid.:57).

J.E. Llewellyn, who witnessed the riots himself, describes what happened on his internet pages (<http://www.smsu.edu/relst/riot.html>). According to him, hundreds were injured, and 150 were admitted to a hospital in Haridvar. Llewellyn also describes how, in a press conference after the riot, 'the Juna leader Parmanand blamed the Bharatiya Jananta Party (the B.J.P.) for the dispute, claiming this party, which controls the Uttar Pradesh state government and which recently took over the central government, had sown dissension among the sadhus' (ibid.). Ashok Singhal, the head

¹³⁹ Govind Bābā remarked: 'If I remember correctly Aryanagar Chowk is five – six kilometres from the scene of the crime. Why are they interviewing people in a phone queue? Of course they will have nothing better to do than throw in an opinion.'

¹⁴⁰ Title of the spiritual (and political) leaders among sādhus. Some of the riots at the Kumbh Melā in Haridvar were results of disagreements about the election of a new Śaṅkarācāryā.

of the Viśvā Hindu Pāriṣad (the VHP), ‘a Hindu nationalist religious and cultural organization allied with the B.J.P.’ (ibid.), according to Llewellyn is ‘reported to have blamed unnamed groups seeking to bring down the B.J.P. government’ (ibid.).

Gradually, I have become aware of the connection between sādhus and right-wing Hindu political organisations who, for instance, employ sādhus to carry through their ideas. In February 1999, *The Indian Express* covered an arrangement by the VHP¹⁴¹ in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) where sādhus had been invited to participate.

Realising that self-help is the best help, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has decided to tackle the problems of illiteracy, ill-health and unemployment in backward areas of India, bypassing the Government and opening schools, hospitals, food distribution centres and *sanskar kendras*¹⁴² in 100 districts. The programme of social reform is also aimed at eradicating inequality, stopping conversions and speeding up reconversions. (*The Indian Express*, February 8, 1999)

Sādhus had been invited to implement the plans and were allotted areas to work in. The work would be co-ordinated by VHP-workers.¹⁴³ According to *The Indian Express*, the VHP had plans to eradicate untouchability and inequality, ‘under which the *sadhus* will eat with the Dalits and the adivasis’¹⁴⁴ (ibid.). The intention was to motivate the upper castes to do the same. ‘Pravin Togadia, VHP’s international general secretary, said the *sadhus* would now work to their full potential and on a large scale, to bring about social reform, especially eradication of untouchability’ (ibid.). On the same page of this edition of *The Indian Express*, there was a detailed report from the arrangement in Ahmedabad under the heading: ‘Sadhus get a break from ascetic ways’:

¹⁴¹ The VHP (Viśvā Hindu Pāriṣad, the World Council of Hindus) is a religious organisation founded in 1964 ‘attempting to articulate a kind of universal Hinduism that would embrace different sects and at the same time possess a basic common creed and common practice’ (Klostermaier 1994:466).

¹⁴² (saṃskār kendra): a centre where Hindus perform their rites of passage.

¹⁴³ As I see it, this is an idea based on motives similar to those of Gulzarilal Nanda who established the Akhil Bhāratīya Samāj, the All-India Society for sādhus.

¹⁴⁴ Adivasi (Ādivāsī) is the term used for the tribal (aboriginal) people in India (ādi: first, prior; primary; original. vāsī: a resident, a citizen; a resident or citizen of India).

6. BEYOND IDEALS

HOLY men are supposed to renounce material comforts. At least, concerning the food they eat. Tell that to the 6,300 sadhus who have converged here for the Dharm Sansad.¹⁴⁵ They've been provided telephones and fax machines, and that just for starters. The main course includes all kinds of delicacies, local and from outside, to make everyone – from regions as diverse as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Kashmir and Indonesia – as comfortable as possible. [...] So, those from the southern part of India will not miss their traditional breakfast: *rasam*, *uttapam*, *vada* and *idli*, VHP joint secretary Dr Kaushik Mehta told *The Indian Express*. And those who wish to be gastronomically adventurous, can try the Gujarati sweetmeat *fada-lapsi* and the local savoury *bataka paun*. [...] And though sadhus are known to favour fruit and milk, the hosts are taking no chances. On the lunch menu are *puris*, *chapatis*, rice and soup. By dinner time, though, their spartan habits catch up with them: The only item on the menu is milk. [...] 'Sadhus like milk so much that on Friday, even the 6,000 litres of milk fell far short of their actual need and an extra supply of 4,000 litres was immediately requisitioned to supplement the shortage,' Mehta says. Similarly, he states that a truck-load of fruits proved to be insufficient for the saints. 'They also like eating ginger to avoid problems of indigestion,' he adds. (ibid.)

There is more news from Gujarat indicating that the political leaders of the state take good care of sādhus – in various ways:

Heads of various political parties in Gujarat's Saurashtra region are on a give-away spree, not to their followers but to the ones they follow: the religious leaders. According to the local press, it was recently discovered that religious gurus of various party leaders in the region were carrying cell-phones and, worse, getting the bills paid by the parties. The reports cited the example of one party leader in Gir who asked for lucre from his head office because his coffers ran dry after clearing hefty phone bills. Worried leaders are wondering whether funds meant for development work and drought relief were also diverted for such a religious cause! (*Outlook*. July 3, 2000:21)

¹⁴⁵ Dharam Sansad, or 'Dharma Samsad' as I have chosen to transcribe it, means 'Religious Parliament.'



Plate 41

While cell-phones apparently are popular among sādhus in Gujarat, fancy cars and other vehicles attract sādhus in Karnataka, further south in the country. *Outlook* writes:

Karnataka's devout are used to seeing their godmen arrive in fancy cars for public functions – a BMW and a couple of Mercs adorn the stable of the seer of the Adichunchugiri Math, one of the most respected in the state. But while the venerable head priest is often seen emerging from his sprawling ashram complex on the outskirts of Bangalore in these four-wheeled *rathams*¹⁴⁶ of the Kaliyug, the junior seer – Shekharaswami – is on another plane altogether. He has just returned from a three-month helicopter piloting course in France. Now, his supporters are urging him on to descend on his adoring public from the skies at the next do. A godsend in these arid times, what? (*Outlook*, May 8, 2000)



Plate 42

¹⁴⁶ Chariot or vehicle (as of the gods).

I believe this involvement of sādhus in politics may be taken as an indication of how blurred the borders are between the so-called modern and traditional sectors, or spheres, of Indian society. Whether aspects of the profane, material sphere have ‘invaded’ the sādhus’ life world or if it is the other way around, is not obvious to me – most likely elements cross the borders both ways. Sādhus that I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with this implantation of politics among sādhus. Svāmī Devendrānand said: ‘According to our rules, according to our goals and objectives, we are not to be concerned with politics. Still, some have chosen to take part in the political game, but it is not appropriate, not so good.’ Svāmī Devendrānand told me that despite being a sādhu he can vote at elections. To him this was however not at all tempting: ‘I take no interest in politics. To me politics is completely corrupt, completely corrupt.’ Svāmī Bhārātī confirmed sādhus’ right to vote at elections: ‘We can vote at elections, but we should not. Saṃnyāsīs are, actually speaking, dead and should have no material connections.’ Brahmācārīn Kalyani Devī was one of the few sādhus I met who admitted having voted at elections. Householders had convinced her it was her duty to cast her vote as she, like them, was benefiting from being a member of the Indian society. At the last election Brahmācārīn Kalyani Devī had voted for the BJP, a Hindu right wing party. My translator Vinita had done the same. They were both disappointed with the way BJP had ruled the country after their victory at the polls. Brahmācārīn Kalyani Devī swore that she would never again cast her vote. ‘Too much corruption’ she declared.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ During my last visit to Varanasi a local election was taking place. In this period Vinita and I visited Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth, and during one of our conversations the election was brought up as a topic. Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth said he would not cast his vote. According to his opinion sādhus should not vote. However, he knew that some do. Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth mentioned another svāmī, Svāmī Jaydevānand, who had told him he was going to vote for the BJP. Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth’s remarked: ‘If the people don’t change, what benefit does it have to change the government? If all boatmen are crazy, what good will it do to change oars?’ (insān nahī badlā hai, sarkār badal kā kyā hogā? jab sau nāvīk pāgal hai, to bātvā badalnā kā kyā hogā?)

Crimes disguised

Indian news-magazines from time to time produce articles shedding light on the increasing influence of politics, also among *sādhus*. *The Week* reported in July 1999 from the holy city Ayodhya where *sādhus* are now involved in abuse of drugs and alcohol: ‘Many sadhus raise their hands not to bless but to kill. They peddle drugs and swear by rum, not Ram’ (*The Week*, July 11, 1999:12):

Ayodhya wakes up to the first rays of the sun playing on the swift waters of the Sarayu. Hundreds of semi-clad sadhus, wet clothes hugging their austere bodies, squat on temple floors chanting hymns and mantras. The chiming of bells rents the air and the smell of fresh flowers invades the lungs. [...] Beneath this facade lies the slimy underbelly of the holy city where criminals in the guise of sadhus indulge in activities that will shame even the most ruthless underworld shark. Fights between different factions to gain control of the 4,000 maths in Ayodhya have turned the city into a bloody battlefield. Most maths have large land holdings and get thousands of rupees as *charawah* (offering) every month. (ibid.:12)

The crime among *sādhus* in Ayodhya began about two decades ago when a criminal from Bihar took refuge in a math. This man died in a confrontation, but by then more criminals had realised the advantage of disguising themselves as *sādhus*. ‘The police seldom raid a math, questioning a sadhu’s past is against tradition, and he can hide behind a new name, often a derivation of his guru’s name’ (ibid.:12):

Ram Kripal Das of Mungerv in Bihar, migrated to Ayodhya in the mid 80s after killing a local politician. He became the *chela* (disciple) of Mahant Laxman Das of Basantia Patti, Hanuman Ghari and for over a decade he lorded over the Ayodhya underworld with his gang of sadhus. Two dozen cases of murder and loot were registered against him in Ayodhya before he was killed in November 1996. (ibid.:12)

The local police have made efforts to identify *sādhus* with criminal connections, but this effort failed because of the large number of temples and maths in Ayodhya – ‘almost every house in the town has a temple’ (ibid.:12). A local police officer told

The Week that another major challenge for the police in their efforts to combat a crime is the sādhus' powerful political connections.

Some of the murder cases involving sādhus are related to property. I believe the quotation below gives an idea of the character of some of the intrigues taking place:

In September 1991, the 70-year-old mahant of Janki Ghat, Barasthan, was strangled in his bedroom. Three sadhus, Janmejai Sharan, Balgovind Das and Kamlesh Das, were accused of killing him to usurp the temple property worth Rs 15 crore. Janmejai became the mahant while the case is pending. There have been several killings for control of the Hanuman Ghari temple complex, where 600 sadhus live. It started in 1984, when mahant Harbhajan Das was shot dead by his own men. In 1992 Deen Bandhu Das, the head of the temple complex was killed; three years later it was the turn of the mahant of Hanuman Ghari, Baba Ram Agya Das. Das was at loggerheads with his guru, Baba Triyugi Das, over a piece of temple land. [...] In a fight for the mahant's seat at Lakshman Quila temple last year, country bombs were lobbed into the room of Mahant Maithali Sharanacharya. The appointment of Sharanacharya was challenged by Sanjay Jha alias Maithali Raman Sharan, a former mahant's driver who had the support of Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas chief Ramchandra Paramhans and BJP state vice-president Vinay Katiyar. Raman Sharan usurped the mahant's seat, and the sadhus supporting Sharanacharya launched an agitation in protest. Finally, the district administration intervened and handed over the temple keys to the agitating sadhus in March this year. [...] Sometimes the local people also have to pay with their lives for the greed of the sants. Thus in November 1998, disciples of Mohan Das alias Mauni Baba opened fire on the residents of Guptar Ghat, killing four persons. The Baba and his disciples had allegedly planned to grab the land adjacent to their Guptar Ghat ashram. (ibid.:12-13)

According to *The Week* Bābā Jñān Dās, mahant of Sagaria Patti, admitted that many criminals have made the maṭhs their hideouts. He blamed the VHP for the spread of crime in Ayodhya: 'The VHP wants to control all the temples and it has turned many mahants into killers' (ibid.:13-14). Tears ran down the cheeks of the mahant of Bhakt Māl Bhavan, Guru Rām Kripal Dās, when he narrated for *The Week* what harassment he had been undergoing:

A hundred sadhus attacked his math last April and, though he escaped death by hiding himself, he had ever since been receiving nasty calls asking him to leave Ayodhya. Blaming

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das, deputy chief of the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, for the attack he said Gopal Das was after the Bhakt Mal Bhavan property. ‘His men have forcibly occupied the land and have even started construction here,’ said Kripal Das. ‘I cannot do anything because he has the VHP’s support.’ (ibid.:14)

Disputes over land represent only some of the illegal business involving sādhus. Misuse of guns is another: ‘A police officer said a large number of prominent sadhus carried guns and those who had legally obtained weapons rarely renewed their licenses’ (ibid.:14). Abuse of drugs and alcohol represents yet another aspect of unholy sādhu business:

In the holy city, where selling of meat is banned, smack and other narcotic drugs are available on its subterranean tracks. [...] A small packet of smack costs between Rs 50 and Rs 150 in Ayodhya. The peddlers, in the guise of sadhus, operate from the nondescript maths and it is the other sadhus who are the main customers. Liquor flows, too, and one can see sadhus relishing their rum on the banks of the Sarayu. [...] Drugs, drinks and arms have become a way of life for these swamis who hide their deeds behind their saffron clothes and sacred ash. The mortals of this world dare not touch these godmen. They drink from the cup of life till their past catches up with them in the form of bullets or bombs. (ibid.:14)

Similar problems are traceable among other congregations of sādhus. The article called ‘Shooting Swamis. In Chitrakoot they need guns to survive’ (*The Week*, January 9, 2000), sheds light on some of these problems:

Wrestler Vinesh Dwivedi had a tough time safe guarding his 10 acres from land-grabbers in Chitrakoot, a pilgrim centre in Madhya Pradesh. The strapping young bachelor finally found a way out: he set up an ashram on his land, sought out a guru and changed his name to Nirbhayananda. [...] When the guru began eyeing the land Nirbhayananda found a new guru and later became a guru himself. Today he heads the Bajrang Ashram and plans to hold a huge congregation of sadhus. ‘The purpose is to show our might,’ says Nirbhayananda. Prayers to God come second. (ibid.: 14)

In Chitrakoot (Madhya Pradesh) there are about 690 ashrams and temples and approximately 2000 ‘men in ochre’ (ibid.:14). ‘Lakhs of pilgrims throng the holy town during Diwali enriching the sadhus with liberal offerings. Rest of the year, most

sadhus are busy fighting succession and real estate wars’ (ibid.:14). These fights are the reason some of the sādhus never move around without gun-toting guards. More than twenty of the sādhus who reside in Chitrakoot have licensed weapons and many more, of them Nirbhayananda, have sought licences (ibid.). “‘Weapons are necessary to protect the property,” said Divyānand, who heads the Sant Samiti, an organisation of the sādhus set up two years ago’ (ibid.:14). Divyānand, who looks after eighty-four ashrams all over the country, does not move out without his revolver and security guards. Sant Samiti has 153 member ashrams, ‘most of them embroiled in property disputes’ (ibid.:14). One of these ashrams is Santoṣi Akhārā, which became involved in a dispute when a sādhu called Gaṇeśdās in 1969 killed his guru (Rāmanujdās) and stole the ashram’s property worth millions of rupees. Later, another sādhu occupied some of the property of the akhārā. ‘The fight is on to get that property back’, said Mahānt Rāmjīdās Mahārāj of the akhārā (ibid.:14). The mahant revealed that there is also a war concerning succession going on within the akhārā: ‘Every disciple of the guru wants a will written in his favour’ (ibid.:14). At another akhārā in Chitrakoot (Khohi Akhārā), worth Rs 2 million, there are three sādhus claiming the seat of mahant. According to *The Week* they have been fighting ever since the first guru of the akhārā, Dhanidās, died three years ago (ibid.). Divyānand, head of Sant Samiti, admits that many sādhus have connections with criminals and dacoits. He says that some of them may also be fugitives from the law as ashrams allow them anonymity or a new identity (ibid.). He blames people from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two of the neighbouring states of Madhya Pradesh, for having come to Chitrakoot in the guise of sādhus in order to steal property. He has asked all the members of Sant Samiti to be cautious about new disciples who may turn out to be another Gaṇeśdās (ibid.). Prem Kumar Pandey, a local shop keeper said: ‘I hate these sadhus. [...] Most of them are criminals or anti-social elements in saffron. They are greedy and lustful’ (ibid.:15).

The power of the sādhus’ political connections is emphasised as a major challenge for the police in their work to eliminate these troublemaking sādhus. ‘Not surprisingly’, *The Week* states, ‘they have political patrons. All police efforts to expose them have been in vain’ (ibid.:15). For instance, in March 1999 a young woman was found dead

in one of Chitrakoot's ashrams, but the police could make no worthwhile investigation (ibid.). "Whenever there is a crime involving the sadhus we first have to find out about their political connections," says the subdivisional officer of police, Shyam Bihari Tiwari' (ibid.:15). Tiwari expressed frustrations over the dead-end the police hit when they tried to make a list of all the sādhus in Chitrakoot and their real addresses. This effort got no support from the local religious leaders, who rather sternly opposed the idea. "We have a great problem in carrying out investigation without any records," says Tiwari. "When we ask their father's name they give us their guru's name saying they have discarded their past life" (ibid.:15).

On the basis of his research among sādhus in Varanasi, Stuart draws the conclusion that individual sādhus within the complex social system that he calls 'the sadhu subculture', 'vie for power and prestige, for the control of financial resources and of other human beings' (Stuart 1995:26). Stuart says that especially his conversations with Daṇḍī Svāmīs often culminated in gossip and jealousy, or discussions of leadership positions. This makes Stuart suggest that if his findings are indicative of the Daṇḍī order, 'power games dominate the lives of many sādhus, both those who have some degree of status and those who do not' (ibid.:29). Svāmī Shivbadri, one of Stuart's informants, admits that he regards the power struggles at work within his own monastic order, the Daṇḍī Svāmīs, as most pervasive. Svāmī Shivbadri expressed sadness over these circumstances and told Stuart that he found it hard to understand how sādhus who, on the one hand, are aware of the futility and ultimate dissatisfaction associated with the maya-driven activities, fail to commit themselves to the religious life and to extricate themselves from illusion (ibid.:29). As Stuart concludes, these facts probably indicate that a number of sādhus 'experience a tension between the political realities of sadhu life, and the traditional models of renunciation' (ibid.:29).

The case of Ayodhya

A relevant example of current interest as to the discussion above, is the debate over the planned construction of a Rām temple in Ayodhya. Right-wing forces within the Indian political landscape want the temple constructed on the ruins of the Babri Masjid mosque, which was demolished by Hindu political activists in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.¹⁴⁸ The VHP represents the main political force behind the planned construction,¹⁴⁹ but they have had to face opposition even among the top-rung Hindu priests, the Śāṅkarācāryās. The issue is still awaiting a legal decision from the Indian Supreme Court, and, whereas the VHP wants to start the construction independent of the Supreme Court’s decision, the four legally recognised Śāṅkarācāryās of India have declared that they prefer to wait for the court ruling. As a consequence of this disagreement the VHP has sought support from other holy men. According to *Outlook*, some of these are also claimants to the title of Śāṅkarācāryā (*Outlook*, September 28, 1998). The VHP is suspected of having planned to create a new order of Śāṅkarācāryās where there will be sixty-four Śāṅkarācāryās – as opposed to today’s four. ‘The VHP move is to create a new group of holy men who subscribe to its point of view’, *Outlook* states (ibid.:14). Jagadguru Svāmī Adhokśajānand, recognised by one faction as the Śāṅkarācāryā of Puri, expressed his point of view to *Outlook* on behalf of the three other Śāṅkarācāryās:

They (the VHP) do not listen to us and when they discover that we are not influenced by them, they attempt to set up a brigade of sadhus and sants – some of whom are like our own misled children, others who are pretenders with beards. (ibid.:14)

¹⁴⁸ On December 6, 1992 the mosque Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu political activists in Ayodhya. This incident caused riots and fights between Hindus and Muslims all over India. ‘For decades the West used to stare at the growth of communism in India as the greatest threat to democracy, but it finally awoke to the reality of a far more serious challenge from the right, that of Hindu extremism, by now well organized and powerful and well within reach of success. The “militant revivalism” of Hinduism has been coming for long. It was not taken seriously by most Westernized Indians and all but ignored by most foreign observers’ (Klostermaier 1994:461).

¹⁴⁹ After the demolishing of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, the VHP aimed at repossessing other areas (from Muslims) considered holy to Hindus: the Kṛṣṇa Janmabhūmī temple in Mathura and the Viśvanāth Temple in Varanasi, ‘two of the holiest places of Hinduism, which were (partially) occupied and desecrated by the Muslims in the Middle Ages’ (Klostermaier 1994:466).

Svāmī Svaroopānand Sarasvatī, who in June 1998 chaired a meeting between the four recognised Śāṅkarācāryās of India concerning the VHP plan to create a new order of Śāṅkarācāryās, accuses the top leaders of the VHP of misusing funds that have been collected from India and abroad for the construction of the Rām temple in Ayodhya. He also points out that the VHP wants the holy men to toe their political line, something the Śāṅkarācāryās are unwilling to do. Svāmī Svaroopānand Sarasvatī fears that the fake Śāṅkarācāryās will accept whatever the VHP says and sees this as the reason why VHP is trying to prop them up. The question, however, is whether the people will accept these false seers. (ibid.:14).

During the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad (January – February 2001), new moves were made concerning the debated construction of a Rām temple in Ayodhya. Not only did the VHP at their camp keep a model of the temple they want to have constructed, but they also arranged a religious meeting, or religious parliament (Dharma Saṃsad),¹⁵⁰ where a strategy was decided as to the construction of the temple. After the meeting they announced a decree saying that all impediments towards construction of the temple should be removed by March 12, 2002. ‘The VHP does not harbour any hopes of a judicial settlement’ *The Week* reported after a meeting with Ashok Singhal, VHP working president (*The Week*, January 21, 2001:36). Ashok Singhal is quoted on saying: ‘The matter has been pending in court for 50 years and is nowhere near getting resolved. [...] Let me make it clear that any court decision which is not in consonance with the views of the Dharam Sansad, or the feeling of the Hindu community, will not be respected’ (ibid.:36). After the meeting arranged by the VHP at the Kumbh Melā (the Dharma Saṃsad) in Allahabad, a number of sādhus ‘scoffed at what they saw as a blatant political ploy’ (*Outlook*, February 5, 2001). Among these was the above mentioned Śāṅkarācāryā of Dwarka, Svāmī Svaroopānand Sarasvatī, who said: ‘What respect do they have for such things like the Ram mandir? The VHP only knows how to exploit people’s emotions and confuse them’ (ibid.:26). Also head of the Akhārā

¹⁵⁰ In Indian media often spelled as ‘Dharam Sansad’.

Pāriṣad, seventy-two year old Mahant Bābā Biram Dās, is critical to the VHP's way of handling the Rām temple issue. That the VHP brought up the issue at the Kumbh Melā, he sees as 'yet another political stunt' aiming towards gaining 'mileage out of the religious sentiments of the masses' (ibid.:26).

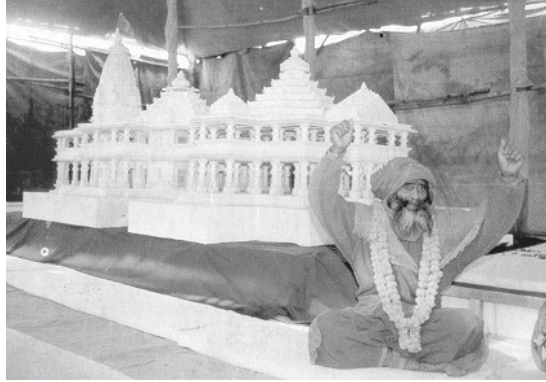


Plate 43: Miniature of the Rām temple displayed at the Kumbh Melā.

The politically active sādhu is not a new phenomena, although the tendency is likely to have increased in recent years. As early as in the eighteenth century, sādhus led a revolt in Bengal that aimed at overthrowing the British and re-establishing Hindu rule. In the late 1940s, Svāmī Karpātrijī Mahārāj founded 'the Kingdom of God' party (Rāma-Rājya-Pariṣad), which advocated reactionary right-wing Hinduism with no room for Muslims, Christians, Marxists or Democrats. Today this party is not very powerful, but still it has attracted a number of sādhus who campaign on its behalf for seats in the Lok Sabhā.¹⁵¹ Another sādhu, Svāmī Dvijayanāth, was for many years general secretary of a right-wing militant Hindu political party (Hindū Mahāsabhā), '[...] out of whose ranks came the murderer of Mahātmā Gandhi' (Klostermaier 1994:357). According to Klostermaier this party has remained one of the national parties based on a narrow definition of Hindu nationhood (ibid.). Further, Svāmī Rameśvarānand, a member of the Parliament in Delhi in the 1960s, led a 'sādhus war

¹⁵¹ 'India is a democratic republic, with a two-tiered Union Government, consisting of the lower *Lok Sabha* (People's Assembly) and the upper *Rajya Sabha* (States' Assembly). The members of the *Lok Sabha* are directly elected, representing national constituencies; the members of the *Rajya Sabha* are nominated by the State assemblies (the *Rajya Sabha* does not dissolve, it is a permanent assembly but members come up for renewal). A (largely ceremonial) President is Head of State but the Prime Minister is the Head of Government' (Shurmer-Smith 2000:12).

for cow protection’ that according to Klostermaier ‘came dangerously close to a coup d’état on behalf of the right-wing fascists’ (ibid.:357). It was also a sādhu who acted as the first president of the Viśva Hindu Pariṣad, the Hindu World Fellowship, an organisation designed to actively propagate Hinduism in India and abroad. Twenty years later, in 1986, Svāmī Vāmadev founded the All India Saint’s Association (Akhil Bhāratīya Sant Samiti). This organisation was also designed to agitate for a restoration of Hindu political power in India:

They had been in the forefront of the Ayodhyā agitation and in the fight against secularism. Among other things they demand that the name India be substituted by Bhārat also in English language documents and that the present national anthem, which ‘carries the foul smell of slavery’ (because it was sung at a ceremony welcoming King George V to India), be replaced by the ‘Bande Mātaram’. (ibid.:358)¹⁵²

Among Hindus today, the involvement of sādhus in politics is a debated topic. Klostermaier quotes the Hindu magazine *Hinduism Today* which in its 1991 December issue proudly presented “‘The Holy Men in India’s New Parliament’”, whom it expected would ‘[...] re-establish the supremacy of moral values in both politics and society and work for the betterment of the lot of the poor and the downtrodden in the country’ (ibid.:472). Others resent the substitution of spirituality by party politics and influence pandering. ‘As a visitor to Rishikesh expressed it: “You come here for getting as close to *nirvāṇa* as you can and end up being lectured on today’s petty politics”’ (ibid.:472). None of the sādhus I encountered admitted to be involved in, nor even concerned with, politics. Rather, I found a widespread dissatisfaction with the apparent implantation of politics among sādhus. However, as the disappointed seeker of eternal bliss (*nirvāṇ*) experienced, it seems as if – in the quest of release – you need to watch your steps carefully in order to avoid every trace of ‘today’s petty politics’.

¹⁵² ‘Bande Mātārām’ (‘Mother, I bow to thee’) are the first words of a poem by the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, in which India is identified with the Goddess. The poem later became the anthem of the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Movement. Today Hindu activists want to reintroduce it as the national anthem.

BELIEFS AND BIASES

‘A *sādhu* is dressed up and put on show’, Narayan’s Swamiji said one morning. Three busloads of pilgrims from Gujarat had just descended for his darśan:

From bent old grandparents to babies in arms, they filed through the room in what seemed like a never-ending procession. [...] Swamiji kept up a steady stream of blessings as he doled out sugar balls as *prasād*. When the waves of people engulfing the room had finally withdrawn and once more there were just a few of us sitting against the walls, Swamiji reclined with relief in his chair. This seemed to have been a moment when he felt ‘on show,’ called upon to perform to unknown people’s expectations. ‘If he dances well,’ Swamiji continued, ‘the world approves. If he can’t dance, he’s criticized.’ (Narayan 1989:63)

Narayan adds that although *sādhus* do not exactly ‘dance’, their everyday interactions are weighed down by a bundle of cultural expectations. *Sādhus* are regarded as cultural ideals and are considered as holy people and ‘worshipped as divinities in human form by traditional Hindus; the detached *sannyāsī* is a cultural ideal. Wandering ascetics are fed by lay Hindus and showered with offerings’ (ibid:65). However, not all *sādhus* do dance in ways appreciated by householders; there seems, for instance, to be a growing presence of commercial motives among the saffron-robed. Such *sādhus* are by some named as ‘tourist *saṃnyāṣīs*.’ This explains the development described by Roger Housden who, according to himself, has been a student of the spiritual traditions in India for more than twenty years:

Even 30 years ago, a knock on the door by a *sadhu* begging for food was seen as a visitation from God which brought nothing but honour. Now the public perception is changing, in line with the shift towards Western values. Indian society no longer looks so kindly on begging. Traditionally, *sadhus* always travelled free on the trains. They often still do, but today, people suspect them of being criminals in hiding, or dope-smoking drop-outs who cannot or do not wish to contend with the challenges of contemporary life. Unfortunately, this perception is not altogether incorrect, and the diminishing number of genuine *sadhus* have to bear the consequences along with their less reputable brothers. (Housden 1996:142)

Power

Any *sādhu* may be chosen to be somebody's guru – their spiritual guide and supervisor. *Sādhus* have gurus, and so do a number of householders. The relation between a guru and his (or her) disciples is hierarchical, and to a greater or lesser extent the disciple surrenders to the guru. Narayan says: 'When an ascetic is chosen as a Guru, disciples will fully submit to his or her will' (Narayan 1989:65) – and in such relations *sādhus* are potentially very powerful persons. Narayan expresses no surprise about the fact that some gurus do misuse their position, 'that a role charged with such power is tempting to those with less than honest motives' (ibid.:65). The itinerant lifestyle adopted by most renouncers makes it relatively easy for what Narayan calls 'pretenders' (ibid.:155) to play the role as *sādhus*. 'Fugitives, criminals, and even inquisitive anthropologists all have adopted ascetic disguise. The use of ascetic costume as a front for other activities dates back many centuries' (ibid.:155). This is today a well-known fact among the 'real' *sādhus* who, as mentioned by both Narayan (1989) and Gross (1992), among themselves distinguish between the 'genuine' and the 'fake' *sādhus*. Narayan refers to Swamiji's way of distinguishing between the genuine *sādhus*, who are sincere about their spiritual practices, and the false *sādhus*, who use the role to exploit others and gain material comfort. Swamiji said: 'There are two kinds of *sādhus*: those who show you the way to find peace of mind, and then those who show you the way to collect money' (ibid.:155). According to Swamiji, genuine religious teachers would never be concerned with financial matters: "One doesn't become a *sādhu* to earn, Swamiji went on to say, eyes solemn behind his spectacles, "but to help others" (ibid.:155). Swamiji's way of judging whether a *sādhu* is genuine or not resembles the observations made by Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson in the early twentieth century. What she described as 'the quicksure test', consisted of giving the *sādhu* money: 'The real *sanyasi* refuses it, the false ascetic accepts it gladly and even begs for it' (Stevenson 1920, in Narayan 1989:156).

The false *sādhus* ('tourist *sādhus*') are miles away from the ideal of being free from attachments and desires. Rather, as opposed to this ideal, they turn out to be 'like any

other self-serving human being, but more dangerous since he bears the power to tamper with other lives' (Narayan 1989:157). Gross suggests that many Indians, 'particularly those who have been exposed to western education and values', often are sceptical and critical towards the sādhus and what he calls 'their "parasitic" relationships with the householders' (Gross 1992:166). Such negative attitudes are by Gross described as 'partially a response to the existence of many beggars disguised as holy men' (ibid.:166):

Numerous 'holy men' in religious centers verbally accost pilgrims and demand alms outright. For instance, they will loudly announce that by giving something to them, Iswara (God) will grant rewards and blessings in this life and the next; often their approach is more abrasive and threatening. (ibid.:166)

According to Svāmī Ātmāprakāś Yati in Tekra Maṭh in Varanasi, householders nowadays are more reluctant to support sādhus they don't know personally: 'Before, householders did a lot to help us, but now some saṃnyāsīs have done bad things. There are also some who wear saffron robes on fake premises. Such things make the householders more sceptical and suspicious towards sādhus, although they still give donations to sādhus they know are sincere.' Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri expressed a similar view:

On the one hand, there are good people with good nature who respect sādhus and who think of all sādhus as God. On the other hand, there are people of bad nature who blame all sādhus for being dishonest. Good people will even respect dishonest sādhus, whereas bad people will mistake all sādhus for crooks. A religious person will always recognise a sādhu who deserves respect. This ability is determined by a person's belief.

Although it may be true that more householders have developed a negative or skeptical attitude towards sādhus in recent years, I still have faith in the persistence of the observations made by Gross in the 1970s: 'Despite the indeterminate number of beggars trying to make a livelihood as false ascetics, authentic sādhus do maintain legitimate and important reciprocal relationships with the householders' (Gross

1992:166-67). Peter Brent, in the early 1970s, referred to the sādhus as ‘the religious Bohemians of India’ (Brent 1972:289). He was aware that ‘the coin of asceticism’ (ibid.:289) had lost some value, but despite this he defended their influential presence:

The sadhus are the religious Bohemians of India; hundreds of thousands of them march across its poverty-stricken plains, their bowls stretch over the thresholds of a million peasant huts, demanding a pinch of rice, a drop or two of dal. Many may be frauds, settling for a comparatively easy life in a country where three hundred million peasants are under-employed or have no work or land of any kind: after all, the coin of asceticism has been devalued in the last fifty years by the millions who have been forced to live in rags and in starvation. But they reinforce an awareness of the transcendent wherever they go; by the fact of their existence, they make India a country stitched and patterned by religion. (ibid.:289)

A couple of times I interviewed a group of Daṇḍī Svāmīs who were living in an ashram in Assi ghāt. They claimed to have noticed nothing of the so-called devaluation mentioned by Brent: ‘When we go to villages and enter somebody’s house, people say: “We have had luck; saṃnyāsīs have come to our house!”’ One of the svāmīs in the cluster said: ‘All people pay respect to us; we are more respected than other sādhus. We are like God.’ Some of the Daṇḍī Svāmīs staying in Mumukṣu Bhavan also expressed that they saw no reason to doubt the respect they were paid by householders: ‘There is no question of disrespect, people always respect us’, they said with confidence. In some respect these Daṇḍī Svāmīs were probably right, as a number of Hindu householders still worship and pay respect to sādhus on equal terms with gods. As Stuart writes:

By honoring the liminal and ascetic lifeway, Hindu householders honor the deeper potentials of human life, potentials that transcend programs and activities in which they are themselves involved. As sadhus live and move within Hindu culture, they inspire the religious consciousness of Hindu lay people, reminding them of the values which the renunciant lifestyle represents and casting a different light on their own activity in ‘the world.’ (Stuart 1995:47)

Stuart describes how he was struck by his interpreter’s (Ramu-ji) reactions to the sincere sādhus they encountered:

6. BEYOND IDEALS

Seeing the way in which Swami Dhruvad Brahmachari touched Ramu-ji, bringing him into the deeper and richer things of God, I was struck by the beauty of the sadhu's role in society, and understood how the presence of a sadhu can be experienced as a restorative blessing. When he lives the call of sannyas sincerely, a sadhu's presence is transformative. (ibid.:47-48)

According to Stuart, the fact that renunciators live outside, on the margins of, the mainstream/caste society may contribute to place additional value on their advice and aid (ibid.). However, he also characterises the nature of interaction between sādhus and householders as 'full of complexities and ambiguities, particularly now as (some) traditional values are being challenged' (ibid.:52). Stuart does not describe in any further detail what exactly he means by 'traditional values', but I suppose he has in mind the decreasing concern for traditional, religious matters and the increasing influence of modern, western values, visible among the Indian urban middle class. However, the rural and poor farmers who constitute the great majority of the Indian population seem to be unaffected by this change of value orientation. To me, more striking than the urban middle class' adoption of modern values is the way in which modern and traditional values are intermingled in the same arena. This was particularly visible during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad (January – February 2001), a religious festival where efforts were made to introduce and apply modern communication technology along with ancient mantras and auspicious times.¹⁵³ Regarding the interaction between sādhus and householders, I see no reason to doubt Stuart's description of it as 'full of complexities and ambiguities'. Perhaps this is most clearly seen in the uneasy way family-members of some of those who wish to renounce the world relate to such a fact. In the following, I will try and shed light on this complex issue.

¹⁵³ See the Epilogue for further descriptions of the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad, an ancient religious festival where modern and traditional values seemed to intermingle.

Discouraged

At the onset of my field research I had an idea that Hindu families would be pleased if a family-member uttered a desire to renounce the world. My limited knowledge of the Hindu scriptures had made me look upon renunciation as an almost expected way of concluding one's life course. Also with regard to young renunciators, I supposed their families would – if not appreciate – then accept this as an unavoidable incident, predetermined by 'the law of karma'. It did not take me long to realise that this was not always so.

Gross tells that when a son (or even a daughter) has run away from home, parents may go to *sādhus* to ask for help in their search. Gross emphasises both the *sādhus*' powers (*siddhis*) and their wide ranging connections as useful in tracing missing persons. Some of these young boys (or girls) may also actually be staying with a *sādhu*, from whom they have asked for initiation, although, according to Gross, 'the holy men generally tell them to return to their parents feeling that most of them are really not sincere (Gross 1992:188). Gross relates two stories of young men who had run away from home in order to take *saṃnyās*. One of the men was in his early twenties and had just completed a degree in engineering at the university. The young man came to a *sādhu*'s camp nearby his university, claimed that he was unhappy with his life and that he wanted to become an ascetic disciple of this *sādhu*. The same day his worried parents came to search for their son, and the *sādhu* advised the young man to return home with his parents. 'The *sādhu* said to him that by serving his parents he was serving God' (*ibid.*:188). Another young man had run away from his village because his parents apparently had beaten and mistreated him. He came to a *sādhu* that Gross was with at the time, declared that he wanted to devote himself to God and that he never would return to his village. The *sādhu* allowed the boy to stay with him and gave him a preliminary initiation. After a week the boy was sent to the *sādhu*'s own guru who lived in the jungle:

6. BEYOND IDEALS

Shortly afterwards, the boy's parents discovered where he had been and went to see the sadhu about the return of their son. The sadhu explained to them that the boy was ready to become a sadhu and that this was the best thing for him since he would not be happy living in the village with them or in marriage. (ibid.:189)

I questioned Svāmī Bhārātī about these matters. My question seemed to appeal to him, and he eagerly announced: 'Yes! But take my parents – my mother wept more and more when I told them that I wanted to renounce the world, and my father wept as well.' Svāmī Bhārātī's experience is not unique. Both young and old, male and female sādhus told me that their families had put every effort into stopping them from realising their desire to renounce the world. Some of the elderly sādhus admitted that they had slipped away from their house at night while their family was asleep. A few of the young sādhus told me that their parents had been searching for them in order to convince them to return home and get married. Brahmācārī Satyā Prakāś opposed his family's wish to arrange his marriage in order to live as a brahmācārī in Mumukṣu Bhavan, and so did Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth, who in fact opposed his family twice: first by preventing them from arranging a second marriage after he divorced his first wife; second by taking saṁnyās. Svāmī Ātmāprakāś Yati's story seems to be representative. He left home at the age of thirteen:

My family wanted me to get married, but that was not in accordance with my desire. I knew getting married would keep me busy with my family. My mother was dead, and I lived with my father and my brother. None of them supported my decision. I wanted to leave home – and so I did. For the first ten – twelve years I had no contact with my family. Now I have some contact with my brother, but our relationship is like a relationship between strangers.

Junnā, a brahmācārī in Śārādā Ashram in Varanasi, told me that her family, after ten years, had still not accepted her choice of being a brahmācārī:

They neither appreciate nor accept that I decided to become a brahmācārī. Even now, after ten years, they ask me to come back and live with them. Whenever I go to my home to visit, they – and especially my father – still beg me not to return to the ashram.

Svāmī Jyotirānand, President of the Ramakrishna Advait Ashram in Varanasi, left home to join the Ramakrishna Mission at the age of nineteen. When I asked him whether his family accepted his decision, he laughingly responded:

No, no! They did not know. I came away without informing anybody. They got to know that I had joined the Ramakrishna Mission only after a long time had passed. Later they accepted my choice. They had themselves seen how hard the life of a householder is, how difficult it is, and they saw how peaceful I was when I had embraced this life – they saw how happy I was. In this way they were consoled.



Plate 44: Svāmī Jyotirānand in his office.

Śārādā Hṛday came to Śārādā Ashram in Varanasi from Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta ten years ago. Her fascination with ashram life developed during her childhood when she was studying at an ashram boarding school. During these years she became used to, and familiar with, the atmosphere of the ashram. She explains the fact that she later actually became a saṁnyāsin as karmic: ‘I became a saṁnyāsin because I had good karma from previous births.’ Śārādā Hṛday was about to get married when, she firmly believes, her guru intervened in these plans. The marriage was arranged when she was eighteen years old, and the man she was supposed to marry lived in Dacca, her father’s native city. Śārādā Hṛday travelled to Dacca with her mother to have the marriage fixed. Upon arrival they had some problems with their

passports and were told by the authorities to leave the country within fifteen days. They were forced to return to their home in West Bengal. ‘It was all due to Guruji’s prayers’, Śārādā Hṛday said: ‘Guruji, Ramakrishna and Śārādā Mā saved me; otherwise my marriage would have been arranged.’ Back home Śārādā Hṛday told her parents that she wanted to go back to live with her guru in the ashram where she had been studying. Her parents were not happy to hear this, but she was determined to go – even if this would force her to defy her parents. After some time her father agreed to let her return to the ashram, whereas her mother did not give her support. Śārādā Hṛday now believes that her father both had heard and had faith in the saying that goes: ‘When a person takes saṁnyās, seven generations of his/her family will be liberated.’ If this is so, why do so many families discourage their sons and daughters from renouncing the world, I wondered. Śārādā Hṛday said she believed the main reason was the affection parents have for their children. ‘Besides’, she added, ‘only a few know that seven generations will be liberated.’¹⁵⁴



Plate 45 and 46: Śārādā Hṛday and some of the young girls who attend the ashram school.

¹⁵⁴ This belief was only mentioned to me by one other sādhu, a Vaiṣṇav called Rādhe Śyām Dās. He said: ‘When a person becomes a sādhu, his whole family becomes pure.’

BLACK ON WHITE AND GLOSSY PRINT

Indian folklore and ancient literature are indeed replete with lecherous ascetics. Perceived by the pious as wise and celibate, ascetics have no problem winning over trust and then exploiting their disciples. This entrenched theme carries over into modern mass media. In Hindi films, for example, holy men are often presented as lewd characters who have put on their robes to gather female disciples around them. Even as they meditate, they occasionally unscrew their eyes to leer at women nearby. [...] It would seem, as B. D. Tripathi dolefully states in his *Sadhus of India*, that ‘sex urge may entrap even the biggest spiritualist.’ (Narayan 1989:129)

A piece of news

From time to time stories involving sādhus season Indian newspapers and news magazines. Some of these stories may well be the products of newspapers’ and magazines’ constant hunt for sensations – as I know some sādhus would argue. Although I respect, and to some extent also agree with, this point of view, I have chosen to include some of these stories as illustrations – as colours contributing to the picture that I am painting of sādhus of India.

A sensational story recently reported in the Indian media concerned one of India’s most famous sādhus – who is also well known abroad – the charismatic guru and miracle man Satyā Sai Bābā (‘the father of truth’). Sai Bābā was born in 1926 and celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday in November last year (2000). According to Klaus K. Klostermaier (1998), Sai Bābā discovered at the age of fourteen that he had miraculous powers to cure illness by means of an ash-like substance that formed on the pictures of the original Sai Baba (who died in 1918), and of whom Satyā Sai Bābā claims to be the incarnation. Satyā Sai Bābā today has millions of followers in India and abroad, and his organisation runs a number of hospitals and schools. In an editorial the serious Indian newsmagazine *India Today* spoke of Sai Bābā as one of India’s most famous godmen: ‘It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that in India there are as many godmen as gods. And among the most famous in the pantheon is undoubtedly

the Sathya Sai Baba, who presides over an empire of faith of an estimated 25 million devotees spread across 165 countries' (*India Today*, December 4, 2000). Sai Bābā is settled in the south of India, in Puttarparthi in Andhra Pradesh, where he runs a spacious and beautiful ashram known as 'the Abode of Highest Peace'. The tales abound of how Sai Bābā materialises gold watches and rings out of thin air, and also how he cures the sick. However, Sai Bābā also has had to face criticism from people who find his magic hard to swallow. Now that the godman was going to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday, Indian media found it 'appropriate to take a closer look at this intriguing godman who has many parts to his life, some admirable and others somewhat unsavoury' (ibid.). *India Today's* editorial goes on to say:

There is little doubt that he has done a great deal of social work, building schools, universities, hospitals and providing water to an entire district – more than most politicians have done in a lifetime. Unfortunately, all this is being sullied by accusations of sexual abuse of disciples, which gathered momentum after a major British newspaper recently published some accounts. The silence of the Sai institution has only added to the speculation. (ibid.)

The accusations of sexual abuse against Sai Bābā have been raised by a number of his former devotees, both Indians and foreigners, now settled abroad. According to *India Today*, one of these is an American who until recently was president of one of the Sai Bābā organisations in the USA. He alleges that his son Sam was sexually abused by Sai Bābā from 1977, when he was sixteen years old, to 1999. The father described the character of the sexual abuse to *India Today*:

The sexual abuse included Baba grabbing Sam's head and forcing him to give oral sex ... Baba would fondle and suck on Sam's penis and get angry because he could not get an erection. Sam said he did not like boys that way. Baba then promised to change himself into a beautiful woman and take Sam inside of him but it never happened. (ibid.:44)

According to *India Today*, the majority of Sai Bābā's devotees dismiss the allegations. An Indian devotee from the Caribbean says: 'Every avatar has enemies. Even Christ had enemies. What Baba has done, no one else has. This creates jealousy' (ibid.:45).

People with high positions within the Sai Bābā organisation do not seem to be worried about the allegations as, they say, ‘these allegations have been going on since decades’ (ibid.:45). By people within Sai Bābā’s organisation, the allegations are also brushed aside either as anti-Hindu attacks, ‘especially since most of those making the charges are foreigners’ (ibid.:45), or by stressing that everything Sai Bābā does is to be considered as ‘teaching’ – even things that may seem immoral or wrong are done with a purpose ‘and so cannot be questioned’ (ibid.:45). The ways of Satyā Sai Bābā are indeed inscrutable.

Most of the news involving sādhus is related to less known characters than the Satyā Sai Bābā. In *The Times of India* (*The Times of India*, March 24, 2000), for instance, I found an amusing article with the headline ‘Offering liquor to seek blessings’. The story is about a shrine in Punjab where devotees offer liquor to have their wishes fulfilled. The place of worship is the samādhi of Bābā Rode Śāh. Every year in the last week of March, thousands of devotees from far and near converge at this shrine to pay their respects to the bābā and to participate in a two-day long melā at the samādhi. ‘During the mela, which begins here on Thursday, devotees, including women, line up outside the samadhi with bottles of liquor, or *lajan*, which is brewed at home and offered at the shrine to seek blessings’ (ibid.). The unique feature of the shrine is that only liquor is accepted as offering – which is in turn offered as prasād. As one would expect, not only the devotees but also the priests soon get drunk. The bābā left his family and settled in this village in 1896, and according to the legend the bābā was approached by a childless village farmer who sought the bābā’s blessing. The farmer and his wife were blessed with a son and offered the bābā Rs 500 as a symbol of their gratitude. ‘The saint, however, refused to accept money but asked the couple to purchase a bottle of liquor every day to be offered as *prasad* to his devotees. The practice continues to this day’ (ibid.). The bābā died in 1924, and ever since a melā has been held yearly in his memory. According to the article, local police on duty also join in with the devotees. Quite a few of them ‘can be found lying on the pavement in an inebriated state while the hawkers do brisk business selling *pakorās* and other snacks to be munched with the drinks’ (ibid.).

“Yogi” surrenders to police’, was the title of another amusing story found one day among the headlines in a local newspaper in Uttar Pradesh (*The Pioneer*, June 8, 2000). The article describes the drama which had revolved around a missing yogī, Prithi Singh (aged eighty-two). The self-styled yogī had resurfaced after 111 days. The police who investigated the case said that the yogī had arranged the drama to convince his devotees that he possessed mystic powers. The yogī intended to construct a shrine at Shoghi, a suburb of Shimla, and he had expected to get a huge amount of money through offerings from his devotees. On February 6, the yogī had taken samādhi in his home near Shoghi, and he was supposed to resurface on May 28. ‘When he failed to appear on the due date, the police broke the doors of the hut in which he had done the samadhi but he was found nowhere. He had also reportedly appeared to be flowing in the air before his disciples during his meditation’ (ibid.) The yogī was supposed to give darśan to his devotees on March 12, April 9, and May 7:

During his interrogation the yogi told the police that after taking samadhi on February 6, he escaped from there on February 8 in a Maruti van brought to him by his son and another relative. He returned in the hut, the door of which was sealed in the presence of the people on the day he took the samadhi on the midnight of March 11 to reappear in an elevated position for which he had concealed a wooden plank through a shelf in the almirah. After convincing his devotees, who were only allowed to peep inside the hut through a hole in the door, the yogi again fled to Yamunagar on March 13. However, he was unable to reach Shoghi for darshan on April 9 as he was suffering from acute dysentery in Yamunagar. Earlier, the police had arrested four of the eleven members of the committee, which had organized the drama for the yogi. The seven absconding persons pressurized the yogi to surrender before the police. Dejected and left with no alternative, the self-styled yogi surrendered before the police on June 5 and explained his entire modus operandi to the people who had gathered there. (ibid.)

In *The Hindustan Times* (December 6, 1998), I found a paragraph carrying the headline ‘Baba’s charri worries Kalyan’. The paragraph referred to a middle-age bābā, Sahib Singh, who claimed to have supernatural powers and to be able to treat and cure even patients with terminal ailments. Followers of the bābā had gathered in his village to receive his blessings. The bābā used a small stick (charri) like a magic wand to cure

all kinds of illnesses. The reputation of the bābā had reached such a level that the Uttar Pradesh governor's wife and political stalwarts like the RSS¹⁵⁵ leader Sheshadri and Mr Bhairon Singh Shekhawat were among the bābā's visitors. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh, felt suspicious about the bābā and ordered an enquiry of his past. This, however, invited the bābā's wrath. Details of some of the bābā's earlier cures were gathered, and with the help of scientists efforts were made to compare the pre- and post-treatment history of cured patients. 'The police have been deployed in the village to control the swelling crowds as presently more than 350 families have been camping there for the "treatment"' (ibid.). Apparently the bābā takes nothing in return for the specialised treatment, but beneficiaries have donated huge sums at the bābā's temple. The paragraph concludes by mentioning a former incident of a fake godman:

It may be recalled that one Devraha Baba Hans, claiming to be the reincarnation of Devraha Baba, had descended on the State capital a few years back. Even then Governor Motilal Vora was among his *bhakt*s. Thousands of people worshipped him till a local English daily exposed the fake godman and he disappeared the very next day. (ibid.)

Stories of sādhus often seem to be used as means of entertainment in films, books, newspapers and magazines in India. However, serious and informative articles also appear. *The Week*, for instance, printed such an article relating the story of Udayraj Gadnis who has become Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati (*The Week*, April 2, 2000). The article is titled 'Art for spirit's sake' and describes the life and work of Udayraj Gadnis, who is 'born again' as Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati and has dedicated his life to the spiritual art movement:

In 1996, when painter Udayraj Anant Gadnis reached Karmali after roaming around Goa for two years in search of a vision he had in a trance five years earlier. He went into a trance again as he thought that he had found his vision, 'a beautiful forest which had a huge ancient well with a white-scented flowering tree growing by its side'. [...] The locals, who found him at the

¹⁵⁵ RSS (the Rāṣṭrā Svayam Sevak Saṅgh) is a political movement located at the extreme right-wing of the Indian political landscape.

6. BEYOND IDEALS

site, traced his parents in Mumbai on the basis of the address found in his purse. He was revived by his tantrik master Gurudev Shri Vamanipai three-and-a-half days later. [...] Udayraj bought the plot right away and on it now stands the Divya Mahadev Temple, the first temple to be built in Old Goa in 450 years, and a *Raj Gurukulum* (an indigenous school based on the *guru-shishya* tradition). Along with the birth of the temple, which has been built without walls and without using glass or plastic, the creator too was reborn. On March 4, Gadnis, 34, decided to become spiritual seeker Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati. (*The Week*, April 2, 2000:60)

The temple and the gurukulum, called ‘Shiv Shakti Pithum’, have been funded entirely from Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati’s earnings as a painter. “Some people meditate looking at a painting”, says Shivaanand, who did his MA in Psychology and had worked in the HRD department of Hotel Taj in Mumbai. “Some others see light in a painting. Yet others hear an inner voice emanating from it” (ibid.:61). Gadnis has been a painter since 1991, when he also took his first spiritual sabbatical. During this sabbatical he went to Varanasi where he became the disciple of a guru. Now, ten years later, he has no guru but has devoted his life to prayer and to experience life as a spiritual seeker. His mission is to continue his spiritual search through art. ‘All the great art movements – the Renaissance, abstract art, cubism, pop art – have been from the west,’ he says. ‘It’s time we contributed, too, with the ‘spiritual art movement’. This is the land of spirituality’ (ibid.:61). *The Week* says that Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati’s parents are convinced that the ‘sanyasi-in-the-making’ is on the right track (ibid.). Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati’s father, Anant V. Gadnis, whispered the new name, Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati, three times into his son’s ears after the ritual bathing in cow’s urine, cow dung and water. Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati’s mother, Geetanjali, is happy with his chosen path to spiritual evolution. She adds that he was a worshipper of Lord Śiv from childhood. The article also informed about the exhibition of Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati’s oil paintings on canvas at the Nehru Centre Art Gallery. A week later (*The Week*, April 9, 2000), there was another picture of Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati, now with Chelsea Clinton, daughter of the former president of the United States. Chelsea Clinton visited the Nehru Centre Art Gallery to see the exhibition of Sadhak Shivaanand Saraswati’s pictures during her father’s visit to India

in the spring 2000. She had come to know about Shivaanand and the spiritual art movement on the internet, and was, according to *The Week*, mightily pleased with him: ‘He’s the most beautiful person I have ever seen,’ she expressed (ibid.:33).

To conclude this part, I have chosen Torbjørn Færøvik’s (1999) description of how, in one of the Indian newspapers (*The Hindu*), he read about the sudden disappearance of Ashok Prasad. His neighbours in Delhi knew him as an unemployed womaniser. The women of his life (rumours said there were quite a few of them) were presented with gifts and expensive dinners. Ashok’s favourite restaurant was the Chinese restaurant Golden Phoenix at the Hotel Le Meridien. He got money by talking nicely with more than thirty moneylenders, but also by robbing the Indian government-run travel agency. One day, however, Ashok suddenly disappeared. The moneylenders had had enough of him, and so had the police. Two months later, he reappeared as an initiated sādhu on the eastern shore of the Jamuna river – with crossed legs and his foolish glance turned towards the sky. ‘You should have arrested him!’, *The Hindu*’s journalist said to the local chief of police – who burst out: ‘Arrest a sādhu? You will not make me arrest a holy man!’ (Færøvik 1999:394).

Saffron in fiction and film

When sādhus appear as characters in books by Indian authors or in films by Indian directors, they are often portrayed with quite a lot of irony. Many of these authors and film directors have emigrated to the West, where they probably find themselves at a sufficiently ironic distance to India. In a few of the latest books I have read by Indian authors, and in the last Indian film I have seen, sādhus appear as role figures. One of the books, *A Fine Balance* written by Rohinton Mistry (1995), gives a brilliant though painful description of Indian society seen from a low-caste perspective. One of the characters of the book is Rajaram, a hair-collector who one night happened to make a terrible mistake. A few months later, when he comes to see his friends Ishvar and Om, he tells them that he is ready to renounce the world – that he wants to reject the

material world and become a samnyāsī. Rajaram invites his friends for a cup of tea at the nearby Vishram restaurant. While sipping the tea, he explains why he has come to think such thoughts:

One night, while he was out on his rounds, he came upon two mendicants, a man and a woman, asleep under a portico, their knees drawn up to their hollow stomachs. He would have walked right past them, except that the streetlight revealed their hair. And it was beautiful. Both heads glimmered with a full-bodied lustre, a radiance he had rarely seen during his extensive travels. Hair such as this was the stuff that advertising executives' dreams were made of. Clients would have fought to feature it – its brilliance could have promoted products like Shikakai Soap or Tata's Perfumed Coconut Hair Oil to new heights of profitability. (Mistry 1995:473)

Rajaram found it strange that this treasure adorned the heads of two beggars. He knelt beside them to touch their hair which was shimmering in the dark. The hair felt like silk. Suddenly Rajaram recalled his 'professional duty': 'He took out his scissors and set to work, starting with the woman. For the first time in his career he felt regret. It was a crime, he thought, to separate hair this gorgeous from its roots – its magic glow would fade, as surely as the blush of a plucked flower (ibid.:474). In the same moment as Rajaram finished cutting the man, the woman awakened and saw 'the scissors glinting in the dark like a murderous weapon' (ibid.:474). The woman screamed, 'a heart-stopping shriek' (ibid.:474):

"Those screams," said Rajaram, shuddering as though they still rang in his ears. "They frightened me so much. I was sure the police would come and beat me to death. I begged the beggars to stop the noise. It was all right, I said, I was not going to hurt them. I clipped a lock of my own hair to show that what I was doing was harmless. I pleaded, I pulled notes and coins out of my pockets, and showered money on them. But they kept on screaming. On and on and on! It drove me crazy!" (ibid.:474)

Rajaram panicked, raised the scissors and struck: 'First the woman, then the man. In the throat and chest and stomach: in all the wretched places that were pumping the breath and quickening the organs to create those terrible screams. Again and again and

again he stabbed, till there was silence' (ibid.:474). Rajaram fled, and later threw away the scissors, the bloodstained clothes, and the stolen hair. Soon he also shaved off his own hair and moustache, so as not to fit the description that any possible witnesses would give the police. Yet, even months later, Rajaram did not feel safe, and he went to see his friends Ishvar and Om to ask them for help. Rajaram explained his plan to them:

“As I first told you, I want to renounce this world of trouble and sorrow. I want the simple existence of a sanyasi. I want to meditate for long hours in a cold, dark Himalayan cave. I will sleep on hard surfaces. Rise with the sun and retire with the stars. Rain and wind, no matter how strong, will be of little consequence to my mortified flesh. I will throw away my comb, and my hair and beard will grow long and knotted. Tiny creatures will find peaceful refuge in them, digging and burrowing as they choose, for I will not disturb them.” [...] “Worldly life has led me to disaster,” said Rajaram. “It always does, for all of us. Only, it’s not always obvious, as was in my case. And now I am at your mercy.” (ibid.:475)

Rajaram needed money to cover his train fare to the Himalayas – a third-class ticket with the *Frontier Mail*. When Ishvar and Om’s landlady Dina heard that they intended to give Rajaram some of their savings so that he could buy himself a train ticket to the Himalayas, she said: ‘[...] if he is renouncing the world, why does he need train fare? He can get there on foot, begging his way like other sādhus.’ Ishvar and Om agreed, but, Ishvar said: ‘[...] that would take a lot of time. He is in a hurry for salvation’ (ibid.:476). Rajaram got his money, counted it, but hesitated and asked whether he could possibly have another ten rupees. ‘For what?’ Ishvar and Om asked. ‘Sleeping berth surcharge. It’s very uncomfortable to sit all night through such a long train journey’, Rajaram said.

Years passed by, and Ishvar and Om neither saw nor heard anything of Rajaram. But one day Maneck, a friend of Ishvar and Om, came across a sādhu that he soon recognised as Rajaram, the hair-collector he got to know through his friends. Maneck noticed crowds of people surrounding and peering inside a marquee, set up at the edge of a field. Above the entrance there was a sign saying: ‘WELCOME TO ONE & ALL

FROM HIS HOLINESS, BAL BABA – DARSHAN AVAILABLE FROM 10.00 A.M. TO 4.00 P.M. EVERY DAY INCLUDING SUNDAY & BANK HOLIDAY’ (ibid.:591). Maneck, who obviously had little faith in *sādhus* in general, started wondering what this one’s speciality would be: ‘producing gold watches out of thin air, tears from the eyes of statues, rose petals from women’s cleavages?’ (ibid.:591). Then he came to think of the godman’s name, Bal Baba,¹⁵⁶ and guessed his speciality would have something to do with hair. When he asked the attendant at the gate who this Bal Baba was, he was told that he is ‘a very very holy man’ who had now returned after many years of meditating in a cave in the Himalayas. He was also told that the *bābā* had ‘a very special, very saintly power. He tells you any sort of thing you will want to know. All he needs is to hold some of your hairs between his holy fingers for ten seconds only’ (ibid.: 591). Maneck wondered how much Bal Baba would charge for this ‘service’: “Bal Baba has no charges,” said the man indignantly. Then he added, with an oily smile, “But all donations are mostly welcome by the Bal Baba Foundation, anymuch amount” (ibid.:591):

Maneck grew curious, and went in. Just for a quick look, he decided – at the latest fakeologist in the city, as Om would say. [...] The crowds were bigger outside the marquee than inside. Only a few people were waiting near a screen behind which sat the very very saintly Bal Baba. Shouldn’t take long, thought Maneck, at the rate of ten seconds per meditation per customer. This was assembly-line darshan and consultation. He joined the queue, and soon it was his turn. The man behind the screen, in a saffron robe, was bald and clean-shaven. Even his eyebrows and eyelashes had been plucked clean. Not a hair was visible on his face or on the skin left uncovered by the robe. Despite the bizarrely smooth and shining countenance, however, Maneck recognized him. “You’re Rajaram the hair-collector!” “Eh?” jumped Bal Baba, startled enough to let the unsaintly ejaculation escape him. Then he regained his composure, raised his head, and enunciated beatifically, embroidering his words with graceful hand and finger movements: “Rajaram the hair-collector renounced his life, his joys and sorrows, his vices and virtues. Why? So that Bal Baba could be incarnated, and could use his humble gifts to assist humanity along the pathway to moksha.” (ibid.:592)

¹⁵⁶ Because *bal*, or *bāl* as I would transcribe it, means hair, the name Bal Baba, or rather *Bāl Bābā*, makes it sound as if the *bābā*’s speciality in some way or the other is related to hair.

Rohinton Mistry has obviously wanted to present Bal Baba, the renouncer, in an ironic light. His reasons for doing so, I can only guess. Because *A Fine Balance* is a political book with a critical attitude to social conditions in India, I find it likely to believe that also Bal Baba's figure is included in the story with a political and/or critical purpose. I will not draw my speculations any further than this, but rather present another book which to a greater extent seems to be based on the entertainment value embedded in the sādhu as a cultural phenomena. The book I have in mind is *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai (1998). The main character of the book is a young boy who climbs into a tree and achieves fame and recognition as a holy man. His name is Sampath Chawla, and he is a complete failure at school, at work, in short – at life in general. When we first meet him, in the early pages of the book, he is employed at the local post office:

A wave of sleepiness overtook him. But, suddenly remembering the advice he had received earlier in the day, mimicking his father's tone of voice, he chirped 'Yes, sir. I will see to it right now, sir' – amazed and shocked by the preceding words, grew shaky and trailed up thinly into the high ceiling of the room, where the fan revolved with an uneven flutter like an irregular heartbeat, cobwebs having been caught in the blades. They all turned to stare at him in surprise. Never had they heard him attempt such a sentence. It was most uncharacteristic. Realizing himself how odd he had sounded, his face burning, Sampath turned and scuttled off to his desk in the dark depths at the back of the post office. (Desai 1998:32-33)

Sampath ends up spending the day as he usually does:

Samapth examined the postcards and letters that had just been brought in on the bus from Delhi for him to sort out into the order in which they were to be delivered. He turned them over, smelled them, looked at the stamps, studied the names, the strange-feathered words: Bombalapetty, Pudukkottai, Aurangabad, Tonk, Coimbatore, Koovappally, Piploo, Thimpu, Kampala, Cairo, Albuquerque. He held them up against the light, the envelopes filled with promise, with the possibility of different worlds. He steamed them open over mugs of tea, or just prised them open, the humidity in the air having rendered the gum almost entirely ineffectual, and lazily, through the rest of the day, her perused their contents. Since he had started work in the post office, he had spent much of his time in this fashion. He had read of

6. BEYOND IDEALS

family feuds and love affairs, of marriages being arranged, of babies being born, of people dying and of ghosts returning, of farewells and home-comings. He had read of natural disasters, floods and earthquakes, of small trivial matters like the lack of shampoo. [...] He picked up all sorts of interesting information. (ibid.:33-34)

When, by evening, it was discovered by his superior that none of the tasks he had been set to do had been completed, Sampath was sent home ‘with warning of dire consequences to follow; he was to come in before everybody else the next day and complete the work’:

How they tormented him! He had been having such a nice time, left to his own devices. And how was he supposed to concentrate? He had been unable to sleep the past night and also the night before, and no doubt he would also remain awake in the night to come. It was curious how he thought of his sleepiness when he had to work, but miraculously forgot it when he came upon something that interested him. On his way home, he recalled a postcard he had seen of an ape with a very big and alarming red bottom. (ibid.:34-35)

Sampath was fired, and he did not care: ‘He hated his job anyway. He didn’t want it, he couldn’t do it and he didn’t want another job. He would not be able to do that either’ (ibid.:42). Sampath wanted his freedom. ‘He wanted open spaces. And he wanted them in large swathes, in days that were clear stretches he could fill with as little as he wished’ (ibid.:44). He caught the first bus passing by:

Sampath thought of snakes that leave the withered rags of their old skins behind and disappear into grass, their presence unbetrayed by even a buckle in the foliage; of insects that crack pods and clay shells, that struggle from the warm blindness of silk and membrane to be lost in enormous skies. He thought of how he was leaving the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing. Now it did not matter any more. His heart was caught in a thrall of joy and fear. Somehow, somewhere, he had found a crack. Bus stations and people passed by in a blur. (ibid.:48)

As the bus made a brief halt up the slope of a hill, Sampath jumped out through the window and raced ‘into the wilderness towards an old orchard visible far up the slope’:

He ran with a feeling of great urgency. Over bushes, through weeds. Before him he saw a tree, an ancient tree, silence held between its branches like a prayer. He reached its base and feverishly, without pausing, he began to climb. He clawed his way from branch to branch. Hoisting himself up, he disturbed dead leaves and insect carcasses and all the bits of dried-up debris that collect in a tree. It rained down about him as he clambered all the way to the top. When he settled among the leaves – the very moment he did so – the burgeoning of spirits that had carried him so far away and so high up fell from him like a gust of wind that comes out of nowhere, rustles through the trees and melts into nothing like a ghost. (ibid.:49-50)

Samapth had climbed into a guava tree. ‘A guava tree larger and more magnificent than any he had ever seen before’ (ibid.:50):

Before his eyes, flitting and darting all about him, was a flock of parrots, a vivid jewel-green, chattering and shrieking in the highest of spirits. This scene filled his whole mind and he wondered if he could ever get enough of it. This was the way of riches and this was a king’s life, he thought...and he ached to swallow it whole, in one glorious mouthful that could become part of him for ever. Oh, if he could exchange his life for this luxury and stillness, to be able to stay with his face held towards the afternoon like a sunflower and to learn all there was to know in this orchard: each small insect crawling by; the smell of the earth thick beneath the grass; the bristling of leaves; his way easy though the foliage; his tongue around every name. And then, as the afternoons grew quick and smoky and the fruit green-gold and ripe, he’d pick a guava... He’d hold it against his cheek and roll it in his palms so as to feel its knobby surface with a star at its base, its scars that were rough and brown from wind and rain and the sharp beak of some careless bird. And when he finally tasted it, the fruit would not let him down; it would be the most wonderful, the most tasty guava he could ever have eaten... (ibid.:51)

A few days later the watchman of the university research forest bicycled into town with some curd for his married sister. ‘Along with the curd, he also brought the news that, in the old orchard outside Shahkot, someone had climbed a tree and had not yet come back down. Nobody could tell why’ (ibid.:52-53). The rumours about this person who had climbed a tree without coming down spread fast. Soon people started doing pilgrimages to the tree to see Samapth. The knowledge he had got from studying people’s letters made it seem as if he was able to read people’s minds – as if he knew all their small and big secrets. The local newspaper printed a modest column

introducing Sampath to the world, ‘along with news of a scarcity of groundnuts, and epidemic of tree frogs and the rumour that Coca-Cola might soon be arriving in India’ (ibid.:67): ‘*Fleeing duties at the Shahkot post office, a clerk has been reported to have settled in a large guava tree. According to popular speculation, he is one of an unusual spiritual nature, his child-like ways being coupled with unfathomable wisdom*’ (ibid.:67). Sampath’s father soon realised that money could be made on Sampath’s fame as a holy man: ‘Sampath might make his family’s fortune. They could be rich! How many hermits were secretly wealthy? How many holy men were not at all he beggars they appeared to be? How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed unfathomable bank accounts? What an opportunity had arisen out of nowhere!’ (ibid.:68). Sampath’s escape into a tree is gradually turned into a well-running, commercial business, far from the ideal of renunciation and non-materialism. In both of these books (*A Fine Balance* and *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*), sādhus and the ideal of renouncing the world are described in quite ironic ways. Accordingly, one may suggest that both of the books in some respect contribute to throw doubt upon the sincerity and truthfulness of those adopting the sādhu way of life.

Renunciation is also a topic in Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire*, although the approach here is quite different from the books mentioned above. Renunciation becomes a topic in the film when the husband of one of the main female characters starts seeing a guru ‘to become a better person’, as he puts it himself. At the end of the film the man tells his wife that he wants to take saṁnyās. Deepa Mehta, as I see it, offers a female perspective to important issues in Indian society, whereof renunciation is but one. Although *Fire* is the kind of film in which a number of topics may be discovered, I see it most of all as a film about loneliness. Mehta describes the lack of communication and mutual understanding between a wife and her husband – a wife who carries a longing for children and closeness, a husband who wants to take saṁnyās. Because of its critical attitude towards traditional Indian Hindu society, the film caused a heated debate in India during the autumn of 1998. Right-wing Hindu forces characterised the film as lesbian and initiated the ‘battle.’ Most of these hard core critics never even saw the film. In my view, the film shows how the institution of saṁnyās may impose

loneliness and loss on the partner who is left behind. The film also communicates an ironic image of the renouncer as one of two available male stereotypes with which Hindu men can identify. The other stereotype is portrayed as the Bollywood film hero – the modern and commercial alternative to the traditional, scripture-based renouncer. The film describes these two stereotypes as equally unable to cope with the challenges of living in India today. While the choice of renunciation is depicted as a cowardly escape from the world, the Bollywood film hero as an ideal also represents escapism – founded on commercialism and consumer culture rather than traditionalism and ancient scriptures.

By now there should be no doubt as to the variety of ways in which the role of the *sādhu* can be used – and sometimes also misused. In conclusion, I would like to picture renunciation as a dynamic institution, adjusting to changing circumstances in the greater Indian society. In other words, along with changes in the greater society, both the idea of ‘a *sādhu*’ and ways of being a *sādhu* are exposed to change. India today finds herself in a culturally ambiguous position. In some aspects, India is a very traditional country, inhabited by illiterate farmers and people placed in traditional occupations, doing what their forefathers have always done. At the same time, India is a country within the modern world and with an increasingly globalised economy – a fact which implies that changes and new ideas are, to varying degrees, imposed upon its inhabitants. Among these inhabitants are the *sādhus*. Although not yet as visible in India as in Nepal, there are *sādhus* who have adapted to and, like everybody else, are trying to exploit the forces of commercialism. At commercial, central places in and around Kathmandu, a number of *sādhus* are offering themselves as models to be photographed by visiting tourists with cameras – but, of course, at a price. I spoke with some of these *sādhus* and was told that a number of them were Indian, but that they had now settled in and near Kathmandu – mainly, I suppose, because commercialism and tourism are further developed and more concentrated here than in India. I understand these figures as entrepreneurs selling a product – a commercialised ideological/cosmological stereotype of a *sādhu*. The paradox is that the *sādhu*, who ideally is expected to be part of an ideology of spiritual desires and cosmological

concerns, in effect here represents a commercial ideology where the stereotyped idea of ‘the sādhu’ is transformed to a commodity.

Fundamentally, I think we should bear in mind that renunciation, to some, is a means of survival. In this respect, I believe D. F. Pocock reveals a healthy attitude when he asks: ‘First of all, in a country where poverty is still so prevalent, who can blame those who, having no alternative but beggary, practise it in its most profitable garb?’ (Pocock 1973:97).¹⁵⁷ However, this is far from describing every sādhu, the majority of whom have found ways to survive without having to ‘prostitute’ themselves commercially or turn to illegal activities. Earlier in this chapter I described the ways of Satyā Sai Bābā as inscrutable, and at the present stage I find it relevant to apply the same term to ways of being a sādhu in general. Indian renouncers and their inscrutable ways make up a fragmented and dynamic whole. Any claim to depict this kaleidoscopic reality as a logically coherent whole would have to be labelled as a contradiction in terms.

¹⁵⁷ See also ‘Matters of escape and survival’ in chapter five.

SACRIFICE



Plate 47

In essence, I am the Immortal Spirit.

I am not this perishable body.

I am not these inert senses.

I am not the fluctuating mind.

I am not even the intellect and ego.

I am the eternal Atman or Self.

I am the embodiment of Peace, Bliss and Wisdom.

(Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī) (Sarasvatī 1978:13)

‘A BODY IS JUST A BODY’

Jonathan Parry describes how death and cremation are ‘symbolically constructed as a sacrificial offering of the self to the gods’ (Parry 1994:158):

Sacrifice is a pre-eminently creative act which not only results in the rebirth of the sacrificer, but also renews the cosmos. In order to serve as a means to such momentous ends, not only must the offering itself – the sacrificer’s own person – be worthy, but his renunciation of it must be complete, for the essence of sacrifice is the sacrificer’s *tyag*, his act of renunciation or abandonment (Biardeau 1976:19). (ibid.:158)

Death, then, in this perspective, must be ‘a *voluntary* relinquishment of life, a controlled evacuation of the body’ (ibid.:158). This is what characterises ‘the good death’ – ‘a willing renunciation of the body, which must be a fit sacrificial offering to the gods’ (ibid.:167). The *sādhu*, by renouncing the world, commits a social suicide and undergoes what Parry describes as the ‘Death that conquers death’ (ibid.:261). Consequences of this sacrificial act form the essence of this chapter.

Body and soul

‘Man is not only the perishable body but much more,’ Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī says (Sarasvatī 1978:15). Sarasvatī goes on to argue that although death may make an end of man’s existence here on earth, it cannot destroy his personality or real being:

Man does not consist of mere body, senses and mind, but is something more. He is in essence the all-pervading immortal Soul. [...] The physical body is only garment of flesh and bone. Pure Spirit is the real man. (Sarasvatī 1978:15-16, 18)

In Hindu scriptures, the human body is on the one hand seen as an impure entity that is part of *saṃsār*; as ‘[...] both the cause and agent of lust (*kam*), anger (*krodh*), greed (*lobh*) and infatuation (*moh*)’ (Parry 1994:169). On the other hand, stress is put on ‘the

body's capacity for transformation, refinement and even perfection' (ibid.:171). Klostermaier describes this attitude towards the human body as ambivalent. 'On the one hand there is a sharp dichotomy between body and spirit and most Hindu systems insist on *viveka* (discernment) through which a person learns to identify with the spirit and to consider the body as 'non-self'. On the other hand, the body is valued as a vehicle of salvation: all acts necessary to obtain liberation require a well-functioning body' (Klostermaier 1998:41). Strategies of liberation within Hinduism are also 'aimed at annihilating the subtle body, neutralizing the force of *karma* and freeing the *ātman* from its bondage to the (gross and subtle¹⁵⁸) body' (ibid.:41). In other words, whereas the body on the one hand is regarded as inferior to the soul (the spirit), on the other hand it is the only vehicle through which the soul can be liberated. Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth described his body as an entity of flesh and bone which, when he leaves his body, will be left behind on earth. 'What is there to keep', he said, 'is the soul':

To have knowledge of this, is the real worship. You have to know yourself – that is my worship. If you succeed in this, if you understand yourself, then you are really worshipping. Pūjā is to realise that the body is nothing – that it is simply an outward appearance, just like the world. The world is nothing – the world is *māyā*. The only thing that really is, is the soul. If you know yourself, you will know that this body is nothing.

The body belongs to the world; it is part of *māyā*. Only by renouncing the world, and the ego, will one be able to see beyond the veil of illusion called *māyā*. By renouncing the world, one dies to the social world and is, as some put it, 'reborn' into the fourth stage of life – *saṃnyās āśram*. The renouncer dies twice: first, at the time of taking *saṃnyās* when he also performs his own funeral rites; second, at the conclusion of life in the *saṃnyās āśram* – when his sacrifices will be rewarded by redemption of the fourth aim in life – *mokṣ*. Śārādā Hṛday said: 'After *dīkṣā* we get a new life', and in this new life preparations for what Parry calls 'the good death' is of main concern.

¹⁵⁸ 'According to Hindu psychology and physiology the human being has three components: the gross body (*sthūla śarīra*); the subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*); and the spirit-soul (*ātman*)' (Klostermaier 1998:41).

Divergent practices are stressed as ways to prepare for ‘the good death’, of which yoga, celibacy, fast, silence and certain dietary practices are only a few. Common for most of these practices is that they are imposed, by oneself or others, in order to strengthen one’s self-discipline. Parry illustrates how important control of the body can be in what he writes about the yogī: ‘It is by an absolute mastery of his own body that the ascetic attains salvation. The wealth of a yogi is his body. There is nothing more precious than this’ (Parry 1989:501).¹⁵⁹ Another reason to take care of the body is suggested by Kirin Narayan’s key informant, ‘Swamiji’, who, while talking about his identity as a sādhu, says:

What is your body for? To see Bhagavan. In your very body, there’s Bhagavan... If you haven’t achieved Bhagavan and you destroy your body, is there any Bhagavan? No. Is there even a body? ... If you want to see Bhagavan you must look after your body. Give it food regularly, give it water regularly. Bhagavan is in your body. You can go to Kashi or anywhere else, but all that isn’t Bhagavan. Bhagavan is in your body itself. To see Bhagavan you can take a *mantra* from a true Guru and keep repeating it.

You might think [petulantly], ‘I want to meet Bhagavan right away!’ But who is Bhagavan, your servant or something? When the right time comes you can meet Him. Until fruit is ripe on a tree, you can’t receive it. If you pick it when it is still unripe, it won’t be sweet. When fruit ripens, you receive it of its own accord. Then, what is our Bhagavan like? Brahma [the creator], Vishnu [the preserver], Mahesvar [the destroyer]; all three are in your body. (Narayan 1989:52)

Although the body and the soul (āt̄mā) are often described as representing the impure and the pure, respectively, they are also interdependent. According to Parry, the state of the soul can in fact be read from the state of the body. Actually, he says, ‘the

¹⁵⁹ Ghurye writes: ‘Jogis are ascetics who have received their particular appellation because they are credited with practices that generically are called Yoga’ (Ghurye 1964:114). He adds: ‘We have included the Yogis as one group among others of the Śaiva ascetics, generically known as Samnyāsis. This is in accordance with the usage of writers on Indian Sādhus. The Jogis are Śaivite in faith and their tutelary deity is some aspect of Siva, though Hanumān, the monkey-god, and Dattāt̄reya, the ascetic-deity, are not only respected but worshipped side by side. In outward appearance, with their bodies besmeared with ashes and covered with ochre-coloured garments, they are almost indistinguishable from Śaiva ascetics and easily marked off from Vaishnava Bairāgis. [...] Jogis with their present outlook and practices are properly described as Tāntric Samnyāsis.’ (ibid.:114).

external body reveals the inner self; the moral condition of the person shows on the skin' (Parry 1994:170). Whereas *ātmā* is perceived as ageless, transcendental, immutable and autonomous, the gross body is seen as ageing, immanent, immutable and contingent (Tilak 1990:9,52). Shrinivas Tilak relates one of the discussions in the *Upāṇiṣad* that concerns the relationship between the body and *ātmā* (by Tilak transcribed as *ātman*). The discussion involves Indra (king of all Vedic gods), Virocana (the demon) and Prajāpati (the father of all beings):

After thirty-two years of apprenticeship by Indira and Virocana as students, Prajāpati declares to them that the self (*ātman*) is nothing but the person and its body image in the mirror. But Indira is not satisfied. He doubts that the body – subject to injury, decay and old age – is the self. Unlike Virocana, he is not satisfied with the explanation that the body is identical with the self (*dehātmavāda*). Prajāpati then provides alternative explanations of the self. But Indra is not satisfied by them. It is only then that Prajāpati reveals to him the truth that the body is not the self, because it is mortal and that the desire for the ageless state free from decay is nothing other than the search for the self [...]. (Tilak 1990:23)

Anantanand Rambachan explains that the self (*ātmā*) within Hinduism is regarded as 'the true being or identity of the human person' (Rambachan 1998:15). He describes it as 'the changeless basis and unifying reality of all other changing components of the human personality' (ibid.:15). In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *ātmā* is described as 'free from birth and death, changeless and eternal' (ibid.:15). *Ātmā* is further described as 'clothed with, though not limited by, the psychological components of the individual personality' (ibid.:15). These psychological components are described as consisting of three bodies, 'constituting, as it were, the vehicle of the self' (ibid.:15):

The outermost body or sheath is the physical body, referred to as the gross body (*sthūlā śarīra*). It is so called because it is composed of matter in the same form as the visible universe and can be perceived and experienced through the sense organs. [...] The gross body is regarded as being different from the self, for whom it is an object of knowledge and an instrument of action.

7. SACRIFICE

Different from the gross body is the subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*), so called because it is composed of matter in a subtle or uncompounded form. Its components include all thinking and decision-making faculties. The subtle body is also different from the self, for whom it is an object and instrument of knowledge. It is considered to be the repository of all our tendencies (*vāsanās*), good and evil.

The third body, or sheath, is the causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*). It expresses itself most prominently in the state of deep sleep, when all mental, emotional and intellectual activities become dormant and unmanifest. From this latent or causal condition, they again emerge to express themselves in experiences of waking and dreaming. The term ‘causal’ is justified since the gross and subtle bodies are absorbed, as it were, into the causal body at the time of deep sleep, and from it they again emerge [...]. The causal body is regarded as being other than the *ātman*, to whom it is also related as an object. [...]

The event of death marks the disintegration of the gross body. The individual being (*jīva*), clothed with the subtle and causal bodies, seeks a new physical form to express its peculiar inclinations and to experience the results of previous actions. The self is associated with its gross and causal bodies until the attainment of *mokṣa*, when, freed from these, it is no longer subject to *saṃsāra* [...]. (ibid.:16)

Rambachan points to the comparison made in the *Bhagavadgītā* between the movement from death to rebirth and a change of clothing: ‘Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new’ (ibid.:16).

‘Are you asking this body or are you asking me?’

A narrow, stinky lane leads up to the gate of the Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti Maṭh. As soon as you enter the gate, a peaceful world enveloped in a lush garden awaits.



Plate 48

Vinita and I came here to meet ‘Rāmjī’. When we entered the garden we could see him waiting for us on the balcony outside his room. We went upstairs, where he welcomed us and invited us to sit down in his room. He shut the Rāmāyaṇ and folded the rack on which the scripture had been placed. His room was cosy although it was small and very simple.

‘What do you know about mokṣ?’ Rāmjī asked me. I told him briefly what I knew, but this did not seem to impress him. He said: ‘Since you don’t know much, I will tell you something.’ He then gave me a lecture on the basis of a few key words he had written on a piece of paper. He spoke fast and made no stops for the next half-hour. The essence was in brief:

7. SACRIFICE

What is the meaning of this world? People are so attached to the material things in this world, but that does not give happiness. The reason some people renounce the material world is that they have realised that material attachment will not give them happiness. In the state of *saṁnyās*, this (physical) body is nothing for you. You have realised that you have to achieve something on a higher spiritual level. On that level your (physical) body will no longer give you any happiness. The goal of renunciation (*tyāg*) is to achieve control of knowledge (*jñān*) and control of your senses. If you want to know what real happiness is, you have to renounce the world.

His age was thirty. For twelve of these years he had been a *sādhu*. He had not at any point been married. ‘It was my nature to become a *sādhu* – it happened because of my karma’ he said. When we asked him whether he could tell us his childhood name, he said: ‘We don’t believe the childhood name is true. My present name is given me from my guru. There is no need of names.’ He requested us not to ask any further personal questions, but we did – first we asked him whether he sometimes sees his family. He answered: ‘No, no, that idea is not on my mind.’ Then we asked him what place he belonged to. At this point I believe he was somewhat annoyed. Still, he replied to our question, although he replied with another question:

Look, are you asking this body or are you asking me?¹⁶⁰ If you are asking me, there is no difference between you and me. If I tell you anything about my previous life, all the memories will come to my mind, all the pictures of my family, my birth place, etc.

When translating this, Vinita remarked: ‘Actually, he does not want to remember.’ *Rāmjī* himself said: ‘You ask why, how, when, etc. But I’ve left home, I’ve renounced the life you are asking about – in the same way as you flush the toilet.’ A final time, we tried to put across a personal question – this time of whether his parents ever come to see him. Quickly, he responded:

Who are my parents? To whom are you asking? Are you asking this body appearance? *Paramātmā*¹⁶¹ is my *mātā* [mother] and *paramātmā* is my *pitā* [father]. Those to whom one

¹⁶⁰ (Dekiye is *śārīr ko pūch rahe haiṁ ki muche pūch rahe haiṁ*)

¹⁶¹ *Paramātmā* is one of the names used to refer to the Lord and literally means ‘great soul’.

says ‘mātā pitā’, can not solve my problems, can not relief my sorrow. I keep myself busy thinking of God, residing in God’s name, doing jāp,¹⁶² to avoid thinking of my past life, my family, etc. We aim at thinking with the heart. I try to control my heart. I say to myself ‘it is your duty to control yourself’, but my heart is not completely under my control. I still can not control my heart fully. That’s why we do pilgrimages – to develop self control.’¹⁶³



Plate 49

‘This body is māyā’

‘Swamiji’, Kirin Narayan’s key informant, said:

‘A body is just a body,’ [...] ‘It’s like a house you live in for a while. And this is one getting old. No matter what anyone does, it’s falling apart like any old house. Mend the ceiling and a wall caves in, mend the wall and the plumbing goes bad, mend the plumbing and the floor

¹⁶² By my informants in English commonly spoken of as ‘counting’. ‘Repetition of a sacred name of mantra, one of the most popular religious practices of Hinduism. It is often done with the help of a mālā, a rosary consisting of beads made from the wood of a tulsī plant [or from the berries called rudrākś]. It can be performed audibly, inaudibly or mentally. It is supposed to bring about a union of the devotee’s mind with God, revealed in the name’ (Klostermaier 1998:89).

¹⁶³ Twenty-six years old Brahmācārī Tapānand in Bholāgiri Saṁnyās Ashram responded in similar terms when asked about his mother and father: ‘I am saint – no mother, no father. My mother and father is God.’ To my question of how many brothers and sisters he had, he replied: ‘I have completely left my family; I am caught by God.’

7. SACRIFICE

needs repair. This one here is like a peasant's hut, it isn't even made of cement. That's why I need to live beside a craftsman!' We all laughed, knowing that he was referring to his doctor upstairs. 'One day though,' Swamiji cheerily continued, 'it'll just fall down and nobody will be able to do anything about it.' (Narayan 1989:187-88)

Swamij has what Narayan calls 'a matter-of-fact acceptance' of the decay of his body. To him 'a body is just a body', a temporary appearance, whereas his soul (*ātmā*) is eternal. Narayan writes:

He [Swamiji] sees it [decay] as an inevitability, something to be confronted and laughed about rather than glossed over. [...] During my 1983 visit, he was still recovering from a severe heart attack. 'My ticket up was cancelled,' he grinned. 'Because I'm ready for death any moment it seems that death is avoiding me.' He made repeated references to the body, which would go, in contrast to the soul (*ātman*), which is eternal, everlasting, and divine. 'Everybody's body will go,' he earnestly tapped his arm. 'No one's will stop over. Don't meditate on this but what's inside. *That* is imperishable.' (ibid.:182-83)

The temple priest I encountered in Machlī Bandar Maṭh in Varanasi, reminded me of the importance of not thinking of the body: 'If you think of your body, you will never get mokṣ. You have to stop thinking of your body and realise that the most important thing is to be found inside your body – your soul.' Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj in Sumeru Maṭh said: 'The body is just a fundament to get mokṣ – a vehicle.' He used the cow as an illustration to stress his point: 'The cow is a vehicle, an utensil, to get milk. In the same way the body is a vehicle to get mokṣ.' Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth described the body as *asatyā* – untrue, false:

God is truth [Rām nām satyā hai], the body is not. God is in our *ātmā*, our soul. God is *paramātmā*. The body is mortal, but your soul is immortal. Don't cry for this body when it is gone, your soul will take another body, another form. To become a *sādhu* one should be free from all sides – no *māyā*, no *moh* [delusion, ignorance], no attraction to worldly things like family and friends.

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth related a story from the Rāmāyaṇ where Lord Rām's brother Bali is killed and his wife Tara is crying over her deceased husband. Lord Rām

told Tara not to cry over her husband's dead body. 'The truth is that your husband's ātmā is still alive,' Lord Rām said. 'Your husband is still alive. This dead body is not your husband. Your husband's ātmā was – and still is – your husband, not this body.' Tara finally understood, and did prâṇām to Lord Rām. 'Yeh śarīr māyā hai' (this body is māyā), Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth said. In his perspective māyā embraces all the material items surrounding us, all the items we are attracted by and attached to. 'Only ātmā is not māyā – ātmā is God':¹⁶⁴

Whatever we do takes place because of ātmā. Whatever the body does, is due to ātmā. We think our body is the agent behind every action, but that is wrong. This is the game [khel] of ātmā. All is part of ātmā's play – God's play. If you think: 'I am a human, I have a human body', you belong to māyā. If you don't think like this, your soul is God. The human body is made out of the five elements. We distinguish between a male and a female body, but in reality they are the same – they consist of the same five elements. We, the humans [jiv], make the differentiation. Ātmā does not differentiate, ātmā is paramātmā. When we die and our bodies are cut open, we will see that everything is the same. When we die, ātmā will take another form – another body. The body is nothing but a cover.

I asked Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth how long he had thought this way himself: 'Ten years ago I thought "I have to take samnyās." This happened because of God and because of my previous karma. At that time I had realised that this body is māyā – the whole world is māyā, everything is māyā.'¹⁶⁵ I also asked him what his response would be to the question: 'Who are you?' His answer was: 'I don't consider myself as anything; I simply think I am a zero.'

¹⁶⁴ (Ātmā hī māyā nahī hai, ātmā hī paramātmā hai)

¹⁶⁵ (Yeh śarīr māyā hai. Sab kutch māyā hai)

REPRESSING DESIRES

Celibacy

‘He placed great emphasis on the virtues of celibacy and self-control in one’s personal life’ (Miller and Wertz 1976:25), David Miller and Dorothy C. Wertz write, referring to one of Miller’s informants during his research in the Śaṅkarānand Maṭh in Orissa. The same informant gave Miller an outline of how to obtain liberation (mokṣ) through self-realisation:

One should be pure and clean, completely detached from desires, firm-minded, self-confident, should possess unswerving faith in the words of his guru and deity, should maintain control over his body and senses, be liberated from all dilemmas, and be free from sorrows and sufferings. He should be knowledgeable in the principal philosophical schools and should remain unattached to any and all dogmas. (ibid.:25)

Among sādhus, celibacy is probably both the most important and the most widely applied method for controlling the body and its desires. Svāmī Ānand, secretary of Bhārat Sādhu Samāj, stressed the importance of what he called ‘self-preservation’: “Self-preservation is as important as self-realization. In order to preserve oneself, one must preserve one’s semen – *bindu*. A real sādhu does not waste one drop of his *bindu*. He draws it up his spinal cord and lets the life force spread in his frame” (Singh 1967:110). Within Hinduism semen is considered as a magical and powerful liquid that, if not spilled, either by intercourse or masturbation, will accumulate and become a source of magical power for the man who is in possession of this (Cantlie 1977). This store of semen is believed to be suffused throughout the body and to make it shine ‘whitely like a light so that a saintly man can be recognised by his luminosity’ (ibid.:247). Narayan refers to similar beliefs:

To conserve semen is to increase vitality, and to sublimate sexuality upwards, into ‘the head,’ is to bring about a gain in power. In traditions of yoga, the man who has lifted semen into his

head, and who is ever thereafter unperturbed by sexuality, is called an *ūrdhvaretas* ('uplifted seed'). Even in tantric practices which prescribe intercourse with a woman, semen is never supposed to fall; to emit semen, in this view, is to waste vitality and succumb to the phenomenal world of death and decay. (Narayan 1989:128)

Peter van der Veer describes retaining of one's semen as one of the most powerful themes in Indian mythology, as '[t]o keep one's semen is to keep one's power' (Van der Veer 1988:74). He mentions the many myths of the power of a saint's asceticism as illustrations of the link between celibacy and religious and magical power. He also lets us know that celibacy, among Rāmānandis, is the most effective boundary between lay disciples, who are householders, and sādhus (ibid.). Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj), whose life situation changed dramatically – from being a full time, independent Nāgā to becoming a householder with a small family and having his own ashram – said he experienced that he has less energy to do sādhnā¹⁶⁶ now than he used to while he was living in celibacy:

Previously I could make wishes come true. I could make things happen. These days a lot of things don't turn out as I want them to; it is no longer sufficient to make a wish. I seem to have lost some of the powers that I once had. I did not use my powers to solve my own problems or make my own wishes come true. I tried to solve the problems of other people – tried to make their wishes come true. Somebody whose brother was ill, somebody who wanted a child, etc. By means of my powers I could fulfil people's wishes.

¹⁶⁶ '[...] the complex of practices recommended by the various *sampradayās* (sects) or individual gurus' (Klostermaier 1998:158).

Tapas

‘Tap’ literally means heat, and tap – or rather, ‘tapas’ or ‘tapasyā’ – is used to describe ‘ascetic favour or practice; religious austerity; penance; mortification’ (McGregor 1997:437). Klaus K. Klostermaier describes tapas as self-mortification – a practice which has been an important notion in Hinduism ‘from the earliest times to the present’ (Klostermaier 1998:182). It is believed, Klostermaier says, that ‘self-mortification leads to an accumulation of power which can be used to summon the gods to be of service’ (ibid.:182). Stories in the epics and Purāṇas describe how Indra and other gods made attempts to prevent ascetics from accumulating too much power through the practice of tapas – either by ‘having them seduced or provoked to anger, through which all power was annihilated’ (ibid.:182).¹⁶⁷ Jonathan Parry describes how tapas, or ‘heat’, is the main agent of all transformation and refinement of the body. This heat, he says, ‘can be generated by an ascetic austerity that burns up the sins of the body’ (Parry 1994:171):

Both symbolically and in terms of the etymology of the word itself (*tapasya*), such austerities are a process of heating the body; and it will be recalled that it was through the heat of the austerities performed at Manikarnika *ghat* that Vishnu created the world at the beginning of time [...]. Austerities, like pilgrimage, undertaken by the householder are not only directed at saving the soul but also at salving the body. (ibid.:171)

According to Hartsuiker, the sexual energy (kām), ‘the fire of passion’ (Hartsuiker 1993:109), is ‘the main potential source of *tapas* – and at the same time it is its opposite’ (ibid.:109). Hartsuiker bases this on a myth describing how Śiv uses fire, created by tapas, from his third eye to kill Kām, ‘the cupid-god of desire’ (ibid.:109), when Kām tries to hit him with his arrow of lust in order to annul his yogic power. ‘In other words, the ascetic must sublimate and control his lust, for its enjoyment would diminish, even destroy his spiritual power’ (ibid.:109-112). The practice of tapasyā

¹⁶⁷ Another indication of how sexual intercourse and loss of semen is seen to cause loss of power.

may be described as ‘an aid to mental control of the fire of passion’ (ibid.:112), or, as Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) put it:¹⁶⁸ ‘The aim of tapasyā is to achieve control over, and finally extinguish, all desires. When you manage to control your desires, you will experience that they disappear.’ Mahārāj further explained that all desires can be controlled through such practices, and that the practice of tapasyā contributes to increase, or stretch, one’s level of tolerance (sahn śakti):

In sahn śakti there is a light [prakāś] which gives happiness, knowledge and wisdom. This wisdom brings an enormous happiness and the happiness gives you a desire to continue – to achieve more and more happiness. The main aim is to become one with God, and when you experience this you feel that you can achieve whatever you need because everything is within you. The light which is provided by sahn śakti, brings you the ultimate happiness. If you experience this, you don’t need anything from saṃsār. You can turn your back to saṃsār because you don’t need it. You will only desire to do bhajan and jāp for God. This state involves an extreme, ultimate feeling of freedom and happiness.

Svāmī Bhārātī put it this way: ‘Saṃnyāsīs should experience difficulties; a saṃnyāsī has to make up his mind to experience and withstand difficulties. Through practices like starving, sitting in heat, sitting in cold, standing in cold water, standing on one leg, etc., while concentrating on God, the saṃnyāsī develops his patience.’ In the Hindu scriptures a great variety of forms of tapas are enumerated: Wearing of chastity belts, keeping fast, not lying down to sleep, standing in water up to the neck, holding one arm up high, looking into the sun, etc. According to Klostermaier, one of the most celebrated forms of tapas is the ‘five-fire’ tapas – ‘an ascetic is to build four blazing cow-dung fires, in each direction of the compass. With the midday sun overhead (as a fifth fire) he is to spend some time exposed to the heat of all these fires’ (Klostermaier 1998:182). Kaṭhiyā Bābā, a Vaiṣṇav sādhu in his mid-fifties whom I met at the ghāṭs in Varanasi, daily performs the ‘five-fire’ (pañc agni) tapas during the hot season. Surrounded by fires, he sits from one to four hours during the hottest time of the day. ‘We do austerities to keep the memory’ he said. ‘Sometimes one may forget that one is

¹⁶⁸ See chapter three (‘A sādhu in saṃsār’).

7. SACRIFICE

a sādhu and make mistakes, like getting married, etc. That is why we put force on the ego by doing austerities against nature – to remind ourselves that we are sādhus.’ I asked him whether one of the aims of this practice is to conquer the body: ‘No, no, no!’ he responded, almost shocked. ‘The body is the medium to liberation; only through the body can you know whether you are free or not.’ ‘So the body is important?’ I asked. ‘Yes! It is only through your body that you can know that you are liberated. The body is the only medium through which you can consume and enjoy – anything – whether it is sex or liberation. Householders enjoy sex, sādhus enjoy liberation.’ This particular day Kaṭhiyā Bābā did his fire-ritual for only one hour. He sat naked, only wearing a wooden, heavy chastity belt (ardhband) around his waist, in the middle of a circle of eighty-four fires (of cow dung). Two of his disciples were doing the same ritual, but with minor differences. One of them had only five fires, while the other was surrounded by the same number of fires as his guru and also had a clay pot with fired cow dung on his head. I observed the ritual with Govind Bābā, who remarked that the young sādhus’ backs were less straight than their guru’s. According to Govind Bābā, this indicated that both of them were less experienced than their guru, whose back held a perfect ninety degree angle.

Plate 50



7. SACRIFICE

B.D. Tripathi's research among sādhus in Uttar Pradesh indicates that 5.8% of the sādhus included in his material 'torture their bodies in different ways' (Tripathi 1978:121). The five-fire tapas is only one of the means of bodily torture mentioned by Tripathi (ibid.:121):

1. Exposure to *Panchagni* (five fires, fire in four directions and blazing sun above as the fifth fire).
2. Standing all the time under the canopy of the sky or under some tree irrespective of the weather.
3. Standing in knee-deep water in winter.
4. Standing with the two arms raised upward.
5. Sleeping on the thorny branches of acacia trees.
6. Burying one's head in the earth for hours.
7. Lifting weighty things, such as big pieces of stone, with the genital organ.
8. Keeping dumb for years together.
9. Subsisting on fruits or milk only.
10. Taking meals after an interval of two or three days.
11. Not wearing any clothes or remaining meagrely clothed.

'The idea behind this bodily torture', Tripathi writes, 'is to torment the flesh which is considered a hurdle in the path of meditation and attainment of Moksha (salvation). One desirous of purifying oneself must renounce bodily pleasure' (ibid.:121). Such practices of bodily 'torture', according to Tripathi, came from Jainism. He claims that even today (in the 1970s) among the Jain ascetics, particularly in the Digambar sect, a common practice is to pull out the hairs of head and chin (ibid.:122). However, Tripathi concludes by suggesting that the majority of sādhus despise the practice of bodily torture as penance: 'To fake and hypocrite ascetics such practices are too painful while genuine ones regard such practices as superficial, showy and hypocritical' (ibid.:122).

One of the relatively mild forms of tapasyā is yoga – practised by Hindu renouncers in order to discipline the body to bear the suffering and hardships caused by cold or heat, hunger or thirst. By practising special disciplines taught within different schools of

yoga, the yogī makes efforts to separate himself from the world of the senses; yoga and related disciplines are ‘designed to concentrate his powers and his attention within his own body’ (Cantlie 1977:252). Through continuous practise, the yogī progressively acquires control over internal processes, physical as well as mental, ‘until he is in a position to eliminate them altogether’ (ibid.:252). Along the same line, Jonathan Parry argues that by concentrating on one single object, the yogī ‘frees his mind from the flux of events and arrests mental process’ (Parry 1994:251). By this practice, the renouncer may reach what Parry describes as ‘the ultimate quest of the ascetic’ (ibid.:251) – to recapture a primordial state of non-differentiation and ‘to re-establish the unity of opposites which existed before the world began’ (ibid.:251). J.C. Heesterman put it this way:

The renouncer can turn his back on the world because he is emancipated from the relations which govern it. He is a world unto himself, or rather, he has resumed the opposition of the world in himself; there is no duality for him anymore. ‘He sees himself (or, the self) in all creatures and all creatures in himself (or, in the self).’ (Heesterman 1985:39)

By abolishing duality, the renouncer aims ‘to abolish duration and death’ (ibid.:251) – and achieve what several of the sādhus I met described as a state of freedom and eternal happiness.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ As can be read from Mark Tully’s descriptions of some of his meetings with sādhus at the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad in 1989, tapasyā is neither practised nor even admired by all sādhus: ‘Among the many sadhus performing spectacular feats of tapasya, or penance, were Balyogi Baba, who was reputed to have been standing on one leg for eight years, and Baba Jagu Das, who was lying on a bed of thorns. In sharp contrast to them was Abhilash Das, the mahant of an ashram of devotees of the fifteen-century mystic poet Kabir. [...] Abhilash Das was quiet-spoken but laughed a great deal. When I asked him about asceticism, he replied, “We say it is madness to perform tapasya by standing on one leg, or sitting surrounded by five fires like some sadhus do. Neither do we believe in miracles. There are plenty of religious liars here, and a religious liar is a bigger liar than any lawyer or politician. If a politician says a mouse has turned into a monkey, no one will believe him. If a mahatma says it, people will”’ (ibid.:115).

Penance and self-discipline

Self-discipline, by all the sādhus with whom I discussed it, was emphasised as a matter of major importance as to the achievement of mokṣ. During a discussion on food, Brahmācārin Kalyanani Devī said: ‘When the food you eat is pure, your heart is pure. It is necessary to control what you eat and how you live. Control of all the senses is necessary.’ In the Gaṅgā Mā Ashram where Brahmācārin Kalyanani Devī lives, the sādhus never drink tea: ‘This is the speciality of our ashram’, she explained. ‘Tea is just something you get addicted to.’ Onion, garlic, and meat are also not eaten: ‘These things should not even enter the ashram because they are not purely vegetarian.’ Also Rāmjī stressed the importance of self-discipline. According to him the attachment to material things is the main obstacle to the experience of happiness. He said that in order to achieve eternal happiness, you have to renounce the world: ‘The goal of renunciation [tyāg] is to achieve control of knowledge [jñān] and control of the senses. If you want to know what real happiness is, you have to renounce the world.’ Svāmī Bhārātī has chosen to discipline his life by promising God never again to cross the borders of Varanasi (kṣetr vrat). To make vows like this is a common and important aspect of popular Hinduism. A vow (vrat) can be described as:

A voluntary religious practice, taken up by individuals in fulfilment of certain promises made. They usually consist of particular fasts, pilgrimages or repetitions of prayer formulas to gain healing for a sick family member or friend, obtain help in difficult situations, or to give thanks for divine support received. (Klostermaier 1998:206)

Other sorts of vows that renunciators sometimes make are to keep silence (maun), to stand (on one leg), and to keep the right arm in the air, etc. These are all considered as sacrifices made to please the Lord, but, as Hartsuiker remarks, in the case of the two latter forms of tapasyā – standing (preferably on one leg) and keeping one hand in the air, ‘the relation with the “fire of passion” may not easily be established; but their successful execution involves superhuman will-power and certainly shows non-attachment to the body’ (Hartsuiker 1993:114). In Nepal I met a sādhu who had kept

maun for the last twelve years. However, maun may also be kept for limited periods – from sunrise to sunset or until a certain time on a certain date. Hartsuiker describes maun, or ‘non-speaking’, as a ‘typical mental form of austerity’ (ibid.:114):

It is meant to conserve the mental energy, to still the mind and to create social distance. It can be done for short periods as a kind of temporary mental retreat, or for years, usually twelve – a holy number related to planetary cycles, representing one astrological phase of personal growth. The ‘non-speaker’, or *maunī*, may maintain absolute silence, or he may communicate through writing, or through gestures, ‘hmmm’ sounds, snapping of fingers, etc. (ibid.:114)

A young saṃnyāsin in Sant Ashram who once guided Vinita and me into the ashram’s temple, refused to talk to us. At first we could not understand what she meant by pointing at her mouth. Not until we entered the temple, where she pointed at the watch on the wall, did we understand that she tried to tell us she kept maun until the temple ceremony started at 4 p.m. It was then five to four, and at 4 p.m., sharp, ‘Jingle bells’ (yes, the Christmas song!) started playing, and the curtain that covered the Gods on the altar was pulled away. The young saṃnyāsin was again allowed to speak.

The disciplined body

Arthur W. Frank (1991) has developed what he calls ‘a typology of body use in action’, and one of these typologies – by Frank called ‘the disciplined body’ – is of relevance to my material. Frank has constructed the typologies of body use in action with reference to four dimensions; control, desire, other-relatedness, and self-relatedness. ‘With regard to control’, Frank suggests, ‘the disciplined body makes itself *predictable* through its regimentation’ and in this way eliminates fears about itself – ‘what else can discipline be but predictability?’ Frank asks (ibid.:55). With regard to the second dimension, desire, ‘the disciplined body understands itself as *lacking*’ (ibid.:55). As I understand Frank, this indicates that the disciplined body is not producing any form of desire. Frank goes on to say that, in order to sustain discipline, it is important that this sense of lack remains conscious: ‘One device for

sustaining the consciousness of lack is for the disciplined body to place itself in some hierarchy (military, monastic or other), in which it is perpetually, and to itself justifiably, subordinated' (ibid.:55). The third dimension, the other-relatedness of the disciplined body, is by Frank described – 'isolated in its own performance' (ibid.: 55); 'the disciplined body may be among others, but it is not *with* them' (ibid.: 55). Finally, as to the fourth dimension, self-relatedness, the disciplined body is by Frank described as '*dissociated* from itself' (ibid.: 56): 'The ascetic can tolerate the degradation of her or his body because she or he only observes that body; the ascetic is in but not of the body' (ibid.:56) and, Frank points out, 'part of the discipline is to cease to feel the body's pain or hunger as one's own' (ibid.:56). In Svāmī Bhārātī's words,¹⁷⁰ this is about 'conquering the body' – or the vital breath (the breath of life), the prāṇ, as he also put it. He said: 'Until you know how to conquer the prāṇ you are dependent on society, and a person who is dependent should not take saṃnyās.' Svāmī Bhārātī seemed to blame himself for having renounced the world before he was in control of his body, before he was independent – independent both of his body and of society. Svāmī Bhārātī argued that nobody who is still dependent – on anything or anyone – should take saṃnyās: 'Saṃnyās is an independent stage; a saṃnyāsī should not be dependent on anyone – then only you can take saṃnyās. If you are dependent, even on your body, you should not take saṃnyās.' Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj)¹⁷¹ has had the experience of being in total control of his body. Mahārāj did tapasyā for a decade with the purpose of achieving control over, and through control finally extinguishing, all desires. He had a desire to become like God, and this was what motivated him in these efforts. He said: 'By doing tapasyā you can become like God – you can convert yourself from being a human being in saṃsār to be God. In this sense the body is important – it is the vehicle to find God.' After years of tapasyā, Mahārāj was rewarded by a vision (darśan) of Dāttatreya, the iṣṭādev of the Nāgās in Jūnā Akhārā. However, when Mahārāj returned to life in saṃsār, he experienced that some of this bodily control evaporated. Today he has adopted the life style of the figure he

¹⁷⁰ See 'In search of permanency', chapter three.

¹⁷¹ See 'A sādhu in saṃsār', chapter three.

has always respected the most – the yogī – who, Mahārāj says, manages to combine family-life with a life in prayer.

SURRENDER

Stuart describes how, among his informants, the message of ‘complete surrender of self in utter dependence on God was a repeated theme, and a point of almost unanimous agreement’ (Stuart 1995:43). Like Stuart, I experienced among the sādhus I got to know a strong desire to surrender to God, often in the guise of their guru.¹⁷² I will describe how some of my informants reflected and acted upon this, but first let me relate some of my observances from the evening āratī in Sant Ashram in Varanasi. What amazed and impressed me most of all by the way the ritual was conducted was the extent to which it expressed the saṁnyāsins’ complete surrender to their guru (‘Mā’) in a symbolic way:

The evening āratī is about to start. Ringing of bells fills the temple. One by one the residents of the ashram enter the temple ground. A curtain covers the altar. Behind the curtain, one of the saṁnyāsins starts the performance of a pūjā to the gods (Kṛṣṇ and Rādhā). Through the curtain we can see flames of candles being waved. At this moment ‘Mā’ enters the temple. She is in her mid-seventies, has long dark grey hair, and wears glasses. She is dressed in a white sārī. Mā sits down on a small chair on the floor just below the altar.

The curtain is now taken aside so that we all can see the gods. The saṁnyāsini performing the ritual moves a candlestick with three candles in circles in front of Kṛṣṇ and Rādhā on the altar. The candles are moved in the direction of the sun. The saṁnyāsini now steps down to Mā and repeats the movements in front of her. She leaves the candlestick next to Mā and picks up a conch from which she pours what I

¹⁷² ‘The true *guru* is the incarnation of God himself who is Self-conscious Infinite Bliss. [...] Even the human *guru* must be seen as a manifestation of the Divine’ (Basu 1974:84-85).

7. SACRIFICE

believe is holy water from the Gaṅgā. She first sprays some holy water on Kṛṣṇ and Rādhā, then on Mā. She then symbolically dries off the gods and Mā with a towel. She picks up the candlestick and moves it from the left to the right, first in front of the gods, next in front of Mā, and finally in front of a marble plaque on the temple wall. On this plaque are written the names of the present guru's predecessors. A third time the candles are held in front of Mā. This time Mā holds her hands above the candles for a few seconds before she moves her hands to her forehead.¹⁷³ The saṁnyāsīn who carries the candlestick repeats the same movements herself before she offers the candles to the others present in the temple. Next, she leaves the candlestick in front of the gods while she again picks up the conch and sprays holy water on us. By this act the ritual performance is over and the bhajan starts. Everybody sits down on the floor and takes part in the chanting. The atmosphere is peaceful and calm.

When the bhajan finishes, Mā leaves the temple. As she crosses the room, some of the saṁnyāsīns bend down to touch the floor where she just stepped; quickly, to pay their respect, they move their hand from the floor to their forehead.

I was struck by the respect these saṁnyāsīns paid their guru, and I was struck by the way they expressed this respect – both through actions as those described above and through words. One of the saṁnyāsīns said:

All we eat is prasād from the Lord. First we offer the Lord some of the food; afterwards we take some ourselves. All food we eat is purely vegetarian. We wear white saris and paint the tilak mark of Viṣṇu in our forehead. All these things are decided and determined by Mā. She has decided what clothes we wear, what food we eat, and what kind of work we do. Everything in this ashram is done according to the instructions given by Mā. Daily, we report to her everything we do. We should submit wholeheartedly to Gurujī. A disciple should not have any independent will, diverging from the guru's will. There should be complete surrender. We have all joined this ashram to be in Gurujī's (Mā's) presence. We have come here to strive for the Lord – this is the ultimate goal for everyone who is staying here. Gurujī is

¹⁷³ Fire is seen as the goddess 'Agni' and is believed to be purifying. I understand this movement between the fire and the forehead as either a symbolic act of purification or as an act where ignorance is extinguished by the light of wisdom.

our link to God, the link between us and the Lord. The power of the Lord is operated through Gurujī.

The brahmacārī I have previously introduced as Rāmjī, expressed his ideas of the relationship between a disciple and his guru in this way:

We have no self-realisation; we do whatever our guru says. Everything depends on the guru. We don't have any independent will, wish, or desire. Everything depends on the guru. We accept whatever the guru says. My guru can, for instance, tell me whether I am capable of doing a specific kind of work or not. He will tell me to do whatever he thinks I am capable of, and I will do it. 'Normal' people – householders – have some kind of ego-problems; they are too proud. Saṁnyāsīs have to leave these kinds of selfish, egocentric thoughts. The ego-problem, the pride, and the material attachments were extinguished during the initiation ceremony. If continuously we remember God (in our work), he will take care of us – give us all and everything.

The guru is perceived as equal to God in the sense that (s)he is the link through which God can be reached. Rāmjī said: 'Cremations are only for those who do pūjā. Renouncers will not be cremated. Renouncers don't believe in pūjā to the gods but to their guru. The guru is the link to God.' Gross states that the primary relationship of a sādhu is 'an internal one linking him with his *istadeva* or personal god. However, mediating and reflecting this relationship and in both a religious and social sense of greater importance is a sādhu's relationship with his guru' (Gross 1992:156):

In fact, it is widely accepted in India by sādhus as well as householders that guru is god: the term *guru-dev(a)* sums up this notion. The guru is believed to be a manifestation of god in human form, and, as such, is considered to be superior to the gods. A guru literally is 'one who dispels the darkness of ignorance.' Through the guru's grace (*guru-kripa*), his blessings, and his teachings, he guides the disciple on the path to spiritual realization. (ibid.:156)

As mentioned in the previous chapter,¹⁷⁴ Peter Brent sees the sādhus as 'the religious Bohemians of India' (Brent 1972:289). Further, he argues that wherever the sādhus go,

¹⁷⁴ See 'Power', chapter six.

they contribute to ‘reinforce an awareness of the transcendent’ (ibid.:289); ‘by the fact of their existence, they make India a country stitched and patterned by religion’ (ibid.:289). These conditions cause Brent to draw the conclusion that getting involved with spiritual development, particularly within a religious context, is easier for any Indian than it would be for a Westerner. This is also how Brent explains why Indian disciples apparently find it relatively easy to surrender to a guru – ‘to make their commitment total’ (ibid.:289). Brent suggests that ‘their view of the Guru is coloured by the very totality with which they have given themselves to him’ (ibid.:289). Further, he argues that disciples have made such an extreme investment in their guru that ‘it becomes more and more impossible with every succeeding year even to consider an alternative’ (ibid.:289); the more the disciples give themselves, ‘the less they see what they have given themselves to’ (ibid.:289): ‘The relationship with the Guru finally becomes a closed circle, around which the currents of demand, satisfaction and consequent dependence endlessly swirl’ (ibid.:289). This kind of relationship may, Brent suggests, cause a condition of delusion. To illustrate his point he relates a story about a disciple who, after many years of meditation and practice of haṭh yoga, was convinced he could fly: ‘And with arms extended he leaped off a cliff, to fall and die like any other mortal’ (ibid.:290). Brent makes the following remark about the story:

It is obvious to a rational outsider that the intensity of a man’s subjective feelings are no guarantee that they relate, even distortedly, to any objective reality. In his highly subjective states of auto- (or God- or Guru-) intoxication, the joyful way in which the disciple throws himself over the cliff of surrender does not of itself mean that he will fly, nor even that flight is possible: too often it seemed to me that he was not flying, but falling. (ibid.:290)

Brent admits that he may give the impression of being very critical towards the institution of saṃnyās and the worship of gurus, although he claims this is not his intention: ‘Far from it; all I am saying is that many of those most heavily involved seem never to have put the dangers, the real possibility of delusion, squarely to themselves’ (ibid.:290). Brent’s objection is that too much about the guru-śiṣyā (disciple) relationship has gone unquestioned for too long, and ‘not only that’, he says:

[...] there is no technique for forcing the disciple to re-examine his preconceptions, not only about the world and himself as a man, but about the Guru, the ashram and himself as a disciple: about the whole Guru-disciple connection, in fact. That is already given, and it dominates his life so thoroughly that he cannot look at it. (ibid.:290)

The sacred, god-like position of the guru, and the reverence in which (s)he is held, is in itself the reason why any ‘real examination’ of this institution is so difficult (ibid.:290). The guru’s godhead is taken literally and, ‘as God is hidden by the effulgence of his own perfection, so the Guru is hidden by the borrowed blaze of this accepted divinity’ (ibid.:291). Despite this somewhat negative analysis of the relationship between a guru and his disciple, Brent in the end admits that the guru may represent a kind of safety-valve in the Indian ‘too tightly organized society’ (ibid.:291): ‘He and his disciples, and sadhus generally, form an alternative order to the normal hierarchies of India’ (ibid.:291-92):

Outside caste and class, they can operate as the Catholic Church did in the Middle Ages, giving an intelligent boy of peasant or shopkeeper background an opportunity to display talent, or at least to live partly off his abilities and not only within his inherited social limits. (ibid.:291-92)

Also Gross discusses the relationship between guru and disciple: ‘In essence, the guru-disciple relationship symbolizes the core of the Hindu devotional attitude, and its meaning is critical to the understanding of the religious life of the sādhus’ (Gross 1992:156-57). Gross tells that Ramanandi sādhus often quoted Tulsidas for him to express the importance of their guru: ‘The basis [root] of meditation is the image of the guru, the object of puja [worship] is the guru’s lotus-feet. The mantra is the guru’s words, and the source of moksa [final liberation] is His grace’ (ibid.:157). Gross further tells that a Nāgā saṃnyāsī had once chanted for him the following lines to express the meaning he attached to his guru: ‘You are my mother as well as my father/You are relative as well as friend/You are my knowledge as well as my wealth/You are my all in all, the greatest of all gods’ (ibid.:157). Gross was also told by sādhus that ‘the guru is superior to the gods because he represents them all’

(ibid.:157). To affirm this, Gross quotes a mantra from the Upaniṣads used by both Vaiṣṇav and Śaiva sādhus: ‘The Guru is Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), Siva (destroyer and fulfiller)/The guru is the power of the Absolute, the Supreme Brahman in embodied form/To Thee, Guru, I prostrate’ (ibid.:157).

INTERNAL FIRE

By practising tapasyā, the renouncer internalises the sacrificial fire. As Hartsuiker put it, ‘in fact, he becomes the sacrifice; he burns within, increases his inner heat and thus his spiritual power’ (Hartsuiker 1993:109).¹⁷⁵ Heesterman formulates it this way: ‘He has resumed the sacrificial fires in himself, and so he is able to perform the ritual in himself and by himself’ (Heesterman 1985:39). The renouncer is himself a sacrifice, but he is also the sacrificer,¹⁷⁶ both roles symbolically present in the initiation rite into saṃnyās āśram. Although the initiation rites vary from one monastic group to another, they all seem to share a strong symbolic focus on rebirth and, naturally, also death. In chapter two,¹⁷⁷ Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) described the initiation rite (saṃskār) of the sādhus (and Nāgās) of the Jūnā Akhārā. In the Jūnā Akhārā the novices perform piṇḍ dāṇ,¹⁷⁸ the rite which is also performed at the death of a householder. The piṇḍ symbolises one’s dead ancestors (pitṛ), but the novices awaiting to become renouncers also make a piṇḍ symbolising themselves – ‘I am also dead.’ When, on the other hand, a householder dies, the death rites are performed by his relatives, not by himself. This, I believe, is the major difference between saṃnyās saṃskār and the saṃskār performed at the death of a householder. Heesterman, with reference to Hindu scriptures, speaks of a renouncer’s sacrifice as a ‘sacrifice in the

¹⁷⁵ See also chapter two.

¹⁷⁶ ‘We give the name ‘sacrificer’ to the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects’ (Hubert and Mauss 1964:10).

¹⁷⁷ See ‘The making of a Nāgā’, chapter two.

¹⁷⁸ Piṇḍ: ‘A small ball made of cooked rice, offered to the ancestors in connection with the last rites by the nearest (male) relation.’ (Klostermaier 1998:138-39). Piṇḍ dān is the name of the rite where these small balls are offered to the departed souls of one’s nearest relatives.

self, an internal, mental sacrifice' (Heesterman 1985:39), a kind of sacrifice which in Manu's Law is praised as 'a thousand times more efficient than the normal ritual' (ibid.:64):

[85] A sacrifice that consists of chanting ('Om' and the verse to the sun-god) is ten times better than a sacrifice performed in accordance with the rules; if inaudible, it is a hundred times better, and if (merely) mental it is traditionally regarded as a thousand (times better). (Doniger 1991:26)

In this chapter, we have caught glimpses of some of the sacrifices involved in renouncing the world. Of main concern for a sādhu is, ideally, to prepare for mokṣ – or 'the good death' (Parry 1994:167), and, as shown above, restrictions imposed on bodily desires (as for instance celibacy) and the practice of austerities (tapasyā) are means to this end. However, not only are bodily desires sacrificed but also any sense of self or ego, pride and selfishness – in short, any aspect of individuality. The complete surrender to god and guru described above, gives an idea of the extent of self-effacement involved.

FACES



Plate 51

To me, the soul – ātmā – is always free.
The body is dependent on others, but my inside, my soul, is free.

(Svāmī Kapileśvarānand, Mumukṣu Bhavan)

INDIVIDUAL-OUTSIDE-THE-WORLD?

In the previous chapter, the *sādhu* was described as a person making efforts to extinguish every sense of self and individuality. How, then, could Louis Dumont see the renouncer as an individual? This is only one of the questions I will try to answer in the following, summarising chapter.

According to Louis Dumont, the renouncer and society would, if brought together, make up ‘a whole containing an equilibrium between quite different things’ (Dumont 1980:185):

[...] on the one hand a world of strict interdependence, in which the individual is ignored, and, on the other hand, an institution which puts an end to interdependence and inaugurates the individual. In the last analysis the system does not neglect the individual, as the description of the caste system alone would lead one to believe. (Dumont 1980:185-86)

In other words, on the one hand we have ‘society’ – the world of caste – on the other hand the world of the renouncer. Dumont underlines his perception of the world of caste as something ‘quite different’ from the world of the renouncer by saying that it ‘may be doubted whether the caste system could have existed and endured independently of its contradictory, renunciation’ (ibid.:186). Dumont’s main reason for seeing these two ‘things’ as ‘different’ and ‘contradictory’ seems to be the status of the individual. In the world of caste, the individual is ignored: ‘To say that the world of caste is a world of relations is to say that the particular caste and the particular man have no substance: they exist empirically, but they have no reality in thought, no Being’ (ibid.:272). Dumont argues, ‘at the risk of being crude’, ‘that on the level of life in the world the individual *is* not’ (ibid.:272). This statement creates a problem regarding ‘how it comes about that there is still something else in Hindu India, another kind of thought, namely a kind of thought which conceives of the individual as being’ (ibid.:273). The solution to this problem is the appearance of the renouncer, ‘with his begging bowl, his staff and orange dress’ (ibid.:273-74). The renouncer has left the

world of caste and strict interdependence behind in order to devote himself to his own release. He has committed a social suicide and is ‘dead to the social world’ (ibid.:184). He has escaped the network of strict interdependence and ‘become to himself his own end as in the social theory of the West’ (ibid.:185). The renouncer is to Dumont an ‘individual-outside-the-world’ – opposed to the attached ‘man-in-the-world’ (ibid.:185), ‘who is not an individual’ (ibid.:275). Dumont’s understanding of the concept ‘individual’ is founded on an analytical distinction between two aspects of man as an individual:

1. the *empirical* subject, indivisible sample of the human species, as encountered in all societies;
2. the independent, autonomous *moral* and, thus, essentially nonsocial being, as encountered first of all in our modern ideology of man and society. (Dumont 1992:279)

Accordingly, Dumont distinguishes between two meanings of ‘the individual’; ‘the particular, empirical man and man as a bearer of value’ (ibid.:16). The individual is first of all, he says, ‘the concrete human being, the particular man as given in immediate experience, and as such the main raw datum of sociology’ (Dumont 1970:134). Thereafter, ‘individual’ designates not a physical but a mental construct, which puts stress on the idea of the individual as a cultural value. ‘On the whole’, Dumont says, ‘we have two persons in one: the empirical subject of speech, thought and will, *indivisible* sample of mankind, and the independent, autonomous moral being, as found first of all in our own ideology of man and society’ (ibid.:135). To Dumont, ‘our own ideology of man and society’ implies the ‘modern West’ (ibid.:142) as opposed to, for instance, India, which Dumont describes as ‘traditional’. In traditional societies, Dumont argues, the paramount value is to be found in society as a whole, not in the individual. While holism is the prevailing ideology in traditional societies, individualism is the ideology dominating the modern West.

The renouncer is dead to the social world and thereby cut off from ordinary social life, including, ideally, the interdependent world of caste. This is taken by Dumont as an indication that the renouncer is more like an ‘individual’ in the Western sense than those of his countrymen who are householders, and thus trapped in the hierarchy of

caste. To me, the social position of the renouncer seems a lot less clear than it does to Dumont. As previously argued,¹⁷⁹ I find that Dumont's opposition between caste society and renunciation fails to match the real world. Despite the ideal prescriptions, renouncers in real life are not always fully detached from the hierarchy of caste. Dumont claims that the renouncer reminds him of the Western individual because (s)he 'thinks as an individual' – and it is 'this distinctive trait which opposes him to the man-in-the-world and brings him closer to the western thinker' (ibid.:275). It is also of importance to Dumont that the renouncer 'depends upon no one but himself, he is alone' (ibid.:274). As my experience with renouncers indicates that the latter is not always the case, I find it hard to agree with Dumont in this particular view. I believe that only in rare cases do renouncers escape from caste society into solitude; rather, the majority is absorbed into a monastic group or a less formal group of devotees surrounding a guru. By taking *saṃnyās*, quite a few renouncers seem to be not only guaranteed the good death but also permission to stay in ashrams, where they are assured both lodging, food and also the company of other *sādhus*. Gross's description of the ascetic initiation as, structurally, a 'rebirth' into a new corporate group, supports my view. The 'rebirth' provides the ascetic disciple with a new 'father' (the guru) and absorbs him or her into 'an alternate "family" and "extended kin unit," the sectarian ascetic community' (Gross 1992:159). The 'reborn' *sādhu* also becomes linked to the ancestors of his sect, 'i.e., the spiritual lineage or descent group composed of a line of gurus tracing their descent from the *Adi-guru*, the original founder-guru of the sect' (ibid.).¹⁸⁰ On the whole, I can see no reason to perceive *sādhus*, in general, as being 'alone'.

Dumont further claims that in leaving the world, the renouncer 'finds himself invested with an individuality which he apparently finds uncomfortable since all his efforts tend

¹⁷⁹ See chapter one, 'Beyond caste?'

¹⁸⁰ I also find it worth mentioning that some of the monastic orders, for example the Ramakrishna Mission, both have a solid internal structure and are well integrated among ordinary householders. When speaking of renouncers within these monastic orders, there is, in my view, even less reason to consider them as 'alone' than there is when speaking of renouncers within other, less structured monastic orders.

to its extinction or its transcendence' (Dumont 1980:274-75). To Dumont, this implies that the renouncer 'thinks as an individual' – 'and this is the distinctive trait which opposes him to the man-in-the-world and brings him closer to the western thinker' (ibid.:275). S.J. Tambiah finds Dumont's branding of the renouncer as 'a quintessential "individual"' (Tambiah 1981:310) somewhat problematic as individualism in the Western sense relates to 'individuals who are "men-in-the-world", who combine to further their individual worldly purposes, and who have distinctive life cycles and careers'; conversely, 'the classical Indian renouncer is outside society and outside the world' (ibid.:310). In the light of this, Tambiah wonders in what sense the renouncer approximates the Western conception of the individual, 'when his life is dedicated to the eradication of 'self' [...] and the seeking of liberation which destroys any vestige of selfhood as an enduring ontological entity?' (ibid.:310). Øyvind Jaer raises a similar objection: 'In opposition to the individualistic individual trying to *increase* his self and his property, often at the expense of society at large, the ideal sadhu is a mystic, striving to *decrease* his self and his property towards the final extinction of individuality in the Absolute' (Jaer 1987:355). These objections are fully in accordance with my point of view, and in particular with the argumentation of the previous chapter where I showed that renouncers not only sacrifice bodily desires, but also aim at extinguishing every sense of self and every aspect of individuality. This self-annihilation is also visible in the way, at the time of taking saṁnyās, the novice is stripped of every aspect of his former identity and enrolled into a 'communitas' – a 'community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (Turner 1991:96).

In order to achieve the ultimate aim of final release (mokṣ), Hindu renouncers have sacrificed their former, individual identity for a collective one. To succeed in this, they should also sacrifice their sense of self and individuality, as only then are they free from all bondage. Accordingly, the ascription of a collective identity at the cost of an individual, personal identity, should be understood as one of the preconditions for a sādhu to achieve his aim.

THE WEST AND THE REST

As mentioned above, to some extent Louis Dumont founds his ideas of individuality on the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies. In traditional societies ‘the stress is placed on society as a whole, as collective Man’ (Dumont 1980:9):

[...] the ideal derives from the organization with respect to its ends (and not with respect to individual happiness); it is above all a matter of order, of hierarchy; each particular man in his place must contribute to the global order, and justice consists in ensuring that the proportions between social functions are adapted to the whole. (ibid.:9)

According to Dumont, in ‘modern society’ the ‘Human Being’, on the contrary, is ‘regarded as the indivisible, “elementary” man, both a biological being and a thinking subject. Each particular man in a sense incarnates the whole of mankind. He is the measure of all things (in full and novel sense)’ (ibid.:9). As we have already seen, Dumont also distinguishes between two meanings of ‘the individual’: ‘the particular, empirical man and man as a bearer of value’ (ibid.:16). He argues that for sociological comparison, ‘only the individual in the full sense of the term must be taken as such, and another word should be used to designate the empirical aspect’ (Dumont 1980:9). Following this advice one will, according to Dumont, ‘avoid inadvertently attributing the presence of the individual to societies in which he is not recognized, and also avoid making him a universal unit of comparison or element of reference’ (ibid.:9). Hereby, he argues, ‘to consider Indian ideas from the point of view of the individual-in-the-world, which is the spontaneous western point of view, is to run the risk of obscuring and limiting them’ (Dumont 1960:47). He claims we will be better off by remembering that ‘these ideas have two facets’; ‘one for the man-in-the-world, who is not an individual, the other for the renouncer, who is an individual-outside-the-world’ (ibid.:47).

One of Dumont’s critics in this matter is Mattison Mines. Mines seems to have no sympathy with Dumont’s claim that the term ‘individual’ should be academically

applied only when the idea of the individual is valued in a society (Mines 1994). Rather, he criticises Dumont for presuming that ‘the idea of the individual can have only one valued manifestation – that of Western individualism’ (ibid.:5). Unless the idea of the individual is valued as such, the term should, according to Dumont, not be used. At this point, Mines raises the question: ‘[...] what if Indians recognize individuality, but do not value individualism?’ (ibid.:5-6). To Dumont, though, there seems to be no difference between individuality and individualism. As Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing (2000) point out, ‘it is from Durkheim’s French followers, especially Mauss and Dumont, that a narrative which conflates individualism with individuality has been propagated and elaborated’ (Rapport and Overing 2000:179). They raise a warning finger against confusing these two concepts (individualism and individuality), ‘difficult though it has been to separate their definition and implication in anthropologists’ work’ (ibid.:178). According to Rapport and Overing, individualism can be defined as pertaining to ‘a particular historico-cultural conceptualization of the person or self’ (ibid.:178). They include in this conceptualisation notions of ‘the ultimate value and dignity of the human individual, his moral and intellectual autonomy, his rationality and self-knowledge, spirituality, right to privacy, self-sovereignty and self-development, and his voluntary contracting into a society, market and polity’ (ibid.:178). Individuality, on the other hand, they describe as referring to ‘the universal nature of human existence whereby it is individuals who possess agency’ (ibid.:178). Like Mines, then, Rapport and Overing consider individuality as a universal aspect of humanity, independent of whether the society the individuals are part of values individualism: ‘[...] this individuality of consciousness and agency is current whatever the acceptance of individualism as a cultural norm’ (ibid.:179). The idea that individuality lacks importance in Indian social life, is by Mines described as ‘a key tenet of Western social science lore about India’ (Mines 1994:2). From his research among Tamils in South India, Mines has come to understand that, although Tamil individuality in several aspects is distinct from Western notions of the individual, one has to admit that Tamils ‘do recognize individuality as an essential feature of ordinary life; that individuality lies at the very

crux of a Tamil's sense of self, as well as his or her sense of others; and that individuality plays a vital role in civic life' (ibid.:2).



Plate 52

The Other

According to some of his critics, Dumont has turned the Indian person into 'the Other' – 'the antithesis of the Western individual' (Mines 1994:6) – in his effort to see the Indians from 'the natives' point of view'. Mattison Mines criticises not only Dumont, but also McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden of making the same mistake:

Like Dumont, then, but for different reasons, Marriott and his followers contend that it is inappropriate to refer to Indians as individuals. To do so, they feel, is to be guilty of ethnocentrism because the very notion of the individual is alien to Indian senses of the person. So, like Dumont, Marriott and Inden too create a notion of the Indian subject that is the antithesis of the Western individual. Indian and Western subjects exhibit no similarities. (ibid.:6)

As mentioned in chapter one, this criticism is shared by Peter Van der Veer – who sees Dumont as yet another member of the academic community holding an orientalist perspective (Van der Veer 1988). Characteristic of this orientalist perspective is a

stress on values and traditions enshrined in the ancient Sanskrit texts. According to Van der Veer, the orientalist perspective has above all led to ‘a picture of Indian society as static, timeless and spaceless, and dominated by the Brahmans as guardians of the sacred order of society’ (ibid.:53). He suggests an alternative argument where the study of textual Hinduism is included as a tool, but where nothing can replace ‘the direct observation of religious practices, the competition in the various arenas and the shifts in the projection of religious identity, as major sources of anthropological information’ (ibid.:268).

Øyvind Jaer, in an effort to explain Dumont’s creation of the Indian individual as an antithesis to the Western individual, points to what he perceives as incongruities in Dumont’s analytical perspective. According to Jaer, Dumont seems to consider the western individual in an emic perspective, whereas in analysing the caste Hindu (the householder) and the renouncer he turns to an etic perspective. ‘He does not ask how the renouncers and caste Hindus understand themselves and each other. Dumont identifies them simply as substance and structure’ (Jaer 1983:263). By pointing at what he calls ‘shortcomings’, Jaer blames Dumont for not being able to differentiate between the ideology of holism and the individuals and groups encompassed by this ideology. I understand this critique as being in agreement with the critique raised by Peter van der Veer to Dumont’s theories of the renouncer and with what Van der Veer sees as a gap between Dumont’s abstract theories and Indian social reality. For instance, in discussing the Ramanandis (who are Vaiṣṇav sādhus and thereby often referred to by the term *tyāgī*) Van der Veer argues: ‘First of all, the tyagi may “leave” ordinary society, but only for another type of society. He is never the “world renouncer” who is the subject of Dumont’s abstract theories’ (Van der Veer 1988:108). The critical comments forwarded by Jaer and Van der Veer refer to the level of abstraction in Dumont’s theories – his one-sided focus on ideas and ideology. Related to this criticism are the arguments of Mines and of Rapport and Overing regarding the necessity to distinguish between individuality and individualism. Mines, on the basis of his research among Tamils, describes them as having ‘a strong sense of individuality, but no abstract notion of the individual’ (Mines 1994:200) – a way of

thinking which, Mines suggests, ‘creates something of a paradox for the Westerner’ (ibid.:200). Mines believes that the lack of an abstract notion of the individual would cause many Tamils to give a negative response if they were asked ‘whether or not the individual is important to a characterization of society’ (ibid.:200). However, if this hypothetical Tamil were instead asked ‘whether who a person is and what he does is important to an understanding of society’ (ibid.:200), the answer would most probably be exactly the opposite – ‘obviously so’ (ibid.:200):

Elaborating, he might add that each person is distinct, an aggregate of manifest qualities and has his or her own nature. Each is an agent with his or her own responsibilities and roles, goals, achievements, and reputation; an agent who naturally interacts with and affects society in his or her particular manner. (ibid.:200)

Rapport and Overing see ‘individuality of consciousness and agency’ as ‘current whatever the acceptance of individualism as a cultural norm’ (Rapport and Overing 2000:179). They are, however, aware that in ‘much anthropological writing on individualism [...], a conflation is apparent’ (ibid.:179):

The study of the conceptualization of the person and his behaviour in a particular socio-cultural milieu spills over into a positing of the nature of the individual actor, also socio-culturally specified. The society or culture to which the individual actor belongs is looked to as the source of his agency, the origin of action and its interpretation; individuality, in short, is depicted as much prone to the vagaries of socio-cultural fashion as individualism. (ibid.:179)

To avoid this conflation, priority should be given to the individual agent rather than to the social system he is part of. As Alan Macfarlane (1970) put it: ‘[...] “individuals and their attitudes, their assumptions and mental life” should not lose out to macro-social (statistical, material, collectivist) “facts” (1970:3)’ (in Rapport and Overing 2000:184).

The stories people tell about their own lives – their life histories, or narratives – represent one approach through which individuals can be given priority over the social and collective. In this respect, I find one of Nigel Rapport’s formulations irresistibly precise:

Rather than according primacy to cultural or linguistic reality, *à la* Geertz (Durkheim, Saussure, Lacan *et al.*), then, rather than conceiving of the individual being inscribed into, necessarily accommodating to, a pre-given socio-cultural reality, an appreciation of the way individuals ongoingly write their own worlds must give onto a different picture. (Rapport 1997:63)

The way individuals ongoingly write their own worlds is a matter of major concern also to Mattison Mines. Mines not only describes what is known about ‘the public person’ – ‘the external manifestations of who a person is’ (Mines 1994:149) but also sees a potential to explore from the narrative ‘the private self – the personal thoughts and aspirations of an individual’ (ibid.:149). ‘What does the Tamil individual look like to his or her own mind’s eye?’, Mines asks (ibid.:149) and reminds the reader of the importance of bringing clearly to mind that ‘the manifested public individual (what is known about an individual), the social being (the fabric of the individual’s social ties), and the inner voice, are components and dimensions of everyone’s individuality’ (ibid.:149). Mines stresses that only by listening to the stories people tell about their own lives can we notice the interconnectedness and interaction taking place among these three aspects of the individual. To ignore these personal stories, Mines warns us, is equal to ignoring ‘the articulation of self, culture, and society’ – aspects that make ‘each person unique and individuation possible’ (ibid.:149); and not only that, ‘we also deny the active agency of the subject in the making of culture, society, and consciousness’ (ibid.:149-50).

Rādhe Śyām Dās, a Vaiṣṇav sādhu I met in an ashram in Assi ghāṭ, said: ‘Sādhus have different minds, different views and ideas. All sādhus are not the same.’ This statement was further confirmed to me through the stories other sādhus shared with me about their lives. Although they all, in one way or the other, expressed an identification with ideals embedded in Hindu scriptures, they nevertheless had their own, individual reasons to lead the particular kind of life they did.

A CHARACTER WITH MANY FACES

Svāmī Devendrānand Giri, during one of our meetings in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram in 1998, endeavoured to me the multitude of motives and reasons, ways of living and thinking, present among Indian sādhus today. At the time, there were nine sādhus in the ashram. One of these, who by then had been in the ashram for three years, had previously been a married man. In order to take saṁnyās, he had left his wife and his children. Svāmī Devendrānand Giri remarked: ‘His choice is different from mine, his story is a different story.’ Another was Svāmī Devendrānand Giri’s guru. He had left home more than fifty years before, when he was only twelve years old. Svāmī Devendrānand Giri said: ‘His story is different; his goal may also be different. I left my home when I was twenty-one years old; Gurujī left home when he was twelve years old, and the sādhu that I previously mentioned did so when he was sixty-six years old. Because of this our stories and our goals may not merge.’

Miller and Wertz conclude their descriptions of the monks and monasteries of Bhubaneswar by pointing to the diversity of ascetic practices which, they say, ‘permits a flexibility that can be rationalized by appeals to an equally diverse philosophical and religious tradition’ (Miller and Wertz 1976:195). Drew Stuart concludes his essay about contemporary sādhu practice by describing the sādhus as ‘a disorganized and highly diverse group of liminal individuals, living in one way or another on the fringe of mainstream Indian culture’ (Stuart 1995:58). He explains that ‘their intentions and activities vary greatly, but share the characteristic of remaining more or less free from the influence of an outward authority’ (ibid.:58). Kirin Narayan gives an almost visual description of this diversity:

There is no overarching structure to monitor all these kinds of ascetics spread through the subcontinent, and even within the same sect or monastery *sādhus* may display a marked individuality. There are naked *sādhus* and ochre-clad *sādhus*; *sādhus* with matted hair, and those with shining bare scalps; poor, wandering *sādhus* and jet-set, Rolls Royce–transported

sādhus; *sādhus* who interact with a handful of Indian villagers, and *sādhus* who hold forth to audiences of thousands in New York or Switzerland. (Narayan 1989:66)

As I concluded by saying in chapter six, any claim to depict this kaleidoscopic reality as a logically coherent whole would have to be labelled as a contradiction in terms. Equally pointless, and doomed to failure, would be an effort to represent this reality in a way doing justice to every part of it. To quote A.M. MacIver: ‘Generalisations are true or false in proportion as they represent or misrepresent all the individual doings and happenings’ (in Rapport 1997:12). Instead of giving priority to a whole rather than its parts – to a social system rather than the individual actors making it up – I will suggest an approach where the main priority is given to the individual agent, and where the social system is seen as a set of values (cultural, religious, moral) to which individuals refer themselves and their ways of life. In this view, the social system should be understood as an underlying whole helping individuals define, legitimate, and understand themselves and the kind of life they are leading. The *sādhus*, we have seen, tend to legitimate their decision to renounce the world by reference to values embedded in Indian (Hindu) society. However, I find that despite this apparently shared set of values, the *sādhus* reveal a striking individual creativity and variety. This all makes me agree with Wendy Sinclair-Brull’s suggestion indicating that, as an ‘individual-outside-the-world’, the renouncer exists ‘only in the realm of folklore’ (Sinclair-Brull 1997:242): ‘He is “of such stuff as myths are made” [sic]. The bold, independent *saṃnyāsin*, who truly has no thought for caste, kin, status, or concerns for ritual purity, must be exceedingly rare’ (ibid.:242). Sinclair-Brull suggests that Dumont’s theories of the renouncer have so far remained undisturbed ‘through the power of the mystique surrounding the *saṃnyāsin*, and the lack of ethnographical data of the *saṃnyāsin* within his social context’ (ibid.:2). However today, unlike the time in which Dumont developed the arguments and theories of *Homo Hierarchicus*, rich ethnographic data concerning *sādhus* are available. Consequently, there now seems to be a tendency to reconsider Dumont’s theories – his ideas and concepts. My contribution to this is an attempt to increase awareness of a different analytical approach. In this respect, I support Nigel Rapport’s way of describing (and

celebrating) ‘the individual, liberal-humanist subject [...] as seat of consciousness, as well-spring of creativity, as guarantor of meaning’ (Rapport 1997:7), contrasting ‘the *dissolved, decentred, deconstructed* individual actor and author as he or she appears in Durkheimian, Structuralist and Post-Structuralist schools of social science, especially as this “line of thought” has been developed during this century in France and imported into the British academy in certain predominant forms of sociology and social anthropology’ (ibid.:7). Rapport argues against these schools, as, he says: ‘I cannot find myself in their descriptions, and, with their anti-humanistic conceptualisations of others (as products and pawns of social structures or social relations, systems of signification, habituated practices of unconscious urges), I cannot see how I can be content to imagine others’ (ibid.:7).

Rapport and Overing (2000) consider it as ‘not good enough simply to say that only Western culture valorizes the concept of the individual (“individualism”) and therefore only in Western society do individuals act distinctively (“individuality”)’ (ibid.:185). ‘For’, they go on to say, ‘whether it is socio-culturally confirmed or not, the individual is the crucial actor in every social situation and individual consciousness the crucial factor in the interpretation of any cultural artefact’ (ibid.:185). Rapport and Overing also introduce what they call ‘to “decolonize” the individual human subject from its common anthropological representations’ (ibid.:194-95) – a process which, in short, implies ‘to liberate it both from overdetermining cultural conditions and overweening social institutions (discourse, language-game, collective representation, social relationship, *habitus*, praxis), and from their holistic and hegemonically minded social-scientific commentators’ (ibid.:194-95). This culminates in an argument saying that anthropological analysis should ‘retain respect for individual cognitive processes and, to this end, apprehend that ambiguous interface between aggregation and individuality’ (ibid.:195). Besides, individual agency,¹⁸¹ ‘which brings socio-cultural milieux to life’ (ibid.:195), should be taken into account with what they call ‘the common socio-cultural forms and practices by which individuals coordinate their

¹⁸¹ ‘[...] the capability, the power, to be the source and originator of acts’ (Rapport and Overing 2000:1)

activities and world-views within these milieux’ (ibid.:195). The aim of this decolonisation is to reach an anthropological appreciation ‘of socio-cultural milieux as encompassing and composed of individual difference, indeed, in a significant way constituted by it: by self-conscious individuals making an ongoing diversity of meaningful worlds’ (ibid.:195).

The *sādhu*, I have argued, is not necessarily an isolated ‘individual-outside-the-world’, but rather a figure carrying a wide span of characteristics and individual experiences. It is, I believe, in the sum of these characteristics and experiences one has to search to understand a particular *sādhu*’s reasons to live the kind of life he, or she, does. As Narayan says, ‘a *sādhu*’s attributes are not fixed but emerge in interaction with other characters’:

The *sādhu* acts in relation to householders and fellow ascetics. Even his solitude is defined in terms of society. Otherwise, he becomes part of a cluster of people in an ashram or sect: the follower of a Guru, or a Guru gathering disciples himself. He is no flat exemplar of the “mystical East” but a character with many faces. (Narayan 1989:232)

Throughout these pages I have wanted to convey individual portraits of some of the *sādhus* making up this ‘character with many faces’. While doing this portraying, I have come to know genuine Indian *sādhus* as constituting a kaleidoscopic group united by certain common characteristics, differentiated by others: united by their self-sacrificing search for mokṣ – ultimate release in a state of eternal peace and happiness; but yet again differentiated by their individual preferences as to why and how to reach this state. The arbitrary selection of *sādhus* presented over these pages is not, as I have already emphasised, meant to give any complete description of the lives of Indian *sādhus*. Rather, I have wanted to convey an idea of how some of these *sādhus* live, think, act, and argue. Such ideas about ‘the lives of strangers’ (Geertz 1973:16) should be seen as a way of bringing unknown worlds and lives closer and understanding them better. Ultimately, I see this as a contribution to a deconstruction of stereotypes and simplified categorisations in favour of a more dynamic representation of reality.

8. FACES

EPILOGUE



Plate 53

The Kumbh Melā

‘A CELEBRATION OF DIVINE MADNESS’

For six weeks,¹⁸² on the occasion of the Kumbh Melā, millions of people were gathered at Prayāg, the confluence of the three sacred rivers, Gaṅgā, Yamunā and the mythical Sarasvatī, in Allahabad. During a time span of twelve years, the Kumbh Melā, which has been called the world’s biggest religious festival, is arranged in four different places – Ujjain, Nasik, Haridvar and Allahabad (Prayāg). This year the constellation of the stars and planets was particularly auspicious; it was said that it will not occur exactly like this again for another 144 years. Sādhus and pilgrims, Bollywood and Hollywood stars, travellers and hippies all came to take part in this rare, auspicious occasion. Not only is the Kumbh Melā known as the world’s biggest congregation of people, it is also the biggest assembly of sādhus – ‘as sādhus from all over India arrive at the sprawling river banks on the eve of the Kumbha, to set up camp at the fair’s improvised township for the full tenure of the melā’ (Bedi and Bedi 1991:112). For sādhus, the Kumbh Melā serves a number of purposes. It represents, first of all, an auspicious occasion to bathe in the Saṅgam and to absorb the spiritual forces gathered at this pilgrimage place. Further, the Kumbh Melā is the time when a number of monastic groups and orders elect organisational leaders among themselves and arrange political and practical discussions about other important matters. Also, the Kumbh Melā offers a good opportunity for sādhus to meet with friends and acquaintances, to get new disciples, and also to earn some money by offering their services to devotees. Bedi and Bedi describe how, for centuries, the Kumbh Melā has been a meeting place for sādhus from all over India:

It is said that Ādi Shankarāchārya, father-figure of the revival of Vedic Hinduism in the 8th century, advised the four pontiffs of the four principal monastic seats – known themselves as Shankarāchāryas; after their inspirational guru, Shankara the First Teacher – that they must without fail meet at the Kumbh Melā, to discuss the affairs of their respective *mathas* (monastic seats) and the progress of their work and attend to theological issues. (ibid.:112)

¹⁸² From January 9th to February 21st, 2001.

On no other occasion are such enormous numbers of sādhus congregated in one place. For this reason, I realised that the Kumbh Melā was a unique opportunity to bring my research to a close, as here I was given the opportunity to observe, in all its splendour, the rich variety of, and among, Indian sādhus. In visiting the Kumbh Melā my idea was not to do a full study of the melā but simply to gather information on the basis of which I could write an epilogue, a concluding remark, so to speak. Because I had only a limited amount of time and energy to invest in the melā, I decided to see it not only through my own eyes but also through articles printed in the English-language Indian media. The epilogue should be read accordingly, and not taken as a full and just description of the Kumbh Melā.

The modern city of Allahabad was crowded with pilgrims and journalists, and so was Kumbh Nagar, the temporary township constructed at the melā area. The average pilgrim, a majority of whom were barefoot, had to cover the distance from the railway or bus station to the Saṅgam, the confluence of the three sacred rivers, on foot. Relatives or neighbours walked in big groups. Fearful of losing sight of each other in the crowds, some had tied pieces of their clothes together. On their heads and in their hands the pilgrims carried what they expected to need for their entire stay. Suitcases and bags were filled with clothes and cooking equipment, rice, flour, oil and vegetables. These pilgrims represent the great majority of the Indian population – poor, pious farmers from the innumerable villages and small towns spread all over India. On several occasions we found ourselves in the middle of these crowds of wandering pilgrims – either aiming for or returning from a holy bath in, or near, the Saṅgam. To bathe here during the Kumbh Melā is said to wash away all sins from the countless lives of the past. Among the pilgrims there were also people who were better off economically. A number of these had special permits which allowed them to go by car almost all the way to the Saṅgam. Despite the obvious differences in social and economic position among the pilgrims, they all shared – spiritually or otherwise – a desire to be part of this enormous gathering and to bathe in the Saṅgam. Beyond this, I believe every pilgrim had his own personal and individual motives or reasons to take part. Some, I suppose, came because they, and possibly also their ancestors, had

always done so. Others came because they saw it as part of their dharma, their religious duty. Again others came to receive forgiveness for sins, to see their guru, or, like me, out of curiosity.

‘I have come to celebrate divine madness!’ Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī, or Śāntjī as he calls himself, exclaimed. We were seated in the sun, below his ashram, the Handia Bābā Yoga Lodge, in Allahabad. Only a few hundred metres below us was the melā ground, where millions of sādhus and pilgrims were gathered. The loudspeakers constantly filled the air with bhajans and messages to the visitors; people who had gone missing; trains that were about to depart; auspicious times for bathing, etc.¹⁸³ The sun was warm, and Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī was sitting on a bed, wearing only his underwear. One of his devotees was giving him a massage, using coconut oil. The oil made Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī’s body shine in the sun. ‘This kind of congregation helps to unite the divine energies and makes it possible for the religious seeker to celebrate divine madness. The purpose of life is to get into this energy field of divine madness’, Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī said. I remarked that I found it interesting that he used the word madness; ‘divine madness’, he corrected, and added: ‘Divine madness is the kind of madness that makes you free from your individual self – as an owner, as someone who can feel guilty or proud of anything. It is God living through you – you are out of the picture, and once you are out of the picture there is only divine celebration and divine madness.’

For the last twenty years Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī has been living in the USA, but he usually comes to India for the Kumbh Melā: ‘I like this kind of congregation, so I usually come. I don’t necessarily stay for the whole melā, but generally I do.’ I was

¹⁸³ Bedi and Bedi (1991) describes Kumbh Nagar, the ‘town’ constructed to accommodate the pilgrims staying at the Kumbh Melā, as ‘as close to an ethereal inhabitation of the gods as the common Hindu can imagine. Over-crowded, congested and chaotic on the surface, its life is held together by an inner unity of thought and emotion. While public address systems and radios blare in their own stratosphere, the dominant mood of worship and reverence is sustained by the public recitals of the scriptures, the singing of hymns and *bhajan*s in praise of God, the chants of the sādhus, the constant fires of the *dhūnī*, the ritual sounds of the conch and the nāgaphanī. Prayer and worship are at a premium at the Kumbha Melā and from within that aura emanates a sense of brotherhood that keeps the multitudes together’ (Bedi and Bedi 1991:126).

curious to know whether he believed the average sādhu shared his view of the melā: ‘No, they will think quite differently’, he said, and went on to explain:

They will think it is liberation, heaven and grace involved, and that it is important to take a dip in the Saṅgam [the point where the three auspicious rivers, Gaṅgā, Yamunā, and the mythological, invisible Sarasvatī,¹⁸⁴ meet]. I hold a more casual attitude. I do not go for a dip every day and all that. Sometimes I do, but not daily. My Gurujī, Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī,¹⁸⁵ who is no more, was also not so particular about ritual acts like taking dips in the holy river, etc.

An example of the immense powers ascribed to a bath at the Saṅgam during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad was given in an article printed by *The Times of India* (January 25, 2001) under the heading ‘Sinner’s chant: Father, forgive us’. The article describes the story of Sirohi, a pilgrim who had come to the melā to take a bath. Sirohi, however, was no ordinary pilgrim. Six years ago he murdered a man, a priest, but not until recently did he admit his crime. He has come to the Kumbh Melā to atone for his sin, as it has now begun to bother his conscience. ‘I thought this would be one solid way of beginning life afresh, as only God could be considered more pious than a priest’, he said. The penance he had imposed on himself was to bathe in the holy waters on the most auspicious day of the Kumbh Melā. In this way he hoped to get ‘forgiveness from the Final Judge’ (*The Times of India*, January 25, 2001:1). “‘That’s one court everyone has to face. Also, the only one where there are no acquittals on technical grounds,” he said, after finishing his rituals’ (ibid.:1).

The Ramakrishna Mission shares some of Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī’s casual attitude as to the meaning of the Kumbh Melā. One of the svāmīs of the Ramakrishna Mission in Varanasi with whom we discussed this, explained to us in a simple way Ramakrishna’s attitude to the Kumbh Melā: ‘Ramakrishna told, and we believe, that

¹⁸⁴ ‘The Sangam is the point where the Jamuna and the Ganges meet. A third river, the Saraswati, is also said to have flowed into the Sangam, but there is no sign of it today, nor is there any record of when or how it disappeared’ (Tully 1991:87).

¹⁸⁵ Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand Sarasvatī was, until he left his body, the mahant of the Yog-Vedānt Kuṭīr. The present mahant, Svāmī Ūṃānand (Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī’s guru-bhāī), is one of his disciples.

where people gather in the name of God, God is present. So, in his name – in the name of God – people come together.’ Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj)¹⁸⁶ offered a somewhat different, less intellectually founded, view: ‘Because all the gods come to the Kumbh Melā, wonders may happen. The divine forces gathered at the Kumbh attract people from all over India. The Kumbh Melā in Allahabad is the most important melā.’ Mahārāj participated in his first Kumbh Melā eighteen years ago. ‘That time I knew nothing about it’ he said. He was invited to go with some other sādhus; he bathed and did what the others did but at the time did not grasp the meaning of these acts. Mahārāj recalled that because everybody talked about the Kumbh Melā, he was curious to see for himself what it was like. Mahārāj also explained the Kumbh Melā as an opportunity for common people to be in the presence of sādhus and to receive their blessings. In this way people are granted a part of the merit the sādhus have earned by studying the scriptures and practising tapasyā. He further explained that the time when the Kumbh Melā is arranged is regarded as very auspicious. For this reason, it is also considered auspicious to become a sādhu (to take saṃskār) during this period. Because the Nāgās can only take saṃskār during the Kumbh Melā, this is of course especially important to them, but it is also important for sādhus in other monastic orders. ‘In fact’, Mahārāj said, ‘the real departure from saṃsār can only take place during the Kumbh Melā.’

In short, I believe this goes to prove that *India Today* is right in saying that the Kumbh Melā, like ‘anything quintessentially Indian, means different things to different people’ (*India Today*, January 22, 2001:51). The Kumbh Melā, *India Today* went on to say, is ‘a grand sweep of Indian civilisation, culture and, to an extent, commerce. Almost by definition it is a mass phenomenon. A festival that involves 70 million pilgrims over 44 days can scarcely be described otherwise’ (ibid.:51). Not everybody who comes to the Kumbh Melā does so ‘with the sole motive of praying to Ma Ganga and bathing in her, now alas mudded, waters in an act of purification’, *India Today* stated (ibid.:51):

¹⁸⁶ See chapter two (‘The making of a nāgā’) and three (‘A sādhu in saṃsār’) where his life history is presented in greater detail.

‘The Kumbh is exotica for the West, entertainment for the media and employment, admittedly seasonal, for literally thousands of people in Allahabad and beyond’ (ibid.:51).



Plate 54

IMMORTALITY

Mark Tully wisely wrote: ‘The history of the Kumbh Mela – like the history of all things Hindu – is not entirely clear and is therefore fiercely debated by historians and theologians’ (Tully 1991:87-88). ‘Kumbh’ is both the word for the sign Aquarius and the word for water-pot – hereby, the Kumbh Melā derives its name both from the constellation Aquarius and from the pot (Kumbh) of ambrosia (amrit), known from Hindu mythology. The myth says that the gods and the demons at the beginning of time together churned the ocean of milk to extract an elixir, known as amrit, which would confer immortality: ‘Though the gods had agreed to share this with the demons, they absconded with the pot containing the precious fluid. They fled over the course of

twelve days (twelve days of the gods are twelve human years) and over the course of this time the amrit spilled on four places on earth: Allahabad, Hardwar, Ujjain, and Nasik' (<http://www.smsu.edu/relst/background.html>). Because the flight lasted for twelve human years, the Kumbh Melā is celebrated within a cycle of twelve years in these four pilgrim centres, each following its own twelve-year cycle. Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī made the following remark to this mythological story: 'I like the story in the sense that it brings us together. Whether it is right or wrong does not matter to me. Take for instance the mythological stories of Christmas. As far as Santa Claus is concerned, it is a beautiful story and it also makes children look forward to something. In this respect, I am also very happy with the mythological story of the Kumbh Melā.'

According to most sources, the first written record of what appeared to be a Kumbh Melā is to be found in the journal of the seventh-century Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsiang who apparently found half a million people gathered at Prayāg to bathe in the rivers (Tully 2001).¹⁸⁷ Of the four Kumbh Melās, the melā in Allahabad is considered the most significant and draws by far the largest crowd (Bedi and Bedi 1991).

THE GREATEST SPECTACLE OF FAITH

Torbjørn Færøvik describes his journey by train to the Kumbh Melā in Haridvar in 1998: 'Half an hour before departure, the night-train to Haridvar was bursting to the last toilet. Anyone who is called by nature has to capitulate here and now. Hygienic solutions are non-existent. [...] We are off and on our way into the north-Indian night, twenty-six wagons, packed with wisdom of life achieved the hard way. [...] Sādhus surrounding me have adopted their positions for the night. Some are fast asleep, skinny and exhausted, with dirty robes and big feet with thick leather-like skin. Others sit with

¹⁸⁷ *Outlook* (January 29, 2001) quoted the writer Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who said: 'The Kumbh is just a village fair, but this Mahakumbh idea is a bit of a joke, simply an exercise in marketing.' According to him, Hiuen Tsiang never mentioned the Kumbh and there is no evidence to show it has existed from time immemorial (ibid.:69).

their eyes closed and their feet crossed and mumble incomprehensible verses. A white-haired old man spends the night talking to the paraffin lamp he has brought along; another practices yoga postures in between the fire-fighting equipment and the water tank' (Færøvik 1999:390-91, my translation). Our approximately nine-hour long journey to Allahabad took place during daytime, in an ordinary second class compartment. The train was crowded, but not all the passengers were going to the Kumbh Melā. A man and his son who were in the same compartment, told us they were going to Allahabad but not to take part in the Kumbh Melā. Although they were Hindus, they appeared to have a somewhat ironic attitude to the festival. There were others, however, in our compartment travelling with the Kumbh Melā as their final destination. Among these were a sādhu dressed in saffron and two young boys who seemed to be his disciples. They brought with them two huge, saffron-coloured loudspeakers, obviously with the intention of contributing to information and enlightenment at the melā. During most of the journey the sādhu rested on his upper berth. His disciples shared a lower berth and were heavily wrapped in blankets during the journey's cold morning hours. When we arrived at Allahabad Junction, the chaos of the Kumbh Melā was already visible. Crowds of pilgrims walked along the roads, covering by foot a distance of several kilometres to reach Kumbh Nagar. What we had not yet realised at the time was that the crowds would increase day by day. After a brief stay, we left Allahabad and did not return until the main bathing day, two weeks later. Now, in all of Allahabad, there was a complete lack of hotel rooms. At several hotel-receptions people were fighting over double and triple-booked rooms; these were people who had come all the way from Mumbai and Calcutta, even abroad, with the sole purpose of observing this event. In the streets, crowds of pilgrims and sādhus were moving either from the railway station towards the melā area, or returning towards the railway or bus station after having completed their auspicious act of bathing at the Saṅgam. Since our first visit, the distance pilgrims had to cover in order to reach the Saṅgam had increased, and no wheeled transportation was allowed within a fixed area. From this limit onwards, no mode of transportation other than one's own feet was available. For the ordinary pilgrims, especially those who were old and frail, these additional kilometres seemed hard to bear. An old sādhu that we met was

struggling with his heavy bag and obviously had a hard time returning from the melā area to the railway station. We could not help feeling sorry for him and gave him money to cover the remaining distance by rickshaw. Our donation must have moved the humble sādhu, and before our paths separated he blessed us.



Plate 55

One of the web-pages of the government of Uttar Pradesh, the state hosting the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad, describes the melā in Allahabad as ‘the biggest spectacle of faith and symbolic of [...] global village, wherein different cultures, different religions, different schools of thought come together and discuss and share information and knowledge’ (<http://www.kumbhaldupgovtindia.org/aboutkumbh.htm>). The melā is even described as being ‘[...] like an open university on religion’ (ibid.) The Kumbh Melā, the web-page goes on to say, ‘does not belong to any particular religion, caste or creed, rather it symbolizes the main spirit of Indian culture and thought. For such a sea of humanity to converge at a point of known attraction, the reason cannot be attributed to a mere myth. Kumbh Mela is a cultural festival, which symbolizes the stability and integrity of the Indian Nation’ (ibid.). According to Bedi and Bedi, the Kumbh Melā, by them called ‘the greatest religious fair on earth’ (Bedi and Bedi 1991:41), is often

described as ‘the parliament of sādhus’ as it attracts sādhus from all parts of India and abroad (ibid.:41). ‘It is at the Kumbha Melā that the diversity and the magnitude of the sadhuic way of life is perceptibly reflected’ (ibid.:41). Bedi and Bedi also explain that in ancient times, according to some scholars, ‘the gatherings of the sādhus at the Kumbh Melās were reflective of the socio-religious needs of a nation that had no maps and no means of quick communication across a length of 240,000 kilometres and a width of 16,000 kilometres, whose population was divided by a multitude of tongues’ (ibid.:112). As emphasised by Dolf Hartsuiker (1993), a Kumbh Melā is a very social occasion, but not only that: ‘Sādhus who have not seen each other in years meet again. The brotherhood is re-united and everybody enjoys the exponentially increased spiritual atmosphere. Important decisions will be taken. Sādhus will be promoted in rank and thousands of novices will be initiated, most of them young boys, but also some older men. Some Sādhus will undergo their second initiation, renew a vow, start a particular austerity or end it’ (ibid.:106).

India Today described the Kumbh Melā in this way: ‘It’s the greatest spectacle of faith on Earth: India’s divine diversity in the digital age, staged by its saints and sadhus and sinners and millions of nirvana seekers’ (*India Today*, January 22, 2001:46). They went on to say:

It’s the rite of immortality in the sacred water, semaphored by the full moon. At this moment of pre-dawn divinity, a multitude of bare bodies give themselves to the Mother River, only to emerge purified. The knowing Ganga, partially barricaded to control the frenzy of faith, receives the sin, and ensures salvation for the submerged souls. As the moon gives way to the sun, devotion, shivering in the sub-zero temperature, multiplies in the shimmering river, and on the sandy banks spreads a multicultural collage of the mundane and the magnificent, the eternal and the ephemeral, painted in the primary colours of celebration as well as submission. The sadhu, the saint, the sinner, the sinned, the voyeur, the karma junkie, the New Age yogi ... all of them have come together to turn the spiritual into a mahaspectacle of the millennium. Or, the Mahakumbha Mela. (ibid.: 48)

Another of the Indian newsmagazines, *Outlook*, described the Kumbh Melā as ‘a journey in search of lost time. A hunt for the eternal, which keeps slipping through

transient history's unsteady fingers like the sand that's everywhere on these 1,396 hectares, but comes back to you in cyclical apparitions' (*Outlook*, January 22, 2001:18):

From daybreak to dusk, everyday without fail, this elusive search goes on. So does the agreeable cacophony of festival crowds. Itinerant hawkers peddling flutes, marigold garlands, *chillum* (pipes), stones, reed mats, milk, cow dung, whatever. Hundreds of pilgrims getting lost and reuniting at the end of every day. Commandos combing the banks for explosives. Inside a tent, young ochre-robed sants jiving to Hindi ditties on a ghetto-blaster. Amid all this, a never-ending stream immersing itself at the mythic confluence of three rivers. (ibid.:18)

A third newsmagazine, *The Week*, described the great variety of the melā in this way:

As the millennium's first Mahakumbh gathers momentum, exotic scenes and personalities abound at Kumbh Nagar in Allahabad. Nagas proudly display their phallic power, ascetics from abroad wait for their burial (*samadhi*) and hi-tech sadhus flash their cellphones while their poor cousins smoke ghanja. Crowds mill around their camps, waiting for a darshan and blessing. Some astound people with their daring acts while some others hold people spellbound with their oratory. (ibid.:43)

January 24th, Maunī Amāvasyā, was regarded as the major and most auspicious bathing day during the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad. The auspicious time started in the afternoon (3.17 p.m.) the 23rd and lasted till the afternoon of the 24th (5.45 p.m.) (*The Pioneer*, January 25, 2001). Early in the morning on the 24th, the different monastic orders marched in a procession towards the Saṅgam to take their bath – the śāh snān, or royal bath. We started walking towards the Saṅgam before sunrise this morning, and we were not the only ones. There were people everywhere – mainly pilgrims who had probably just arrived, carrying heavy bags with whatever was required to spend some cold nights sleeping outside on the sandy banks of Prayāg.



Plate 56



Plate 57



Plate 58

EPILOGUE

When we finally reached the Saṅgam, I was already exhausted. It was going to get worse. We started crossing the sandy banks, trying to get close to the procession. Along the route of the processions, the crowds were immense. A fence was erected along the route, to keep out intruders. I tried to get close to the fence to take some photos, but it was an impossible task. At one time, I stumbled over a sack of rice and fell to the ground in the middle of this packed crowd. As I fought to get to the surface of the sea of human bodies, I realised how close I was to being suffocated – and even closer to having my camera smashed. I withdrew and was perfectly satisfied to watch the procession at some distance, over the heads of hundreds of devoted pilgrims.



Plate 59



Plate 60



Plate 61

The next day the procession was described in the following terms by *The Statesman*:

The auspicious time for the dip began yesterday afternoon but the real crowd gathered early this morning when priests, sadhus and mahants from thirteen Akharas led by the Maha Nirvani, Niranjani and Juna led a procession to the sangam for shahi snan. [...] Naga sadus displayed their martial skills as they led the high priests, whose name and order were displayed on banners. Band parties played songs from Hindi films [...]. Some leaders were carried in palanquins with gold-tinted chhatri (umbrella) by their followers, while others sat on tractor trolleys. Drums beat, trumpets blew and small brass bells jingled. Many jumped the barricades to collect marigold garlands left by the priests. As the Sadhus neared the sangam, they shouted *Har har mahadeva*. The high priests were followed by tens of thousands of supporters, praying and chanting hymns. Many danced before entering the waters. Oil lamps were floated on the waters. Pilgrims seemed happy. (*The Statesman*, January 25, 2001)

The Hindustan Times described how pilgrims camped on the roads leading to the Saṅgam and also how a large number of pilgrims were directed to take their bath at other locations along the rivers in order to relieve the pressure on the Saṅgam itself: ‘The diversion averted a stampede, though it caused a lot of inconvenience. Sukhdevi, a pilgrim from West Bengal, said it took almost 12 hours for her to reach the Sangam. She said her family members had lost their way as the police had forced the men to take another route’ (*The Hindustan Times*, January 25, 2001:1).

The scene of the Kumbh Melā on January 24th was described by *The Hindu* as a ‘mini-India’ (*The Hindu*, January 25, 2001:1), and a few days before *The Pioneer* expressed that the Kumbh Nagar ‘is in reality the face of rural India, unchanging and eternal’ (*The Pioneer*, January 20, 2001). I tend to agree with these descriptions, and my reason for doing so is that the Kumbh Melā in one way or the other made relevant a number of important issues debated within the greater India. These were, for instance, the contrasts between modern and traditional ways of relating to the world, inequality, communalism, and environmental challenges. On the basis of what took place at the Kumbh Melā, and with reference to the English-language Indian media, I will in the following try to shed light on some of these issues.

17,000 TOILETS, 15,000 STREET LIGHTS, 7,000 SWEEPERS

The arrangement of the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad is, in all respects, an impressively huge affair. As Mark Tully writes: ‘Running the Kumbh Mela is a gigantic task. It involves constructing a city in the beds of the two rivers. No work can start until the monsoon floods have receded and the sands have dried out’ (Tully 1991:93). Reports in Indian newsmagazines indicated that the arrangement this year had a budget of Rs 1,265 crore,¹⁸⁸ and with the help of this money ‘the vast sandy basin at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna’ was turned into an organised tented city (*India Today*, January 15, 2001:49). To have this city, called Kumbh Nagar, established, 140 km of makeshift roads were built, at least 30 permanent and temporary bridges were erected across the rivers, a hospital with 100 beds, more than a dozen primary health centres with 20 beds each, ‘special police headquarters, over 200 police posts¹⁸⁹ and marketplaces, all spread over 1,200 hectares’ (ibid.:49). Further:

Around 1,000 religious and cultural organisations have set up camps, each with its own electricity connection, drinking water and sewage disposal facilities. As many as 15,000 streetlights connected by over 450 km of electric cables will provide the lighting; 17,000 toilets and 50,000 trench latrines will take care of the sanitation and 7,000 sweepers will deal with the litter and garbage problem. To ensure proper connectivity, 5,000 temporary telephone connections have been provided, besides countless cellular phones and other wireless communication devices. Security precautions are equally elaborate and stringent. Additional Superintendent of Police Pushpak Jyoti says: ‘We shall employ sniffer dogs and use night-vision binoculars, besides regularly checking all the roads, ghats and bridges for mines and explosives.’ The army, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, the Border Security Force and the Intelligence Bureau have all been roped in to assure safety, especially in light of perceived terrorist threats. (ibid.:49)

¹⁸⁸ 1,265 crore is 12,650 million rupees – equivalent to (approximately) NOK 2,4 billion.

¹⁸⁹ ‘Several thousand policemen, armed with rifles and canes, innumerable squads of mounted police and large numbers of police-women are on round-the-clock duty. Fakes and impostors, thieves and pickpockets, lost children and helpless elders are but some of the commoner headaches the police has to contend with’ (Bedi and Bedi 1991:121-26).

As reported by Bedi and Bedi from the previous Kumbh Melā in Allahabad in 1989, the melā area also contained the following facilities: ‘Post and telegraph offices, telephone booths, police and fire brigade stations, banks, health clinics, water and electricity supply arrangements, grocery and provision stores, shops selling rosaries and beads, cycle stands, cultural centres, volunteer squads set up by political parties’ (Bedi and Bedi 1991:121) – all of which, they say, convert the riverbank ‘into a bustling, over-crowded town’ (ibid.:121).

VIRTUAL RELIGION

A new and global contribution to this year’s Kumbh Melā was the presence of internet-kiosks (or i-kiosks, as they were called by the Indian media). Under the headline ‘Ash, vermilion, saffron flags and now i-kiosks’, *The Sunday Times of India* (January 7, 2001) described the entry of modern communication technology into the traditional arena of the Kumbh Melā: ‘Spirituality and Silicon Valley appear all set to bridge the Great Digital Divide when 75 million people converge at Allahabad for the 2001 Maha Kumbh Mela on January 9’ (*The Sunday Times of India*, January 7, 2001). According to *The Sunday Times of India*, the Uttar Pradesh government’s information and publicity department ‘has joined hands with a dot-com and made elaborate arrangements to provide online information to visitors and India-watchers alike’ (ibid.). A total number of thirty-five such information kiosks were to be put up, twenty-five of these in the melā area itself and ten more in the city. The aim? – ‘to cater to the needs and interests of pilgrims, sadhus, NRIs,¹⁹⁰ foreign tourists and the media’ by offering ‘a history of the Kumbh in addition to spiritual messages, details about transport and accommodation, message boards, online scheduling, dates of important events, a media helpline and Hindi e-mail facilities’ (ibid.). *Outlook* described the event as ‘a heady cocktail of the mystifying past and the banal present. Solemn tradition and brash modernity are cheek-by-jowl, in a silent war of the ages

¹⁹⁰ Non-resident Indians.

[...]' (*Outlook*, January 22, 2001:18). Most of the pilgrims at the Kumbh Melā come from rural areas of India. With this in mind, efforts were made to spread the knowledge of technology which may benefit farmers and, in general, aspects of rural life. According to *The Pioneer*, the technologies were related to 'agriculture and allied sectors, water management, energy, construction, rural industries and others',¹⁹¹ and through this unique venture, 'the fruits of modern science and technology are sought to be popularised and made known to common people in a form that can be adopted by them too' (*The Pioneer*, January 31, 2001).

It may seem as quite a paradox that also sādhus, who represent the possibly most traditional sphere of Indian society, find modern technology fascinating. During the Kumbh Melā a number of media-reports showed sādhus either talking in their cell-phones, taking photographs, or video-filming the melā. *Outlook* mentioned especially 'the cellphone-toting monk, Amar Bharti', who is looking for a 'viewcam': 'An American disciple is pushing forward his guru's fancy to every foreign journalist who visits his camp. "Baba can afford to buy a second-hand one, if you are willing to sell it," he goes on. Why does baba require a viewcam? "It is to keep my disciples happy," he says. "They would love to see pictures of the Kumbh that I'll shoot while I stay here"' (*Outlook*, January 22, 2001:21). *The Sunday Times of India* printed a picture of a sādhu videotaping the melā with the title: 'Godmen go hi-tech' (*The Sunday Times of India*, January 21, 2001). In the accompanying article, called 'Virtual religion', it describes how, twelve years ago when the last Mahakumbh took place in Allahabad, 'there was no cable and satellite TV, the BBC, CNN and Channel Four were not sending camera teams to cover it, and there were no Internet websites offering a virtual *snaan*. Now we live in a media age and, no matter where you are, the event is brought to you so vividly that you can practically smell it' (ibid.). Regarding the sādhus, *The Sunday Times of India* suggested that rather than seeking out mountain retreats to

¹⁹¹ 'Among the more prominent ones are organic farming, low-cost nursery raising, solar energy, aquaculture, honey from wild bees, red-clay pottery, improved vegetable tanning, processing and preservation of fruits and vegetables' (*The Pioneer*, January 31, 2001).

meditate, these days ‘they hire satellite TV transponders and start up cable channels’ (ibid.):

And at the Kumbh, if newspaper reports are to be believed, sadhus pose for photographers and then thoughtfully hand out their visiting cards with a request that they be sent a copy of the published picture. Those are the more childlike sadhus. One of the savvy ones has printed posters of himself with his cellphone number and plastered the mela venue with them. Not what you might expect? Well, why should not godmen move with the times? (ibid.)

Another aspect of modern technology is that it apparently has made salvation more easily accessible – in fact, according to *The Times of India*, it is now only ‘a mouse-click away’ (*The Times of India* January 10, 2001:7). ICKCON (the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness) will, for an online donation of \$ 101 at their secured site, ‘send a pouch of the holy water collected from the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna, at the most auspicious time of the Kumbha Mela’ (ibid.:7). “‘By sprinkling a few drops of this holy water on your head, you will get the benefit of taking bath in the Sangam,’” says follower Bhima Das, in an e-mail message to the devotees across the world’ (ibid.:7).



Plate 62

‘KUMBH POLITICS HOTS UP’

During the Kumbh Melā *The Times of India* suggested that the melā, ‘besides being a global confluence of pilgrims and tourists also embodies a bubbly mix of divergent ideologies, conveyed to millions through *pravachans* or discourses being delivered by *swamis*, *gurus* and *babas* in the *mela* area’ (*The Times of India*, February 6, 2001:11). *The Times of India* gave examples of topics that seemed to be of concern to some of these gurus. One was said to have a daily discourse on revelation of the fundamental truths of life – for instance, that earthly life is just a cover worn by human beings, bound to be discarded with the passage of time. Another was eager to educate his devotees on ‘better management of their family ties, complexities in parenting, wealth and degrading human relationships’ (ibid:11). The quite famous ‘Pilot-Bābā’, a post-graduate in organic chemistry from Benares Hindu University and until 1971 a

squadron leader in the air force (*The Week*, January 28, 2001), was said to have held discourses on issues like religion, politics and national security: ‘He maintains that both religion and politics should be kept apart to ensure a country’s progress and security’ (*The Times of India*, February 6, 2001:11). Another well-known character among the sādhus represented at the Kumbh Melā was the London-based Maruti Rām Bābā. It was said that during the Kumbh Melā he elaborated the cause of karma: ‘Serving mankind is akin to serving the Lord, which helps one attain divine bliss. He asks people to refrain from indulging in unholy acts’ (ibid.:11). Other sādhus took the opportunity of putting across a political message – at this year’s melā as they did twelve years ago. That time Mark Tully observed a meeting arranged by the VHP, the Viśvā Hindu Pāriṣad (World Council of Hindus):

A thin sadhu with greying beard ranted over the loudspeaker system: ‘The Muslims stole all our temples. They stole our land. There is Inglistan for the English, Pakistan for the Muslims, there should be Hindustan for the Hindus. Now it is time to fight back. We should undo partition and make our beloved Bharat Mata, Mother India, one again. We will make every sacrifice to achieve our sacred end, to defend Hinduism, and to restore Bharat Mata. Raise your hands if you are ready to sacrifice your lives for Lord Ram!’ (Tully 1991:99)

At the Kumbh Melā, as in the greater Indian society, mega-bytes, web-pages, and virtual holy baths, coexisted with arguments over when and where Lord Rām was born, and whether and when a temple should be constructed on the site said, by some, to be the place of his birth – thousands of years ago. At the Kumbh Melā, the forces behind the latter were mainly represented by the VHP and its followers. This organisation co-ordinates the activities of different organisations and, during the last decade, has been known above all for its controversial campaign for converting Muslims and Christians, ‘and to pull down the mosques which it claims were built by Muslim rulers on the sites of Hindu temples they had destroyed’ (ibid.:98). During this year’s Kumbh Melā, new moves took place regarding the debated construction of a Rām temple in Ayodhya.¹⁹² The VHP, who kept a model of the temple in their camp,

¹⁹² See also ‘The case of Ayodhya’, chapter six.

arranged a meeting (Dharma Saṃsad¹⁹³) where it was agreed to announce a decree saying that all impediments towards construction of the temple should be removed by March 12, 2002. After the Dharma Saṃsad, *The Times of India* reported: ‘A preview of mass hysteria, which could be whipped up once again over Ayodhya, was on display on Friday at the opening session of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s *Dharam Sansad*. [...] The Vishwa Hindu Parishad on Friday gave the government an ultimatum that if the land in Ayodhya was not handed over to it by March 12, 2002, it would forcibly occupy it and begin construction’¹⁹⁴ (*The Times of India*, January 20, 2001:1). Five days later, *The Times of India* raised the question: ‘Whose *Dharam Sansad* is it?’: ‘What exactly is the *Dharam Sansad*? Who are its members? Are they elected or nominated? Who has vested this body with powers to speak and take decisions on behalf of the Hindus?’ (*The Times of India*, January 25, 2001). R.K. Bhargava, spokesman for the Congress party, is quoted to have asked: “‘Who has elected members to this self-declared *Dharam* parliament?’ [...] ‘I am a staunch Hindu, but I have not vested any organisation with powers to take decisions on my behalf on religious issues’” (ibid.). The president of the Congress party, Sonia Gandhi, visited the Kumbh Melā and took a so-called ‘half dip’. Her visit was widely speculated upon and debated in Indian media. Under the headline ‘Kumbh politics hots up’, *The Times of India* reported that the latest version indicated that the Congress president ‘might come to the city and, when stopped by the Mela administration, might go back, thus taking a slice of the *Hindutva*¹⁹⁵ glory from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’ (*The Times of*

¹⁹³ ‘Dharam Sansad’, or ‘Dharma Saṃsad’ as I have chosen to transcribe it, means ‘Religious Parliament’.

¹⁹⁴ Fortunately, India is blessed, also, with rational-minded people who speak up against VHP’s propaganda. In *The Hindu* (January 28, 2001:15) Neena Vyas writes: ‘Over 50 years, India has traversed a long way and established democratic norms in various spheres. If the courts can decide a dispute over who is the rightful Shankaracharya of the Shardapeeth in Dwarka – the matter is in court – then why can it not decide who a plot of some 2.6 acres belongs to? How can the VHP be allowed to say that its faith is above law?’ Neena Vyas goes on to say: ‘Even the most devout Hindu cannot be taken in by the VHP’s claim and propaganda that Lord Ram was born at the very spot at the very centre of the middle dome of what was once the Babri structure. To fix the exact location of Ram’s birth with such certainty can only take away from his divinity, it is an affront to human intelligence, and to that essential quality of all faith, its mystique. Ram will continue to live in that great epic, the Ramayana, and in the heart of every Indian, believer and non-believer, not in some temple in Ayodhya or elsewhere’ (ibid.:15).

¹⁹⁵ Hindu qualities; Hindu identity

India, January 22, 2001:1). ‘It does not take long to find out the politics of Sonia’s planned holy dip. The Shankaracharya [Swaroopanand of Dwarka] himself makes it very clear: [...] “The VHP wishes that there should be only one shop for the Hindus. [...] I don’t agree with it”’ (ibid.:1). One of the VHP spokesmen, Acharya Dharmendra, is reported to have ‘made a rabble rousing speech during the *Dharam Sansad* about Sonia being a Christian and how the country will be ruled by Christians if she becomes the PM’ (ibid.:1). Further, when asked about Sonia Gandhi’s proposed visit, the ‘VHP international secretary general Praveen Togadia said: “If she loves Hinduism let her go to Ayodhya and proclaim that a temple should be built there. If she does so I will become her follower that very day”’ (ibid.:1). *The Times of India* concluded their report in this way: ‘Thus the Maha Kumbh of spirituality has become the Maha Kumbh of partisan politics. A mela where, in the Shankaracharya’s language, various political groups have opened their shops in the hope of harvesting the Hindu vote bank’ (ibid.:1).

VIPs AND OTHERS

Some of the Indian media described the Kumbh Melā as a ‘great melting pot’ (*The Times of India*, January 25, 2001:3) and emphasised the feeling of equality and togetherness present among the ‘ocean of human beings [...] bathing in the sacred waters amidst the chanting of Vedic mantras, blowing of conch-shells and beating of drums.’ (ibid.:3). *The Times of India* continued:

Hinduism was seen at its magnificent best. Despite the heavy odds, the chilly breeze that swept across at a speed of 70 km an hour, and the threat of terrorist strikes, the devotees stuck to their goal: a dip at the Sangam to salvation. They ate whatever was available. They concentrated on the pooja despite the noise. Unbothered, unmoved and completely content. [...] It was a grand show in which the rich intermingled with the poor freely, Brahmins rubbed

shoulders with dalits¹⁹⁶ and the high and mighty didn't feel shy to walk side by side with the downtrodden. The Sangam is a great leveller. (ibid.:3)

Others conveyed a less uniting image. *Outlook*, for instance, printed an article called 'Rites of duality' (*Outlook*, January 29, 2001):

There are two Kumbhs, one seen and the other unseen. The first is brought to you by the media, sponsored by the likes of Cox & Kings,¹⁹⁷ and is a package deal. Epic, exotic, extraordinary. But in that phantasmagoria, one image comes across strongly, vividly. That of the Pilgrim. He's part of a million-strong crowd, but his mission is strongly individual, his faith entirely personal, a journey he takes alone, in the company of others. (ibid.:60)

While the ordinary pilgrims had to make their way to the Sangam by foot, the VIPs and guests of Cox & Kings were brought in by car, or even by helicopter. Because of road blocks created to let the VIPs through, the pilgrims had to cover two or three times the distance they otherwise would have had to. For this reason, the pilgrims who arrived in Allahabad by train had to walk approximately fifteen kilometres to reach the Sangam, whereas the actual distance is only six kilometres. *The Pioneer* wrote: 'They measured long distances on foot, slept on the sand and returned home after bathing with a smile of satisfaction of achieving something great. They thought that if to attain salvation they had to undergo some trouble and police atrocities, it had no meaning for them' (*The Pioneer*, January 25, 2001:1). Pilgrims were hardly offered any information regarding where things were or what was happening at the huge melā area. *The Pioneer* described how this lack of information hampered the pilgrims, and asked: 'What does the current much-hyped information technology mean to the lakhs¹⁹⁸ of pilgrims who are disembarking from trains and buses for an onward trudging towards the Mahakumbhnagar?' (*The Pioneer*, January 14, 2001). The answer?: 'Practically

¹⁹⁶ 'Self-designation of former outcastes, untouchables, scheduled castes. They have formed many organizations according to religious affiliation. Strictly speaking, most *dalits* were not members of Hindu (caste) society, but were considered servants for impure and degrading work. *Dalits* today strive for emancipation and equal opportunities' (Klostermaier 1998:54).

¹⁹⁷ Cox & Kings is a travel agent that arranged for VIPs and others to stay in luxury tents at the melā ground, an arrangement that caused a lot of debate in Indian media.

¹⁹⁸ One lakh is 100,000.

nothing' (ibid.). *The Pioneer* mentioned that no booklet was available, either at the railway station or at any of the bus stations, to give the pilgrims an idea of the location and design of Kumbh Nagar. Kumbh Nagar was divided into a dozen different sectors and crossings, but, as *The Pioneer* remarked, 'rarely does one find any nameplate indicating the direction of various sectors or important locations. Besides, one expects that at key points of the township, huge maps of Mahakumbhnagar would be on display for the guidance of pilgrims, visitors and media-persons, but nothing of this kind is in evidence' (ibid). We ourselves spent hours walking across the sandy melā ground in search of one specific address. No sign and no maps were available to guide us, and even the police and the local pilgrims we asked for help in the end had to give in. Accordingly, I find the critique raised by *The Pioneer* well reasoned. Critical remarks were also given regarding the sanitary facilities, which, it was said, were unsuited to handle the crowd. *The Hindustan Times* described how the 'entire civic arrangement has been thrown out of gear' (*The Hindustan Times*, January 26, 2001:1): 'There seems no way the managers can cope with lakhs of pilgrims defecating in the open. Existing toilets have to take the huge rush and have turned unusable. Low water pressure in the taps is also causing great inconvenience to the people here. They do not know where to sit and eat peacefully' (ibid.:1). According to Mark Tully (1991), similar criticism was raised against the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad twelve years earlier. Tully defends the melā administration: 'No other country in the world could provide a spectacle like the Kumbh Mela. It was a triumph for the much maligned Indian administrators, but it was a greater triumph for the people of India. And how did the English-language press react to this triumph? Inevitably, with scorn' (Tully 1991:124). He goes on to say:

The Times of India, the country's most influential paper, published a long article replete with phrases like 'Obscurantism ruled the most in Kumbh', 'Religious dogma overwhelmed reason at the Kumbh', and 'The Kumbh after all remained a mere spectacle with its million hues but little substance.' The *Times of India* criticized the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's politics, but made no attempt to analyse or even to describe the piety of the millions who bathed at the Sangam. (ibid.:124)

Also *The Pioneer* complained about the English-language media's attitude to the Kumbh Melā. 'Nothing', it argued, 'underlines the difference between Bharat¹⁹⁹ and India more than the orientation of the English media's Kumbh Mela at Allahabad' (*The Pioneer*, January 25, 2001:8):

For while the grand religious fair should have been considered as natural in the flow of life as any other widely observed ceremonial occasion, say Christmas or Id, some of the premier mainstream English dailies and magazines seem to have made it a point to view it through eyes not acclimatised to the Hindu ethos. (ibid.:8)

The Pioneer blamed the English-language media for focusing their coverage of the Kumbh Melā 'on the bizarre, the quaint, the sensational, all aimed at reinforcing the stereotype of exotic (and backward) India, popular in the West' (ibid.:8):

What could have proved to be an opportunity to understand better the philosophical rationale for such a jamboree, has been turned into an exercise at fathoming western reactions to the mela and all that it represents' (ibid.:8).

The Washington Post was mentioned by *The Pioneer* as a newspaper that had made an effort to 'place in perspective the strange contrast between tradition, in the form of sadhus bathing, and modernity manifest in cell phone-wielding foreign pilgrims immersed in the water' (ibid.:8). This image, *The Pioneer* remarked, could be 'a symbol of the convergence of individual longings, supposed to characterise the New Age. But when home-bred news persons begin to simulate western reactions, the coverage becomes facetious' (ibid.:8).

I mentioned above that one of the writers in *The Times of India* described the Kumbh Melā as a 'great melting pot'. In the same issue of the newspaper a different view was also represented:

¹⁹⁹ The Hindi name of India.

EPILOGUE

If VIP's, saints, mahants and bureaucrats are happy, everything is fine. So, for the lesser mortals, the millions of devotees flooding the Mahakumbh for the biggest snan of the *Mauni Amavasya*, Wednesday turned out to be 'wailsday'. They had to undergo immense hardship, inching ahead like an army of ants, to reach the Sangam for a dip. The police were deployed at every nook and corner to restrict movement towards the Sangam, even as government jeeps and two-wheelers with specific markings were allowed to move freely, not to mention the hundreds of VIPs who had been provided all facilities including pandas and purohits [priests] all along the way. (*The Times of India*, January 25, 2001)

The non-VIPs, on the other hand, 'had to walk at least 15 km to reach the Sangam owing to the police barricades, even though the straight route from the station to the Sangam is hardly six km' (ibid.). To me, this is an obvious example of how the Indian hierarchical society provides a closed distribution of benefits to members of the upper strata, the privileged elite. Also when departing from the sacred site, the less privileged had to fight the crowds either at the railway station or at the bus station. One of the horror stories we were told described a train ride between Allahabad and Varanasi, scheduled to take approximately three and a half hours; it ended by lasting for fourteen long hours. The person who experienced this said it took him another twenty minutes to evacuate his compartment upon arrival at Varanasi Junction. Even in Varanasi then, chaotic scenes resembling those of the Kumbh Melā appeared: 'the traffic was paralysed for hours'; 'due to the heavy rush, a devotee died of heart attack'; 'garbage heaps were not removed'; 'due to garbage the roads became slippery and the pilgrims faced a lot of difficulties in going to the temple'; movement on many city roads became 'difficult due to the heavy rush of pilgrims' (*The Pioneer*, January 17, 2001).

Plate 63



The arrangement and administration of the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad were both praised and criticised. *The Times of India* wrote: ‘Mismanagement, inefficiency, corruption, molestation – all are some of the epithets being employed to describe the Kumbh mela administration. Not a single day passes without complaints being received by the newspapers’ offices against *mela* officials’ (*The Times of India*, February 6, 2001:11). It further reported that eight pilgrims succumbed to the biting cold, that pilgrims had to do without bonfires and first-aid, and that labourers who had been engaged in work to prepare for the melā had yet not got their wages (*ibid.*). Yet in the Indian newspapers and newsmagazines Kumbh Nagar, the temporary town constructed at the melā site in Allahabad, was praised as an ideal Indian town. According to *India Today*, ‘the 1,200 hectare township called Kumbhanagar is a min-India, a temporary home to people from all over the country and, indeed, the world’ (*India Today*, February 5, 2001:4):

In many ways, the cloth-and-bamboo city that has sprung up on the banks of the Ganga in Allahabad is everything that India is not. It is not dirty; it does not have garbage piling up at every corner; two flies and three mosquitoes don’t keep every visitor company. In a notoriously filthy land it is a hygienic miracle, a man-made one at that. The clean Kumbha is a creation of 6,000 sweepers working virtually round the clock. It has been gratifying to see workers remove trash from bathing ghats almost as soon as it is spotted. A monumental 200 tonnes of solid waste is trucked away from Kumbhanagar every day. Regular fogging ensures buzzing insects are kept in exile – and epidemic denied a visa. (*ibid.*:4)

India Today spoke of the Kumbh Melā as ‘a revelation of India’s hitherto hidden skills in civic management’ (*ibid.*:4) and asked why these standards can not be maintained elsewhere: ‘As the world’s largest mela proves, keeping the environment healthy and being a good Indian are not quite mutually exclusive. For a start, Uttar Pradesh could consider replicating the Kumbhanagar model in its once proud but now shabby towns’ (*ibid.*:4).

CLEANSING THE SOUL

In the early part of the Kumbh Melā, *The Times of India* remarked: ‘Even the saints seem to have lost trust in the fabled pristine purity of the Ganga waters. After the ritual bath and other rituals at the Sangam, they were seen drinking bottled mineral water’ (*The Times of India*, January 10, 2001:3) – a metaphor of the environmental problems challenging India. During the auspicious occasion of the Kumbh, the pollution of the Gaṅgā was, of course, an environmental hot potato. One of the newspapers remarking on this was *The Hindustan Times*: ‘With crores²⁰⁰ of pilgrims washing away their sins in the Ganges here everyday, considerable deterioration has been witnessed in the quality of water during peak bathing hours. Add to that the effect of years of water pollution and the defilement of the sacred river is complete’ (*The Hindustan Times*, January 21, 2001). According to a website ‘Hundreds of thousands of gallons of untreated human and industrial waste spew into the Ganges every day. But few devotees care – it is their spirits they have come to cleanse, not their bodies’ (<http://www.scmonitor.com/durable/1998/04/15/p6s1.htm>).

Within what is now considered as classical anthropological literature, both Emile Durkheim and Mary Douglas should be mentioned for having shed light on the importance of distinguishing the sacred from the profane. According to Durkheim, the division of the world into the two domains of the sacred and the profane ‘is the distinctive trait of religious thought’ (Durkheim 1965:52). Douglas says: ‘The sacred must be continually protected from the profane by interdictions’ (Douglas 1975:49). ‘Thus’, she goes on to say, ‘relations with the sacred are always expressed through rituals of separation and demarcation and are reinforced with beliefs in the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries’ (ibid.:49). Regarding the distinction between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim wrote: ‘In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another’ (Durkheim 1965:53). I believe this perspective can

²⁰⁰ One crore is ten million.

be applied to achieve an understanding of why millions of Hindus gather to bathe in a river scientifically known to be heavily polluted. They do so because the river is sacred²⁰¹ and, therefore, profoundly differentiated from the domain of the profane; scientific proofs valid in the profane world can not be applied to the sacred domain. The ritual bathing taking place at the Saṅgam is a sacred act symbolically distinguished from profane facts.²⁰²

SALVATION

A Hindu should act in accordance with his dharma – his religious, moral, and social duty. Mark Tully recalls how a Hindu he met at the Kumbh Melā in Allahabad in 1989 explained to him the meaning of dharma:

‘Religion in India’, he told me, ‘is not what you in the West understand by religion. We believe that it is dharma, that is to say our duty: how we should conduct ourselves from birth to death. The Kumbh Mela is one of the rituals of dharma. You come here because you have faith in dharma and its rituals, not because you hope to get faith. Without faith you cannot really expect to understand the Mela.’ (Tully 1991:113)

A writer in *The Statesman* admitted that it was impossible for him to say how many of the Hindus at the Kumbh Melā really believed in the myths of their ancestral gods or had faith in the astrologers predicting this as an auspicious time. ‘But’, he went on to say: ‘I am sure of why they are there’ (*The Statesman*, January 22, 2001:7):

²⁰¹ Regarding the sacred power of the Gaṅgā, Jonathan Parry writes: ‘Such is its sacred power that Ganges water is often said to provide a complete prophylactic against pollution. But does its protection last for eighteen hours after bathing (as one informant claimed), or merely as long as it takes for the water to evaporate from the skin (as his friend was arguing)?’ (Parry 1994:111).

²⁰² Pollution is not the only threat Mother Gaṅgā has to face, another is the planned construction of the Tehri dam, north of Allahabad. ‘Will Tehri dam block Kumbh culture forever?’, *The Hindustan Times* asked (*The Hindustan Times*, January 26, 2001): ‘This could be the last Kumbhdip for pilgrims as a mighty Tehri dam would be there to block the Ganga stream miles before Prayag. No Ganga means no Kumbh’ (ibid.). According to the newspaper, the seventy-four-year-old environmentalist, Sunder Lal Bahuguna, is the man behind this caution. ‘The dam would not only kill the living river but also sabotage the country’s millennia-old culture,’ he warned (ibid.).

They are there to celebrate a shared culture in awesome congregation with their co-religionists. These are the events by which every group defines its exclusivity. Allahabad is an assertion of Hindu cohesion. It is the antithesis of the global village. It marks the diversity of humanity, not its communality. It affirms the warmth of personal contact, and the barrenness of ‘virtual pilgrimage’. Twenty million people are camped by the Ganges because no electronic screen can ever replace the real thing.

According to Ashtkosal Mahand Raghunandan Bharati, a thirty-five-year-old Nāgā sādhu and mahant within the Jūnā Akhārā, the Kumbh Melā exists ‘because the Impossible exists. [...] Because amidst rogues and tricksters, faith continues’ (*Outlook*, January 29, 2001:68). Raghunandan is described by *Outlook* as ‘naked and skinny, his head piled with dread-locks and his body smeared in ash’ (ibid.:60). He became a Nāgā when he was in his twenties, after having completed a degree in chemistry and Sanskrit from a university in Varanasi. ‘He insists he wanted to be closer to God, he wanted his soul to progress. But he confesses to a love of science and describes how he conducts small experiments to rid the air of carbon monoxide. He uses the Net to reach his comrades in distant *maths* and says if he hadn’t been a Naga, he would have been a scientist’ (ibid.:68). ‘What drove him to sanyas?’, *Outlook* wondered: ‘The call of God? Or rural unemployment?’ (ibid.:68). Shree Deevanjee, worker in an ashram, argued that the majority of sādhus has always been recruited from rural areas, and now, ‘with the shrinking of the rural economy, a number of sadhus – except those attached to the rich akharas – face severe marginalisation’ (ibid.:68-69). Shree Deevanjee added: ‘Most of these young boys become sadhus because they cannot earn their own livelihood. Their families push them into akharas’ (ibid.:69). Ashtkosal Mahand Raghunandan Bharati, the thirty-five-year-old Nāgā sādhu mentioned above, finally admitted to *Outlook*’s journalist that his life had been tough: ‘I have been through a lot of pain’ (ibid.:69) – a statement that makes *Outlook* conclude that the Kumbh Melā ‘illustrates the crisis of Indian unemployment as much as it is a celebration of Indian spirituality’ (ibid.:69). Another apparent fact supporting this analysis is the information granted *Outlook* by a Vaiṣṇav mahant who claimed that a number of the Nāgās participating in the processions at the Kumbh were in fact local

impoverished harijan (outcaste) youths who were recruited for Rs 100 and a phāv²⁰³ to increase the numbers of the akhārās in the processions to the royal baths (śāh snān). A mahant remarked: ‘Rent-a-Naga [...] is lucrative business because every akhara wants to show their strength at the Kumbh’ (ibid.:69). *Outlook* further suggested that a number of the sādhus present at the Kumbh were in fact criminals on the run and that others seemed mentally unfit for society; yet others were representatives of big landowners who were financially capable of buying themselves important posts within sādhu organisations. Bhaskar Bhattacharyya, a filmmaker who has lived among sādhus for several years, has come to the following conclusion: ‘A society as poor and as varied as ours evolves its own welfare mechanisms. [...] In the West, the bums and dropouts go onto the dole. Here, they go to the sadhus. And the sadhus look after them and nurture their delinquency’ (ibid.:69).

The Kumbh Melā may at a first glance give the impression of being a crowded, collective ritual, but in its essence it is constituted by the individual’s quest for salvation and celebration of the sacred (time, place, rivers, and sādhus). Regarding the question of individuality, I have argued in the preceding chapters in accordance with, among others, Mattison Mines (1994); he stresses the point that although individuality among Indians²⁰⁴ is ‘distinct in several respects from Western notions of the individual’ (ibid.:2), individuality is recognised ‘as an essential feature of ordinary life’ (ibid.:2). Individuality, to me, seems to be more prevalent among Indians in questions related to faith and meditation than in matters of a more mundane character. In this respect, the Kumbh Melā should be understood as a collective expression of individual, spiritual motives. *Outlook* wrote: ‘[...] away from the media’s gaze, unaffiliated to any ashram or akhara, simple but rustic and pious folk trudge the miles, make their way to the Sangam for the holy dip and map their individual route to salvation’ (*Outlook*, January 29, 2001:60). Srivats Goswami, a sādhu of the Gamghira Ashram of Vrindavan, said: ‘The amazing fact is not the freaks, but the fact that each

²⁰³ ‘Phauwa’ (or ‘phāv’) is ‘a small amount added by the seller to an amount purchased’ (McGregor 1997:682).

²⁰⁴ Mines’s refers more specifically to his research among Tamils.

person in the immense crowd is an individual, [...] with an individual relationship to the sun and the river' (ibid.:66). Although I see the individual quest for salvation as the main reason people congregate at the Saṅgam during the Kumbh Melā, I still believe the melā should also be understood as a collective celebration and manifestation of Hinduism – individual in its essence, but collective in its expression.²⁰⁵ I also find it important to bear in mind that the Kumbh Melā is considered by individuals and organisations as a unique opportunity to promote political views and commercial interests. Accordingly, what appears to be purely religious behaviour can not be properly understood without taking into consideration its relation to Indian social (cultural, political and economic) reality.

The Kumbh Melā stands out as a great celebration. Essential in this celebration is the sādhu – the holy figure in saffron – in all his diversity. I concluded chapter six by picturing renunciation as a dynamic institution – adjusting to changing circumstances in the greater Indian society. The idea of 'a sādhu' and ways of acting out the role of 'a sādhu' are also dynamic and adjust to social, political and economic changes. As the role of the sādhu is subject to change, so is the Kumbh Melā, yet, I believe the melā will remain an important arena for the congregation of sādhus, pilgrims, politicians, movie-stars, journalists, scholars, tourists and others. The Kumbh Melā was a fascinating additional source of information at the conclusion of my research – a specific context where a great variety of sādhus and householders were interacting. Although the experience of the Kumbh Melā left me with more questions than it provided answers, I believe being there and taking part in this event brought me closer to an understanding of Indian sādhus and the spiritual universe to which they relate.

²⁰⁵ This makes me recall Durkheim, who described religion as 'something eminently social' (Durkheim 1965:22): 'Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups' (ibid.:22).



Plate 64

Appendix:

WHO IS WHO?



Plate 65

Below is an alphabetic list of the sādhus introduced in the respective chapters.²⁰⁶ Only two of these are sādhus in the Vaiṣṇav tradition: Kaṭhiyā Bābā and Rādhe Śyām Dās; the others belong to the Śaiv tradition and are members of one of the ten orders (daśnāmi) founded by Śaṅkarācāryā in the eighth century. With the exception of Svāmī Ūmānand, all these sādhus were either permanent or temporary residents of Varanasi. Sādhus whom I met only briefly are not listed below.

3. FOUR PATHS OF LIFE

Dr. Archana Aditya (Dr. Dīdī) –

Sixty years old, has spent the last seventeen years working as a medical doctor in the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital. She has been married and has two children. She is fluent in English.

Śrī Digambar Śiv Nārāyaṇ Giri (Mahārāj) –

Thirty-five years old, has been living as a sādhu since he was about eight or ten years old. He is a Nāgā of the Jūnā Akhārā and took saṁnyās during the Kumbh Melā in Haridvar in 1986. He is now married and the father of a son, and he lives in his own ashram in Varanasi.

Svāmī Śaśi Śekhar Bhārātī –

In his mid thirties, has been a sādhu for ten years. He calls himself a Daṇḍī Svāmī and has a daṇḍā, but as there is some disagreement as to the Bhārātī-sādhus' right to hold a daṇḍā he never takes it out. He speaks English fluently.

Svāmī Ūmānand –

Forty-five years old, head of the Yog-Vedānt Kuṭīr in Allahabad. He became a brahmacāri at the age of twenty, and took saṁnyās when he was thirty-five. He speaks some English.

²⁰⁶ The sādhus that I introduce in my material are referred to with their present names. A few were reluctant to tell me their names, and instructed me to call them either by their nicknames or simply by a constructed name.

4. MUMUKṢU BHAVAN

Brahmacārī Satyā Prakāś –

Forty-five years old, has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for fifteen years.

Rām Sanehi Trivedī –

Eighty-five years old, has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for one year. He took saṁnyās in April 2000. His wife died two years ago. He has a son.

Śrī-108 Daṇḍī Svāmī Tārakeśvar Āśram –

Eighty years old, well-educated and speaks English. Before he retired into saṁnyās, approximately ten years ago, he had a career as a chemical engineer and a homeopathic doctor.

Svāmī Gaṅgānand (Gaṅgā Svāmī) –

Close to one hundred years old, has been a saṁnyāsī for fifty years. Speaks English but is hard of hearing, which made any long conversation difficult.

Svāmī Īśvarānand Tīrth –

Forty years old and the youngest of the svāmīs in Mumukṣu Bhavan. He has been a sādhu for ten years, the first four or five of these he was a Vaiṣṇav sādhu. He was previously in a childless marriage.

Svāmī Jamunānand Tīrth –

Approximately sixty years old, has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for twenty years.

Svāmī Jñāneśvarānand Tīrth –

Seventy-five years old, left home six years ago and took saṁnyās a year later (1995). He was previously married, and he is the father of seven children.

Svāmī Kapileśvarānand –

Eighty years old, took saṁnyās at the age of seventy-one. He was previously a family man with wife and children.

Svāmī Rāmānand Tīrth –

Ninety years old, has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for twenty-seven years. He is Rām Sanehi Trivedī's guru. He was previously a married man with five sons and one daughter.

Svāmī Vidyānand Tīrth –

Sixty-five years old, has been living in Mumukṣu Bhavan for sixteen years. He was previously a married man with two children.

5. 'THIS WORLD IS NOTHING'

Anant Śrī Vibhūṣit Narendrānand Sarasvatī Mahārāj –

Forty years old, left home at the age of eleven and took saṃnyās during the Kumbh Melā in 1989. He is now head of the Sumeru Maṭh in Varanasi.

Brahmacārī –

Thirty-five years old, has been living in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram since 1991.

Brahmacārī –

Twenty-five years old, has been living in the Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram for six years.

Brahmacārin Kalyani Devī –

In her mid forties, has been a resident of Gaṅgā Mā Ashram in Varanasi since 1964.

Govind Bābā –

In his early fifties. Govind is Canadian, but has been living as a sādhu in India since the early 1970s.

Junnā –

Forty-three years old. She has been a brahmacārin for ten years; the last few of these years she has been living in Śārādā Ashram in Varanasi.

Kanti Gutu –

Approximately sixty years old, has spent forty years in Ānandamayī Ashram in Varanasi. She used to work as a teacher in the ashram but is now retired. Her English is fluent.

Kāśīnāth –

In his eighties, adopted the sādhu way of life ten years ago. He has a wife and three daughters. He still tries to support his wife and his youngest daughter and is obviously concerned by the dowry required to have his daughter's marriage arranged.

Mahant Itvār Giri –

Approximately seventy years old, has been living as a sādhu since he was a teenager. He is a member of the Jūnā Akhārā, but he has not taken the Nāgā initiation. He is Mahārāj's cācā-guru (guru-bhāi of Mahārāj's guru) and lives on his own in Mirzapur, not far from Varanasi.

Nārad Bābā –

Eighty years old, has been living as a sādhu for the last thirty or forty years. He lives with his wife and their five sons.

Rādhe Śyām Dās –

In his fifties, has been a sādhu for fifteen years.

Svāmī Abhinav Saccidānand Giri –

Sixty-three years old, has been a sādhu for forty-five years. The last eighteen – nineteen years he has been living in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram, where he is now the mahant.

Svāmī Ānandānand Giri –

Seventy years old, took saṁnyās in 1992 and has since been living in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram. He was previously a husband and a father. He knows English, but preferred to give his answers in Hindi.

Svāmī Ātmāprakāś Yati –

Fifty-three years old, left home at the age of thirteen or fourteen and took saṁnyās at the age of twenty. Is now head of Ṭekrā Maṭh in Varanasi.

Svāmī Bimal Dev Āśram –

In his late thirties. As a married man and a father of small children he was selected by his father to succeed him as the head of the Machlī Bandar Maṭh.

Svāmī Devendrānand Giri –

When I met him in 1998 he was thirty-one years old. He had then been living in Śrī Śrī Bholāgiri Ashram for approximately ten years. He spoke good English. When I returned to see him in March 2000, I was told that he had left the ashram a couple of months earlier, apparently because he had made a Bengali girl pregnant.

The secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Hospital –

In his seventies, is fluent in English.

6. BEYOND IDEALS**Śārādā Hṛday –**

Sixty-seven years old, started living as a sādhu shortly after her marriage failed to be arranged. She was then eighteen years old. For the last ten years she has been living in Śārādā Ashram in Varanasi. She is now head of the ashram.

Svāmī Jyotirānand –

Born in 1923, joined the Ramakrishna Mission at the age of nineteen. He is now president of the Ramakrishna Mission in Varanasi. He is fluent in English.

7. SACRIFICE

Kaṭhiyā Bābā –

In his mid fifties. Started living as a sādhu in 1965, approximately twenty years old. Nine years later, in 1974, he was initiated in a Vaiṣṇav group of Nāgās. As far as I know, he is the only of my informants who on a regular basis make use of cannabis in his religious practice. Speaks English quite well.

Rāmjī –

Thirty years old, has been a sādhu for twelve years. Lives and teaches in Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti Maṭh in Varanasi.

EPILOGUE: The Kumbh Melā

Svāmī Śāntānand Sarasvatī –

In his early fifties. Mahant of the Handia Bābā Yoga Lodge in Allahabad. Has been living in the USA for the last twenty years and speaks good English.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Plate 66

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auge**, Marc, 1995. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe. London: Verso.
- Bailey**, Fred G., 1959. 'For a Sociology of India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 3: 88-101
- Basham**, A. L., 1996 (1954). *The Wonder that Was India*. India: Rupa & Co.
- Basu**, Sobharani, 1974. *Modern Indian Mysticism*. Varanasi: Bharat Sadhana Publications.
- Bedi**, Rajesh and **Bedi**, Ramesh, 1991. *Sadhus. The Holy Men of India*. New Delhi: Brijbasi Printers Private Limited.
- Berreman**, Gerald, 1962. *Behind Many Masks: Ethnography and Impression Management in a Himalayan Village*. The Society for Applied Anthropology: Monograph no. 4.
- Bjerkan**, Lise, 1994. *Moksha in the City of Shiva. Thoughts and Perceptions of Death and Afterlife among Hindus in Shiva's Sacred City; Varanasi in India*. 'Hovedoppgave', Department of Social Anthropology, University of Trondheim.
- Brent**, Peter, 1972. *Godmen of India*. London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press.
- Briggs**, Jean, 1970. *Never in Anger*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Carrithers**, Michael, 1998 (1996). 'Fieldwork', in Alan, Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 229-232.
- Cantlie**, Audrey, 1977. 'Aspects of Hindu Asceticism', in Ioan Lewis, *Symbols and Sentiments*. London: Academic Press Inc., pp. 247-267.
- Carrin**, Marine, 1999. 'The Sacrifice of Fertility: Female Sacredness at the Hindu/Tribal Frontier in Bengal', in Harald Tambs-Lyche (ed.), *The Feminine Sacred in South Asia*. New Delhi: Manohar, pp. 114-133.
- Clifford**, James, 1986. *Writing Culture*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Den Hollander**, A.N.J. 1967. 'Social Description; the Problem of Reliability and Validity', in D.G. Jongmans og P. C. W. Gutkind (eds.), *Anthropologists in the Field*. Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. N.V., pp. 1-34.

- Desai**, Kiran, 1998. *Guruen i Guavalunden (Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard)*. Oslo: J. M. Stenersens Forlag A.S. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Ltd.).
- Doniger**, Wendy (translator, with Brian K. Smith), 1991. *The Laws of Manu*. New Delhi: Penguin Classics.
- Douglas**, Mary, 1975. *Implicit Meanings*. London: Routledge.
- Dumont**, Louis 1960. 'World Renunciation in Indian Religions', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 4: 33-63.
- Dumont**, Louis, 1980 (1966). *Homo Hierarchicus*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dumont**, Louis, 1970. *Religion/Politics and History in India*. Paris/The Hague: Mouton Publishers.
- Dumont**, Louis, 1992 (1986). *Essays on Individualism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim**, Emile, 1965 (1915). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Dvadaś Jyotirling-Darśan**. Gorakpur: Gītā Press.
- Ellen**, R.F., 1984. *Ethnographic Research*. London: Academic Press Limited.
- Featherstone**, Mike, **Hepworth**, Mike and **Turner**, Bryan S., 1991. *The Body*. London: Sage Publicaitons Ltd.
- Flood**, Gavin, 1996. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Færøvik**, Torbjørn, 1999. *India. Stevne møte med skjebnen*. Oslo: J.W. Cappelens Forlag a.s.
- Geertz**, Clifford, 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. USA: Basic Books.
- Geertz**, Clifford, 1983. *Local Knowledge*. USA: Basic Books.
- Ghose**, Aurbindo (Sri Aurbindo), 1953. *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. New York: The Sri Aurbindo Library, Inc.
- Gross**, Robert Lewis, 1992. *The Sadhus of India*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Ghurye**, Govind Sadashiv, 1964 (1953). *Indian Sadhus*. Bombay: The Popular Book Depot.
- Hartsuiker**, Dolf, 1993. *Sādhus. Holy Men of India*. London: Thames and Hudson.

- Heesterman, J.C.**, 1985. *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hiebert, Paul G.**, 1981. 'Old Age in a South Indian Village', in Pamela T. Amoss and Stevan Harrel (eds.), *Other Ways of Growing Old*. California: Stanford University Press, pp. 211-226.
- Housden, Roger**, 1996. *Travels through Sacred India*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.
- Hubert, Henri and Mauss, Marcel**, 1964 (1898). *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. London: Cohen & West.
- Inden, Ronald**, 1990. *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Jaer, Øyvind**, 1983. *Capital and Karman*. Submitted as thesis for the 'Magistergrad.' Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo.
- Jaer, Øyvind**, 1987. 'The Ideological Constitution of the Individual: Some Critical Comments on Louis Dumont's Comparative Anthropology', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 21 (2): 353-362.
- Karve, Irawati**, 1953. *Kinship Organisation in India*. Deccan College Monograph Series no. 11. Poona: Deccan College.
- Keesing, Roger M.**, 1987. 'Anthropology as Interpretive Quest', *Current Anthropology*, 28 (2): 161-171.
- Kerby, Anthony Paul**, 1991. *Narrative and the Self*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K.**, 1994. *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K.**, 1998. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K.**, 1998b. *Hinduism. A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Knudsen, John Chr.**, 1990. 'Cognitive Models in Life Histories', in *Anthropology Quarterly*, 63: 122-133.
- Leach, Edmund**, 1958. 'Magical Hair', in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 88 (2): 149-64.
- Macfarlane, Alan**, 1970. *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century*

- Clergyman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Madan**, T. N., 1996 (1987). *Non-Renunciation*. Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks.
- Malinowski**, Bronislaw, 1987 (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- McGregor**, R.S., 1997 (1993). *The Oxford Hindi – English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller**, David M. and **Wertz**, Dorothy C., 1976. *Hindu Monastic Life (The Monks and Monasteries of Bhubaneswar)*. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Mines**, Mattison, 1994. *Public Faces, Private Voices*. USA: University of California Press.
- Mistry**, Rohinton, 1995. *A Fine Balance*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Movik**, Knut, 2000. *Bruk av Cannabis i Shivaittisk tradisjon*. 'Hovedoppgave', Department of Cultural Studies, University of Oslo.
- Murray**, Muz, 1998 (1980). *Seeking the Master. A Guide to the Ashrams of India*. Kathmandu: Pilgrims Book House.
- Narayan**, Kirin, 1989. *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Obeyesekere**, Gananath, 1981. *Medusa's Hair*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Parry**, Jonathan, 1989. 'The End of the Body', in Michel Feher (ed.) *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part Two. New York: Zone, pp. 490-517.
- Parry**, Jonathan, 1994. *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pocock**, David F., 1973. *Mind, Body and Wealth*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Potter**, Karl H., 1991. *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*. Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Price**, Richard, 1983. *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Quigley**, Declan, 1997. 'Deconstructing Colonial Fictions?', in Allison James, Jenny Hockey, and Andrew Dawson (eds.), *After Writing Culture*. London: Routledge, pp. 103-121.
- Rambachan**, Anantanand, 1998. 'Human Nature and Destiny', in Paul Bowen (ed.)

- Themes and Issues in Hinduism*. London: Cassell, pp. 11-29.
- Rapport**, Nigel, 1997. *Transcendent Individual*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rapport**, Nigel, 2000. 'Narratives as Fieldwork Technique', in Vered Amit (ed.) *Constructing the Field*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 71-95.
- Rapport**, Nigel and **Overing**, Joanna, 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology. The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ross**, Aileen D., 1961. *The Hindu Family in its Urban Setting*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sarasvatī**, Svāmī Viṣṇudevānand, 1978. *What am I Really?* Allahabad: Handia Bābā Yogalaya.
- Sarasvatī**, Svāmī Śāntānand, 2001. *Are You Free? The Mystical Wisdom of "Non-Doing"*. Allahabad: Handia Bābā Yogalaya.
- Sawyer**, Dana W., 1998 (1993). 'The Monastic Structure of Banarsi Dandi Sadhus', in Bradley R. Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes (eds.), *Living Banaras*. New Delhi: Manohar (Albany: State University of New York Press), pp. 159-180.
- Shattuck**, Cybelle, 1999. *Hinduism*. London: Routledge.
- Shurmer-Smith**, Pamela, 2000. *India. Globalization and Change*. London: Arnold.
- Sinclair-Brull**, Wendy, 1997. *Female Ascetics. Hierarchy and Purity in an Indian Religious Movement*. Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Singh**, Khushwant, 1967. 'Holy Men of India. In Search of the Seekers of Truth'. *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 42, 43, 102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, January 8, 1967.
- Stevenson**, Mrs. Sinclair, 1920. *The Rites of the Twice Born*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Stocking**, G. W., 1983. *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Stuart**, Drew, 1995. *Living on the Sacred Periphery: Reflections on Contemporary Sadhu Practice*. Paper published as part of the requirements for the University of Wisconsin College Year in India Program, 1994-95.
- Tambiah**, Stanley Jeyara, 1981. 'The Renouncer: his Individuality and his Community', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 15 (1/2): 299-320.

- Tambs-Lyche**, Harald, 1992. *Power and Devotion*. Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Dr. philos) at the University of Bergen, Norway.
- Tambs-Lyche**, Harald, 1996 (1994). 'India og Sør-Asia', in Signe Howell and Marit Melhus (eds.), *Fjern og Nær*. Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, pp. 352-378.
- Tambs-Lyche**, Harald, 1995. 'The Son's Burden: Growing up to Represent the Indian Family', in Harald Aspen, Carla Dahl-Jørgensen, Bjørn Erring, Anne Kathrine Larsen (eds.), *The Family. Anthropological Approaches*. Trondheim: Tapir Publishers, pp. 138-161.
- Tilak**, Shrinivas, 1990. *Religion and Aging in the Indian Tradition*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Tripathi**, Bansi Dhar, 1978. *Sadhus of India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Tully**, Mark, 1991. *No Full Stops in India*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tully**, Mark, 2001 (1991). *The Kumbh Mela*. Varanasi: Indica Books.
- Turner**, Bryan S., 1992. *Regulating Bodies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Turner**, Victor, 1991 (1969). *The Ritual Process*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Tyler**, Stephen A., 1986 (1973). *India. An Anthropological Perspective*. Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Van der Veer**, Peter, 1988. *Gods on Earth*. London: The Athlone Press Ltd.
- Van Gennep**, Arnold, 1960 (1909). *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Williams**, Raymond Brady, 1984. *A New Face of Hinduism: the Swaminarayan Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Newspapers/newsmagazines:

- India Today*, December 4, 2000. 'Test of Faith', 'A God Accused'.
- India Today*, January 15, 2001. 'The Making of Maha Mela'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- India Today*, January 22, 2001. 'Jai Ganga'.
- India Today*, February 5, 2001. 'Kleenex Kumbha'.
- Outlook*, May 11, 1998. 'Hardwar's Holy Wars'.
- Outlook*, September, 28, 1998. 'Holier than Thou'.
- Outlook*, July 3, 2000
- Outlook*, February 5, 2001. 'The Trumpcard Jokers'.
- Outlook*, January 22, 2001. 'Roar of the Sublime'.
- Outlook*, January 29, 2001. 'Rites of Duality'.
- The Hindu*, January 25, 2001. 'Over 2 Crores Take a Dip at Sangam'.
- The Hindu*, January 28, 2001. 'Exploiting Judicial Delay'.
- The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi. December 6, 1998. 'Baba's Charri Worries Kalyan'.
- The Hindustan Times*, January 21, 2001. 'Ganga Waters Get Murkier'.
- The Hindustan Times*, January 25, 2001. '2 crore Take Dip on Holiest Day'.
- The Hindustan Times*, January 26, 2001. 'Pilgrims Trapped in Civic Backwash',
'Will Tehri Dam Block Kumbh Culture Forever?'
- The Indian Express*, Mumbai, February 8, 1999. 'VHP's Self-help Way to End Conversions'.
- The Pioneer*, June 8, 2000. 'Yogi' Surrenders to Police'.
- The Pioneer*, January 14, 2001. 'Lack of Information Hampers Pilgrims'.
- The Pioneer*, January 17, 2001. 'Salvation Has Many Variants'.
- The Pioneer*, January 20, 2001. 'A Confluence of Metaphors, Symbols'.
- The Pioneer*, January 25, 2001. 'Over 1 Cr Take Dip in Sangam on *Mauni Amavasya*',
'Greatest Simulated Show'.
- The Pioneer*, January 31, 2001. 'Kumbh Used to Popularise Tech'.
- The Statesman*, January 22, 2001. 'Power of Pilgrimage'.
- The Statesman*, January 25, 2001. 'Sadhus Leave Footprints on the Sands of Kumbh'.
- The Sunday Times of India*, January 7, 2001. 'Ash, Vermilion, Saffron Flags and now I-kiosks'.
- The Sunday Times of India*, January 21, 2001. 'Virtual Religion'.
- The Times of India*, New Delhi, March 24, 2000. 'Offering Liquor to Seek Blessings'.

The Times of India, January 10, 2001. 'Salvation is just a Mouse-click away', 'Amrit in Mineral Water'.

The Times of India, January 20, 2001. 'Temple Land to be Taken by Force', 'Saffron Cover for a Political Sansad'.

The Times of India, January 22, 2001. 'Kumbh Politics Hots up'.

The Times of India, January 25, 2001. 'Whose Dharam Sansad is it?', 'Hinduism's Great Melting Pot', 'It's Wailsday for Common Pilgrims'.

The Times of India, February 6, 2001. 'Bunglings Galore at Kumbh Mela'.

The Times of India, New Delhi, February 7, 2001. 'From Cambridge to Counting Cabbages – the Spiritual De Tour'.

The Week, July 11, 1999. 'Unholy City'.

The Week, January 9, 2000. 'Shooting Swamis'.

The Week, April 2, 2000. 'Art for Spirit's Sake'.

The Week, April 9, 2000. 'Brush with Spirituality'.

Internet:

<http://search.britannica.com>

<http://www.smsu.edu/relst/riot.html>

<http://www.smsu.edu/relst/background.html>

<http://www.scmonitor.com/durable/1998/04/15/p6s1.htm>

<http://www.kumbhaldupgovtindia.org/aboutkumbh.htm>

GLOSSARY

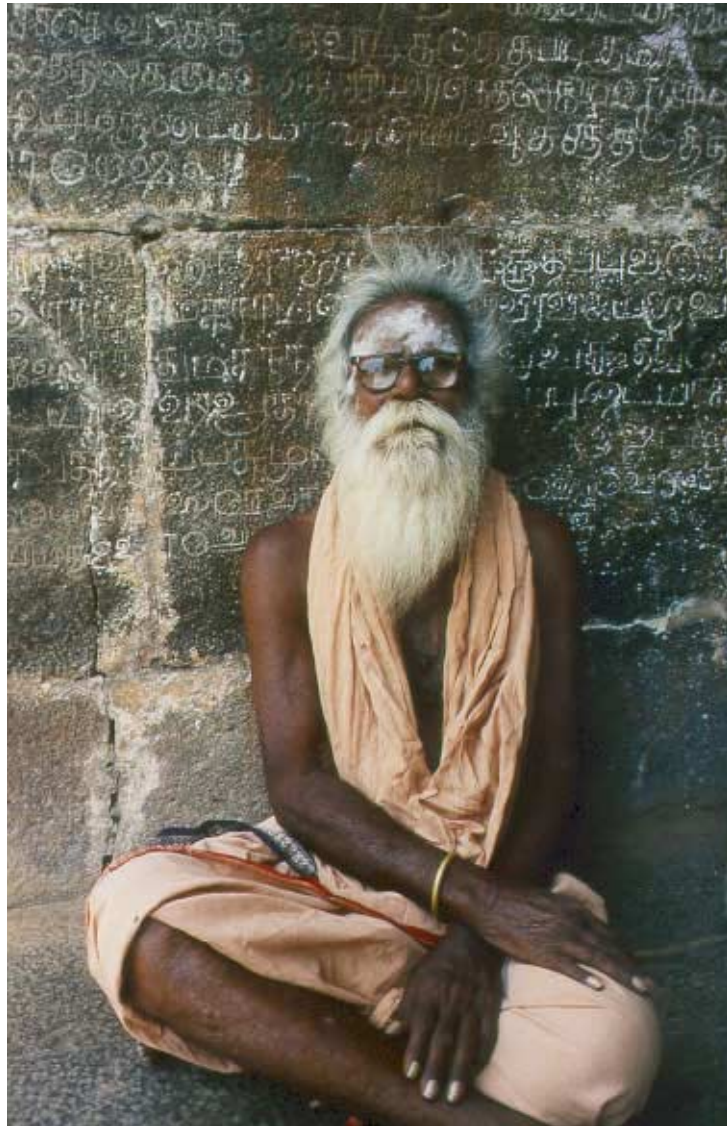


Plate 67

<i>abhinav</i>	recent, very new.
<i>ādivāsī</i>	the term used for tribal people in India; the first, original citizen of India; (Ādi: first, prior; primary; original. Vāsī: a resident, a citizen; a resident or citizen of India).
<i>advait</i>	non-duality; monism.
<i>aghor</i>	not terrible; a title of Śiv.
<i>agni</i>	fire.
<i>ahaṃkar</i>	sense of self, egoism; pride; arrogance; self-respect.
<i>ahiṃsā</i>	non-violence.
<i>akhārā</i>	place of assembly of sādhus.
<i>akhil</i>	adj. whole, entire; all (akhil bhārātīyā; adj. all-Indian).
<i>amāvas(yā)</i>	the last day of the dark fortnight of a lunar month, the night of the new month.
<i>ānand</i>	bliss; joy, delight.
<i>anant</i>	without end, eternal, infinite, an eternal being (title used for several Hindu deities).
<i>anuj</i>	born afterwards, younger; a younger brother.
<i>ārāṭī</i>	‘a ceremony performed in worshipping a god: a dish holding a lamp, burning <i>ghī</i> , incense or other articles, is moved in a series of circles in front of the idol’ (McGregor 1997:92).
<i>ardhband</i>	ardh : half, semi; partial. band : ‘1. adj. fastened, tied, bound. 2. enclosed; confined. 3. closed, shut. 4. stopped (as a mechanism); turned off (an appliance, electricity, &c). 5. come to an end; stopped (as rain); finished. 6. brought to an end (as a process, a discussion, an arrangement); put a stop to, halted (a practice, an abuse); prohibited. 7. closed (as a road); blocked (a channel) [...]’ (McGregor 1997:692).
<i>arth</i>	one of the four <i>puruṣārths</i> (the four aims in life); wealth and power (the remaining three: <i>kām</i> , <i>dharm</i> , <i>mokṣ</i>).
<i>āsan</i>	‘1. sitting; posture. 2. a seat; mat of cloth, grass or skin (as used to sit on in prayer). 3. place, seat (as of an ascetic). 4. a posture (as in

	yoga) (McGregor 1997:87).
<i>asānt</i>	adj. not at peace, restless, disturbed.
<i>asānti</i>	restlessness, anxiety; concern.
<i>asatyā</i>	untrue, false.
<i>ashram</i>	a place where religious seekers/renouncers are allowed to stay; hermitage or retreat.
<i>āśram</i>	stage in life; in Hinduism there are four such āśrams: brahmacāri, gr̥hast, vanaprasth, saṃnyās (also: abode; refuge; sanctuary – which I have here chosen to transcribe as ‘ashram’).
<i>ātmā</i>	the personal soul or self; the essence of life, identical with brahmā but used to refer to the essence within the person.
<i>avādhūt</i>	one who has renounced the world, an ascetic, a yogī.
<i>avastu</i>	‘1. adj. unreal, insubstantial. 2. inessential; trivial. 3. m. sthg. worthless’ (McGregor 1997:63).
<i>bad</i>	‘1. bad. 2. wicked. 3. unlucky. [...]’ (McGregor 1997:702).
<i>bāghaṃbar</i>	tiger-skin.
<i>bahut</i>	many, much.
<i>bandar</i>	monkey.
<i>bel</i>	the wood-apple tree and its fruit (the leaf of the wood-apple tree is offered to Śiv).
<i>Bhagavadgītā</i>	an episode of the Mahābhārata.
<i>bhagvān</i>	‘1. adj. glorious, divine, to be adored; worshipful. 2. m. the supreme being (esp. as equated with Viṣṇu-Krṣṇa). 3. title of a venerated deity (as the Buddha). 4. any revered person (term of address)’ (McGregor 1997:756).
<i>bhajan</i>	devotional song, hymn.
<i>bhaṇḍārā</i>	a meal provided for (and sometimes by) sādhus.
<i>Bhārāṭī</i>	title of the goddess Sarasvatī.
<i>bhavan</i>	place of being or abode; building.
<i>bhikṣā</i>	begging; alms; begged food.
<i>bholā</i>	a name of Śiv.

<i>bindī</i>	‘dot, mark or spangle ornamenting the forehead’ (McGregor 1997:729); ‘drop’, ‘A coloured spot in the middle of the forehead of a woman, indicating her married status’ (Klostermaier 1887:40), today worn even by young, unmarried girls on equal terms with make-up in general.
<i>brahmacārī</i>	one who is observing the rules of the first stage in life.
<i>brahmacary</i>	religious studentship, a period of study and celibacy.
<i>Brahmā</i>	‘In Hindu mythology the creator of the universe; the first member of the <i>trimūrti</i> (consisting of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva). He is represented as four-faced. Originally he had five heads; the loss of the fifth head is explained variously by different myths. In iconography he is represented with four arms, holding a sceptre, a ladle, a string of beads and the book of the Veda’ (Klostermaier 1998:41).
<i>brahm</i>	the all-pervading spirit of the universe, the supreme being, universal consciousness.
<i>brāhmaṇ</i>	‘The priestly class or a member of the priestly class, charged with the duties of learning, teaching, and performing rites and sacrifices’ (Eck 1990:370).
<i>cācā</i>	‘1. paternal uncle, father’s younger brother. 2. term of address to a senior or elderly man’ (McGregor 1997:310).
<i>celā</i>	(fem. <i>celī</i>) a pupil, disciple.
<i>crore</i>	one crore is ten million.
<i>dakṣiṇā</i>	fee (donation) paid to a brāhmaṇ for the performance of a sacrifice or any other religious service.
<i>dān</i>	‘1. giving; giving in marriage. 2. donation; offering; grant; endowment. 3. alms [...]’ (McGregor 1997:490).
<i>daṇḍā</i>	stick, pole, stake; the stick that distinguishes Daṇḍī Svāmīs from other groups of renunciators.
<i>daṇḍī</i>	‘staff-holder’ (McGregor 1997:472).
<i>Daṇḍī Svāmī</i>	sect/order of saṃnyāsīs where only brāhmaṇs are allowed.

- darśan*** “to view” is the act of obtaining audience from a more powerful being, whether a respected elder, holy person, or image of a deity’ (Narayan 1989:251); ‘to do darśan’ – to go to the temple.
- daś*** ten.
- dās*** slave, servant, devotee (of a god).
- daśanāmi*** ‘ten names’; ‘Ten orders of *samnyāsis* (sects) reputedly founded by Śankara in the ninth century and attached to one of the maṭhas established by him. They enjoy a high reputation for their asceticism and scholarship. One of these names is attached to the title of every member of one of the orders: Āraṇya, Vāna, Giri, Pārvata, Sāgara, Tīrtha, Āśrama, Bhārati, Pūrī, Sarasvatī’ (Klostermaier 1998:55-56).
- Dattātreyā*** ‘The principal deity worshipped by the Jūnā Akhādā is Dattātreyā, one of Shiva’s many forms’ (Bedi and Bedi 1991:91). ‘A deity, one of the forms of Viṣṇu, partaking of the nature of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Represented as a wandering mendicant followed by four dogs (the four Vedas). His places of worship are called Datta-maṇḍīras. Popular in Mahārāṣṭra as “Dattobā”. [...] A brahmin saint, son of Atri and Anasūyā, considered an incarnation of Viṣṇu and Śiva. [...] A philosopher, the sixth avatāra of Viṣṇu. According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* he achieved liberation by following the advice of twenty-four gurus in the form of forces of nature’ (Klostermaier 1998:56).
- devī*** a goddess; consort of a God (esp. Durgā, wife of Śiv).
- dharma* (*dharm*)** one of the four puruṣārths (aims in life); religious and moral duty; ‘1. what is to be held or kept: the complex of religious and social obligations which a devout Hindu is required to fulfil, right action, duty; morality; virtue, virtuous life; justice’ (McGregor 1997:525).
- dhotī*** a piece of cloth worn round the lower body.

- dhūnī*** sacred fire; ‘1. smoke. 2. smoke-fire (as of an ascetic who sits beside it as a penance, or as lit to extort compliance with demands)’ (McGregor 1997:532).
- dhyān*** ‘1. meditation, contemplation; deep thought. 2. consideration, reflection. 3. attention; the mind. 4. keeping (sthg.) in mind; thought; memory’ (McGregor 1997:535).
- dīdī*** elder sister.
- digambar*** ‘adj. having the regions (i.e. space) as clothing: naked; m. specif. a Digambar Jain; a naked ascetic’ (McGregor 1997:494).
- dīkṣā*** initiation; ‘[...] implies a life-long commitment to the mode of life of the community. Usually it consists of a number of rituals, often the complete stripping of the candidate and a symbolic self-cremation, the taking of a new name and the transmission of a secret mantra’ (Klostermaier 1998:59).
- dukh*** sorrow, grief.
- Durgā*** the goddess Durgā, consort of Śiv.
- faqīr*** a beggar, an ascetic (esp. Muslim).
- Gaṇeś*** ‘(“Lord of the *gaṇas* [the host of minor Vedic deities]”) Son of Śiva and Pārvatī, with a human body and an elephant’s head. He is worshipped as god of wisdom and remover of obstacles (Vinākya), and invoked before the beginning of any major undertaking. He is Vyāsa’s [a celebrated sage, the arranger of the Vedas, and the compiler of the Mahābhārata and all the Purāṇas] secretary and wrote, at his dictation, the Mahābhārata. His vahana [vehicle] is a rat. He is very popular with students, clerks, writers and business people, and there are numerous temples in his honour. His festival, Gaṇeśa catūrthi, is celebrated very lavishly especially in Mahārāṣṭra, with displays of Gaṇeśa images on public places and in homes and processions through the streets. There are many stories explaining how he came to have an elephant’s head’ (Klostermaier 1998:72).

<i>Gaṅgā</i>	the river Ganges, sacred to Hindus.
<i>gāy</i>	‘1. a cow. 2. fig. a gentle or tractable person’ (McGregor 1997:263).
<i>geruā</i>	ochre-coloured, red; reddish; yellowish; the saffron colour worn by sādhus.
<i>ghāṭ</i>	a slope to water, a river bank; a flight of steps to water.
<i>ghī</i>	clarified butter.
<i>giri</i>	a mountain, a hill.
<i>Gītā</i>	short for Bhagavadgītā.
<i>gṛhast</i>	‘householder’.
<i>guru</i>	‘elder’; teacher, ‘especially of sacred lore and meditation, spiritual master, who initiates and guides disciples in a particular tradition’ (Klostermaier 1998:78).
<i>guru-bhāī</i>	guru-brother; ‘pupils of the same guru; fellow disciples’ (McGregor 1997:271).
<i>guru-kul</i>	<i>kul</i> : herd, troop, multitude; a tribe, community, sect; a family, house, lineage.
<i>guru pūrṇimā</i>	festival on the day of the full moon of July.
<i>Hanumān</i>	name of the monkey chief or deity who was Rāmācandra’s ally in his invasion of Laṅkā.
<i>Hari</i>	‘a name of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa; and of other deities: Śiva, Brahmā, Indra’ (McGregor 1997:1061).
<i>harijan</i>	‘a devotee or servant of Hari; a Harijan, outcaste’ (McGregor 1997:1061).
<i>haṭh yog</i>	‘the form of yoga in which emphasis is laid on physical disciplines and exercises (including breath-control) to achieve withdrawal of the mind from external objects’ (McGregor 1997:1056).
<i>havan</i>	sacrificial ladle; fire-pit: the vessel in which a fire sacrifice is performed.
<i>hindutvā</i>	‘1. Hindu qualities; Hindu identity. 2. Hinduism’ (McGregor

	1997:1071).
<i>īṣṭ</i>	‘1. adj. desired. 2. cherished; favourite [...]’ (McGregor 1997:197).
<i>iṣṭādev</i>	‘the favoured deity of a family, or of an individual’ (McGregor 1997:107).
<i>īśvar</i>	‘1. lord; master. 2. God. 3. ruler; king’ (McGregor 1997:110).
<i>itvār</i>	Sunday.
<i>jāp</i>	muttering, a prayer made by repetition of a sacred verse or name.
<i>janeū</i>	‘The holy thread which members of the three upper castes receive at the time of <i>upanayana</i> (initiation) and which they have to wear throughout their lives as a mark of distinction. It is made out of three times three strands of cotton fibre and is worn at all times directly on the body’ (Klostermaier 1998:89)
<i>jaṭā</i>	‘matted hair (as worn by ascetics, and attributed to the god Śiva)’ (McGregor 1997:353).
<i>jay</i>	‘1. victory; triumph. 2. interj. long live! [...]’ (McGregor 1997:360).
<i>jī</i>	an honorific form, an expression of respect or of affection (used with proper names).
<i>jīv</i>	‘1. the soul; the individual soul (as distinguishable from the supreme soul, <i>paramātmā</i>); life 2. a living creature 3. any partic. form of life’ (ibid.:375).
<i>jñān</i>	‘knowledge’; this is especially in ‘the specific sense of spiritual wisdom, insight, realization of one’s own true nature’ (Klostermaier 1998:90).
<i>jūnā</i>	old.
<i>jyoti</i>	light; brilliance, radiance.
<i>jyotirānand</i>	bliss of light.
<i>Kailās</i>	Mountain in the Himalayas, Śiv’s heaven.
<i>kalp vās</i>	‘residence as an ascetic on the banks of the Ganges during the month of Māgh’ (McGregor 1997:179).

<i>kām</i>	one of the four ends in life (arth, dharm, mokṣ); pleasure; ‘1. desire. 2. sexual desire; passion; lust’ (McGregor 1997:190). May also mean action, act, work, task, occupation, business (ibid.).
<i>kamaṇḍal</i>	an earthen or wooden water-pot used by ascetics, and by other devout persons.
<i>kapāl</i>	the skull; head.
<i>kapāl kriyā</i>	ceremonial breaking of the skull of a corpse at cremation (performed by a son or the nearest male relative).
<i>kapil</i>	‘1. adj. monkey-coloured; brown, reddish. 2. Brbh. name of a sage, founder of the Sāṅkhya system of philosophy’ (McGregor 1996:166).
<i>kaṣṭhā</i>	cloth; clothing, clothes; garment.
<i>karma</i> (<i>karm</i>)	‘action (with its fruit, and implications of merit); an act, deed; work, occupation; function’ (McGregor 1997:175); ‘The law of <i>karma</i> is normally associated with the belief in re-birth: one’s status or the events which occur in this life are the product of good or bad actions in an earlier life’ (Pocock 1973:179).
<i>Kāśī</i>	‘shining: a name of the city of Banaras’ (McGregor 1997:194); one of the names of Varanasi; the most sacred part of Varanasi, regarded as the domain of Śiv. ‘The most beloved name of Banaras. From <i>kash</i> , to shine. The shining city, the luminous, the city of light’ (Eck 1990:372).
<i>Kāśīvās</i>	living in Kāśī.
<i>kaṭhiyā</i>	‘1. m. a wooden platter. 2. a snare, trap. 3. adj. made of wood’ (McGregor 1997:159).
<i>Kedār</i>	a name of Śiv.
<i>kendrā</i>	centre.
<i>khel</i>	play; sport; amusement.
<i>krānti</i>	revolution.
<i>kriyā</i>	‘1. an action, act, deed. 2. a religious act or ceremony; a pious act, duty; obsequies; an oath. [...]’ (McGregor 1997:220).

<i>krodh</i>	anger, rage, resentment.
<i>Kṛṣṇ</i>	name of the eight avatār of Viṣṇu.
<i>kṣatriyā</i>	a member of the second varṇ; originally consisting of kings and soldiers.
<i>kṣetr</i>	area, zone.
<i>kumbh</i>	'1. a water-pot, jar. 2. the sign Aquarius (of the zodiac). 3. the festival (<i>melā</i>) held every twelfth January-February at Allahabad, Hardvār and other centres (so called because the sun is then in Aquarius). 4. the lobe on the upper part of an elephant's forehead (McGregor 1997:201).
<i>kuṇḍ</i>	'1. a wide-mouthed, deep basin. 2. pit (as for sacrificial fire). 3. a pool. 4. tank (as consecrated to a person or deity); a tank encompassed by tall flights of steps' (McGregor 1997:200).
<i>kuṭīr</i>	cottage, (remote) hut.
<i>lakh</i>	one lakh is 100,000.
<i>Lakṣmī</i>	the goddess Lakṣmī (wife of Viṣṇu and goddess of good fortune and wealth).
<i>laṅgoṭ</i>	loin-cloth.
<i>līlā</i>	'1. play, sport 2. the acts by a deity as performed at pleasure (esp. those of the avatārs Rām and Kṛṣṇa); the ways of God in the world' (McGregor 1997:897).
<i>liṅg</i>	a phallus, lingam (in which form Śiv is worshipped); phallic representation of Lord Śiv (in stone).
<i>lobh</i>	greed, intense desire.
<i>lok</i>	'1. the world; the universe. 2. a world, cosmological region (supra- or subterranean). 3. people, folk; the ordinary people, public; society. 4. mankind' (McGregor 1997:901).
<i>luṅgī</i>	'a rectangular cloth worn wrapped round the waist and falling to the ankles, by men' (McGregor 1997:897).
<i>machlī</i>	fish.
<i>maghā</i>	astrological name of the tenth lunar asterism.

<i>mahā</i>	great; mighty; large; chief; eminent.
<i>Mahākāl</i>	another name of Lord Śiv – as the destroyer.
<i>mahāmāyā</i>	‘the divine power of illusion (as to the reality of the material world); the illusory nature of worldly objects, personified; a title of Durgā’ (McGregor 1997:800).
<i>mahārāj</i>	great king.
<i>mahant</i>	the superior of a monastery (maṭh).
<i>mahātmā</i>	‘great soul’.
<i>mālā</i>	a garland of flowers, used to honour and decorate the image of a god, or a person; a string of beads, used to recite mantras or names of deities. ‘Mālās usually have a specific number of beads (often 108 or a fraction thereof)’ (Klostermaier 1998:111).
<i>mandir</i>	temple.
<i>Manikarnika ghāṭ</i>	one of the two cremation grounds in Varanasi; said to be the centre, or navel, of Kāśī. The importance of Manikarnika ghāṭ is endowed in its mythological status as the place where the universe originated.
<i>mantrā</i>	a sacred formula, verse or text, often saluting a particular deity. A Guru imparts this to a disciple during initiation and it is thereafter recited as a part of spiritual practice.
<i>mārg</i>	road or path.
<i>mātā(jī)</i>	mother; the goddess Devī.
<i>maṭh</i>	residence of a devotee and his disciples, a hermit’s hut, a cell, a religious centre, monastery – often combined with a school.
<i>maun</i>	‘1. adj. silent. 2. m. silence. 3. a vow of silence’ (McGregor 1997:838).
<i>maunī</i>	‘1. adj. silent, having vowed silence. 2. m. an ascetic who has taken a vow of silence’ (McGregor 1997:835).
<i>māyā</i>	‘1. supernatural power; magical or wonderful power. 2. illusion; deceit, deception. 3. sthg. illusory; conjuring; jugglery; magic. 4. <i>philos.</i> the world as perceived by the senses (considered as

illusory)’ (McGregor 1997:807); ‘deceit’, ‘fraud’, ‘illusion’, ‘deception’. ‘In Vedānta, especially in advaita, *māyā* comes to mean the universal illusion that veils the minds of humans’ (Klostermaier 1998:116).

- melā*** a large crowd of people; a fair (religious or secular), festival.
- mithyā*** ‘1. adj. false, incorrect; untrue. 2. vain, useless; deceptive (as hope, pride)’ (McGregor 1997:812).
- moh*** ‘delusion (esp. as to the supposed reality of the world); ignorance; folly; error; infatuation; attachment, love’ (McGregor 1997:837).
- mokṣ*** ‘1. release from rebirth in the world. 2. deliverance, emancipation; release’ (McGregor 1997:835); one of the four *puruṣārthas* (aims in life: *kām*, *dharm*, *arth*).
- mukti*** similar to *mokṣ*; ‘1. release, deliverance. 2. freedom, emancipation. 3. release of the soul from the body and from further rebirth; salvation’ (McGregor 1997:819).
- mumukṣu*** ‘1. adj. desiring release (from rebirth in this world). 2. one desiring release’ (McGregor 1997:824).
- mūrti*** ‘1. any body having material form; figure; form. 2. idol; statue; image. 3. embodiment, manifestation; personification’ (McGregor 1997:829).
- nāgā*** naked ascetic.
- nagar*** city, town, municipality.
- namas*** ‘bowing; bow; salutation, greeting’ (McGregor 1997:544).
- nāmī*** ‘1. well-known, famous. 2. of good name. 3. having a name. [...]’ (McGregor 1997:554).
- Nārad*** ‘name of a sage (one of the four sons of Brahmā, an inventor of the *vīṇā*; a friend and devotee of Kṛṣṇa)’ (McGregor 1997:554).
- Nārāyaṇ*** God; title of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa.
- nāth*** lord; protector; master.
- nāś*** destruction; ruin, devastation; loss.

<i>nirvāṇ</i>	‘death, extinction; eternal bliss (in reunion with the ultimate being); annihilation (of the personality, at death).
<i>nivṛtti</i>	release, escape, release from rebirth; ‘The opposite of and counterpart to <i>pravṛtti</i> (“creation”, “expansion”). In a cosmological context it designates the phase in which the universe contracts and disappears. In a personal sense it signifies renunciation, abstinence and self-mortification’ (Klostermaier 1998:128).
<i>pañc agni</i>	‘five fires’; fire in four directions and the shining sun above as the fifth fire.
<i>paṇḍit</i>	‘1. learned, wise; clever. 2. [...] a scholar; a learned brāhmaṇ. 3. title of respect to a brāhmaṇ (esp. if learned). 4. a teacher’ (McGregor 1997:587).
<i>pāpaṛ</i>	a thin crisp cake.
<i>paramātmā</i>	the world soul, God.
<i>paramhaṇṣ</i>	‘the highest order of asceticism; one who has subdued all his senses and achieved complete detachment’ (Pocock 1973:180); ‘An honorific title for a spiritual teacher’ (Klostermaier 1998:134); ‘supreme soul: an ascetic of utmost sanctity’ (McGregor 1997:604).
<i>pāriṣad</i>	adj. having to do with an assembly, or council.
<i>Pārvatī</i>	a title of Durgā (as daughter of Himavar, king of the Himalayas).
<i>pati</i>	master, lord; leader, chief.
<i>patit</i>	‘1. adj. fallen. 2. fig. degraded; abject. 3. lapsed (from religion); sinful. 4. outcast. 5. m. a fallen person [...]’ (McGregor 1997:596).
<i>phalhār</i>	eating or living on fruit; a meal of fruit.
<i>phanī</i>	snake.
<i>piṇḍ</i>	‘a ball of rice or grains offered to the dead; an embryo’ (Parry 1994:xxiv).
<i>piṇḍ-dān</i>	‘the gift of <i>piṇḍ</i> s to the departed’ (Parry 1994:xxiv).
<i>pīṭh</i>	seat of a deity.

<i>pitṛ</i>	(paternal) ancestor.
<i>prakāś</i>	brightness, light; splendour.
<i>prāṇ</i>	‘breath’; the vital breath (breath is often identified with life).
<i>prāṇāyām</i>	‘(in yoga) breath-exercise: restraining the breath’ (McGregor 1997:669).
<i>prasād</i>	‘1. propitiatory offering of gift; boon, blessing. 2. food offered to an idol; the remains of such food’ (McGregor 1997:666): food that has been offered to a deity or powerful being, and then distributed among devotees as God’s gift and blessing.
<i>Prayāg</i>	name of the pilgrimage place at the confluence of the three sacred rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā and the mythical Sarasvatī at Allahabad.
<i>pūjā</i>	ritual worship, prayer.
<i>pujārī</i>	the priest of a temple, a worshipper.
<i>puṇyā</i>	auspicious; virtuous, meritorious (an act); holy, sacred; moral or spiritual merit.
<i>purāṇ</i>	‘a class of voluminous work in Sanskrit dealing with aspects of ancient Indian history, legend, mythology or theology’ (McGregor 1997:637).
<i>purī</i>	town, city.
<i>pūrṇimā</i>	the night or day of full moon.
<i>puruṣarth</i>	the four aims/purposes of man: dharm, arth, kām and mokṣ.
<i>putr</i>	a son; a body, child.
<i>rādhā (rādhe)</i>	‘name (in popular and in later tradition generally) of the chief herdgirl or <i>gopī</i> of Braj, the favourite mistress (of the wife) of Kṛṣṇa’ (McGregor 1997:861).
<i>rāj</i>	king, prince; lord.

- rājā** ‘1. a rajah, king. 2. lord, master; governor. 3. *hist.* title awarded during the period of British rule in India. 4. colloq. an extravagant and careless person’ (McGregor 1997:860).
- Rām** name of Rāmcandra (the seventh avatār of Viṣṇu).
- Rāmānuja** ‘(1017 – 1137) Founder of the school of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and the most important of the Śrīvaishṇava *ācāryas* (teachers). [...] His teaching is known as Viśiṣṭadvaita, qualified monism. Rāmānuja held Viṣṇu to be both the material and the efficient cause of the universe; the material world is God’s body. The relationship between God and the human being is that of whole and part [...]. Rāmānuja taught that by following God’s will a person can earn God’s grace and be saved. Salvation consists in being transferred to Viṣṇu’s heaven [...], being endowed with an incorruptible body and sharing God’s bliss’ (Klostermaier 1998:149).
- Rāmāyaṇ** name of an epic poem composed in Sanskrit by Vālmiki.
- Rām nām satya hai** God’s name is truth.
- rāṣṭrā** state, nation.
- rorī** a red clay made to mark a tilak.
- roṭī** bread (either bread in general or the special Indian flat ‘bread’ that is also called *chapati*).
- rudrā** a title of Śiv.
- rudrākś** Śiv’s eye, ‘Rudra-eyed: the three *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, and its berries (used for rosaries)’ (McGregor 1997:867).
- rudrākś-mālā** ‘rosary made of rudrākṣa shrub, worn by the Śaivites around the neck, used to count the repetitions of mantras’ (Klostermaier 1998:155).
- sādhak** ‘1. adj. adept, skilful. 2. holy. 3. m. a practiser, an adept. 4. a devotee; an ascetic. 5. magician’ (McGregor 1997:1004).

- sādhnā*** to accomplish; to achieve by work or devotion; to study, to learn (as an esoteric skill); ‘means to realization’ (Klostermaier 1998:158); ‘A generic term for the complex of practices recommended by the various *saṃpradāyās* (sects) or individual gurus’ (ibid.:158).
- sādhvī*** fem. *sādhvī*: ‘a virtuous woman or wife’ (McGregor 1997:1005); ‘Generic designation of those who have renounced and who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of religious aims, usually wearing garb that distinguishes them from ordinary people’ (Klostermaier 1998:158); ‘a holy man, an ascetic’ (McGregor 1997:1005).
- sagā*** ‘1. born of the same parents [...]. 2. related by blood [...]. 3. blood relation [...].’ (McGregor 1997:972).
- śāh*** ‘royal; excellent; best, or largest (of its kind)’ (McGregor 1997:949), (*śāh snān*; royal bath).
- sahn*** ‘1. patience; tolerance. 2. endurance’ (McGregor 1997:997).
- sahn śakti*** ‘power of endurance, or of tolerance’ (McGregor 1997:997).
- Śaiv*** devotee of Śiva.
- Śaivism*** ‘worship of Śiva, probably the oldest of the Hindu traditions. Its beginnings go back to prehistoric times’ (Klostermaier 1998:159).
- śakti*** ‘1. power, strength (physical or otherwise); energy; transf. electric power. 2. ability; capacity. 3. *phys.* a force. 4. *pol.* a power, nation. 5. the energy of a deity personified as his wife (as Durgā or Gaurī of Śiva, Lakṣmī of Viṣṇu). 6. the female genitalia (as counterpart of the phallic representation of Śiva; worshipped by *śāktas*)’ (McGregor 1997:942).
- samādhi*** ‘the tomb of an ascetic; the ascetic’s state of suspended animation within it’ (Parry 1994:xxv).
- samāj*** a society, an association; a meeting, gathering.

- saṃnyās*** ‘1. laying down, abandonment; specif. renunciation of the world, becoming an ascetic. 2. the fourth stage (*āśram*) in life, life as a wandering ascetic’ (McGregor 1997:966).
- saṃnyāsī*** (fem.: *saṃnyāsīnī*) renouncer, name of the one who has entered the fourth stage in life.
- sampradāy*** ‘1. an established doctrine, persuasion or system of teaching. 2. a religious sect; school (of thought). 3. a religious community’ (McGregor 1997:967).
- saṃsad*** sitting together; parliament.
- saṃsār*** ‘1. cycle of births or states, transmigration. 2. transf. the world; the universe. 3. life in this world; worldly concerns; illusion as to worldly reality’ (McGregor 1997:970).
- saṃskār*** ‘A rite of passage, through which a Hindu of the three higher varṇas becomes a full member of the community. While in former times a great number of *saṃskāras* were performed, today there are mainly four that are important in the life of a Hindu: birth (*jāta-akṛma*), initiation (*upanyana*, investiture with the sacred thread), marriage (*vivaha*), and last rites (*śraddha* or *antyeṣṭi*). A Hindu who wilfully neglects the *saṃskāras* is no longer a member of the community’ (Klostermaier 1998:163); ‘any of various essential sanctifying or purificatory rites (as the first taking of solid food, investiture with the sacred thread, marriage and funeral rites)’ (McGregor 1997:970).
- sanātan*** ‘adj. existing from old, immemorial; continuing, eternal (*sanātan dharma*: ‘immemorial *dharma*: Hinduism as involving acceptance of śruti and smṛti, orthodox belief and practice’) (McGregor 1997:980).
- saṅgh*** society, association, body.
- saṅgam*** ‘1. meeting, joining. 2. confluence; specif. that of the rivers Ganges and Jumna at Allahabad. 3. junction (as of roads). 4.

association, contact (with); company, society (of). **5.** sexual intercourse' (McGregor 1997:963).

Śaṅkar

name of Lord Śiva, and also of a Vedānt monist philosopher and reformer of Hinduism who lived in the eighth century (more often titled as Śaṅkarācāryā – the suffix 'ācāryā' means a spiritual preceptor or guide; a founder, or leader of a sect; a man of distinguished learning).

Śaṅkarācāryā

“Master Śaṅkara”, a great reformer of Hinduism (eighth century CE). Born in Kālaḍi, Kerala, he entered samnyāsa at a very early age. Defeating Buddhists and followers of other heterodox movements, he established advaita vedānta through his commentaries on the major Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Brahmasūtras*. He also wrote numerous hymns and many smaller treatises. He established *maṭhas* (religious centres) in four strategic places in the east (Purī), west (Dvāraka), north (Bādrīnātha), and south (Śṛṅgerī) and founded ten orders of *samnyāsis* (daśanāmis). By many he is considered the greatest among Indian religious thinkers. His followers consider him either an avatāra of Śiva or a person inspired by him' (Klostermaier 1998:164).

sant

good, virtuous; pious; an ascetic.

śānt

adj. quieted, pacified (turmoil, anger, uprising).

śānti

'calmness, quiet; stillness; peace (of mood)' (McGregor 1997:946).

santoṣ

satisfaction; pleasure.

sapnā

'**1.** a dream. **2.** fig. a vision, longing' (McGregor 1997:981).

śārāḍā

a title of Sarasvatī and of Durgā.

Sarasvatī

'The wife of Brahmā, goddess of speech and learning, inventor of the Sanskrit language and the Devangārī script, patroness of the arts and sciences, usually represented as seated on a lotus, with a *vina* (lute) in one of her hands' (Klostermaier 1998:165-66).

<i>śarīr</i>	the body.
<i>śāstrā</i>	‘a work or book dealing with religion, or with any branch of knowledge, which is regarded as of age-old or divine authority; treatise; a scripture; pl. the scriptures; ancient Indian learning’ (McGregor 1997:949).
<i>śaśi</i>	the moon.
<i>sat</i>	honour, virtue; true.
<i>satyā</i>	‘1. adj. true. 2. real, genuine; sincere, faithful (a friend). 3. pure, virtuous, good’ (McGregor 1997:977).
<i>satsaṅg</i>	religious discourse/conversation, ‘association with the virtuous or the good; good people or company; a congregation gathered to worship and sing <i>bhajans</i> ’ (McGregor 1997:976).
<i>śekhar</i>	crest, garland; crown (<i>śaśi śekhar</i> : moon-crested: a title of Śiva).
<i>sevā</i>	service, attendance, care, worship.
<i>sevak</i>	‘1. adj. serving. 2. m. a servant. 3. one attending (on). 4. a worshipper, devotee; follower. 5. one resorting or addicted (as to a medicine, or a drug)’ (McGregor 1997:1039).
<i>siddhi</i>	‘1. accomplishment, fulfilment; attainment, (of any object). 2. success, prosperity. 3. demonstration, proof (as of a case); substantiation (of a remark). 4. correctness (of any contention). 5. decision (of a law-suit). 6. solution (of a problem); settlement (of a debt). 7. complete knowledge or understanding. 8. acquisition of supernatural powers by magical means; any supernatural skill or capability [...]. 9. good effect or result, advantage [...].’ (McGregor 1997:1014).
<i>sindūr</i>	‘red lead, vermilion (applied by married women to the hair-parting)’ (McGregor 1997:1011).
<i>śiṣyā</i>	disciple, pupil.
<i>Śītā</i>	name of the daughter of king Janak and wife of Rāmcandra.

Śiv	‘graceful’; one of the deities of the Hindu triad; known as the destroyer and reproducer, i.e. as holding both creative and destructive forces.
śiv liṅg	‘a phallus, lingam (in which form Śiva is worshipped)’ (McGregor 1997:894).
snān	bathing, washing.
śmaśān	cremation-ground.
smṛti	what has been remembered; ‘Tradition, as opposed to śruti (revelation). In a generic sense, all authoritative writings pertaining to Hindu tradition that are not <i>śruti</i> , i.e. all works composed after the Veda, such as epics and Purāṇas. In a specific sense, works dealing mainly with law ascribed to inspired lawgivers, such as the <i>Manusmṛti</i> , <i>Yājñavalkyasmṛti</i> ’ (Klostermaier 1998:174).
śrāddh	‘a ceremony in honour and for the benefit of deceased relatives, observed at fixed periods and on occasions of rejoicing as well as of mourning (libations and offerings of <i>piṇḍas</i> [...] are made to the spirits of the deceased and of food and gifts to brāhmaṇ officiants and to relatives)’ (McGregor 1997:958).
śrī	honorific prefix to a name (of a male deity, a man, a sacred place) (McGregor 1997:958); prosperity, success; happiness.
śruti	what has been heard, revelation; ‘The most sacred part of the scriptures of Hinduism. All Hindus consider the Veda (Saṃhitās, Braāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, Upaniṣads) as <i>śruti</i> . Depending on affiliation, Purāṇas, Śaiva Āgamas, Vaiṣṇava Saṃhitās and Tantras would be considered <i>śruti</i> by the followers of these <i>saṃpradāyas</i> (sects) as well. <i>Śruti</i> is the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice: it can be interpreted, but not superseded or bypassed’ (Klostermaier 1998:177).
Śūdrā	member of the fourth and lowest varṇ.
sukh	happiness; pleasure; joy.

<i>Sumeru</i>	the sacred mountain Meru.
<i>svāmī</i>	master, lord; king; one of titles that can be used for a Hindu renouncer/ascetic/sādhu.
<i>svayaṁ</i>	‘1. pron. self, oneself. 2. adv. by oneself, on one’s own. 3. of one’s accord’ (McGregor 1997:1050).
<i>śyām</i>	‘1. dark blue; dark brown; dark green. 2. m. a name or title or Kṛṣṇa’ (McGregor 1997:957).
<i>tablā</i>	small drum.
<i>tantra</i>	‘A form of Hinduism in which śakti, the energy of Śiva is worshipped’ (Klostermaier 1998:182).
<i>tap</i> (<i>tapas-</i>)	heat; ‘ascetic favour or practice; religious austerity; penance; mortification’ (McGregor 1997:437).
<i>tapasyā</i>	‘ascetic fervour or practice’ (McGregor 1997:437).
<i>tārak</i>	deliverer, saviour.
<i>tārak mantra</i>	the mantra that Lord Śiv whispers into the ear of people awaiting their cremation in Kāśī; this mantra will help the deceased to transcend the cycle of rebirth and attain mokṣ.
<i>tekrā</i>	a hillock, rising ground.
<i>thānā</i>	a police station, or post.
<i>tilak</i>	sectarian mark made (with a paste of saffron or sandal) chiefly on the forehead (Śaivas use a mark consisting of three horizontal stripes, Vaiṣṇavs a mark of three vertical stripes).
<i>tīrth</i>	a place of pilgrimage; a bathing place.
<i>triśūl</i>	trident.
<i>trivedī</i>	the three Vedas.
<i>tṛṣṇā</i>	‘1. thirst. 2. desire, longing’ (McGregor 1997:460).
<i>tyāg</i>	‘1. leaving, relinquishing. 2. abandoning. 3. renouncing; resignation; abdication. 4. separation; divorce’ (McGregor 1997:464).
<i>tulsī</i>	the sacred basil plant.

- tyāgī** ‘1. adj. abandoning, renouncing (as worldly life); self-denying. 2. an ascetic’ (McGregor 1997:465).
- Ūm** (also written ‘aum’/’om’) ‘[...] called the *prāṇava*, the mystical syllable containing the universe. It is explained as consisting of the first (a) and last (u) vowel and the last consonant (m) of the Sanskrit alphabet and therefore encompassing all words (which consist of vowels and consonants). [...] aum/om is used to introduce and conclude a religious work, an act of worship, an important task. It is supposed to be auspicious and its prolonged intonation is associated with the creative sound through which the universe came into existence’ (Klostermaier 1998:32).
- Umā** ‘light’; another name of Satī, Śiv’s consort.
- upānayan** Hindu ceremony of investiture with the sacred thread (janeū).
- upāniṣad** ‘session (of a pupil with a teacher), and the knowledge there given: an *upaniṣad* (any of various philosophical works attached to the Brāhmaṇas, and expounding the inner meaning of the Vedas)’ (McGregor 1997:127).
- upāsānā** ‘sitting near: 1. attendance, service 2. worship, adoration; reverence’ (McGregor 1997:129).
- vairāgī** ‘one free from worldly desire, an ascetic; specif. a Vaiṣṇava ascetic’ (McGregor 1997:936).
- vairāgyā** ‘freedom from worldly desires, asceticism’ (McGregor 1997:936).
- Vaiṣṇav** ‘1. having to do with Viṣṇu (as a sect, a tradition). 2. worshipping Viṣṇu. 3. m. a devotee of Viṣṇu’ (McGregor 1997:936).
- Vaiṣṇavī** ‘the *śakti* or personified energy of Viṣṇu; specif. a title of Durgā’ (McGregor 1997:936).
- Vaiṣṇavism** ‘Vaiṣṇavism is characterized by *upāsana* (ritual worship) and *sāraṇāgati* (taking refuge in Viṣṇu. Vaiṣṇavas subscribe to *ahimsā* (non-violence), vegetarianism, selflessness and active altruism. Vaiṣṇavism has brought forth an extremely rich literature both in

	Sanskrit and Indian vernaculars as well as artistic productions (music, dance, sculpture, architecture)’ (Klostermaier 1998:196).
vānāprasth	the third stage in life (āśram), the hermit stage, life in forest.
varṇ	‘1. colour; quality (of gold, as shown by its mark on a touchstone). 2. class, type, kind; race. 3. any of the four classes into which Indo-Aryan society was early divided, viz. brāhmaṇ, kṣatriyā, vaiśya and śūdra; (in comp.) caste’ (McGregor 1997:909).
vās	‘1. residing, residence. 2. place of residence’ (McGregor 1997:916).
vastu	anything real or existent; essence, substance.
ved	‘knowledge: 1. a Veda, any of the (later four) early Indian sacred scriptures. 2. Vedic literature generally (incl. the Upaniṣads, and various types of interpretative or auxiliary texts)’ (McGregor 1997:934).
vedānt	‘end of the Veda: the Upaniṣads collectively (regarded as teaching an essentially monistic doctrine); a monistic philosophy and theology based on the Upaniṣads’ (McGregor 1997:934).
vibhūṣit	adorned, decorated.
vibhūti	‘1. might, power. 2. domination, supremacy. 3. <i>philos.</i> superhuman power. 4. glory, grandeur. 5. wealth; prosperity. 6. transf. cow-dung ash (with which Saivas smear their bodies in the way ascribed to Śiva)’ (McGregor 1997:925).
vidyā	‘1. knowledge, learning; study. 2. a field of knowledge; science. 3. a particular skill or art; a spell’ (McGregor 1997:921).
viśvā	entire, whole, universal; the universe; the world.
Viṣṇu	‘the god Viṣṇu (who is regarded as the preserver of the world during each period of its existence, and who becomes manifest in the world in each period in successive avatārs)’ (McGregor 1997:931).
viśvā	entire, whole, universal.
viṛṣṇā	‘1. freedom from desire; indifference. 2. aversion. 3. strong desire’

(McGregor 1997:921).

vrat '1. vow. 2. religious rite or observance (as enjoyed by the gods or undertaken in devotion); a fast' (McGregor 1997:940).

yāg offering, sacrifice.

yam restraint; self control.

yati an ascetic.

yātrā pilgrimage.

yoga, (yog) connection, union; 'yoga, a theory or practice of abstract meditation undertaken to bring the soul towards or into union with the supreme spirit; bodily exercises or disciplines, as conducive to the above' (McGregor 1997:845).