TAMING THE ASCETIC: DEVOTIONALISM IN A HINDU MONASTIC ORDER

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Anthropologists and historians working on Hinduism often assume that devotionalism implies a religious rejection of social inequality as found in the caste system. This assumption arises from an essentialist interpretation of the 'real' theological and sociological meaning of *bhakti*. This article tries to show that *bhakti* as a religious experience can only be understood in the context of practices which are conditioned by religious organisation. In the case of the Ramanandis of north India there is a clear difference between ascetic and devotional styles which are related to different types of organisation. The devotional worship of images requires an emphasis on caste distinctions, while the peripatetic style of asceticism tends to minimise these distinctions. Historically, there has been an expansion of devotionalism, while 'wild' asceticism has been on the decline. Both processes have led to a greater importance of caste within the Ramanandi order.

Introduction

The Ramanandis of north India are commonly described as a Vaishnavite devotional (*bhakti*) sect. They are in their own perception Ram-*bhaktas*, devotees of the Hindu god Ram whom outsiders regard as an incarnation of Vishnu, but who is in the Ramanandi theology presented as the supreme god in his own right. My experience with the Ramanandis is based on fieldwork in Ayodhya, one of the most important pilgrimage centres of Uttar Pradesh. The Ramanandis have settled in Ayodhya increasingly from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards and form at present the majority of Ayodhya's population.[1] Ayodhya is one of the largest Ramanandi centres in north India for the obvious reason that it is the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Hindu devotional movements or *bhakti* sects have been given considerable attention by historians of religion as well as anthropologists (e.g. Singer 1966; Lele 1980). The common assumption of most anthropologists and historians is that these sects have emerged as a religious rejection of the Brahmanical value system. Emphasis is given to a structural opposition between the egalitarian values of the *bhakti* sects and the hierarchical ones of the caste system which is assumed to be underpinned by Brahmanical ideology. Striking also is the theological essentialism in much of the discussion of the social implications of *bhakti*. The Ramanandis may indeed be Ram-*bhaktas*, but to describe them as a '*bhakti* sect' hinders the correct interpretation of the present nature of this group and its internal divisions, as well of its evolution over time. The case of the Ramanandis demonstrates that *bhakti* has a variety of meanings in different

Man (N.S.) **22**, 680–695

contexts. Moreover, it shows that there is a relation between religious organisation and religious styles which has to be determined before one can even try to answer the question of the social implications of *bhakti*. Before I turn to that case I will briefly review the main arguments on the social and theological nature of *bhakti* and its relation to social change.

Bhakti sects are often described as religious movements, especially developed and eminently suited for practice by the lower classes, namely Shudras and women: those who are not entitled to read the Vedas or to understand Brahmanical philosophy (Singer 1972: 225). Moreover, these sects tend to be seen as signifying the assertion of emotion over intellect—a point of view probably arising from academic opinions about both women and the lower classes. Historically, the break with orthodox rituals and the social restrictions on participation in them, as well as the establishment of image worship and temple ceremonies, are understood to have opened *bhakti* religion to the lower classes in practice as well as in theory (Hopkins 1966: 21).

In their endeavour to understand the social implications of *bhakti* movements, anthropologists have tended to make a distinction between the egalitarian message of these movements and their acceptance of inequality in secular contexts. According to Ishwaran (1980: 74) they served as a 'safety-valve' and 'were essentially geared not to eliminating the Hindu Brahmanical system but to making it more workable and acceptable to the discontented masses'. He argues that 'there is a selfcontradiction built in *bhakti* movements between consciousness and existence' (1980: 82).

Holmström (1970) has developed an argument which is in some respects similar. He argues that one can only understand existing Hindu societies and Hindu history by following the interplay of two radically different kinds of religion, associated with two kinds of morality and of social relations: 'On the one hand, a religion which consecrates the existing social order, values of submission and hierarchy, and a relativist morality of closed groups; on the other, devotional religion, values of choice and equality, and a tendency towards a universalist "open" morality in Bergson's sense' (1970: 28). Holmström makes a distinction between traditional and modern *bhakti*. Traditional *bhakti* tends to distinguish religious values from social values. It recognises caste values while relegating them to a lower plane in the hierarchy of values. Modern *bhakti*, which Holmström finds in the industrialising cities of south India, tends to equate religious and moral universalism. In a well-known essay on the devotional Radha-Krishna *bhajans* in Mylapore (Madras), Singer (1972: 199–245) also relates devotion and modernisation. In his interpretation these devotional groups provide forms of sociability and intimacy that transcend kin, caste, sect and region. They reduce the consciousness of these differences and the tensions generated by it. Finally, Pocock (1973: 152) argues in his study of the Patidar, a landowning caste in Gujarat, that Vaishnavite *bhakti* introduced into north India a doctrine which ran counter to older beliefs underlying the symbiotic relation of pure and impure. His general observation about the Satsang of Swami Narayan is that though this *bhakti* sect does not oppose caste values, it tends to reduce their importance in the eyes of its followers (1973: 153).

The findings of both historians of religion, working on historical *bhakti* movements, and anthropologists, working on modern *bhakti* movements, seem to bear out the same set of interpretations. Hindu devotional groups tend to have egalitarian values and ideas in the religious sphere of action. Their ritual practices are open to all, irrespective of their birth and status. Their influence on society at large, however, is in the traditional situation of the caste system negligible, while in the case of modern *bhakti* it depends to a great extent on a historical transformation of that society whether the latent potentiality for moral universalism will be realised, as in the case of Holmström's industrial city of south India.

It thus seems that *bhakti* can, in one way or another, very easily be associated with egalitarian values which run counter to the values of the caste system. Literally, the Sanskrit term means 'participation' (in the Godhead, *Bhagavan*). But in practice it is used in a great variety of contexts with very different meanings from, say, the Bhagavad Gita onwards[2]. Its meaning and social significance can therefore not be divorced from the contexts in which it is operative (cf. Obeyesekere 1981: 20). It is quite meaningless to argue in a general way that 'anti-Brahmanism' or 'anti-casteism' forms the sociological essence of a Hindu religious phenomenon which is called *bhakti*. In some contexts it might have such aspects, but in many others it will not. At least in some historical situations *bhakti* could rather be seen as an 'invention of the renouncer', as Dumont (1970: 55) puts it. Such an interpretation, however, critically depends on how one understands Hindu renunciation. Burghart (1983: 636) rightly criticises Dumont for looking at the institution of renunciation only from the perspective of the Brahman householder. Both renunciation and Brahmanism are in fact Dumont's ideal-typical constructions and from their dialectical interplay emerges a third ideal type: the *bhakti* sect. Understanding a *bhakti* group, historically and sociologically, depends rather on an interpretation of the differences and debates between those primarily involved. We have to find what these 'intersectarian' and 'intrasectarian' differences are and how they have changed over time (cf. Burghart 1983). A problem with much of the literature on *bhakti*, referred to above, is that it is often not very specific about the social groups it empirically pertains to, but remains on a global, theological level.

Since the main division in religious organisation is that between specialists and laity, we have to decide whether we want to write about the implications of *bhakti* for the Ramanandi *sadhus* or for the Ramanandi laity. For reasons which will become clear in the next section this article will limit itself to the specialists. The discussion of the composition of the Ramanandi order will lead to an important problem in the operative context of Ramanandi religious organisation and beliefs: the relation between its two major religious styles, asceticism and devotionalism. In asceticism the indigenous term *tapas* (heat) seems to be the defining concept, while in devotionalism the term *ras* (religious sentiment) is central. Moreover, there is a historical problem involved here: devotionalism seems in the Ramanandi case to have eclipsed asceticism in the course of the evolution of the Ramanandi order. Immediately connected with that is clearly the question of the social implications of these styles and the historical process affecting them. In this connexion it is important to emphasise that we are not

concerned here with a purely theological question, involving essentialist definitions of what asceticism and devotionalism 'really' are in the Hindu context or with the construction of conceptual universes, as Burghart (1983) has done, but rather with the problem of the relation between religious organisation and religious experience.

In this article I want to argue that, contrary to what is generally assumed about the social implications of devotionalism, devotional beliefs and practices in the Ramanandi case emphasise caste distinctions. Moreover, a long process of sedentarisation has resulted in the taming of the wild, free-moving ascetic and the success of the temple-dwelling, law-abiding devotee. I want to describe the composition of the Ramanandi order and the long-term historical process which affected it in broad outline, before returning to the question of the social implications of devotionalism within the order.

The composition of the Ramanandi order

Bhakti groups are commonly referred to as sects (e.g. Dumont 1970: 187). The use of the term 'sect' to describe the Ramanandis, however, raises all kinds of theoretical and terminological problems. In the first place it leads one to look for its opposite, the church (cf. McLeod 1978: 288). In the Western Christian tradition 'sect' stands for a heterodox group which attempts to break away from the 'church', the institutionalised dominant orthodoxy. The use of the term 'sect' may easily obscure the fact that there is no Hindu church. It is even difficult to speak of Hindu orthodoxy as against Hindu heterodoxy. It seems to me that the church-sect dichotomy which plays such a central role in the sociological analysis of Christianity has been translated into a caste-sect dichotomy in the sociological analysis of Hinduism. For example in the work of Dumont (1966; 1970) a dialectical tension between the caste society under the aegis of the Brahman priest and the sects guided by the renouncers is seen as of major importance for understanding historical transformations in Hindu society. This is, however, clearly problematic, since the so-called *bhakti* sects of Krishnaite persuasion are usually not guided by renouncers, but by Brahman householders who transmit their leadership hereditarily within families which trace their ancestry to the founder of the 'sect'.

Secondly, the use of the term sect tends to obfuscate important differences between specialists and lay-followers. In the case of the Ramanandis—and probably this is true for most of the so-called 'sects'—the laity is highly amorphous, since in north India a layman is prone to see himself as following the teachings of a particular *guru*, rather than as a Vaishnavite or, for that matter, a Ramanandi. This fact emerges clearly, for example, from nineteenth-century census returns, in which the large majority of Hindus did not identify themselves as belonging to certain 'sectarian' denominations. Those who have a clear-cut primary Ramanandi identity are the religious specialists, the *sadhus*, who are organised as monks in a monastic order. Instead of using the term 'sect' I would therefore prefer to speak of an order of Ramanandi *sadhus*. In this way I follow an accepted usage in research on Buddhism. The Buddhist monastic

order is supported by a laity which is in Buddhist countries equated with 'society' at large. This has the advantage of bringing our discussion of the relation between social organisation and religious experience more into focus.

The relationship between *guru* and disciple is the central organisational principle both within the order and between the order and the laity. The Ramanandi *sadhus* of Ayodhya are visited by pilgrims who seek their advice and who may become initiated as their lay disciples. Any layman may choose any *sadhu* as his *guru*, although this choice is in fact constrained by caste, region and language. It is important that for the lay disciples the individual qualities of the *guru* tend to be of greater importance than the doctrinal orthodoxy of his message. However, though the relationship with laymen will not impinge on his freedom in matters of religious opinion, the fact that *sadhus* are dependent for their material support on lay disciples is clearly a major force 'from without' in the process of identity formation within the Ramanandi order.

Although a *sadhu* might 'withdraw to the Himalayas' and be lost to Hindu society—which is of course an important theme in Indian asceticism—renunciation as a social institution is dependent on the support of non-experts who live their secular lives in India's towns and villages and give the *sadhus* part of their surplus, enabling them to follow their religious calling. The renouncing monk in the Buddhist tradition is thus correctly called *bhikkhu*, 'one who begs'. A *sadhu* who wants to sustain his way of life has to be successful in attracting the support of laymen. The more lay support he attracts, the more he will also attract *sadhu* disciples, since he has the means to feed and support them. This may produce an apparent contradiction. A *sadhu* may become successful in attracting the support of laymen as well as a following of *sadhu* disciples when he has endured an extreme form of asceticism. The more liberated he is from the restraining societal and physical bodies thanks to his ascetic feats, the more he will be surrounded socially by ascetic and lay followers. According to Carrithers (1979: 294) the interdependence of monks and laymen in the case of the Buddhist *sangha* leads to the gradual abandonment of ascetic practices and the adoption of lay values, a tendency which he calls 'domestication'. In the case of the Ramanandis I would, however, argue that it is not the mere interdependence of laity and *sadhus* which leads to domestication of the *sadhus*, but a fundamental change in the position of *sadhus* in society, as a result of a larger political and economic transformation of that society. It seems crucial to understand the way ascetic renouncers experience their asceticism and renunciation, if we want to decide whether the interdependence with laymen 'corrupts' their spirituality or not.

The *guru*-disciple relation, which structures the relation between the order and the laity, is also the only permanent organisational principle within the order. The *guru* initiates the *sadhu* into the order during a ritual in which, from the theological point of view, the imparting of the meditation formula (*mantra*) is the major event. Sociologically, however, the most important aspect of the initiation is the fact that the *sadhu* loses both his secular name and the name of his patrilineal clan (*gotra*) which are replaced by a religious name and the clan-name of God (*achyut-gotra*: 'the clan of the One whose seed does not fall'). In this way a spiritual family (*parivar*) is formed by the disciples of one *guru* and kinship-terms

such as *guru-bhai* (co-disciple or 'brother' of one and the same *guru*) and *guru-cacha* ('uncle' or co-disciple of one's *guru*'s *guru*) are used to address the members of such a spiritual family. At this stage the *sadhu* has left his natural family and caste. Moreover, a distinction has been created between Ramanandi laymen who remain householders, and Ramanandi *sadhus*.

The crucial element here is the emphasis on celibacy (*brahmacarya*) as part of what is called 'passionlessness' (*vairagya*). The Ramanandi sadhus are called *vairagis*, 'those who practise *vairagya*', but in principle *vairagya* can also be practised by householders. It is interesting to note that in my interviews with sedentary *sadhus* and Brahman householders in Ayodhya the term *vairagya* is used both for the celibate chastity of the *sadhu* and for chastity within marriage, though it is admitted that this is very difficult for a married man. The *sadhu* is in that sense only more chaste than the householder and offers him a not altogether unattainable ideal of life. In terms of religious experience it seems to be the amount of devotion which requires renunciation: surrendering oneself entirely to the service of Lord Ram implies renunciation of 'normal' family-life. Renunciation is therefore not considered to be necessary, but only a possible devotional method. This makes many north Indian devotional groups think that *vairagya* and especially lifelong celibacy (as distinct from celibacy in the last stage of life) are of relatively minor importance. Such a view might also legitimise the prominence of householders as religious leaders in these groups. The Ramanandi *sadhus*, however, are celibate monks and in this way, as in many others, they resemble more the Shaivite ascetic orders than the other Vaishnavite devotional groups. Celibacy creates a social boundary between laymen and *sadhus* and is clearly one of the major aspects of the organisation of the Ramanandi order as a whole.

After the initiation by the *mantra-guru*, the Ramanandi *sadhu* can choose a second *guru*, by whom he is given a secondary initiation in a specific religious practice or method (*sadhana*) of reaching god. By choosing a specific set of religious methods one becomes, of course, constrained to follow the traditions pertaining to them. The *sadhu* who takes a secondary initiation may, after his instruction, return to his 'primary' spiritual family or remain with the family founded by his '*guru* of methods' (*sadhak-guru*) or go round on his own accord. One may argue that while the relation with the supporting laity is a major force 'from without' that encourages *sadhus* to accept a certain group identity, the *guru*-disciple relation is a major force 'from within'. This force acts to create what we may call spiritual kin-groups which serve as vehicles for the maintenance of certain religious traditions.

Since beliefs are extremely elastic among Ramanandi *sadhus*, differences between them are either of method, based upon differences in religious methods, or personal, based upon differential success in tapping resources. Often these two types of differences tend to blend, however, since differences in method are used as boundary-maintaining mechanisms in efforts to attract as many followers as possible. The differences between Ramanandi *sadhus* are often enormous, as we will see later. This can be explained by the fact that the organisation of the order is very loosely structured. There is no central authority which decides upon doctrinal and organisational matters. Every *sadhu* may go

and roam throughout India, teaching within certain limits his own religious message; and great value is put on that freedom of the *sadhu*. Sociologically, this importance of practical and doctrinal freedom makes the order to a considerable extent an 'open social category'. Nevertheless, there is behind this appearance of the *sadhu*'s unlimited freedom and individuality also the reality of a Ramanandi identity which is maintained over a long historical period. Moreover, the differences in religious methods create recognisable divisions within the order.

The Ramanandi order is divided into three major groups with their own religious traditions. The first is that of the *tyagis* who are the real ascetics and whose beliefs and practices centre on a radical type of renunciation (*tyag*) and on the accumulation of magical heat (*tapas*). The *tyagis* tend to lead a peripatetic life. The second is that of the *nagas*, the fighting ascetics, who are organised in regiments (*akhara*) and armies (*ani*). Their beliefs and ritual activities are akin to those of the *tyagis*, but their life is focused on wrestling and the use of weapons. Their main function is to serve as the military backbone of the Ramanandi order. Finally, the third and last group is that of the *rasiks* who are the real representatives of emotional devotion in the Ramanandi order. In their beliefs and practices Ram's wife Sita is elevated to such an extent that she is equal in status to Ram himself. While *tyagis* and *nagas* put great value on radical renunciation and ascetic methods, *rasiks* rather emphasise devotional surrender and worship. These religious differences should not be interpreted apart from the way these groups are organised and from their historical vicissitudes. A long-term process of sedentarisation and domestication has affected all these groups and has led to settlement in pilgrimage centres such as Ayodhya. Moreover, the devotion of the *rasiks* has become rather more important than the asceticism of the other groups. Contrary to what one might have expected, these historical tendencies have not resulted in a unification and centralisation of the Ramanandi order. The differences between *tyagis* and *nagas* on the one hand and *rasiks* on the other persist.

I will now describe the differences in beliefs and organisation between the three groups of Ramanandi *sadhus*, before turning to our main problem: the social significance of *bhakti* in the Ramanandi order.

Tyagis *and* nagas: *naked violence*

Tyag is a Sanskrit word, meaning 'abandoning', somewhat similar to the common word for renunciation, *samnyas*, which is primarily used in Shaivite circles. It appears to be a rather stronger expression for 'renunciation' than *vairagya*, the general term used by all Ramanandi *sadhus*. While, as we have seen, *vairagya* of *sadhus* is, theoretically, only a stricter discipline of 'passionlessness' than that followed by lay householders, *tyag* is of an entirely different order. *Tyagis* are easily recognisable. They have long matted hair (*jata*), smeared with ashes (*khak*) and can be often observed sitting near a fire (*dhuni*), smoking hashish from clay pipes. A *tyagi* believes that an ascetic lifestyle, including strict celibacy and an itinerant life, is the best way to realise Ram within himself. *Tyagis* 'abandon' the comfort of clothing, food, housing and sexual gratification

for that ultimate goal. Besides leaving behind these comforts offered by settled life as a householder, they follow all kinds of ascetic practices which induce certain types of religious experiences and result in the obtaining of magical powers (*siddhi*).

Like the other Ramanandi *sadhus*, the *tyagis* are organised in spiritual families, based on the *guru*-disciple relationship. However, they also have a distinctive organisation of itinerant groups (*jamat* and *khalsa*). The major functions of these groups are to provide mutual protection and support in a hostile environment and to pool resources for giving a feast or building a temple. The differences between these groups are rather unclear. They are often couched in symbolic terms such as 'those who wear only a loincloth of grass or banana' as against 'those who wear a metal or wooden belt'. There is a continuous process of fission and my informants were in general unable to give precise answers to questions about the origin of their group and the reasons for its separation from other groups. To such questions mostly *ad-hoc* answers were given, such as for example: 'Because they ate rice and we did not'. From my observations, however, it is perfectly clear that when a *tyagi* is successful in tapping resources, he becomes able to found his own itinerant band and will often do so instead of remaining subservient to the authority of another *tyagi*. The formation of an itinerant band provides a successful *sadhu* with a channel for status mobility. Notions of hierarchy and prestige are clearly very important in the life of ascetics. This seems to run counter to what is often assumed to be the goal of asceticism: escape from societal and physical constraints to gain liberation (e.g. Dumont 1970: 43). The goal of *tyag*, however, is rather to gain magical power by accumulating heat (*tapas*). In one way or another this magical power is also reflected in social power and prestige. Prestige is, however, certainly not only the result of ascetic capacities, but also of more mundane political ones. To become abbot (*mahant*) or regional overseer (*mandaleshvar*) one has to be capable of rallying support from other *tyagis* (cf. Burghart 1976).

Tyagis do not have a clearly demarcated, coherent system of beliefs. They do have, however, clusters of ascetic practices which define their life-style and which are to some extent theologically underpinned. Theology as such is not highly valued by them, since they do not consider knowledge a desirable asset, but rather have the practical aim of realising Ram through the transformation of body and mind. I will describe the central clusters of ascetic practices to show the way the *tyagis* proceed to realise Ram.

The first cluster is that of fire (*dhuni*) and ashes (*vibhuti*, *khak*). After the primary mantra-initiation to become a Ramanandi, the *sadhu* has to undergo a secondary intiation, before he can become a *tyagi*. The *guru* applies ashes on several parts of the initiate's body and instructs him in the significance of fire and ashes. The fire is the focus of the *tyagi*'s lifestyle. It is simultaneously regarded as the god Fire (Agni) and as the Ultimate Reality (Ram). Every morning a sacred fire is kindled from which ashes are taken. A unity between fire and body is created by smearing ashes over the body. This act is interpreted as symbolising the unity between the individual soul and the ultimate reality. According to my *tyagi* informants ashes are also symbolic of death: by applying ashes they are constantly reminded of the perishability of the body.

Tyagis need the sacred fire for most of their ritual activities. It is striking that some of these activities are Brahmanical. *Tyagis* are famous for staging great quasi-Vedic sacrifices (*hawan*, *yajna*), in which Brahman priests often officiate. This makes a ritual and conceptual opposition of Brahmanism and the religion of renouncers, as assumed by Dumont (1970) and Burghart (1983), somewhat problematic. In general, however, one can say that the *tyagis* make a quite distinctive ritual use of the sacred fire. They kindle fires and sit surrounded by them in the burning sun in order to accumulate *tapas* which might be best translated by 'magical heat'. Fire creates heat which is full of power and energy. This power (*shakti*) is dangerous and it takes great ascetic efforts to contain it. In fact, the greater part of the *tyagis'* ascetic methods is directed towards accumulating and containing heat and therewith magical power.

It might be clear that the ascetic practices which focus on the sacred fire and its ashes form an important cluster. The smearing of ashes on the body and the placing of fires to accumulate heat act to create a boundary between *tyagis* and other Ramanandi *sadhus*, but on the other hand it obfuscates the differences between them and ascetics who are not Ramanandis. The placing of fires for the accumulation of heat is also a major aspect of the ritualised life of the Shaivite Nath Jogis, and in general ashes are symbolic of Shiva, the great ascetic god, and not of Vishnu. Ramanandi *tyagis* readily admit that there is a great resemblance between their life-style and that of the Shaivite ascetics. The difference lies, according to them, primarily in the meditation on the Name of Ram. The meditation formula not only refers to Ram as the ultimate reality, but is in fact Ram himself (cf. Bakker 1986: 72). Theologically, they regard Shiva as Ram's greatest devotee, but, as we have already observed, theology is not very important for *tyagis*. Except for the cult of the Name of Ram, the *tyagis* seem to be closer to the Shaivite Yogis in terms of rituals and religious experiences than to their Ramanandi brethren of *rasik* persuasion.

A second important cluster of activities is the taking of vows (*vrat*). There are an almost infinite number of vows or austerities to take, and not only the *tyagis*, but all Ramanandi *sadhus* indulge in them. The most important vow is of course that of celibacy. The *tyagi* gives a special meaning to this vow which is different from the one given above in our discussion of *vairagya*. As we have already argued *tyag* is more radical than *vairagya* and so is the *tyagi*'s celibacy. The *tyagi* retains his seed not to be able to devote himself entirely to the service of Ram, but to contain his heat, energy and power. Contact with women, especially in the vulnerable years of building up one's power, is considered to be highly dangerous, since it may result in the spilling of semen, even involuntarily. The *tyagi* wants to kill his desire (*kama*), following the myth-model of Shiva who killed the god of sensual love, Kama. Sexual desire is sometimes quenched in a very violent way. The *tyagis* speak of the breaking of the mind (*man-tor*), so that the illusions of the world are broken and its attractions warded off. A step further on this path of using violence against oneself is by breaking the penis (*tang-tor*) which three of my informants claimed to have gone through.

Other austerities bring out an opposition between nature and culture which is very marked in the lifestyle of *tyagis*. They often claim to eat only uncooked things from the jungle. In this way they emphasise a distinction between their

itinerant 'jungle' life and sedentarised life in villages and towns. In their way of dressing this opposition serves as a boundary within the Ramanandi order between *tyagis* who wear 'jungle clothes' which may amount to wearing practically nothing, and sedentarised *sadhus* who wear woven cotton cloth (*vastradhari*).

Performing austerities enhances self-control and quenches desire. From the *tyagi*'s point of view, however, it is a positive method which does not only aim to suppress affects, but also to acquire special religious experiences and magical power. The latter is not always explicitly claimed by *tyagis*, but certainly always ascribed to them by their lay followers who seek their magical blessings and therapeutical advice. *Tyagis* are often seen as especially effective in exorcising demons, since they have conquered the world of desire, a clear allusion to the fact that demons arise from that world.

Finally, a third cluster of practices important for the *tyagis* focuses on the worship of Lord Ram. As we have seen, the sacred fire is considered to be a manifestation of Ram. Besides the fire they also worship a black ammonite (*shalagram*) which represents Ram and stones smeared with red paste, said to represent Hanuman. However, the *tyagis* also carry small anthropomorphic images, especially of Ram and Hanuman, with them. In general, they regard the worship of images (*murti-puja*) as relatively irrelevant, but condone the practice as a method to reach the laity who are thought to be unable to worship without images. In their view Ram is essentially 'without qualities' (*nirguna*) and to worship him as 'having qualities' (*saguna*) is of minor importance. The sacred fire and the black ammonite were taken to be manifestations of *nirguna* Ram. They certainly considered themselves as devotees of Ram (Ram *bhaktas*), but focusing on *Nirguna* Ram their *bhakti* did not require image worship.

This attitude towards image-worship is of sociological significance. Both *tyagi* and lay informants were of the opinion that image worship requires caste distinctions, since only priests of high status can attend to the images of Ram and Sita, while the worship of the aniconic manifestations of *nirguna* Ram does not require these distinctions. There seems thus to be an affinity between the idea that the ultimate reality is without qualities which makes image worship irrelevant, and ritual practices in which this ultimate reality can be worshipped without caste distinctions.

So much of religious activities. We may now have a picture of the prototypical *tyagi*: a wild man with matted hair, smeared with ashes, unconstrained by social conventions, travelling alone or in itinerant groups from village to village through the jungle, being without residence (*alamgi*) and without family (*nihamgi*). From a sociological point of view, one of the most important aspects of this way of life is a clear tendency to neglect caste. *Tyagi* informants of low caste origin always stressed in interviews that while travelling around caste distinctions were not followed, even in cooking. Only after arrival in a village or in a pilgrimage centre was a distinction made between twice-born *tyagis* and others. To put it bluntly, the *tyagi* itinerant groups are organised as brotherhoods in which caste distinctions are de-emphasised and which follow a very open recruitment policy. Status depends here on ascetic achievement, while positions of authority, like abbotship, are awarded by majority vote.

The itinerant groups of *sadhus* from different ascetic orders have played an important role in Indian history. Even now they not only offer their religious teachings, but also horses, camels, elephants, money and other items of long-distance trade to the villagers and the merchants of the *qasba*. They were the ascetic trader-soldiers who dominated long-distance trade in northern India, at least during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Cohn (1964) points out that Shaivite *sadhus* were the commercial leaders of the important north Indian commercial town Mirzapur in the eighteenth century. He argues that ascetics had great advantages as traders, since they could pool resources without being forced to divide them among inheritors. Moreover, they could use their pilgrimage cycle which ran from Hardwar in the north through the Gangetic plain to Bengal and Jagannath Puri. Bayly (1983: 143) puts it succinctly:

> Using a combination of military and commercial power, they could link up areas of supply and demand in the stable and productive zones and provide their own protection on the different routes between them. Their corporate savings and investment habits enabled them to form and direct the uses of capital with great efficiency. By the 1780's, the ascetic sects seem to have comprised the dominant moneylending and property-owning groups in Allahabad, Benares and Mirzapur.

It is indeed not hard to understand that with these great interests at stake the *tyagi* itinerant groups had to be able to defend themselves or to attack, when necessary. It is, however, difficult to say when ascetic groups started to organise themselves in a military fashion, though it is clear that asceticism and organised violence is a historical combination of long standing in India (cf. Lorenzen 1978). With the improvement of communications in the seventeenth century and the connected growth of pilgrimage (Bayly 1980) ascetic military organisation seems to have become more important. Oral history in the Ramanandi order refers to a great increase of competition between the different ascetic orders in the eighteenth century. This increase in organised violence, especially between the Shaivite Dashanamis and the Ramanandis, is commonly regarded by the militant ascetics, the *nagas* (lit. 'naked ones'), as the cause of their military organisation. Evidently disparate Ramanandi ascetic groups endeavoured in the early eighteenth century to organise themselves in regiments and armies. In so doing they were copying the military organisation of the Dashanami *nagas*. Besides protecting their combined pilgrimage and trade routes these Shaivite *nagas* were already famous as condottieri. In their armies anyone could make a career, based on personal qualities rather than on caste identity. They were hired by the Nawabs of Awadh as well as by Hindu rajas, but could also fight independently (Barnett 1980). We know much less about the historical role of Ramanandi *nagas* in state formation than we know about the Dashanamis. From the available evidence, however, it seems clear that besides copying the Dashanami organisation the Ramanandis also followed the same ascetic policy of open recuitment.

I would also like to suggest that there is a continuity in religious style between *tyagis* and *nagas*. Ramanandi asceticism is a means of acquiring power. Physical and magical power are not seen to be contradictory. Ascetics use inward

violence on their own body and mind to acquire power over the microcosm of their individual existence and the connected macrocosm of nature. They also use outward violence to acquire power in society. The Ramanadi *naga* is an ascetic warrior, following the myth-model of Hanuman, the great yogi who fights simultaneously with magical and military means. Moreover, we find with the *nagas* the kind of organisational set-up we also found with the *tyagis*. A good example is Hanumangarhi in Ayodhya, a temple-fortress with at least 500 naga inhabitants. Hanumangarhi is a *panchayati* temple, meaning that it is governed by the assembly of *naga* inhabitants. The abbot of the temple is very restricted. He is even not allowed to leave the temple compound without permission of the assembly. The temple gives ample scope to free enterprise by the individual *nagas*. A *naga* may leave the temple to live in one of the many houses in Ayodhya which are owned by the temple and start his own business. In this way at least a hundred *nagas* pursue a commercial career in money-lending and shopkeeping, without being hindered by institutional constraints.

Rasiks: *sweet devotion*

The majority of Ramanandi *sadhus* in Ayodhya lead a religious life which is in tone and quality almost entirely different from that of *tyagis* and *nagas*. They are called *rasiks* and follow the path of sweet devotion (*madhuryopasana*). Since their arrival in Ayodhya in the early eighteenth century, protected by their militant brethren, the *nagas*, they have gradually come to dominate this religious centre. They populate most of Ayodhya's temples, since they are not *alamgi* (without residence), as the *tyagis* are, but *asthanandharis* (temple-dwellers). Rather than deeming image-worship relatively unimportant, as the *tyagis* do, they emphasise a kind of religious theatre, in which they act out their emotional attachment to the deities while worshipping the images. They spend much effort in beautifying their temples and the images of the gods, since they hold the belief that the vision of god (*jhanki*) one receives during these activities is of immense religious value. All one's actions should be devoted to pleasing the gods and in that way one reaches real bliss.

Rasiks emphasise theological knowledge rather more than *tyagis* and *nagas* do. Their beliefs and ritual activities are very intricate and elaborated in a theory of 'sentiments' or 'moods' (*ras*), underpinned by theological niceties. In the devotional theatre the worshipper acts out an emotional relationship with the gods. The most common identity taken by the worshipper is that of girl-friend (*sakhi*) of Sita, although other devotional attitudes may also be chosen. The *rasiks* are for this reason often called *sakhis*. As Sita's girl-friend the Ramanandi is able to serve Ram and Sita in their esoteric and erotic play (*lila*). To make this idea acceptable they have had to develop a theological re-interpretation of the traditional Ram story. Hanuman, for example, who is regarded as a great magician and warrior and as an incarnation of the fierce Bhairava by *tyagis* and *nagas*, but also by the laity, is given the female identity of girl-friend of Sita by the *rasiks*. In an attempt to bring about a radical transformation of their masculinity in the ritual theatre of temple worship, the *rasiks* dress as females and

sometimes even go so far as to observe the taboos of the menstruation period. Exactly what kind of relation the *rasiks* think they have with Ram remains a secret for outsiders. The common line is that the *rasiks* only act as observers of the marital joy of Ram and Sita, the divine couple. Moreover, Ram is considered to be *ekpatnivrat*, loyal to only his wife, Sita.

It will be clear that we have come a long way from the naked violence which characterised the life-style of *tyagis* and *nagas*. Those with some basic knowledge of Hinduism will already have recognised some similarities between what the Ramanandi *rasiks* do and believe and the religious attitudes of the Krishna-devotees in the Braj region. To my mind there can be no doubt that the sweet Krishna devotion which was promulgated by the Krishnaite groups of Braj had a great influence on the worship of Ram, as practised by Ramaite ascetic groups who were gradually to form the Ramanandi order. This influence amounted to a 'Krishnaisation' of the mythology and theology of Ram. We have already seen the transformation of the violent Hanuman in the sweet girl-friend of Sita, but also the life of the virtuous king (*dharmaraja*) Ram had to be interpreted in terms of the playing, sensuous and mischievous Krishna. Moreover the relationship between Ram and Sita, which emerges from the Ram story as a model of the 'passionless' ideal marriage, had to be eroticised to a love-play (*lila*).

The *rasik* emphasis on ritual theatre in temples, focused on the images of Ram and Sita 'with attributes' (*saguna*), has a number of social implications. The *rasiks* are clearly the most sedentarised of the Ramanandi *sadhus*. They do not travel in itinerant groups and their temples are theological centres. Most of the abbots of these temples either have been married and have children, having entered the order in the later celibate stage of life, or keep a mistress. They do not see celibacy as having an intrinsic religious value in the way the *tyagis* do who need to contain their accumulated heat. It is not the fact that these *rasiks* have sexual relations which has to be explained, but rather that they stick, at least in theory, to the celibacy which is essential to their identity as Ramanandi *sadhus*.

Contrary to the indifference of *tyagis* to caste distinctions, these are of great importance to *rasiks*. While it is a general rule that only those belonging to the three highest status-categories (twice-born) are allowed to enter the sanctum, there is a clear tendency in *rasik* temples to give only Brahmans the positions of authority, such as those of officiating priest and abbot. Of crucial importance is the fact that these temples are not governed by the assembly of *sadhus*, as we have seen is the case with the *naga* monastery of Hanumangarhi. They are owned by the abbots and given that one becomes an abbot not by election, but by pupillary succession, one can imagine how powerful these *rasik* abbots can be. Here again, however, I do not believe that this situation impairs their spiritual authority. On the contrary, the richest *rasik* abbots in Ayodhya were also the most important *gurus* in spiritual matters.

Conclusion: the taming of the ascetic

I have tried to convey an admittedly oversimplified picture of the differences between Ramanandi *sadhus* I encountered in Ayodhya. What we have seen

might be presented as a series of oppositions: itinerant life versus sedentarised life; relative indifference to caste origin in militant and ascetic life versus importance of caste in temple worship; ascetic practices directed at attaining godhead within oneself versus devotional practices directed at the worship of god through external images in temples; celibacy as a method to contain heat and ascetic power versus celibacy as a way of devoting oneself completely to the worship of god. This seems to add up to a structural opposition of asceticism versus devotionalism, but to put it that way would lead us to commit a basic error. In our urge to generalise we would neglect the historical context, in which ascetic and devotional experiences get their meaning and social significance. Of major importance here seems a historical trend of sedentarisation of *sadhus* which has been favourable to devotional worship and at the same time has amounted to the taming of wild asceticism.

Till the nineteenth century asceticism was a most rewarding and promising option. Especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when ascetic orders dominated major parts of trade and soldiery, they offered great social opportunities and, what is more, an equality in opportunity. Without being hindered by one's caste identity one could opt for the relatively open identity of *tyagi* or *naga* and start a more or less individual career. This freedom created, of course, its own inequalities, but they were based upon ascetic entrepreneurship rather than on the ascriptive status of caste. With the Pax Britannica this world of opportunity gradually disappeared. The period came to a characteristic end in the so-called Sannyasi rebellion, a protracted battle between ascetics of different persuasions and the British from 1780–1800 (Ghosh 1930). The military organisation of the Ramanandi *nagas*, which had emerged from the loosely structured *tyagi* groups, gradually lost its military functions. But like the Banjaras, the gypsy-travellers, the itinerant ascetics still kept a role in long-distance trade in camels and horses till well into the twentieth century. The importance of trading in ascetic life, however, lost much of its importance, when the British started to develop railways and other communications in the late nineteenth century. Gradually the Banjaras disappeared from the stage and during my fieldwork the last *tyagi* abbot in Ayodhya, who had organised trading on a large scale, died.

Another long-term development, starting in the late sixteenth century, has been the expansion of a devotional movement among the Ramanandis which got much of its impetus from the Krishnaite sects of Braj. To my mind, the *rasik* emphasis on the worship of anthropomorphic images of Ram and Sita is sociologically of great importance. Images belong properly to temples and temples belong in villages or towns, and especially in sacred places. The 'finding' of 'lost' or 'hidden' images and sacred places in the establishment of a localised cult, documented by Vaudeville (1976) and Burghart (1978), has been one of the major aspects of the expansion of the *bhakti* movement in north India. One may argue here for a relation between the devotional worship of images in a localised temple cult and a process of sedentarisation. Moreover, the priestly worship of images should be confined to members of pure castes, and especially Brahmans, if one wants to have the support of lay members of higher castes.

Sedentarisation, the devotional worship of images in temples and caste inequality seem to have an affinity in the Weberian sense. Moreover, social and

religious identities are not merely the result of the free option of individuals. To a great extent the options are constrained by the configurations of power. An important role in making the Ramanandis follow caste regulations has, for example, been played by Jai Singh, the king of Jaipur (1688–1743), in whose state some of the largest Ramanandi monasteries are still to be found. At this stage, however, there was still an ambivalence in Hindu state policy towards ascetics, since on the one hand the kings needed military and commercial support which could be provided by ascetics with an open recruitment policy, while on the other hand they were bound to uphold and enforce the ideology of caste. When in the nineteenth century the commercial and military side of the Ramanandi order became of little consequence, sedentarisation and royal patronage made caste more important for the *sadhus*.

Returning to the problem of the social implications of *bhakti* with which we started, I would argue that *bhakti* has no religious or social essence which would enable us to make generalisations. The Ramanandis are devotees (*bhaktas*) of Lord Ram, but *bhakti* has a different meaning for *tyagis*, *nagas* and *rasiks*. *Bhakti* as a religious experience gets its meaning in the context of practices which are conditioned by religious organisation. The way these practices are organised is clearly affected by the simple fact of whether these *sadhus* lead an itinerant or a sedentary life. When we find that the Ramanandi *rasiks* practise a 'Krishnaite' model of *bhakti* which focuses on image worship in temples, we may conclude that at least this type of *bhakti* requires sedentarisation and forces *sadhus* to acknowledge caste distinctions in their ritual activities. In that sense there can be no doubt that religious practice has certain social and, for that matter, psychological implications, but quite different from those one would have expected from reading much of the literature on *bhakti*[4].

The connected problem of the relation between *bhakti* and social change leads us to ask how the success of the 'Krishnaite' model of *bhakti* might be related to the sedentarisation of ascetic groups. Though we may feel a legitimate urge to present the muddle of history in some coherent form, it is in fact unclear how these two processes are linked. Despite a process of sedentarisation the *tyagis* have not disappeared, but have merely been marginalised. They have adapted to changing circumstances as also the *nagas* have done. A modest conclusion may be that the *rasik* style has become in the nineteenth century a more viable option for Ramanandi *sadhus* than the styles of *tyagis* and *nagas*. It is, however, impossible to show any grand design behind these historical tendencies.

NOTES

The fieldwork for this article was carried out at intervals between 1980 and 1984 and was supported by the Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research. Discussions with Chris Fuller, Lisette van den Hoogen, Johnny Parry and Bonno Thoden van Velzen have helped to shape my argument. I should also like to thank the seminar on Equality and Inequality, organised by James Woodburn at the London School of Economics, for useful suggestions.

[1] Ayodhya had, in 1981, 30,468 inhabitants. It is, however, extremely difficult to make a correct estimate of its population, which consists in large part of peripatetic *sadhus* and pilgrims who may stay for a week, a month or even a year. Besides the relatively sedentary population, the Municipal office has also an estimate for the so-called 'floating' population, which was in 1983 one million.

According to rough estimates there are 4,360 houses and about3,000 temples in Ayodhya. Ayodhya is not only a Ramanandi centre, but also a pilgrimage place for Brahmanical rituals near the river Sarayu, in which Brahman priests officiate (cf. van der Veer 1985). An ethnographic and historical description of Ayodhya and its religious specialists is given in van der Veer, in press.

[2] Hardy (1983) argues that there is a difference between 'intellectual' *bhakti* and 'emotional' *bhakti* in the context of Krishna worship. I would suggest that the meanings of *bhakti* proliferate when we consider other than Krishnaite contexts.

[3] Some of these wordly activities and their consequences for communal politics are discussed in Van der Veer 1987*b*.

[4] For an interpretation of the psychological implications of these practices in the Ramanandi order, see Van der Veer 1987*a*.

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