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By

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Abstract: The paper discusses the character of an Indian ascetic (sadhu) and the pattern of his life history which expresses an alternative way of human existence in the Indian society. The author's point of departure were biographies and autobiographies of some famous ascetics, the founders of schools etc. The author constructs an ideal model of the ascetic's life. According to the model the ascetic's biography includes a number of regular elements: (1) a miraculous, unusual birth, (2) a danger threatening his life or health in childhood or adolescence. (3) the first symptoms of his supernatural power, miraculous accomplishments, (4) departure or escape from home and his family's repeated attempts to make him come back. (5) wandering in search of a master, (6) meeting of a master, (7) initiation, (8) entering the path of mortifying, monastic vows. (9) the period of novitiate, apprenticeship, (10) first accomplishments in spiritual practice, (11) achieving a supernatural power, unusual acts indicating great spiritual power e.g. taming wild animals, healing diseases, foreseeing future and converting people to the proper way of life' (12) first disciples, founding a new school, line or sect in order to transmit the achieved knowledge and power, (13) visions, the state of a cosmic consciousness, Samadhi, (14) the unusual death with previous knowledge of the exact moment of own demise entering the state of mahasamadhi.

Key words: asceticism, India, Hinduism, Siva

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of asceticism is a very important part of the Hinduism religious structure. It can be analysed from different points of view. One of them is to bring the form of ascetic (sadhu) as a mediator between the different elements of social hierarchy. The caste system determines human life from the moment of birth. One cannot avoid belonging to a group, a caste. Even in case of a religion change, for example to Islam, one will only move to the "Muslims caste." Traditionally in India ascetic movement focused resilient individuals who grew beyond their duties assigned by the mere birth. Beside them, however, other people could be also found, like beggars or fugitives. In accordance with the applicable system, ascetic loses affiliation to a caste to which was born, thus gains freedom and unfettered access to all other groups.

Another approach to the problem is to consider asceticism as a portion of the Great Tradition of India. The Great Tradition consists of - on the one hand - focus on maintaining ties with the social world, highlighting the work ethic, the family and rituals; on the other hand breaking ties with the world, operation or existence of the side, on the margin of the whole structure.

Established by the ascetic ashram (form of a monastery, assemblies) is often a foothold of civilizations, a bridge between primitive religiosity of isolated local groups and external influences (eg. Influences from other cultural centres, other regions from which ascetics came). The functioning of the ashram can also be an interesting topic of research.

Ascetics or sadhus can be found in India anywhere: in pilgrimage centres, in villages and modern cities, in mountain caves and woods. They wander almost 10 months of the year, with the exception of the rainy season. They reach all corners of India, cross territorial (state and national), linguistic and geographical borders. They are in constant motion and not only in the physical, but also internal sense. Various forms of spiritual practice are compared to the internal pilgrimage. The starting point for each of them has a definite place in the social structure and the associated rights and obligations. One remains always on the periphery of the structure, which was followed by an initiation and crossing the borders. Going beyond this limit meant a break with the current world social structures. The second stage of the spiritual journey led to the often inaccessible end, which is moksha - liberation from the state chain of successive birth, death and rebirth. This goal was attainable only for the few most developed spiritual individuals. The rest was walking slowly along a designated path.

Indian asceticism originally manifested as individual practice, but over time developed into a socio-religious institution. Many ascetics and yogis exist in mythology. According to myths, asceticism is practised by gods and demons. Cultivating asceticism demon reaches such a power that it starts to threaten the gods. It disrupts the existing balance of forces and becomes a cause of armed intervention of one of the gods, who was forced to kill the demon. Indian myths are full of this kind of intervention. The archetype of the ascetic and yogi in mythology is Siva (also named Jogesvara). It is believed that he was the first yo-gin. Iconographic model of ascetic belongs to Siva sitting cross-legged in the lotus position, with the body greased with ashes from the fire, with hair tied in a kind of a bun. His attributes are: a bowl made from a human skull (used by beggars) and trident - objects used by some contemporary ascetics. Buddha and Mahavira were also ascetics. Probably to the eighth century AD ascetic movement was associated with the worship of Siva (Ghurye, 1964).

ASCETIC JOURNEY

Being an ascetic is like a concept of an avatar, or incarnation of an idol, landing him in a particular bodily form to earth to perform an appropriate task. Their lives paths form a pattern. Its elements are: 1) The miraculous or unusual birth related to prophecies; 2) a threat to life or health in childhood or early youth; 3) the first manifestations of supernatural power, miraculous actions; 4) leaving or running away from home and family, repeated attempts (from the family) to persuade the fugitive to return; 5) wandering in search of a master; 6) meeting with the master; 7) initiation; 8) entering the path of renunciation, the adoption of the vows; 9) The period of novitiate, science; 10) the first achievement in spiritual practice; 11) achievement of supernatural powers, extraordinary acts proving a high spiritual strength, for example taming wild animals, healing the sick, to know the future, converting people to the right path; 12) the first disciples, the establishment of a new school or sect, in order to transfer the achieved knowledge and power; 13) images, visualizations, states of cosmic consciousness, Samadhi; 14) advance awareness of the time of own departure and unusual death; enter the state maha-samadhi.

Presented here are excerpts of sources, showing the various elements of the above model. First of these elements, a wonderful or unusual birth and related predictions:

A wandering ascetic came to Ramana great-grandfather's home, begging for food, and when he was refused, he said that henceforth always someone from one generation will wander and beg for food. It is not known whether it was a curse or a blessing, but it might be fulfilled (Osborne, 1982).

After own birth Yogananda remembered his past lives, when he was a yogi in the Himalayas (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1982).

Another element of the model is a threat to life or health in childhood or early adolescence:

Yogananda at age of eight became seriously ill with cholera. He miraculously recovered thanks to a picture of guru's mother, whose character many times will be significant in his life (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1982).

In danger to life or health a child is in contact with other world powers. His survival is a testament to supernatural forces and a sign calling to extraordinary goals. An important element in the model of the ascetic is the first manifestation of supernatural power and actions of a miracle:

Yogananda unexpectedly predicts that he will burn his arm. He later becomes aware of his power and in a conversation with his sister says that the Mother Goddess gives him what he asks for. Also predicts the death of his mother (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1982).

Another element of the model is moving away or running away from home and family and repeated attempts (by parents) to persuade the fugitive to return. Family life at home and school education are the child's anguish. He decides to change it. He walks or runs away from home, going for a hike in search of a master who would help him find his own way.

Yogesvaranana's father chose an Earth career for his son. The young man, however, repeatedly ran away from home, rejected the possibility of marriage, choosing the Brahman way. He held that the love of a family is a great obstacle on the path of spiritual realization (Yogeshvarananda, 1970).

A major event of ascetic life is a meeting with the master, initiation and adoption of the vows:

During meditation Yogananda heard a voice that told him that this day a guru would come. And so it happened. Svami Yuktesvara initiated him, and a few years later took him to own sect (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1982).

Yogesvarananda met his master in a cave in the Himalayas, away from human trails. Guru poured his power onto Yogesvarananda, entering him into a state of ecstasy. Only after a few years Yogesvarananda was admitted to the Dasanami sect. He made self-initiation, which requires only the submission of a sacrifice, and he then gave himself a new name (Yogeshvarananda, 1970).

The period of novitiate lasts for several years. At that time the student is first and foremost a servant to his master, preparing him food, cleaning, doing everyday tasks. Then comes the first time achievement in the spiritual practice of extraordinary deeds, proving high spirit strength. A violent attack and miraculous healing of the illness is a sign of last attempt to achieve a higher stage of development (Amma, 1971; Gopi Krishna, 1971; Paramahansa Yoganada, 1982; Yogeshvarananda, 1970).

Significant are repeated encounters with wild animals, taming them, and so the struggle to overcome the forces of nature. The first contacts end with an animal attack and ascetic escape, miraculously avoiding mortal danger, but then there is a certain harmony between man and animal. Yogeshvarananda has an unexpected encounter with a bear, panther, tiger and black cobra (Yogeshvarananda, 1970); STI Hamsa fled from an angry elephant, tiger and cobra (Bhagwan Sri Hamsa, 1934); Svami Muktananda escaped from mad dog and a crocodile (Amma, 1971).

With a time, a healing power is being disclosed. Yogananda treats a friend with cholera, recognizes his deceased student in a newborn child, and converts his materialist brother-in-law on the spiritual journey (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1982).

Yogesvarananda converts renegades to Hinduism, who have already converted earlier to Christianity. He also converts thieves; he pulls the horse out of the swamp, stops an avalanche in the mountains, stops the rain, or for a while stops beating of his own heart (Yogeshvarananda, 1970).

The next phase of life is marked by the appearance of the first disciples and establishment of a new school. Yogananda forms a school in Ranchi, but later guru sends him to the United States as he has been chosen to establish the first school of yoga for people in the West (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1982).

Svami Muktananda, after years of wandering, meets his first master of childhood, Nityananda and settles with him. After death of the master, he founded his own school of siddha yoga (Amma, 1971).

The last element of the model is the decline of the ascetic life and unusual death. Ascetic usually knows when it will happen. In India, according to tradition the body of a dead man is subjected to cremation, however, this rule does not apply to sadhus. Before the death, ascetics enter the last time in Samadhi state (Mahasamadhi). Their body is buried in the ground in an upright position, to simulate meditation. On the surface a tombstone is set, with an inscription informing, whose Samadhi (tomb) it is. Another type of ritual is the ceremonial sinking of the body in the middle of the river (Tripathi, 1978). Six months after the death of sadhus, a feast (Bhandara) is organized, during which other sadhus and the needy are fed. Samadhi of a known ascetic becomes a place of pilgrimage. His disciples gather at each anniversary of the master's death.

TRANSFORMATION OF LIFE

The transformation that gradually ascetic goes through has an impact on all spheres of its existence. The initiation (diksa) is to permanently disconnect him from past life, tear his all ties with the world. Initiation ceremony symbolically resembles death. Initiation aims at legitimising exceeding the limits of the existing condition, and designating an end to the performance of the existing role in society.

The essence of initiation is the shedding of knowledge and power (Shakti) from master to disciple. Before initiation, during the novitiate master learns the value and growth opportunities of his student. When a student is ready for initiation, master gives him some of own energy during the ceremony. If he transmits a mantra, it becomes one of the main elements of student's practice. In the case of the laity mantra is almost the only element. Mantra should be kept secret and should never be written.

All activities during the initiation are there to emphasize the final break with the past. One can no longer return to own previous state. After each initiation, all present (a sadhu, the disciples of the same guru) render a sacrifice for the dead (the practice also belongs to a common funeral ritual). When the father is dying in the family, the sacrifice for him should be given by eldest son. Submission of such a sacrifice for the deceased is a symbolic emphasis of death. For this reason, later, at the moment of death of an ascetic, the sacrifice is not made again.

The break from a cast system entails the abandonment of any property, renunciation of inheritance and other rights of family. After initiation, the adept is obliged not to engage in any gainful employment and has to keep up from alms or ashrams' kitchens. There are four parts, to which a life of Brahmins is divided into, under general principles formulated in sixth century. Each of them sets human rights and responsibilities to the world:

- 1) Brahmachar - childhood and youth, science and studies, preparation for the responsibilities of adult life - lasts approx. 25 years;
- 2) gryhastha - time from marriage to the birth of the first grandchild, a period of fulfilling the duties of the head of the family and ritual duties assigned to the host, strengthening its position and families in the social hierarchy (25-50 years);
- 3) vanaprastha - period of resignation from family responsibilities, handing them over to first son, being away from home and living in the woods alone or with wife; man lives as a hermit, does not build a house, cannot cultivate the land, if comes back, he is no longer master of the house; preparing for the final stage of life (50-75 years);
- 4) Sannyasi - breaking ties with existing social life, renunciation of action in this world (75-100 years) (Manusmryti, 1986).

The man's lifetime has four main objectives:

- 1) Dharma - adaptation to the existing world, right, respectability;
- 2) Artha - prosperity, power and wealth in the social world;
- 3) Kama - love and earthly pleasures;
- 4) Moksha - liberation from the winch of successive incarnations (Manusmryti, 1986).

Everyone has the chance to fulfil their spiritual ambitions and achieve moksha, proceeding sequentially through all the stages of life. Asceticism, adopting the role of a sadhu, Sannyasi are the passage from the first to the fourth stage, bypassing the role of host. To that second stage of life in Hindu tradition are assigned specific responsibilities of the whole system of ritual. The ritual is assumed to be the most conscious participation in social life. The whole weight of ritual lies with the people who find themselves at the stage gryhastha. The man remained in a state of vanaprastha (third stage) can still participate in the ritual and submit certain sacrifices, but not in the form of host's duties. Vanaprastha activities are focused not on the things of this world, but to meet their minimum needs.

Sannyasi, which is entering the path of renunciation or going from vanaprastha onto the stage of Sannyasi, causes exclusion of sacrifice and exemption from ritual duties. Upon initiation the last ritual in the life of an ascetic was performed. Now his life itself has become a ritual. With the transition from stage gryhastha to Sannyasi the relation between the ritual and sacrifice changes the nature of the physical and literal to more interior and abstract.

Initiation is a turning point in the life of an ascetic, at the same time divides them into two parts. His whole life now bears the stigma of death. During the initiation ascetic deliberately deprives himself of the attributes of life and gradually takes over the attributes of death. All of his activities are directed at internal evolution.

Ascetic life is a gradual achievement of the anonymous existence (Campbell, 1964). The ascetic no longer resists self-destruction. Self-destruction is a condition on which he can achieve a rebirth on another level of existence. All personal ambitions and desires have been suspended and ascetic does not try to get back to previous life. By contrast, he becomes Anonym, follows the inner voice, Dharma lives in him with his unlimited consent. (Campbell, 1964).

CONCLUSION

In India, there are two kinds of people: those who live in this world, and those who deny it. Who seeks liberation must leave this world and adopt a different way of life. In the Indian social system of asceticism institution it is in many cases the only form of going beyond traditional social constraints, particularly for the lower casts (Dumont, 1968).

Archetypal characters of the first ascetics to this day are vibrant, popular and present in many spheres of life of modern India. Their message still finds a response in the form of hundreds of thousands of followers. It seems that the model of renunciation and realization of higher spiritual goals as a way of life is necessary to maintain a balance in society. In the face of the more rapidly progressive change and the evolution of social structures community requires the appearance of the characters, whose life and actions during the crisis of existing values will become a clear, universally understandable guideline. Such individuals are the future era, a new order, which will come thanks to their efforts. Currently, India has nearly one million ascetics.

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