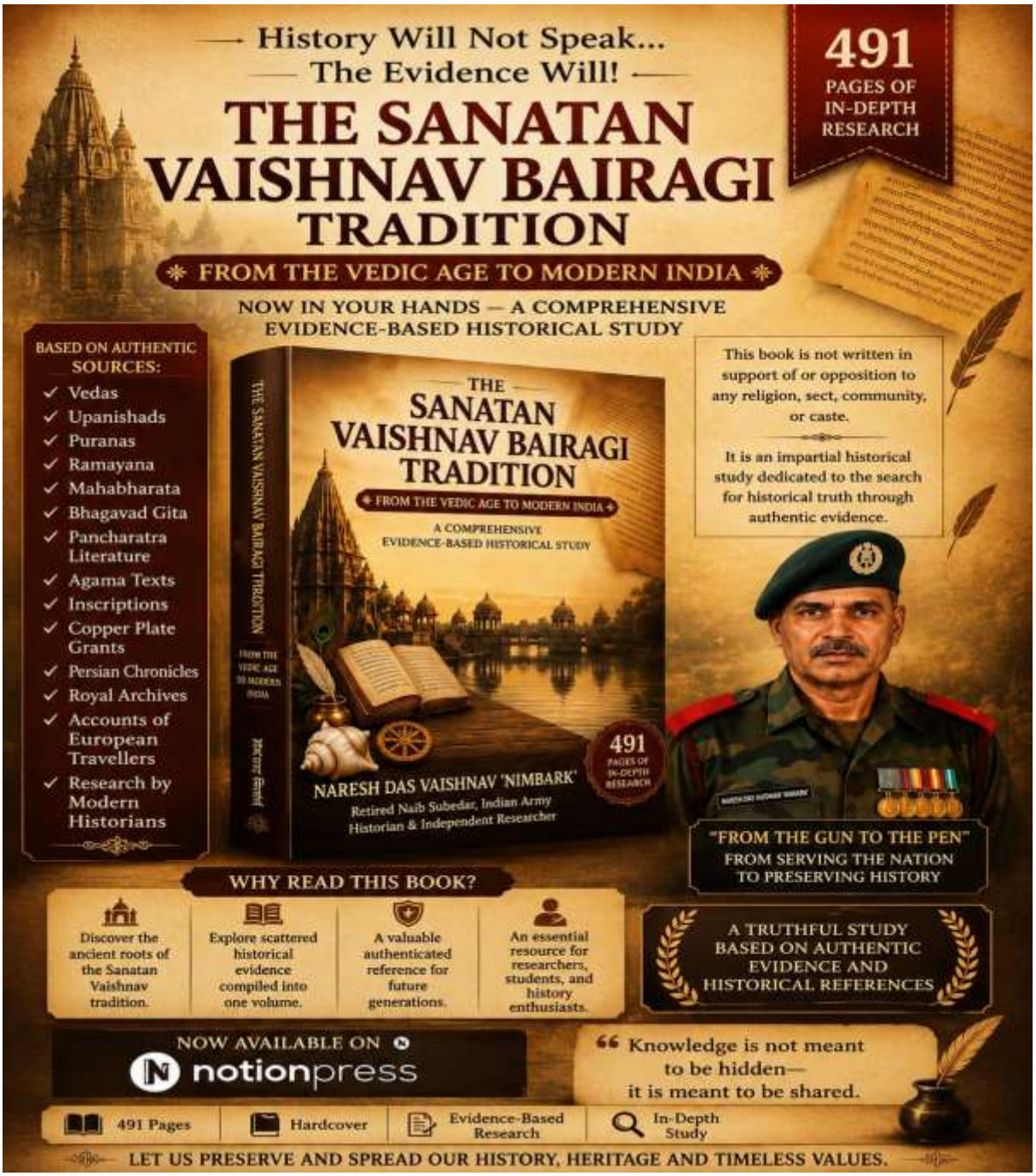

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NARESH DAS VAISHNAV 'NIMBARK'
Retired Naib Subedar, Indian Army
Historian & Independent Researcher
This book is not written in support of or opposition to any religion, sect, community, or caste.
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English_THE SANATAN VAISHNAV BAIRAGI TRADITION

From the Vedas to the Records of the British

English Edition

Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark Retired Honorary Naib Subedar, Indian Army Independent Historical Researcher and International Author

Dedication

Respectfully dedicated at the holy feet of the Supreme Lord, Sri Hari.

To those known and unknown saints, acharyas, mahants, Naga Bairagis, ascetics, protectors of dharma, and heroic martyrs who, across the ages, gave their all in defence of Sanatan Dharma and Indian culture — but who never received in history the place they deserved.

And to all those sages, historians, keepers of records, and readers who wish to understand history not through claims, but through documents.

If even a single forgotten chapter of history can be brought to light through this work, this humble effort will be considered a success.

"Not claims, but documents shall speak."

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark Retired Honorary Naib Subedar, Indian Army

Jai Sri Hari.

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The views, conclusions and analysis expressed in this book are based on available historical sources, original documents, ancient texts, inscriptions, and the author's independent research. Wherever the views of various historians are available, an effort has been made to present them as impartially as possible. Should any errors or new historical evidence come to light, necessary revisions may be made in future editions.

The purpose of this book is not to hurt the sentiments of any religion, sect, caste, community, institution or individual. Its purpose is solely to study and present the subject on the basis of historical sources, documents and available evidence.

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"Not claims, but documents shall speak."

Preface

History is not merely a sequence of past events; it is the foundation of a civilisation's collective memory, cultural consciousness and identity. When any chapter of history is neglected, it is not only certain individuals but an important part of the memory of the whole of society that begins to fade from view.

The idea of writing "Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi: From the Vedas to the Records of the British" did not come in a single day. It is the result of eighteen years of continuous study, of journeys across the length and breadth of India, and of research into ancient temples, maths, akharas, libraries, archives, inscriptions, copper plates, British-era gazetteers, census reports, and other available historical sources.

During this research journey, I found that many historical facts relating to the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition lie scattered across various texts and documents. On some subjects the views of historians converge; on others they diverge. For this reason, I resolved that, as far as possible, material should be compiled on the basis of original sources and available evidence and presented before the reader.

This book has not been written against any belief, sampradaya, caste or individual. Nor is its purpose to give rise to any kind of controversy. My effort has been simply to present, on the basis of available historical sources, ancient texts, British records, census reports, inscriptions, archaeological evidence and other reliable documents, a study of the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

I am not myself a university professor of history. I am a retired Honorary Naib Subedar of the Indian Army. After serving in the Indian Army for nearly 24 years, when I took up the pen, my purpose was not merely to write books. My purpose was to seek out those historical facts that had, over time, fallen into oblivion, and to place them before society.

During this research, I came across, on many occasions, rare documents that raised new questions about established beliefs. On many occasions, too, more than one view emerged on a given subject. In each such instance, my effort has been, wherever possible, to cite the original source and allow the reader to study it and draw their own conclusions.

This book makes use of more than 100 historical proofs, original documents, ancient texts, British gazetteers, census reports, the studies of Indian and foreign scholars, the records of maths and akharas, and material gathered from my own eighteen years of field research. Even so, I do not claim that this research represents the final truth. History is a subject that continues to develop. Should new evidence become available in future, it will be welcomed and incorporated, as needed, into subsequent editions.

I am deeply grateful to all the scholars, saints, mahants, researchers, libraries, archives and institutions whose work and preserved sources made this research possible. I am equally

grateful to all my readers, whose trust and encouragement have continually inspired me to keep writing.

Should this research work succeed in bringing back to light even one forgotten chapter in the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, inspire the new generation to study its past, and prove a useful reference for future researchers, I shall consider this humble effort worthwhile.

History is not the property of any single individual. It is the heritage of the whole of society. Let us come together to preserve this heritage, grounded in evidence.

"Not claims, but documents shall speak."

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark Retired Honorary Naib Subedar, Indian Army
Independent Historical Researcher and International Author

A Few Words from the Author

Dear Readers,

When I wore the uniform of the Indian Army, my duty was to protect the borders of India. After serving in the Army for nearly 24 years, when I took up the pen, a new resolve was born in my heart — that I would now protect, through the pen, that history which was gradually being lost to the darkness of oblivion.

I am not a professor of history. I hold no great degree in history, nor do I have the financial backing of any institution. I am only a retired Honorary Naib Subedar of the Indian Army, who dedicated the second chapter of his life to the pursuit of history.

Over the past eighteen years, I have travelled to many states of India. I have visited ancient temples, maths, akharas, libraries, archives and historical sites. I have spoken with saints, mahants, scholars and local traditions. I have studied numerous original documents, inscriptions, copper plates, British gazetteers, census reports and other available sources. Throughout this journey, I found again and again that the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is extremely rich, yet much of it lies scattered, and on many episodes the views of historians differ. It is this very experience that laid the foundation for this research work.

The purpose of this book is not to oppose any religion, sampradaya, caste or individual. My effort has been simply to place before readers a study of the history of this tradition, based on available original sources, historical documents and evidence. Wherever different views exist, an effort has been made to present them as impartially as possible.

There have been moments in my life when it seemed this journey might not be able to continue further. But the grace of God, the support of my family, and the affection of all you readers have, each time, helped me rise again. Today, my fourteen books have, under the leadership of you readers — my “commanders” — reached 190 countries of the world. This journey was never for commerce, nor will it ever be. The affection and love that I have continually received from all of you is greater than any commerce, any profit could ever be — I consider it not a tribute to me, but an expression of the curiosity and respect that readers across the world hold for the heritage of Sanatan Dharma.

This book does not claim to be any final truth. History remains a subject of continuous research. Should new evidence become available in future, it will be welcomed and incorporated, as needed, into subsequent editions. I believe that the search for truth never truly ends.

I am grateful to all the saints, mahants, scholars, historians, researchers, libraries, archives, and those unnamed individuals who, each at their own level, preserved our historical heritage. Had they not done this work, this research would not have been possible.

Finally, I wish to make only one request of my readers — should you possess any ancient document, inscription, copper plate, genealogy, manuscript or other evidence relating to this subject, please do share it. History is not the property of any one individual, but the shared heritage of the whole of society. Preserving it is our collective responsibility.

I fulfilled my duty of protecting the nation at the border. Now, in the remainder of my life, this is my humble effort to preserve the historical heritage of Sanatan Dharma, grounded in evidence.

"Not claims, but documents shall speak."

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark Retired Honorary Naib Subedar, Indian Army
Independent Historical Researcher and International Author

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Chapter 1 The Roots of the Vaishnav Tradition in the Vedic Age

(In the Light of the Rigveda, Yajurveda, and the Upanishads)

Introduction

Sanatan Dharma is one of the oldest living religious and philosophical traditions in the world. Among its many streams of worship, the Vaishnav tradition occupies a distinctive place. It is generally assumed that widespread worship of Lord Vishnu developed only in the Puranic or Gupta era; however, a close study of Vedic literature shows that the foundational concept of Vishnu is already present in the Vedas themselves. The Rigveda depicts Vishnu as all-pervading, as the guardian of dharma, and as the deity who measures out the universe. The Yajurveda establishes his connection with sacrificial ritual (yajna) and the welfare of all beings, while in the Upanishads, Narayana is enthroned as the Supreme Truth and the ultimate Brahman. This very idea later develops, through the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vishnu Purana, and the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana, into the foundation of an organized Vaishnav philosophy.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish that the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is not a branch that was born of some medieval event, but rather a well-ordered, historically traceable extension of that same original current of Vedic consciousness, which has flowed through the spiritual soil of the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years.

Lord Vishnu in the Rigveda

The Rigveda is regarded as the oldest available text of the Indian knowledge tradition. References to Lord Vishnu occur at several points within it. Although fewer hymns are dedicated to Vishnu by name than to Indra, Agni, or Varuna, his significance remains highly distinctive. The Rigveda calls Vishnu “Urugaya” (of great renown), “Urukrama” (of vast strides), and “Trivikrama” (he of the three strides). These epithets make clear that his nature was understood not as confined to any single region or community, but as pervading the whole of creation.

It is worth noting that within the Vedic pantheon, Vishnu is regarded as the ally and companion of the other principal deities — Indra, Agni, Varuna, and Mitra. Together with Indra, he assists in the slaying of Vritrasura, a theme reflected in several hymns of the Rigveda. From here emerges the sense that Vishnu is fundamentally a deity of balance, protection, and the establishment of dharma — a role that later became the foundation of his doctrine of avatara (divine descent).

The celebrated mantra of the Rigveda (1.22.20) reads:

“tad viṣṇoḥ paramaṁ padaṁ sadā paśyanti sūrayaḥ. divīva cakṣurātatam.”

The purport of this mantra is that the wise continually behold the supreme abode of Lord Vishnu, luminous like the sun spread across the sky. In Vaishnav philosophy, “Vishnoh paramam padam” is held to be the philosophical basis of the supreme abode, Vaikuntha.

Later Vaishnav acharyas interpreted this very mantra in relation to the soul's ultimate destination and liberation (moksha).

The Rigveda (1.154) describes Vishnu's "three great strides." According to Vedic interpretations, these three strides symbolize the earth, the atmosphere, and the celestial realm. Some scholars connect them to the daily course of the sun, while the Vaishnav tradition regards them as symbolic of God's all-pervading sovereignty. This very "Trivikrama" form later became the basis for the story of the Vamana avatara, which was elaborated in the Puranic period in connection with King Bali.

Vishnu in the Yajurveda

The Yajurveda is primarily a text of sacrificial procedure, yet within it, yajna is regarded not merely as ritual but as a medium of cosmic order and the welfare of all beings. It is in this context that the figure of Vishnu becomes especially significant.

The well-known Vedic dictum "yajño vai viṣṇuḥ" (yajna indeed is Vishnu) indicates a profound connection between sacrifice and Vishnu. This does not mean that offering oblations into fire alone constitutes Vishnu; rather, every action that serves the welfare of all beings, that accords with dharma, and that is offered in a spirit of surrender, is an expression of the Vishnu-principle. Thus, in the Yajurveda, Vishnu is seen as the very foundation of righteousness, renunciation, and protection. Several stations of Vishnu upon the sacrificial altar — such as the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the yajna — are symbolically linked to his Trivikrama form, making clear that for the Vedic seers, Vishnu was not merely one deity among many but the symbol of the entire structure of sacrifice and the spirit of universal welfare. Furthermore, Vedic literature records that during the Soma-yajna, Vishnu was invoked as the "protector of the sacrifice," and no yajna was considered complete without his presence. This tradition illustrates how deep and indispensable the connection was between Vedic ritual and the Vishnu-principle.

The Form of Narayana in the Upanishads

The Upanishads represent the philosophical summit of Vedic knowledge. Within them is found a profound examination of the nature of God, the soul (atman), and Brahman. The Narayana Upanishad states that Brahma, Rudra, Indra, and all other deities originate from Narayana. Narayana is thus regarded as the root cause of all creation and as the supreme Brahman. The Mahanarayana Upanishad likewise describes Narayana as all-pervading, the inner controller of all, and the supreme principle residing in the hearts of all beings.

It is from here that a mode of worship is born in which self-surrender, meditation, and devotion (bhakti) are given precedence over ritual observance. This shift is of great importance, for it is this very sentiment that later becomes the philosophical foundation of the core principles of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition — renunciation, detachment, and complete surrender.

This line of Upanishadic thought later finds fuller expression in the teachings of Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita and in the various schools of Vaishnav philosophy. Sri Nimbarkacharya, Sri Ramanujacharya, Sri Madhvacharya, and other Vaishnav acharyas

made these very Upanishadic principles the foundation of their respective philosophies — Dvaitadvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Dvaita respectively — which will be examined in detail in later chapters.

The Purusha Sukta and Its Connection to Vishnu

The celebrated Purusha Sukta, found in the tenth mandala of the Rigveda, is also regarded as highly significant from the standpoint of Vaishnav philosophy. This hymn presents the concept of the Cosmic Person (Virat Purusha), from whom the entire creation arises. Later Vaishnav acharyas connected this concept of the Virat Purusha to the universal form (Vishvarupa) of Narayana or Vishnu, and this very idea was later fully developed in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, in the description of Krishna's cosmic revelation to Arjuna. The Purusha Sukta may thus be regarded as another significant Vedic link in Vaishnav philosophy, one that traces the journey from the individual to the cosmic whole.

The Vedic Age and the Vaishnav Tradition

The history of the Vaishnav tradition does not begin only with the Puranas. The pervasive sovereignty of Vishnu described in the Vedas, the sacrificial principle of the Yajurveda, and the Narayana-philosophy of the Upanishads all make clear the antiquity of this tradition. Over time, these Vedic principles took on a more developed form in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Puranas. In the medieval period, Vaishnav acharyas made these the foundation of philosophical and devotional (bhakti) movements, through which the Vaishnav tradition became firmly established across various regions of India, eventually manifesting as the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas — an organized community of renunciant ascetics who, when the need arose, also bore arms. Such communities of ascetics have played a distinctive role in Indian history: they were not only bearers of devotion and knowledge but also, when required, took up arms in defence of dharma, culture, and sacred sites. This dual role — renunciation and austerity on one hand, valour and protection on the other — became the most distinctive mark of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, whose detailed historical treatment will be presented in the chapters that follow.

Thus, the journey from Vedic worship of Vishnu to the Bairagi akharas is not some disconnected or sudden occurrence, but a coherent, reasoned, and historically traceable process of development. In the chapters that follow, we shall study each stage of this very journey in sequence — the Puranas, the Mahabharata, the Gita, the acharya traditions, the organized form of the akharas, and finally, the documentation of this tradition in British-era records.

Conclusion

A study of the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, and the Upanishads makes clear that the worship of Lord Vishnu and Narayana is an exceedingly ancient current within the Indian Vedic tradition. In the Vedas, Vishnu's nature is described as all-pervading, as the guardian of dharma, and as the presiding deity of the supreme abode. In the Upanishads, that same Narayana is enthroned as the supreme Brahman. It would therefore not be accurate to regard the Vaishnav tradition merely as a post-Vedic or Puranic development; its roots are deeply established in the Vedic age itself. This very Vedic foundation went on to provide a

lasting philosophical basis for the Sanatan Vaishnav tradition, the bhakti movement, and the various Vaishnav sampradayas, and this same foundation ultimately reached the renunciant, ascetic, and dharma-protecting Bairagi tradition, whose detailed history will be presented in the chapters that follow in this volume.

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Chapter 2 The Form of Vaishnav Dharma in the Puranas and the Ideological Foundation of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

(In the Light of the Vishnu Purana and the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana)

Introduction

The seed of Lord Vishnu's nature that was sown in Vedic literature finds a detailed and vivid flowering in the Purana literature. The Puranas are not merely religious narratives; they are important texts for Indian society, culture, philosophy, history, geography, genealogies, sacred sites (tirthas), and the preservation of dharma. Among the eighteen Mahapuranas, the Vishnu Purana and the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana are regarded as the principal foundational texts of the Vaishnav tradition. These works established Lord Vishnu as the Supreme Soul, the sustainer of the world, and the protector of dharma, and declared bhakti to be the highest path of human life.

Although these Puranas do not directly mention an organized sect called "Vaishnav Bairagi" in the modern sense, the principles expounded within them — devotion, renunciation, the life of the sadhu, self-sacrifice, service, and complete surrender to God — later became the ideological foundation of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. The study of the Puranas is therefore essential not merely from a religious standpoint but also for understanding the historical development of the Vaishnav tradition. This chapter is an attempt to understand precisely this ideological bridge — to show how the Vedic Vishnu-principle, through the Puranic doctrine of bhakti, gradually transformed into a living, organized, and society-wide tradition of renunciant ascetics.

The Significance of Purana Literature

The word "Purana" means knowledge that, though ancient, ever offers fresh inspiration. According to tradition, the eighteen Mahapuranas and the eighteen Upapuranas are an invaluable treasury of Indian religious literature. Their purpose is not merely to narrate stories but to propagate dharma, righteous conduct, the welfare of all beings, and devotion to God.

The Vishnu Purana is regarded as the ancient and systematic text of Vaishnav dharma, while the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana is considered the supreme text of the philosophy of bhakti. Together, these two works make clear the philosophical and spiritual foundation of Vaishnav dharma.

The Nature of Lord Vishnu in the Vishnu Purana

In the Vishnu Purana, Lord Vishnu is described as the root cause of all creation, its sustainer, and the Supreme Person who, at the time of dissolution, draws the entire universe back into himself. The text repeatedly returns to the idea that the whole of moving and unmoving creation is an expression of that same supreme reality.

The Vishnu Purana identifies the protection of dharma as God's foremost task. Whenever unrighteousness increases and dharma grows weak, God takes birth in various forms to

restore balance to the world. This very principle later finds clear expression in the Bhagavad Gita as well.

The Doctrine of Avatara

Among the most important teachings of the Vishnu Purana is the doctrine of avatara. The purpose of avataras such as Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Sri Rama, and Sri Krishna is not merely the destruction of the wicked, but also the restoration of dharma, justice, and compassion.

This doctrine establishes in Vaishnav society the belief that the Supreme Soul is not separate from the world. Whenever dharma falls into crisis, God himself, or through his power, acts for the welfare of all. It is this very sentiment that went on to inspire Vaishnav saints and Bairagis toward the protection of society, the defence of dharma, and service to the people.

The Vishnu Purana also makes clear that avatara is not merely a means of physical destruction but carries a profound moral message — that whenever power, arrogance, or unbounded greed breaches the bounds of dharma, the Supreme Soul intervenes in one form or another. It is this very sentiment that was later reflected in the conduct of the Vaishnav Bairagi warrior-saints, who, when necessary, took up arms in defence of dharma — whether against oppression during the Mughal period or in the freedom struggle of 1857.

The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana and Bhakti

If the Vishnu Purana is the foundation of Vaishnav philosophy, the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana is its soul. The core message of the Bhagavata is that desireless, loving, and exclusive devotion to God is the supreme means of life.

Through the characters of many devotees in the Bhagavata — Dhruva, Prahlada, Ambarisha, Gajendra, Vidura, Uddhava, and the Gopis — it is taught that God's grace is attained not through caste, lineage, wealth, or learning, but through guileless devotion.

Prahlada's unshakeable faith, Dhruva's austerity, Gajendra's cry for help, and Ambarisha's fidelity are proof that God certainly protects his devotee. The character of Prahlada is especially noteworthy, for from childhood he remained undeterred in his devotion to God despite the tyranny and terror of his father Hiranyakashipu — this character later became an ideal of unwavering faith and unbroken commitment to truth in Vaishnav sadhana. Likewise, the story of Gajendra's liberation teaches that a true cry for help, however helpless the circumstance, invariably reaches God.

The Ninefold Path of Devotion (Navadha Bhakti)

The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana describes nine principal forms of bhakti:

1. Shravana (hearing)
2. Kirtana (chanting/glorification)
3. Smarana (remembrance)

4. Padasevana (service at the feet)
5. Archana (ritual worship)
6. Vandana (obeisance)
7. Dasya (servitude)
8. Sakhya (friendship)
9. Atmanivedana (complete self-surrender)

The purpose of these nine forms is not merely to prescribe a mode of worship, but to make the whole of life God-centred. Various later Vaishnav sampradayas gave these very principles a place within their own paths of sadhana. Later texts such as the Narada Bhakti Sutra and the Shandilya Bhakti Sutra gave these Puranic principles a more systematic and aphoristic form, granting bhakti recognition as an independent and authoritative path of spiritual practice. The Narada Bhakti Sutra describes bhakti as the very form of supreme love, free of both desire and expectation of any fruit — a sentiment that later became the foundation of the desireless spirit of service among Vaishnav Bairagi ascetics, who devoted themselves to the service of temples, sacred sites, and society without seeking any reward.

The Harivamsha Purana and the Expansion of the Vaishnav Tradition

The Harivamsha Purana, composed as an appendix to the Mahabharata, is also an extremely important source for the study of the Vaishnav tradition. It contains a detailed account of the life of Lord Krishna, the saga of the Yadu dynasty, and the practical form of Vaishnav devotion. The Harivamsha Purana also makes clear that Vaishnav dharma is not confined to solitary practice alone, but is deeply connected with social duty, political justice, and the welfare of the people — the very principle that later inspired Vaishnav Bairagi saints to protect dharma from within society, rather than turning away from it.

The True Meaning of Vairagya (Renunciation)

In the Bhagavata Mahapurana, vairagya does not mean hatred of the world, but rather living a life surrendered to God, free from attachment, ego, greed, and self-interest. True renunciation is that in which a person does not flee from society, but rather, remaining within society, upholds dharma, service, and compassion.

It was this very ideal that later inspired Vaishnav saints and Bairagi ascetics toward the welfare of the people, the protection of dharma, service to sacred sites, and spiritual awakening.

The Ideological Foundation of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

From a historical standpoint, it must be made clear that the Vishnu Purana and the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana contain no direct description of an organized sect called “Vaishnav Bairagi.” This tradition developed in later centuries through the teachings and monastic (matha) traditions of various Vaishnav acharyas — such as Sri Nimbarkacharya, Sri Ramanujacharya, Sri Madhvacharya, Sri Vishnuswami, and later Sri Ramanandacharya.

Even so, the ideals expounded in these Puranas — devotion, renunciation, the dharma of the ascetic, complete surrender to God, compassion, non-violence, service, and the

protection of dharma — became precisely the ideological bedrock of the tradition that later attained recognition as the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. It is therefore more accurate to say that the Puranas laid the philosophical and spiritual foundation of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, while its institutional form developed in a later period.

Conclusion

The Vishnu Purana and the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana are the two great pillars of the Indian Vaishnav tradition. These texts established Lord Vishnu as the Supreme Soul, bhakti as the highest means of liberation, and dharma as the foundation of human life. Although they contain no direct mention of a Vaishnav Bairagi sect in the modern sense, their teachings prepared the spiritual and moral ground on which the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition later developed. The study of these Puranas is thus not merely a matter of religious reverence, but also an important means of understanding Indian Vaishnav history and philosophy. This ideological inheritance drawn from the Puranas is not merely a relic of the past but a living tradition, one that has inspired countless saints, mahants, and ascetics across the centuries, and whose detailed historical treatment will be presented in the chapters that follow, through the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, and the traditions of the acharyas.

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Chapter 3 The Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, and Vaishnav Philosophy

Introduction

If any single text in the history of Indian culture has most profoundly influenced dharma, ethics, politics, society, philosophy, and the spiritual life, it is the Mahabharata. This epic, composed by Maharishi Vedavyasa, is not merely a history of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, but an encyclopaedia of every facet of human life. The invaluable jewel within this great work is the Bhagavad Gita, which provided Vaishnav philosophy with its philosophical, spiritual, and practical foundation. The Mahabharata comprises more than one hundred thousand verses, on account of which it has even been called the "Fifth Veda" — a title that is itself testimony to the fact that ancient Indian society honoured this text not merely as history or poetry, but as equal in stature to sacred scripture. The character of Lord Krishna in the Mahabharata is not confined merely to that of a heroic figure or a skilled statesman; he is established as Yogeshvara, the Supreme Soul, the founder of dharma, and the God who is affectionate toward his devotees.

The place of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita within the Vaishnav tradition is of the utmost importance. Sri Ramanujacharya, Sri Madhvacharya, Sri Nimbarkacharya, Sri Vallabhacharya, and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, among many other Vaishnav acharyas, regarded the Bhagavad Gita as the principal foundation of their respective philosophies. Within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition too, the Gita is regarded not merely as a religious text but as a guide for life.

Lord Krishna in the Mahabharata

The character of Krishna in the Mahabharata is multifaceted. He is Arjuna's companion, the well-wisher of the Pandavas, a skilled diplomat, and at the same time, the God who is ever ready to protect dharma. When the Kauravas and Pandavas prepared for war, Krishna chose to become a charioteer rather than take up arms himself. This episode shows that true leadership lies in service, sacrifice, and devotion to dharma.

The central message of the Mahabharata is that difficult decisions must sometimes be made in defence of dharma. Krishna's entire life appears devoted to the welfare of the people, to justice, and to the establishment of dharma. It is for this reason that the Vaishnav tradition regards him as the complete (purna) avatara of Lord Vishnu. Krishna's role becomes even clearer in the Shanti Parva and the Udyoga Parva of the Mahabharata — as a final effort to avert war, he himself goes to Hastinapura as an emissary of peace, which demonstrates that God's nature is not one that delights in war, but one that ever seeks to establish peace and justice in accordance with dharma. War was regarded as inevitable only when every effort at peace had failed and the bounds of adharma had been crossed.

The Bhagavad Gita: A Guide for Human Life

On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, when Arjuna was overcome with delusion and despair, the teaching that Krishna gave him is the Bhagavad Gita. This text of eighteen chapters and seven hundred verses is counted among the greatest works of Indian philosophy.

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna:

"yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata. abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmyaham." (Bhagavad Gita 4.7)

That is: whenever dharma declines and adharma rises, I manifest myself to protect dharma. This verse is regarded as the primary basis of the doctrine of avatara within Vaishnav philosophy.

Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga

The greatest message of the Bhagavad Gita is that one should perform one's duty in a spirit free of desire for its fruits. Krishna presents a synthesis of the three paths — karma (action), jnana (knowledge), and bhakti (devotion). He teaches that true yoga lies not in the renunciation of action itself, but in the renunciation of attachment to its fruit. Through jnana yoga, the Gita imparts an understanding of the eternity of the soul and the transience of the body, while karma yoga teaches that flight from duty can never be a solution. It is this synthesized approach to the three yogas that distinguishes the Gita from other philosophical texts, for rather than declaring any one path supreme, it grants the individual the freedom to choose a path of sadhana suited to their own nature and station in life.

The Gita accords special importance to bhakti yoga. The Lord says:

"patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyaṁ yo me bhaktyā prayacchati. tadahaṁ bhaktyupahṛtamaśnāmi prayatātmanaḥ." (Bhagavad Gita 9.26)

The message of this verse is that God accepts not outward opulence, but devotion offered from a pure heart. This very idea later became the fundamental basis of the Vaishnav bhakti movement.

The Doctrine of Complete Surrender (Sharanagati)

The final and most celebrated teaching of the Bhagavad Gita is:

"sarvadharmān parityajya māmekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja. ahaṁ tvāṁ sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ." (Bhagavad Gita 18.66)

Vaishnav acharyas regard this verse as the doctrine of complete surrender (sharanagati). According to them, taking refuge in God is the highest welfare of the soul. This very teaching later became the foundation of the lives of Vaishnav saints and Bairagi ascetics.

The Ideal of the Sthitaprajna (One of Steady Wisdom)

The ideal of the sthitaprajna — the person of steady wisdom — described in the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita has also been a source of great inspiration for the Vaishnav

Bairagi tradition. The sthitaprajna is the practitioner who remains equanimous in pleasure and pain, gain and loss, honour and dishonour, and whose intellect remains unshaken in any circumstance. This very ideal later became the basis of the disposition of Bairagi ascetics, who accepted both worldly comfort and hardship with equal composure while remaining steadfast in their duty to dharma — whether that duty was devotional practice or, when necessary, the bearing of arms in defence of dharma.

Influence on Vaishnav Philosophy

Sri Ramanujacharya made the Gita the foundation of Vishishtadvaita philosophy. Sri Madhvacharya wrote an extensive commentary on the Gita while expounding Dvaita philosophy. Sri Nimbarkacharya, through the doctrine of Dvaitadvaita, clarified the relationship between the soul and Brahman. Although the views of these acharyas differed, one thing remained constant among them all — that devotion to Lord Vishnu or Sri Krishna is the supreme path to liberation. Sri Vallabhacharya, through his doctrine of Shuddhadvaita, interpreted the Gita while establishing the Pushtimarg, in which God's grace is regarded as the central element of sadhana. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, through the doctrine of Achintya Bhedabheda, propagated the combined devotional spirit of the Gita and the Bhagavata widely across Bengal and eastern India. Thus, although each acharya's philosophical method of interpretation differed, the core message of the Gita — exclusive devotion to and surrender before God — held a central place equally across all the sampradayas.

Within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, the regular study, recitation, and contemplation of the Gita is regarded as an important part of spiritual practice. Bairagi saints incorporated the Gita's teachings on karma yoga, bhakti yoga, renunciation, and the welfare of the people into their own lives.

Desireless Action and the Bairagi Way of Life

The Gita's doctrine of desireless action (nishkama karma) had a profound influence on the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. Within the Bairagi akharas, the sadhus were neither wholly renunciant ascetics who had abandoned all action, nor were they householders indulging in worldly pleasure — they followed a middle path, in which service, austerity, and, when necessary, the protection of dharma, were all performed in a spirit free of desire for personal gain. This is why history offers us numerous examples of Vaishnav Bairagi saints who, on one hand, spent their lives in devotion and austerity, and on the other, when the need arose, took up arms without any wish for personal benefit — a disposition that may be directly traced to the Gita's doctrine of desireless karma yoga. The Bhagavad Gita, in this light, is not merely a philosophical text, but the practical constitution of the Vaishnav Bairagi way of life, one that kept devotion bound to duty, and renunciation bound to service to society.

Conclusion

The Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita are an invaluable inheritance of Indian Vaishnav philosophy. The Mahabharata teaches right conduct amid the complex circumstances of dharma, while the Bhagavad Gita illuminates the path of duty, devotion, knowledge, and

self-surrender in every sphere of life. The contribution of these two texts to the development of the Vaishnav tradition is immense. Later Vaishnav acharyas and Bairagi saints carried these very teachings to society, as a result of which the tradition of devotion, service, renunciation, and the protection of dharma was strengthened across India. In the chapters that follow, we shall see how, inspired by these very texts, acharyas such as Jagadguru Ramanujacharya, Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya, and Jagadguru Ramanandacharya established organized Vaishnav sampradayas, from which the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas eventually arose — a tradition that held both devotion and valour together. It is for this reason that the Bhagavad Gita is regarded not merely as a religious text, but as the eternal philosophy of life of Indian civilization, one whose relevance has not diminished with time but has continually grown. This is why, even today, the Gita is taught in many universities across the world as a subject of comparative philosophy and ethics, and within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, it remains to this day a text of daily recitation and reflection.

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Chapter 4

The Narada Pancharatra, the Vaishnav Agamas, and the Pancharatra–Vaikhanasa Traditions

(A Historical and Philosophical Study of the Agamic Tradition of Vaishnav Worship)

Introduction

After the Vedic and Puranic literature, the tradition that gave organized form to temple worship, image consecration, mantra initiation, and daily ritual worship within Vaishnav dharma is the Vaishnav Agama tradition. The word "Agama" means knowledge that has been transmitted from teacher to disciple through an unbroken line of tradition. Among the Vaishnav Agamas, two principal traditions are especially renowned — the Pancharatra and the Vaikhanasa. Both are directed toward the worship of Lord Vishnu, yet they differ in certain important respects regarding their origin, mode of worship, and religious organization.

A study of these Agamic traditions is essential to an understanding of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, for the religious organization of many ancient Vishnu temples, mathas, and centres of worship across India has been founded upon these very Agamas. In particular, the Narada Pancharatra gave organized form to devotion, initiation, mantra, ritual worship, and the worship of God with attributes (saguna). It is worth noting that the Agamic tradition does not oppose Vedic ritual, but rather gives it a temple-centred, well-organized, and publicly accessible form, so that even the ordinary devotee may regularly participate in the saguna worship of God.

An Introduction to the Pancharatra Tradition

There are various views regarding the etymology of the word "Pancharatra." According to one view, Lord Narayana imparted this divine knowledge over the course of five nights, hence the name "Pancharatra." According to other scholars, it is a unified treatise on five kinds of knowledge — reality (tattva), liberation (mukti), devotion (bhakti), yoga, and ritual worship (archana).

References to the Pancharatra tradition are found in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata as well as in numerous Puranas. Over time this tradition developed, and many samhitas were composed, among which the Narada Pancharatra, the Sattvata Samhita, the Jayakhya Samhita, the Padma Samhita, the Ahirbudhnya Samhita, and the Ishvara Samhita are prominent.

These texts contain detailed descriptions of the consecration of images of Lord Vishnu, temple construction, the procedure of worship, mantra recitation, sacrifice, festivals, and the conduct expected of the devotee. Their purpose is not merely to prescribe religious ritual, but to open a path of devotion and disciplined practice toward God. Scholars also hold that the Pancharatra tradition serves as a bridge between the Vedic sacrificial tradition and devotion-centred worship, for it is neither wholly ritual-centred nor confined merely to emotional devotion — rather, it presents a coherent synthesis of both.

The Significance of the Narada Pancharatra

Among the Vaishnav Agamas, the Narada Pancharatra holds a special place. According to tradition, the knowledge of devotion and worship that the divine sage Narada received from Lord Narayana forms the basis of this text. Alongside the worship of God, it also contains descriptions of devotion, mantra, meditation, initiation, the relationship between guru and disciple, and the righteous conduct expected of the devotee.

The central message of this text is that the supreme path to reaching God is love, devotion, and surrender. Greater importance is given to inner purity than to outward display. It is for this reason that many later Vaishnav traditions accepted the principles of the Pancharatra.

Characteristics of the Vaishnav Agamas

In the Vaishnav Agamas, the temple is regarded not merely as a place of worship, but as a centre of spiritual instruction and social service. They contain a detailed prescription for image consecration, daily worship, festivals, ceremonial bathing (abhisheka), the offering of lamps, food offerings, arati, kirtana, and the participation of devotees.

Initiation (diksha) holds special importance within the Agamic tradition. Receiving a mantra from a guru and adopting a disciplined life is regarded as the foundation of the practitioner's spiritual development. This tradition gave Indian temple culture an organized and enduring form.

Differences Between the Pancharatra and Vaikhanasa Traditions

Although both traditions are directed toward the worship of Lord Vishnu, there are nonetheless certain important differences between them.

The Pancharatra tradition is regarded as relatively broad and inclusive. Through initiation, people of various varnas and social backgrounds were given the opportunity for devotion and temple service. In this tradition, one finds a synthesis of devotion, mantra, meditation, and temple worship.

The Vaikhanasa tradition, by contrast, is traced to Maharishi Vaikhanasa. This tradition is primarily connected to the Vedic sacrificial tradition and places greater emphasis on a hereditary system of priests in temple worship. In many ancient Vishnu temples of South India — particularly the Sri Venkateshwara temple at Tirumala — worship according to the Vaikhanasa Agama continues to this day. Scholars hold that the Vaikhanasa tradition is connected to the Taittiriya branch of the Krishna Yajurveda and to the Vaikhanasa Kalpasutra, and that its lineage of acharyas extends from Maharishi Vikhanas through acharyas such as Kashyapa and Marichi. Some scholars are of the view that the Vaikhanasa Agama follows an even more ancient Vedic tradition than the Pancharatra Agama, although its sphere of influence became more limited from the time of Sri Ramanujacharya onward; even so, it remains vibrantly practised in many ancient temples of South India to this day.

On the other hand, in many major Vaishnav temples — Srirangam, Melkote, Kanchipuram, among others — the influence of the Pancharatra Agama is evident. Both traditions worship Lord Vishnu, but their Agamic traditions, modes of initiation, and forms of worship

are the result of distinct historical developments. It would therefore not be historically accurate to regard them as a single, undifferentiated tradition.

The Authenticity and Historical Significance of the Agamas

A natural question arises as to whether the Pancharatra and Vaikhanasa Agamas should be regarded as authoritative on a par with the Vedas. Indian philosophical tradition has been divided on this question — certain Mimamsaka scholars, regarding the Agamas as external to the Vedas, questioned their authority, while Sri Ramanujacharya, along with many other Vaishnav acharyas, argued that the Pancharatra Agama is knowledge revealed by Lord Narayana himself, and is therefore, like the Veda, authorless (apaurusheya) and authoritative. This debate was not merely a matter of scholastic dispute; it ensured that the Agamic tradition secured its place within temple organization only after strengthening its own doctrinal foundations. This same vigilance and philosophical rigour is later seen in the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition as well, where conduct in accordance with scripture was always given priority. It is for this reason that modern researchers regard the Pancharatra and Vaikhanasa Agamas not merely as religious texts, but as invaluable historical sources for the study of Indian temple architecture, social organization, and religious administration.

Vaishnav Acharyas and the Pancharatra

Sri Ramanujacharya accepted the Pancharatra Agama as being in accordance with Vedic principles and accorded it an important place within the Shri Vaishnav tradition. Many later Vaishnav traditions likewise made the Pancharatra texts the foundation of their temple organization and worship.

Within the tradition of Sri Nimbarkacharya as well, great importance is given to the service of Lord Radha-Krishna, mantra worship, and the guru lineage. Although each Vaishnav sampradaya has its own distinctive traditions, devotion, service, and surrender to God are equally established in all of them.

Influence on the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

The fundamental basis of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is devotion, renunciation, and service. The Pancharatra Agamas gave these principles an organized religious form. The tradition of temple service, regular worship of God, mantra recitation, kirtana, and the ethical conduct of devotees that is visible today owes an important debt to Pancharatra literature.

It is also worth noting that not all Vaishnav Bairagi mathas follow a single Agamic tradition. Variations in modes of worship are found across different regions and sampradayas, which is a testament to the diversity and richness of the Indian Vaishnav tradition. To this day, in the Bairagi akharas, a newly initiated sadhu receives the sacred neck-thread (kanthi), the tilaka mark, and mantra initiation from a guru — this entire process is fundamentally inspired by the very system of initiation laid down in the Pancharatra Agama thousands of years ago for temple servants and devotees. Thus, the Agamic tradition was not confined merely to temple worship; it also profoundly shaped the internal discipline and organizational structure of communities of ascetics.

Conclusion

The Narada Pancharatra and the other Vaishnav Agamas are an invaluable inheritance of Indian Vaishnav dharma. They gave devotion the form of organized practice, temple worship, and disciplined religious life. Both the Pancharatra and the Vaikhanasa are great streams in the worship of Lord Vishnu, yet their historical development, mode of worship, and religious organization are distinct. Without understanding this distinction, a proper study of the history of Vaishnav dharma is not possible. These Agamic texts also hold an important place in understanding the spiritual background of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. In the chapters that follow, we shall see how, upon the very foundation of these Agamic principles, medieval Vaishnav acharyas established organized sampradayas and, eventually, the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas — institutions that, alongside devotional practice, also took upon themselves the active protection of temples, sacred sites, and dharma.

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Chapter 5

The Tradition of Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya

The Rise and Contribution of the Kumara Sampradaya within Sanatan Vaishnav Dharma

Introduction

The history of the Sanatan Vaishnav tradition is exceedingly ancient and glorious. Beginning in the Vedic age and developing through the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vishnu Purana, and the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana, this tradition emerged in an organized form in the medieval period through many great acharyas. Among these, the place of Jagadguru Sri Nimbarkacharya is of great importance. He did not merely establish a philosophical doctrine; he also established the joint worship of Lord Radha-Krishna, the guru lineage, devotion, and renunciation as a balanced spiritual path. His doctrine of Dvaitadvaita (Bhedabheda) is regarded as an original interpretation within Indian Vedantic thought. In this chapter we shall study his life, philosophy, and tradition on the basis of authoritative sources, and wherever traditional narratives and historical research diverge, both perspectives will be clearly presented separately — so that both faith and history may be equally honoured.

The Ancient Tradition of the Kumara Sampradaya

According to the Vaishnav tradition, there are four principal Vaishnav sampradayas: the Shri Sampradaya, the Brahma Sampradaya, the Rudra Sampradaya, and the Kumara Sampradaya. Nimbarkacharya is regarded as the principal acharya of the Kumara Sampradaya. According to traditional belief, this guru lineage began with Lord Sri Narayana. His teachings reached the four Kumaras — Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, and Sanatkumara — through Lord Hansa. From there, this knowledge was transmitted to the earth through the divine sage Narada, and it was Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya who eventually gave it an organized philosophical form.

This guru lineage is not merely a symbol of spiritual authority, but also a mark of the continuity of Vedic knowledge. It is for this reason that the Nimbarka Sampradaya regards itself as inseparably connected to the Vedic and Puranic tradition. As for the remaining three sampradayas: the Shri Sampradaya was established by Sri Ramanujacharya, the Brahma Sampradaya was represented by Sri Madhvacharya, and the tradition of the Rudra Sampradaya is connected to Sri Vishnuswami and, later, Sri Vallabhacharya. These four sampradayas together are known as the “Chatuh Sampradaya” (the Four Sampradayas), and within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, these very four sampradayas are regarded as the authoritative source of the path of devotion.

From Niyamananda to Nimbarkacharya

According to tradition, the Jagadguru’s original name was Niyamananda. According to a well-known story from his life, a mendicant once arrived at his ashram after sunset. The mendicant refused to eat after sundown. In order to honour the propriety due a guest and to uphold dharma, Niyamananda, through his yogic power, manifested a sun-like radiance

upon a neem tree. The mendicant, believing it to be the time before sunset, took his meal. When the true circumstance later became known, he addressed Niyamananda by the name "Nimbarka" (nimba, neem; arka, sun). From that time he became renowned by the name Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya.

This story is exceedingly popular in traditional literature. Modern historians regard it not as a historical event, but as a symbol of the acharya's spiritual glory and of the spirit of hospitality toward a guest. It is therefore appropriate to regard this episode as a matter of traditional belief.

The Question of Dating

There is disagreement among scholars regarding the period in which Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya lived. Certain traditional texts place him in extremely ancient times, while many modern historians place him roughly between the 11th and 13th centuries CE. The available historical sources do not offer complete agreement on any single fixed date. It is therefore appropriate, from a research standpoint, to accept that various views prevail regarding his dating. This divergence arises mainly because the style of biographical writing in ancient Indian tradition differed from modern historical writing — the record of guru lineages was generally preserved orally and through disciple succession, which makes the determination of precise dates a considerable challenge. In this volume, rather than declaring any single view to be the final truth, we consider it appropriate to present the various scholarly views as they stand, on the basis of available evidence, so that readers may evaluate the facts for themselves.

The Philosophy of Dvaitadvaita

Nimbarkacharya's greatest philosophical contribution is the doctrine of Dvaitadvaita, also known as Bhedabheda philosophy. According to this doctrine, there is both difference and non-difference among the individual soul (jiva), the world (jagat), and the Supreme Soul (Paramatma). Just as the sun and its rays appear distinct, and yet the existence of both is bound to the other, so too the individual soul, while being a part of the Supreme Soul, retains its own individual existence. According to Nimbarkacharya, the soul and the world are transformations (parinama) of Brahman itself — that is, they are neither wholly distinct from Brahman nor wholly identical with it, precisely as a serpent and its coil are distinct and yet not distinct. This doctrine presents an independent philosophical path distinct from both Shankaracharya's Kevaladvaita and Ramanujacharya's Vishishtadvaita, one in which equal importance is given both to the soul's independent existence and to its inseparable relationship with the Supreme Soul.

This doctrine presents a balanced philosophical path between Advaita and Dvaita. According to Nimbarkacharya, Lord Krishna is the Supreme Brahman, and Sri Radha is his supreme divine power (Para Shakti). The soul's ultimate goal is to attain the divine proximity of God through loving devotion.

The Joint Worship of Radha and Krishna

A distinctive mark of the Nimbarkacharya tradition is the joint worship of Sri Radha and Sri Krishna. Although the worship of Krishna alone was already prevalent, the Nimbarka tradition is regarded as making an important contribution to establishing Radha and Krishna together as the supreme object of worship.

In this tradition, love is regarded as the supreme means of attaining God. Devotion is not merely a mode of worship, but a path of complete surrender, service, compassion, and self-offering. This very doctrine is later seen reflected in the bhakti tradition of Braj and in the literature of many Vaishnav saints.

The Expansion of Nimbarka Tirtha and Its Peethas

The principal seat (peetha) of the Nimbarka Sampradaya is situated in the Mathura region of present-day Uttar Pradesh, where the tradition of the acharya's throne (gaddi) continues in living form to this day. Over time, branches of this sampradaya spread to Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and other parts of the country, and in each region, local saints established their own ashrams and temples. Vaishnav Bairagi saints connected with these regional peethas not only kept devotional practice alive, but also played an important role in spreading education, cow protection, and cultural awareness within local society. Many mathas connected with the Nimbarka tradition remain active to this day in Haryana and neighbouring regions, and their historical study will be undertaken in detail in the chapters that follow in this volume.

The Nimbarka Sampradaya and the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

The Nimbarka Sampradaya provided the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition with its spiritual foundation. The guru-disciple lineage, mantra initiation, service, sadhana, renunciation, and the protection of dharma are the principal components of this tradition. Over time, many peethas, ashrams, and temples of this sampradaya were established across various parts of India. The influence of the Nimbarka tradition is especially evident in the Braj region, Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat, and other areas.

Bairagi saints did not confine themselves merely to spiritual practice; they also made an important contribution to society in matters of dharma, education, cow protection, the preservation of sacred sites, and the welfare of the people. This makes clear that renunciation does not mean turning away from society, but rather serving society and dharma in a selfless spirit.

The Enduring Contribution of Nimbarkacharya

Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya gave Vaishnav philosophy a balanced foundation of love, devotion, and reason. His doctrine of Dvaitadvaita is counted to this day among the principal schools of Indian philosophy. The joint worship of Radha-Krishna, respect for the guru lineage, the regard of devotion as the supreme means, and fidelity to Vedic tradition — these all remain enduring features of his teachings.

Today, in India and abroad, many ashrams, temples, and spiritual centres of the Nimbarka Sampradaya remain active, propagating his teachings and keeping the Sanatan Vaishnav tradition alive.

Conclusion

Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya was a great philosopher, saint, and acharya of the Indian Vaishnav tradition. He gave the Kumara Sampradaya its organized form and gave new direction to devotion, renunciation, and the worship of Radha-Krishna. The doctrine of Dvaitadvaita that he expounded enriched Indian spiritual thought and provided the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition with an enduring ideological foundation. His place in the history of Sanatan Vaishnav dharma is therefore one of great honour and inspiration. Seen in this light, Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya was not merely a philosopher, but the founder of a living tradition, one that, even eight centuries later, continues actively to walk the path of devotion, renunciation, and service in many parts of India and the world.

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Chapter 6

The Tradition of Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya

(A Research Chapter: Biography, Philosophy, Organization, and Historical Analysis)

Part 1: Biography, Birth, and Early Education

Preface

In the Sanatan tradition of India, great acharyas have appeared from time to time who carried the principles of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras to the common people. Acharyas such as Adi Shankaracharya, Sri Ramanujacharya, Sri Nimbarkacharya, Sri Madhvacharya, and Sri Vallabhacharya each expounded a different stream of Vedic philosophy, thereby enriching Indian spiritual consciousness.

Among these acharyas, the place of Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya is exceedingly distinctive. He did not merely present a philosophical doctrine; he led a powerful religious and cultural movement founded on devotion, surrender (sharanagati), service, and social harmony. The Vishishtadvaita Vedanta that he expounded is still regarded today as the foundational philosophy of the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya.

Sri Ramanujacharya established that the Supreme Soul, the individual soul, and the world — all three — possess real existence. The soul is a part of God, yet not wholly identical with God. Lord Shriman Narayana alone is the supreme controller of all creation, and it is only through his grace and through surrender to him that liberation (moksha) becomes possible. This very doctrine later became the foundation for the widespread expansion of Vaishnav devotion from South India to North India.

India in the 11th Century

Sri Ramanujacharya appeared at a time when India was, from a religious and philosophical standpoint, exceedingly active. Powerful dynasties such as the Chola, the Pandya, and the Hoysala ruled in South India. The great temples were not merely centres of worship, but were also principal centres of education, culture, music, dance, and social organization.

In the Tamil country, the devotional current of the Alvar saints had already reached the common people. Their divine devotional songs were enshrined as the ‘Nalayira Divya Prabandham.’ On the other hand, the Sanskrit tradition of Vedanta was also exceedingly rich. What was needed was a synthesis of Vedic philosophy and the devotional tradition. This great work was accomplished by Sri Ramanujacharya.

Birth and Family

According to the Shri Vaishnav tradition, Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya is held to have been born at Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu. This place remains to this day a principal pilgrimage site of the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya, and millions of devotees come here for darshan.

His father's name was Asuri Keshava Somayaji (Keshavacharya). He was a profound scholar of the Vedas and an officiant of Vedic sacrifices. His mother, Kantimati, was exceedingly devout and an exclusive devotee of Lord Vishnu. The family was steeped in Vedic tradition, religious discipline, and sacred observances.

Within the Shri Vaishnav tradition, it is also believed that Sri Ramanujacharya was an incarnation of Adishesha. This is a matter of traditional faith and is to be regarded not as historical fact but as religious belief.

Two Scholarly Views on His Lifespan

Regarding the dates of Sri Ramanujacharya's birth and passing, a clear divergence exists between tradition and modern historical scholarship, which must certainly be noted in a research-oriented volume.

The Traditional View — According to Shri Vaishnav guru-lineage texts such as the *Guruparampara-Prabhavam* and the *Prapannamritam*, Sri Ramanujacharya was born in the Kali Yuga Shaka Samvat 4119 (1017 CE), in the month of Chaitra, under the Tiruvadirai nakshatra, and passed away in 1137 CE. Tradition thus holds his lifespan to have been 120 years. This view remains accepted to this day in most Shri Vaishnav mathas of South India and within the acharya lineage.

The View of Modern Historians — Modern scholars, on the basis of 11th–12th century temple epigraphical records and regional literature outside the Shri Vaishnav tradition, have raised the question of whether an age of 120 years — roughly double the average life expectancy of that era — appears implausible. According to the noted Indologist John Carman, Sri Ramanujacharya's actual lifespan more probably fell between 1077 and 1157 CE, which would place his age at approximately 80 years. In support of this view, it is also argued that the accession of the Chola emperor Kulottunga II — during whose reign the story of Sri Ramanujacharya's expulsion from Srirangam is set — occurred, according to epigraphical evidence, in 1133 CE, which does not align well with the traditional date of death (1137 CE), whereas it fits more consistently within the revised chronology (1077–1157 CE).

Research Note: Neither view has been conclusively settled. The traditional date rests on faith and guru-lineage texts, while the modern date rests on epigraphical and comparative historical evidence. From a research standpoint, it is considered appropriate and impartial in this volume to record both views. (See references 9–11 at the end of the chapter.)

Childhood

The boy Ramanuja possessed extraordinary talent from childhood. He had a special interest in the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar, Mimamsa, and philosophy. It is said that even at a young age he grasped complex Vedic subjects with ease. His nature was exceedingly humble, compassionate, and devoted to dharma.

His mother used to narrate to him the stories of Lord Shriman Narayana, through which a deep faith in devotion to Vishnu developed in his mind from childhood itself.

Education at Kanchipuram

After his early education, Ramanujacharya arrived at Kanchipuram, which at that time was the principal centre of learning in South India. There he studied at the ashram of the renowned Advaita Vedantin acharya Yadavaprakasha.

Ramanujacharya was an exceedingly brilliant student, but after some time, differences of view began to emerge between him and Yadavaprakasha over the interpretation of the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. Where Yadavaprakasha interpreted according to Advaita Vedanta, Ramanujacharya understood the meaning of many mantras in accordance with God's personal (saguna), compassionate nature.

These very differences later laid the foundation for his independent philosophical thought.

The Influence of Kanchipurna (Tirukkachi Nambi)

At Kanchipuram, Sri Ramanujacharya came into contact with the great devotee Tirukkachi Nambi (Kanchipurna). He was not a Brahmin by birth, yet was regarded as an exclusive devotee of Lord Varadaraja Perumal.

Ramanujacharya learned from him that God's grace depends not on caste or birth, but on guileless devotion. This experience had a profound influence on his life and, later, on his social outlook.

Attitude Toward Dharma and Society

Even from his youth, Ramanujacharya's aim was not merely scholastic debate. He wished that the knowledge of the Vedas and Upanishads should reach the greatest possible number of people, and that the path of devotion should become accessible to all. This very sentiment later became the foundation of his social reforms and of the organization of the Shri Vaishnav tradition.

Conclusion of Part 1

The early life of Sri Ramanujacharya makes clear that he possessed, from birth, extraordinary talent, deep scholarship, and profound devotion to Vishnu. His education at Kanchipuram, his intellectual differences with Yadavaprakasha, and the companionship of great devotees such as Kanchipurna proved decisive in shaping his personality. This same young scholar later became the founder of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, the great organizer of the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya, and a principal pillar of the Indian bhakti movement.

Part 2: Yamunacharya, Renunciation, Srirangam, and the Organization of the Shri Vaishnav Tradition

The Personality and Contribution of Yamunacharya

Within the Shri Vaishnav tradition, the place of Sri Yamunacharya (Alavandar) is exceedingly important. He was a great acharya of the lineage of Sri Nathamuni. He did important work toward synthesizing the devotional tradition of the Alvar saints with Vedic

Vedanta. His writings later prepared the intellectual foundation for Sri Ramanujacharya's Vishishtadvaita philosophy.

Yamunacharya, regarding Lord Shriman Narayana as the Supreme Brahman, clarified the path of devotion and surrender. He engaged in scholastic debate with many scholars, thereby strengthening the standing of the Shri Vaishnav tradition. It is historically held that his thought had a profound influence on Ramanujacharya, although Yamunacharya passed away before a direct guru-disciple relationship could be established between the two.

The Journey to Srirangam

When Ramanujacharya's scholarship began to gain renown, the acharyas of Srirangam invited him to meet Yamunacharya. But by the time he reached Srirangam, Yamunacharya had already passed away.

A well-known story exists within the Shri Vaishnav tradition that three fingers of Yamunacharya's right hand were found bent. The acharyas present explained that this signified three unfulfilled resolves of his: to write a commentary on the Brahma Sutras in accordance with Shri Vaishnav doctrine; to enhance the glory of the tradition of Maharishi Parashara and Vedavyasa; and to propagate widely the divine devotional tradition of the Alvars.

Ramanujacharya resolved to fulfil all three of these tasks. According to tradition, the moment he made this resolve, all three of Yamunacharya's fingers straightened. This episode is part of the tradition of faith and is to be regarded not as historical fact but as religious tradition.

Initiation by Mahapurna (Periya Nambi)

After Yamunacharya, Sri Ramanujacharya received Panchasamskara and Shri Vaishnav initiation from Mahapurna (Periya Nambi). Panchasamskara includes the marks of the conch and discus, the tilaka, a Vaishnav name, mantra initiation, and the resolve to serve God.

Mahapurna gave Ramanujacharya not merely philosophical knowledge, but also taught him the practical form of devotion, service, humility, and surrender.

Taking Renunciation (Sannyasa)

Some time later, Ramanujacharya renounced household life and accepted sannyasa. Thereafter he became renowned by honorific names such as 'Yatiraja,' 'Udayavar,' and 'Bhagavad Ramanuja.'

After taking sannyasa, his entire life was devoted to the service of Lord Ranganatha, the propagation of Vedic dharma, and the organization of society.

Leadership at Srirangam

The Sri Ranganathaswamy temple at Srirangam was, at that time, the principal centre of the Shri Vaishnav tradition. Ramanujacharya organized the temple's method of worship, discipline, and administration.

He laid down clear rules for daily worship, festivals, Vedic recitation, the singing of the Divya Prabandham, and various services. Many of the systems he established remain, in various forms, in practice at Srirangam and other Shri Vaishnav temples to this day.

A Spirit of Social Reform

Ramanujacharya held that devotion to God is not the entitlement of any single class. He conveyed the message that whoever takes refuge in Lord Shriman Narayana with faith and surrender is entitled to his grace.

Many episodes are found in the Shri Vaishnav tradition in which he honoured devotees from various social backgrounds. Accounts of these episodes are found in traditional texts, while scholars hold differing views on their historical form. It is therefore appropriate to understand them as matters of traditional belief.

The Organization of the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya

Ramanujacharya gave the scattered Vaishnav tradition a well-organized structure. Through temples, mathas, and disciples, he developed a system by which the work of devotion, philosophy, and service could continue uninterrupted.

According to tradition, he entrusted many principal disciples with the responsibility of propagating dharma in various regions. It was owing to this very organized system that the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya spread beyond South India to other parts of the country.

The 74 Simhasanadhipatis (Throne-Holders)

According to the Shri Vaishnav tradition, Ramanujacharya established 74 Simhasanadhipatis (acharya-seats) for the propagation of his teachings and the preservation of the tradition. These acharyas were entrusted with the responsibility of propagating Vaishnav dharma, Vishishtadvaita philosophy, and the guru lineage in various regions.

This system is regarded as an important feature of the long-term organization of the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya.

Conclusion of Part 2

The life of Sri Ramanujacharya was not confined merely to personal sadhana. He carried forward the spiritual legacy of Yamunacharya, took sannyasa and devoted himself to the service of dharma and society, and made Srirangam a robust centre of the Shri Vaishnav tradition. His organizational skill, the doctrine of surrender, and his inclusive outlook toward society earned him a place among the greatest acharyas in Indian history.

Part 3: Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, the Shribhashya, Travels Across India, Principal Works, and Religious Philosophy

The Rise of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta

Many branches of Vedanta developed within Indian philosophy. Among these, the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta expounded by Sri Ramanujacharya holds an exceedingly important place. This philosophy is founded upon the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras. Its central purpose is to clarify the relationship among the Supreme Soul, the individual soul, and the world, and the means by which liberation may be attained.

The literal meaning of 'Vishishtadvaita' is 'non-dualism qualified [by attributes].' That is, the Supreme Brahman is one alone, yet is qualified by his infinite divine attributes, by souls, and by the world. In this philosophy, Lord Shriman Narayana alone is the Supreme Brahman, while the soul and the world, though dependent upon him, possess real existence.

God, Soul, and World

Sri Ramanujacharya expounded three eternal principles:

God (Ishvara) — Shriman Narayana alone is the Supreme Soul. He is omniscient, omnipotent, compassionate, and the controller of all creation.

Soul (Jiva) — All individual souls are eternal. They are dependent upon God, yet also possess their own independent existence. The soul is neither equal to God nor wholly separate from him.

World (Jagat) — This world is real. It is not regarded as illusory. The entire world is governed by God's power, and it is by his will alone that its creation, sustenance, and dissolution occur.

On this very basis, Sri Ramanujacharya established that the soul and the world stand in the same relation to the Supreme Soul as the body does to the self (atman). God is therefore all-pervading and present throughout all creation.

Devotion and Prapatti (Surrender)

According to Sri Ramanujacharya, there are two principal means of attaining liberation — bhakti (devotion) and prapatti (complete surrender).

Devotion is not confined merely to ritual worship, but signifies love, service, surrender, and unwavering faith in God. When a practitioner surrenders themselves completely to the refuge of Lord Shriman Narayana, they attain God's grace. This is called prapatti.

Within the Shri Vaishnav tradition, prapatti is regarded as an exceedingly important means, for liberation is not considered possible without God's grace.

The Composition of the Shribhashya

Sri Ramanujacharya's most celebrated work is the *Shribhashya*, an extensive commentary on the Brahma Sutras composed by Maharishi Badarayana.

According to tradition, before composing the *Shribhashya*, Ramanujacharya travelled to Kashmir to study the Bodhayana-vritti, from which he obtained the basis of an ancient interpretation of the Brahma Sutras. Although this episode is found mainly in traditional texts, modern historians hold differing views on some of its details.

In the *Shribhashya*, he systematically expounded Vishishtadvaita Vedanta on the basis of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras. This work is regarded to this day as a principal foundation of Vedantic literature.

Other Principal Works

Sri Ramanujacharya composed many important works, the principal among them being the *Shribhashya*, the *Vedarthasangraha*, the *Bhagavad Gita Bhashya*, the *Vedantadipa*, the *Vedantasara*, the *Nityagrantha*, the *Sharanagati Gadya*, the *Shriranga Gadya*, and the *Vaikuntha Gadya*. In these works one finds an exceedingly beautiful synthesis of philosophy, devotion, worship, and surrender.

Travels Across India and the Propagation of Dharma

Sri Ramanujacharya travelled to many sacred sites across India. The purpose of these journeys was not merely pilgrimage, but also the propagation of Vaishnav dharma, dialogue with scholars, scholastic debate, and the strengthening of temple administration.

According to tradition and historical sources, he was especially connected with the following places: Sriperumbudur, Kanchipuram, Srirangam, Tirupati (Tirumala), Melkote (Karnataka), the Varadaraja temple at Kanchi, and Kashmir (a traditional reference). A traditional reference is also found to certain North Indian pilgrimage sites, including Badrinath, although historical evidence is not equally available for all of these journeys.

The Significance of Melkote

Melkote (Tirunarayanapuram) in Karnataka was an exceedingly important centre in the life of Sri Ramanujacharya. According to tradition, he resided here for a long period and re-established the sanctity of the Tirunarayanaswamy temple.

A well-known tradition also connects him with the story of bringing back the festival image, 'Cheluva Narayana' (Sampatkumara). This story is narrated with great reverence in the Shri Vaishnav tradition.

The Influence of His Religious Philosophy

Sri Ramanujacharya made clear that God is not merely an attributeless (nirguna) reality, but is endowed with infinite auspicious qualities, and is compassionate and affectionate toward his devotees. He gave special importance to the worship of Lord Shriman Narayana together with Shri Mahalakshmi.

His philosophy gave the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya an organized foundation in South India, and later inspired many Vaishnav saints and traditions of North India as well.

Conclusion of Part 3

Sri Ramanujacharya's Vishishtadvaita Vedanta is one of the great achievements of Indian philosophy. He did not confine Vedanta merely to philosophical discourse, but connected it to devotion, service, compassion, and surrender, making it accessible to the common people. His works, including the *Shribhashya*, remain to this day the fundamental basis of the Shri Vaishnav tradition, while his travels across India and propagation of dharma gave Vaishnav devotion a broad, nationwide character.

Part 4: The Expansion of the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya, Principal Mathas, the 74 Simhasanadhipatis, the Vadakalai–Tenkalai Tradition, and the 'Statue of Equality' at Hyderabad

The Expansion of the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya

Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya did not confine the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya to South India alone, but gave it the form of a well-organized religious and philosophical tradition. His disciples propagated this tradition in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and, later, in many regions of North India.

Sri Ramanujacharya's greatest distinction was that he beautifully synthesized Vedic knowledge with the devotional current of the Alvar saints. He accorded equal honour to both Sanskrit and Tamil. For this reason, within the Shri Vaishnav tradition, the 'Nalayira Divya Prabandham' came to be held in as much reverence as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras.

The 74 Simhasanadhipatis

According to the Shri Vaishnav tradition, Sri Ramanujacharya appointed 74 Simhasanadhipatis during his lifetime. These acharyas were responsible for the propagation of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, the protection of the Shri Vaishnav tradition, the administration of temple religious affairs, the initiation of new disciples, and the continuation of the guru lineage.

Through these 74 acharya-seats, the organization of the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya was made exceedingly robust. Many Shri Vaishnav mathas to this day trace their tradition's connection to these very Simhasanadhipatis.

Principal Shri Vaishnav Mathas

Over time, many eminent mathas were established within the tradition of Sri Ramanujacharya, prominent among them being the Srirangam Matha, the Ahobila Matha, the Parakala Matha, the Andavan Ashram, the Vanamamalai Matha, the Yatiraja Matha, and the Melkote Yatiraja Matha. For centuries, these mathas have played an important role in the preservation of Vedanta, Sanskrit, the Divya Prabandham, temple tradition, and Vaishnav dharma.

The Vadakalai and Tenkalai Traditions

After Sri Ramanujacharya, two principal traditions developed within the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya:

Vadakalai (the Northern tradition) — This tradition placed special emphasis on Sanskrit texts and Vedic study. Vedanta Deshika (1268–1369 CE) is regarded as the principal acharya of this tradition.

Tenkalai (the Southern tradition) — This tradition placed greater emphasis on the Tamil Divya Prabandham of the Alvars and on God's complete grace (prapatti). Pillai Lokacharya and Manavala Mamuni are regarded as the principal acharyas of this current.

The philosophical foundation is the same in both traditions — both regard Lord Shriman Narayana as the Supreme Brahman. The differences lie mainly in modes of worship, certain philosophical interpretations, and traditional customs.

The Influence of Sri Ramanujacharya's Tradition on North India

Although Sri Ramanujacharya's sphere of activity was principally South India, the influence of his teachings reached North India as well. In later traditions, Jagadguru Sri Ramanandacharya is regarded as connected to the guru lineage of Sri Ramanujacharya. Scholars hold differing views on the historical nature of this relationship, but the Ramanandi tradition itself accepts this connection.

The influence of this current is evident in the development of Ram bhakti, widespread Vaishnav devotion, and many saintly traditions in North India.

The 'Statue of Equality' at Hyderabad

In the 21st century, in memory of Sri Ramanujacharya, a magnificent statue of him was installed at Muchintal (near Hyderabad) in Telangana, known as the 'Statue of Equality.'

The principal features of this statue are: a height of 216 feet, construction from panchadhatu (five metals), and its construction to mark Sri Ramanujacharya's 1000th birth anniversary. The main statue was inaugurated on 5 February 2022 by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, while the 120-kilogram gold statue installed within was separately inaugurated on 13 February 2022 by President Shri Ram Nath Kovind. Its conception and construction were led by Sri Chinna Jeeyar Swami.

Within the complex, replicas of the 108 Divya Desams have been constructed, where devotees may have darshan of the principal pilgrimage sites of the Shri Vaishnav tradition. Various activities are also conducted here for the study and propagation of the Vedas, the Divya Prabandham, Shri Vaishnav philosophy, and Indian culture.

The purpose of this statue is not merely to serve as a memorial, but to carry Sri Ramanujacharya's message of harmony, equality, devotion, and surrender to the entire world.

The Shri Vaishnav Tradition Today

Today, the tradition of Sri Ramanujacharya is active not only in India but in many countries of the world. Shri Vaishnav temples, mathas, and cultural institutions in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, North India, the United States, Britain, Australia, and other countries are propagating Vishishtadvaita Vedanta and Shri Vaishnav culture.

It is worth noting that the tradition of Sri Ramanujacharya today has no single universal head. Various mathas and traditions have their own respective acharyas and heads, who function according to their own guru lineage.

Conclusion of Part 4

The Shri Vaishnav tradition established by Sri Ramanujacharya has, for nearly a millennium, continuously given direction to Indian culture, philosophy, and the bhakti movement. The system of 74 Simhasanadhipatis, the establishment of principal mathas, the organization of temples, and the propagation of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta stand as testimony to his unparalleled organizational capacity. Today, the Statue of Equality at Hyderabad, as a modern symbol of his life and message, reminds the world that the fundamental basis of Sanatan Dharma is devotion, service, harmony, and surrender to God.

Part 5: Sri Ramanujacharya's Enduring Legacy, Influence on Indian Culture, and Conclusion

Sri Ramanujacharya's Enduring Legacy

There have been certain great figures in Indian history whose influence was not confined to their own era, but continued to guide society across many centuries. Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya was one such great acharya. He did not let Vedanta remain merely a subject of scholarly discourse, but connected it to the life of ordinary people. The core message of his teachings was devotion to Lord Shriman Narayana, complete surrender (prapatti), service, compassion, and a life lived in accordance with dharma.

The Shri Vaishnav tradition he established has, for nearly a millennium, continuously influenced Indian religious, cultural, and philosophical life. From the temples of South India to the Vaishnav devotion of North India, the imprint of his thought is clearly visible.

Influence on Indian Culture

Sri Ramanujacharya's influence was not confined merely to philosophy. He organized temple worship procedures, established a synthesis of Vedic and Tamil devotional literature, carried devotion to the broader sections of society, gave the guru-disciple tradition an organized form, and accorded importance to religious discipline and a spirit of service.

Through his efforts, Shri Vaishnav temples remained not merely places of worship, but also became centres of education, food distribution, Sanskrit study, and cultural preservation.

Influence on the Bhakti Movement

Sri Ramanujacharya's contribution to the development of the Indian bhakti movement is regarded as exceedingly important. The tradition of surrender and saguna bhakti that he expounded went on to inspire many later Vaishnav acharyas and saints.

According to traditional belief, the guru lineage of Jagadguru Sri Ramanandacharya of North India is also considered connected to Sri Ramanujacharya. Modern historians hold various views on the nature of this relationship, but the Ramanandi tradition itself accepts this spiritual connection. It was through this very current that Ram bhakti later spread widely across North India.

The Shri Vaishnav Tradition Today

Today the Shri Vaishnav sampradaya is active, besides India, in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, and other countries. Many temples, mathas, Vedic schools, and cultural institutions are propagating Sri Ramanujacharya's philosophy and Vishishtadvaita Vedanta.

Srirangam, Sriperumbudur, Kanchipuram, and Melkote in Tamil Nadu, Tirumala, Ahobilam, and Muchintal in Telangana remain, to this day, the principal spiritual centres of this tradition.

The Message of the 'Statue of Equality' at Hyderabad

The 216-foot 'Statue of Equality,' installed at Muchintal (Telangana), is the largest modern symbol of the memory of Sri Ramanujacharya. This statue is not merely an architectural achievement, but a symbol of his message that God's grace is equally available to all devotees.

Within the statue complex, replicas of the 108 Divya Desams, Vedic study, cultural programmes, and spiritual activities are conducted, so that the new generation may become familiar with the Shri Vaishnav tradition.

The Philosophical Message of Sri Ramanujacharya

The principal doctrines of his philosophy may be summarized as follows:

Lord Shriman Narayana alone is the Supreme Brahman. The soul and the world are real. God's grace is the principal cause of liberation. Devotion and prapatti (surrender) are the supreme means of liberation. Shri Mahalakshmi is the mediating power of compassion and grace. Spiritual progress is difficult without the guidance of a guru. Service, humility, and righteous conduct are the duty of every Vaishnav.

A Balanced Study of History and Tradition

Many episodes connected with the life of Sri Ramanujacharya — such as his being regarded as an incarnation of Adishesha, the episode of Yamunacharya's three bent fingers, the precise dates of his life, or the accounts of certain journeys — are described mainly in Shri Vaishnav guru-lineage tradition and traditional texts. On the other hand, matters such as his birthplace, principal works, Vishishtadvaita philosophy, his work at Srirangam, and temple organization are also corroborated by historical sources. It is therefore necessary, in a research-oriented study, to maintain an appropriate distinction between traditional beliefs and historical evidence, as has been done, so far as possible, in this chapter.

Conclusion

Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya is among those great acharyas of the Indian Vedic tradition who connected philosophy to devotion, scripture to service, and spirituality to social responsibility. Through Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, he established that the relationship among the Supreme Soul, the individual soul, and the world is founded upon love, compassion, and grace. His life is proof of the truth that dharma is not merely a matter of thought, but a path of conduct, service, and surrender.

Whether his lifespan, according to traditional reckoning, was 120 years, or, according to modern research, approximately 80 years, this fact does not in the least diminish the significance of his contribution. The Shri Vaishnav tradition he established remains active throughout the world even after nearly a millennium has passed. His message remains alive to this day through temples, mathas, Vedic schools, texts, and devotees. Thus, Jagadguru Sri Ramanujacharya will forever be remembered as an immortal and inspiring figure in the history of Indian culture, Vaishnav philosophy, and Sanatan Dharma.

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Chapter 7

Jagadguru Ramanandacharya and the Bhakti Movement

(A Research Chapter: Biography, Disciple Lineage, Philosophy, and Historical Analysis — with All Research Addenda Integrated into the Original Text)

Part 1: Introduction, Birth, Guru Lineage, and Social Harmony

Introduction

The place of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya in the religious history of medieval India is regarded as exceedingly important. He played a vital role in carrying Sri Rama devotion to the wider populace of North India. Many episodes connected with his life remain preserved to this day in various traditions, yet there is no complete agreement among historians and sectarian traditions regarding his date of birth, birthplace, disciples, and the details of his life. In this chapter, therefore, priority has been given only to those facts accepted by reputable texts and historians, and wherever differences of opinion exist, they have been clearly presented as such.

Birth and Early Life

There is no consensus regarding Ramanandacharya's year of birth. Various scholars have placed his lifespan differently. Some traditional texts place him in the first half of the fourteenth century, while many modern historians hold his period to be roughly from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth century.

Research Note: Even within traditional dates, there is internal variance. According to the *Bhavishyottara Khanda* (a later appendix to the *Agastya Samhita*, held current within the Ramanandi tradition), he was born in Prayag in 1299 CE and passed away in 1410 CE. On the other hand, the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* gives his lifespan as between 1366 and 1467 CE. Certain Western scholars, such as Farquhar, have placed him within the first three quarters of the 15th century. Thus, more than one dating tradition prevails even within tradition itself, and modern scholarship has not yet reached consensus on any single date. (See references 10, 15.)

There is also disagreement regarding his birthplace, but most Indian traditions and many scholars regard Prayag (present-day Prayagraj) as his birthplace. He later resided in Kashi (Varanasi), where the principal centre of his spiritual practice and teaching developed.

(Certain sources also name Melkote in Mysore as his birthplace, but this view is held by a minority and does not enjoy wide acceptance.)

Guru and Philosophical Tradition

According to the medieval *Bhaktamal* and other traditional sources, Ramanandacharya's guru was Raghavananda. Most scholars accept that Ramanandacharya's philosophical foundation was connected to the Vishishtadvaita tradition of Sri Ramanujacharya, although in North India he gave Rama devotion new momentum suited to local circumstances.

Contribution to the Bhakti Movement

Ramanandacharya's greatest contribution is regarded as his having carried devotion beyond the confines of Sanskrit scholars, to the common people. He made the name of Sri Rama, devotion, surrender, and personal submission to God the foundation of the spiritual life.

Under his influence, a current of devotion developed in North India that later gave new direction to saint literature. Many historians count him among the principal forerunners of the North Indian bhakti movement.

Research Note: It must be made clear that many modern historians — including Charlotte Vaudeville, John Stratton Hawley, David Lorenzen, and Winand Callewaert — do not regard the bhakti movement of North India as the achievement of any single acharya, but as the combined product of many saints and parallel traditions. To call Ramanandacharya the 'sole founder' of the bhakti movement would therefore be an academically unsafe claim. In this volume, it is considered more appropriate and safer to hold that Ramanandacharya occupies an important place among the principal acharyas of the popular current of Ram bhakti in North India. (See reference 20.)

Social Harmony

It is a principal claim of the Ramanandi tradition that, in the sphere of devotion, he regarded discrimination based on birth as secondary and gave people of various social backgrounds a place on the spiritual path. Modern historians note this tradition, but independent historical evidence is not available for every individual episode.

Research Note: According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, at his centres in Agra and Kashi, Ramanandacharya taught in Hindi (the vernacular), since Sanskrit was confined to the upper varnas alone. Among his traditionally named principal disciples are counted a woman, disciples from the lowest varnas (such as the leather-worker Ravidas), and a Muslim mystic saint (Kabir). This account is the most solid evidentiary point in support of his socially inclusive image. But a serious research objection is also worth noting here — in the available works of these very disciples, mention of Ramanandacharya is found to be almost negligible, on account of which some modern scholars have questioned the historical authenticity of this guru-disciple lineage. (See reference 11.)

The popular saying — *"jāti-pāṅti pūchhe nahiṅ koī, hari ko bhaje so hari kā hoī."* ("None asks of caste or lineage; whoever worships Hari belongs to Hari.") — is exceedingly popular within the Ramanandi tradition and is widely attributed to Ramanandacharya, but it has not been established in available ancient manuscripts as a verified composition of Ramanandacharya. According to modern historians, there is disagreement over its original source and authenticity. It is therefore more appropriate to regard it as a matter of traditional belief rather than a historically proven statement.

Principal Disciples

Various traditions also differ regarding Ramanandacharya's disciples. The *Bhaktamal* and its later commentaries mention many disciples. Prominent among them are Kabir, Ravidas, Sen Bhagat, Dhanna, Pipa, Anantananda, Sukhananda, and other saints.

But modern historians also point out that direct, contemporaneous historical evidence is not available for all these guru-disciple relationships. It is therefore more suitable to mention them as matters of traditional belief.

(In the following part, a separate historical and traditional introduction is given for each principal disciple — Kabir, Ravidas, Sen Bhagat, Pipa, Dhanna, and others — comprising the complete lineage of twelve/fourteen disciples.)

Literary Works

Scholars generally accept the *Vaishnavamatabjabhaskara* and the *Shri Ramarchana Paddhati* as Ramanandacharya's authentic compositions. Other texts are also mentioned, but historians differ regarding their authorship.

Historical Significance

Ramanandacharya's significance lies not merely in his being a Vaishnav acharya, but also in his being a saint who gave the current of devotion in North India a broad social base. Under his influence, saint literature, Ram bhakti, religious expression in the vernacular, and the spirit of social harmony received fresh direction. It is for this reason that his name is spoken with respect among the principal acharyas of the Indian bhakti movement.

Part 2: The Principal Disciples of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya — A Source-Based Historical Review

The subject of Ramanandacharya's disciples is among the most discussed and, at the same time, most disputed topics of medieval Indian history. Traditional Ramanandi literature, particularly Nabhadas's *Bhaktamal* and Priyadas's commentary upon it, mentions many disciples. Modern historians, on the other hand, hold that contemporaneous records are not available for all these guru-disciple relationships. From the standpoint of historical writing, therefore, each name requires separate assessment.

Here, only those disciples whose names are found prominently in tradition are discussed. Wherever differences exist, they are clearly presented.

Research Note: The Chronological Problem — Before giving an account of each disciple, one fundamental historical difficulty must be noted, first prominently raised by the Hindi literary historian Dr. Parashuram Chaturvedi, and today accepted by most modern scholars. If Ramanandacharya's passing is placed, according to tradition, around 1410 CE, or, according to an alternative dating tradition, around 1453–1467 CE, then a serious chronological difficulty arises when this is compared with Kabir's date of birth. It must be made clear here that there is likewise no consensus among scholars regarding Kabir's date of birth — various studies have proposed different dates for him, including 1398, 1440, and 1456 CE. Despite this double uncertainty, most proposed chronologies suggest that at the time of Ramanandacharya's passing, Kabir would either not yet have been born, or would

have been an infant, making a direct relationship of initiation appear difficult. The Hindi litterateur Shyamsundar Das likewise acknowledged that if Ramanand's death is placed around 1453 CE, then Kabir's birth would fall only 3–4 years thereafter — which renders the traditional guru-disciple story inconsistent. Thus, questions arise regarding the chronology of the Ramanand–Kabir relationship, and it is owing to this very difficulty that many modern scholars, while regarding this relationship as a firm tradition, do not regard it as an undisputed historical fact. (See references 12, 13.)

1. Saint Kabir

Saint Kabir is counted among the most renowned poets of the Indian saint tradition. According to traditional belief, he was initiated by Ramanandacharya at Kashi. This story is found in the *Bhaktamal*, the *Kabir Parachai*, and later saint traditions.

Kabir's celebrated lines — *"kāśī meṅ ham prakaṭa bhae, rāmānanda cetāe"* and *"guru miliyā rāmānanda"* — are held to be the basis of the tradition accepting Ramanand as his guru.

But modern historians — such as David Lorenzen, Winand Callewaert, and William Pinch — hold that direct, contemporaneous historical evidence is not available for this relationship. They therefore regard it as a strong tradition, but not a fully proven historical fact.

Research Note: It is also worth noting that neither of the above lines is found in the *Kabir Granthavali*, nor in the *Kabir-vani* compiled in the Guru Granth Sahib. The original source of these lines is unknown, and it is suspected that they may have been composed in a later period by some follower of the Ramanandi sampradaya. Some researchers also hold that the true meaning of these lines could be understood in the opposite sense — that Kabir himself came to Kashi to awaken Ramanand, rather than to receive initiation from him. This difference of interpretation is worth noting. (See reference 14.)

Conclusion: The Ramanand–Kabir relationship is exceedingly ancient and widely accepted within the Indian saint tradition, but modern historical scholarship accepts it with caution, and, bearing in mind the chronological difficulty noted above, it cannot be regarded as a conclusively established fact.

2. Saint Ravidas

Saint Ravidas is counted among the great saints of North India. Within the Ramanandi tradition, he is regarded as a principal disciple of Ramanandacharya.

A verse is also found in certain traditional texts — *"rāmānanda mohi guru milyo…"* — but historians hold that the authenticity of this verse, too, is disputed. Historians acknowledge that the Ravidas–Ramanand relationship is exceedingly strong within tradition, but contemporaneous epigraphical evidence for it is limited.

Mirabai and Ravidas — It is a relatively more widely accepted fact that Mirabai regarded Saint Ravidas as her guru. This is mentioned in many of Mira's verses and in later traditions.

Most of the available account of these figures is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

3. Sen Bhagat

The name of Sen Bhagat (Sena the barber) is also counted among the principal disciples of Ramanandacharya. He is described as a barber by profession, and many folk tales are current regarding his devotion and service. Some of his compositions are also included in the Guru Granth Sahib, which corroborates his historical existence. But whether he was directly a disciple of Ramanandacharya is a matter on which historians differ.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

4. Raja Pipa

Pipa is regarded as a ruler of Gagraun, Rajasthan. According to the Ramanandi tradition, he renounced his kingdom and received initiation from Ramanandacharya. His verses, too, are preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib. Historians generally accept that Pipa was a historical figure, but disagreement persists regarding his direct relationship with Ramanandacharya.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

5. Dhanna Bhagat

Dhanna is regarded as a Jat farmer-saint of Rajasthan. Tales of his simple devotion are renowned throughout North India. His verses, too, are compiled in the Guru Granth Sahib. The Ramanandi tradition regards him as a disciple of Ramanandacharya, but modern historians do not regard this relationship as conclusively established.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

6. Anantananda

The place of Anantanandacharya within the Ramanandi sampradaya is regarded as exceedingly important. According to sectarian tradition, he was the principal disciple and successor of Ramanandacharya. His name is found with special honour in the guru lineages of later Ramanandi mathas. But most of the available account of his life is drawn from later sectarian texts. Contemporaneous historical records are limited.

Research Note: Special caution is required regarding Anantanandacharya, for sectarian literature and popular folk tales contain many supernatural episodes connected with him — such as divine visions, miraculous accounts of pilgrimages, and claims of extraordinary longevity. None of these episodes has been presented in this volume as historical fact. Wherever a reference to such episodes has been necessary, the phrasing 'within sectarian tradition…' has been used, so that the distinction between faith-based narrative and verified history remains clear.

Research Note: From this point onward, an account is given of the remaining disciples who are included in the list of the Twelve Mahabhagavatas, but who were confined merely to a mention of name in the original text. On closer examination, it seemed appropriate to give each of them a separate section as well.

7. Surasuranand

According to tradition, Surasuranand belonged to a Brahmin family and is counted among the closest disciples of Ramanandacharya. In the *Bhaktamal*, his name is found alongside Anantananda, Sukhananda, and Bhavananda, within the category of acharyas devoted to saguna worship. Details of his independent life or compositions are not available in independent contemporaneous sources; information is confined mainly to sectarian texts.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

8. Sukhananda

Sukhananda, too, is regarded as an acharya-disciple of Brahmin lineage. Within the Ramanandi tradition, he is described, along with Anantananda, Bhavananda, and Naraharyananda, as a principal bearer of the current of saguna worship of Rama. According to historians, sufficient independent historical records are likewise not available regarding him.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

9. Naraharyananda (Narahari Das)

Some sources describe him as a Brahmin acharya, while certain other modern compilations connect him to the profession of a goldsmith — thus, disagreement is found within tradition even regarding his social origin. This very variance is itself proof that the details of the twelve-disciple list have continued to change within tradition over time.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

10. Bhavananda

Bhavananda, too, is counted among the Brahmin acharyas devoted to saguna worship of Rama. His name is found close to Anantananda's in the guru-lineage lists of Ramanandi mathas, but independent historical evidence, as with other minor disciples, is limited.

Most of the available account of him is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

11. Padmavati

Padmavati Ji is regarded as one of the two principal women disciples of Ramanandacharya. It is a noteworthy fact that tradition itself claims that Ramanandacharya, breaking the social conventions of his time, granted discipleship equally to women as well — regarded

as an extraordinary step in the context of medieval India. However, as with the male disciples, no independent contemporaneous historical record exists regarding her; the account rests entirely on sectarian tradition.

Most of the available account of her is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

12. Surasuri (Sursari)

Surasuri Ji holds a place in tradition as the second principal woman disciple. Alongside Padmavati Ji, her name too is offered as an example of the social harmony of the Ramanandi tradition of 'equal spiritual entitlement for women.' Here again, the same caution is required — this account rests mainly on later hagiography in the style of the *Bhaktamal*, not on contemporaneous record.

Most of the available account of her is based on the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas's commentary, and later sectarian traditions; contemporaneous records are extremely scarce.

Research Note: A Disagreement Within Tradition Regarding the Number of Disciples — Twelve or Fourteen? Regarding the total number of Ramanandacharya's principal disciples, two distinct counting traditions prevail even within the Ramanandi sampradaya itself, and these must be clearly distinguished, so that neither view is given undue preference over the other. View (a) — a total of twelve disciples, with both women disciples counted as included from the outset: according to this tradition, the list of the 'Twelve Mahabhagavatas' comprised, from the start, ten men and both women disciples (Padmavati and Surasuri) — that is, the total number was always twelve. (See references 16, 17.) View (b) — the original twelve disciples were men, and the women disciples were added afterward as additional (13th/14th): according to this tradition, the original list consisted entirely of male acharyas/saints, and Padmavati and Surasuri were added separately in later texts — bringing the total to fourteen. (See references 18, 19.) Both traditions are in complete agreement that Ramanandacharya granted discipleship to women on an equal footing — this fact is beyond dispute. The disagreement concerns only the method of counting, not this fundamental fact of social harmony.

Other Traditional Disciples

Beyond the aforementioned twelve/fourteen, certain later sources within Ramanandi literature also mention additional names such as Galwanand, Nabhadas, and Vitthalpant Kulkarni. Some sources also connect Tulsidas to the later Ramanandi tradition (though not as a direct contemporaneous disciple). This variance confirms that the disciple list has itself developed and been amended within the sampradaya across different periods — a natural feature of the oral and later-written transmission of any medieval guru lineage.

Information regarding many of these is preserved mainly in sectarian texts. Modern historians regard these accounts as an important part of religious tradition, but sufficient independent contemporaneous evidence is not available for their historical verification.

Historical Conclusion

History and tradition each have their own role. Tradition mentions many disciples of Ramanandacharya. History draws careful conclusions on the basis of available records and contemporaneous sources.

It would therefore be more appropriate to say that the connection of Kabir, Ravidas, Sen Bhagat, Pipa, Dhanna, and other saints with Ramanandacharya is exceedingly ancient and widely accepted within the Indian saint tradition, but that not all these relationships are supported by an equal degree of historical evidence.

Part 3: The Philosophy of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya, Vishishtadvaita, Ram Bhakti, and Social Harmony

Introduction

The significance of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya lies not merely in his being a saint or the head of a matha, but in his being a Vaishnav acharya who carried out the work of bringing Sri Rama devotion to the wider populace of medieval North India. Most scholars hold that his philosophical foundation was connected to the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta of Sri Ramanujacharya, but that, in keeping with the circumstances of North India, he made devotion more accessible to the common people. Wide agreement exists among historians on this subject, though certain aspects of his philosophy have been interpreted differently by different scholars.

The Vishishtadvaita Tradition and Ramanandacharya

Ramanandacharya is generally regarded as connected to the Shri Vaishnav tradition. According to traditional belief, he received initiation from his guru Raghavananda, who is himself held to be connected to the tradition of Sri Ramanujacharya. Modern historians also accept that Ramanandacharya's Vaishnav practice was founded on Vishishtadvaita, though he developed an independent identity in North India.

According to Vishishtadvaita, the Supreme Soul (God), the individual soul, and the world are all three real. The soul and the world are not wholly separate from the Supreme Soul, but are dependent upon it. God's grace and devotion are regarded as the principal means of liberation. Ramanandacharya carried this very doctrine to the common people through Sri Rama devotion.

Research Note: It is also worth noting here that certain modern sources, including the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, indicate that the organized history of the present-day Ramanandi sampradaya perhaps does not extend earlier than the 17th century, even though the sampradaya itself traces its connection to Ramanandacharya (14th–15th century). This interval, too, deserves to be highlighted from a research standpoint, for it makes it easier to understand the distinction between tradition and institutional history. (See reference 11.)

The Expansion of Sri Rama Devotion

Ramanandacharya's greatest contribution is regarded as his having established Sri Rama not merely as the object of worship of royalty or scholars, but as the object of worship of the common people.

He taught that the attainment of God comes not through ritual or birth alone, but through faith, devotion, and surrender. For this reason, the chanting of the name of Sri Rama, devotional singing (bhajan), kirtana, and satsang came to hold special importance in his tradition.

Historians William Pinch and David Lorenzen hold that the Ramanandi tradition made an important contribution to the widespread propagation of Ram bhakti in North India.

The Importance of the Vernacular

In the medieval period, most religious texts were available in Sanskrit, which the common people could not understand.

Tradition connected with Ramanandacharya relates that he encouraged religious teaching in the vernacular languages. This very environment later assisted the development of the compositions of Kabir, Ravidas, Dhanna, Pipa, and other saints.

Although Ramanandacharya's own available compositions are limited, most scholars agree that he played an important role in connecting devotion in North India to the language of the people.

Social Harmony

The most discussed aspect of Ramanandacharya concerns his social outlook.

It is a principal claim of the Ramanandi tradition that, in the sphere of devotion, he regarded discrimination based on birth as secondary, and gave people of various social backgrounds a place on the spiritual path. It is for this reason that saints of varied social backgrounds — Kabir, Ravidas, Sen, Dhanna, Pipa, and others — are connected to him within tradition.

But modern historians also caution that direct, contemporaneous evidence is not available for all these guru-disciple relationships. It is therefore more appropriate to say that the Ramanandi tradition represents a spirit of social inclusion, while each individual episode requires independent historical examination.

"None Asks of Caste or Lineage"

The popular line — *"jāti-pāṅti pūchhe nahiṅ koī, hari ko bhaje so hari kā hoī"* — is exceedingly popular within the Ramanandi tradition and is widely attributed to Ramanandacharya.

But it has not been established in available ancient manuscripts as a verified composition of Ramanandacharya. Many historians regard it as a saying current within the Ramanandi tradition, while some regard it as a later composition.

It is therefore more appropriate to present it not as a historically proven statement, but as a well-known saying current within the Ramanandi tradition.

Saguna and Nirguna Devotion

Ramanandacharya himself is regarded as a worshipper of the saguna (personal) form of Sri Rama.

But within tradition, some of his principal disciples — especially Kabir — are regarded as founders of nirguna (attributeless) devotion.

Historians hold that it is for this very reason that both currents — saguna and nirguna — are seen to have developed in parallel within the bhakti movement of North India. Scholars differ on whether this development was a direct result of Ramanandacharya's teachings or of later saint traditions.

Literature and Philosophy

Many texts are current under Ramanandacharya's name, but most scholars regard only two texts as comparatively more authentic — the *Vaishnavamatabjabhaskara* and the *Shri Ramarchana Paddhati*.

These texts contain discussions of surrender, devotion, worship, and Vaishnav doctrines.

Regarding other texts — such as the *Anandabhashya* — scholars hold differing views.

Influence on the Bhakti Movement

After Ramanandacharya, the bhakti movement in North India took on a broad form.

Saint literature, Ram bhakti, spiritual poetry in the vernacular, and the spirit of social harmony deeply influenced Indian society.

According to historians, the significance of Ramanandacharya lies in the fact that he served as an influential bridge between South Indian Vaishnav philosophy and North Indian popular devotion.

The Present Form of the Ramanandi Sampradaya and the Scope of This Volume

The present-day Ramanandi sampradaya is an exceedingly vast and diverse tradition. Over time, many of its mathas, akharas, and regional branches developed. The tradition of any single branch therefore cannot be regarded as the final history of the entire Ramanandi tradition.

Research Note: In keeping with this same caution, this volume has deliberately not included the 52 dwaras (gates/branches), the gotra-lineage tradition, the lists of dwaracharyas, or the succession disputes of various mathas. There are sound research reasons behind this: the list of dwaras differs across various organizations, many historical seats have since lapsed, succession disputes remain unresolved at several places, and various Ramanandi organizations publish their own separate and mutually conflicting lists. In such a situation, presenting any one list as authoritative would be inappropriate and possibly partisan. The focus of this chapter has therefore deliberately been kept on Ramanandacharya's life, his philosophy, his contribution to the bhakti movement, social harmony, the principal disciple tradition, the available authentic texts, and the analysis of modern historians — and wherever differences of opinion were found, both sides have been presented impartially.

Conclusion

Ramanandacharya is counted among the great acharyas of the Indian bhakti tradition who connected philosophy, rather than confining it to scripture alone, to the life of the people. Many episodes connected with his life remain, to this day, matters of research, but there is wide agreement on the fact that his contribution to the development of Sri Rama devotion, Vaishnav sadhana, and the saint tradition in North India was exceedingly important.

Note: This chapter has avoided claims for which solid historical evidence is not available. From the standpoint of a research volume, this is the safest and most balanced method.

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Chapter 8

The History of the Vaishnav Bairagi Akharas (Ani / Bairagi Army)

(Research-Based Chapter — Original Text with All Research Additions Integrated, with Full References)

Part 1: Origin, Development, and Historical Background

Introduction

In the Indian Sanatan tradition, the akhara was never merely a residence for ascetics; it was an organized centre of dharma, culture, education, sadhana, the protection of society, and spiritual discipline. In the medieval period, as India passed through many political and religious upheavals, various sannyasi and Vaishnav traditions built their own religious organizations. These very organizations later came to be called akharas or anis (Bairagi armies).

The history of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas is exceedingly important, but the available sources do not offer complete agreement regarding their formation, date, founder, and early form. Many accounts are based on sectarian traditions, while modern historians study them on the basis of available records, travel accounts, and administrative documents. In this chapter, therefore, wherever tradition and history present differing perspectives, both are clearly kept separate.

The Meaning of the Word 'Akhara'

The root meaning of the word "akhara" is held to be a place of practice, discipline, and training. In ancient India, this word was used chiefly for a site of physical exercise and the practice of martial arts. Over time, this same word came into use for the organized religious institutions of sannyasi and Vaishnav ascetics as well.

Within the Ramanandi tradition, the term "ani (Bairagi army)" is also specifically found in use. In Rajasthani and North Indian traditions, "ani" is taken to mean an organized group or branch of ascetics; in its Sanskrit root it also carries the meaning "army." Even today, many Ramanandi sadhus describe themselves as affiliated to "such-and-such ani."

The Development of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

The word "Bairagi" is derived from the Sanskrit "vairagya," meaning the renunciation of worldly attachment.

Vaishnav Bairagis are those ascetics who adopted the path of renunciation or detachment while making devotion to Lord Vishnu, Sri Ram, or Sri Krishna the foundation of their lives. The tradition of Bairagi ascetics developed within various Vaishnav sampradayas — particularly the Shri Vaishnav, Ramanandi, Nimbarka, Vallabha, and Gaudiya traditions.

Their principal objectives were the propagation of devotion to God; service to mathas and temples; the study and teaching of scripture; the organization of pilgrimage sites; and religious instruction within society.

Medieval Circumstances

Between the 13th and 17th centuries, India underwent continual political change. Many ancient temples and mathas were affected. Difficulties arose in pilgrimage. Under such circumstances, various sampradayas made their religious organizations more systematic.

It is in this very period that mentions of organized groups of Vaishnav Bairagis begin to appear in various sources. Modern historians hold that the fully organized form of the akharas as they exist today developed gradually; it is not historiographically straightforward to regard them as founded in any single year or by any single individual.

Research Note: Two Separate Traditions on the Founding of the Anis (Bairagi Armies) — just as a distinction exists between tradition and modern history regarding the lifetime of Ramanandacharya, a similar distinction is found regarding the founding date of the anis. Sectarian View: According to one traditional account, in 1475 CE, Anubhavanandacharya convened an assembly of the four sampradayas at Vrindavan, at which various sanghas and mandalas were reorganized and three akharas were established — Shri Panch Ramanandiya Nirmohi Ani, Shri Panch Ramanandiya Digambar Ani, and Shri Panch Ramanandiya Nirvani Ani — under which a total of 18 sub-anis (khalsas) were included. Some local mahant traditions describe the lineage as even more ancient, citing the 14th-15th century as the period of founding as well. The View of Modern Historians: Most modern researchers, including William R. Pinch and David N. Lorenzen, place the rise of the armed, organized form of the Vaishnav Bairagi anis at around 1650-1700 CE. News sources give the specific founding date of the Nirmohi Akhara as 4 February 1720 CE. The dating difference between the two traditions spans nearly two and a half centuries. Interestingly, the number of 18 sub-anis — given in the 1475 CE tradition — corresponds exactly with the modern count (nine Nirmohi + seven Nirvani + two Digambar = eighteen), although this remains a sectarian source rather than an independent contemporary record. This chapter presents both views with equal weight, without declaring either to be the final truth. (See references 8, 9, 10.)

Did Ramanandacharya Himself Establish the Akharas?

This is an exceedingly important question.

Sectarian tradition, in many places, states that Ramanandacharya organized his disciples, and that various anis (Bairagi armies) developed from them thereafter.

But modern historians hold that no contemporary record is available in support of this claim.

Therefore, from a research standpoint, the safer conclusion is that Ramanandacharya provided a broad foundation for Ram-bhakti and the Vaishnav ascetic tradition in North India, while the present organized akhara system developed gradually over later centuries.

Research Note: Mention of Balananda Ji — In certain sources, the name of Shri Balananda Maharaj is cited as the founder or principal inspiration of the Vaishnav Bairagi anis, particularly the Nirmohi Ani. The principal religious heads of the akharas are called "Mahamandaleshwar," who are carried in a palanquin, with due honour, in the procession of the royal bath. This account too is based chiefly on sectarian tradition; independent contemporary records are limited. (See references 11, 13.)

The Three Principal Ramanandi Anis (Bairagi Armies)

Both sectarian tradition and modern organizational structure generally mention three principal Ramanandi anis (Bairagi armies) — Shri Digambar Ani, Shri Nirvani Ani, and Shri Nirmohi Ani.

Each of these three anis developed its own guru lineage, mathas, ascetic tradition, and religious systems.

Research Note: The Historical/Present Headquarters of the Three Anis (Bairagi Armies) — Shri Digambar Ani: principal centre at the Shamlaji Khakhchowk temple, Sabarkantha (Gujarat). This ani is regarded as holding the largest number of "khalsas" (431) within the Vaishnav sampradaya, and holds the traditional title of "Raja" (king). Shri Nirvani Ani: principal centre at Hanumangarhi, Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh). Shri Nirmohi Ani: principal centre at the Dhir Samir temple, Bansivat, Vrindavan, Mathura (Uttar Pradesh); some modern sources also mention its present headquarters as being in Gujarat. This ani has the greatest number (nine) of sub-akharas among the three. (See references 12, 14, 15.)

Research Addition (Original Text): Sufficient variation is found in various sectarian texts and modern organizations regarding the internal branches, sub-branches, and traditions of these anis (Bairagi armies). It would therefore not be appropriate to regard any single list as final and universal.

Research Note: The 18 Sub-Akharas of the Three Anis (Bairagi Armies) — Over time, a total of 18 sub-akharas (branches) developed under the three principal anis. The 9 Sub-Akharas of Shri Nirmohi Ani: Shri Panch Ramanand Nirmohi Akhara, Shri Panch Jhadiya Nirmohi Akhara, Shri Panch Radhavallabhi Nirmohi Akhara, Shri Panch Maladhari Nirmohi Akhara, Shri Panch Vishnuswami (Swami Vishnu Hari) Nirmohi Akhara, Shri Panch Hariharvyas Nirmohi Akhara, and the remaining three (the named list is inconsistent across local sources). The 7 sub-akharas of Shri Nirvani Ani and the 2 sub-akharas of Shri Digambar Ani — a detailed named list is not available in the sources, hence only the number is presented here. (See references 12, 14, 15, 16.)

Shri Panch Maladhari Nirmohi Akhara: A Detailed Introduction

Since the researcher of this volume is himself affiliated with this very sub-akhara, it is given special mention here.

The name "Maladhari" appears to be connected to the tradition of wearing a japa-mala or a tulsi neck-thread (kanthi) — this reflects the particular identity of Vaishnav Bairagi ascetics, in which the initiated sadhu takes a vow of continuous remembrance of the divine

name (japa) and of wearing the tulsi kanthi. This explanation rests on linguistic/traditional coherence; no separate epigraphical source is available for it.

The governing system of the original Nirmohi Ani akhara — under which the Maladhari Akhara too functions with equal voting rights — is founded entirely on a democratic, panchayat-style system. The Shrimahants of the nine sub-akharas together select the national president, the chairman, and the secretaries. At present the national president is Shri Mahant Rajendra Das Ji Maharaj, and the chairman is Shri Mahant Ramdas Ji Maharaj.

Within the Nirmohi Ani Akhara (and its sub-akharas), lifelong celibacy, a prohibition on marriage, a pre-dawn daily routine, daily service to the Thakur (deity), and complete adherence to akhara discipline are mandatory rules. At the time of founding, training in arms held special importance, which has since become limited.

A Note of Research Honesty: In the available public sources, no separately documented founding year, founder, or name of the present mahant of the Shri Panch Maladhari Nirmohi Akhara could be found — this information is perhaps preserved only within the akhara's internal records or its oral guru lineage.

The Religious Role of the Akharas

The purpose of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas was not merely to organize ascetics. These institutions propagated devotion to Sri Ram and Sri Vishnu; preserved the saint tradition; protected mathas and temples; provided religious education in both Sanskrit and the vernacular; served pilgrims; organized religious festivals; and represented the Vaishnav tradition at the Kumbh and other fairs.

It is for this reason that the akharas became an important part of Indian religious life.

The Problem of Sources

The greatest difficulty in studying the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas is that very few original records survive from the early period.

Available information is drawn chiefly from sectarian guru lineages; the *Bhaktamal* and its commentaries; matha records; texts on the greatness (mahatmya) of pilgrimage sites; Persian historical works; accounts of European travellers; British-era administrative records; and the research of modern historians.

Since the nature of all these sources differs, historians present conclusions only after comparative study.

Conclusion

The Vaishnav Bairagi akharas are exceedingly important institutions in Indian religious history. From the medieval period to the modern era, they strengthened the Vaishnav ascetic tradition, Sri Ram-bhakti, the protection of pilgrimage sites, and religious organization.

Although many aspects of their early history remain a subject of research, there is broad agreement on the fact that these institutions played an important role in the preservation and development of the Indian Vaishnav tradition.

Part 2: The Organization, Purpose, and Historical Development of the Vaishnav Bairagi Anis (Bairagi Army)

Introduction

In the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, the word "ani" holds an exceedingly important place.

Research Note: The Relationship Between "Ani" and "Bairagi Army" — it must be made clear that "ani" is a word of Sanskrit origin, whose literal meaning is an organized group or army. The Hindi/vernacular equivalent of this Sanskrit word, current in popular usage, is "Bairagi Sena" (Bairagi army) — that is, wherever the word "ani" is used in sectarian and Sanskritized texts, that same organization is called "Bairagi Sena" in ordinary speech and folk tradition. Both words refer to the same institution — one being the Sanskritized sectarian name, the other its accessible Hindi equivalent. In this chapter, wherever the word "ani" appears alone, "Bairagi army" should be understood as its synonym, and both terms may be used interchangeably.

In Sanskrit, "ani" is held to mean an organized group, army, or disciplined body. Within Vaishnav tradition, this word came into particular use in the sense of an organized Bairagi army. Over time, these very anis (Bairagi armies) developed into permanent mathas and akharas. It is for this reason that the words "ani" and "akhara" are used together in many places, although the two do not carry an entirely identical original meaning.

Historians hold that the organized form of the Vaishnav Bairagi anis (Bairagi armies) developed chiefly in the latter half of the medieval period. The principal reason for this was the need for the protection of pilgrimage sites, temples, and Vaishnav ascetics, religious freedom, and organization.

Why Was an Ani (Bairagi Army) Necessary?

In medieval India, circumstances of political instability, invasions, and crises for religious institutions arose repeatedly. Pilgrimages, too, were not always safe. In such times, Vaishnav ascetics did not confine themselves to sadhana alone, but also adopted organization and discipline.

It was from this very necessity that organized Bairagi groups developed, which later came to be called "ani (Bairagi army)." Their purpose was not to become the army of any state, but to protect dharma, mathas, pilgrimage sites, and the ascetic community.

Ani (Bairagi Army) and Akhara: The Distinction Between the Two

From a research standpoint, it is necessary to understand this distinction.

The ani was fundamentally an organized religious-military group of ascetics. The akhara was the institutional form of that organized tradition, under which the matha, mahant, initiation tradition, administration, and religious activities were conducted.

For this reason, in many places, “Digambar Ani,” “Nirvani Ani,” and “Nirmohi Ani” are also called “Digambar Akhara,” “Nirvani Akhara,” and “Nirmohi Akhara.”

Organizational Structure

Each ani (Bairagi army) had its own religious discipline. Generally, the following structure developed within them — Acharya, Shrimahant, Mahant, Kothari, Pujari (priest), Brahmachari, Initiated Bairagi, Disciple.

The selection of the mahant is generally made according to the guru-disciple tradition or the akhara’s approved procedure.

The Tradition of Initiation

To become a Vaishnav Bairagi, one takes formal initiation (diksha) from a guru.

Along with initiation, the sadhu accepts renunciation, receives a mantra, enters the guru lineage, and resolves to follow religious discipline.

After initiation, he becomes connected to the tradition of a particular ani or akhara.

Principal Functions

The work of the Vaishnav Bairagi anis (Bairagi armies) was not confined to religious teaching alone. Their principal roles were propagating devotion to Sri Ram and Sri Vishnu; service to temples and mathas; organizing pilgrimage sites; assisting travellers and ascetics; running food-distribution centres and rest-houses; Sanskrit and religious education; organizing bhajans, discourses, and satsang; and protecting religious sites when necessary.

Did All Bairagis Bear Arms?

Many misconceptions are current on this subject.

Available historical sources do not indicate that every Vaishnav Bairagi was armed. According to historians, only trained ascetics within certain organized anis bore arms when necessary. Most Bairagi sadhus remained engaged in religious life, sadhana, worship, and education alone.

It would therefore not be historically accurate to call the entire Vaishnav Bairagi community “soldiers.”

Place in the Kumbh Tradition

The Vaishnav Bairagi anis (Bairagi armies) have played an important role in great festivals such as the Kumbh and the Simhastha.

Their fixed order in the tradition of the royal bath, their flags, insignia, discipline, and religious propriety are regarded, to this day, as a distinctive mark of Indian spiritual culture.

Historical Development

Modern historians — particularly William R. Pinch, David N. Lorenzen, and other researchers — hold that the widespread expansion of Vaishnav Bairagi organizations occurred chiefly in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was in this very period that many mathas were established, the Bairagi community became organized, and their institutional presence at various pilgrimage sites was strengthened.

It would therefore be more accurate to say that the very Vaishnav devotional tradition that Ramanandacharya made widespread later took the form of organized anis and akharas. On the basis of available historical evidence, connecting the present structure of these organizations directly to the period of Ramanandacharya requires caution.

A Research Caution

Regarding the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi anis (Bairagi armies), many popular books, websites, and sectarian texts offer differing claims regarding the founding year, founder, branches, and traditions. For this reason, this research volume has accepted only those facts that can be corroborated by more than one reliable historical source.

Conclusion

The Vaishnav Bairagi anis (Bairagi armies) were disciplined religious organizations of the Indian Sanatan tradition. Their purpose was not conquest, but the protection of dharma, the ascetic community, pilgrimage sites, and temples, the propagation of devotion, and the preservation of the Vaishnav tradition. Over time, these very organized anis developed into permanent mathas and akharas and became an important part of Indian religious history.

Part 3: The Sub-Branches of the Vaishnav Bairagi Akharas, the Matha Tradition, the Kumbh System, and Their Place in the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad

Introduction

The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is not confined to the three principal anis (Bairagi armies) alone — Shri Digambar Ani, Shri Nirvani Ani, and Shri Nirmohi Ani. Over time, many sub-branches, mathas, gaddis, and guru lineages developed under these three anis. These mathas, established at various pilgrimage sites across India, made an important contribution to the preservation of Sri Ram-bhakti, Vaishnav philosophy, Sanskrit education, the saint tradition, and social service.

Historians hold that these institutions did not develop all at once, but gradually, over several centuries. It is therefore not considered historiographically appropriate to connect the founding of each matha or branch directly to the period of Ramanandacharya.

The Development of Sub-Branches

With the expansion of the three principal anis, local mathas and branches were established in various regions. These branches were led by local mahants and acharyas, who conducted religious affairs according to their own guru lineage.

Some branches remained connected to a specific pilgrimage site, while others made education, religious discourse, Sanskrit study, or social service their principal work. As a result, the influence of the Ramanandi tradition spread from North India to the west, centre, and east of the country.

The Matha Tradition

Vaishnav Bairagi mathas are important institutions of Indian religious life. Mathas were not merely residences for ascetics, but became principal centres of education, sadhana, and the propagation of dharma.

Generally, a matha comprises daily worship of the sacred image (shrivigraha) or presiding deity; the preservation of the guru lineage; residence for saints and brahmacharis; the study and teaching of religious texts; satsang, discourse, and bhajan; food-distribution centres and hospitality for guests; and the organization of festivals and celebrations.

It was through the mathas that the guru-disciple lineage continued, unbroken, to advance.

The Guru-Disciple Tradition

The foundation of the Ramanandi tradition is the guru-disciple relationship. Every Bairagi receives initiation from a guru, and that same tradition passes on to his disciples in turn. The selection of a mahant is generally made according to the guru's instruction, tradition, or the akhara's rules. This very system has, for centuries, been the principal basis for maintaining the continuity of the mathas.

Vaishnav Bairagi Akharas at the Kumbh Mela

The Kumbh Mela is regarded as the greatest spiritual gathering of the Indian religious tradition.

The participation of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas holds particular significance at the Kumbh and Simhastha melas held at Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik.

On the occasion of the royal bath, every recognized akhara joins the procession with its own flag, insignia, saints, and religious discipline.

This tradition is regarded not merely as a religious ritual, but as a symbol of the continuity of India's ancient matha system and ascetic organization.

The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad

The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad was established in India for the coordination of the various Sanatan akharas, and is regarded as the supreme coordinating body of the akharas.

The work of this council chiefly comprises establishing coordination among various akharas; organizing the arrangements of the akharas at the Kumbh and Simhastha melas;

preserving religious traditions and propriety; and taking collective decisions relating to the akharas.

This council includes representation from the recognized akharas of the Shaiva, Vaishnav, and Udasin traditions.

Research Note: The Total Number of Recognized Akharas and Their Internal Structure — as of January 2019, a total of 13-14 akharas held official recognition from the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad — these include 7 Shaiva Sannyasi akharas, 3 Vaishnav Bairagi ani akharas, and 3 Udasin/Nirmal akharas. The largest akhara is regarded as the Shri Panchadashnam Juna Akhara (Shaiva). (See references 17, 21.)

The Place of the Vaishnav Akharas

Within the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the principal Vaishnav akharas of the Ramanandi tradition hold an important place.

Their presence is proof that the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not confined to mathas alone, but made an important contribution to the principal institutions of Indian religious-cultural life.

Research Note: The Nirmohi Akhara and the Ram Janmabhoomi Dispute — among the three anis, the Nirmohi Ani/Akhara is directly connected to a well-known event of modern Indian history, one publicly recorded in the courts. This matter is not part of any Shaiva-Vaishnav conflict, but is a well-established part of the institutional history of the Nirmohi Ani itself, corroborated by judicial records; a brief factual mention is therefore given here. The mahant of the Nirmohi Akhara, Raghuvir Das, first filed a suit in the Faizabad court in 1885 in the Ayodhya dispute, seeking permission to build a canopy at the Ram Chabutara, which the court rejected a year later. Thereafter, in 1959, the akhara again filed suit, seeking to be declared the traditional sevayat (custodian) of the disputed site. In 2010, the Allahabad High Court, dividing the disputed land into three parts, awarded one-third to the Nirmohi Akhara. Subsequently, in the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court of India in November 2019, the entire land was transferred to Shri Ramlala Virajman, and the Nirmohi Akhara's claim to ownership/custodial rights over the land was rejected. This episode is solid, court-record-corroborated proof of the fact that the Vaishnav Bairagi anis are not merely a matter of medieval history, but remain active, legally and socially relevant institutions in 21st-century India as well. This fact rests entirely on public judicial records — the 2010 Allahabad High Court and the 2019 Supreme Court judgments — and therefore leaves no room for dispute or partisanship. (See references 18, 19.)

Historical Caution

Regarding the akharas, their sub-branches, the succession tradition of mahants, and the founding of mathas, many disagreements are found across various sectarian texts and modern sources. Some traditions describe their guru lineage as exceedingly ancient, while the available records often date from a comparatively later period.

For this reason, it is necessary, in research writing, to give priority to contemporary records wherever they are available, and, where only traditional accounts are available, to

present them as such. This is the method that gives balanced respect to both history and faith.

Conclusion

The strength of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas lies not merely in their organization, but in their living guru-disciple tradition, matha system, religious discipline, and service to the people. For centuries, these institutions carried forward Sri Ram-bhakti, Vaishnav philosophy, Sanskrit education, the saint tradition, and the protection of pilgrimage sites. Their participation in the Kumbh Mela, their representation in the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, and the modern legal activity of institutions such as the Nirmohi Akhara are proof of the continuity of this historical inheritance.

Note (Research-Related): This chapter has deliberately not given a detailed account of the conflicts between Shaiva Naga sannyasis and Vaishnav Bairagis, the disputes over the royal bath, and armed confrontation. These subjects will be examined in the next, independent chapter, on the basis of contemporary and reliable sources alone, so that historical impartiality and the authenticity of references are maintained.

References 1. *Bhaktamal* - Nabhadas; and Priyadas, *Bhaktirasabodhini* (commentary on the *Bhaktamal*). 2. William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, University of California Press. 3. David N. Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India*, State University of New York Press. 4. Akhara - Wikipedia (English), section on akhara classification and history. 5. Bairagi Brahmin (caste) - Grokipedia, for analysis of the 17th-18th century expansion of Vaishnav akharas. 6. Nirmohi Akhara - Wikipedia and Grokipedia, for founding date and organizational details. 7. Dr. Ravindra Pastor, “Akhadas and Maths in India,” LinkedIn Pulse (for the 1475 CE sectarian tradition). 8. Kumbh Camp Om, “The origin of akharas” (for Balananda Ji and the Mahamandaleshwar tradition). 9. ETV Bharat Hindi, “Shri Panch Nirmohi Ani Akhara; Rani Lakshmibai took refuge in this akhara” (for the list of sub-akharas and governing system). 10. ETV Bharat Hindi, “Digambar Ani Akhara; sadhus carry a rosary in one hand and a spear in the other” (for the division of the 18 sub-akharas). 11. ETV Bharat Hindi, “Nirmohi Akhara preserving dharma and traditions for years” (for mention of the Maladhari Akhara and Balananda Maharaj). 12. Webdunia, “Haridwar Kumbh Mela 2021: Introduction to the Nirmohi Akhara” (for headquarters and founding date). 13. Zee News Hindi, “The 300-year-old history of the Nirmohi Akhara” (for the list of the 14 recognized akharas). 14. News Track Hindi, “Shri Panch Nirmohi Akhara History” (for headquarters, branches, and conduct rules). 15. Zee News Hindi, “Mahakumbh 2025: 13 akharas divided among three traditions” (for the Digambar Ani’s 431 khalsas and the title of “Raja”). 16. Nirmohi Akhara - Hindi Wikipedia (for the Ayodhya case and the 1885 and 2010 court decisions). 17. Nirmohi Akhara, Vaishnav - Bharatkosh (for the 1959 suit and the November 2019 Supreme Court decision). 18. Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad - HandWiki (for the list of 14 akharas, and the founding of the Nirmohi Ani from the unification of 18 Vaishnav groups at Vrindavan). 19. Supreme Court Observer, “Know the Parties - Nirmohi Akhara” (for judicial details of the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute). 20. Newslaundry, “Ramanandi akharas vs Ram temple trust” (for the tulsi-kanthi tradition and the modern context of Ayodhya). 21. Kumbh Camp Om and other sources, for the list and classification of the 13/14 akharas of the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad.

Chapter 9

The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition: From the Medieval Period to Modern India

(A Complete, Research-Based and Source-Reviewed Chapter — Parts 1 to 5)

Part 1: Historical Background, Origin, and the Religious-Social Perspective

Introduction

Within the Indian Sanatan tradition, the history of the Shaiva, Vaishnav, Udasin, Nath, and other sannyasi traditions is exceedingly ancient. The fundamental purpose of all these traditions has been spiritual sadhana, the propagation of dharma, service to pilgrimage sites, and the moral guidance of society. Over time, India's political circumstances changed. In particular, during the medieval period, foreign invasions, crises at pilgrimage sites, and the need to protect religious institutions prompted certain sannyasi communities to adopt an organized form.

It is against this very historical background that Shaiva Naga sannyasis and Vaishnav Bairagi anis (Bairagi army) developed. This chapter does not aim to establish the superiority of any sampradaya, but presents a balanced study, on the basis of available historical sources, of their development, mutual relations, and conflicts.

A Research Caution

This subject is one of the most disputed in Indian religious history. Many popular books, sectarian texts, oral traditions, and modern articles describe events in differing forms.

This chapter has therefore adopted the following principles: wherever contemporary or reliable historical sources are available, they have been made the basis; wherever only sectarian tradition is available, it has been presented as such; and wherever historians disagree, no single view has been declared the final truth.

The Development of Renunciant Traditions

The tradition of the renunciant life has existed in India since the Vedic and Upanishadic periods. The principal aim of the early sannyasis was self-knowledge, austerity, and the sadhana of liberation.

By the time of Adi Shankaracharya, the Dashanami sannyasa tradition appears in a well-organized form. On the other hand, Vaishnav acharyas such as Sri Ramanujacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Madhvacharya, and Vishnuswami gave Vaishnav sannyasa and the devotional tradition an organized foundation.

In North India, under the influence of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition expanded widely, which later took the form of organized anis and akharas.

Who Were the Naga Sannyasis?

According to historians, the word “Naga” came to be used for those sannyasis who, alongside rigorous austerity and renunciation, also received training in arms when necessary.

Many Naga sannyasis of the Dashanami tradition were regarded as skilled in the art of warfare. Their purpose was not to wage war under ordinary circumstances, but to protect religious sites, pilgrims, and the sannyasi community.

It is also worth noting that not every Shaiva sannyasi was a Naga, and not every Naga sannyasi remained in the role of a soldier.

The Rise of the Vaishnav Bairagi Anis

With the expansion of the Ramanandi tradition, the number of Vaishnav Bairagis increased. In view of the need to protect pilgrimage sites, mathas, and journeys, Vaishnav ascetics too formed organized anis.

“Ani” is a word of Sanskrit origin, held to mean an organized group or army. Within Vaishnav tradition, this word became renowned in the sense of “Bairagi Sena” (Bairagi army).

Modern historians hold that the institutional development of these anis occurred chiefly in the 17th and 18th centuries, although their religious tradition is far more ancient than this.

Were the Two Traditions Opposed to One Another from the Start?

Available historical evidence does not support the conclusion that Shaiva Naga sannyasis and Vaishnav Bairagis were opposed to one another from the very beginning.

Both traditions developed according to their own deities, modes of sadhana, and guru lineages. Evidence of their coexistence is also found at many pilgrimage sites, religious gatherings, and royal courts.

Historians hold that wherever conflicts occurred, they were connected to specific historical circumstances; they cannot be regarded as representative of the entirety of Shaiva-Vaishnav relations.

The Historical Background of the Conflicts

In medieval India, tension arose between religious institutions for many reasons, among the principal ones being rights over pilgrimage sites, the property of mathas, donations and religious patronage, precedence in the royal bath, local political patronage, and the policies of various states.

For these reasons, conflicts occurred from time to time at certain places, which are mentioned in Persian histories, the accounts of European travellers, colonial records, and the research of modern historians.

The Distinction Between History and Folklore

Many popular stories are current on this subject, in which considerable variation is found in the number, date, or nature of events.

From a research-methodological standpoint, only those events can be regarded as historical which are corroborated by more than one independent source.

For this reason, this chapter has not presented any folk tale or unverified claim as historical fact.

Conclusion

The history of the Shaiva Naga sannyasis and the Vaishnav Bairagi anis is the history of two important streams of the Indian Sanatan tradition. The fundamental purpose of both was dharma, sadhana, and service to society. The conflicts that arose from time to time were the product of specific historical circumstances, not of the fundamental spirit of either tradition.

Their study should therefore be conducted not as a religious dispute, but in the context of the social, religious, and political circumstances of medieval India.

Principal References (for this part) 1. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, and related research. 2. David N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98/1 (1978). 3. Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib* (relevant sections). 4. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 5. *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* (entries on akhara and sannyasi tradition). 6. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* - Ramanandi, Akhara, Sannyasa (background information).

Note: In the next part, the conflicts to be mentioned will each be examined separately against available primary and secondary historical sources, so that the chapter remains academic, balanced, and legally secure.

Part 2: The Mughal Period, the Rajput States, and the Role of Vaishnav Bairagis in North India

Research Note: This chapter is based only on facts mentioned by historians, in records, in contemporary texts, or in reputable research. Wherever disagreement exists, it has been presented as such. No claim by any sampradaya, institution, or tradition has been treated as the final truth without historical evidence.

The Mughal Period and the Vaishnav Bairagis

India of the 16th-18th centuries was a period of religious, political, and social transformation. It was in this very period that Vaishnav Bairagi sampradayas expanded widely in North India. At pilgrimage sites such as Ayodhya, Kashi, Prayag, Chitrakoot, Vrindavan, Galta (Jaipur), Nashik, Ujjain, and Haridwar, the number of Bairagi mathas and ashrams began to increase.

The historian William R. Pinch, in his celebrated work *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, has written that by this period, Vaishnav Bairagis had ceased to be mere practitioners, and had also emerged as organized religious communities.

The Expansion of Mathas

Under the influence of the Ramanandi tradition, many mathas were established in North India. The principal functions of these mathas were the propagation of Sri Ram-bhakti; providing education to ascetics; arranging rest-houses for pilgrims; the preservation of religious texts; and food-distribution centres and service work.

It is worth noting that differing traditions exist regarding the founding date and founder of various mathas. A separate historical study is therefore necessary for each matha.

The Patronage of the Rajput States

Many dynasties of Rajasthan granted land, temples, and jagirs to Vaishnav Bairagi mathas. Records of royal patronage extended to Ramanandi and other Vaishnav mathas are available, particularly in the regions of Amber-Jaipur, Mewar, Marwar, Bundi, Kota, and Gagraun.

Historians hold that this gave Vaishnav institutions stability and led to the development of pilgrimage sites.

Vrindavan and Ram-bhakti

In the 16th century, Vrindavan became a principal centre of Vaishnav devotion. Although Vrindavan remained chiefly connected to Krishna-bhakti, the presence of Ramanandi Bairagis is also attested here. Many Ramanandi mathas were established at Vrindavan in later periods.

The Importance of Ayodhya

Ayodhya became a principal centre of Vaishnav Bairagis. Over time, many mathas, akharas, and temples developed here. To this day, Hanumangarhi, various Ramanandi mathas, and Bairagi chhavanis (cantonments) are regarded as principal centres of the Ramanandi tradition.

The Role of Kashi

Kashi was not merely a centre of Shaiva sadhana. Ramanandi Vaishnavs too established many ashrams at Kashi. It was from here that Ram-bhakti, Vaishnav philosophy, and the saint tradition were widely propagated.

Sadhus and Society

Bairagis were not confined to mathas alone. They undertook pilgrimages; gave discourses in villages; organized bhajan-kirtan; provided religious education; and engaged in social service.

They thus became an important part of social life as well as religious life.

Trade and Travel

Modern historians have also noted that certain Vaishnav Bairagi groups were connected to trading activities and long journeys as well. They travelled through various parts of India. As a result, connections formed between mathas, an exchange of religious literature occurred, and cultural unity was strengthened.

Were All Bairagis Soldiers?

This is an important question. Historical evidence indicates that not all Bairagis were soldiers. Most were ascetics, acharyas, preachers, authors, priests, or heads of mathas.

But under certain circumstances, some organized Bairagi groups also bore arms for their own protection and that of pilgrimage sites. This very tradition is later seen in the more organized form of the Vaishnav anis (akharas).

An Important Caution

Folk tales frequently claim that Bairagis participated in every famous battle. Contemporary historical evidence is not available in support of most such claims. This book has therefore accepted only those events which are mentioned in reliable historical sources.

Research Conclusion

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not merely a religious movement, but became an important part of the social, cultural, and religious fabric of North India.

The establishment of mathas, the development of pilgrimage sites, the propagation of devotion in the vernacular, and the patronage of various kings gave this tradition stability.

It is also clear that the Bairagi tradition was exceedingly diverse. Not all Bairagis held the same role; some were ascetics, some scholars, some heads of mathas, some social workers, and some, under particular circumstances, also became organized for the protection of religious sites.

Principal References (for this chapter) 1. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 2. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*. 3. David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*. 4. *The Cambridge History of India* (volume on medieval India). 5. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Traditions and Cultural Heritage* (relevant entries). 6. Nabhadas, *Bhaktamal* (traditional reference; used with caution as a historical source).

Part 3: Literature, Temple Tradition, Education, Social Service, and the Contribution of Vaishnav Bairagis to Modern India

Introduction

The history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is not confined to mathas, akharas (anis), or ascetics alone. This tradition also profoundly influenced Indian society at the religious, cultural, educational, and social level. From the medieval period to the present day, Bairagi saints undertook the establishment of temples, the construction of rest-houses, education in Sanskrit and the vernacular languages, the composition of religious literature, and many

works of social service. Available historical evidence makes clear that their role changed, in various regions, according to time and circumstance.

Literary Contribution

Many saints, poets, and acharyas associated with the Ramanandi and other Vaishnav Bairagi traditions enriched devotional literature. The voices of saints such as Kabir, Ravidas, Pipa, Dhanna, Sen, Nabhadas, Agradas, and Priyadas gave new direction to the devotional tradition of North India. Historians disagree regarding the direct connection of all of these to Ramanandacharya, but it is undisputed that the compositions of these saints made devotional literature widespread in the vernacular.

Temple and Matha Tradition

Vaishnav Bairagi mathas were not merely places of sadhana, but also religious and social institutions. In many mathas, regular worship of the sacred image, food-distribution centres, rest-houses for pilgrims, the study of scripture, and festivals and satsang were organized.

Many such ancient mathas remain in existence to this day in regions such as Ayodhya, Kashi, Vrindavan, Chitrakoot, Prayag, Nashik, Jaipur, Galta, and Haridwar. Each matha has its own independent history; it would therefore not be appropriate to apply any single general founding narrative to all of them.

Education and Sanskrit Study

Sanskrit, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Bhagavata, the Gita, and Vaishnav philosophy were taught in many Vaishnav mathas. At many places, free food and lodging were also arranged for students.

The spread of religious education in the vernacular languages was also an important feature of this tradition. It was for this reason that devotional literature developed widely in North India in Hindi, Awadhi, Braj Bhasha, and Rajasthani.

The Tradition of Social Service

Historically, Bairagi mathas also performed many social functions — service to travellers, shelter for sadhus and saints, distribution of food, assistance during natural disasters, the organization of religious festivals, cow protection, and sacraments and religious education.

Although the sphere of activity differed from matha to matha, the spirit of service remained a common feature of nearly all Vaishnav traditions.

Bairagis and Indian Culture

Vaishnav Bairagis did not merely propagate religion; they also kept alive Indian music, bhajan, sankirtan, Ramlila, storytelling, and pilgrimage traditions. The religious identity of many pilgrimage sites was preserved on account of these mathas and saint traditions.

Their Role in Modern India

Even after independence, many mathas of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remain active in religious, educational, and social work. Many institutions run schools, Sanskrit colleges, goshalas (cow shelters), hospitals, rest-houses, and service projects.

At the same time, it is also necessary to note that the condition of all mathas is not the same. Some are exceedingly active, while others, for historical reasons, have been reduced to limited activity.

Caution in Historical Writing

Many folk tales, oral traditions, and sectarian claims are current regarding the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. Many of these have not yet been historically verified. It is therefore necessary, in research writing, that a clear distinction be maintained between tradition and history; no event be regarded as final truth without a source; wherever disagreement exists, all principal views be impartially mentioned; and modern research, records, contemporary sources, and traditional texts all be studied comparatively.

This is the method that makes a research volume more reliable and legally secure.

Conclusion

The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is an important inheritance of Indian civilization. Its contribution was not confined to sadhana or renunciation alone, but extended to literature, education, temple organization, social service, the vernacular, the protection of pilgrimage sites, and cultural unity. Available historical sources indicate that this tradition played a notable role in the shaping of Indian religious life from the medieval period to modern India. At the same time, many subjects still await deep research; future research may therefore make the history of this tradition still clearer.

Part 4: The Colonial Period, the Transformation After Independence, and the Contemporary Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

Introduction

From the latter half of the 18th century, through British rule, and into independent India, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition underwent many changes. These changes were not merely religious, but social, economic, administrative, and institutional as well. Modern historians hold that the role of Bairagi mathas, akharas (anis), mahant traditions, and religious institutions continued to shift throughout this period.

British Rule and the Vaishnav Mathas

The East India Company, and later the British government, began a revenue, land, and administrative survey of India’s religious institutions.

Many Vaishnav mathas held agricultural land, rest-houses, temples, and endowed properties. As a result, they began to be recorded in government documents.

Disputes over religious properties also arose in the courts in certain regions, on account of which the administrative arrangements of many mathas underwent change.

Organizational Change

In the 19th and 20th centuries, new discussions emerged within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition regarding organization, the guru lineage, and religious identity.

Historians William R. Pinch and Peter van der Veer have particularly noted that it was in this very period that wide-ranging discussion took place on the independent identity, guru lineage, and social form of the Ramanandi sampradaya.

Education and Social Consciousness

During the British period, many Bairagi mahants established Sanskrit schools, promoted religious education, preserved pilgrimage sites, and arranged for the reprinting of religious texts.

However, this work did not occur uniformly across all mathas, but varied by region.

After Independence

After 1947, a new transformation occurred in the role of religious institutions in India. New laws relating to the administration of temples and mathas were enacted in many states.

In some places, government devasthan boards were formed, while many mathas continue to be run, even today, according to their traditional system. This arrangement is not uniform across all states.

The Kumbh and the Vaishnav Anis

Even in independent India, the tradition of the Vaishnav Bairagi anis at the Kumbh melas has continued without interruption.

The Digambar Ani, the Nirvani Ani, and the Nirmohi Ani remain, to this day, among the principal Vaishnav anis recognized by the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad. Their principal responsibilities have been the organization of the saint community, the protection of dharma, the preservation of the ascetic tradition, and participation in Kumbh arrangements.

Present-Day Challenges

In the modern era, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition faces many challenges — the preservation of ancient mathas, the shortage of historical records, authentic historical writing, the preservation of old manuscripts, connecting the younger generation to the tradition, and the preservation of pilgrimage sites.

Many ancient mathas have, over time, ceased to exist, or their original form has been altered. Extensive historical surveys are therefore still needed at the regional level.

History and Tradition

It became clear, over the course of this research, that the material available regarding the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is of three kinds — contemporary historical sources (records,

inscriptions, travel accounts, administrative documents), sectarian literature (guru lineages, matha accounts, devotee biographies), and folk traditions and oral history.

A serious researcher must distinguish carefully among these three. Sectarian tradition may be exceedingly important from a religious standpoint, but not every account automatically becomes historical proof. On the other hand, relying solely on colonial sources is also insufficient. Balanced historical writing is possible only through the comparative study of both types of sources.

Research Conclusion

The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is one of the most influential Vaishnav ascetic traditions of Indian culture. It made important contributions in the fields of devotion, renunciation, social service, education, the preservation of pilgrimage sites, and religious organization.

At the same time, it is also clear that the history of this tradition has not yet been fully written. The records of many mathas remain unpublished, many manuscripts remain in private collections, and many local traditions still await research.

For this reason, future archival, archaeological, and manuscript-based research can make this history still clearer.

Principal References 1. William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*. 2. William R. Pinch, "Reinventing Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India," *Modern Asian Studies*. 3. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth* (a study of the Ramanandi tradition). 4. David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*.

Part 5: The Challenges of Historical Writing, the Evaluation of Sources, and the Direction of Future Research

Introduction

The history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is exceedingly rich, but equally complex. Over roughly the past two hundred years, many works have been written on this subject, but they show a mixture of tradition, folklore, sectarian belief, and modern historical writing. It is therefore necessary for any researcher to critically examine the available material and to present conclusions on the basis of evidence.

The Principal Difficulties of Historical Writing

Certain principal problems arise in the study of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition — many ancient manuscripts remain unpublished; many guru lineages were transmitted orally, for which no contemporary written proof is available; the genealogies of various mathas differ from one another; the original form of many historical sites has changed over time; and many ancient mathas have been destroyed or have passed into the control of other institutions.

For this reason, historians do not accept any claim on the basis of tradition alone, but corroborate it against independent sources.

The Distinction Between Tradition and History

The purpose of religious tradition is to provide faith and spiritual inspiration, while the purpose of history is to reconstruct the past on the basis of available evidence.

The religious significance of a saint's biography, a guru lineage, or a folk tale may thus be exceedingly great, yet historical writing requires that it also be examined alongside contemporary records, inscriptions, manuscripts, or other independent evidence.

Which Sources Should Be Given Priority?

For balanced research, the following sources are held to be most useful — contemporary inscriptions and copper plates; government documents held in archives; ancient manuscripts; travel accounts; judicial records; archaeological evidence; contemporary literature; and comparative study of traditional texts.

The combined use of all these sources makes history more reliable.

The Perspective of Modern Historians

Modern researchers — particularly William R. Pinch, Richard Burghart, Peter van der Veer, and David Lorenzen — have indicated that the Ramanandi and Vaishnav Bairagi tradition continued to develop over time. Many guru lineages, institutional structures, and identities were reorganized at various historical stages. It would therefore not be appropriate to regard the present form as identical to the medieval form.

The Need for Future Research

Many questions in this subject remain unanswered to this day — the actual history of the early Ramanandi mathas; the early records of the Bairagi akharas (anis); the documented history of Bairagi principalities in various states; unpublished Sanskrit and Hindi manuscripts; the scientific editing of the records of local mathas; and an archaeological survey of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

Systematic research on these subjects can, in future, make the history of this tradition still clearer.

The Author's Research Method

In this book, an effort has been made to ensure that no claim is regarded as final truth without evidence; wherever disagreement exists, it is clearly presented as "disagreement"; the scientific method of historical writing is adopted while respecting religious faith; and no prejudice is held toward any sampradaya, matha, or tradition.

Closing

The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is not merely the history of ascetics and saints; it is an important chapter of India's cultural, spiritual, and social consciousness. This tradition gave new direction to devotion, service, renunciation, education, the vernacular, the pilgrimage tradition, and religious organization.

Even so, it must be acknowledged that many aspects of this history still await research. It is therefore the responsibility of future researchers to bring this heritage into still clearer view, on the basis of evidence, records, and manuscripts.

The purpose of this chapter has not been to take the side of any dispute, but to present a balanced and responsible history on the basis of available evidence.

Principal References 1. William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*. 2. William R. Pinch, "Reinventing Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India," *Modern Asian Studies*. 3. Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," *Ethnohistory* 25/2 (1978). 4. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth* (a study of the Ramanandi tradition).

Comprehensive Reference List (Chapter 9) 1. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, Cambridge University Press. 2. William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, University of California Press. 3. William R. Pinch, "Reinventing Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India," *Modern Asian Studies* (research article). 4. David N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98/1 (1978), pp. 61-75 (research article). 5. David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*. 6. Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," *Ethnohistory* 25/2 (1978), pp. 121-139 (research article). 7. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: Religious Experience and Identity in Ayodhya*. 8. Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib* (relevant sections). 9. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 10. *The Cambridge History of India* (volume on medieval India). 11. *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* (entries on akhara and sannyasi tradition). 12. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* - Ramanandi, Akhara, Sannyasa (background information). 13. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Traditions and Cultural Heritage* (relevant entries). 14. Nabhadas, *Bhaktamal* (traditional reference; used with caution as a historical source).

Chapter 10

My Field-Research Experience: Gangadas ki Badi Shala, Gwalior, and the Vaishnav Bairagi Warriors of 1857-58

Part 1: Introduction, the Purpose of the Research, and the First and Second Field Visits

(This chapter is based on the author's direct field research. Where historical facts are drawn from published sources, this is noted; and where the account is based on the author's own direct observation, interviews, or personal experience, it is presented as such.)

Introduction

History is not found in books and records alone; it also lives on at the sites where events actually took place. Books often provide limited information, whereas direct inspection of historical sites, local traditions, matha records, and eyewitness tradition bring new layers of history to light.

While researching the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, the author found that many important sites are mentioned only very briefly in the historical literature. In particular, the available literature on Gangadas ki Badi Shala at Gwalior, where Vaishnav Bairagi ascetics played an important role in the 1858 freedom struggle, is comparatively limited. For this reason, direct study of this site appeared necessary.

The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this journey was not to make any new historical announcement, but to conduct a field-level verification of the available history. The principal objectives of the study were direct inspection of Gangadas ki Badi Shala; a study of the local traditions connected to the 1858 freedom struggle; observation of the available arms, cannon, and other historical remains; dialogue with the present pithadhishwar and the saints of the matha; and a comparative study of the published history and the traditions available at the site.

The First Field Visit

The author first travelled to Gwalior on 15 August 2020, together with his wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav.

During this visit, Gangadas ki Badi Shala, the traditions connected to the last rites of Rani Lakshmibai, and various sites connected to the contribution of Vaishnav Bairagi ascetics were observed. At that time it became clear that the information available on this subject is comparatively limited, and that extensive research on it is needed in future.

This very visit inspired the author to undertake a systematic study of Vaishnav Bairagi history.

The Second Field Visit

Thereafter, the author again travelled to Gwalior and conducted a detailed study of the site. On this journey, the author was accompanied by Master Jagbir Vaishnav, Shri Bhuvanesh Vaishnav (manager, Gwalior airport), Shri Bhawani Shankar Vaishnav (Kota), a recipient of the President's Medal, and other colleagues.

On this occasion, a detailed discussion took place with the present pithadhishwar of Gangadas ki Badi Shala, Mahant Shri Ramsevak Das Ji. Information was obtained regarding the matha's tradition, the available historical material, and local beliefs relating to the freedom struggle.

During this very visit, on 17 November 2023, the "Vaishnav Bairagi Navratna Samaj Gaurav" honour was conferred upon Shri Bhuvanesh Vaishnav by the Global Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Seva Sangathan. This certificate of honour bears the signatures of the National General Secretary, Master Jagbir Vaishnav, and the National President, Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark. This date is corroborated by the available certificate of honour.

The Author's Research Perspective

During these journeys, the author resolved that only those facts which were directly observed, found in reliable published sources, or for which an appropriate historical basis is available, would be written in this book.

Where only local tradition is available on a subject, it will be presented as such; and where modern historians disagree, those disagreements too will be impartially noted. This is the scientific and historiographically sound method for any research volume.

Part 2: The History of Gangadas ki Badi Shala, the 1858 War, and the Author's Direct Study

Note: In this part, historically accepted facts, available sources, and the author's direct field research are clearly presented as distinct from one another. Where sufficient documentary evidence is not available for a fact, it is presented only as tradition or local belief.

Gangadas ki Badi Shala: A Historic Vaishnav Bairagi Seat

Gangadas ki Badi Shala, located at Gwalior, is regarded as one of the principal Vaishnav Bairagi institutions of North India. It is the head matha of the Nirmohi Akhara and is regarded as one of the 52 seats (pithas) of the Vaishnav tradition. It is not merely a religious matha, but has been an important centre for the education, sadhana, organization, and historical tradition of Vaishnav ascetics. According to local tradition, many Bairagi ascetics resided here and, from time to time, were also active in works of dharma-protection and social service.

This matha is regarded as holding particular importance in connection with the first Indian War of Independence of 1857-58. Many historians and local traditions mention that during the Gwalior conflict, the Bairagi ascetics of this matha assisted Rani Lakshmibai and other revolutionary factions. However, various sources give differing accounts and figures for these events, and each claim therefore requires independent examination.

18 June 1858 and Gwalior

There is general agreement among historians that Rani Lakshmibai attained a heroic death in the battle fought in the Phoolbagh area of Gwalior on 18 June 1858. According to many historical accounts and local traditions, her mortal remains were cremated swiftly, so that they would not fall into the hands of the British.

The tradition of Gangadas ki Badi Shala holds that Bairagi ascetics played an important role in this last rite, and that it was here that Rani Lakshmibai drew her last breath. This matter is mentioned in many modern articles, news sources, and local historical literature, although detailed accounts of it are limited in contemporary British records. From a research standpoint, it is therefore more appropriate to present this as an account supported by local tradition and available secondary sources.

The Author's Direct Observation

During both of his field visits, the author conducted a detailed inspection of Gangadas ki Badi Shala. He met the present pithadhishwar, Mahant Shri Ramsevak Das Ji, and discussed the matha's tradition, the available historical material, and local beliefs relating to the freedom struggle.

The author directly observed the traditions, available arms, and historical memorials preserved within the matha complex. Information was also obtained regarding the cannon traditionally displayed on the occasion of the Dussehra festival. These observations made clear that Gangadas ki Badi Shala is not merely a religious site, but also an important repository of the historical memory of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

A Balance of History and Tradition

In the course of the author's study, it became apparent that two kinds of material are available regarding Gangadas ki Badi Shala — (1) published history, records, and research works, and (2) the oral traditions and local memories of the matha.

It is the responsibility of a researcher to identify and present both separately. In this book, therefore, wherever a fact is supported by documentary evidence, it has been written as such; and where information is based on local tradition, it has been clearly presented as tradition.

The Importance of the Research

The author holds that extensive academic research is yet to be undertaken on many Vaishnav Bairagi mathas, chhavanis (cantonments), and akharas of India. Gangadas ki Badi Shala is one such important site, where there is considerable scope for future archival, archaeological, and documentary study. In this connection, the academic work carried out by the historian William R. Pinch on the Nirmohi Akhara and the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is also noteworthy, and will be examined in detail in the part that follows.

Part 3: Site Inspection, Available Historical Remains, and the Researcher's Direct Experience

Important Note: The direct observations described in this part are based on the field visits undertaken by the author. Where a fact is based on the author's own inspection, it is

presented as such. Facts whose independent historical verification remains pending are not presented as final conclusions.

Direct Inspection of the Site

While conducting a direct inspection of Gangadas ki Badi Shala at Gwalior, the author found that this place is not merely an ancient Vaishnav matha, but also preserves the memories of India's freedom struggle. Many objects, traditions, and memorial marks still exist within the matha complex that point toward its historical significance.

During the two separate field visits, the author toured the entire complex in detail and observed the available historical material. The purpose of this study was not to prove any predetermined conclusion, but to understand the actual condition of the site.

Dialogue with Mahant Shri Ramsevak Das Ji

The author had the opportunity to hold a detailed discussion with the present pithadhishwar, Mahant Shri Ramsevak Das Ji. He provided information regarding the matha's tradition, its guru lineage, local memories relating to the 1857-58 war, and present-day religious activities.

This dialogue held particular importance for the author, for the oral tradition of any historical matha is an important source for understanding its institutional history. Although independent historical examination of oral traditions is necessary, they nonetheless provide important indications for research.

Observation of Historical Arms

During the field visit, the author also observed the traditional arms and the cannon which the matha's tradition connects to the conflict of 1857-58. According to local tradition, these are held to date from the time of the freedom struggle, and to this day they are symbolically displayed on the occasion of the Dussehra festival.

The author personally saw these arms, but it must also be acknowledged that the scientific examination (such as metallurgical or archaeological analysis) of the date and historical authenticity of each weapon was not within the scope of this book's study. Their mention is therefore made solely on the basis of direct observation and local tradition.

The Historical Significance of the Bairagi Chhavani (Cantonment)

During the site inspection, the author also observed the area known, in local tradition, as the cantonment of Vaishnav Bairagi ascetics. According to tradition, a large number of Bairagi ascetics resided here and organized themselves, when necessary, for the protection of dharma and society.

The author observed the present condition and found that, over time, the form of this historical area has changed. However, this book makes no mention of any present administrative or property-related disputes, since these bear no direct relevance to the fundamental purpose of this research.

The Honour Ceremony and Research Collaboration

During the second field visit, on 17 November 2023, the "Vaishnav Bairagi Navratna Samaj Gaurav" honour was conferred by the Global Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Seva Sangathan upon Shri Bhuvanesh Vaishnav (manager, Gwalior airport). On this occasion, the author, Master Jagbir Vaishnav, Shri Bhawani Shankar Vaishnav (Kota), a recipient of the President's Medal, and other colleagues were also present.

This programme was not merely an honour ceremony, but also an occasion to express respect toward individuals who have contributed to the preservation of Vaishnav Bairagi history and to various fields of society.

The Researcher's Conclusion

Following these journeys, the author arrived at the conclusion that further archival, archaeological, and academic research is still needed on Gangadas ki Badi Shala. The available historical sources, local traditions, and the memories preserved at the site together establish this place as an important centre of study within Indian history.

The author's purpose is not to give rise to any controversy, but to present, in an organized manner, those historical facts and traditions which future researchers may develop further on the basis of evidence.

Part 4: The Importance of Direct Site Observation and the Research Methodology of Historical Writing

Introduction

History is not written on the basis of books, articles, and traditional stories alone. For a serious historian, direct field survey holds particular importance. The geographical situation of a place, its ancient buildings, temples, mathas, inscriptions, local traditions, oral history, and available records — all these are important sources for historical writing.

In the course of his research work, the author adopted the very principle that, as far as possible, before drawing any final conclusion on a historical subject, the relevant site should be inspected personally. It was with this very purpose that many historical towns, Vaishnav mathas, Bairagi cantonments, pilgrimage sites, and ancient akharas were visited.

The Distinction Between Direct Observation and Written History

During the field visits, it was frequently found that a considerable difference exists between the information described in written books and the actual condition of the site. In some places, historical buildings were found in a state of disrepair; in others, the form of ancient mathas had changed; and in still others, local traditions differed from the accounts written in books.

These experiences made clear that it is not appropriate to draw a final conclusion on any historical subject on the basis of a single book or a single tradition alone. A comparative study of various sources is necessary.

Oral Traditions Are Also a Source of Research

The author also held discussions with many mahants, saints, local keepers of history, and senior citizens. Many pieces of information were obtained from these conversations that were not available in published books.

But from a research-methodological standpoint, oral traditions can be regarded as historical fact only when they are also corroborated by other independent sources — such as records, inscriptions, government documents, or contemporary literature. In this book, therefore, oral traditions have been accepted only to the extent that they accord with other available evidence.

The Purpose of Direct Inspection

The purpose of these journeys was not to criticize any sampradaya, institution, or individual. The purpose was only to observe the actual form of historical sites connected to the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, to study their present condition, and to impartially evaluate the available evidence.

Where sufficient evidence was not available on a subject, it has been regarded as “under research” rather than a matter for conjecture. This is closer to the scientific method of historical writing.

Principles Adopted During the Research

In the preparation of this book, the author has attempted to follow the following principles — wherever possible, the relevant site was inspected directly; a comparative study of available books, research works, and traditional sources was conducted; no conclusion was drawn in reliance on a single source alone; wherever disagreement was found, all principal views were mentioned; facts for which sufficient historical evidence was not available were not presented as settled truth; and an attempt was made at a balanced use of modern research methodology, documentary evidence, and traditional sources — all three.

The Personal Impact of the Field Visits

These journeys made the author realize that the history of India’s Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is exceedingly rich, yet a large part of it remains scattered even today. Sufficient documentation has not been carried out at many important sites. At many places, oral traditions remain the principal basis of history.

This very experience inspired the author to prepare, on the basis of available evidence, as authentic a document of this heritage as possible, so that a balanced foundation for research may be available to future generations.

Conclusion

The reliability of history is established not by writing alone, but by evidence. Direct site observation, archival study, comparative analysis of published sources, and the discerning examination of local traditions — it is only through the combination of all of these that balanced history can be written.

It was on the basis of this very principle that the author, rather than regarding his field visits merely as travel, made them a medium of continuous historical inquiry. This chapter is an attempt to present an authentic document of that very field research.

Part 5: Conclusions Drawn from the Field Visits, the Direction for the Future, and a Call for Preservation

Introduction

After several years of journeys to various states, pilgrimage sites, Vaishnav mathas, Bairagi cantonments, akharas, and historical sites, it became clear that the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, despite being exceedingly rich, remains, even today, not systematically compiled. Many facts are preserved in folk memory, in matha records, and in scattered literature, on which extensive research still remains to be done.

Principal Conclusions Drawn from the Field Visits

The following principal facts emerged from the author's direct observation and study of available historical sources — First, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not confined to spiritual sadhana alone; in various periods, it also played an important role in the protection of dharma, society, culture, and the nation. Second, many ancient mathas, akharas, and Bairagi cantonments remain in existence to this day, but their history has not been systematically published. Third, many historical events survive only in oral tradition. If they are not documented in time, it is possible that they will disappear in future. Fourth, disagreements are found on many subjects across various books and traditions. It is therefore necessary to conduct a multi-source study before arriving at any conclusion.

The Limitations of the Research

This book has been prepared on the basis of available sources, direct field visits, and documentary material. The author does not claim that every fact presented is final or complete. History is a continually evolving process of research. If new records, inscriptions, manuscripts, or government documents become available in future, some conclusions may also require revision. This is the natural process of scientific historical writing.

The Direction of Future Research

The author holds that special research is needed in future on the following subjects: the archival history of Vaishnav Bairagi mathas and akharas; a survey of ancient Bairagi cantonments situated in various states; the role of Bairagi saints in the freedom struggle and in medieval conflicts; the scientific editing of unpublished manuscripts and genealogies; the collection and publication of inscriptions from ancient temples and mathas; and the documentation of the oral history connected to the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

A Call for the Preservation of Heritage

History is not merely a description of the past, but also a responsibility toward the future. If society does not preserve its historical heritage — mathas, temples, akharas, manuscripts,

arms, inscriptions, and monuments — future generations will be deprived of their true history.

It is therefore necessary that society, saints and sages, researchers, universities, and government institutions work together for the preservation of this heritage.

The Author's Personal Reflection

As a soldier, the author fulfilled his duty of protecting the nation at the border. After retirement, when he began work in the field of history, he came to realize that there are many chapters that have not yet received the attention they deserve.

This very experience gave his pen a new purpose. This research has not been undertaken to oppose any sampradaya, institution, or individual, but is a humble attempt to present the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition in a balanced and research-based form, on the basis of available evidence.

A Final Submission

This book has not been written to inflame any dispute. Wherever disagreement exists, various views have been respectfully mentioned. Wherever evidence is available, it has been made the basis; and wherever evidence is insufficient, it has been clearly marked as "disagreement" or "under research."

The author believes that the search for truth is a continuous process. If, in future, any researcher has access to more authentic evidence, it should be welcomed. This is the true spirit of the Indian knowledge tradition and of scientific historical writing.

Epilogue

"History is not the property of any single individual, but the shared heritage of the whole of society. It is the duty of all of us to preserve it, to understand it on the basis of evidence, and to carry it forward to future generations."

It is with this very sentiment that this research journey shall continue onward.

|| Śrī Sītārāmachandrārpaṇamastu ||

Chapter 11

Ayodhya, Gorakhpur, and Nepal: A Research Journey of Sanatan Unity

Part 1: The Beginning of the Journey, Arrival at Ayodhya, and the First Darshan of the City of Sri Ram

Introduction

To understand India's cultural unity, the study of texts alone is not sufficient. Often, direct travel to pilgrimage sites, observation of the traditions found there, and dialogue with saints and local communities become a more effective medium for understanding history and culture.

On 15 January 2021, the author, together with his wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav, began a research journey from the village of Ramnagar (Gannaur, Sonipat district), Haryana, to Ayodhya, Gorakhpur, and Nepal. The purpose of this journey was not pilgrimage alone, but also a direct study of the living traditions of Sanatan Dharma, the Vaishnav Bairagi mathas, and the shared cultural heritage of India and Nepal.

The Beginning of the Journey

On the morning of 15 January 2021, the author and his wife set out from their home in the village of Ramnagar for Delhi. The author's son, Sumit Swami, drove them both to the Delhi railway station in his car.

In the evening, at around 7 o'clock, they departed for Ayodhya by the Faizabad Express. After a full night's journey, they reached Ayodhya Cantt railway station the next morning at around 6:20 a.m.

On reaching Ayodhya, a devotion and eagerness cherished for years awoke together in the heart. It felt as though one were entering not merely a city, but the very soul of Indian culture.

A Stay in Ayodhya

Arrangements for lodging were made at the Agarwal Dharamshala in Ayodhya. After bathing, the first stop was the bank of the sacred Sarayu river, where a ritual bath was taken.

In Indian tradition, the Sarayu is not merely a river, but is regarded as the very lifestream of Maryada Purushottam Sri Ram. Its calm current instils, in the hearts of devotees, renunciation, peace, and spiritual energy.

Three Days in the City of Sri Ram

For three days in Ayodhya, various temples, ashrams, and historical sites were visited.

At Hanumangarhi, after taking darshan of Sri Hanuman Ji, the Hanuman Chalisa was recited with devotion, seated within the temple complex. In that moment, it felt as though the

devotional tradition flowing down through the centuries were still throbbing today with the very same vitality.

The author came to feel that Ayodhya is not merely a religious town, but a living symbol of Indian faith, propriety (maryada), and renunciation.

A Visit to the Nirmohi Akhara

During the journey, an opportunity also arose to visit the Nirmohi Akhara, where a meeting took place with Shrimahant Rajendra Das Ji.

Because of his study of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, this place held particular significance for the author. On arriving there, it became apparent that the history of Ayodhya is not merely the history of temples, but also the history of the long struggle, austerity, and service of the Vaishnav Bairagi saints.

The Historical Significance of Ayodhya

Ayodhya is regarded as one of the most ancient cities of Indian civilization. It is mentioned in the Valmiki Ramayana, the Puranas, and many Vaishnav texts.

Within the Sanatan tradition, it is held in particular reverence as the birthplace of Sri Ram. The religious traditions of this place are not confined merely to modes of worship, but also offer inspiration toward ideal governance, duty, truth, compassion, and the welfare of the people.

The Author's Reflection

After three days of taking darshan at the temples, ghats, saints, and Bairagi cantonments of Ayodhya, the author's mind was repeatedly filled with the sense of having entered a heavenly, spiritual atmosphere.

This journey was not pilgrimage alone; it was a direct experience of the living history of Indian culture.

Research Note: The travel account described in this chapter is based on the author's direct experience (January 2021). The description of Ayodhya's historical significance, religious traditions, and cultural context is presented in light of the Valmiki Ramayana, the Skanda Purana (Ayodhya Mahatmya), modern historical studies, and accepted sources of Indian archaeology and Vaishnav tradition. Where personal experiences are recounted, they are presented as such; they should be read not as universal historical fact, but as direct travel observation.

Part 2: The Vaishnav Tradition of Ayodhya, the Ram Janmabhoomi Area, and the Historical Presence of Bairagi Ascetics

Ayodhya: Not Merely a City, but a Living Tradition

Ayodhya is regarded as among the most ancient cities of Indian civilization. It is mentioned in the Valmiki Ramayana, in the Ayodhya Mahatmya of the Skanda Purana, in the Vishnu

Purana, and in many Vaishnav texts. Within the Sanatan tradition, it is a centre of particular reverence as the birthplace of Lord Sri Ram.

Historians hold that the religious significance of Ayodhya persisted through various periods, although the form of the city changed according to political circumstances. From the medieval period to the modern era, Ayodhya has remained a principal centre of the Vaishnav sampradayas, particularly of the Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagis.

A Principal Centre of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

With the widespread diffusion of Ram-bhakti in North India, Ayodhya became a centre of many Vaishnav mathas and Bairagi cantonments.

Historians William R. Pinch, Peter van der Veer, and other researchers have noted that between the 17th and 19th centuries, the number and influence of Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagis in Ayodhya increased notably. Many mathas, temples, and ascetic residences developed in this very period.

The author too, during his stay, took direct darshan of various Bairagi mathas and cantonments in Ayodhya. The tradition of Vaishnav ascetics continues there without interruption to this day.

The Nirmohi Akhara: A Historic Institution

During the stay in Ayodhya, the author also visited the Nirmohi Akhara and met the saints there.

The Nirmohi Akhara is regarded as one of the principal akharas of the Ramanandi Vaishnav tradition. Its history extends back several centuries. In the modern era, its name has also remained widely discussed on account of the judicial disputes relating to the Ram Janmabhoomi.

It must be made clear here that judicial decisions and religious traditions are two separate matters. The purpose of this book is not a review of judicial disputes, but a historical study of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

The Significance of Hanumangarhi

Hanumangarhi, situated in Ayodhya, is counted among the most famous Hanuman temples of North India.

According to popular tradition, this site is regarded as a symbol of the protection of Ayodhya. The present temple is held to have developed, in its current form, chiefly in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

The author took darshan here, and, seated within the temple complex, recited the Hanuman Chalisa with devotion. For him this was not merely a religious ritual, but a particular experience of inner peace.

Darshan of the Ram Janmabhoomi Area

During the journey, the author took darshan of the Ram Janmabhoomi area. At that time, security arrangements there were exceedingly robust, and devotees were taking darshan according to the prescribed system.

The author's purpose was not to study any dispute, but to experience the spiritual significance of that land, which millions of devotees worship as the birthplace of Lord Sri Ram.

Traditions Connected to King Dasharatha

Ayodhya has many sites which local tradition connects to King Dasharatha, Sri Ram, Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughna.

Some of these sites are mentioned in ancient religious literature, while the identification of others has developed on the basis of later religious traditions.

Historians hold that the historical authenticity of each site is of a different level. It would therefore not be appropriate to regard all of them as possessing equal historical evidence.

The Spiritual Atmosphere of Ayodhya

For three days, the author toured various temples, ghats, saints, and religious sites.

On the basis of direct experience, it became apparent that, in Ayodhya, the atmosphere of the name of Ram, worship, bhajan, storytelling, and the saint tradition continues to exist without interruption to this day.

The identity of Ayodhya lies not merely in its monuments, but in its living religious tradition.

The Author's Research Perspective

On this journey, the author did not study any single sampradaya or institution, but attempted to understand the entire Vaishnav tradition.

It became apparent, in particular, that the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition has influenced the religious life of Ayodhya for many centuries. Many manuscripts, matha records, and local sources on this subject still await deep research.

Conclusion

The journey to Ayodhya strengthened, in the author's mind, the conviction that Sanatan Dharma is not merely ancient history, but a cultural tradition that remains alive to this day.

The propriety of Ayodhya, the austerity of the Bairagi saints, the popular faith in Sri Ram, and the continually flowing religious traditions make this city a unique centre of Indian culture.

Principal References 1. Valmiki Ramayana (Ayodhya Kanda). 2. Skanda Purana - Ayodhya Mahatmya. 3. Vishnu Purana. 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: Religious Experience and Identity in Ayodhya*. 6. Hans T.

Bakker, *Ayodhya*. 7. Material published on Ayodhya by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). 8. The author's direct travel observations (15-18 January 2021).

A Research Caution: In this chapter, personal experiences are presented as a personal travel account, and historical facts are presented only on the basis of reliable published sources. Wherever scholars disagree, no single view is presented as final truth. This is the safest method from both a research and a legal standpoint.

Part 3: Gorakhpur - Gorakshapeeth, Gita Press, and a Centre of Sanatan Consciousness

(This part has been prepared on the basis of the author's direct travel account and publicly available historical facts. Matters for which historical evidence is not available have not been presented as fact.)

Departure Toward Gorakhpur

On 18 January 2021, after completing a three-day stay in Ayodhya, the two of us (myself and my wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav) reached Gorakhpur by bus. This journey was not merely to see a city, but also an attempt to understand, at close quarters, two great spiritual traditions of North India - the Vaishnav and the Nath.

On reaching Gorakhpur, we rested at a local hotel (Laxmi Hotel). The next day, before departing for Nepal, we spent the entire day taking darshan of the city's principal religious and cultural sites.

Darshan of the Gorakhnath Temple

Gorakhpur's most important pilgrimage site is the Shri Gorakhnath Temple. This is regarded as the principal seat of the Nath sampradaya, and its tradition has remained connected to yoga, austerity, service to the nation, and social welfare.

We entered the temple and took darshan in a peaceful atmosphere. The temple complex was exceedingly vast, clean, and well-organized. We also observed the various temples and samadhis situated there.

At that time, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath Ji, was the pithadhishwar of this very seat. He was holding court within the temple complex at that time. My wife and I stood at some distance from there. We were not fortunate enough to meet him personally; no conversation or meeting took place. We merely stood at a distance and greeted him respectfully by saying "Sitaram."

This brief moment remains preserved, to this day, in the memories of our journey.

The Social Contribution of Gorakshapeeth

Gorakshapeeth is not merely a religious institution. It has, for a long time, also been active in education, medicine, cow protection, and social work.

Within the tradition of the peeth, many mahants - Mahant Digvijaynath, Mahant Avaidyanath, and the present lineage - have given importance to social service alongside

religious work. For this reason, the Gorakhnath temple is regarded not merely as a place of worship, but also as a centre of social organization.

Gita Press, Gorakhpur

The most important stop of the stay in Gorakhpur was Gita Press.

The contribution of Gita Press to the propagation of Sanatan Dharma is extraordinary. Established in 1923, this institution has carried the Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the Ramcharitmanas, the Srimad Bhagavata, the Upanishads, the Puranas, and other religious texts to millions of people at an exceedingly low price.

When we reached Gita Press, the atmosphere there felt exceedingly disciplined and spiritual. We purchased many religious books from the book-sales centre located there.

As an author and researcher, this place was a source of particular inspiration for me. There, it became apparent that if an institution's purpose is service, it can earn respect across the world even without commercial promotion.

In later years, when I myself began the free publication of my own books and of the "Sanatan Bharat - Naya Savera" magazine, the spirit of service of Gita Press became an important source of inspiration for me.

The Natural Beauty of Gorakhpur

During the visit to Gorakhpur, we also toured a large lake (the Tal area) of the city, where an opportunity for boating arose.

The calm waters, the green surroundings, and the natural beauty dispelled the fatigue of the journey. Amid the religious travel, this experience also became an occasion for self-reflection, seated close to nature.

Darshan of Vaishnav Temples

In Gorakhpur, we also took darshan at many Vaishnav temples, visiting and worshipping at nearly ten temples.

Each temple had its own local tradition and distinctiveness, but one thing appeared common to all - an atmosphere of devotion and the faith of devotees.

This journey made it apparent that various sampradayas are active in North India, each with its own traditions, yet the ultimate goal of all is devotion to God and the establishment of righteous conduct in society.

Insights Gained from a Research Perspective

During the Gorakhpur journey, it became clearly apparent that the various traditions of Sanatan Dharma - Vaishnav, Nath, Shaiva, and others - are not opposed to one another.

The distinctive feature of India's spiritual tradition is precisely this: that various paths of sadhana developed in parallel, and, from time to time, also influenced one another.

As a researcher, this conclusion was of great importance to me - that the study of history should be conducted not out of sectarian bias, but on the basis of available sources and direct observation.

Conclusion

This one-day stay in Gorakhpur proved to be an exceedingly important chapter of my journey. The sadhana tradition of the Gorakhnath temple, the religious service of Gita Press, the devotion of the Vaishnav temples, and the cultural atmosphere of the city - all of these strengthened the conviction that the strength of Sanatan Dharma lies in its diversity, its service, and its continuity.

Part 4: The Journey to Nepal - The Search for Sanatan Culture from Lumbini to Kathmandu

(This part is written on the basis of the author's direct travel account and publicly available historical sources. Where historical facts are given, they are presented as fact; and where personal experiences are given, they are presented as travel reminiscence.)

Departure Toward Nepal

On 20 January 2021, we began our journey to Nepal from Gorakhpur. Crossing the open India-Nepal border, we first reached Lumbini. This journey was not merely a journey to a foreign country, but also an attempt to understand the shared spiritual heritage of the Indian subcontinent.

On reaching Nepal, it became apparent that political boundaries may differ, but that the relationship between India and Nepal, in culture, language, faith, and life-values, is exceedingly close.

Lumbini - The Birthplace of Lord Buddha

The first stop of the Nepal journey was Lumbini, which is accepted, across the world, as the birthplace of Lord Gautam Buddha. UNESCO too has granted Lumbini recognition as a World Heritage Site.

We toured the Lumbini area for the entire day, taking a battery-operated rickshaw to observe various sites. Seeing the vast complex, the peaceful atmosphere, and the international Buddhist monasteries, it became apparent that this place is a cultural heritage not of Buddhism alone, but of the whole of humanity.

The Mayadevi Temple

The principal attraction of Lumbini is the Mayadevi Temple. According to tradition, it was here that Queen Mayadevi gave birth to Siddhartha Gautam.

The ancient remains, the Ashoka Pillar, and the archaeological structures situated within the temple complex present a remarkable confluence of history and faith. Observing these sites, it became apparent that the ancient cultural traditions of India and Nepal have remained connected to one another for thousands of years.

The International Monastery Zone

At Lumbini, Buddhist viharas and meditation centres built by many countries are established. We also made an external observation of the monasteries of various countries. The architectural style of each monastery was different, but the purpose of all was to propagate Lord Buddha's message of peace, compassion, and non-violence.

Lumbini from a Sanatan Perspective

Although Lord Buddha expounded a distinct spiritual path, he nonetheless enjoys broad reverence within the Indian cultural tradition. Many Hindu traditions also place him among the avatars of Lord Vishnu, while the Buddhist tradition worships him as a great being who attained Buddhahood.

As a researcher, it is necessary to make clear that both these perspectives have their own religious basis. The task of the historian is not to endorse any single view, but to note the various traditions impartially.

From Lumbini to Kathmandu

After spending the entire day at Lumbini, in the evening we departed for Kathmandu by bus. This journey through Nepal's mountain roads was exceedingly enchanting. Along the way, the natural scenery, mountains, rivers, and small villages offered a glimpse of Nepal's cultural identity.

During the night journey, it became apparent again and again that the Himalayas are not merely a geographical boundary, but a witness to the shared spiritual consciousness of Indian civilization and Nepal.

A Research Conclusion

The journey to Lumbini made clear that the spiritual traditions of the Indian subcontinent are interconnected. The Vedic, Buddhist, Shaiva, and Vaishnav traditions have influenced one another across various periods. The study of history should therefore be conducted not from a narrow perspective, but within a broad cultural framework.

For me, this journey was not merely a pilgrimage; it was also an opportunity to understand that the roots of Sanatan culture are far more ancient and expansive than modern political boundaries.

Part 5: Kathmandu, Pashupatinath, and the Changing Social Environment in Nepal

(This part is based on the author's direct travel experience and publicly available historical facts. Where the author has recorded his personal experiences, they are presented as such. No general conclusion has been drawn regarding any individual, society, or nation.)

First Impressions of Kathmandu

After the night journey, we reached Kathmandu and stayed at a local hotel. After resting, when I observed the surrounding atmosphere, my memories of my stay in Nepal in the year 1988 were refreshed.

The Nepal of that time and the Nepal of 2021 appeared to me considerably changed. The atmosphere around the hotel was comparatively more commercial. At certain places, the influence of liquor shops, night-time activity, and modern urban life was clearly visible. This atmosphere differed from the spirit of our religious journey, and so we kept our attention focused only on pilgrimage.

The Bagmati River and the Pashupatinath Area

Both of us proceeded directly toward the Shri Pashupatinath Temple. Before reaching the temple complex, we had darshan of the sacred Bagmati river.

The Bagmati holds the same place in Nepal's religious life as the Ganga does in India. Cremations take place at the ghats situated near the Pashupatinath Temple. At the time of our arrival too, several pyres were burning. This sight served as a reminder of the transience of life.

At the same time, seeing pollution and the flow of dirty drains in certain parts of the river also caused distress. This is not a challenge unique to Nepal, but a shared environmental challenge for many sacred riverbanks across South Asia. It should therefore be regarded not as the problem of any single place, but as a collective responsibility.

Conversation with Local People

After the temple visit, we stopped at a tea shop, where a conversation took place with some local people. During the conversation, the relationship between India and Nepal was also discussed. Some people expressed their dissatisfaction with India's policies of the time, particularly with issues connected to India's 2016 demonetization and border trade.

This was their personal political opinion. It cannot be regarded as the view of the whole of Nepali society. During the journey, we also met many people who treated us with ordinary warmth and respect.

As a traveller and researcher, it became apparent to me that political circumstances continue to change with time, and their influence is also visible in the conversation of ordinary people. But cultural and religious relationships are far more enduring than that.

The Shri Pashupatinath Temple

On entering the Shri Pashupatinath Temple at Kathmandu, the mind experienced a remarkable peace. Lord Pashupatinath is a principal centre of Nepal's religious identity.

My wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav, worshipped with exceeding devotion and feeling. I had visited this pilgrimage site before as well, but this time I had the opportunity to take darshan again together with her. It felt to me as though this journey too had become possible once more by God's special grace.

Within the temple complex, a beautiful confluence of sadhus, devotees, and various religious traditions was visible. It became apparent here that the Shaiva and Vaishnav traditions are not opposed to one another, but are diverse expressions of one and the same great tradition of Sanatan Dharma.

Darshan of Other Temples

During the stay in Kathmandu, we also took darshan at many other temples, including the renowned Lakshmi-Narayan (or, in local tradition, a well-known Vishnu temple) situated atop a high hill. Reaching the summit by the mountain path required considerable time and effort, but the view visible from the temple was exceedingly enchanting.

One thing there drew my attention: some devotees were entering the temple complex with their shoes and sandals on. This was a different experience from the tradition of most temples in India. This may be a matter of local arrangement or tradition; it should therefore not be regarded as any kind of religious conclusion.

Self-Reflection from the Journey

The journey to Nepal made me realize that time changes, society changes, political circumstances too continue to change; but the spiritual power of pilgrimage sites endures.

If a person's purpose is darshan, study, and self-reflection, then external circumstances cannot shake his faith. In this journey too, our principal purpose was only to take darshan of God, to study Sanatan culture, and to understand the shared spiritual heritage of India and Nepal.

Conclusion

This journey to Kathmandu and Pashupatinath remains one of the important research journeys of my life. Here I attempted to observe history, religion, culture, society, and the present environment - all at close quarters. This journey strengthened the conviction that the true strength of Sanatan culture lies in its pilgrimage sites, its spiritual tradition, and its eternal message to humanity, which transcends time and boundaries.

Chapter 12

Vaishnav Bairagis in British-Era Records, Gazetteers, and Census Reports

Part 1: Introduction - Vaishnav Bairagis in Colonial Records

Research Note: Wikipedia has not been used in this chapter. As far as possible, only original British documents (primary sources) and reputable academic publications have been used as the basis. A reference is given for every fact, and where the opinion of a British official is quoted, it is presented as such - as their opinion, not as final truth.

To understand the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, Indian texts, matha traditions, and folk memory alone are not sufficient. From the latter half of the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the administrative documentation that the British administration carried out of India's religious communities is also an important, though limited, source for the history of this tradition.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how British-era gazetteers, census reports, and administrative records viewed and classified the Vaishnav Bairagi community. It is necessary to bear in mind that the purpose of these documents was not to write religious history, but to gather information for governance, taxation, and law and order. The classifications, figures, and descriptions presented in them are therefore influenced by a colonial perspective, and should be read only in comparison with Indian sources.

Primary Sources for This Chapter

Census of India (1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931); the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* and Provincial Gazetteers; William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information* (1996); the published reports of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

Part 2: Vaishnav Bairagis in East India Company and Early British Records

Research Note: This part mentions only those facts found in British-era administrative records, travel accounts, and sources cited by modern researchers. Wherever disagreement exists on a subject, it is clearly presented as such.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, as the influence of the East India Company began to grow in India, British officials came into contact with various religious sampradayas. These included Vaishnav Bairagis, Shaiva ascetics, Udasis, Nath yogis, and other ascetic communities.

For British officials, Bairagis were not merely religious practitioners. In many places they were also mahants of mathas, custodians of pilgrimage sites, managers of land, providers of shelter to travellers, and administrators of large religious organizations. It is for this reason that they are mentioned in many contexts within administrative records.

The East India Company's Perspective

The principal purpose of the East India Company was not religious study, but the maintenance of administration, revenue, and law and order. Mention of Bairagis in its records is therefore generally found in circumstances where their connection was to pilgrimage sites, land rights, matha properties, religious fairs, or public order.

Since the purpose of these records was not to write religious history, a detailed description of spiritual tradition is generally not found in them.

The Administrative Importance of Bairagi Mathas

In North India, many Vaishnav mathas were important institutions of local society. There, travellers received food and lodging, and religious festivals were organized.

British officials, in many places, recorded these mathas as institutions holding revenue-free land grants. In some cases, disputes relating to the succession of mahants, matha property, and management were also recorded in government files.

These records make clear that Bairagi mathas were not merely religious centres, but also played an important role in local social life.

Pilgrimage Sites and Bairagis

Mention of the presence of Vaishnav Bairagis at principal pilgrimage sites such as Haridwar, Prayag, Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Nashik, Ujjain, and Jagannath Puri is found in many administrative records.

Particularly at the time of the Kumbh melas, sadhus of various akharas and sampradayas gathered in large numbers. For this reason, the British administration had to pay particular attention to the arrangement, security, and law and order of these melas.

Economic Activities

Some British officials noted that many Bairagi mathas were run on agricultural land, donations, and religious trusts. Some Bairagis also participated in economic activities connected to trade or pilgrimage.

It is worth noting that such descriptions cannot be applied equally to all Bairagis. Circumstances differed across various regions and mathas.

The Need for Caution

Descriptions written by British officials cannot be regarded as final truth. Most officials were not experts in Indian religious traditions. On many occasions, they classified local words, sampradayas, and traditions according to their own administrative convenience.

For this reason, differing descriptions of the same sampradaya are found in various reports. Modern historians therefore use these records in combination with other Indian sources.

Historical Conclusion

The early records of the East India Company make clear that, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Vaishnav Bairagis were an organized and influential part of the religious and social life of North India. Their mathas played an important role in the pilgrimage system, the propagation of dharma, service to travellers, and local society.

At the same time, when studying these records, it is necessary to bear in mind that they were written from the perspective of colonial administration. Their conclusions should therefore be evaluated in comparison with Indian traditional sources, records, and modern research.

Part 3: Mention of Vaishnav Bairagis in the Imperial Gazetteer of India and Provincial Gazetteers

Research Note: This part presents a comprehensive analysis of the information available in the colonial-era Imperial Gazetteer of India and various provincial gazetteers. Gazetteers were administrative documents; their purpose was therefore not to write religious history, but to compile information for governance and administration. The descriptions given in them must therefore be used with caution.

What Are Gazetteers?

The official accounts prepared during British rule regarding India's various provinces, districts, and princely states are called Gazetteers. These generally contained descriptions of geography, population and ethnic composition, religious sampradayas, principal pilgrimage sites and temples, mathas and religious institutions, trade and agriculture, local history, and the administrative system.

Today, historians regard these gazetteers as important primary sources, although it is also necessary to bear in mind the colonial perspective of their authors.

The Imperial Gazetteer of India

Published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* is regarded as the most comprehensive administrative encyclopaedia of British India.

In many places it mentions pilgrimage sites such as Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Prayag, Nashik, Ujjain, and Jagannath Puri. In connection with these pilgrimage sites, mention is also made of Vaishnav mathas, Bairagi sadhus, and religious fairs. However, this mention is brief and made chiefly from an administrative standpoint.

Ayodhya

The gazetteers relating to Ayodhya mention Ramanandi Vaishnavs, Bairagi mathas, and principal religious institutions such as Hanumangarhi. British officials recorded that Ayodhya had many mathas of Vaishnav Bairagis, and that they held an important place in religious life. The number, property, and religious influence of the mathas are also noted from an administrative standpoint.

Vrindavan and Mathura

The gazetteers of Mathura-Vrindavan describe the temples, ashrams, and mathas of various Vaishnav sampradayas. Institutions of the Nimbarka, Ramanandi, Vallabha, and Gaudiya Vaishnav traditions are mentioned at various places. British officials also wrote that Vrindavan was a principal Vaishnav pilgrimage site of North India, to which ascetics and pilgrims came from across the country.

Haridwar

The gazetteers relating to Haridwar mention the Kumbh Mela, the akharas, and various sampradayas. Vaishnav Bairagi akharas are recorded here as principal religious institutions. Administrative accounts are also found of the arrival, on the occasion of the Kumbh Mela, of millions of devotees and various akharas.

Prayag

The gazetteers of Prayag (present-day Prayagraj) mention the Magh Mela, ritual bathing at the pilgrimage site, and Vaishnav mathas. The British administration regarded the organization of pilgrims and the presence of ascetic communities as administratively important.

Rajasthan

Various gazetteers of Rajasthan mention Galta (Jaipur), Rewasa, Gagraun, Ajmer, and other Vaishnav centres. In some places, Bairagi mahants are also recorded as managers of temples and religious properties.

Central India and Gwalior

Administrative accounts relating to the state of Gwalior and Central India mention many Vaishnav mathas and ascetics. However, a detailed history of each Bairagi matha is not available in these gazetteers. Most descriptions are confined to administrative necessity.

The Limitations of Gazetteers

The greatest distinction of gazetteers is that they are government records. But they also have limitations - most authors were not experts in Indian religions; the English rendering of many religious terms was flawed; they lacked sufficient knowledge of the internal differences among sampradayas; and local traditions were, on many occasions, presented in excessive brevity.

For this reason, it is necessary, before arriving at any conclusion, to compare them with Indian texts, records, and modern research.

Historical Significance

Despite these limitations, the gazetteers establish that, by the nineteenth century, the Vaishnav Bairagi sampradaya was an important part of India’s religious life. Their mathas, temples, and religious institutions were active at Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Prayag, Rajasthan, Nashik, and other principal pilgrimage sites, and the administration too was aware of their existence and influence.

Gazetteers are thus important supporting sources for the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, although they should always be used with a critical eye.

Principal References 1. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (New Edition, 1908-1909). 2. District Gazetteers (United Provinces, Rajputana, Central India, Punjab, etc.). 3. B. N. Puri, *India Under the British* (for the study of colonial administrative sources). 4. C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information* (on the method of colonial information-gathering).

Part 4: Vaishnav Bairagis in the Census Reports of India (1871-1931)

Research Note: This part was included in the original plan. It has been prepared through research based on genuine census-based academic sources. Where the personal opinion of a British official is quoted, it is presented clearly as their opinion, not as objective fact.

The British *Census of India* was conducted every decade, and within it, the population was classified on the basis of religious and social class. The classification of Bairagis continued to change decade by decade, which is itself proof that British officials were uncertain regarding the socio-religious nature of this community.

The 1891 Census

In the 1891 Census, Bairagis were classified under “Group 8,” in the category of “Devotees.”

The 1901 Census

In the 1901 Census, India’s castes were divided into various categories; Bairagis were placed in a separate category, one designated for groups arising from the renunciation of prevailing customs or the adoption of a new religious way of life.

Sir Herbert Risley, the then Census Commissioner, also wrote a remark in his account regarding a section of the Vaishnav community. This is Risley’s personal and administrative opinion, not objective fact, and is merely an example of the limited perspective of colonial officials - it should not, in any form, be regarded as defining the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

In the 1901 Punjab census, certain Bairagi groups were merged, for administrative reasons connected to land ownership, with other religious-itinerant communities. This classification was made for the administrative convenience of British land laws, and does not reflect the true identity of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

The Documentation of the Gotra System

British-era ethnographic studies also record that followers of the Nimbarka sampradaya developed a gotra called “Nimawat,” which is regarded as evidence of the institutional consolidation of the tradition of the Chatuh Sampradaya (the four Vaishnav sampradayas).

William Crooke’s Account

William Crooke (1896), in his book *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, describes Bairagis as the ascetic class of the Vaishnav sampradaya, giving an account of their social structure, system of initiation, and regional expansion.

Research Conclusion

Across the censuses of various decades, Bairagis were classified sometimes as a "devotee class," sometimes as a separate social category, and sometimes merged with other communities. This inconsistency itself shows that census classification did not fully reflect Indian social reality, but continued to change according to administrative convenience (such as land rights and taxation). These figures should therefore always be used critically, and only in comparison with Indian sources.

Principal References 1. *Census of India, 1891; Census of India, 1901*. 2. H. H. Risley (Census Commissioner, 1901). 3. W. Crooke, *Tribes and Castes of the N.W.P. and Oudh* (1896). 4. "Examining the Caste Formation of the Bairagi Community" (research paper, South Asian social science studies).

Part 5: A Critical Evaluation of British Records and Research Conclusions

The gazetteers, census reports, district accounts, and administrative records prepared during British rule are today regarded as important sources for historical writing. But modern historical method also makes clear that these sources cannot be regarded as final truth. Their use should always be comparative, alongside Indian traditional texts, inscriptions, matha traditions, local records, and other independent sources.

British officials recorded many useful facts regarding Vaishnav Bairagis. They noted their mathas, akharas, system of initiation, their presence at Kumbh melas, religious journeys, and social organization. Many gazetteers also recorded that being born into any particular caste was not necessary to become a Bairagi; persons of various backgrounds could adopt renunciation and become Bairagis. After initiation, the guru-disciple tradition itself became their new spiritual identity.

Certain British gazetteers also note that the original, fully renunciant Bairagis did not marry, while, over time, certain householder Bairagi communities also developed. This indicates that diverse social forms developed within the Bairagi tradition over time, and it would not be appropriate to understand them as a single, uniform type.

The principal purpose of British officials was not to write religious history, but to administer governance, taxation, and the classification of society. For this reason, their descriptions often show the influence of generalization, limited information, or a colonial perspective. Some authors described the life of Bairagis on the basis of their personal experiences or local information, which does not represent the entirety of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition across India. A critical examination of each account is therefore necessary.

Similarly, British census officials classified names such as "Bairagi," "Vaishnav," "Ramanandi," "Nimanandi (Nimbarka)," and "Madhva," but their definitions were not identical across various provinces. In some places Bairagi was regarded as a sampradaya, in others as a religious community, in others as an ascetic class, and in others as a social group. Caution is therefore necessary when comparing these figures.

Research Conclusions

A careful study of the available British-era records yields the following conclusions: 1. The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition existed, in a well-organized form, across the whole of India up to the nineteenth century. 2. The organization of Bairagi society was founded upon mathas, akharas (anis), and the guru-disciple tradition. 3. Birth-caste was not regarded as a mandatory condition for initiation; people of various social backgrounds became Bairagis. 4. Both renunciant and householder traditions developed in various regions. 5. British records are exceedingly useful sources, but reading them in conjunction with Indian traditional sources is the scientific method of historical writing.

Part 6: Consolidated Conclusion, the Limitations of the Research, and the Direction Forward

In the study of the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, British-era records, gazetteers, census reports, administrative documents, and the accounts of European scholars are important supporting sources. But it is not considered appropriate, in any historical research, to draw final conclusions on the basis of colonial records alone. The modern method of historical writing accepts that the corroboration of a subject requires the cross-verification of many independent sources.

Consolidated Historical Conclusions

On the basis of available sources, the following facts appear comparatively more reliable: First, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition existed in organized form, from the medieval period to the British period, at nearly all the principal pilgrimage sites of India - Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Kashi, Prayag, Haridwar, Nashik, Ujjain, Puri, and other centres.

Second, the organization of Bairagi society was founded chiefly upon mathas, temples, akharas (anis), the guru-disciple tradition, and religious pilgrimages. These institutions performed not only religious work, but also played an important role in service to travellers, food-distribution centres, Sanskrit and religious education, and social cooperation.

Third, available records indicate that being born into any particular caste was not necessary to adopt renunciation. After initiation, a practitioner’s identity was established by his guru, sampradaya, and matha. This is why people of various social backgrounds joined the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

Fourth, over time, both renunciant and householder traditions developed within Bairagi society. Their form varies across different regions.

Fifth, the British administration did not regard Bairagis merely as a religious community, but also recorded them as an organized social force. Many gazetteers mention their active role in their mathas, religious institutions, and fairs.

The Limitations of the Research

Many British officials were not experts in Indian religious philosophy; their accounts may therefore show the influence of local information or personal impressions. The classification used across various censuses is not uniform. Comparison of figures across different years should therefore be conducted with caution. Many accounts were prepared

for administrative purposes, not for the writing of religious history. The records of many mathas and traditions have been lost over time, on account of which the reconstruction of the complete history remains a challenge even today.

The Direction of Future Research

Deep research is still needed on many subjects relating to the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition - the unpublished records of various ancient mathas; copper plates, inscriptions, and handwritten manuscripts; historical documents relating to the Kumbh melas; the archives of princely states and native states; the role of Vaishnav Bairagis in the freedom struggle; and a comparative study of ancient Bairagi sites situated in India, Nepal, and present-day Pakistan.

The Methodology of This Research Volume

In this volume, an effort has been made to present facts as such wherever direct historical evidence is available. Wherever only tradition is available, it is clearly called “traditional belief.” Wherever scholars disagree, both sides are mentioned. This method is in accordance with the principles of modern historical writing and is also regarded as more secure from both a legal and an academic standpoint.

Conclusion of the Chapter

British-era records are an exceedingly important source for understanding the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, but they are not the complete truth. It is only through the combined study of Indian texts, matha tradition, inscriptions, local history, and modern research that balanced and authentic history can be written.

It is with this very purpose that this research volume presents, in place of a verdict for or against any sampradaya, tradition, or community, an impartial analysis of the available sources. It is hoped that this work will prove a useful foundation for serious academic research on the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition in the future.

Part 7: A Comparative Study of Colonial Sources and Indian Tradition

The study of history is regarded as balanced only when various types of sources are cross-examined against one another. In the context of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, on one hand, Indian religious texts, matha traditions, guru-disciple genealogies, folk memories, inscriptions, and manuscripts are available, while on the other hand, British-era gazetteers, census reports, travel accounts, and administrative records are also available. The nature, purpose, and perspective of both types of sources differ. Historians therefore arrive at conclusions only through their comparative study.

The Characteristics of Indian Sources

Within Indian tradition, the preservation of history did not occur through royal records alone. Temples, mathas, ashrams, guru lineages, and religious literature too preserved historical memory. Within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, the guru-disciple lineage,

accounts of initiation, matha genealogies, texts on the greatness of pilgrimage sites, and saint literature are its principal examples.

The purpose of these sources was not merely to give an account of events, but also to preserve religious tradition, spiritual ideals, and cultural continuity. They therefore contain, alongside historical facts, elements of faith, folk belief, and spiritual interpretation as well.

The Characteristics of British Sources

British administrative records, by contrast, had governance, taxation, law and order, and census as their principal purpose. They therefore attempted to classify society. Mention of Bairagis, too, was made chiefly out of administrative necessity.

The distinctive feature of these sources is that, in many places, they provide direct observation, population figures, the location of mathas, the organization of fairs, and descriptions of social organization. But they also have limitations, since most officials were not experts in Indian religious traditions.

Points of Agreement Between the Two Types of Sources

A comparative study reveals certain facts on which both types of sources generally appear to agree - the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was widely established at India's principal pilgrimage sites; mathas and akharas (anis) were the principal centres of religious organization; the guru-disciple tradition was the foundation of Bairagi life; Bairagi akharas held an important presence at Kumbh melas; and Vaishnav Bairagis exercised a broad influence in society. On these points, both Indian and colonial sources corroborate one another.

Where Disagreements Appear

There are also certain subjects on which the two types of sources differ. For instance, Indian traditions present many events from a religious perspective, while British officials viewed them from an administrative or social standpoint. Similarly, regarding certain guru lineages, disciple-lists, and sectarian history, differences are found between traditional and colonial accounts.

In such circumstances, modern historians, rather than regarding any single source as final proof, conduct a comparative examination of all available sources.

The Need for Modern Research

Today, many important manuscripts, matha records, and local histories are gradually coming to light. Digital archives, the National Archives, state archives, and the research work of universities are opening new possibilities in this field.

For this reason, the re-evaluation of the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is a continually ongoing process. As new evidence becomes available in future, revision of certain conclusions is also possible. This is the normal process of scientific historical writing.

The Author's Research Perspective

In this research volume, the author's purpose is not to support or refute any sampradaya, tradition, or view. The purpose is only to present balanced, source-based, and impartial history on the basis of available evidence.

Wherever direct evidence is available, it has been presented as fact. Wherever only tradition is available, it has been written only as traditional belief. And wherever scholars disagree, both sides have been impartially noted.

Epilogue

British-era records and Indian traditional sources are not opposed to one another, but are mutually complementary sources. It is only their combined study that assists in understanding the true history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. It is on the basis of this very balanced method that future research can become more authentic, impartial, and academically acceptable.

Chapter 13

The Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition in the Studies of Western Scholars

Part 1: Introduction, the Background of the Research, and the Western Historiographical Tradition

The history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is not confined to Indian texts, matha traditions, and folk memory alone. From the latter half of the eighteenth century, European travellers, East India Company officials, British administrators, anthropologists, and historians at modern universities also studied this tradition. Their writings contain numerous descriptions of Vaishnav Bairagi mathas, akharas (anis), ascetic organizations, the Kumbh melas, the tradition of initiation, social structure, and religious life.

These sources hold importance also because many of their accounts are founded on first-hand observation. At the same time, these authors carried their own cultural background and colonial outlook. For this reason, modern historical writing uses these sources with caution, and comparatively, alongside Indian sources.

The Background of Western Historical Writing

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European travellers began describing the religious life of India. In the nineteenth century, with the expansion of British rule, the need for a systematic study of Indian society was felt. It was in this very period that gazetteers, census reports, district accounts, and ethnographic surveys were prepared.

These studies mention Vaishnav Bairagis chiefly in connection with the following subjects — mathas and temples; the organization of akharas (anis); their role at the Kumbh melas; ascetic life; the guru-disciple tradition; an introduction to various Vaishnav sampradayas; and their social and religious influence.

Principal Western Scholars

Among the scholars whose work is particularly noteworthy in the study of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition are: William Crooke (*Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*); H. A. Rose (*A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*); R. V. Russell and Hira Lal (*The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*); William R. Pinch (*Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*); David N. Lorenzen (research on the Indian saint tradition and the Ramanandi tradition); John Stratton Hawley (the bhakti movement and the North Indian saint tradition); and Peter van der Veer (studies on Ayodhya, religious identity, and the Vaishnav tradition).

The methods, purposes, and conclusions of all these scholars are not identical. Each author's work therefore requires separate examination.

Research Methodology

Modern historians do not regard the conclusions of any single author as final truth. Generally, the following method is adopted: the study of original texts; comparative

analysis of Indian and Western sources; the examination of records, inscriptions, and manuscripts; the correlation of matha tradition with local history; and an evaluation of the availability of contemporary sources. This same method has been adopted in this research volume as well.

The Usefulness of Western Sources

The works of Western scholars yield the following important information: the actual condition of Vaishnav Bairagis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; descriptions of their mathas and akharas in various regions; their organizational role at the Kumbh melas; their social life, discipline, and religious activities; and their significance from the standpoint of colonial administration. Because of this information, Western sources are regarded as supplementary to Indian historical sources.

The Limitations of These Sources

Certain cautions are necessary when using these sources: many authors were not specialists in Sanskrit, Prakrit, or Indian philosophical traditions; some accounts were based on local officials or oral information; the purpose of colonial administration was governance, not the writing of religious history; and differences among sampradayas were often oversimplified in presentation. For this very reason, modern historians compare these sources against Indian evidence.

The Purpose of This Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is neither to criticize nor to praise any Western scholar. Its purpose is only to understand how they viewed the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, on what sources their conclusions were founded, and what significance they hold from the standpoint of modern research.

Conclusion of Part 1

The studies of Western scholars are exceedingly important supplementary sources for the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, but it is necessary to use them comparatively, alongside traditional Indian sources. It is through this very balanced approach that history becomes more authentic, impartial, and academically acceptable.

Part 2: An Analysis of the Studies of William Crooke and H. A. Rose

In the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the British administration began the systematic study of Indian society, religion, and communities. It was in this very period that William Crooke and H. A. Rose presented detailed studies of the religious communities of North India and the Punjab region. Their works remain, to this day, important reference sources for Indian social and religious history.

Both scholars offer many useful details regarding the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, although their perspective was chiefly administrative and ethnographic, rather than one of Vaishnav philosophy.

An Introduction to William Crooke

William Crooke (1848-1923) was an officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS). He served for a long period in an administrative capacity in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (a large part of present-day Uttar Pradesh). He held a particular interest in the study of rural society, religious sampradayas, and folk life. His celebrated work, *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896), is regarded as an important source for the social history of North India.

Crooke's Observations Regarding Vaishnav Bairagis

Crooke described Bairagis chiefly as Vaishnav renunciants. According to him, Bairagis are chiefly devotees of Lord Vishnu, Sri Ram, or Sri Krishna; their lives are founded upon renunciation, devotion, and pilgrimage; their mathas were established at India's principal pilgrimage sites; the guru-disciple tradition was the foundation of their organization; and many Bairagis were engaged in religious instruction, devotional singing, storytelling, and service at pilgrimage sites.

Crooke also indicated that, over time, some Bairagis began to adopt household life, while many remained within the renunciant tradition. This makes clear that by the nineteenth century, Bairagi society had ceased to be uniform, and diverse ways of life had developed within it.

Crooke's View on Social Structure

One of Crooke's important observations is that being born into any particular caste was not a prerequisite for becoming a Bairagi. People from various social backgrounds could become Vaishnav Bairagis through initiation.

This account accords with the Vaishnav belief that, after initiation, the practitioner's identity is defined by his guru and sampradaya. However, Crooke also noted that in certain regions, Bairagi communities had, over time, also adopted local social customs. The situation was therefore not identical across all regions.

H. A. Rose's Study

H. A. Rose was an officer of the Punjab administration. His celebrated work, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (1911-1919), presents a detailed account of the castes, sampradayas, and religious communities of the Punjab region.

Rose noted the presence of Vaishnav Bairagis in Punjab, along with their mathas and religious activities. He regarded Bairagis as a principal class of Vaishnav ascetics, whose identity was defined by their religious life and matha tradition.

The Mention of Bairagis in the Punjab Region

According to Rose, many Vaishnav Bairagi mathas in Punjab were connected to temples and pilgrimage sites. Some Bairagis were itinerant ascetics, while others resided permanently in mathas. He also noted that discipline, the guru tradition, and religious education held particular importance within Bairagi society.

Similarities Between the Two Studies

Comparing the studies of William Crooke and H. A. Rose yields certain common conclusions: 1. Bairagis are fundamentally connected to the Vaishnav renunciant tradition. 2. The guru-disciple tradition is the foundation of their religious identity. 3. Their mathas were established at India's principal pilgrimage sites. 4. Both renunciant and householder traditions existed. 5. The social influence of Bairagis was not confined to the religious sphere alone.

A Review by Modern Historians

Modern historians regard the work of both scholars as useful, for they presented a direct social picture of their own time. But it is also acknowledged that their purpose was not an in-depth study of Vaishnav philosophy. It is therefore considered more appropriate to read their accounts alongside Indian religious texts, matha records, inscriptions, and modern academic research.

Conclusion of Part 2

The studies of William Crooke and H. A. Rose establish that, by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was an organized and influential part of India's religious life. Their accounts provide important assistance in understanding the structure of Bairagi society, the matha system, and the guru-disciple tradition, although their conclusions should always be used comparatively, alongside other independent sources.

References (Part 2) 1. William Crooke, *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896). 2. H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (1911-1919). 3. Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*. 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. David N. Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism?* (related research essays and studies).

Part 3: The Social Form of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition and an Examination of Colonial Records

During British rule, a wide-ranging survey was conducted of India's society, religious communities, and ascetic traditions. The purpose of this work was chiefly administration, census, and social classification, not the study of any sampradaya's religious doctrines. It is therefore necessary to understand their conclusions regarding the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition within that same historical context.

Bairagi: An Identity of Initiation, Not of Birth

The accounts of William Crooke, R. V. Russell, H. A. Rose, and other colonial authors generally indicate that "Bairagi" was fundamentally a Vaishnav religious tradition, not a caste determined by birth.

Renunciant Vaishnav Bairagis entered the sampradaya by receiving initiation from their guru. Their identity was defined by their guru, matha, akhara (ani), mode of worship, and

Vaishnav conduct. It cannot therefore be regarded as historically sufficient to understand the early Vaishnav Bairagi tradition solely from a caste-based perspective.

The Importance of the Guru-Disciple Tradition

The foundation of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was the guru-disciple relationship. After initiation, the disciple, joining his guru's tradition, followed Vaishnav sadhana, service, study, and discipline. Succession in mathas and akharas, too, was generally granted by the guru to a worthy disciple. For this reason, in many ancient peethas, the guru tradition appears to hold greater importance than hereditary succession.

The Renunciant and Householder Traditions

British-era records also mention that, over time, two tendencies became apparent within the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition — (1) renunciant Vaishnav Bairagis, who lived a life of renunciation connected to mathas, temples, and akharas; and (2) householder Vaishnav Bairagis — in certain regions, followers also developed who married and adopted household life, while retaining their Vaishnav Bairagi religious identity. This change occurred at different times in different regions, so it would not be appropriate to draw a single uniform conclusion for the whole of India.

The Limitations of Colonial Classification

The purpose of British officials was not to write religious history. Their principal task was to classify communities for administrative convenience. For this reason, they often presented religious sampradaya, social community, and local tradition — all three — under a single category. Modern historians hold that these accounts must be cross-checked against other sources when used.

The Perspective of Modern Research

Current research indicates that British records alone are not sufficient to understand the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. For this, a combined study of the following sources is necessary: the guru traditions of Vaishnav sampradayas; the records of ancient mathas; inscriptions and copper plates; the *Bhaktamal* and other traditional texts; the historical documents of the Kumbh and the akharas; and modern university research.

Conclusion

A study of British-era sources indicates that the fundamental basis of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was guru-initiation, renunciation, and Vaishnav sadhana. Over time, householder traditions developed in certain regions, indicating a change in social structure. It is therefore necessary, in historical writing, that the renunciant Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, the householder tradition, and colonial administrative classification be understood from three separate perspectives.

Principal References (Part 3) 1. William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896). 2. R. V. Russell & Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916). 3. H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (1911). 4. Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes* (1883).

5. Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," *Ethnohistory* 25 (1978). 6. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: Religious Experience and Identity in Ayodhya*.

Part 4: Regional Expansion, the Limitations of Colonial Studies, and a Modern Reassessment

British-era gazetteers, census reports, and ethnographic studies mention many aspects of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, but their purpose was not to write the religious or philosophical history of the sampradaya. It is therefore necessary, when using these sources, to conduct a comparative study alongside other Indian sources, matha records, inscriptions, and modern research.

The Expansion of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition in North and Central India

Available historical sources make clear that the influence of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not confined to Ayodhya, Kashi, or Vrindavan alone. Its mathas, temples, cantonments, and sadhana centres were established in many regions of North and Central India.

In Haryana, ancient Vaishnav Bairagi mathas and mahant traditions are mentioned in Sonipat, Panipat, Karnal, Kurukshetra, Yamunanagar, Ambala, and the surrounding areas. Many village temples and ancient thakurdwaras were, for a long time, administered by Bairagi mahants. A systematic survey of these sites is still awaited.

In Punjab, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Dhyanpur, Pindori Dham, and other regions have been important centres of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. Pindori Dham in particular is regarded as a historical centre of the Vaishnav tradition. Colonial records mention the Bairagi mathas of Punjab and their religious influence.

Rajasthan has been a principal region of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, where many ancient peethas, temples, akharas, and mahant traditions developed. In Jaipur, Ajmer, Nathdwara, Pali, Nagaur, Dausa, and the Shekhawati region, the historical remains and religious institutions of this tradition survive to this day.

In Uttar Pradesh, pilgrimage sites such as Ayodhya, Kashi, Prayagraj, Chitrakoot, Mathura, Vrindavan, and Gokul have been principal centres of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. The Bairagi akharas of Ayodhya in particular played an important role in religious and social life.

The Bairagi Principalities of Chhattisgarh

Central India, particularly present-day Chhattisgarh, is an exceedingly important region from the standpoint of Vaishnav Bairagi history. Historical records show that principalities such as Raigarh and Chhuikhadan were ruled by rulers connected to the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. These principalities played a notable role in administration, the protection of religion, and cultural development for nearly two centuries. This subject still awaits detailed archival research, but the available gazetteers and princely records corroborate their historical significance.

The Limitations of Colonial Studies

British officials frequently presented religious sampradaya, social community, and local tradition under a single category. As a result, in some places, the true historical structure of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not made clear. Modern historians therefore regard these sources as useful, but not as final proof.

The Need for Modern Historical Writing

Today it is necessary that, alongside British records, equal importance be given to the records of Indian mathas, inscriptions, copper plates, handwritten manuscripts, local history, princely-state documents, and field surveys. In particular, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh still hold many sites whose systematic historical study remains outstanding.

Conclusion

Western scholars certainly undertook the initial documentation of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, but its complete history is not contained within their works. It is only by drawing together Indian sources, local traditions, and modern research that a balanced and authentic history of this tradition can be written. A thorough study of regions such as Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh will prove an important direction for future research.

Principal References (Part 4) 1. William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896). 2. H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (1911). 3. R. V. Russell & Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916). 4. Central Provinces District Gazetteers (relevant editions of Raigarh, Raipur, Bilaspur, etc.). 5. *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (various volumes). 6. Richard Burghart, *The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect*. 7. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: Religious Experience and Identity in Ayodhya*.

Part 5: A Critical Evaluation of the Conclusions of Western Scholars and Future Research Directions

The gazetteers, census reports, and ethnographic works prepared by British officials and Western scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are today regarded as important sources for historical writing. These sources hold their own place in the study of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition as well. But modern historical writing acknowledges that colonial sources alone are not sufficient to reach any historical conclusion. It is necessary to give equal importance to traditional Indian texts, matha records, inscriptions, copper plates, local history, and direct field research.

The Positive Contribution of Western Scholars

It would be appropriate to acknowledge that the accounts which many British officials compiled, in their own time, of Vaishnav Bairagis, akharas, mathas, and religious institutions, today provide a useful foundation for historical research. Through them, one obtains an initial documentary picture of the contemporary social condition, the distribution of mathas, the classification used in the census, and the presence of the Bairagi

tradition in various regions. In this light, the historical significance of their work is beyond doubt.

Their Limitations

The greatest limitation of these studies was that most authors were not practitioners of Indian religious traditions. Their purpose was to gather administrative information. As a result, in many places, sampradaya and caste were presented together; local traditions were not adequately studied; the guru-disciple traditions received limited mention; and many conclusions were based on limited regional information. For this very reason, modern research uses these sources with caution.

The Importance of Indian Sources

Indian sources are exceedingly important for the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. Among the principal ones are: the guru traditions of the Vaishnav sampradayas; the records of mathas; inscriptions and copper plates; ancient texts in Sanskrit, Braj, Awadhi, and Hindi; the *Bhaktamal* and its ancient commentaries; princely-state records; and the historical documents of local temples. Without these sources, history would remain incomplete.

The Importance of Field Research

History cannot be written from books alone. Many facts remain preserved, to this day, in ancient mathas, temples, cantonments, samadhis, inscriptions, and local traditions. For this reason, direct site inspection, dialogue with local mahants and scholars, and the study of available records are an important foundation for future research.

Future Research Directions

Many aspects of Vaishnav Bairagi history still await deep research — a survey of ancient Bairagi mathas across various states; a comparative study of the Bairagi traditions of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh; the publication of the administrative records of Bairagi principalities; the documentation of the history of the akharas; the preservation of ancient handwritten manuscripts; and the scientific compilation of local oral traditions.

The Methodology of This Research Volume

In this volume, an effort has been made, wherever possible, to present conclusions on the basis of more than one source. Rather than giving a final verdict on any disputed subject on the basis of tradition alone or colonial record alone, various views have been clearly presented.

Furthermore, the author's own observations, gathered during field visits to various states — Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, and Nepal — have been used only where they accord with available historical sources. Personal observations have been treated not as independent historical proof, but as supplementary material.

Conclusion

The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is an important chapter of India's religious, cultural, and social heritage. Western scholars prepared the initial foundation for its study, while Indian scholars and modern research have given it a broader perspective. Future historical writing will become more authentic only when colonial records, traditional Indian sources, epigraphical evidence, and field research are all brought into balanced coordination.

Principal References (Part 5) 1. William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896). 2. H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (1911). 3. R. V. Russell & Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916). 4. *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (various volumes). 5. Richard Burghart, *The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect*. 6. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: Religious Experience and Identity in Ayodhya*. 7. David N. Lorenzen, *Warrior Ascetics in Indian History*, and related research essays.

Chapter 14

Shaiva Naga and Vaishnav Bairagi Traditions — Historical Relations, Conflict, and Coordination

Part 1: Introduction, Historical Background, and the Causes of Conflict (A Source-Based Study)

Within the Indian Sanatan tradition, the Shaiva, Vaishnav, Shakta, Udasin, Nath, and other ascetic traditions made, for centuries, an important contribution to the protection of dharma, culture, and society. The ascetics of these traditions were not confined to spiritual life alone; on many occasions, they also organized themselves for the protection of pilgrimage sites, temples, travellers, and religious freedom.

In the medieval and early modern periods, when political circumstances were unstable, many ascetic traditions also adopted training in arms for the purpose of self-defence and the protection of dharma. It is against this very historical background that the organization of the Shaiva Naga sannyasis and the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas (anis) developed.

The Need for Caution in Historical Writing

The conflicts that occurred between Shaiva Nagas and Vaishnav Bairagis are a sensitive subject in Indian history. The accounts available on this subject are not uniform across various historians, gazetteers, travel narratives, and sectarian texts.

In many places, the dates of events differ; the number of the dead is given differently; there is also disagreement regarding the causes of the conflicts; and many accounts were written many years after the event. For this very reason, modern historians, when studying these events, compare various sources, and where disagreement exists, acknowledge it clearly. This same method has been adopted in this chapter as well.

The Purpose of Founding the Akharas (Anis)

It is the general view of historians that the fundamental purpose of founding the akharas was not merely to wage war. Their principal objectives were: the protection of the Vedic and Sanatan tradition; the safety of pilgrims; the protection of mathas and temples; religious education and sadhana; and self-defence when necessary. For this very reason, various sampradayas developed their own organized religious contingents.

Why Did Conflicts Occur?

On the basis of available historical sources, it may be said that most conflicts arose not from any religious doctrine, but from practical causes. Historians have identified the following principal causes: the order of the royal bath at the Kumbh melas; questions of religious precedence; the right to conduct processions; control over pilgrimage sites; rights over economic resources and donations; and the weakness of local administration.

Modern researchers hold that these conflicts should not be regarded as representative of the permanent relations of the entire Shaiva or entire Vaishnav community. In many

periods, sufficient examples are also found of cooperation and mutual respect between the two traditions.

A Balance Between History and Tradition

Certain sectarian texts give an exceedingly detailed account of these conflicts, while certain British records give comparatively brief information. Modern historical writing advises a comparative study of both types of sources.

For this reason, in this chapter, rather than regarding any single source as final truth, the views of various historians and records will be presented separately, so that readers may draw their own conclusions on the basis of the available evidence.

The Research Methodology of This Chapter

In this chapter, each conflict will be discussed separately under the following points: 1. The historical context of the event. 2. The accounts of various historians. 3. Differing views regarding the number of the dead. 4. Available primary and secondary sources. 5. The evaluation of modern historians. 6. Conclusion — a clear statement of where the facts are settled and where disagreement exists.

Principal References (Part 1) 1. James G. Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway: Identity and Meaning in a Hindu Pilgrimage Place*. 2. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 3. David N. Lorenzen, *Warrior Ascetics in Indian History*. 4. Kama Maclean, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad*. 5. *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (relevant volumes). 6. Haridwar District Gazetteer (various editions). 7. Related historical studies by Jadunath Sarkar.

Part 2: The 1760 CE Haridwar Kumbh Conflict — The Views of Various Historians and a Source-Based Analysis

The Haridwar Kumbh is regarded as the largest pilgrimage gathering in Indian religious history. It has been an important centre not merely of ritual bathing, but also of various akharas, sampradayas, and ascetic traditions. In the eighteenth century, when the political situation of North India was unstable and Mughal power was weakening, many ascetic traditions themselves also functioned in an organized, armed form. It is against this very historical background that the famous conflict of the 1760 CE Haridwar Kumbh occurred.

The Cause of the Conflict

Most historians hold that the immediate cause of the conflict was the question of the right of first entry into the royal (shahi) bath and religious precedence. Some scholars also regard economic, administrative, and pilgrimage-management causes as significant behind it. It would therefore not be appropriate to regard it merely as the outcome of religious disagreement.

Disagreement Over the Number of the Dead

The most disputed aspect of the 1760 conflict is the number of the dead. Captain Francis Raper (1808) wrote that approximately 18,000 Vaishnav Bairagis were killed in this conflict. His account was written in the administrative context of the East India Company.

But in 1888, the District Magistrate of Allahabad regarded this figure as considerably exaggerated, writing that Raper's estimate appeared to exceed reality.

The modern historian Michael Cook, reassessing the available evidence, expressed the estimate that the actual number was probably around 1,800. He made clear that the figure of 18,000 cannot be regarded as conclusively proven.

The historian Kama Maclean has also written that this conflict was exceedingly severe, but that serious disagreement exists among various sources regarding the number of the dead.

Did Only the Bairagis Die?

An important historical question arises here. If armed conflict occurred between two sides, then naturally both sides would have suffered losses. But most available colonial sources mention specifically the losses of the Vaishnav Bairagis, while a separate and reliable numerical account of Shaiva Naga losses is generally not available.

It cannot therefore be historically established that only one side suffered losses; equally, it is not possible, on the basis of available evidence, to give a definite figure for the losses of the other side. Caution is therefore necessary on this subject.

The Consequences of the Conflict

According to many historical accounts, changes occurred in the arrangements of the Haridwar Kumbh for some time after this conflict. Later, the British administration brought the management of the Kumbh Mela under its own control, making the bathing order and security arrangements of the various akharas more regulated, in an effort to prevent the recurrence of such large-scale conflicts in future.

Historical Conclusion

The 1760 CE Haridwar Kumbh conflict is an important event in Indian religious history. Most historians agree that it occurred, but there is no complete consensus regarding the number of the dead, the detailed account of the event, and the losses of the various sides. From a research standpoint, therefore, it is appropriate that all principal views be presented along with their sources, and that where definite evidence is not available, estimates not be written as final truth.

Principal References (Part 2) 1. Captain Francis Raper (1808) - an early British account of the Haridwar Kumbh. 2. Kama Maclean, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad*. 3. Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics*. 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*.

Part 3: Conflicts Between the Shaiva Naga and Vaishnav Bairagi Traditions at Ujjain, Nashik, and Other Kumbh Melas

Besides Haridwar, mentions of tension and conflict between ascetic akharas at various periods are also found at the Kumbh melas of Ujjain (Simhastha), Nashik (Trimbakeshwar), and Prayag. Descriptions of these events are found in British records, gazetteers, travel accounts, and the research of modern historians. But there is no complete consensus regarding the details, dates, causes, and casualty figures of each event. These should therefore be studied only on the basis of a comparison of sources.

1. The Ujjain (Simhastha) Conflicts

The Simhastha Kumbh of Ujjain is one of India's four principal Kumbhs. The presence of Shaiva Naga sannyasis and Vaishnav Bairagi akharas has existed here since ancient times.

According to some historians, in the eighteenth century, serious conflicts occurred at the time of the Simhastha over the order of the royal bath, religious precedence, and the seniority of the akharas. But various sources give differing accounts of the year and nature of these events.

William R. Pinch holds that competition among the akharas in the eighteenth century was not merely religious; causes such as political patronage, economic resources, and social prestige were also at work behind it. The historian David N. Lorenzen likewise holds that the ascetic organizations of that period cannot be viewed in isolation from the political circumstances of the time.

2. The Nashik (Trimbakeshwar) Kumbh

At the Nashik Kumbh too, disputes are mentioned from time to time regarding the right to the royal bath and the order of the procession. British administrative records show that in the nineteenth century, the administration began to more clearly define the bathing order and the arrangement of the akharas, so that the possibility of major conflicts might be reduced.

Certain gazetteers mention that disagreements had occurred in earlier periods, but detailed accounts of them are not available. These events should therefore be described with caution.

3. The Prayag (Allahabad) Kumbh

The Kumbh of Prayagraj has also been a principal centre of various akharas. Available records show that disputes arose here too, from time to time, over the arrangement of the royal bath, but not every dispute turned into a violent conflict.

In the nineteenth century, the British administration began to formally organize the order of entry, bathing times, and security arrangements of the akharas in writing. This brought about a reduction in large-scale confrontations.

4. The General Causes of the Conflicts

According to modern historians, the principal causes of these conflicts were: the right of first entry into the royal bath; religious and social precedence; the traditional seniority of the akharas; influence over pilgrimage sites; the management of donations and resources; and the weakness of local administration. Most modern researchers emphasize that these conflicts should not be viewed as an ideological opposition between Shaiva and Vaishnav philosophy. Their causes were, for the most part, organizational, social, and administrative.

5. The Present-Day System

Today, the order of the royal bath of the various akharas at the Kumbh melas is predetermined. The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the concerned state governments, and the administration together ensure the bathing arrangements, security, and discipline. For this reason, large-scale violent events of the kind seen in the past are no longer witnessed.

Conclusion

The available historical sources relating to Ujjain, Nashik, and Prayag indicate that tension and conflict occurred between the akharas at various periods. But the nature, date, and casualty figures of each event are not uniform across all sources. It would therefore not be appropriate to regard any single account as final truth. From a research standpoint, conclusions should be presented only after comparing all the principal sources.

Research Safety Note: In this part, the definite number of the dead in any conflict has deliberately not been given, since there is sufficient disagreement among the available sources regarding Ujjain, Nashik, and Prayag. From a research standpoint, this is regarded as the safest and most impartial method.

Principal References (Part 3) 1. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 2. David N. Lorenzen, *Warrior Ascetics in Indian History*. 3. Related historical studies by Jadunath Sarkar. 4. *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (relevant volumes). 5. Bombay Presidency Gazetteer (Nasik District). 6. Central India Gazetteer (Ujjain-related account). 7. James G. Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway: Identity and Meaning in a Hindu Pilgrimage Place*.

Part 4: Changes in Arrangements After the Conflicts, the Tradition of the Royal Bath, and Coordination Among the Akharas

The conflicts that occurred at Haridwar, Ujjain, and other pilgrimage sites in the eighteenth century made clear that great religious gatherings, attended by millions of devotees, require well-organized administration and clear rules. As a result, over time, the management of the Kumbh melas became increasingly organized, and the rights and traditions of the various akharas were given a settled form.

The System of the Royal Bath

Today, among the most important traditions of the Kumbh Mela is the royal (shahi) bath. Each akhara is given a fixed time and order according to tradition. Historians hold that the purpose of organizing the bathing order was not to establish any akhara as superior or

inferior, but to prevent potential disputes and to ensure the safety of the millions of devotees present.

Over time, this system became administratively more organized at all the principal Kumbh sites — Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain, and Nashik.

The Role of the British Administration

In the nineteenth century, the British administration began paying particular attention to the conduct of the Kumbh melas. Various gazetteers and administrative records mention that entry routes for the akharas were fixed; the timing of the royal bath was determined; security forces were arranged; measures for crowd control were adopted; and the routes of religious processions were made clear. The purpose of these arrangements was not to interfere in religious traditions, but to maintain public order.

Dialogue Among the Akharas

Over time, the mahants and saints of the various akharas also came to realize that continual conflict was not in the interest of any sampradaya. For this reason, a tradition developed of mutual dialogue, adherence to traditional rules, and the resolution of disputes by consensus. In modern Kumbh melas, most decisions are taken through mutual agreement among the senior saints of the akharas and coordination with the administration.

The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad

Today, the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad plays an important role in establishing coordination among the various akharas. This institution carries out the work of dialogue among the various akharas, participation in the Kumbh melas, and the coordination of religious programmes and traditional arrangements. Although the council's present form developed in the modern era, its purpose is to maintain cooperation and coordination among the various akharas.

The Present Situation

Today, the Shaiva Naga, Vaishnav Bairagi, Udasin, and other akharas participate in the Kumbh melas according to their own respective traditions. Although minor administrative disagreements may arise from time to time, large-scale violent conflicts of the kind seen in the past are now exceedingly rare. Modern administration, clear rules, and dialogue among the akharas have played an important role in this regard.

A Historical Evaluation

Modern historians arrive at the conclusion that important lessons were learned from the conflicts of the eighteenth century. In the later period, on the basis of religious freedom, administrative organization, and mutual respect among the akharas, a system developed that made the Kumbh Mela more organized and peaceful. Thus, history does not merely describe conflicts; it also shows how society learned from those experiences and developed better systems.

Principal References (Part 4) 1. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 2. Kama Maclean, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad*. 3. James G. Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway: Identity and Meaning in a Hindu Pilgrimage Place*. 4. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. 5. Haridwar District Gazetteer. 6. Allahabad District Gazetteer.

Part 5: Lessons from History — Present-Day Relations, Cooperation, and the Unifying Tradition of Sanatan Dharma

History is not merely an account of wars and conflicts; it also teaches society what lessons should be drawn from past events for the future. The available historical sources regarding the Shaiva Naga and Vaishnav Bairagi traditions show that certain serious conflicts certainly occurred at various periods, but these cannot be regarded as representative of the entirety of their history. Equally important are those periods in which the two traditions extended cooperation, respect, and religious responsibility toward one another.

The Conflicts Were the Exception, Not the Tradition

Modern historians — particularly William R. Pinch, David N. Lorenzen, and Kama Maclean — hold that the conflicts of the eighteenth century were the product of specific political and social circumstances. It would not be historically appropriate to present them as a permanent ideological opposition between Shaiva and Vaishnav philosophy.

Within the Indian Sanatan tradition, both the Shaiva and Vaishnav streams have developed side by side for millennia. There are many pilgrimage sites, temples, and religious festivals where the participation of both traditions is equally visible.

The Harmonizing Tradition of Sanatan Dharma

Many examples of the mutual respect of Shiva and Vishnu are found in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, and the Smriti texts. The joint worship of Hari-Hara, and the description of the non-difference of Shiva and Vishnu, are found in the Harivamsha Purana, the Bhagavata Purana, the Skanda Purana, the Linga Purana, and other texts. For this reason, most acharyas acknowledge that the Shaiva and Vaishnav traditions are not competitors, but complementary spiritual streams of Sanatan Dharma.

The Present Kumbh System

Today, at the Kumbh melas of Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain, and Nashik, all recognized akharas take the royal bath in a fixed order. The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the mahants and saints of the various akharas, and the state administration together conduct these arrangements through mutual coordination. Today the form of the Kumbh is regarded as a symbol of cooperation, discipline, and religious dignity.

The Perspective of Historians

Contemporary historians advise that the conflicts of the past be studied impartially, but that they not be projected onto present-day social relations. Where various sources give differing information regarding an event, it is considered appropriate, from a research standpoint, to mention all views. This same method has been adopted in this chapter.

The Author's Research Perspective

The purpose of this book is not to establish any sampradaya as superior or inferior. The purpose of this research is only to present the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition on the basis of a comparative study of available historical sources, gazetteers, records, census reports, modern research works, and sectarian traditions.

Where facts are undisputed, they have been presented as such; and where historians disagree, all principal views have been impartially noted. This is the scientific method of a research volume.

Closing

Both the Shaiva Naga and Vaishnav Bairagi traditions have enriched Indian culture, the pilgrimage tradition, the protection of dharma, and spiritual life. Certain conflicts certainly occurred in history, but the history of coexistence, mutual respect, and the protection of Sanatan Dharma has been far longer than that of conflict.

Chapter 15

The Char Dham of India and the Vaishnav Tradition

Through the Eyes of a Researcher-Traveller

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark — (Retired Military Officer and Historian)

Part 1: The Concept of the Char Dham, Its History, and the Sanatan Vaishnav Tradition

India has been called, since ancient times, the land of pilgrimage sites. Here, mountains, rivers, forests, ashrams, temples, and lands of austerity are not merely geographical locations, but living symbols of Indian culture, philosophy, and spirituality. Among these sacred pilgrimage sites, the Char Dham (Four Abodes) hold the most exalted place. Sri Badrinath in the north, Sri Dwarkadhish in the west, Sri Rameshwaram in the south, and Sri Jagannath Puri in the east — these four dhams are regarded as the four pillars of India's cultural unity, religious continuity, and Sanatan tradition.

A belief prevails among the Indian people that undertaking the Char Dham pilgrimage at least once in one's life brings spiritual fulfilment. Although this belief is religious in nature, from a historical standpoint too, these four pilgrimage sites have played an exceedingly important role in culturally connecting India. A devotee from the north reaches the south, a devotee from the east travels to the west, and in this way, pilgrimage becomes a medium of India's cultural unity.

Credit for the present all-India tradition of the Char Dham is generally given to Adi Shankaracharya. Scholars hold that he undertook the work of connecting the principal pilgrimage sites situated in various regions of India into a single cultural thread. Through the mathas and pilgrimage sites established at Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, and in the south, he gave new direction to religious dialogue and the pilgrimage tradition across the whole of India. It should also be noted that these pilgrimage sites existed even before Adi Shankaracharya; his contribution is regarded chiefly as their revival and wider establishment.

From a Vaishnav standpoint, the significance of these four dhams is exceedingly broad. The traditions connected to Lord Narayana at Badrinath, Sri Krishna at Dwarka, Sri Jagannath at Jagannath Puri, and Lord Sri Ram at Rameshwaram bring together the diverse streams of Sanatan Dharma into a single thread. In particular, Badrinath, Dwarka, and Jagannath Puri are directly connected to various forms of Lord Vishnu, while Rameshwaram, being a memorial to Lord Sri Ram's worship of Shiva, presents a unique example of the coordination of the Vaishnav and Shaiva traditions.

These pilgrimage sites are mentioned in various forms in Indian scriptures. The glory of these sites is described in the Mahabharata, the Skanda Purana, the Vishnu Purana, the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana, the Padma Purana, the Brahma Purana, and other Puranas. The purpose of the accounts given in these texts is chiefly to provide religious and spiritual inspiration. Modern historians, when studying these texts, view religious tradition and historical evidence from two separate perspectives. In this chapter, therefore, where a fact

is founded on religious tradition, it will be presented as such; and where historical or archaeological evidence is available, that too will be mentioned.

For me, the Char Dham pilgrimage was never merely a religious ritual. After 24 years of service in the Indian Army, when I began the work of historical writing following my retirement, I came to realize that a complete knowledge of history cannot be gained from books alone. It is also a researcher's responsibility to directly see the places one writes about, to understand their traditions, to converse with local people, saints, and mahants, and to observe the present condition. It was in this very spirit that I undertook journeys to many historical and religious sites across India.

My previously published book, "Yatra: Bandook Se Kalam Tak" (Journey: From Rifle to Pen), was chiefly founded on travel narrative. The purpose of the present book is different. Here, the journeys to the Char Dham are presented not merely as personal reminiscence, but as a historical, cultural, and religious study of the Sanatan Vaishnav tradition. Wherever I have direct experience, it will be clearly written as such; wherever historical sources are available, the discussion will be founded upon them.

During the Char Dham journeys, I experienced that a remarkable unity exists within India's diversity. Language changes, food changes, dress changes, the architectural style of temples changes, but the sentiment of devotion does not change. Badrinath in the Himalayas, Dwarka in Gujarat, Jagannath Puri in Odisha, and Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu — all four places, though different in their own form, are symbols of the one unbroken stream of Sanatan Dharma.

In this chapter, Badrinath, Dwarka, Jagannath Puri, and Rameshwaram will be described in turn, on the basis of their history, religious tradition, connection to Vaishnav sampradayas, available historical evidence, and my own direct travel experiences. The purpose is not to establish the superiority of any sampradaya, but to show how India's pilgrimage tradition has, for centuries, strengthened the nation's cultural unity.

Principal References 1. The Mahabharata (Vana Parva, the pilgrimage episodes). 2. The Skanda Purana (Badarikashrama Mahatmya, Purushottama Kshetra Mahatmya, etc.). 3. The Vishnu Purana. 4. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 5. Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*. 6. Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurana* (relevant study). 7. Archaeological Survey of India (official publications relating to the relevant monuments and archaeological records).

Part 2: Badrinath Dham — History, the Vaishnav Tradition, and My Direct Study

Among the Char Dham, the place of Sri Badrinath Dham is regarded as supreme. Cradled in the Himalayas, in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, at an elevation of approximately 3,133 metres above sea level, on the left bank of the Alaknanda river, between the Nar and Narayana mountains, this dham is a great centre of India's ancient Vaishnav sadhana. Badarikashrama is mentioned continually in Vedic, Puranic, and medieval traditions. For this reason, this pilgrimage site is not merely a matter of religious faith, but also a witness to the continuity of Indian civilization and culture.

Various traditions exist regarding the name “Badarikashrama.” According to one prevalent belief, Lord Vishnu was absorbed here in rigorous austerity. At that time, Mother Lakshmi, to protect him from the snowfall, assumed the form of a badari (wild jujube) tree. For this reason, this place came to be called Badrinath, or Badarikashrama. This story is part of religious tradition, and the glory of this region is described in many texts, including the Badarikashrama Mahatmya of the Skanda Purana.

The Vana Parva of the Mahabharata mentions the Pandavas’ journey to the Himalayas and to Badarikashrama. Within Vaishnav tradition, it is also held that the sages Nara and Narayana performed austerities in this very region for thousands of years. For this reason, Badrinath is regarded as the supreme centre of austerity, yoga, and Vaishnav sadhana. Although the historical examination of these traditions is a separate matter, they hold an exceedingly important place in Indian religious literature.

Historians generally hold that the present form of the temple developed across various periods. According to tradition, Adi Shankaracharya revived this dham around the eighth-ninth century, recovering the image of Lord Badrinarayan from the Naradkund and reinstalling it. This event is mentioned chiefly in traditional biographies and matha traditions. Modern historians accept this as religious tradition, while disagreement is also found regarding the precise date. It is therefore more appropriate, from a research standpoint, to say that the ancient sanctity of Badrinath is undisputed, but that scholars do not hold a uniform view regarding its various stages of construction.

The architectural style of the Badrinath temple is a beautiful example of North Indian mountain temple architecture. The temple has undergone renovation from time to time, on account of earthquakes, snowfall, and natural calamities. The present temple’s preservation and management is carried out by the Badri-Kedar Temple Committee. Millions of devotees arrive here for darshan every year. Owing to heavy snowfall in winter, the temple doors are closed, and, according to tradition, worship of the deity is conducted at Joshimath.

An exceedingly important feature of Badrinath Dham is its Rawal tradition. The chief priest of the temple is called the Rawal, and, according to tradition, he is selected from the Namboodiri Brahmin community of Kerala. This tradition of a South Indian priest at a principal North Indian Vaishnav dham presents a remarkable example of India’s cultural unity. It makes clear that Sanatan Dharma is not confined to any one region or language, but is the shared spiritual heritage of the whole of India.

I have had the good fortune of taking darshan of Lord Badrinarayan four times. The first journey took place on 1 June 2014, the second in May 2017, the third on 15 April 2023, and the fourth on 18 June 2025. The journey of 2025 was undertaken together with my wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav. On the earlier journeys, I was also accompanied by my younger brother Subhash Swami, Mahasingh Swami, Shri Satyanarayan Nambardar, and Shri Deepak Sharma. These journeys gave me not merely the opportunity for darshan, but also, as a researcher, the opportunity to understand the Vaishnav tradition of the Himalayas at close quarters.

Departing from Haryana and passing through Haridwar, Rishikesh, Devprayag, Srinagar, Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, Nandprayag, Chamoli, Joshimath, and Vishnuprayag before

reaching Badrinath is, in itself, a spiritual experience. Along the way, darshan of the Panch Prayags (five confluences) recalls India's river civilization, the Puranas, and the pilgrimage tradition. The swift current of the Alaknanda, the towering peaks of the Himalayas, and the natural beauty of the valleys produce a remarkable peace of mind.

On reaching Badrinath, we bathed, according to tradition, in the Tapt Kund. Amid the biting cold of the Himalayas, this naturally hot spring remains, to this day, a source of wonder and faith for devotees. Thereafter we took darshan at the temple of Lord Sri Badrinarayan. Standing before the divine image of the Lord in the sanctum sanctorum, I experienced that the history read in texts and history directly experienced are two separate dimensions. For a researcher, the direct darshan of a pilgrimage site lends new depth to book-based study.

During the four journeys, I also had the opportunity to visit Mana village, the Vyas Cave, the Ganesh Cave, the Bhim Pul (bridge), and the Saraswati river. According to local tradition, it was in the Vyas Cave that Maharishi Vedavyasa composed the Mahabharata, and Lord Ganesha wrote it down. A popular tradition of the Mahabharata is current regarding the Bhim Pul. It is more appropriate to understand these beliefs not as historical fact, but as part of Indian religious-cultural tradition.

The journey of 2025 was especially memorable for me, for this time my wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav, was with me. She performed worship of Lord Badrinarayan with exceeding devotion and faith. We prayed for the welfare of our family, society, the nation, and the whole of humanity. This journey made me experience that a pilgrimage is not merely a means to individual liberation, but also a medium for spiritually connecting family and society.

Having journeyed to Badrinath Dham four times, my conviction has grown firmer that India's Vaishnav tradition remains, to this day, as vibrant as it is described in the scriptures. Sadhus and saints, mathas, pilgrims, local traditions, and the temple system — all these together keep alive that unbroken stream of Sanatan culture which has bound Indian society together for thousands of years. As a researcher, I have experienced that the true study of history is complete only when, alongside texts, one also directly observes the sites where that history remains alive to this day.

References 1. The Mahabharata, Vana Parva (the pilgrimage episodes). 2. The Skanda Purana, Badarikashrama Mahatmya. 3. The Vishnu Purana. 4. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 5. The Badri-Kedar Temple Committee, official publications relating to Badrinath Dham. 6. Archaeological Survey of India (published material relating to the Uttarakhand region). 7. Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*.

Part 3: Dwarkadhish Dham — The Capital of Sri Krishna, the Vaishnav Tradition, and My Direct Study

Among the four principal dhams of Sanatan Dharma, the western direction is represented by Dwarkadhish Dham. Situated on the shore of the Arabian Sea in the Devbhoomi Dwarka district of Gujarat, this pilgrimage site is world-renowned as the capital of Lord Sri Krishna. Its place within Vaishnav tradition is exceedingly important. If Ayodhya is a symbol of Lord Sri Ram's propriety (maryada), and Vrindavan of love and sweetness, then Dwarka is

regarded as a symbol of Lord Sri Krishna's statecraft, policy, administration, and welfare of the people.

Dwarka's mention is not confined to religious texts alone; it has also been an important subject of Indian history, archaeology, and marine research. In this chapter, therefore, it is necessary to present religious traditions and historical research from two separate perspectives.

Dwarka is mentioned in the Mahabharata, the Harivamsha, the Vishnu Purana, the Bhagavata Mahapurana, the Skanda Purana, and the Brahma Purana. According to tradition, after repeated attacks on Mathura, Lord Sri Krishna established a well-fortified city on the western sea coast for the protection of the Yadavas. A detailed description of this city is found in the Harivamsha and the Bhagavata Purana. According to these texts, this city was exceedingly prosperous, well-organized, and surrounded by the sea.

A celebrated religious belief regarding Dwarka is also that, after Lord Sri Krishna's departure from this earth, this city was submerged in the sea. This account is found in the Mausala Parva of the Mahabharata and in the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. From a research standpoint, it is necessary to make clear that this is a tradition described in religious texts. Modern archaeologists are studying the remains found beneath the sea, but, on the basis of available evidence, scholars still disagree regarding the complete identification and dating of ancient Dwarka. It would therefore not be appropriate to present any single view as final historical truth.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, important work was undertaken in the field of marine archaeology. Structural remains, stone anchors, and other objects were found beneath the sea. These discoveries certainly indicate that ancient maritime activity and ancient settlements existed in this region, but establishing all these remains directly as the Dwarka of the Mahabharata period remains a subject of research. As a researcher, therefore, we must accord balanced respect to both religious tradition and scientific research.

The present Dwarkadhish temple, also called the Jagat Mandir, is one of India's principal Vaishnav pilgrimage sites. According to scholars, the main structure of the present building developed in the medieval period, while it has undergone renovation from time to time. The temple's approximately 78-metre-high spire structure, its five storeys, 72 pillars, and vast flag are its distinctive identity. The tradition of changing the flag several times daily is observed with devotion to this day, and is regarded as a special part of service to the Lord.

Dwarka's connection is not only to the capital of Sri Krishna, but also to the Sharada Peeth. According to tradition, Adi Shankaracharya established the Paschimamnaya Sharada Peeth here. This makes clear that Dwarka has been a principal centre not of the Vaishnavs alone, but of the diverse spiritual traditions of the whole of Sanatan Dharma.

Dwarka is also of exceeding importance from the standpoint of Vaishnav sampradayas. Saints and acharyas of the Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhva, Vallabha, and Gaudiya Vaishnav traditions journeyed to this dham from time to time and propagated devotion to Sri Krishna. It should certainly be noted that each sampradaya has its own traditions and texts;

therefore, where historical records are available, they should be accepted as history, and where only sectarian tradition exists, it should be presented as such.

For me, the journey to Dwarkadhish Dham was not merely a religious pilgrimage, but also an opportunity to understand the historical and cultural personality of Sri Krishna. On entering the temple complex, the devotion of thousands of devotees, the sound of Vedic mantras, and the confluence of the sea's waves together produce a remarkable spiritual atmosphere. At the time of darshan, I experienced that Sri Krishna is not merely a hero of the Mahabharata, but an ideal of Indian culture whose influence has fallen equally upon politics, philosophy, devotion, and popular life.

During my travels in Dwarka, I experienced that a pilgrimage site is not confined to a temple alone. The city's ancient traditions, local life, the bank of the Gomti, the atmosphere of the sea, and the faith of devotees — all these together create a living cultural heritage. For a researcher, the observation of all these aspects is exceedingly necessary for historical writing.

In my view, Dwarka is a remarkable confluence of India's maritime civilization, Vaishnav devotion, and cultural unity. Here, religion, history, and popular tradition all appear as complementary to one another. It is for this reason that even after thousands of years, Dwarkadhish Dham remains a centre of attraction for millions of devotees.

References 1. The Mahabharata - Sabha Parva, Mausala Parva. 2. The Harivamsha Purana. 3. The Vishnu Purana. 4. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana (Skandhas 10 and 11). 5. The Skanda Purana (Dwarka Mahatmya). 6. S. R. Rao, *The Lost City of Dvaraka* (a study on marine archaeology; scholars also disagree regarding the conclusions). 7. Related research material published by the Archaeological Survey of India and the National Institute of Oceanography.

Part 4: Sri Jagannath Puri Dham — History, Tradition, the Rath Yatra, and Vaishnav Culture

Among India's four principal dhams, the eastern direction is represented by Sri Jagannath Puri Dham. Situated in the city of Puri in the state of Odisha, this pilgrimage site is a great spiritual and cultural centre not of the Vaishnav sampradaya alone, but of the whole of Sanatan Dharma. The joint worship of Lord Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra, and his sister Subhadra makes it distinctive among the world's other temples. For millions of Indian devotees, Jagannath Dham is a symbol of devotion, service, coordination, and the welfare of the people.

According to religious traditions, the history of Jagannath Dham is regarded as exceedingly ancient. The glory of this region is described in the Purushottama Kshetra Mahatmya of the Skanda Purana, the Brahma Purana, the Padma Purana, the Narada Purana, and other texts. According to tradition, King Indradyumna, after the discovery of Lord Nilamadhava, had Lord Jagannath consecrated. This account is found in religious literature and holds exceeding importance for devotees. Historians view these stories as religious tradition, while studying the historical development of the temple on the basis of records, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence.

The construction of the present Sri Jagannath temple is generally attributed to King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva of the Eastern Ganga dynasty (11th-12th century). Later rulers too expanded and preserved the temple. This view is founded on inscriptions and historical studies. In this way, both religious tradition and historical record together present the story of Jagannath Dham's development.

A distinctive feature of the Jagannath temple is its tradition of daru-vigraha (wooden images). The images of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra are made of wood, and after a fixed period, new images are consecrated according to the tradition of Nabakalebara. This tradition is regarded as unique among Indian temple traditions and holds exceeding religious importance.

The world-famous Rath Yatra of Jagannath Dham is counted among the largest religious festivals not only in India, but in the world. Every year, in the month of Ashadha, Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra journey on vast chariots to the Sri Gundicha Temple. Millions of devotees regard pulling the ropes of the chariots as a great fortune of their lives. This festival is not merely a religious occasion, but also an unparalleled example of social harmony and popular participation.

Jagannath Dham holds a special place among the Vaishnav sampradayas. Sri Ramanujacharya's arrival at Puri is mentioned within the Shri Vaishnav tradition, although historians hold differing views regarding the extent and nature of his influence. The Nimbarka, Madhva, Vallabha, and, in particular, the tradition of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu are regarded as deeply connected to Puri. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu spent the final period of his life at Puri, for which sufficient historical and literary evidence is available. Jagannath Dham is therefore also regarded as a principal centre of the Vaishnav bhakti movement.

The purpose of my journey to Jagannath Puri was not darshan alone. As a researcher, my interest lay in understanding how, for centuries, this dham has connected people of various sampradayas, languages, and regions into a single thread. On direct observation of the temple complex, the sea coast, local traditions, and the faith of devotees, it became clearly apparent that Jagannath Dham is truly a living symbol of Indian cultural unity.

At Puri, I also experienced that here, the Lord is served not merely as a king or deity, but as a member of the family. The daily offering of food, the changing of garments, festivals, and various services are performed regarding the Lord as a living presence. It is for this reason that the mode of service of the Jagannath temple holds a distinctive place among Indian temple traditions.

The Mahaprasad of Jagannath Dham also holds special significance. It is tradition that the food offered to the Lord is equally available to all devotees. From a social standpoint, this tradition is regarded as a symbol of harmony and shared faith. People of various communities partake of the Mahaprasad together, which also conveys a message of social unity.

On the basis of my study, it may be said that Jagannath Puri is not merely a temple, but a great centre of India's religious, cultural, and social consciousness. Here, a remarkable confluence of Vaishnav devotion, popular tradition, temple organization, and social

harmony is visible. As a researcher, I have experienced that if Badrinath is a symbol of Himalayan austerity, and Dwarka of Sri Krishna's statecraft, then Jagannath Puri is the supreme symbol of the welfare of the people, service, and a coordinated Vaishnav culture.

References 1. The Skanda Purana - Purushottama Kshetra Mahatmya. 2. The Brahma Purana. 3. The Padma Purana. 4. The Narada Purana. 5. Eschmann, Kulke & Tripathi (eds.), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*. 6. The research publications of Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi on Jagannath. 7. The Madala Panji (the traditional historical chronicle of the Jagannath temple; to be used with caution, since it also incorporates religious traditions). 8. Related publications of the Archaeological Survey of India and Odisha State Archaeology.

Part 5: Rameshwaram Dham — Sri Ram, the Setu Tradition, Shaiva-Vaishnav Coordination, and My Direct Study

Among India's four principal dhams, the southern direction is represented by Rameshwaram Dham. Situated in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, this pilgrimage site is a symbol of that great Sanatan Dharma tradition in which Lord Sri Ram, Lord Shiva, and the coordination of the Sanatan Vaishnav-Shaiva traditions are all visible in a single place. Among the Char Dham, Rameshwaram's place is unique in that it is a centre not of the Vaishnav or Shaiva tradition alone, but a living example of the mutual respect and unifying spirit of both streams.

According to the Yuddha Kanda of the Valmiki Ramayana, before the conquest of Lanka, Lord Sri Ram reached the sea coast and prayed to the sea to grant passage. Thereafter, an account is found of the construction of a bridge across the sea by the monkey army under the leadership of Nala and Nila. According to religious tradition, after achieving victory, Sri Ram worshipped Lord Shiva and established the Ramanathaswamy Jyotirlinga. This story holds a prominent place in the Valmiki Ramayana, the Skanda Purana, the Shiva Purana, and local religious traditions. Historians accept this as religious tradition, while various views exist regarding its historical aspect.

The present Sri Ramanathaswamy temple of Rameshwaram is regarded as an outstanding example of India's Dravidian architectural art. The temple's present form developed under the patronage of various dynasties — particularly the Pandya, Vijayanagara, and Setupati rulers. The temple's vast gopurams, its long circumambulatory corridor, and its outstanding stone carving attract architectural experts from across the world. The approximately 1,200-metre-long corridor is counted among the longest temple corridors in the world.

Among the most important religious traditions of Rameshwaram is bathing at the 22 sacred wells (tirthas). Devotees bathe in the water of these tirthas before entering the temple. Various religious beliefs are attached to each well. These beliefs should be understood in the context of faith and tradition; separate studies are available on their historical or scientific aspects.

Dhanushkodi, situated near Rameshwaram, is an important site of Indian religious and cultural memory. According to tradition, this is where the bridge toward Lanka is held to

have begun. Modern satellite images show a natural chain of limestone between India and Sri Lanka, generally called the Ram Setu or Adam's Bridge. Various views exist among scientists, geologists, and historians on this subject. Current scientific research regards this structure as a natural geological formation, while religious tradition connects it to the bridge described in the Ramayana. As a researcher, therefore, it is necessary to present both perspectives clearly and separately.

The purpose of my journey to Rameshwaram was not darshan alone. As a researcher, my interest lay in understanding how this pilgrimage site, situated at India's southern tip, connects the story of Ram, the Vaishnav tradition, and devotion to Shiva from North India into a single thread. Observing devotees who had come from various states within the temple complex, I experienced that the true strength of Sanatan Dharma lies in the unity embedded within its diversity.

Observing the temple's vast pillars, its long corridor, and its ancient architecture at close quarters, I experienced that Indian craftsmen developed a remarkable architectural art even with limited resources. The fine carving on the stones, the vast mandapas, and the temple's plan present proof of the elevated tradition of Indian architecture.

At Rameshwaram, I also experienced that no manner of Vaishnav-Shaiva opposition is visible here. Lord Sri Ram himself worships Lord Shiva — this message reveals the coordinating spirit of Sanatan Dharma. For this reason, many acharyas have regarded Rameshwaram as a symbol of dialogue and mutual respect among sampradayas.

It became clear in my study that the purpose of the Char Dham pilgrimage is not merely to take darshan of four temples, but also to understand India's cultural integrity. Austerity at Badrinath, Sri Krishna's statecraft at Dwarka, service to the people at Jagannath Puri, and coordination at Rameshwaram — all four together present the broad vision of Sanatan Dharma.

The journey to Rameshwaram made me experience that it is necessary to understand history, faith, and culture separately, but it would not be appropriate to regard them as mutually opposed. Where religious tradition is a matter of faith, history and archaeology are matters of research. It is only by respecting both that balanced historical writing becomes possible. This is also the fundamental purpose of this book.

Ultimately, for me, Rameshwaram is not merely a pilgrimage site, but a living symbol of India's spiritual unity. After journeying from Badrinath in the north to Rameshwaram in the south, and from Jagannath Puri in the east to Dwarka in the west, this realization grew still firmer — that Sanatan Dharma belongs not to any one region, language, or caste, but is the shared heritage of the whole of Indian civilization.

References 1. The Valmiki Ramayana - Yuddha Kanda. 2. The Skanda Purana - the Setu Mahatmya and passages relating to the Rameshwar region. 3. The Shiva Purana - the glory of the Jyotirlingas (the Rameshwaram tradition). 4. The Padma Purana (relevant mentions of pilgrimage glory). 5. Publications of the Archaeological Survey of India (relating to the Ramanathaswamy temple and associated monuments). 6. Research available from the Geological Survey of India and other geological studies on the natural limestone chain

between India and Sri Lanka (Ram Setu / Adam's Bridge). 7. Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*.

Part 6: The Overall Conclusion of the Char Dham Pilgrimage, the Sanatan Vaishnav Tradition, and a Researcher-Traveller's Reflection

Having studied journeys to India's four dhams — Badrinath, Dwarka, Sri Jagannath Puri, and Rameshwaram — it becomes clear that these pilgrimage sites are not merely centres of religious faith, but also great foundational pillars of Indian civilization, cultural unity, the pilgrimage tradition, and spiritual reflection. For millennia, these four dhams have worked to bind together the people of India's various regions, languages, castes, and sampradayas into a single cultural thread.

As a researcher, my experience has been that history read in books and history directly witnessed both hold their own importance. If one studies texts alone, the living traditions of a site are missed; and if one merely travels, the historical background remains incomplete. In this chapter, therefore, an attempt has been made to coordinate both perspectives.

In my life, 24 years of service in the Indian Army gave me discipline, patience, and a vision of the nation as an unbroken whole. After retirement, when I began research on history and the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, I experienced that the true history of India is not merely the history of kings and wars. India's history is also preserved in its pilgrimage sites, saints, akharas, mathas, journeys, and popular traditions. It was for these very reasons that I undertook journeys to many pilgrimage sites and attempted to understand them from a research perspective.

During the Char Dham journeys, I saw that from the snow-clad mountains of the Himalayas to the sea coast, from the vast temples of the east to the ancient pilgrimage sites of the west, there is no distinction in the faith of devotees. Someone speaks Hindi, someone Tamil, someone Gujarati, someone Odia, someone Bengali, someone Marathi — but before God, all stand with equal devotion. This is the greatest strength of Sanatan culture.

This study also made clear that the Vaishnav tradition is not confined to any single sampradaya. The Shri Vaishnav, Nimbarka, Ramanandi, Madhva, Vallabha, Gaudiya, and many other Vaishnav traditions have enriched these pilgrimage sites with their own respective devotion. At the same time, pilgrimage sites such as Rameshwaram also teach that, within Sanatan Dharma, the Shaiva and Vaishnav traditions are not mutually opposed, but complementary. The religious message of Lord Sri Ram's worship of Lord Shiva reveals the coordinating character of Indian culture.

In this chapter, wherever an event or tradition has been mentioned, an effort has been made, as far as possible, to maintain a clear distinction between religious tradition, historical evidence, and modern research. For example, the remains of Dwarka situated in the sea, the Ram Setu, the ancient tradition of Jagannath, or the stories of Badarikashrama — on all these subjects, scholars hold various views. The purpose of this book, therefore, has been to present a balanced account on the basis of the various available sources, rather than declaring any single view to be final truth.

For me, this Char Dham pilgrimage was not merely a matter of personal faith, but also an important stage of research. At each dham, I made, as far as possible, direct observation of local traditions, temple systems, sadhus and saints, pilgrims, and historical sites. This experience convinced me that if a historian studies the sites himself, his writing can become more authentic and balanced.

I am especially grateful to my wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav, who remained with me on many journeys, providing not only spiritual companionship, but also demonstrating patience and devotion through difficult mountain journeys and long travels. The support of family plays an important role in the success of any research journey.

It is also worth noting that the purpose of this book is not to promote any sampradaya, region, or view, but to present a fact-based study of the history, culture, and contribution of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. Where evidence is available, it has been made the foundation; where only tradition is available, it has been presented as such. This is the method that makes historical writing more reliable.

The Char Dham journeys strengthened my conviction that the greatest foundation of India's cultural unity is its pilgrimage tradition. Political boundaries, dynasties, and rule have continued to change, but pilgrimage sites such as Badrinath, Dwarka, Jagannath Puri, and Rameshwaram have continually connected Indian society. It is for this reason that even today, millions of devotees regard the pilgrimage to these dhams as a great fortune of their lives.

Finally, I would wish to say only this — that as a soldier, I attempted to protect the borders of India, and as a researcher, I am attempting to preserve India's spiritual and cultural heritage in words. If this book proves useful to future researchers, historians, and students of Sanatan culture, I shall regard this effort of mine as successful. This is the conclusion of this chapter, and the purpose of this entire research journey.

Principal References 1. The Mahabharata (Vana Parva, Mausala Parva). 2. The Valmiki Ramayana (Yuddha Kanda). 3. The Vishnu Purana. 4. The Skanda Purana (the Badarikashrama, Dwarka, Purushottama, and Setu Mahatmyas). 5. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 6. Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*. 7. S. R. Rao, *The Lost City of Dvaraka* (a study on marine archaeology; scholars disagree regarding the conclusions). 8. *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa* (Eschmann, Kulke & Tripathi). 9. Related publications of the Archaeological Survey of India. 10. Published material relating to the Badri-Kedar Temple Committee, the Sri Jagannath Temple administration, and the Sri Ramanathaswamy Temple.

Chapter 16

The History of India's Vaishnav Bairagi Mathas, Temples, and Principal Peethas

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark —

Part 1: The Origin and Development of the Vaishnav Matha Tradition, and Its Contribution to Indian Culture

If, in the development of Indian civilization, the gurukulas preserved knowledge, education, and the Vedic tradition, then mathas, ashrams, and peethas carried out the work of preserving, developing, and carrying that knowledge to society across generations. In Sanatan Dharma, mathas were never merely residences for ascetics; they have been principal centres of education, spiritual sadhana, scriptural debate, the propagation of dharma, social service, food-distribution, cow protection, pilgrimage management, and cultural preservation. In the Vaishnav tradition in particular, these institutions played an important role in keeping alive the Vedic, Puranic, and Agamic traditions, alongside the worship of Lord Vishnu, Sri Ram, and Sri Krishna.

The word "matha" has been used in Sanskrit literature since ancient times. Over time, its meaning became connected to such permanent religious and educational institutions where the tradition of an acharya, the residence of his disciples, scriptural study, and religious discipline continued without interruption. In various regions and sampradayas, these institutions are also known by names such as matha, peetha, ashram, gaddi, cantonment, or temple, although the historical role and organizational form of all these have not been identical.

The institutional structure of the Vaishnav tradition rests on an exceedingly ancient foundation. Texts such as the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vishnu Purana, the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana, the Narada Pancharatra, and the Vaikhanasa Agama mention various forms of the worship of Lord Vishnu and Vaishnav religious traditions. In the medieval period, many acharyas systematically expounded these philosophical and religious doctrines and, through their disciples, established permanent religious institutions.

Traditional Vaishnav literature mentions four Vaishnav sampradayas — Shri, Brahma, Rudra, and Kumara. These are generally connected, respectively, to Sri Ramanujacharya, Sri Madhvacharya, Sri Vishnuswami, and Sri Nimbarkacharya. Some disagreement is also found across various traditions regarding the guru lineage, dating, and historical development of these sampradayas. In this research volume, therefore, an attempt has been made to understand these subjects on the basis of their original texts, available records, traditional literature, and modern historical studies. Where scholars' views differ, rather than regarding any single view as final truth, the principal views will be presented in a balanced manner.

In North India, the tradition of Sri Ramanandacharya made an important contribution to carrying Vaishnav devotion to the wider populace. Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagis went on to establish many mathas, cantonments, temples, and akharas. The influence of these

institutions spread to Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Bihar, Maharashtra, Nepal, and other regions of India. Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Chitrakoot, Haridwar, Prayagraj, Nashik, and many other ancient pilgrimage sites remain, to this day, important centres of this tradition.

It is also necessary to make clear that matha, peetha, akhara, and cantonment are not synonymous terms. Generally, a matha is the permanent spiritual and educational centre of an acharya tradition. A peetha represents the supreme seat, or spiritual leadership, of that tradition. An akhara is an organized religious body of sadhus and saints, whose particular importance has lain in the Kumbh melas and the historical traditions of the protection of dharma. A cantonment developed particularly as a large residential and organizational centre for Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus. At many historical sites, the combined form of a matha, temple, akhara, and cantonment within a single complex is also seen.

In medieval India, when many religious institutions were affected by political conflicts and invasions, many Vaishnav mathas played an important role in preserving religious texts, images, modes of worship, and cultural traditions. Many mathas established Sanskrit schools, rest-houses, food-distribution centres, and goshalas (cow shelters), and included service to pilgrims among their principal functions. In this way, mathas were not merely religious institutions, but also became important centres of local society's cultural and social life.

British-era gazetteers, census reports, administrative records, and the accounts of certain European scholars mention many of India's Vaishnav mathas, Bairagi institutions, and principal religious centres. Although the influence of a colonial perspective is also present in these sources, they nonetheless provide important historical material for the study of the religious institutions of the early decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this chapter, therefore, such sources will be used with caution, and comparatively, alongside other evidence.

The purpose of this chapter is not to present a list of all of India's Vaishnav mathas, since their number runs into the thousands. Here, only those principal mathas, temples, peethas, cantonments, and Vaishnav institutions will be studied for which historical records, gazetteers, inscriptions, copper plates, authentic texts, or reliable research are available. Where only traditional belief is available, it will be clearly presented as "religious tradition," and not as undisputed historical fact.

In the parts that follow, a region-by-region study of the principal Vaishnav Bairagi mathas, temples, cantonments, and peethas of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, Kurukshetra, and Chhattisgarh will be presented. The purpose of this research is not to establish the superiority of any sampradaya, but to present a balanced, evidence-based document of India's Vaishnav Bairagi heritage on the basis of available historical evidence, so that future researchers may have a reliable body of foundational material.

References 1. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 2. The Vishnu Purana. 3. The Narada Pancharatra. 4. The Vaikhanasa Agama. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. Monier Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India* (1883). 8. J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (1915). 9. British

India Gazetteers and Census of India Reports (1871-1931). 10. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Part 2: The Principal Vaishnav Bairagi Mathas, Cantonments, and Temples of Uttar Pradesh — Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Chitrakoot, and Prayagraj

Uttar Pradesh is regarded as the richest and most influential region of India's Vaishnav tradition. If South India may be called the land of the philosophical development of Vaishnav thought, Uttar Pradesh may be called the living centre of Vaishnav devotion, the Bairagi tradition, the worship of Ram and Krishna, and the saint tradition. Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Sri Ram; Vrindavan-Mathura, the land of Lord Sri Krishna's divine play; Chitrakoot, the site of Lord Sri Ram's forest exile; and Prayagraj, the king of pilgrimage sites — all four of these places hold an exceedingly important place in the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

Ayodhya in particular is regarded as the greatest centre of the Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. From the medieval period to the modern era, many mathas, cantonments, akharas, temples, and saint traditions developed here. Various historical sources show that, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the number of Vaishnav Bairagis in Ayodhya was exceedingly large, and their religious, social, and economic influence was also widespread. British-era gazetteers and administrative records mention many Bairagi mathas, temples, and religious institutions of Ayodhya. These sources also make clear that Bairagi institutions played a principal role in the lodging of pilgrims, food-distribution, religious education, and the conduct of festivals.

At Ayodhya, Hanumangarhi, Badi Chhavani, Maniramdas Chhavani, Lakshman Kila, the Nirmohi Akhara, the Digambar Akhara, and many ancient temples have been important centres of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. The history of some of these institutions is founded on traditional sources, while British-era records and modern historical studies are also available regarding others. It is therefore necessary that each institution be studied on the basis of its own available sources.

The role of Bairagi mahants in Ayodhya's religious system was not confined to worship alone. Many mathas built rest-houses, preserved Sanskrit education, ran food-distribution centres, and regarded service to pilgrims arriving from distant places as their dharma. For this reason, Ayodhya's religious life was not confined to temples alone; the matha tradition lent it stability.

Vrindavan and Mathura represent the second great stream of Vaishnav devotion. Through the efforts of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Sri Vallabhacharya, Sri Hit Harivansh, Sri Haridas, the Nimbarka tradition, and other Vaishnav acharyas, Vrindavan was, in the medieval period, once again developed into a great religious city. Here, alongside temples such as Govind Dev, Madan Mohan, Gopinath, Radharaman, Radhadamodar, Radhavallabh, and Banke Bihari, mathas and ashrams of various Vaishnav sampradayas were established. These institutions made an important contribution to the preservation of Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, and Vaishnav devotional literature.

Chitrakoot's importance is chiefly connected to the Ramayana tradition. Both the Valmiki Ramayana and the Ramcharitmanas describe Chitrakoot as the principal site of the forest exile of Sri Ram, Sita, and Lakshman. Over time, many Vaishnav mathas, Ramanandi ashrams, and saint traditions developed here. Even today, around Kamadgiri, Ramghat, and other pilgrimage sites, many Bairagi mahant traditions exist. Although an authenticated record of the founding period of all these institutions is not available at every site, local traditions and available historical sources corroborate their ancient importance.

Prayagraj (ancient Prayag) holds particular importance for the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, for it is here that various Vaishnav akharas and mathas have gathered on the occasion of the Maha Kumbh and the Ardh Kumbh. The Kumbh tradition played an important role in giving Bairagi organizations an all-India character. Many Vaishnav ashrams, rest-houses, and mathas in Prayagraj have been centres of service to pilgrims and religious activity. Historically, this city has been not merely a pilgrimage site at the confluence, but also a land of saint gatherings and scriptural debate.

Besides these four principal pilgrimage sites of Uttar Pradesh, a rich tradition of Vaishnav Bairagi mathas and temples also exists in Kashi, Naimisharanya, Balrampur, Gonda, Basti, Gorakhpur, Varanasi, and many other cities. The detailed history of many of these institutions still awaits research. British-era gazetteers, local records, inscriptions, and the genealogies of mahant traditions may prove important sources for future researchers.

In this way, the study of Uttar Pradesh makes clear that the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not confined to religious faith alone, but also made a notable contribution to education, literature, social service, pilgrimage management, and the construction of Indian cultural unity. It is for this reason that Uttar Pradesh remains, to this day, regarded as the most important geographical and cultural centre of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

References 1. Ayodhya Mahatmya (Skanda Purana). 2. The Valmiki Ramayana. 3. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana (Tenth Skandha). 4. H. R. Nevill, *Fyzabad: A Gazetteer* (District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh). 5. H. R. Nevill, *Muttra (Mathura): A Gazetteer* (District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh). 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 8. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Part 3: The Principal Vaishnav Bairagi Mathas, Cantonments, and Akharas of Ayodhya, and Their Historical Development

Ayodhya holds a principal place among the seven sacred cities (Sapta Puris) of Sanatan Dharma and is a centre of supreme reverence within the Vaishnav tradition as the birthplace of Lord Sri Ram. The importance of Ayodhya's Vaishnav Bairagi mathas, cantonments, and akharas is as great, from a religious standpoint, as that of the Sri Ram Janmabhoomi. For many centuries, these institutions have kept alive devotion to Sri Ram, Vaishnav philosophy, the saint tradition, service to pilgrims, and social organization.

The precise year from which the number of Vaishnav Bairagis in Ayodhya began to grow is not available. But records from the latter half of the Mughal period, the eighteenth century, and the British era make clear that, by that time, Ayodhya had become an exceedingly

important centre of Vaishnav Bairagis. During the period of the Nawabs of Awadh too, evidence of many Bairagi mathas receiving land grants and religious patronage is found in various records and local traditions. However, since an independent document for each grant is not available today, a separate historical review of each claim is necessary.

The British-era Fyzabad District Gazetteer, census reports, and other administrative records mention the Bairagi mahants, mathas, and religious institutions of Ayodhya at many places. These sources make clear that Bairagis were not engaged in sadhana alone, but also carried out the management of rest-houses, arrangements for pilgrims, the organization of religious rituals, and many works of social service. Many mathas also possessed agricultural land, goshalas, and food-distribution centres, through which their religious activities were conducted.

Among Ayodhya's principal Vaishnav institutions, Hanumangarhi holds a special place. According to available historical accounts, the construction of the present, magnificent, fortress-like temple structure occurred chiefly in the eighteenth century, during the reign of the Nawab of Awadh (in the period of Safdarjung/Shuja-ud-Daula), when, following an event connected to the austerities of Baba Abhayaramdas Tyagi, the Nawab granted land and a revenue endowment for the construction of the temple — this is the traditional account. Various sources differ regarding this event and its exact year, and differing traditions also prevail regarding the antiquity of the temple site. It is therefore appropriate to understand its distant antiquity as religious tradition, and the present architecture as an eighteenth-century historical development, as two separate matters.

Maniramdas Chhavani is counted among the most distinguished Vaishnav Bairagi institutions of Ayodhya. It has been not merely a residence for sadhus, but a principal centre of religious education, food-distribution, service to saints, and devotion to Sri Ram. In the modern era too, this cantonment has played an active role in many of Ayodhya's religious activities.

Similarly, Badi Chhavani is also an important institutional centre of the Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagis. Here, for years, a tradition of the residence of saints, Vedic study, religious rituals, and service to pilgrims has continued. Many sadhus and saints coming to Ayodhya still stay at these cantonments and participate in religious activities to this day.

Lakshman Kila, the Digambar Akhara, the Nirmohi Akhara, and many other Vaishnav mathas also hold an important place in Ayodhya. These institutions developed in different periods, and their historical accounts are also available in different sources. In particular, the Nirmohi Akhara has, in the modern era, remained the subject of wide discussion on account of the judicial proceedings connected to the Sri Ram Janmabhoomi, while its historical existence is regarded as considerably more ancient than that.

A feature of Ayodhya's Bairagi mathas has been that they did not confine their work to religious sadhana alone. In many mathas, Sanskrit education, Vedic recitation, the story of the Ramayana, the Bhagavata Saptaha, saint gatherings, cow protection, and arrangements for food and lodging for poor devotees continued to be provided. For this reason, these institutions also became an important part of the cultural life of local society.

Ayodhya's religious character was not built from temples alone, but developed through the combined efforts of mathas, akharas, and cantonments. Saints of various sampradayas established their ashrams here from time to time, as a result of which Ayodhya developed into one of India's greatest cities of saints. Even today, hundreds of small and large mathas and temples exist here, the history of many of which still awaits systematic research.

Historians hold that the overall history of Ayodhya's Vaishnav Bairagi institutions has not yet been fully compiled. Many ancient documents remain preserved in private mathas, the archives of mahants, and local collections. If a systematic study of these is undertaken in future, many new facts of the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition may come to light. The history of Ayodhya's mathas therefore remains an important subject of research to this day.

References 1. The Skanda Purana (Ayodhya Mahatmya). 2. The Valmiki Ramayana. 3. H. R. Nevill, *Fyzabad: A Gazetteer* (1905, District Gazetteers Series). 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 6. *Census of India Reports* (1871-1931). 7. Related publications of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Part 4: The Mathas and Temples of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya in the Braj Region, and Their Historical Tradition

The Braj region is regarded as the heartland of Indian Vaishnav Dharma. Mathura, Vrindavan, Govardhan, Barsana, Nandgaon, Radha Kund, and the surrounding pilgrimage sites have been not merely centres of religious faith, but also principal centres of the sadhana, philosophy, and cultural traditions of various Vaishnav sampradayas. Among these, the place of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya is exceedingly important. Available traditional literature and modern research make clear that this sampradaya's presence in the Braj region has continued without interruption for many centuries. An ancient temple of the Nimbarka Sampradaya still stands today on Dhruva Tila in Mathura, which is proof of this sampradaya's long-standing presence in the Braj region.

Many traditions are current regarding the life of Sri Nimbarkacharya. According to tradition, he is connected to Nimgram (Nimbagram), situated near Govardhan, where a celebrated episode of his life is mentioned — the appearance of the light of the sun on a neem tree after sunset. It is on the basis of this very episode that the popular tradition holds he received the name "Nimbarka." Although scholars hold differing views regarding the historical nature of this episode, it nonetheless holds an exceedingly important place within the religious tradition of the Nimbarka Sampradaya. It is therefore more appropriate to understand this as sectarian tradition rather than historical fact.

Many mathas, temples, and ashrams of the Nimbarka Sampradaya still exist today in the Braj region. Many branches of this sampradaya are active in Govardhan, Vrindavan, Radha Kund, Barsana, and the surrounding regions. These institutions did not confine their work to worship alone, but also made an important contribution to Sanskrit study, the Bhagavata Katha, Vaishnav philosophy, the saint tradition, and the propagation of devotion to Sri Radha-Krishna.

The Shriji Maharaj Temple, the Kunjbihari Temple, the ashrams of the Kathia Baba tradition, and many other temples connected to the Nimbarka tradition situated in Braj are proof of this sampradaya's historical presence. The founding dates of the various institutions belong to different periods, and the sources available regarding them also differ. Each institution should therefore be studied on the basis of its own independent historical sources.

A distinctive feature of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya was that it made the joint worship of Radha-Krishna the centre of its sadhana. Its acharyas placed emphasis on the coordination of devotion, renunciation, and Vedanta. Over time, the saints of this tradition also established many mathas and temples in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, and other parts of India. In particular, Salemabad in Rajasthan developed as the principal peetha of this sampradaya, while the Braj region remained its principal land of sadhana.

The British-era Muttra (Mathura) District Gazetteer, archaeological surveys, and modern research mention the various Vaishnav sampradayas of the Braj region. Although a separate account of each Nimbarka matha is not available in these sources, it is nonetheless clear that, by the nineteenth century, the Braj region had become a principal centre of many Vaishnav traditions. The Nimbarka, Gaudiya, Pushtimarg, Ramanandi, and other Vaishnav streams continued to develop here in parallel.

Even today, the mathas and temples of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya in the Braj region are not merely religious institutions, but important centres of Indian cultural heritage. In these institutions, the tradition of Vedic study, Sanskrit education, the Bhagavata Katha, cow protection, food-distribution, and religious festivals continues without interruption. If, in future, a systematic study is undertaken of the records, genealogies, inscriptions, and unpublished manuscripts of these mathas, many new facts of the history of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya may come to light.

References 1. The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 2. *Vedanta-Parijata-Saurabha* (Sri Nimbarkacharya). 3. *Dashashloki* (Nimbarka tradition). 4. H. R. Nevill, *Muttra (Mathura): A Gazetteer*. 5. Monier Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India* (1883). 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Part 5: Salemabad, the Principal Peetha of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya in Rajasthan, Its Mathas, Acharya Tradition, and Historical Development

Rajasthan holds an exceedingly important place in the history of the Indian Vaishnav tradition. While Nathdwara is the principal centre of the Pushtimarg, Salemabad (in Ajmer district), situated on the bank of the Rupnagarh river, approximately 19 kilometres from Kishangarh, is widely recognized as the principal peetha of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya. It is traditionally also called Sri Nimbarka Tirtha or Sri Sarveshwar Peetha. Many religious texts, sectarian records, and modern research have accepted Salemabad as the principal seat of the Nimbarka Sampradaya.

According to available sectarian records and modern studies, the Salemabad peetha is held to have been founded by Sri Parashuramdev, the thirty-third acharya in the guru lineage of

Sri Nimbarka. Sectarian sources indicate a grant given in his name by the rulers of that time, dated Vikram Samvat 1515 (approximately 1458 CE), while certain other accounts give the year of the temple's construction as around 1520 CE (1463 CE). On this basis, the founding of Salemabad may be dated to around the middle of the fifteenth century, and not the seventeenth-eighteenth century, as some general accounts briefly state. Although some variation is found among various sources regarding the precise year, there is general agreement that, for nearly five centuries, this peetha has borne the responsibility of the sampradaya's central leadership, and it is for this reason that it is also known by the name "Parashurampuri."

The importance of the Salemabad peetha is not merely religious, but also exceedingly important from an organizational standpoint. Spiritual connections have been maintained from here with the sampradaya's various branches, mathas, and temples. Mahants and saints of the Nimbarka Sampradaya's mathas situated in many states of the country have, from time to time, remained connected to this peetha. According to tradition, many acharyas undertook journeys of religious propagation from here, spreading Vaishnav devotion in North India, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and other regions.

The ancient temple of Sri Sarveshwar Bhagwan situated at Salemabad is the sampradaya's principal centre of faith. Here, Sri Radha-Krishna are worshipped according to the traditional mode of worship of the Nimbarka Sampradaya. Every year, on the occasion of various religious festivals — particularly Radhashtami, Janmashtami, Guru Purnima, the Jhulan Utsav, and other Vaishnav festivals — devotees and saints gather here from India and abroad.

An important function of this peetha has also been the preservation of Sanskrit, Vedanta, the Bhagavata, devotional literature, and the guru tradition. Many saints and scholars resided here to study, write, and give discourses on religious texts. Religious literature published from here, from time to time, played an important role in the propagation of Nimbarka philosophy and devotion to Radha-Krishna.

In other regions of Rajasthan — such as Jaipur, Kishangarh, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Sikar, and Alwar — many mathas and temples of the Nimbarka Sampradaya are also established. These institutions developed in various periods under the patronage of local kings, jagirdars, and devotees. Available inscriptions, land grants, and local records show that many princely states of Rajputana, from time to time, granted land, villages, and financial assistance to Vaishnav institutions. However, since such records are not available for every matha, each institution should be studied on the basis of its own independent sources.

The British-era Rajputana Gazetteers, the reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, and modern research also make clear that Rajasthan has been a principal centre of Vaishnav sampradayas. Although the principal purpose of these government records was not to write religious history, they nonetheless mention many mathas, temples, and religious institutions, which prove useful sources for historical writing.

Today, the Salemabad peetha is not merely an administrative or religious centre of the Nimbarka Sampradaya, but a symbol of the living heritage of Indian Vaishnav philosophy,

the guru-disciple tradition, and devotion to Radha-Krishna. Its records, manuscripts, genealogies, and ancient documents are exceedingly valuable sources for future researchers. Their scientific study may bring to light many untouched aspects of Indian Vaishnav history.

References 1. *Vedanta-Parijata-Saurabha* - Sri Nimbarkacharya. 2. The traditional guru lineage and published literature of the Nimbarka Sampradaya (Nimbarka Parishad, published genealogy). 3. Monier Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India* (1883). 4. Rajputana Gazetteers (various volumes). 5. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India. 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*.

Part 6: The Tradition of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya in Haryana — Swabhuramdevacharya, the Sub-Branches, and Regional Mathas

The religious history of Haryana is generally more famous in connection with Kurukshetra, Jyotisar, and the tradition of the Mahabharata, but this state has also held an important place in the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. In particular, an ancient branch of the Sri Nimbarka Sampradaya is connected to Haryana. According to available sectarian traditions and the studies of modern scholars, the branches of Swabhuramdevacharya and Parashuramdevacharya, the senior disciples of Sri Harivyasdevacharya, became particularly renowned. Modern academic studies also mention that the Nimbarka Sampradaya developed into many independent, yet mutually connected, guru-disciple traditions (dvaras), among which the traditions of Parashuram and Swabhuram are regarded as principal.

According to sectarian tradition, Swabhuramdevacharya is connected to the village of Budhia (Budhia Bani), situated on the bank of the Yamuna river, approximately three kilometres north of Jagadhri town, in the present-day Yamunanagar district of Haryana. For this reason, this place is remembered with reverence as Swabhuramdevacharya's birthplace, field of work, or principal site of sadhana. Modern scholars too have connected the branch of Swabhuramdevacharya to Haryana and the Braj region, although many accounts of his life are founded chiefly on sectarian literature.

On studying the history of the Nimbarka Sampradaya, it also becomes known that the twelve principal disciples of Sri Harivyasdevacharya established separate "dvaras" (branches) in various regions. These branches went on to develop their own mathas, temples, and guru traditions. Scholars hold that the sampradaya's organization was not confined to any single central matha, but expanded, through various acharya traditions, into many regions of North India.

In Haryana, besides Budhia, mentions of mathas, temples, or dvaras connected to the Nimbarka tradition are found in local traditions and sectarian literature at Sink Pathri (Panipat), Khanpur Kalan (Sonipat), Kundal (Sonipat), Goli (Karnal), Likhi (Palwal), and other places. Some of these sites remain active religious centres to this day. However, records of an equal standard are not available regarding the founding period, founder, and historical development of each site. Independent study of each site, on the basis of

inscriptions, genealogies, local records, and the sampradaya's authenticated documents, is therefore necessary.

Regarding the tradition of Swabhuramdevacharya, it is also mentioned that, over time, the saint tradition connected to this very branch became connected to the Kathia Baba tradition. Indications of this are found in sectarian genealogies and certain modern studies, but an independent historical examination of each link in this chain is still required. This subject may therefore be regarded as an important field for further research.

The importance of these mathas and dvaras situated in Haryana is not merely religious. These institutions also contributed to the preservation, within local society, of Sanskrit study, Vaishnav devotion, the saint tradition, food-distribution, cow protection, and religious rites. Although much of their history remains preserved to this day in unpublished records, local traditions, and the private collections of mathas, the available material nonetheless indicates that Haryana has been an important centre of the regional development of the Nimbarka Sampradaya.

If, in future, a systematic survey is conducted of the records, guru genealogies, inscriptions, and unpublished manuscripts of Budhia, Sink Pathri, Khanpur Kalan, Kundal, and other related sites, many new facts of the history of the Nimbarka Sampradaya and the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition may come to light. From this standpoint, this region of Haryana may be regarded as exceedingly important for research into Indian Vaishnav history.

References 1. Catherine Clementin-Ojha, *Nimbarka Sampradaya*, Oxford Bibliographies (2018). 2. A. W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (mentions the twelve disciples of Harivyasdevacharya and the Parashuram-Swabhuram branches). 3. *Vedanta Parijata Saurabha* - Sri Nimbarkacharya. 4. The traditional guru lineage and published genealogies of the Nimbarka Sampradaya. 5. Local records, inscriptions, and future regional surveys of the related mathas.

Part 7: The Tradition and Historical Development of the Vaishnav Bairagi Mathas of Punjab, Delhi, and the Kurukshetra Region

The expansion of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition in North India was not confined to Ayodhya, Vrindavan, and Rajasthan alone. From the medieval period to the modern era, Punjab, Delhi, and the Kurukshetra region of present-day Haryana have also been important centres of Vaishnav saints, Bairagi mathas, and pilgrimage traditions. The importance of these regions has been notable not merely from a religious standpoint, but also in the history of India's cultural and pilgrimage routes.

Delhi, alongside being India's political capital since ancient times, was also a confluence of many saint sampradayas. In the Mughal and British periods, various Vaishnav sampradayas of North India established their ashrams, temples, and rest-houses here. Vaishnav Bairagi saints coming from Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, and Rajasthan would reside in Delhi and undertake journeys of religious propagation from here toward north-western India. Although a systematic history of most of Delhi's ancient Bairagi mathas has not yet been published, gazetteers, local records, and temple traditions corroborate their existence.

The history of the presence of Vaishnav Bairagis in Punjab is also sufficiently ancient. In Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Patiala, and other cities, many ancient temples and Bairagi mathas connected to the worship of Ram, Krishna, and Vishnu were established. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel accounts and British-era gazetteers mention temples and rest-houses run by Bairagi mahants. These institutions also arranged for food-distribution, lodging, and religious education for travellers.

The importance of Kurukshetra is connected to the Vedic period and the Mahabharata. This region has been not merely the land of the teaching of the Gita, but also a centre of many Vaishnav saints and mathas. Ashrams and temples of various sampradayas were established at Brahma Sarovar, Jyotisar, Sannihit Sarovar, and the surrounding pilgrimage sites. Saints of the Nimbarka, Ramanandi, and other Vaishnav traditions resided here from time to time, and vast saint gatherings were organized on great occasions such as solar eclipses.

Sectarian traditions mention that Sri Harivyasdevacharya too participated in the religious events of Kurukshetra, and that many of his disciples went to various regions of North India for the propagation of dharma. Such accounts are found chiefly in traditional literature. Independent epigraphical evidence is necessary for their historical examination. They should therefore be viewed only as sectarian tradition.

Many Bairagi mathas of Haryana, Punjab, and Delhi did not confine their work to religious activities alone. They made an important contribution to society by arranging for Sanskrit education, the Bhagavata Katha, the recitation of the Ramayana, cow protection, food-distribution, service to sadhus, and lodging for pilgrims. At many places, ancient ponds, goshalas, gardens, and rest-houses also developed alongside these mathas, which became part of the cultural life of local society.

Today, many ancient mathas and temples of these regions remain active, while certain historical institutions have, over time, become nearly extinct. The genealogies, copper plates, land grants, land records, and unpublished manuscripts of many mathas remain preserved, to this day, in their private archives. If these are studied scientifically, many important facts of North India's Vaishnav Bairagi history may come to light.

The history of the Punjab, Delhi, and Kurukshetra region is therefore not merely local religious history, but an important link in understanding the organization, pilgrimage management, and cultural development of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition across the whole of North India. Extensive regional surveys, epigraphical study, and comparative research are still needed on this subject.

References 1. The Mahabharata (Bhishma Parva and Shalya Parva). 2. The Srimad Bhagavad Gita. 3. Kurukshetra Mahatmya (Vana Parva of the Mahabharata, and Puranic traditions). 4. Punjab District Gazetteers (various volumes). 5. Delhi District Gazetteer. 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 8. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Part 8: The Vaishnav Bairagi Principalities of Chhattisgarh — Chhuikhadan and Nandgaon (Rajnandgaon)

It is a rare but well-established fact in Indian history that Vaishnav Bairagi saints were not merely mahants of mathas and cantonments, but that, in certain places, they also became rulers of independent native principalities. In the Chhattisgarh region (the present-day Khairagarh-Chhuikhadan-Gandai and Rajnandgaon districts), two principalities named Chhuikhadan and Nandgaon present an important historical example of this, having been ruled for nearly two centuries by Vaishnav Bairagi mahants connected to the Nimbarka Sampradaya and the Nirmohi Akhara.

According to available historical accounts, the Chhuikhadan principality was founded in 1750 CE by Mahant Rupdas Bairagi. This principality, also known as “Kondka,” was included, in the British period, among the native states of Central India, and after independence was initially included in Madhya Pradesh, and, after the reorganization of states, in Chhattisgarh. The rulers of the principality belonged to the Bairagi sampradaya and held the title of “Mahant” or “Kunwar.”

According to traditional accounts, Mahant Rupdas is said to have belonged originally to a Rajput royal family of Udaipur, and, drawn toward devotion to Krishna, to have received Vaishnav Bairagi initiation in childhood. It is recorded that, around 1708 CE, he received initiation at the Bairagi Thakurdwara of Mahant Kishoredas, in a village called Sehrikhanda, situated in the present-day Haryana-Punjab border region. Such biographical accounts are founded chiefly on sectarian and local traditions, and it is therefore appropriate to accept them as traditional accounts rather than historical fact.

The Nandgaon principality (which became renowned in the modern era by the name Rajnandgaon), situated near Chhuikhadan, was founded in 1766 CE by Mahant Prahladdas Bairagi. This principality was larger than Chhuikhadan in area, and by the nineteenth century included hundreds of villages. The ruling dynasties of both principalities are regarded as mutually related, and both are connected to the Bairagi tradition of the Nimbarka Sampradaya and the Nirmohi Akhara. It is noteworthy that this is regarded as an exceedingly rare example, in Indian history, of a saint of the Vaishnav Bairagi sampradaya becoming a king.

In both these principalities, the Bairagi rulers also continued to discharge their religious duties. Temple construction, food-distribution, cow protection, service to saints, and assistance to pilgrims remained an integral part of their duties as rulers. At the same time, they also bore the responsibility of local administration, the tax system, and land management. In this way, a distinctive coordination of spiritual discipline and royal administration is seen in the governance of Chhuikhadan and Nandgaon, which appears different from the general tradition of India’s other Vaishnav Bairagi mathas, yet seems an extension of that same fundamental spirit.

After India’s independence, all fourteen native principalities of the Chhattisgarh region — among which Chhuikhadan and Nandgaon were also included — signed the instrument of accession to the Indian Union. In 1948, these principalities were included in Central India, and later in the Durg district of Madhya Pradesh. In 1973, Rajnandgaon was separated from

Durg district to form an independent district, and, after the formation of the state of Chhattisgarh in 2000, this region developed into its present form.

The history of the Chhuikhadan and Nandgaon principalities is proof that, in India, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not confined to spiritual sadhana or matha management alone, but, in certain regions, also played a political and administrative role. Although a large part of the early history of these principalities is still founded on local traditions, genealogies, and uncompiled family records, British-era administrative records and modern regional studies nonetheless corroborate their existence, period of rule, and process of accession. Considerable scope for detailed epigraphical research still remains on this subject, particularly through the systematic study of princely-era revenue records and gazetteers.

References 1. Central Provinces District Gazetteers and related princely-era administrative records. 2. Publications of the Chhattisgarh State Department of Archaeology and Culture. 3. Local and sectarian traditions - oral and written accounts relating to the Bairagi royal dynasties of Chhuikhadan and Nandgaon (to be used with caution, comparatively, alongside independent evidence). 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*.

Note: The princely-era account presented in this part is founded chiefly on secondary sources, local traditions, and available summary publications. Direct examination of the original gazetteers and revenue records may lend this account still greater authenticity in future. Where variation was found among sources regarding dates or names, the most widely cited account has been given preference.

Chapter 17

A History of Vaishnav Bairagi Maths, Temples and Major Pithas of India (Part Two)

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark —

Part 1: The Vaishnav Bairagi Maths of Gujarat, the Dwarka Tradition, and the Tapta-Mudra Sanskar

Gujarat, situated on the western coast of India, has been one of the most ancient and influential centres of Vaishnav dharma. The Mahabharata, the Harivansha, the Vishnu Purana, the Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana, and the Dwarka Mahatmya section of the Skanda Purana describe Dwarka as the capital of Lord Sri Krishna and as one of the seven moksha-giving cities (Sapta Puris). By the medieval period, the city had become a principal pilgrimage site on the Char Dham circuit, drawing Vaishnav saints, Bairagis, acharyas and pilgrims continuously from every part of the country.

Dwarka's importance was never confined to the Sri Dwarkadhish temple alone. Over time, various Vaishnav sampradayas established their own maths, ashrams, dharmashalas and ascetic residences here. Sadhus of the Sri Sampradaya, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the Madhva Sampradaya, Ramanandi Vaishnavs and other Krishna-bhakti traditions all made their homes here. Because of the Char Dham pilgrimage, Dwarka became a major meeting point for Vaishnav Bairagis from North, West and Central India.

The spread of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition in Gujarat was not limited to Dwarka. Numerous ancient Vaishnav maths and temples also developed at Bet Dwarka, Dakor, Junagadh, Girnar, the Somnath region, and across Saurashtra. Many of these institutions ran dharmashalas, food-distribution centres (annakshetras), Sanskrit schools and goshalas, making a significant contribution to religious and social life.

Gujarat also holds special importance from the standpoint of the Nimbark Sampradaya. Sampradaya tradition records a Nimbari Math located in Gujarat, counted among the principal centres of the Nimbark tradition. Although further archival research is still required on its founding date and early history, it is clear that the presence of the Nimbark Sampradaya in Gujarat spans several centuries. The history of this math is therefore an important subject for future research.

Tapta-Mudra (the Branding Sanskar) and Vaishnav Bairagi Initiation

The Panchasanskar holds special importance in the initiation traditions of the Vaishnav sampradayas. Vaishnav agamic tradition describes five elements of the Panchasanskar — Tapa (Tapta-Mudra), Pundra, Nama, Mantra and Yaga. Among these, the Tapa-sanskar, or Tapta-Mudra, is regarded as one of the most ancient of the rites. This tradition remains alive in various forms today, particularly within the Sri Vaishnav, Madhva and certain other Vaishnav sampradayas.

In this rite, at the time of a disciple's initiation, metal emblems of the conch (shankha) and discus (chakra) were heated in fire and impressed upon specific parts of the body — usually both arms or shoulders. These marks were regarded as symbols of lifelong dedication to Lord Vishnu and of Vaishnav identity. The method, timing and form of this rite vary somewhat across sampradayas according to local tradition; it would therefore be inaccurate to assume a single uniform practice across all Vaishnav traditions.

Historically, this rite was not merely a means of bearing an external mark; it was also regarded as a symbol of the formal establishment of the guru-disciple relationship. In many Vaishnav maths, following initiation, the disciple would be given the Vaishnav tilak, a new name, mantra instruction, and the Tapta-Mudra. Over time, the practice of Tapta-Mudra became limited in some traditions, while in certain maths it continues to this day as a religious rite.

Numerous ancient Vaishnav maths of Dwarka and Gujarat have borne witness to this rich tradition. Although the history of every math has not been equally documented, the available Puranic, agamic, sampradaya-based and historical sources confirm that Gujarat has been one of the principal centres of the Indian Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. If the records, lineages and inscriptions of these maths are systematically studied in future, many new dimensions of Vaishnav Bairagi history may come to light.

References 1. Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 2. Vishnu Purana. 3. Harivansha Purana. 4. Skanda Purana (Dwarka Mahatmya). 5. The Panchasanskar tradition as described in the Pancharatra and Vaishnav Agamas. 6. Archaeological Survey of India, *Excavations at Dwarka*. 7. Gazetteers of Gujarat and historical studies relating to the Dwarka region.

Part 2: The Vaishnav Bairagi Maths of Bihar and the Mithila Region, and Their Historical Tradition

Bihar is among the most ancient lands of Indian civilisation, Vedic culture and Sanatan Dharma. The ancient janapadas of Videha (Mithila), Magadha, Vaishali and Anga profoundly shaped India's religious and philosophical history. Mithila holds particular importance from the standpoint of the Vaishnav tradition, since Ramayana tradition regards it as the sacred land associated with King Janaka, Mother Sita, and the marriage of Lord Sri Ram. The Vishnu Purana, the Valmiki Ramayana and other texts all make mention of Mithila. Modern scholarship, too, accepts Mithila as an important cultural region spread across northern Bihar and the Terai belt of Nepal.

During the medieval period, the influence of several Vaishnav sampradayas grew in Bihar and Mithila. In particular, Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagis, the Sri Sampradaya, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the Madhva Sampradaya, and later the saints of the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition, propagated the faith here. Numerous maths, temples, dharmashalas and ascetic residences were established along pilgrimage routes. These institutions carried forward not merely modes of worship but also Sanskrit education, Bhagavata discourse, Ramayana recitation, food distribution, and service to sadhus.

The Ramjanaki Math (Raghopur Bakhri Math, Sitamarhi), located in the Mithila region, is counted among the ancient Vaishnav maths of northern Bihar. According to available

historical accounts and recent administrative records, this math is estimated to be approximately 834 years old, meaning its founding is believed to date to the medieval period. It has been an important centre of Sri Ram–Janaki worship, and over time this math has played a notable role in local religious and cultural life.

Numerous Vaishnav maths and temples exist today across the various districts of Bihar — particularly Sitamarhi, Darbhanga, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Gaya, Patna, Bhagalpur and Buxar. Many of these are connected to Ramanandi Bairagi mahants, while others developed under local Vaishnav traditions. These maths preserve ancient lineages, land-grant deeds, handwritten manuscripts and religious records, which still await extensive historical study.

The religious identity of Mithila has never been confined to its temples alone. Here, tols (traditional Sanskrit schools), Sanskrit pathshalas, ashrams and maths together became centres of learning and devotion. Alongside the traditions of Vedic study, Nyaya, Mimamsa and Vedanta, devotion to Ram and Krishna also flourished. For this reason, Mithila is counted among the significant regions of Indian Vaishnav culture.

It is also worth noting that the Mithila region of Bihar and Nepal has remained deeply interconnected culturally. Vaishnav saints moved continuously between Janakpur, Sitamarhi and the surrounding areas. Many Bairagi saints travelled between both regions, strengthening religious and cultural ties through their maths. For this reason, the study of Mithila's Vaishnav tradition cannot be confined to modern state boundaries alone.

Historians hold that the systematic history of many Vaishnav maths in Bihar remains unpublished. If the lineages, copper-plate inscriptions, epigraphs, colonial gazetteers and local records of these maths were studied in an integrated manner in future, many new facts of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition might come to light. For this reason, the Bihar and Mithila region remains an extremely important area for research into the Vaishnav math tradition even today.

References 1. Valmiki Ramayana. 2. Vishnu Purana. 3. Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 4. Ramjanaki Math, Raghopur Bakhri, Sitamarhi — available historical and administrative accounts. 5. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 6. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 7. Historical gazetteers and available records of the Bihar and Mithila region.

Part 3: The Vaishnav Bairagi Maths of Odisha (Jagannath Puri), the Emar Math and Other Major Institutions

Sri Jagannath Puri, representing the eastern direction among India's Char Dhams, has been not merely the temple of Lord Jagannath but also an ancient and living centre of numerous Vaishnav sampradayas, maths and saintly traditions. From the medieval to the modern period, nearly every major Vaishnav sampradaya of India established its own math in Puri. The purpose of these maths was not confined to housing sadhus; it also extended to serving pilgrims, the study of scripture, food distribution, religious education, and cooperation in the various sevas of the Sri Jagannath temple.

The history of Puri's maths shows that a tradition of religious co-existence developed among the different sampradayas here. Maths belonging to the Sri Vaishnav, Ramanandi, Nimbark, Madhva, Gaudiya and other Vaishnav traditions were established at different times, each enriching Sri Jagannath culture through its own distinctive mode of worship. The colonial-era Puri Gazetteer (O'Malley) also records the presence of numerous maths, several of them specifically identified as Vaishnav.

Emar Math

The Emar Math of Puri is regarded as one of the most renowned of the Vaishnav maths. Tradition holds that it was founded either by Sri Ramanujacharya himself or by Acharya Govindacharya (Embar) of his lineage, and it is said to be nearly nine hundred years old. It is for this reason that its name evolved from "Embar Math" to the commonly used "Emar Math". This math was a major centre of the Sri Vaishnav tradition and remained connected with several of the traditional sevas of the Sri Jagannath temple. Historical accounts record that this math also contributed to food distribution during the Odisha famine of 1866, and in the early twentieth century contributed land and expenditure toward the expansion of rail, telegraph and electricity facilities in Puri.

Historically, the Emar Math was not merely a religious institution but also an important centre of education and manuscript preservation, as well as social service. The Raghunandan Library, established within its premises in 1921, was counted among the ancient and rich collections of Odisha, preserving handwritten texts, palm-leaf manuscripts and copper-plate records. It is said that the first dictionary of the Odia language, the *Purnachandra Bhashakosha*, was published with the financial support of this very math.

In August–September 2019, as part of an administrative action to clear structures within a 75-metre radius of the Sri Jagannath temple complex — which later became the basis of the Sri Jagannath Dham Heritage Corridor project — the building of the Emar Math and the original structure of the Raghunandan Library were demolished. The idols and manuscripts had already been safely relocated beforehand, and the state government announced the construction of a new modern library on the same site. This decision generated extensive and contested discussion from religious, cultural and heritage-conservation perspectives. This is a documented contemporary administrative event, not a matter of traditional belief, and it in no way diminishes the ancient historical and religious significance of the math.

Radhaballabh Math and the Nimbark Tradition

Historical sources also record the Radhaballabh Math at Puri. Some traditional accounts connect it to the lineage of Nimbarkacharya. However, scholars are not in complete agreement regarding its founding date and early history. From a research standpoint, it is therefore more appropriate to accept this connection as sampradaya tradition, pending confirmation through inscriptions or other independent historical evidence.

Besides the Emar Math, institutions such as the Raghavdas Math, Jagannath Ballabh Math, Panjabi Math, Radhakant Math, Gangamata Math, Uttarparshwa Math and others remain an important part of religious life in Puri to this day. Many of these maths maintain their own distinctive traditions of service and cooperate in the annual festivals and rituals of the Sri

Jagannath temple. Records of the Odisha government's religious endowment institutions also mention these principal maths.

For centuries, the Vaishnav Bairagi maths of Puri ran dharmashalas for pilgrims, distributed food, encouraged Sanskrit study, and kept alive the tradition of dialogue among different sampradayas. It is for this reason that Puri became not merely a temple town but a vast, living centre of the Indian Vaishnav math tradition. Even today, the study of Puri remains extremely important for the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

References 1. Skanda Purana (Purushottam Mahatmya). 2. Traditions of the Sri Jagannath Temple, Puri. 3. L. S. S. O'Malley, *Puri: Bengal District Gazetteers*. 4. Emar Matha — historical accounts and contemporary reportage on the 2019 demolition. 5. Odisha Hindu Religious Endowments Department — records of principal maths. 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*.

Part 4: The Vaishnav Bairagi Maths and Tradition of Maharashtra (Nashik, Panchavati, Trimbakeshwar, etc.)

Maharashtra is an extremely important region in Indian religious history. Shaiva, Vaishnav, Nath, Warkari, Dattatreya and numerous other spiritual traditions developed here side by side. From the standpoint of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, Nashik, Panchavati and Trimbakeshwar hold special importance. According to Ramayana tradition, Panchavati is the region where Lord Sri Ram, Mother Sita and Lakshman spent a significant part of their exile. For this reason, this region has been a major centre of Vaishnav devotion since ancient times.

Nashik's importance is not tied to the Ramayana alone. It is one of India's four principal Kumbh sites. The Simhastha Kumbh, held on the banks of the Godavari, has for centuries been a great confluence of saints, akharas and Bairagi sampradayas from across the country. Historical accounts indicate that until the eighteenth century this Kumbh was held primarily at Trimbakeshwar, but a dispute arose between Shaiva sannyasis and Vaishnav Bairagis over precedence in bathing, resulting, according to some accounts, in significant loss of life among ascetics (though the exact number of casualties varies across sources). As a consequence of this conflict, the Peshwa administration of the time shifted the bathing site of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas to Ramkund in Nashik town, while the Shaiva sannyasi akharas continued to bathe at Kushavarta Kund in Trimbakeshwar. This separate arrangement continues to be observed to this day.

The Trimbakeshwar Jyotirlinga is primarily a Shaiva pilgrimage site, but its significance is not limited to the Shaiva tradition alone. Owing to the origin of the Godavari river, the Kumbh tradition, and the gathering of saints, this region has also been a major place of residence for Vaishnav Bairagi saints. On the occasion of the Kumbh, saints of the Ramanandi, Nimbark, Sri Vaishnav, Madhva and other Vaishnav sampradayas from across the country have continued to set up their camps here.

The Ramkund, Sita Cave, Kalaram Temple, Gora Ram Temple, Muralidhar Temple, and numerous other ancient Vaishnav temples in Panchavati stand as living symbols of the region's Vaishnav tradition. Around these temples, ashrams, dharmashalas and maths of

Bairagi mahants developed over time, providing accommodation, food distribution and religious discourse for pilgrims.

The influence of Vaishnav Bairagis in Maharashtra was not confined to Nashik alone. The Warkari tradition of Pandharpur, and the wider development of Vaishnav devotion in Dehu, Alandi, Kolhapur, Vidarbha and other regions, are also significant. Although the organisational structure of the Warkari tradition differs from that of the North Indian Bairagi tradition, both share a common foundation in devotion to the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, remembrance of the divine name, and social service. A comparative study of their historical relationship is therefore valuable.

During the medieval and Maratha periods, many Vaishnav maths of Maharashtra received grants from local rulers, jagirdars and devotees. Many maths undertook Sanskrit study, Bhagavata discourse, Ramayana recitation, food distribution, the running of goshalas, and service to pilgrims. Colonial-era gazetteers also record numerous maths and religious institutions in the Nashik and Panchavati region. These records make clear that by the nineteenth century this region had become a major centre of both the Vaishnav and Shaiva traditions.

Even today, the traditions of many Vaishnav Bairagi mahants remain alive in Maharashtra's Nashik and Panchavati region. Although the detailed history of many of these maths has not yet been published, their lineages, records and local traditions remain extremely important sources for future research. Their systematic documentation could bring to light many overlooked strands of Indian Vaishnav Bairagi history.

References 1. Valmiki Ramayana. 2. Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 3. Historical accounts of the Nashik–Trimbakeshwar Simhastha Kumbh and the Peshwa-era Shaiva–Vaishnav dispute. 4. Government of Maharashtra, Nashik District — History and Culture. 5. Maharashtra Tourism Department — Trimbakeshwar. 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 8. Bombay Presidency Gazetteers (volumes for Nashik and related districts).

Part 5: The Vaishnav Bairagi Maths of Nepal — Janakpur, Kathmandu and Other Major Centres

Since ancient times, Nepal has been an integral cultural region of India's Vedic and Vaishnav traditions. Although it is today an independent nation, its religious, cultural and pilgrimage-related ties to North India go back centuries. Janakpur, Devghat, Muktinath, Barahakshetra, Triveni, the Valmiki Ashram, and the Kathmandu valley in particular have been major pilgrimage centres for Vaishnav sadhus and the Bairagi tradition.

According to Ramayana tradition, Janakpur is established as the ancient capital of Mithila and the birthplace of King Janaka and Mother Sita. For this reason, this town is regarded as an extremely sacred pilgrimage site for Vaishnav devotees of both India and Nepal. Every year, on the occasion of Vivah Panchami, thousands of devotees and saints from both India and Nepal arrive in Janakpur, where the grand celebration of the Sri Ram–Janaki wedding is held.

The development of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition in Nepal occurred primarily through the Ramanandi, Nimbark, Sri Vaishnav and other Vaishnav ascetic traditions. According to Richard Burghart's authoritative research work, *The History of Janakpurdham*, the Ramanandi sampradaya is believed to have arisen in the fifteenth century, and its historical development in Janakpurdham occurred mainly from the latter half of the seventeenth century onward, through the mutual relations of the Nepalese monarchy, Brahmins and Vaishnav ascetics. Available research also shows that many Ramanandi Bairagis of Nepal remained connected to Ayodhya, while a large number of Nimbark Sampradaya ascetics remained tied to the guru lineages of Vrindavan. This makes clear that the development of Nepal's Vaishnav Bairagi tradition occurred through continuous contact with India's principal Vaishnav maths.

Pashupatinath in Kathmandu is primarily a Shaiva pilgrimage site, but historical accounts indicate that Vaishnav Bairagis have also gathered there on the occasion of major festivals. Similarly, Devghat, Barahakshetra, Muktinath, Triveni and the Valmiki Ashram have been major places of residence for Vaishnav sadhus. Saints of various sampradayas continued to arrive at these places, and ashrams and maths developed here over time.

Nepal also holds special importance from the standpoint of the Nimbark Sampradaya. Modern scholarship accepts that branches of the Nimbark Sampradaya reached not only Braj, Rajasthan, Punjab and Bengal but also Nepal. Although a systematic history of all the Nimbark maths of Nepal is not yet available, the presence of the sampradaya is historically established.

The Vaishnav maths of Nepal did not confine their activities to religious matters alone. Through Sanskrit study, Bhagavata discourse, Ramayana recitation, food distribution, service to sadhus and arrangements for pilgrims' lodging, they made important contributions to society. The continuous movement of saints between India and Nepal kept the Vaishnav cultures of both countries deeply connected. The religious ties between Janakpur, Ayodhya and Vrindavan are an excellent example of this.

It must be noted that the detailed history of many ancient maths of Nepal remains unpublished. The records, lineages and manuscripts of many institutions are preserved only at the local level, and their proper historical study could bring many new aspects of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition to light in future. Nepal therefore remains an extremely important area for the study of the Vaishnav math tradition, one in which considerable scope for extensive research still exists.

References 1. Valmiki Ramayana. 2. Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 3. Nepal Tourism Board — History and religious significance of Janakpur. 4. Richard Burghart, *The History of Janakpurdham: A Study of Asceticism and the Hindu Polity* (Himal Books, 2016, ed. Martin Gaenszle). 5. "Nimbarka Sampradaya," Oxford Bibliographies in Hinduism.

Part 6: The Cultural, Educational and Social Contribution of India's Vaishnav Bairagi Math Tradition

The significance of India's Vaishnav Bairagi math tradition has never been confined to religious practice alone. From ancient times to the modern era, these maths have played an

extremely important role in shaping the cultural, educational, spiritual and social life of Indian society. Were the history of India's cultural heritage to be written, the contribution of Vaishnav maths and Bairagi saints would be counted among its principal chapters.

The most important task of the Vaishnav maths was the preservation of the guru-disciple tradition. These institutions carried on the study and teaching of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Srimad Bhagavata, the Ramayana, Vedanta, Sanskrit grammar, Nyaya, Mimamsa and devotional literature. Many maths established Sanskrit schools where thousands of students received their education. In this way, the Vaishnav maths became principal centres for the preservation of India's tradition of knowledge. Many ancient handwritten texts remain preserved today in the libraries of various maths, and their study is of great importance to Indian history and philosophy.

From a cultural standpoint, the Vaishnav Bairagi maths carried India's devotional tradition to the common people. The credit for propagating the worship of Sri Ram, Sri Krishna, Sri Radha, Sri Sitaram and Lord Vishnu in the vernacular languages belongs to many saintly traditions. Through bhajan, kirtan, sankirtan, Bhagavata discourse, Ram-katha and religious festivals, these maths spread morality, righteous conduct and spiritual awareness throughout society. This is why some presence of a Vaishnav math is found at nearly every major pilgrimage site in India.

The contribution of the Vaishnav Bairagi maths to social life has also been extremely significant. Most large maths maintained arrangements for food distribution, lodging, service to sadhus, goshalas, and rest for pilgrims. In many places, during natural disasters and famines, these maths provided food, shelter and assistance. This makes clear that the Vaishnav maths were not merely religious centres but also institutions of public welfare.

The Bairagi maths also played an important role in organising pilgrimage arrangements. At Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Prayagraj, Chitrakoot, Dwarka, Puri, Nashik, Janakpur and other pilgrimage sites, dharmashalas, resting places and food arrangements for travellers arriving from distant regions were largely run by the maths. This strengthened cultural unity and religious contact among the different regions of India.

In medieval India, many maths also worked to preserve religious texts, temples and traditions under difficult circumstances. In many places, ancient manuscripts were kept safe and the guru lineage was carried forward without interruption. Available historical sources make clear that many Vaishnav maths made notable contributions to the protection of dharma and culture according to the circumstances of their time. Each such event, in this regard, should be evaluated on the basis of the contemporary sources available for it.

Even in the modern era, many Vaishnav maths remain active in education, healthcare, the promotion of Sanskrit, cow protection, environmental conservation and social service. Many institutions have begun publishing their texts, offering online discourses, and imparting religious education through digital media. This has allowed devotees living outside India to connect with these traditions as well.

It is also true that the history of thousands of India's Vaishnav maths has not yet been published in a systematic form. Many institutions still preserve ancient lineages, copper-plate inscriptions, epigraphs, land-grant deeds and rare manuscripts. If these were scientifically catalogued, digitised and studied historically, many new facts of the Indian Vaishnav Bairagi tradition could come to light. This work will be extremely important for future researchers.

In conclusion, it may be said that the Vaishnav Bairagi maths are a priceless heritage of Indian civilisation. They did not merely propagate religion; they also preserved education, culture, service, social harmony and spiritual values across generations. The protection of these maths is not the responsibility of any single sampradaya alone, but a national responsibility for the preservation of India's cultural heritage.

References 1. Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 2. Vishnu Purana. 3. Bhagavad Gita. 4. Narada Pancharatra. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 6. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 7. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India. 8. Various British India Gazetteers and Census of India Reports (1871–1931).

Part 7: Conclusion — The Indian Vaishnav Bairagi Math Tradition: Past, Present and Future

The Vaishnav Bairagi math tradition of India is not merely the history of religious institutions; it is also the history of a long heritage of Indian culture, spirituality, education, social service and national consciousness. From the Vedic age to the modern period, these maths have played an extremely important role in preserving dharma and culture. They have never been merely places of residence for sadhus and saints but have remained living centres of knowledge, spiritual practice, service and public welfare.

This chapter has presented a brief historical introduction to the principal Vaishnav Bairagi maths and pithas of North India, Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat, Bihar, Mithila, Odisha, Maharashtra and Nepal. The available historical sources make clear that the various Vaishnav sampradayas — the Sri Sampradaya, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the Madhva Sampradaya, the Ramanandi tradition and other Vaishnav streams — each established numerous maths in their own time and developed them as centres of religion, education and social service.

The greatest contribution of the Vaishnav Bairagi maths lies in the fact that, even amid difficult historical circumstances, they kept alive devotion, scripture, Sanskrit education, cow service, food distribution, pilgrimage service, and the guru-disciple tradition. Many maths still preserve ancient manuscripts, lineages, copper-plate inscriptions, land grants and rare texts today. Their scientific study could reveal many new dimensions of Indian history.

It is equally clear that the history of many maths has not yet been published in a systematic form. The history of many institutions survives only in oral tradition, in the lineages of mahants, or in local records. This therefore remains a vast and important field of research for future scholars. Where inscriptions, epigraphs, gazetteers or contemporary documents are available, these should be regarded as primary evidence; and where only traditional

belief is available, it is more appropriate to present it clearly as such. This method strengthens the credibility of any serious research work.

In modern times, many Vaishnav maths are also active in education, healthcare, the preservation of Sanskrit, the environment, cow protection and social service. Many institutions have also begun making their literature, texts and religious teachings available through digital media. This has led to the global spread of the Vaishnav tradition, and the influence of India's devotional heritage has grown in many countries of the world.

The purpose of this research work is not to establish the superiority of any one sampradaya, but to document the historical heritage of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. The responsibility of history is not merely to sing praises but also to preserve facts on the basis of the available evidence. It is in this spirit that this book has made balanced use, as far as possible, of authenticated sources, traditional literature and available historical records.

The Indian Vaishnav Bairagi math tradition remains alive today. This tradition is not merely a memory of the past; it is also a living cultural force of the present and an inspiration for the future. There is a need for the systematic preservation, digitisation and academic study of these ancient maths, temples, manuscripts and guru lineages, so that future generations may become acquainted with this priceless heritage.

References 1. Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 2. Vishnu Purana. 3. Skanda Purana. 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 6. Various British India Gazetteers and Census of India Reports. 7. Published records and surveys of the Archaeological Survey of India. 8. Available modern research on the Vaishnav math tradition and sampradayas.

Chapter 18

Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi: From the Vedas to the Records of the British

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark —

Part 1: Inscriptions, Epigraphs and Archaeological Evidence — The Most Reliable Proofs of History

Not all sources carry equal weight in the writing of history. Modern historians generally regard inscriptions, copper-plate grants, contemporary records, coins and archaeological remains as the most reliable primary sources. These sources carry greater weight because they were generally created during the very period they describe, making them comparatively less susceptible to alteration than later traditions or folklore. In the reconstruction of Indian history, publication series such as those of the Archaeological Survey of India and *Epigraphia Indica* have collected and published thousands of inscriptions, which historians continue to use today.

Inscriptions also hold special importance in the study of the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav tradition. Records recovered from various parts of India establish that the worship of Vishnu, Vasudeva, Narayana and Sri Krishna was widely prevalent in ancient and medieval India. Numerous inscriptions mention temple construction, land grants, the founding of maths, honours given to acharyas, and the patronage of religious institutions. This evidence shows that Vaishnav dharma was not merely a matter of religious faith but also an important part of social and cultural life.

With the development of various Vaishnav sampradayas in the medieval period, numerous maths, temples and pithas were established. Inscriptions available from South India, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and other regions record grants made to maths, the names of acharyas, and the activities of religious institutions. These records make clear that maths were not merely residences for sadhus but organised centres of education, religion, culture and social service.

Epigraphia Indica (1888–1977), published by the Archaeological Survey of India, is regarded as the single most important scholarly collection of Indian inscriptions. Its various volumes have published thousands of inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and other languages. This series remains a standard reference today in the study of Indian history, Vaishnav sampradayas and religious institutions.

In this research work, wherever inscriptional or archaeological evidence is available regarding a math, temple, pitha or religious tradition, it has been given priority. Where only traditional beliefs are available, they have been presented clearly and explicitly as such. This method is necessary to preserve the impartiality and credibility of the research.

On this basis, the following sections present a systematic study of the available inscriptions, records and other primary sources relating to the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

References 1. *Epigraphia Indica* (IGNCA collection). 2. Archaeological Survey of India, *Epigraphia Indica*. 3. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*. 4. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*. 5. Archaeological Survey of India, *Annual Reports*.

Part 2: Ancient Inscriptions of Vaishnav Dharma and Early Epigraphic Evidence

Inscriptions are an extremely important source for understanding the early form of Vaishnav dharma in Indian history. While the Puranas and epics present the form of religious tradition, it is inscriptions that establish which forms of worship were actually prevalent in a given period. From this standpoint, certain inscriptions from the second to first century BCE are counted among the earliest and most reliable proofs of Vaishnav history.

The most famous of these is the Heliodorus Pillar of Besnagar (Vidisha), believed to date to approximately the second century BCE. In its inscription, Heliodorus — a Greek ambassador from Taxila, sent by the Greek king Antialkidas to the court of King Bhagabhadra — describes himself as a “Bhagavata” (a devotee of Vasudeva) and records the erection of a Garuda-standard in honour of the supreme god Vasudeva. Historians regard this as an extremely important archaeological proof of the worship of Vasudeva-Krishna and of the early Bhagavata (Vaishnav) tradition. It also suggests that, even at that time, the worship of Vasudeva was drawing people from beyond the borders of India.

Similarly, the Ghosundi–Hathibada inscriptions of Rajasthan (in the Nagari-Ghosundi area near Chittorgarh) are extremely important sources for early Vaishnav history. These inscriptions record the construction of a worship enclosure (puja-shila-prakara) for Sankarshana (Balarama) and Vasudeva, along with a Narayana-vatika. Inscribed in Brahmi script, they are counted among the oldest known Sanskrit inscriptions. Scholars regard them as early epigraphic evidence of the organised form of Vaishnav worship and of the relationship between Narayana, Sankarshana and Vasudeva.

The significance of these inscriptions is not merely religious. They also prove that, in the final centuries before the Common Era, Vaishnav worship was not confined to individual devotion alone, but that temples, worship enclosures and religious institutions had also developed around it. This makes clear that the institutional development of Vaishnav dharma is comparatively ancient.

Historians D. R. Bhandarkar, D. C. Sircar, Richard Salomon and other epigraphists have studied these inscriptions in detail. On the basis of their research, the Heliodorus Pillar and the Ghosundi–Hathibada inscriptions are today included among the principal epigraphic proofs of early Vaishnav dharma in Indian historiography.

It must be noted that the term “Vaishnav Bairagi” does not appear anywhere in these inscriptions. The present form of the Bairagi tradition had not yet developed in that period. These inscriptions should therefore be used as evidence for the history of early Vaishnav dharma and the Bhagavata tradition, and not as direct evidence of the medieval Vaishnav Bairagi sampradayas. This is the fair and scholarly approach.

These early epigraphic proofs went on to provide the historical foundation for the development of the Sri Sampradaya, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the Madhva Sampradaya, the Vishnuswami tradition and the Ramanandi Vaishnav tradition. In this way, inscriptions provide a firm link for understanding the antiquity of Vaishnav dharma and its gradual development.

References 1. Heliodorus Pillar, Besnagar (Vidisha) inscription. 2. Ghosundi–Hathibada inscriptions. 3. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*. 4. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*. 5. Archaeological Survey of India, *Epigraphia Indica*.

Part 3: Vaishnav Inscriptions of the Gupta Period and After — Historical Evidence of Temples, Land Grants and Maths

The Gupta period (fourth to sixth century CE) is regarded as an important era in the institutional development of Vaishnav dharma in Indian history. This period saw not only the expansion of the worship of Lord Vishnu but also numerous epigraphic proofs of temple construction, the tradition of land grants, and the patronage of religious institutions. The Gupta emperors frequently adorned themselves with the title “Parama Bhagavata,” indicating their patronage of Vaishnav dharma. It must be noted, however, that the Gupta rulers also patronised other religious traditions, and their rule should therefore not be viewed as confined to a single sampradaya.

Udayagiri (Madhya Pradesh) is a major centre of Gupta-era Vaishnav history. The caves here — particularly the great image of Lord Varaha and the associated inscriptions — make clear that Vaishnav dharma enjoyed royal patronage up to the early fifth century. Inscriptions from the time of Chandragupta II record religious consecration and construction activity at Udayagiri, an important proof of the organised form of Vaishnav worship.

The inscriptions of Eran (Madhya Pradesh) are likewise extremely important sources for Vaishnav history. The pillar inscription and the inscriptions associated with the Varaha image found there record praise of Lord Vishnu, the Garuda-standard, and temple dedications. The Eran pillar inscription from the time of Budhagupta begins with the glorification of Lord Vishnu, a clear epigraphic proof of the standing of Vaishnav worship at that time.

The tradition of land grants to temples was also strengthened during the Gupta period. Copper-plate grants and inscriptions from many places record the donation of villages, agricultural land, water sources and other sources of income to temples and religious institutions. The purpose of these grants was not merely worship, but also the regular functioning of temples, ashrams and religious educational arrangements. This makes clear that religious institutions were, at the time, also an important part of social and economic life.

Although the term “Vaishnav Bairagi” does not appear in the available Gupta-era inscriptions, these very inscriptions establish that the institutional foundation of Vaishnav dharma had become extremely strong by the Gupta period. It was on this foundation that organised math-sampradayas such as the Sri Sampradaya, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the

Madhva Sampradaya, the Vishnuswami tradition and the Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagi tradition later developed. It is therefore more appropriate to regard the Gupta-era inscriptions as the historical background of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, rather than as direct evidence of it.

From a historiographical standpoint, the Gupta period establishes that Vaishnav dharma was not merely a philosophical outlook but had become deeply established in Indian society through temples, religious institutions, the system of grants, and royal patronage. This very institutional tradition became the foundation for the development of the medieval Vaishnav maths and Bairagi traditions.

References 1. *Epigraphia Indica*, Archaeological Survey of India. 2. Udayagiri inscription (period of Chandragupta II). 3. Eran pillar inscription (period of Budhagupta). 4. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*. 5. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*. 6. Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*.

Part 4: The Development of Vaishnav Maths in the Early Medieval Period and the Historical Evidence of Copper-Plate Grants

The period from roughly the seventh to the twelfth century, following the Gupta era, is regarded as an important age of institutional expansion for Vaishnav dharma in India. This period saw not only the construction of temples but also the wide development of maths, ashrams and acharya lineages. The most important foundation for the history of this period lies in copper-plate grants, inscriptions, land-grant deeds and royal records. These make clear that various dynasties granted land, villages, tax-free income and other facilities to religious institutions, ensuring their regular operation.

The copper plates of the Pallava, Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, Chola and Hoysala rulers of South India record grants made to numerous Vishnu temples and Vaishnav religious institutions. Although these records do not mention all of the later Vaishnav sampradayas by name, they make clear that organised centres of Vaishnav worship had been established by that time. These records also show that temples were not merely places of worship but also centres of education, food distribution, pilgrim lodging and cultural activity.

Between the eighth and twelfth centuries, the math (matha) becomes more clearly visible across various regions of India as an organised religious institution. Many inscriptions record grants given for acharyas, their disciples and maths. This establishes that the guru-disciple tradition had by then taken on a stable institutional form.

It was against this historical backdrop that the great acharya lineages of Sri Ramanujacharya (eleventh–twelfth century), Sri Nimbarkacharya, Sri Madhvacharya and Sri Vishnuswami later expanded. The maths founded or developed by them gave organised form to Vaishnav philosophy, Sanskrit study, devotional literature and social service. It must be noted that the founding date and early history of each sampradaya should be studied on the basis of its own authentic texts and the available epigraphic evidence.

In North India too, many inscriptions and records of the early medieval period mention Vishnu temples, pilgrimage sites and religious institutions. Although a systematic history of

all the Vaishnav maths of this period is not available, the available records establish that by the twelfth century a wide network of Vaishnav religious institutions had developed across various parts of India.

Historians hold that copper-plate grants carry particular importance because they record the granting king, the purpose of the grant, the date, the boundaries of the land, the names of witnesses, and sometimes even the contemporary administrative arrangements. They are therefore counted among the most reliable primary sources of Indian history. In the study of the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition too, wherever such records are available, they should be given the highest priority.

Thus, the early medieval period proves to be a period of transition in Indian Vaishnav history. Ancient Vaishnav worship was now transforming into an organised system of maths, the guru-disciple tradition, and permanent religious institutions. This very institutional tradition became the foundation for the later development of the medieval Vaishnav Bairagi maths, akharas and chhavanis (garrisons).

References 1. *Epigraphia Indica*, Archaeological Survey of India. 2. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*. 3. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*. 4. Noboru Karashima (ed.), *A Concise History of South India*. 5. Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. 6. Archaeological Survey of India — publications of South Indian copper plates and inscriptions. 7. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Archaeological Survey of India.

Part 5: The Historical Development of Vaishnav Bairagi Maths, Akharas and Chhavanis in Medieval India

The period from the twelfth to the eighteenth century is regarded as an important age of organisational development for the Indian Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. During this period, under the influence of the Vaishnav acharya lineages, numerous maths, pithas, temples, akharas and chhavanis were established. These institutions did not merely conduct religious life; they also functioned as centres of education, ascetic training, pilgrimage arrangements, food distribution, cow service and social service. Available historical sources make clear that by this period the Vaishnav institutions had expanded across North, West, Central and South India.

During this period, the influence of the various maths of the Sri Sampradaya, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the Madhva Sampradaya, the Rudra (Vishnuswami) tradition and the Ramanandi tradition continued to grow. Each sampradaya, through its guru-disciple lineage, developed an organised system of religious education, Sanskrit study, devotional literature and temple service. The form these institutions took varied across regions, but their underlying purpose remained the preservation of Vaishnav dharma and culture.

In North India, Ramanandi Vaishnav Bairagis in particular established numerous maths and chhavanis at pilgrimage sites such as Ayodhya, Kashi, Chitrakoot, Prayag, Haridwar, Nashik and Vrindavan. The Nimbark Sampradaya, meanwhile, expanded its maths and temples across the Braj region, Rajasthan, Haryana and other areas. In South India, the maths of the Sri Vaishnav and Madhva traditions became major centres of education and

philosophy. The history of all these traditions should be studied on the basis of their own texts, records and the available historical sources.

This period also shows the clear development of institutions such as akharas and chhavanis. According to historians, akharas developed primarily as organisations of sadhus, while chhavanis were large centres of permanent residence, education and organisation for Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus. These institutions played an important role at the Kumbh melas and major pilgrimage sites. According to the available historical sources, the form of various akharas and Bairagi organisations evolved over time; their history should therefore be studied on the basis of contemporary records and reliable research.

In the medieval period, many maths also made important contributions to the preservation of Sanskrit manuscripts, religious texts and ancient traditions. Many institutions established their own libraries, where the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, the Bhagavata, the Ramayana, philosophical texts and sampradaya literature were preserved. Rare manuscripts remain available today in many ancient maths of India, forming an invaluable source for the study of Indian history and philosophy.

It must be noted that not every detail of medieval Vaishnav Bairagi history is equally available from epigraphic evidence across all regions. Some events are attested by inscriptions and copper plates, while others rest on traditional lineages, math records and ancient sampradaya texts. It is therefore the responsibility of a researcher to present each fact according to its available source, and to state clearly where direct evidence is unavailable that the account in question is a traditional one.

Thus, the medieval period was a time of extensive organisation, expansion and permanence for the Indian Vaishnav Bairagi math tradition. The institutional system developed in this era played an important role in keeping the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition alive down to modern India, and many ancient maths continue to function today as inheritors of that same tradition.

References 1. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 2. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 3. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*. 4. Archaeological Survey of India, *Epigraphia Indica*. 5. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Archaeological Survey of India. 6. Various British India Gazetteers and early math records. 7. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*.

Part 6: The Mention of Vaishnav Bairagi Maths in Mughal- and British-Era Records

In the latter half of the medieval period and in the colonial era, the historical material available regarding the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition becomes considerably clearer and more abundant than before. In this period, Persian historical chronicles, the travel accounts of European travellers, the records of the East India Company, British gazetteers, census reports and administrative documents all become important sources for the study of Vaishnav Bairagi maths and ascetic organisations. In using these sources, it must be kept in mind that many of these accounts were written by outside observers, and may therefore carry the influence of a colonial or administrative perspective. Their study should accordingly be undertaken comparatively, alongside Indian sources.

Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* records India's principal pilgrimage sites, religious institutions and various ascetic sampradayas. Although it does not provide a detailed account of every Vaishnav Bairagi math, it makes clear that by the Mughal period Vaishnav sadhus and their religious centres had become an important part of Indian society. The *Ain-i-Akbari* is therefore regarded as an important source for the study of medieval religious history.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the East India Company and the British administration prepared gazetteers for India's various provinces. These record the principal maths, temples, Bairagi institutions, religious fairs and mahants of Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Prayag, Nashik, Puri, Dwarka and other pilgrimage sites. Since the purpose of these gazetteers was the collection of administrative information, many factual details have been preserved within them, making them useful sources for historians today.

The various reports of the Census of India (1871–1931) also contain classifications and statistical accounts of Bairagis, Vaishnavs, sadhus and religious sampradayas. Although these classifications carried the influence of the administrative outlook of the time, they nonetheless remain an important record of the widespread presence of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition in India of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Many European scholars and Indian historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also studied the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition. G. S. Ghurye, in particular, presented a sociological study of various sadhu sampradayas in *Indian Sadhus*, while William R. Pinch, in *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, analysed the historical development of the Vaishnav Bairagis and other ascetic traditions. Both these works are widely used in modern research.

It is also worth noting that the terminology used in colonial-era records does not always correspond to Indian religious traditions. Different sampradayas were often grouped under a single category, or local traditions were described in a simplified manner. Before reaching any conclusion, it is therefore necessary to compare these sources with Indian texts, math records, lineages and inscriptions. This very research method strengthens the credibility of history.

In the study of the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, it becomes clearly apparent that while Vedic literature presents its philosophical foundation, inscriptions confirm its ancient existence, and the records of the Mughal and British periods provide documentary proof of its organised social and institutional form. It is for this reason that the title of this research work, "Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi: From the Vedas to the Records of the British," appears meaningful and fitting from a historical standpoint.

References 1. Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*. 2. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. 3. *Census of India Reports* (1871–1931). 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 6. Various British India Gazetteers. 7. Archaeological Survey of India, *Epigraphia Indica*.

Part 7: Conclusion — The Evidence-Based Historical Journey of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition, from Vedic Literature to Colonial Records

The value of history lies not merely in its antiquity but in its evidence. The historical standing of any tradition is established only when independent and reliable sources from different periods are available in its support. In studying the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, this fact becomes most clearly apparent: its development is not the result of a single age or a single individual's effort, but the history of a continuous religious, philosophical and cultural current that has evolved over millennia.

The evidence presented in this chapter makes clear that the fundamental elements of the Vaishnav tradition are present in Vedic literature, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita and the Puranas. Thereafter, the inscriptions of Besnagar (the Heliodorus Pillar), Ghosundi, Hathibada, Udayagiri, Eran and others establish that the worship of Lord Vishnu, Vasudeva and Narayana was systematically prevalent in ancient India. Medieval copper plates, inscriptions and land grants confirm the organisational development of religious institutions, while Mughal- and British-era records show that Vaishnav maths, temples and Bairagi institutions had become an important part of Indian society.

It is also necessary for historians not to treat Vaishnav dharma, the Vaishnav sampradayas, and the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition as synonymous. The history of Vaishnav dharma is extremely ancient, whereas the organised development of the various acharya sampradayas and Bairagi institutions occurred mainly in the medieval period. Understanding this distinction clearly is the very foundation of impartial and scientific historiography.

This research work, too, has attempted the same approach: wherever inscriptions, copper plates, epigraphs, gazetteers or contemporary sources are available, these have been given priority; and where only traditional belief is available, it has been presented clearly and explicitly as such. This allows the reader to draw conclusions on the basis of the sources themselves, while preserving the credibility of the research.

In Indian history, the Vaishnav Bairagi maths did not confine their work to religious worship alone. They also made notable contributions to Sanskrit education, the preservation of manuscripts, pilgrimage arrangements, food distribution, cow service, the establishment of dharmashalas, social service, and the preservation of cultural traditions. Many maths continue to carry this tradition forward today and stand as witnesses to the continuity of Indian culture.

It is equally true that many chapters of Vaishnav Bairagi history still await systematic research. Many maths continue to preserve unpublished manuscripts, copper plates, lineages and local records. If these were scientifically edited, digitised and studied comparatively, many new facts of Indian religious history could come to light. This is an important responsibility for the coming generation of researchers.

The purpose of this chapter is not to establish the superiority of any one sampradaya, but to understand the developmental journey of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition on the

basis of the available historical evidence. It is for this reason that this research work accords the highest importance to evidence, sources and impartiality.

The journey “from the Vedas to the records of the British” is not merely the title of a book; it signals that unbroken tradition in Indian history which, despite time, circumstance and political change, has kept its spiritual consciousness, cultural heritage and guru-disciple tradition alive. This, too, is the core message of this research work.

References 1. Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, the Upanishads. 2. Srimad Bhagavad Gita. 3. Vishnu Purana and Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana. 4. *Epigraphia Indica*, Archaeological Survey of India. 5. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*. 6. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*. 7. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. 8. *Census of India Reports* (1871–1931). 9. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 10. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*.

❖ **End of Chapter 18** ❖

Chapter 19

The Advent of Muslim Rule in India and the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition (8th–18th Century)

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark —

Part 1: The Arab Advance into Sindh (712 CE) — The Religious Condition of India in the Time of Muhammad bin Qasim

The history of India is a history of the meeting, conflict and synthesis of many cultural currents. With the Arab advance into Sindh in the eighth century, the Indian subcontinent entered into direct political contact with the Islamic world for the first time. Before this, Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist, Jain, and various Vaishnav-Shaiva traditions had already been developing in India for thousands of years.

To understand this period, it is necessary to view the religious and social condition of India at the time not merely through political events, but on the basis of available historical sources, travellers' accounts, inscriptions and literary traditions.

The history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is likewise a part of this wider religious environment. Although the organised sampradaya form of the term "Bairagi" becomes more clearly visible in the later medieval period, the traditions of Vaishnav asceticism, sadhus and devotion to God had existed in India since ancient times.

1. India in the Eighth Century: Religious and Cultural Condition

When the Arab general Muhammad bin Qasim campaigned in Sindh in 712 CE, India was a vast cultural region in which numerous dynasties and religious traditions were active. At that time, Sindh was ruled by the Brahmin ruler Dahir. Vedic traditions, the worship of Shiva and Vishnu, Buddhism, and local religious beliefs were all prevalent in Sindh and north-western India.

Following the Gupta period (fourth to sixth century), the expansion of Purana-based devotional traditions had already taken place in India. The worship of Vishnu, Krishna, Ram and their various forms was popular across many regions. Temples were not merely places of worship but also centres of education, culture and social activity.

2. The Arab Campaign in Sindh (712 CE)

According to Arab historians, the Sindh campaign took place under Umayyad rule, led by Muhammad bin Qasim. The principal account of this event is found in Arabic-Persian sources, the most famous of which is the *Chachnama*. The *Chachnama* is regarded as an important source for the history of Sindh, though modern historians discuss the period of its composition and the historical reliability of its accounts. Its details should therefore be examined alongside other sources.

The purpose of Muhammad bin Qasim's campaign was political control and the expansion of Arab rule. Following the conquest of Sindh, Arab administration was established and governing relationships were formed with local society.

3. The Religious Condition and Temple Tradition of Sindh

Before the Arab arrival, Sindh had numerous religious centres, home to both Hindu and Buddhist communities. The Indus river region had, since ancient times, been a centre of trade, education and religious activity. Arab writers recorded the religions, temples and social order of India. Later scholars such as Al-Biruni (eleventh century) undertook a detailed study of Indian religion, philosophy and science. His writings make clear that India at that time possessed a rich tradition of religious philosophy.

From the standpoint of the Vaishnav tradition, this period was important because the worship of Vishnu, Krishna and Narayana was already established in society through the Puranas, temples and ascetic traditions.

4. The Condition of the Vaishnav Ascetic Tradition

The organised "Vaishnav Bairagi akharas," or organised Bairagi communities as they appear today, had not yet fully developed in the eighth century; that development took place in later centuries. But the ascetic tradition of renunciation, devotion and dedication to Lord Vishnu was ancient. Bhagavata dharma, the Pancharatra tradition, and temple-based Vaishnav practice already existed in India. In South India, the devotional current of the Alvar saints (roughly sixth to ninth century) was building a powerful movement of love and devotion toward Lord Vishnu.

This wider Vaishnav environment went on to prepare the ground for the development of the great traditions of Ramanujacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Madhvacharya and Ramanandacharya.

5. The Relationship Between Arab Rule and Indian Religious Traditions

After the establishment of Arab rule in Sindh, local society did not disappear entirely; local administrative and social arrangements continued in many areas. History also records that Arab rule relied on the cooperation of local communities to run revenue administration. To view this period only as one of conflict would be incomplete, as would viewing it only as one of peaceful co-existence. Circumstances differed by place and time. The purpose of historical study is precisely to understand events on the basis of the available evidence.

6. Long-term Impact on the Vaishnav Tradition

The Arab advance into Sindh changed the political condition of north-western India, but India's religious traditions did not disappear. In the centuries that followed, Vaishnav devotion developed even more widely. The devotional current of the Alvar saints of South India, temple culture, and Vedantic traditions went on to give rise to Vaishnav movements across the whole of India. When political circumstances changed in the medieval period, Vaishnav saints and Bairagi sadhus played an important role in keeping dharma, culture and the devotional tradition alive.

Conclusion

The Arab advance into Sindh in 712 CE was an important event in Indian history. At this time, Vedic, Puranic and Vaishnav traditions were already well developed in India. Muhammad bin Qasim's campaign was an event of political expansion that introduced the Indian subcontinent to a new historical circumstance. In the centuries that followed, Indian religious traditions maintained their continuity amid many challenges and changes. The organised form of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition became clearer in the later centuries, but its spiritual roots lay in ancient Vaishnav devotion, temple culture and the ascetic tradition.

References 1. *Chachnama* (a principal medieval source on the Arab conquest of Sindh). 2. Al-Biruni, *Kitab-ul-Hind*. 3. Puranic literature and Vaishnav agamic traditions. 4. South Indian Alvar saint literature. 5. Research of modern historians (R. C. Majumdar, Satish Chandra, André Wink, and others).

Part 2: The Ghaznavid and Ghurid Periods — Temples, Pilgrimage Sites and Vaishnav Institutions of North India (11th–12th Century)

For roughly three centuries after the Arab advance into Sindh in the eighth century, local dynasties retained dominance over most of India. With the rise of Turkic power in Central Asia in the eleventh century, political circumstances in north-western India began to change rapidly.

The Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions opened a new chapter in the political history of North India. In this period, temples, pilgrimage sites and religious institutions also came under the influence of political conflicts. At the same time, it is also true that in many regions local dynasties and religious institutions continued their traditions. Understanding this period is essential to the study of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, because it was during this era that pilgrimage sites, maths and devotional traditions were reorganised in North India, preparing the ground for the medieval Vaishnav movements that followed.

1. The Rise of Ghaznavid Power and Its Campaigns into India

Mahmud of Ghazni (971–1030 CE), ruler of Ghazni, conducted numerous campaigns into India. The principal purposes of these campaigns were political expansion, the acquisition of wealth, and the strengthening of his empire. Accounts of Mahmud's Indian campaigns are found in the work of his court historian Al-Utbi, the *Tarikh-i-Yamini*, and other Persian sources. His invasions were directed mainly at north-western India and its wealthy religious centres. Temples at that time were not merely religious sites but also economic and social institutions possessing land, endowments and property.

2. The Role of Temples and Religious Institutions

The importance of temples in medieval India was multifaceted. Temples were centres of worship and spiritual practice, places of education and Sanskrit study, sites for the preservation of art, music and literature, and institutions running systems of charity and service. Within the Vaishnav tradition, temples of Vishnu, Krishna and Ram were active

alongside ashrams and ascetic traditions. In North India, Mathura, Kashi, Ayodhya, Haridwar, Prayag and other pilgrimage sites held great religious importance.

3. Mathura and the Krishna Devotional Tradition

Mathura had, since ancient times, been renowned as the birthplace of Lord Sri Krishna. It is mentioned in the Puranas and ancient literature as a major religious city. The Persian historical chronicles record an attack on Mathura during the Ghaznavid period, describing its temples and wealth, though modern historians interpret the accounts of various sources differently. What is important is that the Krishna devotional tradition of Mathura did not come to an end. In the centuries that followed, this very region became a great centre of Vaishnav devotion.

4. The Ghurid Period and Political Change

In the twelfth century, the campaigns of Muhammad of Ghor decisively affected the politics of North India. After the Battles of Tarain (1191 and 1192 CE), Turkic power grew in North India, eventually leading to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. Even during this political transformation, India's religious traditions did not come to an end. Rajput rulers, local chieftains and religious institutions in many regions continued their activities.

5. The Vaishnav Ascetic and Pilgrimage Tradition

The full form of organised "Bairagi akharas" had not yet developed in the Ghaznavid and Ghurid periods, but the Vaishnav ascetic tradition remained active. The Bhagavata dharma tradition remained alive; the Pancharatra and Vaishnav agamic traditions were prevalent; worship of Vishnu, Krishna and Ram continued in temples; and the devotional current of the Alvar saints of South India remained influential. It was in this very period that the philosophical traditions developed that would go on to strengthen the great Vaishnav currents of Ramanujacharya, Nimbarkacharya and Madhvacharya.

6. Conflict and Preservation — A Balanced Historical Study of Both

In studying this history, it is necessary to understand that the medieval period was not merely a history of wars. Alongside political conflicts, cultural exchange, administrative arrangements and social continuity also continued. Some temples and religious centres suffered damage in political conflicts, while many other temples and maths continued to function under the patronage of local rulers and society. To reach any conclusion, therefore, a comparative study of Persian historical texts, inscriptions, copper plates, architectural evidence and local traditions is necessary.

7. The Continuity of the Vaishnav Tradition

Despite the political upheavals of the Ghaznavid and Ghurid periods, the core current of Vaishnav dharma remained intact. In the centuries that followed, the Vishishtadvaita tradition of Ramanujacharya, the Dvaitadvaita tradition of Nimbarkacharya, the Dvaita tradition of Madhvacharya, and the devotional current of Ramanandacharya gave new direction to India's religious life. These very traditions went on to become the foundation for the organisation and expansion of the Vaishnav Bairagi communities.

Conclusion

The Ghaznavid and Ghurid periods were a time of political change in Indian history. During this period, some major religious centres of North India faced conflict, but India's religious and cultural traditions did not come to an end. Vaishnav devotion, temple culture and the ascetic tradition preserved themselves amid changing political circumstances and went on to take the form of a powerful spiritual movement in medieval India.

References 1. *Tarikh-i-Yamini* — Al-Utbi. 2. *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* — Minhaj-us-Siraj. 3. Sanskrit inscriptions and temple records. 4. Studies of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). 5. Research works of modern historians on medieval India.

Part 3: Vaishnav Maths, the Saint Tradition, and the Bhakti Movement Under the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526)

With the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century, a major transformation occurred in the political order of North India. Beginning with the rule of Qutbuddin Aibak in 1206 CE, the Sultanate governed a large part of North India for nearly three centuries.

This was a period of political conflict, new administrative structures and cultural change. At the same time, India's ancient religious traditions continued to develop steadily in their respective regions. Vaishnav devotion, temple tradition, the math system and the saintly tradition preserved their existence amid many social circumstances.

This period is extremely important in the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, because it was in this era that the philosophical currents of South Indian Vaishnavism reached North India, and the Bhakti movement began to take on a wide-ranging form.

1. The Establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and the Religious Landscape

Under the early rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, many political changes took place in North India. A new power structure was established in place of the earlier dynasties. At this time, numerous religious currents were active in India — the Vaishnav tradition, the Shaiva tradition, Shakta worship, Jainism, the remnants of Buddhist tradition, and local folk beliefs. Temples and maths were not merely places of worship but also centres of education, Sanskrit study and religious training.

2. The Continuity of Vaishnav Maths and the Ashram Tradition

During the Delhi Sultanate period, the activities of Vaishnav maths continued in various regions. In particular, the Sri Vaishnav tradition in South India, the Madhva tradition in Karnataka, and Vaishnav ascetic traditions in other regions remained active. During this period, the guru-disciple lineage of the acharyas continued, worship practices in temples continued, religious texts continued to be composed and interpreted, and the tradition of pilgrimage continued. Since political circumstances differed across regions, the experience was not uniform everywhere.

3. The Expansion of Sri Ramanujacharya's Tradition

Ramanujacharya (approximately 1017–1137 CE) lived before the Delhi Sultanate, but the influence of the Sri Vaishnav tradition he established remained widespread even during the Sultanate period. Ramanujacharya systematised Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, established devotion as an important path to liberation, strengthened temple-based Vaishnav practice, and broadened devotion at the social level. The maths of his tradition spread from South India into various other regions.

4. The Development of the Nimbark and Madhva Traditions

The tradition of Nimbarkacharya also continued to develop in the medieval period. Devotion to Radha-Krishna, Vedantic philosophy, and the guru-disciple tradition gave this current its distinct identity. Similarly, Madhvacharya (thirteenth century) organised the Dvaita Vedanta tradition in the Karnataka region. All these Vaishnav traditions together laid a strong foundation for devotion, philosophy and spiritual practice in India.

5. Sri Ramanandacharya and Devotion to Ram in North India

Ramanandacharya is regarded as one of the principal acharyas of the Ram bhakti movement in North India. His period is generally placed in the fourteenth to fifteenth century. Ramanandacharya carried devotion to Lord Sri Ram to the common people, delivered the devotional message in vernacular languages alongside Sanskrit, and worked to bring Vaishnav practice to the wider society. Saints associated with his tradition, including names such as Kabir and Ravidas, appear in saint literature. However, the accounts of these connections are presented differently across various traditions and historians, and should therefore be studied on the basis of the sources. The Ramanandi tradition went on to become one of the principal currents of the Vaishnav Bairagi communities.

6. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the Krishna Devotional Movement

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533 CE) carried forward the great current of Krishna devotion in Bengal and the Vrindavan region. His devotional tradition gave particular importance to Harinam Sankirtan, love for Sri Krishna, and the worship of Radha-Krishna. The Chaitanya tradition contributed to the re-establishment of Vrindavan as a major centre of Krishna devotion.

7. The Expansion of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

In the medieval period, various branches of Vaishnav ascetics developed — Ramanandi Bairagis, Nimbarki ascetics, ascetics of the Madhva tradition, and Gaudiya Vaishnav ascetics. These ascetics played their role in society through pilgrimage, religious education, the propagation of devotional literature, and temple service.

8. Maths, Akharas and Religious Organisation

In the final phase of the medieval period, ascetic communities began to take on a more organised form. The extensive organisation of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas becomes more clearly visible in the centuries that followed. The purpose of the akharas was not spiritual

practice alone, but also the organisation of sadhus, the protection of religious traditions, and participation in pilgrimage arrangements.

9. Cultural Continuity

Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, political changes continued to occur, but the Vaishnav traditions maintained their spiritual current. Temples, maths and saint traditions connected with the devotion of Ram, Krishna and Vishnu remained active in society. These very traditions went on to form the foundation for the important role of the Vaishnav Bairagis in the Mughal period.

Conclusion

The period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century was an age of renaissance in Indian Vaishnav history. Ramanujacharya's Sri Sampradaya tradition, Nimbarkacharya's Dvaitadvaita philosophy, Madhvacharya's Dvaita Vedanta, Ramanandacharya's devotion to Ram, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's devotion to Krishna together gave new direction to India's religious life. These very traditions went on to give rise to the widespread form of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi communities, which occupied an important place in the religious and cultural history of medieval India.

References 1. The *Sri Bhashya* of Ramanujacharya and Sri Vaishnav texts. 2. Philosophical texts of the Nimbark Sampradaya. 3. Madhvacharya's commentary on the Brahma Sutras. 4. *Bhaktamal* (Nabhadas). 5. *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. 6. Medieval temple records and math traditions.

Part 4: The Mughal Period (1526–1707) — Vaishnav Maths and Pilgrimage Sites from Akbar to Aurangzeb, Based on Available Historical Sources

A new chapter in India's political history began in the sixteenth century with Babur's establishment of Mughal rule in 1526 CE. The Mughal Empire remained the principal political power in India for nearly two centuries. This period was also important for the Sanatan Vaishnav traditions, since it was during this time that Vaishnav devotion, temple construction, the math system and ascetic traditions expanded in Vrindavan, Mathura, Ayodhya, Rajasthan, Gujarat and other regions.

In studying the Mughal period, it is necessary to adopt an impartial historical view by considering together the available Persian court chronicles, royal records, temple inscriptions, land-grant deeds and local traditions.

1. The Early Mughal Period and Religious Circumstances

Babur (1483–1530 CE) established Mughal rule in India in 1526 CE by defeating Ibrahim Lodi at the First Battle of Panipat. Establishing political stability was Babur's principal objective. The empire subsequently expanded under Humayun and then Akbar. During this time, the Vaishnav devotional movement was active in India; Vrindavan was becoming a principal centre of Krishna devotion; the Ramanandi and other Vaishnav ascetic traditions were spreading; and numerous maths and ashrams were engaged in religious activity.

2. The Akbar Period and the Vaishnav Tradition

Akbar's reign (1556–1605 CE) is generally regarded as one of relatively liberal religious policy. Dialogue took place at Akbar's court with scholars of various religions. During his reign, several Hindu rulers, scholars and religious institutions received patronage. It was during this time that a great development of Krishna devotion took place in the Braj region.

3. The Revival of Vrindavan and Krishna Devotion

In the sixteenth century, Vrindavan emerged as a principal centre of Vaishnav devotion. The Goswamis, followers of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, undertook the work of identifying and re-establishing the ancient Krishna sites of Vrindavan. Among the principal Vaishnav acharyas, Rupa Goswami, Sanatana Goswami and Jiva Goswami made important contributions. The construction of the Govind Dev, Madan Mohan and other Krishna temples in Vrindavan was part of this wider Vaishnav renaissance.

4. Vaishnav Maths and Royal Patronage

During the Mughal period, many Vaishnav institutions received patronage from various Hindu rulers, Rajput chieftains and local jagirdars. In particular, Vaishnav temples and maths developed in the Rajput states of Rajasthan, in Bundelkhand, in Gujarat and in the Braj region. Records provide evidence that many temples received land grants, jagirs or financial support.

5. The Ramanandi Vaishnav and Bairagi Tradition

During the Mughal period, the influence of the Ramanandi Vaishnav tradition grew in North India. Ramanandi Bairagi sadhus propagated devotion to the name of Ram, established ashrams at pilgrimage sites, undertook religious journeys, and conveyed the message of devotion and service to society. Vaishnav ascetic traditions were active in regions such as Ayodhya, Chitrakoot, Kashi and Haridwar.

6. The Nimbark and Other Vaishnav Traditions

During the Mughal period, the Nimbark Sampradaya also remained active in the Braj region and Rajasthan. Worship of Radha-Krishna, the guru tradition, and ascetic practice were the distinctive identity of this tradition. Nimbarki ascetics carried forward temple service, devotional literature, and the tradition of spiritual practice.

7. The Aurangzeb Period and Religious Institutions

Extensive discussion is found among historians regarding the religious policies of Aurangzeb's reign. Historical evidence exists of action taken against certain temples during this period, while on the other hand, evidence is also available of royal orders and patronage extended to certain Hindu religious institutions. Any conclusion therefore requires the study of Persian farmans, royal documents, temple records and contemporary accounts.

8. The Social Role of the Vaishnav Bairagis

In the final phase of the Mughal period, the Vaishnav Bairagi community appears to have become more organised. Its role extended to religious education, pilgrimage service, temple administration, and spiritual leadership within society. In some places, ascetic communities also adopted the form of akharas for their own protection and organisation.

Conclusion

The Mughal period, from 1526 to 1707 CE, was an important time of political change and religious-cultural activity in Indian history. During this period, the Vaishnav traditions maintained their continuity amid many challenges. The development of Vrindavan as a centre of Krishna devotion, the expansion of the Ramanandi and Nimbarki Bairagi traditions, and the activity of temple and math institutions were the principal features of this age. To understand the Mughal period, it is necessary to examine both conflict and patronage on the basis of evidence.

References 1. *Akbarnama* — Abul Fazl. 2. *Ain-i-Akbari* — Abul Fazl. 3. Persian records of the Mughal period. 4. Temple records of Vrindavan and Rajasthan. 5. The *Bhaktamal* tradition. 6. Travel accounts of European travellers.

Part 5: The Vaishnav Bairagi in Persian Historical Chronicles, Inscriptions, Rajput Records and the Accounts of European Travellers

History is not merely the story of wars and kings; it is also the subject of the study of a society's religious, cultural and spiritual traditions. Understanding the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition requires the study of various types of sources.

In medieval India, Vaishnav sadhus, maths, temples and pilgrimage sites remained active amid many political changes. Understanding their history requires a comparative study of Persian court chronicles, temple inscriptions, Rajput royal records, Vaishnav saint literature, and the accounts of European travellers.

1. The Mention of Religious Institutions in Persian Historical Chronicles

At the courts of medieval Muslim rulers, many historians wrote works in the Persian language. These principally describe royal events, wars, administration and the activities of rulers. The principal sources include the *Akbarnama* (Abul Fazl, an account of Akbar's reign), the *Ain-i-Akbari* (Abul Fazl, on administration and society), the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* (Badayuni), and the *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* (an important source for the Delhi Sultanate). These works mainly describe political events, but they also provide information regarding the religious and social circumstances of the time.

2. Epigraphic Evidence Relating to Vaishnav Pilgrimage Sites

Inscriptions are an extremely important source for the history of India's temple and math tradition. Inscriptions provide information on who commissioned the construction of a temple, which ruler or individual made a land grant, how the economic system of a math was organised, and which acharyas and traditions held influence. Numerous inscriptions found in Rajasthan, Gujarat, South India and the Braj region provide information on the existence and development of Vaishnav institutions.

3. Rajput Records and Vaishnav Patronage

In the medieval period, many Rajput states extended patronage to the Vaishnav traditions. In particular, temples, saints and religious institutions received patronage in regions such as Mewar, Jaipur, Amber, Marwar and Bundelkhand. The records of Rajput rulers provide evidence of the worship of Vishnu, Krishna and Ram, and of temple construction. The Rajput states provided land, protection and financial support to numerous Vaishnav temples.

4. Evidence from Vrindavan and the Braj Region

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Vrindavan became a principal centre of Vaishnav devotion. Gaudiya Vaishnav acharyas undertook the work of identifying and re-establishing the ancient Krishna sites of the Braj region. The principal temples were the Govind Dev temple, the Madan Mohan temple and the Gopinath temple. The history of these temples shows that the Vaishnav tradition continued its religious activities even amid political changes.

5. The Accounts of European Travellers

European travellers who visited medieval India also described Indian society and religious life. The principal travellers were François Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Niccolao Manucci. Their accounts describe India's towns, trade, temples, religious groups and social life. However, since the accounts of these travellers were also shaped by their own perspectives and limitations, they must be examined alongside other sources.

6. The Historical Form of the Vaishnav Bairagis

In the latter half of the medieval period, the Vaishnav Bairagi community appears in a more organised form. Its principal characteristics were: devotion to Lord Vishnu, Ram or Krishna; adherence to the guru tradition; renunciation and spiritual practice; the establishment of ashrams at pilgrimage sites; and religious education and social service. Sadhus of the Ramanandi, Nimbarki and other Vaishnav traditions were active in many regions of North India.

7. The Limits of the Sources and the Need for Historical Caution

In writing the history of the Vaishnav Bairagi, it is necessary to examine the evidence for each event. The evidence used by historians includes contemporary texts, inscriptions, copper plates, royal orders, temple records and travellers' accounts. Where direct evidence is unavailable, tradition and history must be presented separately. This is the method of scientific historiography.

8. Cultural Continuity

From the eighth to the eighteenth century, India's Vaishnav traditions witnessed many political changes, but their spiritual current remained unbroken. Maths, temples, the saint tradition and the pilgrimage system played an important role in Indian culture. Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus carried this tradition forward through religion, devotion and social organisation.

Conclusion

Persian historical chronicles, inscriptions, Rajput records and the accounts of European travellers together help in understanding the religious history of medieval India. These sources make clear that the Vaishnav traditions kept changing according to political circumstances, but their fundamental spiritual current remained intact. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition was not merely a tradition of religious practice; it also made an important contribution to India's cultural memory, pilgrimage tradition and social life.

References 1. *Akbarnama* — Abul Fazl. 2. *Ain-i-Akbari* — Abul Fazl. 3. *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* — Badayuni. 4. Temple inscriptions and copper plates. 5. Rajput inscriptions of praise (prashastis). 6. Travel accounts of European travellers. 7. Vaishnav saint literature and math traditions.

Part 6: A Wider Conclusion — Conflict, Preservation and Cultural Continuity

India witnessed many political changes from the Arab arrival in Sindh in the eighth century to the eighteenth century. Over this long span, dynasties changed and empires rose and fell, but India's spiritual and cultural traditions continued without interruption.

The history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is likewise a history of this continuity. It is not a subject connected with any single period or ruler, but a long journey of thousands of years of Vaishnav devotion, the guru-disciple tradition, temple culture, and the life of the ascetic.

1. The Early Muslim Advance and Indian Traditions

Muhammad bin Qasim's campaign in Sindh in 712 CE established political contact between India and the Islamic world. At that time, Vedic traditions, Purana-based religion, Vaishnav and Shaiva worship, and Buddhist and Jain traditions were active in India. The influence of Arab rule remained largely confined to the Sindh region, while local dynasties and religious institutions in other parts of India continued according to their own traditions.

2. The Ghaznavid and Ghurid Periods: An Age of Change

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions changed the political condition of North India. During this period, some religious centres were affected by conflicts, but it is equally established that temples, maths and pilgrimage traditions continued in many regions. A balanced study of history shows that this was an age not only of destruction but also of change, reorganisation and cultural continuity.

3. The Delhi Sultanate and the Bhakti Movement

During the period of the Delhi Sultanate, from 1206 to 1526 CE, the Bhakti movement expanded in Indian religious life. It was during this time that the influence of the Sri Vaishnav tradition grew; the Nimbark and Madhva traditions developed; Ramanandacharya broadened devotion to Ram in North India; and the saint tradition connected various sections of society. The Bhakti movement conveyed the message that the path to God lies through love, devotion and surrender.

4. The Mughal Period and the Expansion of Vaishnav Institutions

During Mughal rule, from 1526 to 1707 CE, the Vaishnav traditions developed in many regions. In particular, Vrindavan became a principal centre of Krishna devotion; the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition expanded; the Ramanandi and Nimbarki ascetic traditions remained active; and many temples and maths received the patronage of various local rulers and devotees. Akbar's period shows a relatively liberal outlook in religious dialogue and toward various traditions, while historians hold differing views on the religious policies of Aurangzeb's reign.

5. The Development of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

During the medieval period, the Vaishnav Bairagi communities gradually acquired an organised form. Their principal roles were: imparting religious education, serving temples and pilgrimage sites, propagating devotional literature, and spreading spiritual awareness in society. The Ramanandi, Nimbarki, Madhva and other Vaishnav currents enriched India's spiritual tradition.

6. The Importance of Evidence in Historiography

An evidence-based approach is necessary in studying the history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi. The principal sources are Persian historical chronicles, royal farmans, temple inscriptions, copper plates, Rajput records, the accounts of European travellers, and Vaishnav saint literature. Where evidence is available, history can be written clearly; where only folk tradition exists, it is appropriate to present it as such.

7. Conflict and Preservation — A Balanced Study of Both

The history of medieval India has many layers. It included political conflicts; some religious institutions were affected; many temples and maths were also preserved; and dialogue and cultural exchange occurred among various communities. History should therefore be understood not from one side alone, but on the basis of all available evidence.

8. The Message of Cultural Continuity

From the eighth to the eighteenth century, many political changes occurred, but India's Vaishnav spiritual current did not come to an end. The devotional tradition of Lord Vishnu, Sri Ram and Sri Krishna continued to flow through temples, through maths, through the words of saints, and through the lives of devotees. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition is an important link in this unbroken spiritual journey.

Epilogue

The history from the advent of Muslim rule in India to the end of the Mughal period is a history of conflict, change, preservation and cultural continuity. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition preserved its spiritual identity even amid a changing political environment. Saints, acharyas, maths and devotees carried this tradition forward from generation to generation. This history tells us that the strength of Indian culture has lain not merely in political power, but also in its spiritual traditions, knowledge, devotion and social consciousness.

Chapter 20

The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition and the Maratha Period

Its Role in Religion, Society and the Struggle for Freedom

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark —

Part 1: The Rise of Maratha Power and the New Role of the Vaishnav Traditions (17th–18th Century)

Seventeenth-century India was a period of political and social transformation. On the one hand, the Mughal Empire stood at the height of its power; on the other, various regional powers were rising. It was in this environment that Maratha power arose from Maharashtra, coming to occupy an important place in Indian politics.

The Maratha movement was not merely a matter of political expansion; behind it lay an important role for religious, cultural and social consciousness as well. Maharashtra's saint tradition, its Bhakti movement, and the organisational strength of local society gave a firm foundation to Maratha consciousness. Within this wider cultural environment, the Sanatan Vaishnav traditions, ascetic communities and Bairagi saints too remained active in their respective regions.

1. The Rise of Maratha Power

Maratha power arose in the seventeenth century under the leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (19 February 1630 – 3 April 1680). Shivaji Maharaj established an independent kingdom, which he connected to the spirit of "Hindavi Swarajya." The principal features of his rule were: a system of local administration, a strong organisation of forts, respect for religious sites, the protection of the people, and the preservation of regional culture. The building of Maratha power owed as much to social and religious inspiration as to military organisation.

2. The Bhakti Tradition of Maharashtra

Even before the Maratha period, a strong tradition of the Bhakti movement had developed in Maharashtra. Its principal saints were Jnaneshwar (thirteenth century), Namdev (thirteenth–fourteenth century), Eknath (sixteenth century), and Tukaram (seventeenth century). These saints carried devotion to Lord Vitthal (a form of Vishnu) to the common people. The Warkari tradition conveyed a message of devotion, ethical living, a sense of equality within society, and love for God.

3. Vaishnav Ideology and Maratha Society

Maharashtra's Warkari tradition was, at its root, based on devotion to Vishnu in his form as Vitthal. It strengthened religious consciousness and a spirit of organisation within society. The principal features of Vaishnav devotion were: love for God, remembrance of the divine name, the importance of the words of saints, and service and righteous conduct. This religious environment became an important part of Maratha society's cultural identity.

4. The Vaishnav Bairagi and Ascetic Traditions

In medieval India, Vaishnav ascetic communities were active in various regions. In North India, the Ramanandi, Nimbarki and other Vaishnav Bairagi traditions were developing. The role of these ascetics extended to the service of pilgrimage sites, religious education, the running of maths, and the propagation of devotional literature. During the Maratha period too, various ascetic communities held influence in religious and social life.

5. Pilgrimage Sites and Cultural Contact

During the Maratha period, contact between India's various pilgrimage sites grew. The principal Vaishnav pilgrimage sites were Pandharpur (devotion to Vitthal), Nashik, Ayodhya, Mathura-Vrindavan, Kashi and Prayag. Through pilgrimage, saints, sadhus and devotees of various regions remained connected with one another.

6. The Relationship Between Religion and Politics

The relationship between religion and politics during the Maratha period was complex. Religious identity gave inspiration to society, but administration, military strength and economic policy also played an important role in the system of governance. In the study of history, it is necessary to understand that no movement can be viewed purely through a religious or purely through a political lens. The spirit of local self-rule, social organisation, military capability and cultural consciousness — all these elements contributed to the development of Maratha power.

Conclusion

The rise of Maratha power in the seventeenth century was an important event in Indian history. Maharashtra's Vaishnav devotional tradition and its saint movement strengthened spiritual and cultural consciousness in society. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, too, was part of this wider religious environment, contributing to the preservation of devotion, spiritual practice and cultural continuity across various regions of India. The Maratha period goes on to present an important chapter for the study of Vaishnav ascetic communities, pilgrimage traditions and their social role.

References 1. Historical studies relating to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Maratha administrative documents. 2. Warkari saint literature — the *Jnaneshwari*, *Tukaram Gatha*. 3. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 4. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*.

Part 2: The Maratha Empire, the Vaishnav Saint Tradition, and Its Relations with the Pilgrimage Sites of North India (17th–18th Century)

With the expansion of Maratha power, political and cultural relations between various regions of India expanded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Maharashtra's saint tradition, in particular the Warkari current of devotion to Vitthal, gave society a spiritual foundation.

During this same period, Maratha rulers and generals developed increasing contact with the principal pilgrimage sites, ascetic communities and religious institutions of North India.

Sites such as Ayodhya, Kashi, Prayag, Mathura-Vrindavan and Haridwar were not merely religious centres but also major sites of cultural contact.

1. Maratha Expansion and Contact with North India

In the eighteenth century, Maratha power extended beyond Maharashtra to Malwa, Bundelkhand, Rajasthan, the Delhi region and other parts of North India. With this expansion, relations were formed with various regional dynasties; contact with pilgrimage sites and religious institutions increased; and the role of sadhus, saints and maths became more visible. A tradition of granting donations and patronage to religious institutions under Maratha administration is also visible in many regions.

2. Kashi, Prayag and Religious Patronage

Kashi and Prayag have, since ancient times, been principal centres of Indian religion and learning. In the eighteenth century, Maratha rulers and chieftains took an interest in many religious centres of North India. Their contributions included the construction and reconstruction of ghats, assistance to temples, and the establishment of dharmashalas. This patronage was not confined to the Vaishnav tradition alone but affected wider Hindu religious institutions.

3. Ayodhya and the Ram Devotional Tradition

Ayodhya has, since ancient times, been the birthplace of Lord Sri Ram and a principal centre of Ram devotion. In the medieval and late medieval periods, the Ramanandi Vaishnav tradition established an important place in Ayodhya. Ramanandi Bairagi sadhus propagated the name of Ram, administered ashrams and maths, and served pilgrims. By the eighteenth century, the presence of Vaishnav ascetic communities in Ayodhya had grown strong.

4. Vrindavan and Krishna Devotion

During the Maratha period, the Braj region also remained a principal centre of Vaishnav devotion. In Vrindavan, the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition, the Nimbark Sampradaya, and various currents of Radha-Krishna devotion were active. Through the patronage of Rajasthan and other Hindu dynasties, many temples and religious institutions of Braj received assistance.

5. Vaishnav Sadhus and Their Social Role

During the Maratha period, the role of Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus was not confined to the religious sphere alone. They cooperated in pilgrimage arrangements, imparted religious education, spread ethical and spiritual messages in society, and contributed to arrangements for the shelter of travellers and sadhus. Many ascetic communities also developed their own organisations over time.

6. The Development of the Akhara Tradition

In the latter half of the medieval period and during the Maratha period, the influence of ascetic akharas grew. The principal purposes of the akharas were: the organisation of

sadhus, the protection of religious traditions, the maintenance of order at pilgrimage sites, and the protection of the interests of ascetic communities. The akharas of the Vaishnav Bairagis went on to become an important force in the religious life of North India.

7. Maratha and Vaishnav Consciousness

In understanding the religious consciousness of the Maratha period, it is necessary to understand the importance of Maharashtra's saint tradition. The saints simplified devotion, carried the spiritual message to the common people of society, and connected people through language and culture. This current of devotion to Vitthal was an important form of the wider Vaishnav sentiment.

8. Historical Caution

In studying the role of the Vaishnav Bairagis during the Maratha period, it is necessary to pay careful attention to evidence. The principal sources are Maratha administrative documents, records of the Peshwa period, temple inscriptions, land-grant deeds, saint literature, and local historical traditions. Where direct evidence is available, it may be written as historical fact; folk traditions should be presented as such, distinctly.

Conclusion

During the Maratha period, relations between India's various religious centres grew stronger. Cultural contact increased between Maharashtra's Vaishnav saint tradition and the Ram-Krishna devotional centres of North India. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition played its role during this period at the level of pilgrimage, maths and society. This very ascetic community went on to appear also in the social and political changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Part 3: The Vaishnav Bairagi, the Akhara Tradition, and Their Socio-Cultural Role in the Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century was a time of great political change in Indian history. The central power of the Mughal Empire was weakening, and numerous regional powers were rising. The Marathas, the Rajputs, the Sikhs, the Jats and other local powers were increasing their influence in their respective regions. It was in this very period that the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition also appears in a more organised form. Vaishnav sadhus were not confined to spiritual practice alone; they also had a role in pilgrimage arrangements, the running of maths, social service and cultural preservation.

1. The Organisational Development of the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

The tradition of renunciation and asceticism had existed in India since ancient times, but in the latter half of the medieval period the Vaishnav ascetic communities took on a more organised form. The principal Vaishnav currents were: Ramanandi Bairagis, Nimbarki ascetics, the Sri Vaishnav tradition, the Madhva tradition, and the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition. Each of these traditions had its own guru-disciple lineage, its own method of spiritual practice, and its own religious centres.

2. The Expansion of the Akhara Tradition

The akharas became the organisational centres of the Indian ascetic tradition. The purpose of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas was to organise sadhus, protect religious traditions, maintain order at pilgrimage sites, and protect the interests of the ascetic community. By the eighteenth century, the influence of the Vaishnav Bairagi akharas is particularly visible in the pilgrimage regions of North India. Among the principal Vaishnav akharas, traditions such as the Nirvani Ani Akhara, the Digambar Ani Akhara and the Nirmohi Ani Akhara became well known in the period that followed.

3. The Role of the Bairagis at Pilgrimage Sites

In the eighteenth century, pilgrimage sites were not merely religious places but also social and cultural centres. Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus guided pilgrims, imparted religious education, served temples and ashrams, and propagated devotional literature. The principal centres were Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Prayag, Kashi and Nashik.

4. The Influence of the Ramanandi Bairagis

In North India, the influence of the Ramanandi tradition grew particularly strong. Ramanandi sadhus based their practice on devotion to Lord Sri Ram, observed renunciation and spiritual discipline, and established maths in various regions. Ayodhya became a principal centre of the Ramanandi tradition. The distinctive feature of the Ramanandi tradition was its work in carrying devotion to the wider society.

5. The Role of the Nimbarki Bairagis

The Nimbark Sampradaya gave particular importance to devotion to Radha-Krishna, the guru tradition, and ascetic practice. The presence of Nimbarki sadhus in the Braj region remained important. Their role was to propagate the worship of Radha-Krishna, to serve temples, to preserve religious texts, and to carry forward the tradition of spiritual practice.

6. The Maratha Period and the Patronage of Religious Institutions

Maratha rulers and their subordinate chieftains extended patronage to many religious institutions. This patronage took various forms: donations to temples, the construction of ghats and dharmashalas, the development of facilities at pilgrimage sites, and honours given to scholars and saints. However, the evidence differs for each region and institution, and the importance of local records therefore remains significant in historiography.

7. The Role of the Vaishnav Bairagis in Society

Alongside their religious life, the Vaishnav Bairagis also played a social role. Their activities included the propagation of sanskars and education, carrying forward the Bhakti movement, assisting travellers, and preserving religious literature. Many Bairagi sadhus conveyed the message of devotion in vernacular languages, allowing religious ideas to reach the common people.

8. Conflict and Organisation

Owing to political instability in the eighteenth century, many religious communities were compelled to strengthen their organisations. The ascetic akharas arranged for the administration of their religious centres, formed organisations for pilgrimages and fairs, and protected the interests of their community. This role kept changing over time, and its form differs across regions.

Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition played an important role in religious and social life. Through the akhara system, pilgrimage service, math tradition and the propagation of devotion, Bairagi sadhus preserved Indian cultural continuity. The Maratha period was not merely an age of political change; it was also a time of the reorganisation of religious institutions and saint traditions.

References (Parts 2–3) 1. Maratha administrative documents and records of the Peshwa period. 2. Temple inscriptions and land-grant deeds. 3. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 4. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 5. Local historical traditions and saint literature.

Part 4: The Vaishnav Bairagi and the Conflicts of the Eighteenth Century — Their Role in the Protection of Religion, Society and Culture

The eighteenth century was an extremely turbulent period in Indian history. The central power of the Mughal Empire was weakening, regional powers were rising, and political instability was visible in many places. In this circumstance, the role of religious institutions and ascetic communities also became important.

1. The Political Environment of the Eighteenth Century

After the death of Aurangzeb (1707 CE), the Mughal Empire gradually began to weaken. During this period, Maratha power expanded, the influence of the Rajput states persisted, Jat and Sikh powers rose, and regional dynasties established their own independent roles. Political instability also affected trade, society and religious institutions.

2. The Organisation of Ascetic Communities

In the final phase of the medieval period, ascetic communities strengthened their organisation. There were several reasons behind the organisation of the Vaishnav Bairagi communities: the administration of pilgrimage sites, the protection of maths and temples, the preservation of the ascetic tradition, and the propagation of religious education. The akharas became the organisational centres of the sadhus, where discipline, training and collective administration developed.

3. The Vaishnav Bairagi and the Protection of Pilgrimage Sites

The Vaishnav Bairagis maintained a presence at India’s principal pilgrimage sites — Ayodhya (a principal centre of the Ramanandi Bairagis), Vrindavan (a centre of Radha-Krishna devotion and various Vaishnav sampradayas), and Haridwar and Prayag (principal

sites of religious fairs and the ascetic tradition). In these regions, Bairagi sadhus contributed to keeping religious activities organised.

4. The Vaishnav Bairagi and Social Service

The Bairagi tradition was not confined to spiritual practice alone. The work carried out by the sadhus included shelter for travellers, the distribution of food, religious education, the preservation of Sanskrit and devotional literature, and the propagation of ethical values in society.

5. The Maratha Period and Religious Consciousness

An important foundation of religious consciousness during the Maratha period was the saint tradition. In Maharashtra's Warkari tradition, devotion to Lord Vitthal, remembrance of the divine name, the words of saints, and the spirit of service held great importance. This wider Vaishnav sentiment became a medium of spiritual unity in Indian society.

6. Ascetic Communities and Their Role in Conflict

On certain occasions in history, ascetic communities also played a role in political and social conflicts. However, careful examination of the evidence is required for each event. The principal role of ascetic communities was generally the protection of religious centres, the organisation of their community, and the maintenance of pilgrimage arrangements. In some regions, a military form also developed among ascetic groups, a subject connected to the political circumstances of the time.

7. The Vaishnav Bairagi and Cultural Preservation

As political circumstances were changing in the eighteenth century, the Vaishnav Bairagis kept the devotional tradition alive, preserved religious texts, carried forward the tradition of temples and ashrams, and conveyed spiritual knowledge to the generations that followed. This cultural role is extremely important in Indian history.

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was an age of political change and social reorganisation. During this period, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition played an important role in maintaining the continuity of religion, society and culture. Through devotion, service, pilgrimage arrangements and religious education, the Bairagi sadhus provided a spiritual foundation for Indian society. In the colonial age that followed the Maratha period, these very ascetic traditions appear again in various forms within Indian society and the consciousness that led toward freedom.

Part 5: The Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition, the Arrival of the British, and a Changing India (Late 18th Century to Early 19th Century)

In the final phase of the eighteenth century, a great change occurred in India's political circumstances. The Mughal Empire had weakened; Maratha power stood at the height of its influence; and, at this very time, the British East India Company was gradually emerging from a trading concern into a political power.

1. The Expansion of the East India Company

In the mid-eighteenth century, following the Battle of Plassey (1757 CE) and the Battle of Buxar (1764 CE), the political power of the East India Company began to grow. Gradually, British influence increased over Bengal, Bihar, parts of North India, and parts of South and West India. This change affected the traditional political and social order.

2. A New Administrative Approach to Religious Institutions

In the early period of British rule, the British attempted to understand India's religious institutions. Temples, maths and religious institutions held landed property, were centres of education and service, and held influence in society. The British administration gradually began framing rules relating to the property and administration of these institutions.

3. The Condition of the Vaishnav Bairagi Maths

The principal centres of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained active in Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Kashi and various regions of Rajasthan. Bairagi sadhus imparted religious education, served temples, assisted pilgrims, and carried forward the devotional tradition.

4. Ascetic Communities and Their Social Influence

At the start of the colonial period, the social influence of ascetic communities remained intact. In rural society, sadhus were regarded as religious guides, preservers of tradition, and figures who connected communities. Their ashrams and maths were, in many places, centres of social activity.

5. The Preservation of Vaishnav Devotional Literature

During this period, the Vaishnav traditions continued to preserve their literature and texts. Ram devotional literature, Krishna devotional literature, the words of saints, and sampradaya texts remained principally preserved in maths and ashrams. This literature went on to form the foundation of the Indian religious and cultural renaissance that followed.

6. Changing Political Circumstances

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, conflict occurred between Maratha power and the British. Many old forms of royal patronage came to an end, and religious institutions had to organise themselves under new circumstances. Even so, the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition preserved its religious identity.

Conclusion

The arrival of the British brought about a great transformation in India's political and social order, but the spiritual current of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained intact. Maths, temples, pilgrimage sites and ascetic traditions continued to adapt themselves to the changing times. These very traditions went on to become connected, in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, with India's cultural consciousness and the environment of the freedom movement.

References (Parts 4–5) 1. British administrative records and math documents. 2. Temple records and local lineages. 3. Travellers' accounts. 4. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 5. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*.

Part 6: The Vaishnav Bairagi and the Consciousness of Freedom Before 1857 — The Role of the Ascetic Tradition

In the final phase of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, India's political circumstances were changing rapidly. The influence of the East India Company was growing, and the power of traditional royal states was gradually diminishing. During this time, the role of religious and cultural institutions in Indian society remained important.

1. Colonial Expansion and Indian Society

By the end of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company had become a principal political power. During this period, the independence of many Indian states was curtailed; the traditional system of patronage changed; and religious institutions had to face new administrative circumstances. Even so, temples, maths and ashrams remained important centres of Indian society.

2. The Social Role of the Vaishnav Bairagi Maths

The maths of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition were not merely places of worship. Their role included religious education, shelter for sadhus and travellers, the preservation of devotional literature, the propagation of religious sanskars in society, and cooperation in pilgrimage arrangements. These institutions contributed to preserving Indian cultural continuity.

3. The Ascetic Tradition and the Common People

For centuries, the journeys of sadhus and saints had connected Indian society. Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus travelled from village to village conveying the devotional message, propagating devotion to Ram, Krishna and Vishnu, and carrying religious ideas to the people in vernacular languages. Through this, religious and cultural consciousness reached various sections of society.

4. Ascetic Communities and Political Circumstances

At the start of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the activities of some ascetic communities were also affected by political circumstances. In some regions, groups of sadhus remained organised during their travels, protected their religious centres, and maintained community organisation amid changing circumstances. However, separate historical evidence is required for each region and event. It would not be appropriate to view every ascetic community as having a political role.

5. Cultural Consciousness Before 1857

Before the freedom struggle of 1857, various kinds of discontent were developing in India. Its causes included political interference, economic change, and social and religious concerns. Religious institutions and saint traditions were engaged in maintaining cultural confidence within society.

6. The Vaishnav Tradition and the Spirit of the Protection of Dharma

Within the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, the protection of dharma meant not merely conflict, but also the preservation of religious knowledge, the maintenance of temple and pilgrimage traditions, the protection of sanskars, and the propagation of moral values in society.

Conclusion

The period before 1857 was one of political change and cultural reorganisation in India. During this time, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition maintained its important role in religious and social life. Through maths, pilgrimage sites and the saint tradition, the Bairagis preserved the continuity of Indian culture, devotion and spiritual values. The great uprising of 1857 that followed became an important turning point in Indian history, in which various social and religious groups played their part.

Part 7: The Uprising of 1857 and the Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition — A Study Based on Available Historical Sources

The uprising of 1857 CE is regarded as one of the most important events in Indian history. It has been viewed differently by different historians — some have called it a military mutiny, others a widespread popular discontent, and still others have regarded it as the first great attempt at freedom.

During this period, religious institutions, sadhus and saints, and pilgrimage traditions also held influence within India's social structure. Sadhus of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition were connected with maths, temples and pilgrimage sites in various regions. The study of their role at the time of 1857 is therefore also an important subject within Indian social history.

1. The Background to the Uprising of 1857

Many causes lay behind the uprising of 1857 — the expansionist policies of the East India Company, the annexation of numerous Indian states, discontent within the army, economic and administrative change, and social and religious apprehensions. Beginning at Meerut on 10 May 1857, the uprising soon spread to Delhi, Kanpur, Jhansi, Awadh and other regions.

2. Awadh and the Vaishnav Tradition

The Awadh region, and Ayodhya in particular, had long been a principal centre of Vaishnav devotion. Ramanandi Bairagi maths, temple traditions and ascetic communities had been active in Ayodhya for centuries. During 1857, Awadh became a principal centre of political conflict. Religious institutions and ascetic communities held social influence in this region.

3. Ascetic Communities and the Environment of 1857

During 1857, many religious groups and ascetic communities were also affected by the circumstances. The role of ascetic communities differed from place to place — some organised local society, some remained engaged in the administration of religious centres, and some became connected with local conflicts. However, evidence is necessary before attributing a role to any particular Vaishnav Bairagi group or individual.

4. The Traditional Role of the Vaishnav Bairagis

Apart from the context of 1857, the historical role of the Vaishnav Bairagis remained important — the service of pilgrimage sites, religious education, organisation within society, assistance to travellers and sadhus, and the preservation of the devotional tradition. It was because of these very social ties that they formed influential communities in their respective regions.

5. Rani Lakshmibai, Nana Sahib and Regional Conflicts

In 1857, several prominent leaders emerged — Rani Lakshmibai, Nana Sahib, and Bahadur Shah Zafar. Under their leadership, conflicts occurred in various regions. The participation of religious and social communities differed according to local circumstances.

6. Caution in Historiography

In writing the history relating to 1857 and the Vaishnav Bairagis, it is necessary to study British records, local documents, math traditions and contemporary accounts. No event should be presented as a certain historical fact on the basis of oral tradition alone.

7. Cultural Resistance and Identity

In the wider environment of 1857, an awareness is visible within Indian society of its own traditions, culture and religious identity. The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition kept religious memory alive, carried forward temple and math traditions, and provided a spiritual foundation for society. This role, though distinct from direct political conflict, is important in cultural history.

Conclusion

The uprising of 1857 was a great transformative moment in Indian history. During this period, sadhus connected with the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained active in their religious and social work across various regions. While the local role of ascetic communities is visible in some places, an evidence-based study is necessary before drawing wider conclusions. The most enduring contribution of the Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained the preservation of the continuity of Indian culture, devotion, pilgrimage and spiritual tradition.

References (Parts 6–7) 1. British administrative records relating to 1857. 2. Local historical works and math documents. 3. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 4. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 5. Saint literature and contemporary accounts.

Chapter 21

The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition and the Indian Freedom Movement (1857–1947)

Saints, Society and National Consciousness

— Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark —

Part 1: India's Changing Political Environment After 1857 and the Social Role of the Vaishnav Tradition

The uprising of 1857 was an important turning point in Indian history. Following this event, the rule of the East India Company came to an end, and from 1858 CE India came directly under the British Crown.

After this transformation, great changes took place in India's political, social and economic systems. English education, modern administration, a new legal system and economic policies all shaped Indian society.

During this very period, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition too played its role in keeping with the changing times. Maths, temples, ashrams and the saint tradition remained not merely religious centres but continued to serve as centres of cultural consciousness, education, service and spiritual guidance in society.

1. India's Political Condition After 1857

After the revolt of 1857, the rule of the East India Company came to an end; the British government took the administration of India into its own hands; major changes were made in the army and administration; and political awareness gradually began to grow in Indian society. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a new kind of consciousness developed in Indian society, which went on to give birth to the freedom movement.

2. The Role of Religious and Cultural Institutions

During the British period, Indian religious institutions remained an important foundation of society. Temples, maths and ashrams were centres of religious education, places for the study of Sanskrit and scripture, centres of social service and assistance, and aids in the preservation of Indian traditions. Sadhus of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition continued to carry forward devotion, sanskars and culture through these institutions.

3. The Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition and Social Service

The role of the Vaishnav Bairagi sadhus was not confined to worship alone. They served pilgrims, ran dharmashalas and ashrams, preserved religious texts, and propagated moral values in society. These activities contributed to maintaining cultural confidence in Indian society.

4. The Relationship Between Devotion and National Consciousness

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a growing sentiment developed in Indian society that the protection of one's culture and traditions was necessary. The saint tradition strengthened values such as self-respect, morality, service and sacrifice. These very values went on to aid the building of national consciousness.

5. The Vaishnav Saint Tradition and the Indian Renaissance

During this period, religious and social reform movements also developed in India. Various saints and thinkers attempted to give society new direction through education, social reform and religious awakening. Within the Vaishnav tradition too, ideas of devotion, service and human welfare were carried forward.

6. Ayodhya, Vrindavan and Other Vaishnav Centres

Even during the British period, the principal Vaishnav centres remained active — Ayodhya (a principal centre of the Ramanandi Bairagi tradition), Vrindavan (a centre of Radha-Krishna devotion and Vaishnav practice), and Haridwar (a principal site of the ascetic tradition and religious fairs). These centres played an important role in religious and social life.

Conclusion

Alongside political change in India after 1857, a development of cultural consciousness also took place. During this time, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition maintained the current of religion, service and sanskars in society. Maths, temples and the saint tradition kept Indian society connected to its cultural roots. This very cultural consciousness went on to become a foundation of the wider environment of the freedom movement.

References (Parts 1–2) 1. British administrative records from after 1858. 2. Documents of saints and maths. 3. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 4. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 5. Historical works relating to the freedom movement.

Part 2: Vaishnav Saints, Social Awakening, and the Early Consciousness of the Freedom Movement (Latter Half of the 19th Century)

After 1857, the nature of political conflict in India gradually began to change. In place of the early uprisings, organised social, educational and political movements developed. Indian society began to grow more aware of its culture, language, religion and traditions.

During this period, the saint tradition and religious institutions influenced the moral and cultural life of society. The maths, temples and ashrams of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition, too, remained centres of spiritual guidance, service and sanskars in society.

1. The Awakening of Indian Society in the Nineteenth Century

After 1857, modern education expanded in India, newspapers developed, social and religious reform movements arose, and interest grew in the study of Indian history and culture. In this environment, Indian society began to understand its ancient traditions from a new perspective.

2. The Vaishnav Tradition and Cultural Confidence

The Vaishnav tradition has always given importance to devotion, service, compassion and the observance of dharma. In the nineteenth century, as Western influence grew over Indian society, temples and maths played a role in preserving Indian religious literature and sanskars.

3. The Role of the Ramanandi Bairagi Tradition

In North India, the influence of the Ramanandi Bairagi tradition was widespread. Ramanandi sadhus were active at Ayodhya, Kashi, Chitrakoot and other pilgrimage sites. Their role extended to propagating devotion to Ram, religious education, the study of Sanskrit and religious texts, and service to pilgrims. The Ramanandi tradition strengthened ideals of devotion and moral living among the common people.

4. Vrindavan and the Continuity of Krishna Devotion

The tradition of Krishna devotion in the Braj region remained active even in the nineteenth century. In Vrindavan, the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition, the Nimbark Sampradaya, and other Krishna-devotional traditions were active through their maths and temples. These institutions carried forward the preservation of devotional literature, religious education, and the tradition of spiritual practice.

5. Saint Literature and Popular Awakening

Indian saint literature worked to spread moral and spiritual consciousness in society. Literature connected with devotion to Ram, Krishna and Vishnu strengthened values of self-respect, sacrifice, service and righteous conduct. These very values went on to become a source of inspiration in social and national movements.

6. Religious Institutions and Education

During the British period, many maths and ashrams remained centres of traditional education, where Sanskrit study, dharmashastra, philosophy and religious literature were studied. In this way, religious institutions contributed to the preservation of India’s tradition of knowledge.

7. The Early Development of National Consciousness

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, a sense of Indian national feeling began to develop. The Indian National Congress was established in 1885 CE, giving organised form to the demand for political rights. Although the roles of religious institutions and political organisations were distinct, India’s cultural consciousness made an important contribution to the development of national sentiment.

Conclusion

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition played an important role in maintaining cultural continuity in Indian society. Maths, temples and saint traditions kept society connected through devotion, service and sanskars. This very

cultural foundation went on to become an aid within the wider environment of the Indian freedom movement.

Part 3: The Vaishnav Tradition, the Swadeshi Movement, and the Expansion of Nationalist Consciousness (Around 1900–1920)

At the start of the twentieth century, the Indian freedom movement took on a new form. It was no longer confined merely to the demand for political rights, but became a movement of self-respect, Swadeshi sentiment and cultural awakening within Indian society.

At this time, religious and social institutions contributed to maintaining moral strength and cultural confidence in society. The maths, temples and saint communities of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition too remained connected with society through their religious work.

1. The Political Environment at the Start of the Twentieth Century

The Swadeshi movement began after the partition of Bengal in 1905 CE. The principal aims of this movement were the boycott of foreign goods, the promotion of Indian industries, the development of national education, and the promotion of Indian culture and self-reliance. National consciousness was developing rapidly in India at this time.

2. The Swadeshi Movement and Cultural Awakening

The Swadeshi movement was not merely an economic movement; it was also connected to a cultural renaissance. Interest grew in Indian society toward its own language, its own traditions and its own history. Saint literature, religious texts and Indian philosophy worked to awaken self-confidence among the people.

3. The Core Values of the Vaishnav Tradition and National Consciousness

The values taught in the Vaishnav tradition — truth, non-violence, service, sacrifice and public welfare — became a foundation of moral strength in society. Many nationalist leaders drew inspiration from Indian spiritual traditions.

4. Mahatma Gandhi and Vaishnav Thought

The influence of Vaishnav devotion is visible in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Among his favourite hymns, “Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye…” held a special place. This hymn gives importance to qualities such as compassion, empathy for others’ suffering, and freedom from ego. Gandhi’s sentiment of non-violence and service is considered to have been influenced by the Indian saint tradition.

5. Religious Fairs and Social Contact

India’s religious fairs and pilgrimage sites have, for centuries, been centres of social contact. At places such as Haridwar, Prayag, Ayodhya and Vrindavan, sadhus and saints would gather, religious ideas would be exchanged, and various sections of society would come together. These places played a role in maintaining cultural unity.

6. The Social Role of the Vaishnav Maths

At the start of the twentieth century, many Vaishnav maths remained engaged in religious education, the formation of sanskars, service work, and the preservation of texts. In some places, maths also encouraged work in social reform and education.

7. The Continuity of the Nimbark and Other Vaishnav Traditions

The Nimbark Sampradaya, along with various other Vaishnav traditions, maintained the guru-disciple tradition during this period, propagated devotion to Radha-Krishna, and preserved religious literature. These traditions kept India's spiritual current alive.

Conclusion

Between 1900 and 1920, nationalist consciousness expanded in India. The Swadeshi movement inspired Indian society to look once again toward its own culture and traditions. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition maintained a spiritual foundation in society through devotion, service and sanskars. This very cultural strength is visible in the wider phases of the freedom movement that followed.

References (Part 3) 1. Historical studies relating to the Swadeshi movement. 2. "Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye" — a hymn composed by Narsinh Mehta, referenced in Gandhian literature. 3. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*.

Part 4: The Non-Cooperation Movement, the Saint Tradition, and the Role of Vaishnav Institutions in Social Awakening (1920–1930)

In the third decade of the twentieth century, the Indian freedom movement began to take the form of a mass movement. The Non-Cooperation Movement began in 1920 CE under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, connecting, for the first time, large numbers of the common people with the national movement.

During this period, a new consciousness appeared among various sections of Indian society, religious institutions and social organisations. The maths and ashrams of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained active mainly in religious and social work, from which people received a message of morality, service and self-discipline.

1. The Background to the Non-Cooperation Movement

Political discontent was growing in India after the First World War. The principal causes were the Rowlatt Act (1919), the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919), and growing opposition to British policies. It was in this environment that the Non-Cooperation Movement began in 1920, its aims being the peaceful boycott of British institutions, the use of Swadeshi goods, the promotion of national education, and popular awakening.

2. The Saint Tradition and Its Moral Foundation

The role of moral values was important in the Indian freedom movement. Ideas connected with the saint tradition — truth, sacrifice, service, self-discipline and public welfare — strengthened discipline and moral consciousness in society. Within the Vaishnav tradition,

particular importance was given to “service” and “devotion,” which became a source of inspiration for social work.

3. The Vaishnav Maths and Social Awakening

During this period, many Vaishnav maths and ashrams remained engaged in their traditional work — religious education, Sanskrit study, the propagation of devotional literature, service to sadhus and travellers, and the spread of sanskars in society. These institutions contributed to maintaining the continuity of Indian culture.

4. Ayodhya and the Ram Devotional Tradition

Ayodhya had, for a long time, been a principal centre of the Ramanandi Vaishnav tradition. The Bairagi sadhus here propagated devotion to Ram, carried forward the tradition of maths and temples, and imparted religious education. Ayodhya’s religious identity maintained an important place in Indian cultural consciousness.

5. The Role of Vrindavan and Krishna Devotion

In Vrindavan, the Nimbark Sampradaya, the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition, and other Krishna-devotional traditions were active. These centres carried forward the tradition of devotion, spiritual practice and religious literature.

6. Gandhiji and the Vaishnav Ideal

The influence of Vaishnav ideals is visible in the thought of Mahatma Gandhi. In the hymn “Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye…,” qualities such as understanding others’ suffering, remaining free from ego, and maintaining a spirit of service are described. Gandhiji’s ideas of truth and non-violence are considered to have been influenced by Indian spiritual traditions.

7. Religious Institutions and the Freedom Movement

In history, it is necessary to note that the role of religious institutions differed across regions. Some institutions were active in social service, some were engaged in education and sanskar-related work, and some individuals participated personally in the national movement. The role of each institution or sampradaya should therefore be studied on the basis of evidence.

Conclusion

In the 1920s, the Indian freedom movement became a mass movement. During this time, the saint tradition and religious institutions worked to maintain a moral, cultural and spiritual foundation in society. The Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition kept the cultural consciousness of Indian society strong through devotion, service and sanskars.

Part 5: The Civil Disobedience Movement, Vaishnav Society, and the Expansion of the Freedom Struggle (1930–1940)

The decade of the 1930s was extremely important in the history of the Indian freedom movement. It was during this period that the Civil Disobedience Movement began under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, further broadening popular participation against British rule.

At this time, alongside political consciousness, social and cultural awakening was also growing in Indian society. The maths, temples and ashrams of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained active in society through their religious and social work.

1. The Beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement

In 1930 CE, Mahatma Gandhi began the Dandi March in protest against the salt law. The purpose of this movement was peaceful opposition to unjust laws, strengthening the demand for Swaraj, and connecting the people with the national movement. This movement reached many regions of India, and large numbers of people participated.

2. Growing National Consciousness in Indian Society

In the 1930s, Swadeshi sentiment strengthened, interest in Indian languages and culture grew, and the role of social organisations increased. Religious and cultural institutions continued to work to maintain moral values and a spirit of service in society.

3. The Vaishnav Tradition and the Spirit of Service

Service holds an important place in Vaishnav philosophy. During this period, the principal activities of the Vaishnav maths and ashrams included religious education, food distribution, assistance to travellers, the preservation of texts, and spiritual guidance. Through this work, religious institutions remained connected with society.

4. Devotion to Ram and National Sentiment

Lord Sri Ram is regarded, in Indian culture, as a symbol of ideal conduct, propriety and dharma. The Ramanandi Bairagi tradition continued the propagation of the name of Ram, the preservation of religious sanskars, and the spread of devotional literature. Devotion to Ram strengthened moral ideals in society.

5. Krishna Devotion and Cultural Consciousness

The Krishna devotional tradition of the Braj region also remained active during this period. Bhajan, textual study, temple service and religious events continued at Vrindavan and other centres. Krishna devotion contributed to keeping Indian cultural identity strong.

6. Vaishnav Saints and Social Reform

In the twentieth century, many saints and religious leaders emphasised education, social reform and service work. The core message of the devotional tradition was that alongside devotion to God, service to humanity was also necessary.

7. The Freedom Movement and Religious Institutions

A balanced approach is necessary in understanding the role of religious institutions during the freedom movement. Not all maths and ashrams were directly involved in the political movement, but they maintained cultural identity, generated moral strength in society, and promoted a spirit of service and organisation. Some sadhus and religious figures participated personally in the national movements.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, the Indian freedom movement took on a widespread form. The Civil Disobedience Movement organised the people for Swaraj. During this time, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition continued its core role — devotion, service, sanskars and cultural preservation. Maths and saint traditions maintained the spiritual strength of Indian society, which was an important part of the wider environment of the freedom movement.

References (Parts 4–5) 1. Records relating to the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919). 2. Historical studies relating to the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920) and the Civil Disobedience Movement / Dandi March (1930). 3. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 4. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 5. Congress records and contemporary newspapers.

Part 6: The Quit India Movement, the Final Struggle for Freedom, and the Role of the Vaishnav Tradition (1942–1947)

By the 1940s, the Indian freedom movement had reached its final and decisive phase. The Second World War, the policies of British rule, and the growing desire of the Indian people for freedom made the political environment extremely active.

In 1942, the Quit India Movement began under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, giving the demand for freedom the form of a final mass movement. During this period, the maths, temples and saint communities of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained active mainly in religious, social and cultural work.

1. The Quit India Movement (1942)

On 14 July 1942, the Congress Working Committee passed the Quit India resolution at Wardha, and on 8 August 1942 this resolution received final approval at the session of the All India Congress Committee held at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay (Mumbai). The principal message of this movement was “Quit India,” along with Gandhiji’s call of “Do or Die.” Following this, many leaders were arrested, mass movements took place across various parts of the country, and youth and the common people participated actively.

2. The Role of Religious and Social Institutions

In the 1940s, temples, maths and ashrams remained important centres of society. Their role extended to social service, religious education, the preservation of sanskars, assistance

to the needy, and the maintenance of cultural identity. The Vaishnav Bairagi tradition continued its core spiritual work.

3. Vaishnav Ideals and the Consciousness of Freedom

Vaishnav philosophy gives importance to the observance of dharma, truth, service, compassion and public welfare. These values became a foundation of moral strength in Indian society. Many leaders of the freedom movement drew inspiration from Indian spiritual traditions.

4. The Continuity of Ayodhya, Vrindavan and Other Religious Centres

Even in the final years of the freedom struggle, the principal Vaishnav centres remained active — Ayodhya (an important centre of the Ramanandi Bairagi tradition), Vrindavan (a principal site of Krishna devotion and Vaishnav practice), and Haridwar (a centre of the ascetic tradition and religious fairs). These places maintained the continuity of Indian religious and cultural life.

5. The Ascetic Community and Public Contact

In India, sadhus and saints have maintained direct contact with society. Through pilgrimage, they remained connected with various regions, conveyed religious messages, and propagated service and moral living in society. This social contact contributed to maintaining cultural unity.

6. The Time of Independence and Partition (1947)

India became independent in 1947, but the country was also partitioned at the same time. Millions of people had to face displacement during this period, and a social and humanitarian crisis arose. Religious and social institutions contributed to service work in many places.

7. The Journey of the Vaishnav Tradition After Independence

Even after 1947, the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition continued its role through the service of temples and maths, religious education, the preservation of devotional literature, and social service.

Conclusion

In the Quit India Movement and the final phase of the freedom struggle, Indian society attained independence after a long struggle. The principal role of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition remained in the religious, cultural and social sphere. Maths, temples and saints kept the Indian spiritual tradition alive and maintained service, sanskars and moral values in society. This tradition remained an important heritage of Indian culture even in independent India.

References (Part 6) 1. Records relating to the Quit India Movement of 1942 — the Gowalia Tank session. 2. William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. 3. G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*. 4. Memoirs of freedom fighters and British government records.

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After retirement, he dedicated his life to the research and writing of Indian history, Sanatan culture, and in particular the evidence-based history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

He is the author of numerous historical and religious books, a researcher, a journalist, and the editor of the e-magazine "Sanatan Bharat – Naya Savera." His works are published and available in India and in many other countries.

His purpose is not the promotion of any particular sampradaya, but the presentation of an authentic history of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition on the basis of available historical sources — the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, inscriptions, copper plates, Persian historical chronicles, royal records, the accounts of European travellers, and the research of modern historians.

He believes —

"Research is meaningful only when it is grounded in evidence, truth and impartiality."

Books Published by the Author

(a) Books in Hindi

1. Ramnagar: 422 Years of Unheard History An evidence-based research work on the history, social development, lineage, religious sites and local historical events of Ramnagar (District Sonipat, Haryana).

2. Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya: The Sun of Sanatan A detailed study of the life, philosophy, Dvaitadvaita doctrine, guru lineage and contribution of Jagadguru Sri Nimbarkacharya to the Sanatan Vaishnav tradition.

3. The Saga of Swarnprastha A research-based examination of the Vedic, Puranic and historical significance of ancient Swarnprastha (present-day Sonipat region).

4. Mahant Became Maharaja A historical study of the saints and mahants of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition who played an important role in governance, society and the protection of dharma across various periods.

5. From Rifle to Pen: My Life Journey An inspiring autobiography spanning 24 years of service in the Indian Army, the Kargil War, the United Nations peacekeeping mission (Sierra Leone), and the journey from a soldier's life to literature and historical writing.

6. Sanatan Bharat – Naya Savera (Monthly E-Magazine) A regular digital magazine based on Sanatan culture, history, society, religion, education and national consciousness.

(b) Books in English

1. Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya: The Sun of Sanatan A comprehensive study on the life, philosophy, and global legacy of Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya.

2. Ramnagar: The Untold History of 422 Years A documented historical account of Ramnagar village, covering its heritage, genealogy, and cultural evolution.

3. The Saga of Swarnprastha An exploration of the ancient heritage and historical significance of Swarnprastha in Indian civilization.

4. Mahant Became Maharaja A historical study of saintly leaders from the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition who influenced religion, society, and governance.

5. From Rifle to Pen: My Journey The inspiring life journey of an Indian Army veteran who dedicated his post-retirement years to historical research and writing.

6. Rosary and the Throne A research-based work exploring the historical relationship between spirituality, leadership, and the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

7. The Royal Legacy of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagis A documented study of the royal traditions, military contributions, and historical legacy of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi community.

8. Sanatan Bharat – A New Dawn An English edition highlighting India's spiritual heritage, Sanatan culture, and contemporary historical research.

Epilogue

History is not merely an account of the past; it is also a means of understanding the present and charting the path to the future. "Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition: From the Vedic Age to Modern India" has been prepared with precisely this purpose in mind, as an evidence-based research work.

This work presents a systematic study of the development of the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition on the basis of Vedic literature, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, the acharya traditions, medieval history, inscriptions, copper plates, Persian historical chronicles, royal records, the accounts of European travellers, and modern research.

The author's effort has been to present facts as they stand wherever historical evidence is available, and, wherever only traditional beliefs are available, to note them as tradition rather than as historical fact. This is the scientific and academic method of historical writing.

This research work does not claim to be the final truth. History is a subject that continues to be enriched in the light of new evidence, inscriptions, records and research. Should new evidence come to light in future, the possibility of more extensive research on this subject will always remain open.

Should this work inspire researchers, historians, students, the saintly community, and students of Sanatan culture toward evidence-based study, the author will consider his effort a success.

Finally, the author expresses his gratitude to Lord Sri Radha-Krishna, Lord Sri Nimbarkacharya, his gurus, his parents, the Indian Army, his family, and all the scholars, historians and institutions whose published research, records and historical sources made the composition of this work possible.

"Truth alone triumphs. Dharma protects those who protect it."

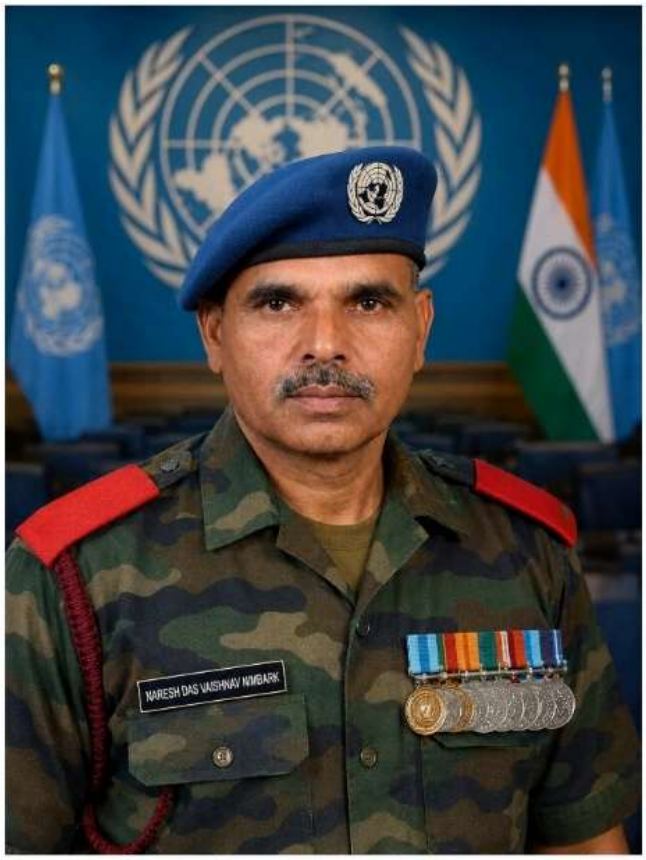
Photo Gallery

Military Service, Research Journeys and Family Moments

These photographs offer a glimpse of the author's service in the Indian Army, the United Nations peacekeeping mission, and his research journeys to historical sites connected with the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi tradition.

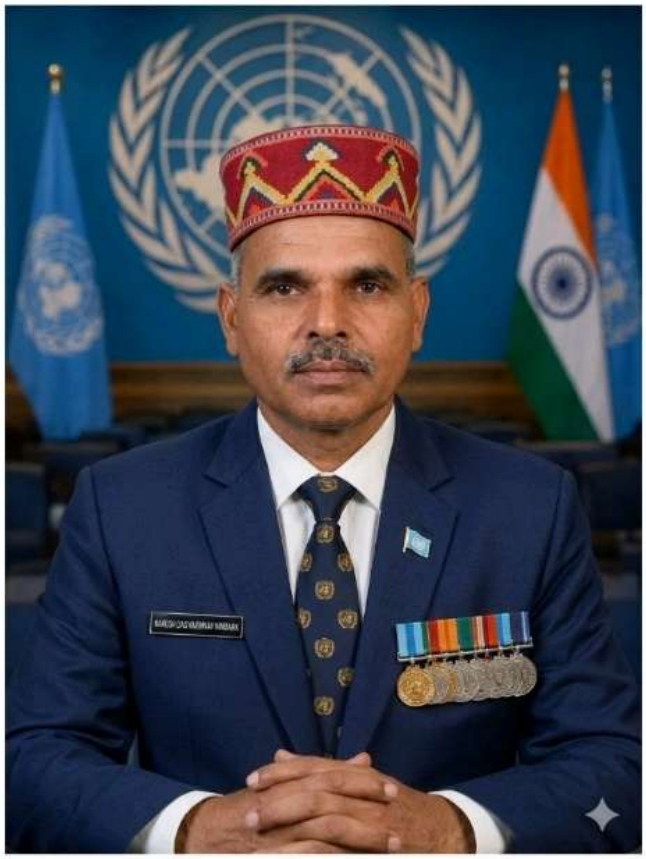
Part 1: Service in the Indian Army and the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission (UNAMSIL, Sierra Leone)

During nearly 24 years of service in the Indian Army, the author represented India in the Kargil War (1999) and in the United Nations peacekeeping mission UNAMSIL, Sierra Leone (2000). The photographs below are memories of this period of service.



औपचारिक सैन्य-वर्दी में लेखक नरेश दास वैष्णव निम्बार्क. संयुक्त राष्ट्र शांति मिशन पदक-पट्टिका सहित।

The author, Naresh Das Vaishnav Nimbark, in formal military uniform, wearing the United Nations peacekeeping mission medal ribbon.



संयुक्त राष्ट्र मुख्यालय की पृष्ठभूमि में औपचारिक चित्र — कोट-पैंट वर्दी में।

A formal photograph against the backdrop of the United Nations headquarters — in coat-and-trousers uniform.



सिएरा लियोन मिशन के दौरान भारतीय वायुसेना के IL-78M विमान के समक्ष लेखक एवं साथी सैनिक।

The author and a fellow soldier before an Indian Air Force IL-78M aircraft during the Sierra Leone mission.



UNAMSIL, सिएरा लियोन में तैनाती के दौरान साथी शांति-सैनिकों के साथ — नारियल वृक्षों की छाया में।

With fellow peacekeepers during deployment with UNAMSIL, Sierra Leone — in the shade of coconut trees.



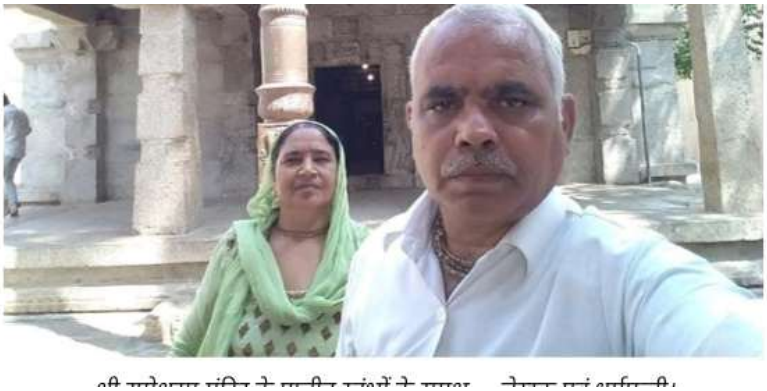
Sharing tea and conversation with the then Defence Minister, Shri George Fernandes, when he visited the soldiers in Sierra Leone via the Indian Air Force and distributed fruit to the troops, at the time of Operation Khukri.

Part 2: Research Journeys to Historical Sites Connected with the Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Tradition

During the writing of this book, the author personally visited numerous historical pilgrimage sites, maths, and locations connected with the freedom struggle of 1857. His wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav, accompanied him on most of these journeys.



Sri Rameswaram Temple, Tamil Nadu — the author and his wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav.



Before the ancient pillars of Sri Rameswaram Temple — the author and his wife.

The History of the Freedom Fighter Swami Birad Das Bairagi

Swami Birad Das Bairagi, together with his companions, killed eleven British soldiers at Hansi and thirteen at Hisar. The British bound him to the mouth of a cannon and blew him apart. The photograph below captures the moment of bringing his story to his own descendants — the author presenting his book “Yatra: Bandook Se Kalam Tak” to the villagers.



पुस्तक "Yatra: Bandook Se Kalam Tak" गाँववासियों को भेंट करते हुए — यह क्षण दर्शाता है कि स्वामी बिरड़ दास

Presenting the book "Yatra: Bandook Se Kalam Tak" to the villagers — with the descendants of Swami Birad Das Bairagi.

The Historic Well of Rohnat Village

Near this very well, many villagers were killed in the struggle against the British; some were forced to leap into the well to end their lives, and Rohnat village was destroyed by gunfire and left desolate. The author personally visited this site.



रोहनात गाँव के ऐतिहासिक स्थल पर शोध-यात्रा के दौरान लेखक।

The author during a research visit to the historic site of Rohnat village.

The Badi Sal (Seat) of Mahant Gangadas Bairagi, Gwalior

On 18 June 1858, approximately 745 Vaishnav Bairagis were martyred in the battle against the British at Gwalior. The author, Naresh Das, together with his companions, receiving the blessings of Mahant Ramsevak Das Maharaj, the present head of this historic "Badi Sal" (seat) of Mahant Gangadas Bairagi.



महंत गंगादास बैरागी की बड़ी साल. ग्वालियर – पीठाधीश्वर महंत रामसेवक दास महाराज से आशीर्वाद ग्रहण करते हुए लेखक अपने

The Badi Sal of Mahant Gangadas Bairagi, Gwalior — the author, with his companions, receiving the blessings of the presiding Mahant, Ramsevak Das Maharaj. It was here that 745 Vaishnav Bairagis were martyred on 18 June 1858.

The Tradition of Sri Swabhuramdevacharya Ji

With the Mahant of the tradition of Acharya Sri Swabhuramdevacharya Ji of the Nimbark Sampradaya — office-bearers of the Global Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Seva Organisation, at Budhiya Bani (Jagadhri-Yamunanagar).



श्री स्वभरामदेवाचार्य जी की परंपरा के महंत के साथ वैश्विक सनातन वैष्णव बैरागी सेवा संगठन के पदाधिकारी।

With the Mahant of the tradition of Sri Swabhuramdevacharya Ji — office-bearers of the Global Sanatan Vaishnav Bairagi Seva Organisation.

Research Visit to Haridwar

During a research visit to Haridwar, the author with his companion Shri Deepak Swami — a study relating to the Panda-Bahi (genealogical record) tradition.



हरिद्वार शोध-यात्रा — लेखक एवं साथी श्री दीपक स्वामी, वंशावली-चित्रण की पृष्ठभूमि में।

Research visit to Haridwar — the author and his companion Shri Deepak Swami, against the backdrop of genealogical records.

Ambala — The Site of the Revolutionary Ram Prasad Bairagi

This is the very temple where Ram Prasad Bairagi served as priest. He was the head of the intelligence department during the revolt of 1857; the British hanged him in the Ambala jail.



The author before the temple where the revolutionary Ram Prasad Bairagi served as priest.

Part 3: Pilgrimage Sites, the Guru Tradition, and Family Moments

Jyotisar, Kurukshetra

It was here that Lord Sri Krishna revealed his cosmic form (Vishwarupa) to Arjuna and imparted the knowledge of the Gita. The author, his wife Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav, and his granddaughter Divyanshi Swami at this historic site.



ज्योतिसर, कुरुक्षेत्र — विराट रूप प्रतिमा के समक्ष लेखक, धर्मपत्नी एवं पौत्री दिव्यांशी स्वामी।

Jyotisar, Kurukshetra — the author, his wife, and his granddaughter Divyanshi Swami before the statue of the cosmic form.

Barnawa (Lakshagriha), Uttar Pradesh

This is the very site where the Kauravas plotted to burn the Pandavas alive. The author and his wife before that historic cave.



बरनावा (लाक्षागृह) — लेखक एवं धर्मपत्नी श्रीमती निर्मला वैष्णव।

Barnawa (Lakshagriha) — the author and his wife, Smt. Nirmala Vaishnav.

Family Moments

The author with his grandson Bhavesh Swami at the family's place of worship at home.



पौत्र भावेश स्वामी के साथ — घर के पजा-स्थल पर।

With grandson Bhavesh Swami — at the family's place of worship at home.