

## The Renouncer and the Man in the World\*

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**Abstract:** The most distinctive feature of the present Indian society is the emergence of different guru-cults or sects which have attracted a large number of devotion from all over the world. These religious movements have tried to interpret the modern way of life within the framework of tradition which has helped the devotees to cooperate with the fast changing world and has also helped them to maintain a balance the worldly life and the spiritual life.

**Key-Words:** Guru, Householder, Renunciation, Hinduism, salvation

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“...The Hindu has been all over the world in the image of the sannyasi; a truly magnificent, even theatrical, figure who gives away all his possessions, performs his own mortuary rites to proclaim the reverence of all human bonds, and lives a highly disciplined life of austerities—a homeless wanderer, ‘an emaciated figure...with his begging bowl, his staff and orange dress’”(Dumont: 1970: 44).

Renunciation has been described by Dumont as ‘a sort of universal language of India’ and the renouncer has been identified as ‘the creator of values’ but it does not mean that the renouncer is the only ‘actor on the Hindu stage of life’(Madan:1987:2). The other prominent figure is the householder whose ideal of life is to ‘live in the world’ but to do so with the help and suggestion of the renouncer’s philosophy.

According to the Brahmanic point of view, the man in the world or the ‘twice-born’ householder is the only person who fulfills the duties of dharma. The order of the householder is considered as the highest of the four ashramas; moreover, the other ashramas(Brahmcharya, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa) depend on the householder. In fact, dharma, or the order of the world rests on the activity of the householder alone.

On the other hand, the renouncer whose sole aim is moksha, poses a threat to the very existence of the dharmic order by turning his back on society. It is often said that by rejecting the world, the renouncer rejects the Vedas also but in reality, on the other hand, the renouncer ‘internalizes’ the Vedas.

The conflict of the Vedic sacrifices apart, the renouncer also presents a different tradition in contrast to the Brahmanic tradition. The Brahman has Vedic ritualism with him, based firmly in this world only and on the other end is the renouncer—a “boundary-man”, whose quest implies negation of the world and of the caste society. But both of them end up resembling each other, the Brahman taking on sannyasic features and the renouncer becoming brahmanised. Hence, we have ‘two kinds of spiritual authority, the Brahman and his Vedic tradition as against the renouncer and his sects; initiative and innovation are on the side of the renouncer, the Brahman, on the other hand, is a highly effective agent of integration and aggregation who in the end is all but completely absorbs his rituals’(Hersterman, 1962,,251).

The householder and the renouncer have been viewed as two kinds of components. It has been argued, time and again, that whereas grhastha asrama is a life of a series of interactions having reciprocity, renunciation denies a major focus in Hindu social action. But renunciation is the only stage that allows the individual to be independent and liberated from the fetters of life. It is often said that ‘the renouncer was not concerned with changing the social order but being outside it’.(Thapar, 1952, 274).

There is not a clear-cut dichotomy between the two. The renouncer, by joining an order or by establishing new sects, comes into contact with society and performs a social role. This brings him closer to society, reducing his claim to individualism and involving him in activities that bring about changes in the social order. Moreover, many socio-political ‘reformers in India have frequently appropriated the symbols of the renouncer’(ibid). There were some men who provided the reply to the Western challenge, e.g., Mahatma Gandhi.

Similarly, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a social reformer as well as a sannyasi who expressed the awakening of religion. And Vinoba Bhave was a renouncer of his own kind who emphasized on agrarian reforms. Moreover, British domination also 'reactivated renunciation as an attitude of mind, because it was only through it that the Indian could accept the new spirit'(Dumont, 1970, 236).

The earlier dharmasutras maintain that there is really only one asrama, that of grhastha. The others are considered as inferior to it as they do not permit the begetting of grhastha. However, the notion of renunciation was present much earlier than the composition of the dharmasutras. Many historians are of the opinion that the Yatis, munis, and sramanas were among the earliest renouncers.

But the question arises as to when a man could opt out of his social obligation as a householder and become a renouncer. The stage of grhastha was considered as a precondition but this made the renunciation more difficult for he was now fully attached to the worldly life. Another crucial question -whether a brahmacharin could proceed directly to sannyasa without going through the stage of grhastha was also related to the performance of one's social obligations. But it was always argued that 'true renunciation can only be attained once one has passed through the stage of grhastha, which makes renunciation all the more arduous'(Thapar, 1952, 280).

Initiation into grhastha is marked by marriage which is negated by the insistence of celibacy among renouncers. The grhastha has to live his life 'around the rearing of a family, observing the social norms required by the fact of living amidst others, worshiping his ancestors at the time of 'shraddha, protecting and enhancing his property and labouring on his profession'(Thapar, 1987, 287). But the renouncer enters sannyasa which is in fact a death rite. During the Vanaprastha stage, the man can still perform yajnas which indicates that he is still tied to householdership and removed from renunciation. On the other hand, the sannyasin cannot perform the yajna since he becomes ritually impure by breaking all taboos. The renouncer transcends the social world by denying the notions of impurity and social hierarchy. But, what is more, his tapas and dhyana enable him to achieve purity as well as power.

By breaking all ties and taboos, the renouncer is considered as dead to the world and therefore, instead of being cremated, he is buried in a sitting position and his grave or samadhi becomes a place of worship. But from the sociological point of view, the renouncer is in the society in the sense that society still remains the very basis which shapes his relationship with others.

Does the Brahman have the sole authority to renunciation? Initially, renunciation in the Brahmanical tradition was open only to the twice-born varnas, the Shudras being excluded. In Ramayana there is a mention of an ascetic who is a Shudra and has dared to perform tapasaya and, as a result, he had his head cut off by the hero of the epic. But this very passage indicates that even the Shudra could achieve magical practices through asceticism. Hence we can say that 'the monopolistic claim never given up officially, was never completely effective in practice'(Max Weber, 1958, 155).

Many eminent Shudra saints formed an easy method of salvation for the Shudras. This method of 'preaching by means of devotional sermons delivered in temples with the accompaniment of some simple music was created to perfection by two non-Brahman saints, Namdev and Tukaram'(Ghurye, 1969, 103). In contrast to the Brahmanical tradition, Buddhist renouncers disguised their caste origins by taking on a new name while being initiated into monkhood.

Is renunciation the only way to achieve salvation? For salvation, inactivity is not necessary, but one can leave the world from within, having detachment and disinterestedness are sufficient, as preached by some newly emerged religious sects like Sikhism. Secondly, art also takes over the function of this-worldly salvation, no matter 'how this may be interpreted. It provides a salvation from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism'(Weber, 1948, 295).

A very distinct way of salvation or liberation was provided by not so sacred but profane 'Tantrism', also identified as the 'fifth veda'. Tantrism represents the rejection of ascetic renunciation and also symbolises the reversal of values. It formulates the notion of enjoyment of everything which is forbidden like meat, alcohol, sexual intercourse. A text of the Kula or Kauls highlighted the basic theme on which Tantrism has been formulated, 'For the adepts let that be drink which should not be drunk and that food which should not be eaten, and that which should not be the object of intercourse-let it be so'(Dumont, 1960, 53).

Unlike renunciation tantrism manifests itself in 'bhoga'. Tantrism is not only open to all five classes, and to women, but 'supernatural sanctions threaten anyone refusing to initiate an untouchable, a woman can be a guru, and the sacrifice of widows is forbidden'(Dumont, 1960, 55).

But why should one renounce the world? Renunciation was seen as the mode of escape from death and rebirth. Now-a-days, it is seen as a way to escape from pain but it also involves the elements of protest. The renouncers were not the 'magic men of the earlier pastoral society but were those who had deliberately chosen to dissociate themselves from the beliefs, rituals and social obligations of a complex society with the aim of discovering an alternative path to salvation because of disillusionment with the existing ways'(Thapar, 1987, 278).

Moreover, the main aim of renunciation has never been the attainment of heaven but 'it has as its goal release from rebirth taking the more abstract form of moksa'. Therefore, even the renouncer's mode of action is not without a practical end—having renounced the world, he yearns for moksa. But the renouncer does not deny the religion of the man-in-the-world. Hence explained by Dumont that 'an individual religion based upon choice is added onto the religion of the group'(Dumont, 1960, 46).

Why some groups of renouncers sought to organise themselves into orders? This sect formation was increasingly taken by renouncers from the late first millennium A.D. These 'sects of renouncers became common after the initial organisation established by Sankaracharya in the ninth century A.D.'(Thapar, 1987, 292). The institutional nature of renunciation had also to do with the nature of the caste system. Renouncers were supposed to 'de-caste' themselves. If they had remained as individuals in society even after breaking the rules of the dvija code, they would have been accorded the Shudra status. Therefore, it was necessary for them to organize themselves as a group outside society and yet with its own rituals and norms. Moreover, the renouncers who had found the way, helped to enlighten others also, therefore, the search for salvation was not selfish. Thus the creation of the sect became necessary for preaching the message.

The political role of the sannyasin is also not insignificant. His power of tapas was seen as a parallel authority to that of temporal power. Therefore, 'the renouncer was the symbol of power and was often treated as the counterweight to temporal authority'(Thapar, 1987, 294). He also made a claim to extrasensory powers and 'the sannyasin like the gods could conjure up visions of the universe and create the illusion of time, place and person'(Thapar, 1987, 294). This is what has been called 'an institutionalized possession of a man by a god'(Dumont, 1960, 30).

A prominent feature of modern India is the growing number of guru-cults or the emergence of new religious movements in the urban centre. Most of these gurus are popular more among the western followers. But why do we need a living guru? Almost every religious order claims that it was founded by God who is their first Guru and the living guru is regarded as the embodiment of the famous deity and the devotees are required to give to their gurus the honour due to God. 'Just as a letter posted in a street corner post-box is accepted by the postal department, so God acknowledged the honour and services rendered to the Guru'(Khushwant Singh, 1973, 15). As a matter of fact, it has been suggested that 'Jesus gave this knowledge, Krishna gave this knowledge, but now we must look again for a new master to show us the light. The sun comes and goes away but we don't look for the light of the day which has just gone. We look for the new rising sun. The sun is there, but it rises in a new, beautiful way, and we look for that. In the same way, God is the same but we now look for Him to come, in a new way, to give this knowledge'(Khushwant Singh, 1973, 18). When people forget the reality, God's grace materializes itself in a human body, called a saint who guides you in the eternal way.

But the new religious cults or the so called 'living Gods', have neither deviated from traditional practices nor added to the store of India's ancient religious knowledge. What they teach today is already stated in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas. The reason is that the 'important truths do not come through study of books or independent intellectual contemplation but are the result of inherited wisdom handed down from inspired leaders...the Guru is the only living flame of such truth and he alone can charge the unlit wick of the discipline, duly dipped in the oil of cult teaching, with the divine light'(Khushwant Singh, 1973, 16).

What is more, is it not the fact that we all want a living mother, a living father, a living wife, a living son and so on. Why should we not seek the living and perfect master. So it is not surprising that the Guru receives more than the deity. Almost all saints place great emphasis on the importance of the guru in showing the path of salvation. Without association with the guru, there is no possibility of release from birth and death.

But why so many Americans are turning towards these new-age Gurus and the sects formed by them? Peter L. Berger opines that it is mainly because of 'meaninglessness' in life. So far, the western man's concept of happiness was fulfillment of desires. But the desires are endless and the striving for their fulfillment leads to frustration only. Hinduism provided a better answer which formulates the theory that instead of satisfying each and every desire one should try to overcome it or channelize it which can transform a man and make him content and happy. Moreover, Hinduism assured man that God is inside every man-atman and paramatma are one. Therefore, 'while western religions were unable to cope with Freud, Jung and other psycho-analytic probes into the mind, Hinduism took time in its stride by making every man his own psychoanalyst' (Khushwant Singh, 1973, 14). At the social level, members find acceptance and personal meaning (Arvind Sharma, 1986, 230).

The new religious movements and the relationship between the guru and the disciple have established contact beyond India and this 'internationalization' has resulted in the transformation of Hinduism which has emerged as a 'universalistic' religion.

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