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# Encountering Asceticism: A Hindu Nun in *Jogan*, vis-à-vis a Buddhist Monk in *Trishagni*

## RENUNCIATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Indian asceticism, monasticism and renunciation have a continuous history of almost three millennia. We find the earliest references to both monks and nuns in the sacred texts of Jainism and Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Many centuries ago the charismatic leaders in those faiths organized the monastic traditions with a detailed set of rules.<sup>2</sup> Hindu ascetic institutions developed after the 8th century CE (Joshi 2002). It is well-known that Hindu texts, such as the *Māhābhārata*, criticized and incorporated the ascetic challenges by highlighting the importance of householders as the pillars of society. Hindu householders were contrasted to Jain or Buddhist ascetics with the allegory of a “snake–mongoose conflict” (Jain 2006).

In the medieval period Hindu asceticism started developing under the influence of the Buddhist counterparts.<sup>3</sup> For instance, we find several elaborate temples dedicated to Yogini,<sup>4</sup> female ascetics, in Central India; the earliest such temple is believed to have been built in the 9th century CE. In addition to these elaborate stone monuments, folktales and folksongs have immortalized wandering ascetics. Although itinerant female ascetics have not received much scholarly attention, famous legends such as that of Mirabai, a female poet-saint from the 15th century, have kept such public memory alive well into the 21st century. Mirabai was a quintessential wandering female renunciant who defied all barriers of caste, class, gender, and even institutionalized religion. An understanding of such religious behavior can benefit significantly from studying the popular portrayal of ascetics in street plays, which transitioned into Indian films in the early 20th century. For instance, although Mirabai was a North Indian figure, in modern times her pan-Indian appeal was evidenced and reinforced by a South Indian film, *Meera* (1945), which became so popular that it was later remade in a Hindi version for North Indian viewers in 1947. Another version on Mirabai by a different film crew was released in 1979. Several silent films produced in the 1930s also provide us with similar ethnographic insights into similar Hindu figures. One of the movies that we are analyzing here, *Jogan* (1950), is in this tradition of showing the life of a female ascetic.

Although Buddhist figures have not been as famous as their Hindu counterparts in Indian films, there are still about half-a-dozen films that make reference to Buddhist teachings remarkably well. For instance, *Angulimaal* (1960) and *Amrapali* (1966) show us the influence of the Buddha's message on a serial killer and a renowned dancer respectively. The first film on the Buddha was *Prem Sanyas* (1925), better known as *The Light of Asia*. It was made jointly with funding and support from a European and Indian crew, and it reflected the international appeal and influence of Buddhism. This, one of the oldest examples of organized monastic movements, is rich with clearly laid-out monastic rules (Wijayaratna 1990). The Buddha is believed to have allowed the entry of females into his monastic order, though with some reluctance. According to some historians the intermingling of genders resulted in moral degeneration, leading to weakened Buddhist influence in India (Joshi 2002, 307). One of the films we discuss here gives some illustration of this phenomenon, albeit in Central Asia, not India.

As mentioned, the two films *Jogan* (1950) and *Trishagni* (1988) are about Hindu and Buddhist ascetics. These portrayals of monastic life in such a popular medium offer a glimpse into ascetic lifestyles. Indian householders have revered and sustained countless thousands of ascetics over the centuries. Ascetics in turn have also in the main lived up to the moral expectations of the laity. However, these two films present an alternative side of monastics. Since moral laxity is hard to study anthropologically, especially in the present, both of these films can help our understanding of the moral dilemma of a Hindu nun and the ethical conflict of a Buddhist monk.

Moreover, both films show us the everyday life of ascetics in fine detail, such as the begging for alms, the well-crafted robes, the dwellings, food habits, religious rituals, interactions with the laity, and their compassionate care for children. In their climactic scenes both films show how ascetics willingly choose to die by surrendering to the universe as a mark of their repentance. Despite their slight commercial appeal, these two films offer anthropologists some enthralling ethnography. *Jogan* ("Female ascetic," 1950) is a Hindi spiritual-romantic drama whose title is based on the Sanskrit term *Yogini*, the female ascetics linked to Yoga and Tantra (Keul 2017). *Trishagni* ("The Fire of Thirst," 1988) depicts a Buddhist monastery and, like *Jogan*, deals with carnal temptations for monastics.

Ramesh Seth, a well-known Indian film critic,<sup>5</sup> included *Jogan* in his insightful chapter (2005), and noted the naming parallel between the medieval female mystic Mirabai and the heroine in the film, Meera Devi. The composer for the film's music incorporated five devotional songs by Mirabai.<sup>6</sup> In that chapter, the movie is analyzed from a visual perspective, primarily focusing on the gaze between the two protagonists, and concluding that the film discusses the conflict of modernity in India. However, to the Indian audience of the 1950s the film would have reminded them of the famous tale from the fundamental text, the *Māhābhārata*, in which a celestial dancer successfully seduces a sage, a trope also hinted at in films like *Sanyasi* (1975); *Jogan* reverses these gender

roles to some extent. This familiar romantic conflict indeed appealed to audiences, and the film turned out a box-office success.<sup>7</sup>

#### AN OUTLINE OF *JOGAN* (1950)

The story revolves around Vijay, an atheist,<sup>8</sup> returning to his ancestral village and becoming attracted by a woman ascetic, Meera Devi. Although he is delighted by her singing he never enters the temple where she holds religious discourses. He reveals his non-belief in spirituality, so she immediately instructs him not to see her again: how could she allow him to break her vows and permit him to pursue his materialistic desires? He asks to still remain in the vicinity of the temple, to which she agrees. He keeps coming there and leaves flowers outside her room regularly. Soon he is in a quandary and cannot refrain from chasing her around. Meera Devi's mental peace is also ruffled, and even the chanting of a Hindu mantra is of little comfort. The film director quickly shows the ruffled feathers of a pigeon to suggest her mental state. These initial scenes offer us a window into the world of a nun, by showing how she sings devotional songs, interacts with the laity, and where she stays in one Indian village before moving on to another.

The question that haunts Vijay is why did Meera Devi, at such an early age, renounce the world and become an ascetic? She avoids him initially, but later has a deep and intense conversation, talking about her early life as a carefree woman before becoming a nun. In that previous life she used to be a cheerful young girl happy in her dream world. She liked to sing, write poems, and was unaware that her destiny would take her differently. She was the daughter of a wealthy landlord who was in debt. When her brother fixes her marriage to a much older man for a high brideprice, she decides instead to leave her house and takes the monastic initiation in a Hindu monastery headed by an abbess. These scenes give us an insight into one of the reasons that young householders renounce their families and wealth.

Vijay expresses his caring for her, but she explains that a renunciate is beyond all pleasures and pains and needs no sympathy. He figures however that her peace is merely trying to hide the intense state of her fractured dreams. She insists that being a female she can suppress her emotions, and acknowledges that males find it more difficult to control their passion. Vijay asks to become her disciple, but she challenges him to first renounce all his hopes and desires. She soon realizes however that she has developed feelings for him, which will become an obstacle in her spiritual journey. She therefore decides to move on to a different village as a penance. Hearing this, Vijay is shattered and approaches her, but she begs him not to follow her beyond a certain tree on the village border. Vijay is left alone, continuing to miss her after she leaves. She performs final rites for her death and sends her diary to Vijay as her last gift. The story revolves around the earthly attributes of attachment and affection, to the ethereal plane of renunciation. Meera Devi's

acceptance of death reminds us of *Sallekhana*,<sup>9</sup> a ritual in which ascetics willingly accept death in their advanced years.

#### AN OUTLINE OF *TRISHAGNI* (1988)

In an early scene, this film shows one of the Buddhist monks summarizing Buddha's fire sermon, *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*,<sup>10</sup> based on the Four Noble Truths. This scene is followed by a sandstorm devastating a nearby village, though two Buddhist monks survive it.<sup>11</sup> These two discover two infants, who eventually grow up to become a handsome boy, Nirvana, and a beautiful girl, Iti. The junior monk, Ucchanda, out of his prejudice does not allow Iti to participate in any education. Once he sees her naked while bathing and is aroused; he tries to suppress his passion by reading the Buddha's tales and sermons, but to no avail. His frustration is then noticed by the head monk, Thera, who invites Ucchanda to confess his failing. Thera turns to us, the audience, and asks why one does not acknowledge one's sins, a question well worth pondering by everybody!

Meanwhile, the two young members of the group, Nirvana and Iti, fall in love with each other. As soon as he kisses her for the first time, the girl too turns to us, the audience, and affirms, "Now you are mine!"—as if telling us that our desires own and control us, and there is no escape from them. Meanwhile the head monk, Thera, notices the failing of the junior monk once more but cannot get him to confess his sin. Instead Ucchanda proposes that the young man Nirvana should be initiated into the monastic order as a veiled attempt to keep him away from the young woman. Soon Nirvana becomes the third monk in the small monastery. Ucchanda also tries to control Iti with various rules, but she realizes his plot arises from his intense envy and frustration. The junior monk Ucchanda keeps preaching to Nirvana to avoid women, as they always try to lure men away from their spiritual journey. Nonetheless, one night Nirvana and Iti again unite. When Ucchanda notices their absence from the monastery he takes Thera, the head monk, to the desert and catches them red-handed, so to speak. Both of the monks banish the two younger members from the monastery to punish this transgression. Eventually the junior monk, Ucchanda, realizes his own failings, tries to confess to Thera, and then decides to bring Nirvana and Iti back to the monastery. But before he can locate them again he is buried under another sandstorm, and so the film ends. Meanwhile, Iti narrates the Buddha's message on marriage and spirituality to Nirvana, and they happily marry each other. The head monk Thera has also died a few scenes earlier. Yet another sandstorm buries the monastery, as if to signal the decline of the Buddhist movement in the impending corrupt age.

#### THE TWO FILMS COMPARED

Both films give us a good insight into how men and women can handle carnal temptations. In *Jogan*, Meera Devi could not be portrayed as succumbing to Vijay's advances and so she leaves the village forever. However, in *Trishagni*,

Uchanda is easily lured by Iti, and instead of controlling his desires he ensures that the novice Nirvana stays away from Iti and her advances. *Jogan* was released in 1950, the same year when India became a Republic with a new constitution. In this modernizing nation Vijay could proudly reject religious traditions, but Meera Devi had to toe her spiritual path and adhere strictly to celibacy. She must live and ultimately die as an ascetic, thus following the sociocultural norms.

*Trishagni* portrays sexuality in a more realistic and modernized way, on the eve of the 1990s when the film was released. In this India, eager to modernize, Iti comes across as a confident woman who can proudly proclaim that she has conquered Nirvana just by her one embrace. She does not hesitate to assert herself toward Nirvana and even confronts his teacher Uchanda multiple times. In one pivotal scene she summarizes the message of the Buddha on the topics of marriage and spirituality. She quotes him, and convinces Nirvana that one should balance the pursuit of the ultimate truth with the married life. This worldly life and spiritual practice can complement each other and need not be poles apart. This novel interpretation breaks away from a traditional understanding of Indic traditions, where women are frequently criticized as seducers and obstacles to spiritual progress, e.g., the well-known criticism of *Kanchan Kamini* (Flood 1996, 256–57).

Both films can be taken as a sensational critique of the Indic notion of renunciation. However, *Jogan* made a more profound impact than *Trishagni* on Indian audiences, especially with its skillful portrayal of silent gazing, facial expressions, and dialogue delivery by the two leading actors, Dilip Kumar and Nargis. In some dialogues the protagonist represents the viewers who are householders enjoying their worldly lives and enticed by various temptations. Both these actors were in their twenties at the time of the film's production.<sup>12</sup> Both played their characters exceedingly well, with perfect dialogue delivery and sensuous facial expressions. Both spoke the Sanskrit terms impeccably—not a common occurrence in films of that era which usually were predominantly in Urdu or Hindustani. In *Trishagni*, Nana Patekar, playing the role of the prejudiced monk, carried the bulk of the plot forward, and his piercing voice expressed his anguish well. His pace of dialogue delivery suddenly shot up while teaching, making that sequence of scenes come alive. He was also the last face in the film, ending with the message of the Buddha. As he searched for Nirvana and Iti, he merged with the natural elements of sun and earth, as if to demonstrate the Buddhist concept of nonduality.

## CONCLUSION

The proverbial "love at first sight" is captured flawlessly in *Jogan*. The director shows the tussle between one's basic sensory impulse and spiritual advancement. The ending of the movie may appear idealistic to some, but it seems unrealistic in the contemporary world. The spiritual commitment of Meera Devi is so staunch that she refuses to make any compromises despite multiple efforts by Vijay. Following the tragic theme of many films of that era, the male protagonist

does not get the last chance to see the woman whom he admires so much. All he is left with is her funerary memento. The movie hints at the two crucial positions of Indian philosophy: the path of action, *Praaritti*, and of renunciation, *Nivritti*. *Trishagni* presents the same theme in a Buddhist context. Even after years of practice a respected teacher at a monastery fails to confront and control his desires, resulting in his prejudice toward the two children he adopted and raised. Somewhat like *Jogan*, *Trishagni* also ends on an intriguing and philosophical note with the message of the Buddha. Overall, both films succeed in presenting unappreciated aspects of monastic life in Hinduism and Buddhism. These movies offer an insightful portrayal of their Hindu and Buddhist characters, with relevant spiritual messages from both of the traditions.

## NOTES

1. In Jainism, interestingly, the number of nuns has always been more than the number of monks.
2. For instance, ascetics in both these traditions were segregated along gender lines with nuns subservient to monks (Collett 2016; Valley 2002).
3. One of the most significant Hindu ascetics, for instance, is referred to as "crypto-Buddhist."
4. In *Sangdil* (1952), the protagonist is an ascetic priestess, *Pujarin*, like a *jogan*, but the filmmaker adds a disclaimer that this is a fictional character as female ascetics do not exist. However, the presence of Yogini temples in Central India proves otherwise.
5. One of the authors first saw *Jogan* when Chatterjee showed the film at an American University and held the discussion by bringing in Freudian ideas.
6. The music composer for the film incorporated five devotional songs by Mirabai.
7. In her article Anuradha Warriar (2018) describes the intense conversation between the two protagonists on the etiquette and code of conduct of a nun. Warriar mentions how the nun considers it a sin if she privately talks to a male. Sukanya Verma (2014) shows the purity of the relationship between a male and a female without carnal expectations from each other. Suresh Kohli (2010) talks about the hero's disturbed state of mind when the nun leaves him forever. Sonal Pandya (2020) highlights the challenging role of heroine and her dilemma of being an ascetic on the one hand and having sensory feelings toward the hero, which she was continuously trying to suppress. All the authors portray *Jogan* as a perfect combination of romantic love and spirituality.
8. The idea of a male protagonist being an atheist continues to be repeated in Hindi films till today with various leading actors such as Amitabh Bachchan, most famously in *Deewar* (1975), and others defy the institutions of religion and other sociocultural norms as a rebellious progressive youth of the newly independent modern India.
9. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/09/02/436820789/fasting-to-the-death-is-it-a-religious-rite-or-suicide>. (Accessed September 10, 2020)
10. <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/wheel017.html#s3>. (Accessed September 10, 2020)
11. The location, the sandstorms, and the two survivors remind us of another film, *Genesis* (1986), that also deals with thirst, albeit the urge for sensory pleasures, toward which *Trishagni* also tends to move.
12. This performance was arguably the first significant one by Dilip Kumar that set him ready for his next intense role in *Devdas* (1953) and more. The director of *Jogan* also acted and wrote the dialogues for *Devdas* (1936), a classic film depicting the tragic

end of a tender love story. *Jogan* conspicuously showed the influence of the plot of *Devdas*, especially with Vijay's visit to a singer and Meera Devi's impending marriage to a wealthy but much older man—the two events respectively in the lives of the two protagonists as a reaction and as a reason for their mental state in both the films *Devdas* and *Jogan*.

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