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Jayeel Cornelio, François Gauthier, Tuomas Martikainen, Linda Woodhead

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Daniela Bevilacqua
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Globalization and asceticism

Foreign ascetics on the threshold of Hindu religious orders

Daniela Bevilacqua

Introduction

Indian ascetics, with their ideals of spirituality and detachment, have captured the Western imagination since the end of the 19th century. While some Indian gurus began to travel internationally to spread their teachings, at that time it was almost impossible for a foreigner to become part of a Hindu traditional religious order (sampradāya). However, this began to change in the second half of the 20th century, and today not only can foreigners be initiated, but some of them are even able to obtain important religious titles. This chapter focuses on these groups of foreigners as representative of contemporary changes that have come about as a result of the new possibilities of cultural and religious exchange offered by a globalized society, as well as a revolution in travel and communication; changes that have allowed individuals to overcome strict identities connected to the geographical-social-cultural milieu in which they grew up. As pointed out by D. Lehman (2002, p. 346), the interaction of religion and globalization has moved boundaries, bringing different practices to new groups and new settings and creating multifarious identities that crisscross frontiers. This has led to a dialectical process of Westernization of the East and Easternization of the West. Westernization is often explained as occurring ‘largely because the West exercises power over other civilizations, whether the power is military, economic, political, or cultural in nature’ (Campbell 2007 p. 40), and often includes several ideals (like equality and female emancipation for example) that are seen as necessary today for the ‘improvement’ of society. Similarly, the presence of Indian gurus in the West has contributed to interest in the ‘wisdom of the East,’ which has frequently been cast since the 19th century as providing ways to overcome ‘disillusionment with the wisdom of the West’ (Campbell 2007, p. 41). Foreign Hindu ascetics represent a case in which the Easternization of the individual may lead to the Westernization of the chosen Eastern path.

This chapter describes some of the trajectories of foreigners who have been initiated into Hindu traditional ascetic orders. First, the dichotomy between Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism will be introduced. It will be seen that the ascetics on whom this chapter focuses belong to orders that can be described as part of the former.
will then be argued that because of new communication technologies, new political-economic contexts and the presence of foreigners themselves, this form of Hinduism acquires in some contexts features more commonly found in Neo-Hinduism.

**Contexts and methods**

An understanding of contemporary Hinduism can begin by considering the word Hinduism to be an umbrella term under which further classifications are possible. A useful one is that proposed by De Michelis (2004, p. 37), in which Hinduism is divided into Classic Hinduism, Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism, thus making clear that various Hinduisms coexist, each characterized by the influences it has received and assimilated, and the changes that it has subsequently undergone.

Following De Michelis (2004, p. 37), Classic Hinduism has to be considered as including not only what belongs to the Brahmanic tradition and is testified to in orthodox texts, but also *sampradāyas* belonging to heterodox streams. It was present in the pre-18th century context, before the advent of British colonial power in India. Subsequently, British presence promoted Westernization and its ‘imported culture,’ which affected ‘traditional ways of life in a noticeable degree’ (De Michelis 2004, p. 38). The influence has in part led to the rise of Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism. As already mentioned, this dichotomy is of fundamental importance in understanding the directions that Hinduism has taken in contexts influenced by, and resulting from, globalized circumstances.

Using Halbfass’s definitions (1990, pp. 219–220), 19th century Neo-Hinduism and Classical Hinduism are distinguished by ‘the different ways in which they appeal to the tradition, the structures which they employ to interrelate the indigenous and the foreign, and the degree of their receptivity *vis-a-vis* the West.’ This does not mean, however, that Neo-Hinduism breaks with tradition. Rather, it invokes it ‘to find in it the power and context for its response to the West,’ but as ‘the result of a rupture and discontinuity … basic concepts and principles of this tradition have been reinterpreted and provided with new meanings as a result of the encounter with the West’ (Halbfass 1990, pp. 219–220). Other features of Neo-Hinduism include the following: ‘the tendency to give more weight to a new rational reading of the texts, bypassing traditional schools; less allegiance to *sampradāyas* and gurus; a tendency to regard God as abstract and aniconic; and an emphasis on direct religious experience’ (Sardella 2013, p. 235).

The gurus who began to leave India at the end of the 19th century to preach in the West belonged to the wave of Neo-Hinduism and had to communicate with Western audiences unfamiliar with Hindu deities and practices. In doing so, ‘Western values are firstly embraced and then included in a new vision of Hinduism,’ and the transnational diffusion of Hindu-based beliefs and practices ‘implied a process of Westernization, which started even before they crossed Indian frontiers’ (Altglas 2011, p. 234). Neo–Hindu gurus are referred to as ‘modern gurus’ because, following Jaffrelot’s definition (1999, pp. 195–196), they place particular emphasis on ‘individual growth, social concern and religion as a code of conduct for every man to make life a success,’ and because their ‘spiritual practice is based on discourses in English with messages adapted to the urban middle class with whom they often share the same background.’ In an effort to be universal or global, these gurus and their movements were affected by transnational processes, often supporting and promoting ideas that were not those of India’s ancient tradition, but rather those of the counter-cultural milieu (Altglas 2011, p. 237). In the 1960s, young people in Western societies, driven by a desire for rebellion and by the search for unconventional forms of
awareness, became fundamental social agents, open to cultural innovation and ready to reject preconceived historical-cultural heritage (Palmisano and Panno 2017, pp. 128–129). In that period, several modern gurus provided a generation of Westerners with various spiritual teachings and practices. For example, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi developed Transcendental Meditation; Swami Muktananda introduced the path of Siddha Yoga; Swami Sivananda founded the Divine Life Society; and Bhaktivedanta Swami founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) (Altglas 2007; Khandelwal 2012). Directly or indirectly these gurus encouraged spiritual ‘searchers’ to go to India.

Some seekers, however, did not find gurus associated with Neo–Hinduism, but rather found ascetics belonging to sampradāyas representative of Modern Hindu Traditionalism, which appears as a middle path between Classical Hinduism and Neo–Hinduism. Modern Hindu Traditionalism resists ‘the closer contact with the West of Neo–Hindu thought and practice, but also the views of classical Hinduism that were perceived to be outmoded’ (Sardella 2013, p. 236). It preserves an essentially unbroken continuity with the tradition, carrying on what is already present while also making additions and extrapolations. Whereas Neo–Hindu gurus are referred to as ‘modern,’ in this chapter gurus and ascetics representing Modern Hindu Traditionalism are referred to as ‘traditional.’ A fundamental difference between Neo–Hinduism and Modern Hindu Traditionalism concerns the idea of Sanattana Dharma, a label with which in the 19th century Hindus began to refer to their eternal or universal religion. Modern Hindu Traditionalism considers Sanattana Dharma to be ‘a pure interpretation of Hinduism, drawn from a plurality of texts, inclusive of the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and Tantras,’ and therefore it supports the presence of the various sampradāyas with their diverse approaches, rites and ceremonies (Kasturi 2010, p. 123). Neo–Hinduism, on the other hand, aims for a unified Hindu religion rather than the plurality of the sampradāyas.

Indian traditional asceticism has indeed been characterized by various orders, groups and subgroups whose members follow śādhanās (religious disciplines) that vary with respect to the importance given to devotional practice, to the outside world and to the body as a means of liberation. The foreigners dealt with in this chapter belong to some of the sampradāyas that today are representative of Modern Hindu Traditionalism and in which asceticism demands the renunciation (sannyāsa, vibhakt) of social life. Many of these sampradāyas have historically upheld caste hierarchies and not admitted lower castes or women, who in any case often face strong opposition from their families and society to a path of asceticism. Such a path is not considered appropriate for women since it takes them beyond the boundaries of a safe, normal, social life (Bevilacqua 2017). Traditional asceticism, however, is not a rigid structure: its history shows that constant adaptation has allowed ascetic traditions to survive, transforming themselves in the wake of wider social and religious changes (Bevilacqua 2018, pp. 13–15). The presence of foreigners, both male and female, in these orders today is an example of this adaptation and is in itself a remarkable change.

Nevertheless, scholarship on foreign ascetics in traditional sampradāyas is still a relatively inchoate field, apart from a handful of monographs (Allop 2000; Tillis 2004), autobiographies (Swami Agehananda 1961; Rampuri 2005), articles (Khandelwal 2007, 2012) and references to foreign ascetics in more general publications on asceticism (Haunser 2007). During my own fieldwork among śādhus in India, however, I met a number of such foreigners and collected information from informal conversations with them, both in India and abroad. I also collected information while talking with Indian śādhus and collected data from websites and Facebook pages managed by foreign ascetics. Although the number of individuals presented is limited to 16, their ages (from 24 to 70 years old), origins (Europe
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and the Americas) and social backgrounds mean that they constitute a diverse sample that can provide valuable insights and the basis for an analytical framework. Although there are no numerical data available, my experience at religious melās (fairs) suggests that the majority of foreigners have joined traditional Śaiva orders, rather than Viṣṇuva groups. Clearly, I do not consider here foreigners belonging to modern Viṣṇuva groups which nevertheless claim a more ancient lineage, such as the ISKON which was founded in 1966.

In addition, the sample illustrates ways in which the relationship between traditional ascetics and foreigners changed between the 1970s and the present, allowing us to catch glimpses of wider transformations within Hindu asceticism.

Foreigners on the path of Hindu traditional asceticism

At the beginning of the 20th century, while modern gurus began to initiate foreigners in the West—Swami Vivekananda, for example, initiated two ascetics in New York, a middle-aged Russian Jew known as Swami Kripananda and an elderly American lady of French extraction known as Swami Abhayananda (Sil 1997, p. 163)—Hindu traditional orders in India kept their doors closed to them. According to Brahmanic sources, not all castes can undertake the ascetic path and many, as already noted, do not include lower castes or women. Foreigners were considered outcastes and by definition ineligible. Swami Agehananda Bharti, who was born in Vienna in 1923, reports in his autobiography that in the 1940s he had to be initiated by an Indian guru who belonged to a Neo-Hindu sect because, ‘according to the 90 per cent of orthodox Hindu opinion, anything of this sort is impossible—you have to be born a Hindu’ (1961, p. 46).

Foreigners began slowly to be admitted into those orders, however, which have a history of accepting low-caste disciples, such as the Nāgā section of the Daśānāṃ sampradāya, the Udāsīn akhāṇā and the Nāth and Rāmānandī sampradāyas. Nāgās are the naked saṃnyāsins (ascetics) traditionally grouped in regiments—called akhāṇā—that form the army of the Daśānāṃ sampradāya (see Clark 2006). As suggested by Gross (1992, p. 73). These akhāṇās had allowed entry to landless peasants and the urban unemployed, who were then able to acquire an ‘identity, a sense of security and a potential for accumulation of wealth.’ The Udāsīn akhāṇā, on the other hand, probably inherited its openness from Sikhism, to which it was initially connected. The lineages of the Nāth sampradāya, an order traditionally associated with the practice of hatha yoga, also do not discriminate between castes and in the Rāmānandī sampradāya the ascetic path is allowed to anybody regardless of gender, caste or religion. Rāmānandī ascetics are usually called vairāgīs and the order has a history of admitting disciples from low castes (see Bevilacqua 2018).

Despite these examples of open recruitment, the first generation of foreign sādhus had nonetheless to struggle to be admitted to ascetic orders when they arrived in India in the 1970s. R. Purṇi, who was born in the United States, faced much opposition to his initiation into the Jūnā akhāṇā—one of the seven akhāṇās which are part of the Daśānāṃ sampradāya—and several sādhus disagreed with it because as a non-Indian he had no gotra (clan) and therefore he could not be given a jāneu, the sacred thread received by the three higher castes (Brahmans, Ksatriyas and Vaśivas) during the ceremony of upanayana, which marks a second social and ritual birth and eligibility to study the Vedic texts. He was finally initiated when, like other persistent foreigners elsewhere in India, he found an individual guru who was willing to give him a chance and who appreciated his commitment to the austere, ascetic lifestyle. The fact that this lifestyle could also be seen as ‘alternative’ satisfied the specific ideals of those first seekers who reached India on the wave of the counterculture movements (see
For example, S. Dās and G. Bābā reached India in the 1970s after leaving their countries (Italy and Canada respectively) as a sign of protest against Western political systems. India represented for them, on the other hand, a place where individuals could be themselves and where jobless and wandering ascetics were supported and respected. S. Dās met his Uḍāśīn guru by chance and was taught some yoga, meditation, mantras and the daily rituals. G. Bābā did not reveal his affiliation to me. Another foreign ascetic, I. Naṭha, arrived in India when he was only 14 years old and initially began to wander with ascetics. Later he met the man who was to become his guru and remained with him.

At that time, being initiated into these orders meant first spending months with the guru, following him in his pilgrimages and wandering, often in very hard conditions. As J. Dās from the UK told me, meeting with the guru over the years was uncertain, depending to a certain extent on chance, since there were no mobile phones or sophisticated communication methods at the time and often the meeting point was given according to religious festivals happening in this or that holy city. Foreign disciples were not given any special treatment or rights, and it was the foreigner who had to adapt to the situation if he wanted to be part of the order. Exemplary is the story narrated by the disciples of D. Gīrī, who was originally from Italy and was a saṃnyāsin of the Āvāhan akhāra who seriously followed the ascetic path and spent a lot of time in India with his guru before returning to Italy. Later he changed his affiliation because his akhāra did not want to recognize the disciples that he had initiated abroad. After a protracted dispute, however, he eventually had his 100 disciples accepted by the Jūnā akhāra.

Today the situation is different, with many gurus more than willing to accept foreign ascetics and an increasing number of foreigners ready to become initiated into traditional orders. To understand this new situation, we have to look at the Indian and global socio-economic context since the 1990s.

**Changes in the ascetic world**

Political powers and wealthy individuals have always supported ascetics and religious centers. By the 1990s, the national policy of economic liberalization opened up India’s markets to the world and businesses began to operate in a more competitive global economy (Fuller and Harris 2001). In the same period the political religious nationalism of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the continuous propaganda of religious and cultural associations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) transformed the public sphere, which became increasingly religious in tenor with Hindus more assertive about celebrating their religion and identity in direct opposition to Muslims and Christians (Fuller and Harris 2005, p. 227). As argued by Nanda (2009, p. 144), indeed, ‘economic globalization and neo-liberal reforms have created the material and ideological conditions’ that enabled Hindu religiosity to grow. The support of the state became ‘a channel for pumping taxpayers’ money into promoting temples, ashrams, and pilgrimage spots,’ making Hinduism a ‘rapidly growing and lucrative market’ (Nanda 2009, p. 109). Thus, a three-sided partnership between the secular state, temples, and corporate interests was created:

> [t]he government provides land either as a gift or at a throwaway price for temples’ investments in schools, universities, hospitals, and other charities . . . At this stage, industrialists and business houses step in: they make donations to build and sustain these religious institutions headed by the holy man/guru they may happen to revere.

*(Nanda 2009, p. 114)*
Many wealthy people direct their devotion towards modern gurus, but many continue to support more traditional ones because the connection with a specific traditional sampradāya responds to a demand for authenticity and religious authority by the faithful.

The amount of money that flows into the religious world is far more than in the past, and with it has come greater participation of lay people in the activities of religious centers as well as increased numbers of lay people in the company of ascetics. As a Rāmānandī sādhu told me, up to a few decades ago religious gatherings were attended mostly by sādhus; there was not the huge participation of lay people that occurs today. The organization of religious festivals has at the same time come under the control of politicians, transforming such festivals into tourist attractions for both Indians and foreigners.

Today ascetics can rely not only on larger numbers of supporters coming from the middle and upper classes of society but also on supporters from abroad. The roads to the East are, indeed, more accessible. According to M. Nanda (2009, p. 16):

> The creation of trans-planetary communication networks in the last thirty years or so is something radically new . . . another dimension of space—‘super-territorial space,’ or space that is not linked to any specific physical territory on the map—has become widely available for carrying out all kind of activities.

New transnational religious networks are emerging ‘as globalization disembeds religions from their historic homelands and scatters them around the world’ (Nanda 2009, p. 172). This means that a single individual can now remain in a temple or small religious setting but, because of new technologies, is able to reach any corner of the globe and have the opportunity to become globally famous and attract followers. As stressed by Nanda (Nanda 2009, p. 14),

> for the first time in human history, it has become technologically feasible for ordinary people, using everyday, household gadgets, to communicate across oceans almost as easily as it is to talk to their neighbor across the street. Even those who lack the resources and the opportunities are becoming aware of the possibilities.

In recent years, the Internet and then social media like Facebook and WhatsApp have provided an interesting window on the life of sādhus and been a factor in the increased interaction between ascetics and the wider society.

Lay people donate to ascetics not only money but also material things (such as laptops, mobile phones, and even motorized vehicles) that are changing their lifestyle. As well, many āśrams are today becoming so predisposed to hosting lay people that they have the comforts of guesthouses, with amenities such as hot water and flushing toilets. This situation is well accepted by many ascetics because the more disciples and followers they have, the more political or charismatic power their order will have as well. At the same time, wealthy devotees can support their guru to achieve higher status. While making a donation or giving a dākṣiṇā after receiving a religious title has been quite a normal procedure, the possibility of making a payment before entering a religious order or getting a title has now opened up. Lay Indian people may support their gurus by purchasing titles in this way, and foreigners do it as well. That is why there are now more and more sādhus who search for foreigners (especially during religious gatherings), knowing that some will also pay a lot of money to be initiated or to skip some steps of the training. Such sādhus may also have in mind the increased recognition they could obtain through the foreigners and the likelihood that
foreigners will return to their countries of origin, only to come back to India with more money and perhaps friends. Furthermore, some sādhus see foreigners as their ticket for flying abroad, an interest that is quite common among the new generations of sādhus. Several young ascetics disclosed to me that after having traveled far and wide in India, they now wanted the opportunity to travel abroad and see the world. But to accomplish this, they know they need not only the economic support of devotees but also letters from individuals in other countries to assist with getting visas.

This openness to foreigners is clearly not always or only based on utilitarian motives, and some ascetics, as already noted, can be genuinely curious about foreigners and prepared to accept them as disciples. For example, in her study of the Nātha sampradāya, Bouillier (2008, p. 280) argues that today’s monasteries show a less sectarian attitude and are open to those who want to apply a more individual approach to the tradition of the order. There is also an interest among some gurus and ascetics in new approaches that can better satisfy the religious quest of a wider society that now spills far beyond the geographical borders of India, and one in which requests (for example, for ceremonies, initiations or visualization of Gods and Goddesses) can come from all over the world. For similar reasons, some gurus and ascetics adapt their religious methods according to the new interests of followers and supporters, and ascetics belonging to traditional sampradāyas, for example, often give foreigners a very simplified idea of Hinduism, closer in fact to Neo-Hinduism. They may also use ‘New Age’ concepts that they themselves have learned from other foreigners or the Internet.

This chapter will now further illuminate these changes in ‘the ascetic world’ by examining more closely the place of foreigners in traditional religious orders in recent decades, and attitudes towards those foreigners.

**Foreigners on the threshold of ascetic lives**

Newer generations of foreigners often approach Hindu philosophies being moved first by the practices—yoga, chanting and meditation—which are seen as instruments through which to fight today’s materialism, bureaucratization and consumerism (Altglas 2008). Since the end of the 19th century, modern Indian gurus have ‘used’ yoga—or better a transnational version of it—as a means by which to represent Indian spirituality and attract a Western audience (Strauss 2005; Singleton 2010). Since yoga became a globalized practice, yoga groups with religious connotations have sparked interest in gurus and traditional orders connected with yoga practice, such as the Nātha sampradāya. This happened in the case of M. Nāth, an accomplished guru of Russian origin who went to India in search of Nātha yogis to deepen his knowledge of yoga. Later he became a world-famous teacher and today he has about 100 students in various countries (such as Israel, Latvia, Spain and the United States) through which he spreads the sampradāya’s teaching of yoga and the Nātha tradition. On the same path is S. Nāth who runs a yoga school in the Czech Republic.

At the same time, there are individuals who reached India without a precise plan, in search of answers to their imprecise questions but who decided to take initiation and remain in India after having ‘mystical’ experiences. For example, Austrian C. Dās had a ‘spiritual awakening’ while collecting šaligrams (holy stones dedicated to the god Viṣṇu), and in 2008 became initiated into the Rāmānandī sampradāya. She now lives a retired life with her guru in Uttar Pradesh. M. Nāth, from Italy, went to India after he dreamed several times that Lord Kṛṣṇa was suggesting he should find his path there. Eventually he was initiated into the Nātha sampradāya.
Foreigners may become sādhus for a number of other reasons. One is the appeal of belonging to an ‘exotic’ sect, while others may be attracted to the charisma to be gained by becoming a guru. It is not rare, in fact, for ‘successful’ foreign ascetics to become gurus, with followers all around the world through social media. ‘Old’ foreign ascetics can drive new generations towards Hindu asceticism and people initiated between the 1970s and 1990s became bridges from their own country to India. Many created in their countries a path for those who might be called ‘sādhus at a distance,’ which is to say sādhus who were not initiated in India and follow their religious discipline abroad. When I asked H. Giri, an Italian samnyāsin, why so many young foreigners were attracted to Indian ascetics and spirituality, he replied:

But because of drugs. You meet a guru, or a guru calls you to sit with him and share a chillum. Then you start enjoying the smoking. And that is the main practice initially. But then the guru gives you also some teachings, and if you are interested you continue and dig into Indian spirituality.

This consideration was true for most of the foreign ascetics I met: their first encounter with Indian spirituality was with its chillums and only later came its theories, or in some cases a Westernized version of its theories.

The Easternization of some individuals, indeed, leads at times to a Westernization of traditional asceticism or simply an adaptation of it according to the particular people involved. Either can result for them in lives lived on a kind of threshold. The concept of ‘threshold’ here is similar to that of liminality defined by Turner (1967, pp. 95–98) as a state of being ‘betwixt and between’ in which liminal people ‘are necessarily ambiguous,’ since their conditions ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space,’ and they become therefore outside ‘the’ single, accepted social reality. Since the term liminality has been amply used and developed (see Thomassen 2009), I prefer to use ‘threshold’ to describe the position of foreign ascetics. The threshold represents a doorsill, an intermediate, in-between place that potentially allows entry to a space, but at the same time can represent a limit if this entrance is not completely actualized. The threshold can become a place in which innovations occur because it is where two realities (in the current case ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’) meet. Below, I discuss the various ways in which this threshold manifests.

A first aspect of the threshold manifests in the confrontation of foreign ascetics with Indian society. Indian ascetics also confront society, of course, and occupy a threshold in which they are supported by it without being part of it. At the same time, however, they are a familiar sight and the position of the renouncer is generally accepted. However, the presence of foreigners among ascetics always arouses a particular curiosity: during religious gatherings Indian people very often stop in front of camps where foreign ascetics sit or smoke, simply to take photographs. To the general Indian population, it seems that, despite having taken a dīkṣā and being theoretically as respected as Indian ascetics, a foreigner in India is perceived first of all as a foreigner.

Foreign ascetics also live on the threshold of their society of origin, a threshold made more precarious by the fact that to many they represent a very unusual religiosity, perhaps between the exotic and the bizarre. Therefore, it can be very difficult to live off alms, as ascetics do in India, while at the same time following a religious discipline. An example is given by D. Giri: when he is in Italy he stays in his temple, which is in a very remote place, and spends his time alone, doing his practices. Since he has only a few supporters who can
take care of his expenses, however, he often finds it difficult to travel to India. To overcome this problem, he is sometimes obliged to work, even though that is not normally permitted by his order, and on rare occasions he organizes small yoga training sessions that attract a few curious Italians.

A second aspect of the threshold is a ‘cultural’ one, arising because foreigners do not always understand or accept the norms of the new Indian society they enter. When abroad-formed-sādhus go to India to immerse themselves in their ‘religious tradition’ they find that the ‘theory’ they have learned does not always correspond to the realities in India. The Italian J. Girf was initiated in Italy in 1995 when he was just 17 years old and went to India only twice. In Ujjain, he was quite confused about his sādhana and was scolded by his bretheren because he could not easily sit with crossed legs on the floor, revealing an absence of daily practice. However, this aspect of the threshold is also felt by older ascetics, who got initiated in India but are no longer integrated into their religious order. They are following a path they decided upon when they were young and are somehow ‘stuck’ in their ascetic life. For example, neither S. Dās nor G. Bābā lives in an āśram of their ascetic order, although both have connections with various pilgrimage centers in India. They now spend most of their time with other foreigners they meet in India and who often become their source of support. Money for daily survival, or how to earn it when not in India, is a major problem. Interestingly, Khandelwal (2012, p. 215) provides similar examples of foreigners ‘stuck’ in Rishikesh.

These conditions often lead to lives on the edge of multiple identities: several foreign ascetics are on the threshold between an ascetic life and a kind of lay-life in ascetic garb. Without a full awareness of what an ascetic life really entails—or, sometimes, despite knowing what it entails—they prefer to adjust it according to their own needs and according to life events.

A particularly revealing aspect of a lay-life in ascetic garb is the fact that many foreign ascetics, despite taking sāṃnyāsa, have relationships with women. This is the case, for example, of R. Purī: during religious gatherings he seems a well-integrated sādhu, but most of the time he lives in Goa with a partner in his āśram, where he gives teachings and organizes yoga retreats. S. Dās as well was in a relationship for 18 years. Despite his order being a celibate one, he said that the decision is up to the individual and that his guru taught him so. However, according to his ascetic brethren, this is absolutely untrue and demonstrates his unreliability, meaning that he is an ascetic only by clothing. J. Girf has also been criticized for his relationship with women, but like S. Dās he said that his guru taught him that celibacy is not necessary because the intention in the sādhana is more important.

This is an issue that also affects Indian sādhus, who by rule are celibate, but if a ‘simple’ sādhu is discovered to have a partner, he is likely to be expelled from the order unless he is very influential or has only a religious relationship with his partner. This is not the case with foreigners. It would seem, then, that Indian gurus are not particularly strict when it comes to foreigners. Low expectations and inconsistent behaviors towards them are often present, and this indicates a fourth aspect of the threshold in regard to the teachings they can get. There is sometimes a kind of cultural indiffERENCE and diffidence towards a non-Indian individual that becomes a lack of transparency and incompleteness of information. Some Indian ascetics have suggested to me that Indian gurus limit their teachings because they do not consider foreigners completely worthy: despite all, they are the result of a ‘karma’ which made them grow up outside India. Other Indian ascetics might limit their teachings because they interpret the fact that many foreigners do not follow the rules as proof of their lack of a serious commitment to the sādhana. The comment I received most often about foreign
ascetics was that they are sādhu manoranjan ke liye, sādhūs for amusement, although at the same time there are some foreign ascetics who are obviously committed to the practice and are therefore held in high esteem. Khandelwal (2012, p. 217) reported that, according to a Swami she met, although:

> there are some [foreigners] who genuinely wanted to take sannyasa ... the majority wanted orange robes for their personal vanity ... to go back to the West and pose as swamis without any qualification whatsoever and then to make disciples.

Consequently, foreign ascetics who live abroad are accepted to a degree but are also considered with suspicion, because they can appear and disappear from the sampradāya and because—as a sādhu told me—’what they do once they are back is out of our jurisdiction.’ Some foreign ascetics seem to spread teachings more similar to Neo-Hindu movements than the teachings of their own religious orders. As we have seen, indeed, Neo-Hindu movements aim to spread a universal message that detaches ‘Hindu practices and beliefs from their specific cultural, national, and religious roots’ (Altglas 2010, p. 240). Following an approach of ‘religious appropriation’ (Tomlinson 1999, p. 84), they often make a process of selection, adaptation and interpretation of the teachings that they have learned, often simplifying them. This appropriation can also lead to adaptation of the sampradāya’s rules to make them more suited to social realities outside India. For example, the Russian-born M. Nath took the permission of his guru to initiate foreigners, and today his community of followers is quite spread out. In the Nath sampradāya there are two stages of initiation (dīkṣā): the first is the aughar dīkṣā, which refers usually to the training time, while the second is called darśanī and refers to the full accomplishment of the teachings (see Bouillier 2017). M. Nath claims, however, that an aughar, or individual who has received the first initiation, can decide whether to live as a householder or an ascetic. This represents an important variation because in the Nath sampradāya in India an aughar is necessarily a renouncer and cannot maintain the previous social life style. Furthermore, M. Nath is also giving initiation to women, something that a male guru is not allowed to do in India: generally, a woman should be initiated by another woman.

Gender indeed represents a final aspect of the threshold for female foreign ascetics. In the male-dominated ascetic world, as already noted, the traditional ascetic path is usually very arduous for Indian women, which is a reason why only a few groups have a female section (Bevilacqua 2017). However, Vijaya Ramaswami (1997) and Ursula King (1984) suggest that renunciation has become more, not less, accessible to women over the last century, with an increasing number of modern female gurus (who can often be considered to be in the Neo-Hinduism streams) and female ascetics as well. According to Amanda Lucia (2014, p. 16), there are two reasons that have caused female ascetics to appear more frequently in modern politics, social movements and academic publications: first, ‘the intellectual tides instigated by the political impulses of subaltern studies and feminism have brought forth a generation of anthropologists and scholars of religion who have actively sought out women’s narratives of renunciation’; and second, ‘Westernization and globalization have introduced the rapid transformation of modern Indian society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ therefore ‘these modern forces challenge the primacy of Brahmanical exclusions of women and have created new cultural spaces for a multiplicity of voices occupying positions of religious exemplars.’

Likely because of these modern forces, female foreigners have been more readily accepted in the ascetic path. Although many are involved in the practice of sevā (service) and belong
to āśrams that run schools and hospitals, several distinguish themselves by their more austere practices. For example, a Japanese sādhu called Keiko Mātā was allowed to practice austere and rigorous training at altitudes between 5,000 and 6,000 meters in the Himalayas with Hari Bābā and under the guidance of Pilot Bābā, a sādhu from the Jūnā akhā. Keiko Mātā and Svāmī Ānand Līla Gīrī, a Russian sādhu, were bestowed with the title of mahāmāndalēśvara (spiritual guardianship and Superior of a religious district), one of the highest titles of the Hindu religious hierarchies which had been given to hardly any sādhus in the past, indicating therefore a meaningful change.

Female foreigners, however, sometimes are unaware of the etiquette that should be followed with male ascetics and this leads at the very least to misunderstandings. There are also cases of misbehavior on the part of Indian ascetics who apply certain ideas about foreign women (such as that they are open-minded and sexually available) to foreign sādhus, and several cases of sexual harassment and rape of foreign female ascetics have been reported. However, I have also heard many stories of young sādhus who were completely captivated by Western female disciples and ended up marrying them and leaving India to start lives as householders.

Conclusion

Globalization has created a favorable background for the circulation of people and ideas. According to Tsing (2000, p. 336), circulation is a central theme of globalization: ‘Many things are said to circulate, ranging from people to money; cultures to information … circulation is thus tapped for the endorsement of multicultural enrichment, freedom, mobility, communication, and creative hybridity.’ The circulation of ideas and cultures through new media, and the circulation of people due to new means of transport, have created ‘new opportunities for the global transmission of religion’ so that religious leaders can ‘communicate easily the universal ideas of transnational religions to their expanding communities worldwide’ (Juergensmeyer 2006, p. 9).

In this chapter we have seen the circulation of traditional Hindu asceticism, and that the increased presence of foreigners in traditional orders has been driven by a new socio-economic, political and religious context in India, one that derives from globalization. Although the attention of scholars is often on modern gurus because of their international appeal, this chapter has focused on traditional gurus and orders.

These gurus, who represent what we have defined as Modern Hindu Traditionalism, are often considered as social leaders thanks to their traditionally legitimized authority. However, they often maintain this authority thanks to a predisposition to ‘evolve’ their role according to changed social conditions, crossing domains and therefore extending their range of action. The inclusion of foreigners as disciples can be seen as part of attempts by ancient sampradāyas to modernize and indeed their traditions survive because they are in a constant state of evolution. The presence of foreigners may indeed be a catalyst for this evolution, because it creates conditions in which the needs of the Other (a foreigner) are very obvious and require immediate answers.

Foreign ascetics, therefore, have begun to occupy a place in the evolution of Modern Hindu Traditionalism. We have seen that they approach and live Hindu asceticism in various ways, interpreting and including it in their lives according to their needs. As disciples of traditional gurus, they can support their masters, helping them to manage relationships in India and abroad through sophisticated social media and expanding their area of influence or power. As gurus themselves, they can spread the teachings of their religious orders beyond
the boundaries of India also adapting those teachings and thus ‘glocalizing’ Modern Hindu Traditionalism: creating it in different shapes in different geographic areas, but coexisting with a ‘universal’ shape (Robertson 2003). In so doing, they sometimes approach Neo-Hinduism, and we have also seen a Neo-Hindu influence in the ways Indian sadhus interact with foreigners.

It is clear that both Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism are rapidly changing, influenced by both tradition and modernity, in order to satisfy the religious questing not only of a multifarious Indian society but now numbers of foreigners as well.

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