11
HINDU ASCETICS
AND THE POLITICAL
IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Raphaël Voix

Introduction
This chapter examines the social and political implications of ‘ascetic practice’ in modern and contemporary India. For the purposes of this analysis, I will consider Indian ascetics who have a meditative and/or yoga practice and who refer to it as a ‘sādhana’. Starting with the assumption that no form of asceticism proposes unambiguous social principles applied to specific contexts, I will examine the way that those who claim to practise ascetic disciplines – most notably, those who have renounced their social role as a member of a specific caste and family – relate to and act in the society around them (Barnard and Kripal 2002; Godrej 2016, 2017). Considering the late colonial period up until the beginning of the twenty-first century from an ethnohistorical perspective, I intend to outline various ways in which these individuals render their social conduct compatible or coherent with their ascetic practices.

The social involvement of modern Hindu ascetics
In South Asian societies, far from the ‘theological fiction’ of the homeless wandering monk (Olivelle 2003: 274), Hindu ascetics have long constituted communities and represented figures of authority who have played an important – yet overlooked – socio-political role (Thapar 1987: 8, 13, 24). Gathered around charismatic figures, they have formed different institutions or sectarian traditions (sampradāyā) and looked for public support by attracting lay members and political patronage. Ascetics engaged in different activities, holding positions such as royal advisers, merchants and warriors, with the primary objective often being primarily to maintain the existence of their own order.1 However, the upheavals generated by colonisation gave rise to important transformations in the way ascetics understood their social role. The emergence, notably among the Indian elites, of a form of socio-political consciousness led to Hindu reformism, a deliberate and concerted activity aimed at a socio-religious change considered ‘progress’.2

In this context, new religious Hindu movements developed. These movements challenged the traditional social role of ascetics and articulated a more modern conception of renunciation which, in order to be socially accepted, had to be portrayed as useful to a larger public.

Although some monasteries (math) have a long history of charity, in the nineteenth century critics condemned these institutions as interested mainly in the accumulation of wealth rather
Hindu ascetics and the political

than working for the good of the Hindu public at large. Celibate ascetics were denounced as not ‘socially responsible’. This criticism, which first appeared in European orientalist discourses, became a common trope among Hindus reformers. Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), who founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, severely denounced the ‘parasitic’ lifestyle and ‘egoism’ of those preoccupied solely by their own salvation. The idea that an ‘authentic’ ascetic should be altruistic arose, and with it a reformulation of what renunciation meant in terms of value. Whereas, since the Upaniṣads and the Mahābhārata, renunciation had been associated with the abandonment of all worldly activity (niyṛtti dharma), a sine qua non for obtaining liberation (mokṣa) (Bailey 1985: 18), nineteenth-century Hindu reformers insisted that an individual who withdrew from the world must nevertheless act in the service of those who live in the world, leading to the figure of the ‘renouncer engaged in the world’. This new figure of a renouncer who could be as active in the world as a householder, while retaining the supreme ‘value’ of renunciation, can be considered a modern manifestation of what Dumont called ‘the dialogue of the renouncer and the man-in-the-world’ (1999/1970: 12–13).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sahajananda (1781–1830), founder of the Svāmīnārāyaṇa movement, is believed to be the first to ask his disciples, celibate ascetics like himself, to serve God by serving the people (Williams 1984). He justified this teaching through a reinterpretation of the religious practice of sevā (service), a term that has assumed different meanings in various Hindu texts. In Brahmanical texts, sevā was primarily associated with ideas of servility and obedience and thus reserved for śūdra and women (Beckerlegge 2015: 211). In the medieval devotional traditions (bhakti), where a position of humility was praised, sevā became a positive religious attitude: anyone serving the Supreme Being could be granted liberation (mokṣa). This ‘vertical’ form of sevā was associated with a ‘horizontal’ one that consisted of giving mutual aid to fellow devotees (Jacobsen 2010: 861–865). However, this form of charity was usually exercised exclusively within a specific community of believers. In contrast, Sahajananda broadened the scope of this belief by no longer limiting it to co-religionists (Pandya 2016). Although this history of the term is not uncontested, it seems that Sahajananda inaugurated a religious practice that became widely popular in the following centuries (Beckerlegge 2015).

When Vivekananda (1863–1902) proposed his ‘practical Vedanta’ (Halbfass 1995), the idea of socially useful renunciation took definitive shape. Having realised the massive poverty of the population during his many travels around India, Vivekananda thought that celibate ascetics, if properly trained, could be agents of progress far more effectively than householders, since their celibacy made them better adapted to ‘social service’. In 1894, in a letter to his brother disciples, he urged them to raise an army of celibate ascetics: ‘No disciple householders, please, we want sannyasi. Let each one of you shave a hundred heads. Educated young men, not fools’ (Vivekananda in Beckerlegge 1998: 187–188). Vivekananda thus founded a monastic order, the Ramakrishna Mission, and led his disciples in various ‘relief activities’ which he designated as ‘sevā (service). Vivekananda’s commitment to service led to the mobilisation of ascetics in the public sphere in unprecedented forms. Various personalities spread the idea that an ascetic can organise relief operations in the event of famine or natural disaster. Over time sevā has thus grown from referring to ‘selfless service’ to designating ‘any voluntary social activity’ and become a central concept in contemporary Hinduism, and more specifically within ascetic-led religious groups.

With the entry of the nationalist movement into the decisive phase that led to independence, not only could ascetics engage within society, but they could also be important leaders in nation-building; a ‘great potential for political action was attributed to renunciation’ (Clémentin-Ojha 2019: 231). This inspired a new figure, that of the ‘patriotic ascetic’ who would sacrifice his life for his homeland. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s (1838–1894) novel
Raphaël Voix

Ānandamatha (The Monastery of Bliss, published in 1882), played an important part in this representation. Partly inspired by the so-called saṁnyāsin revolt that the East India Company had suppressed at the end of the eighteenth century, this classic of Indian literature features a group of ascetics who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a highly idealised country, ‘Mother India’, which is suffering under the yoke of a foreign occupier. Aspiring to a government other than the one in power – a Moghul who oppresses his people – they prepare for armed insurrection in the forest where they live. Their purpose is to overthrow the reigning power and, when the time is ripe, to establish a Hindu kingdom.

In 1899, the Maharashtrian Congress leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) acclaimed this ‘new type’ of ascetic as not someone ‘for whom the world is nothing’ but one ‘for whom the world is everything and for whom his country and people are dearer than all the world put together’ (Tilak in Ganachari 2005: 106). It was in similar vein that, in 1905, the Punjabi Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), also a member of the Congress Party, complained that it was a ‘matter of shame’ that his party had not ‘produced at least a number of political saṁnyasis ready to sacrifice their lives for the political regeneration of the country’. The life of Śraddhānanda (1857–1926), member of the Arya Samaj, could be read as an answer to that call, since he paradoxically engaged himself in politics after he had become a Hindu renouncer (Jordens 1981). Freed from obedience to any organisation, he believed that the act of renunciation had conferred on him the power to overthrow the East India Company and to establish a Hindu kingdom. This ‘new type’ of ascetic as not someone ‘for whom the world is nothing’ but one ‘for whom the world is everything and for whom his country and people are dearer than all the world put together’ (ibid). It was in similar vein that, in 1905, the Punjabi Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), also a member of the Congress Party, complained that it was a ‘matter of shame’ that his party had not ‘produced at least a number of political saṁnyasis ready to sacrifice their lives for the political regeneration of the country’. (ibid: 210). Whereas within traditional ascetic milieus, ‘politics’ had a negative connotation, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new modality of the renouncer’s authority within society emerged through ascetics entering into politics – a mode of intervention in the public sphere that has contemporary heirs, as we will see below.

Originating within the same ‘reformist’ milieu and in parallel to that of the patriotic ascetic, also emerged figures of laymen who act in the world in the name of ascetic ideals. This immediately calls to mind two major Indian personalities of the twentieth century. The first is Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) who, after having instigated the Bengali revolutionary movement, moved to Pondicherry, where from 1910 onwards he led a secluded life as a guru unconnected to any sampradāya (Heehs 2008; Wolfers 2016, 2017). The second is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), the internationally renowned leader of India’s independence movement who became famous for his nonviolent resistance campaigns. While Gandhi and Aurobindo had conflicting views on the means of gaining independence, they were both married men who had internalised the value of renunciation through following ‘chastity’ (brahmacarya), an ascetic practice that they envisioned as being at the foundation of their moral standing (Clémentin-Ojha 2019: 218). Like many in this generation of nationalists, they were inspired by their political reading of the Bhagavadgītā, a Hindu text that preaches the possibility of renouncing while remaining in the world through abandoning the desire for the results of one’s action (niṣkāma karma) (Olivelle 1978: 33). Both Gandhi and Aurobindo envisioned their action in society as a specific ‘yoga’ that combined the values of renunciation and detachment with those of social and political action. Significantly, with shared inspiration from the Bhagavadgītā, both thinkers notably diverged on the acceptability of the use of force: while the young Aurobindo advocated ‘violent’ action against the British, Gandhi preferred ‘non-violent resistance’ (Kapila and Devji 2013). Both figures are still an important source of inspiration for the contemporary world.
Hindu ascetics and the political

Contemporary configurations

The implementation of the Indian Constitution in 1950 drew a separation between a secular domain, which the state can regulate, and a religious one, in which it should not interfere. However, this did not prevent some ascetics from interfering in public life in newly-independent India. Ascetics have continued to engage in society through different means, adapting historical patterns to the new political situation, including the transformations of public Hinduism and the emergence of Hindu nationalism (Kanungo 2015).

It is important also to emphasise that some ascetics present themselves as exclusively dedicated to personal liberation (mokṣa): the pursuit of knowledge is the foremost life duty in the face of which all worldly activities are looked upon as illusory. Thus, they cultivate a distance-cum-indifference towards the world and societal matters. Some exemplary ascetic figures in twentieth-century India looked on the world's activity with disdain and assisted others primarily by their mere presence, notably their detached serenity. Widely considered as one who attained liberation while living (jivamukti), Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) did not belong to any specific lineage, yet he incarnated Shankara’s ideal of classical Vedānta, in which the realisation of the identity of ātman/brahman makes one totally detached from worldly desires and does not require one to act in the world (Fort 1997: 489–490, 502n4; Barua 2015). This posture is promoted by teachers who lay claim to Maharshi’s heritage. Likewise, Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) also showed a ‘complete indifference to politics’ (Hallstrom 1999: 11) and conceived the realms of the ‘spiritual’ and that of the ‘social’ or ‘political’ as entirely separated. However, this position does not prevent many ascetics from allowing political dignitaries to meet and pay respects to them. These types of ascetic aim to transform one’s relation to the divine and not to the world per se: in fact, as noted by Weber, Hindu sects often disseminate a conviction of ‘the unchangeable nature of the order of the world’ (Weber 1958: 313). Anandamayi Ma, for example, is known to have supported Indian customs such as sati (women’s self-immolation on husband’s pyre) (Hallstrom 1999: 211–212). While the places where these ascetics and their devotees congregate are not devoid of internal politics (linked to authority and material matters), they are still considered by devotees as places that offer temporary relief from the world.

Although not directly engaged in the transformation of society, some ascetics have been asked to associate themselves with the highest state authorities and to play the role of éminence grise. In the former years of Independent India, notably during the years when the agnostic Nehru officiated as prime minister (1947–1964), the absence of any relationship with religious authorities prevailed (Jaffrelot 2012: 82). But during her years as prime minister (1966–1977, 1980–1984), Indira Gandhi sought political mentorship from ascetic figures. She publicly called upon recognised figures, such as the world-famous lecturer Krishnamurti (1895–1986) and more secretly resorted to the services of controversial figures, such as Dhirendra Brahmachari (1924–1994), a hathayoga teacher who became popular in north India through his weekly TV show in the 1970s. As prime minister (1991–1996), Narasimha Rao also secretly maintained personal connections with ascetics, notably Chandraswami (1948–2017), ex-Youth Congress Leader and self-made tantric guru, who was later accused of various criminal activities (Jaffrelot 2012: 88; Jha 2019: 53). These cases of high-profile politicians seeking advice or supernatural protection from charismatic ascetic figures replicate an old Hindu schema of the renouncer as a ‘super-brahmin’ counsellor or adviser to the king (Jaffrelot 2012). This relationship can be made public, or not, according to the political benefits one might expect from such an association; for politicians who know how to make use of it, association with an ascetic can reinforce their legitimacy (ibid: 80).
With the rise of a narrow ideology of religious nationalism as defined by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent of the Sangh Parivar (Family of Organisations), in the public sphere from the 1980s onwards and the rise in power of its political arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the late 1990s, charismatic ascetics have been brought in more than ever to play a public and – almost – official political role (McKean 1996). This is notably the case since the 2014 elections and the rise of the self-made ascetic and businessman, Ramdev (b. 1965). Originating from an Arya-Samaj schooling background, Ramdev gained national fame in the 2000s through his yogic evangelism – a daily public lesson broadcast on TV – and during free camps. His commercialisation of branded ayurvedic products has assured him an outstanding financial success (Chakraborty 2007; Sarbacker 2013; Khalikova 2017). After having brought yoga and ayurveda into the ‘mainstream of Indian society […] in unprecedented ways’ (Sarbacker 2013: 352), Ramdev entered the political arena in 2011 during the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare (b. 1937). Hazare staged a public fast that was considerably retransmitted on social media and captured massive attention from the public. Ramdev, who from the start has benefited from solid support from the Sangh Parivar, supported the BJP in the 2014 national elections (Jaffrelot 2011; Pathak-Narain 2017). Since then, he has appeared as a personal ally to the prime minister, Narendra Modi, with whom he shares regular public platforms. Not only has Ramdev probably directly influenced the ‘politics of yoga’ 7 encouraged by the government by placing yoga and ayurveda at the forefront of public discourse (Worth 2018), but his wide propagation of a Hindu ‘somatic’ (Chakraborty 2006: 388) or ‘biomoral’ (Khalikova 2017: 113) nationalism constitutes an invaluable asset for the Sangh Parivar. 8

In addition to resorting to an ascetic’s influence through personal connection, high-profile politicians have for a long time attempted to mobilise the numerous sādhus belonging to the different akhāṛās. From Gandhi to Nehru, politicians of all sides have seen the Kumbha Mela, a religious fair on which these traditional ascetics reign, as constituting an enviable platform for spreading political messages to the millions of Indian citizens who congregate there every three years. Whereas before Indian independence the ascetics’ associations were reluctant to introduce politics to the religious festival (Gordon 1975: 182), after independence, the festival became gradually more political (MacLean 2003: 897). Yet the different parties at stake encountered only limited success until the 1980s when hundreds of RSS militants (pracharakas) became ascetics themselves and put forward the Ram temple agenda within the ranks of the ascetics. Following this infiltration, a great number of sādhus participated both in the 1989 yatra – that the Sangh Parivar had organised in favour of building a Ram temple – and in the 1992 unlawful destruction of the Ayodhya Babri mosque. While political mobilisation of the sādhus in the past was usually done on an individual basis (and had an element of instability), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)9 promised to give the sādhus an ‘ecclesiastical status’ within a larger Hindu Kingdom, granting them an unprecedented sense of collective importance (Jha 2019). This has enabled the Sangh Parivar to build up a substantial and durable network of patronage within the akhāṛās. Among sādhus who are also public figures, those opposed such political drift remain exceptions, and even these often support some of the specific claims of the Hindu right. 10

A more straightforward way for ascetics to influence politics is by standing as candidates in local, regional or national elections. Since India’s independence, dozens of them have taken the plunge either through a registered party – Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Janata Party, or the BJP – or through the creation of their own political party. While for most of them this was an individual initiative, there are some new Hindu religious movements based around the cult of a charismatic ascetic that have also attempted to gain power by presenting candidates (laymen or ascetics) under the banner of a specifically created party. 11 In 2017, however, the election of the
Hindu ascetics and the political

BJP candidate Yogi Adityanath (b. 1972) as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh changed the game by instituting in India’s most populated State ‘a form of theocracy’ (Jaffrelot 2019: 231). Spiritual and political heir of Swami Avedyanath (1921–2014), whom he succeeded in 1998 as a deputy of Gorakhpur and in 2014 as the abbot (Mahant) of the prestigious Nāth temple-monastery of Goraknāth, Yogi Adityanath distinguished himself in the political arena by his extensive use of ‘muscle power’. In 2002 he founded a devoted militia, the Hindu Yuva Vāhini (Hindu Youth Brigade), aimed at vigilantism which specialised in orchestrating inter-community riots intended to polarise the electorate along religious lines (Bouillier 2016: 277–279). Since his election as chief minister, he has been using ‘terror’ to govern through police squads that ‘under the guise of protecting women, exercise cultural policing’ (Jaffrelot 2019: 232). Parallel to his political activity, Yogi Adityanath is also active within his sect where he sponsors publications, defends the sect’s yogic heritage and appears at all the important functions where the press is welcome (Bouillier 2016: 278). All kinds of actors – policemen as well as journalists – thus perceive him not only as a politician but as a holyman, routinely bowing at his feet in public (Jaffrelot 2019: 235).

While since the 1960s most of these political ascetics have been functioning in line with the Sangh Parivar, there exist rare but eloquent examples of opponents. Such is the case of Svami Agnivesh (b. 1940) who since the 1970s has been actively campaigning against forced labour, sati, the dowry system, consumption of alcohol and abuses of the caste system, both through social work and through being elected multiple times. In keeping with his forefathers in the Arya Samaj, he is a staunch defender of the sanctity of the Vedas. The party he founded, the Arya Sabha, declares its aim as establishing Vedic socialism (vādik sāmajvād), yet he vehemently opposes ‘Hindutva politics’ which he considers ‘a threat to democratic-secular fabric of India but also to the spiritual core of Hinduism’. 12

The vast majority of ascetics refrain from engaging directly in politics. Yet, many still reflect the broad consensus according to which ascetics must act in the world for its betterment, combining the search for spiritual growth with engagement in social activity. This is notably the case of the contemporary self-made gurus who do not belong to a specific sampradāya but have gathered around their personality a huge and often cosmopolitan following. They have founded important religious organisations with many satellite NGOs through which they offer a wide range of social activities. Based on offerings from disciples and state funding, this philanthropic activity has become an ascetic practice in its own right. Since disciples consider that sevā is their main sādhana, this has also become a way to glorify the movement or its leader. One of the most successful examples of this type of movement is the one founded by Mata Amritanandamayi (b. 1953). 13 Because they are supposed to be free from any kinship attachment, theses gurus are often considered as inherently benevolent, in contrast to politicians who are seen as corrupt. While officially distancing themselves from electoral politics, these gurus nevertheless act as ‘Hinduising agents’ by bringing back some Hindu pride to the lower and upper urban middle classes from which their followers originate; some of them also openly promote a softcore Hindutva or endorse a position on a particular political issue, such as the cow protection or the Ramjanmabhumi movement. Similarly, traditional ascetics running Hindu monasteries (matha) often have a strong regional influence. Taking advantage of their significant local following, they are able, in times of natural disasters, to raise funds for relief and reconstruction through which they broaden their local influence. They can also choose to influence the course of politics more directly while at the same time keeping a distance from its ‘dirty world’. This explains why politicians often seek support and see their religious organisations as ‘vote banks’ (Ikegame 2012: 51).

An altogether different way for ascetics to transform society is by radically opposing it through the building of ‘practical utopias’, that is ‘total ideological systems that aim […] through
the transition to practise to radically transform existing global social systems’ (Seguy 1999: 117).
Whereas the Hindu social order (varṇāśrama-dharma) is based on the acknowledgement of the
Veda as revelation (śruti), Sanskrit as the unique sacred language and Brahmans as exclusive fig-
ures of religious authority, Hindu ascetics follow a revelation of their own that contests these
Brahmanical values and affirms that a Supreme Being grants his saving grace to all those who
surrender themselves to him. Although these affirmations are theological in nature, they can
have certain sociological implications: ideally all persons have direct access to the divine on an
equal footing, and therefore they cannot be ranked according to his birth/caste. 14 Whereas for a
great majority of these groups their principles of equality exclusively target salvific ends, there
exist a few exceptions: groups that intend to produce a real alternative social order through the
building of ‘ideal cities’. Among the most famous cases, we find the Radhasoami communities
at Beas (founded in 1891) and Dayalbagh (founded in 1915) (Juergensmeyer 1982), Ananda
Marga’s Anandanagar (founded in 1962) (Voix 2011) and the Mother’s Auroville founded in
1968 (Minor 1999, 2000). Although most of these movements are also engaged in welfare activ-
ities, their objective is not solely to improve society but to develop a new type of humanity.
Yet, their success has often been limited. Through a complex socio-religious process, they have
gradually lost their radicalism and been co-opted into the caste system by becoming colonies of
disciples who have to mingle with the surrounding society.

Conclusion
Contrary to the popular imaginary of a solitary yogi absorbed in meditation in South Asia,
where yoga and contemplative practices originate and where they have a long and varied
history, ascetics have never been devoid of temporal preoccupations and have had varying
relationships with society. During the rise of nationalism, renunciation (saṁnyāsa), which had
long been associated with detachment and otherworldliness, was reinterpreted to represent the
highest moral ideal of action in the world undertaken for the benefit of others as well as for
political aims. This led to the appearance of new ascetic figures who were more fully engaged
in the world, such as the ‘renouncer engaged in the world’, the ‘patriotic ascetic’ and the con-
temporary ‘political sādhus’.

There is a common assumption that yoga should lead to a ‘progressive’ approach towards
society at large, especially in comparison to more classical modes of religious piety. In con-
trast, this chapter has shown that in contemporary India, renunciant activism has mostly been
associated with the dominant Hindu nationalist discourse. This dynamic widely nourishes a
narrow Hindutva agenda that aims to reframe the Indian political state. The theological and
philosophical background against which actors inscribe their practice of yoga and meditation
does have a certain influence on their attitudes towards the world. Yet, this chapter has shown
to what extent, more than the practices per se, it is their entrenchment in a particular histor-
ical and/or sociological context that defines a specific relation to society. Yoga and meditation
traditions, like many other religious traditions, are multiple and sufficiently varied or plastic to
justify opposing political or societal choices.

Notes
1 Following Clémentin-Ojha (2006: 536), I use the term ‘ascetic’ as a generic term and the term
‘renouncer’ as a translation of saṁnyāśī. This latter Sanskrit term can refer either to the ‘twice-born who
has entered the fourth Brahmanical stage of life’ (āśrama) and to a member of an ascetic lineage whose
rules of conduct, though modeled on the former’s pattern, have integrated later sectarian developments’. This distinction is important since ‘not all Hindu ascetics are strictly speaking renouncers’.
Hindu ascetics and the political

2 Although it can be traced back to earlier times, Hindu reformism was most evident in the second half of the nineteenth century, once the political regime following the repression of the Sepoy Revolt (1857–1858) had been established. Literature on Hindu reformism is vast; for a brief synthesis on the upheavals it led to, see Ray (1995) and for an up-to-date bibliography see OUP Bibliography Online.

3 On this revolt where ascetics were defending what they considered to be the rights and prerogatives of their sect, see Lorenzen (1978).

4 Although fictional, this novel had a great impact on Indian history: it became a symbol of Indian nationalism and its lyrical ode ‘Tribute to the Motherland’ (Vande Mataram) became the rallying song of many resistance fighters against colonial power (Lipner 2005).


6 For example, the Ajatananda Ashram website proclaims that the ‘monastic community does not undertake any regular or systematic activities in the world. Rather, the community is designed for those who are called to follow the path of “non-doing”, focused on an inner life of silence and solitude (nivritti marga)’ (sic) (see ajatananda.org and Lucas 2014).

7 By the ‘politics of yoga’, I refer to the many decisions that the BJP government has enacted in order to promote yoga nationally and internationally: e.g. the founding of International Yoga Day, annual meetings of the World Ayurveda Congress, introduction of free, semi-compulsory yoga classes for civil servants and most notably for the armed forces (Banerjee 2015).

8 In return, various BJP-ruled state governments granted Ramdev huge discounts on land acquisition, echoing some old habits of kingly patronage (Bouillier 2016), and most certainly nurturing a growing ‘crony capitalism’ economy (Bhattacharya and Thakurta 2019: 212).

9 VHP is a nationalist organisation founded in 1964 that federalizes different Hindu sects.

10 For example, although the respected Svaroopananda Saraswati (b. 1924), Śāṅkara-ācārya of Dwarka and Jyotish pīthas, is often considered as a Congress supporter and VHP’s enemy (Jha 2019: 132), he supports some political claims that are in line with Sangh Parivar’s agenda. For example, he supported the removal of article 370 for Jammu and Kashmir; the reconstruction of a Hindu temple on the premises of the destroyed Babri Masjid; the Ban on the PK movie, etc. (ibid: 169).

11 At local elections in India as well as, in some cases, outside India, the success of these endeavours has been limited and heavily criticised. On the ‘Unconquerable India Party’ (Ajeeya Bharat Party, ABP), founded in 1992 and based on the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008), see Humes (2005: 70–71, 2013: 513–514). On the Proutist Bloc of India and Amra Bengali, two off-shoots of the Ananda Marga, see Voix (2010: 54–61).

12 This defence of secular India might sound surprising considering the historical role that his organisation played in galvanizing Hindu militancy together with aggravating Hindu-Muslim relations at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. As the head of the Arya Samaj he supported the Congress in the 2019 elections (Scroll.in 2019).

13 For studies on her movement, see Warrier 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Lucia 2014a, 2014b. Other important examples are Shri Shri Ravi Shankar (b. 1956), founder of the Art of Living in 1981; H.H. Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati (b. 1952), head of the Parmath Niketan ashram in Rishikesh; Jagi Vasudev (alias Sadhguru, b. 1967), founder of the Isla Foundation – to name just three important ones.

14 This explain why many sects, from the time of their first appearance – with early pre-medieval groups such as the Ājivikas, the Jainas and the Buddhists – have often been seen as protest movements contributing to the development of a ‘counter-culture’ in South Asia (Thapar 1978, 1979).

Bibliography


Raphaël Voix


Hindu ascetics and the political


