Wanderers, Warriors and Threshold: Situating Ascetic Militarism in Eighteenth Century South Asia

Sutapa Bhattacharya[*]

Abstract

South Asia witnessed a meteoric rise of the Hindu ascetics to the helm of political, commercial and most importantly military order at the turn of the eighteenth century. This coincided with a transitional time when many changes were unfolding in the sub-continent. Gradual decline of the centralized administration of the Mughal State widened the scope and opportunity for the wandering ascetics to flex their military muscle, as did for many other regional powers in Bengal, Awadh and in other parts of the empire. Wandering Hindu ascetics like Dasnamis, needs to be contextualized in the complexities of the eighteenth century Indian scenario as a threshold time. Lying in-between pre-colonial and colonial times it indeed carried the memories of the past, but also the seeds of the future. Routes of commerce gained a new currency under the leadership of both Indian and western traders, as did State authority through territorialisation of nuclear zones of power into regional kingdoms. A wide market for military labour had opened up in South Asia and people had begun to make their services available therein that included the peasantry. Perhaps such complexities called into order a complete recasting of spiritual, material and secular plane. The purpose of the present research paper will be to demonstrate how the Dasnamis, made an innovative addition to the military labour market by not only offering their military skill and services as a product available for sale, but also their spiritual and commercial services.

Key words: Hindu Ascetics, *Dasnamis, Nagas, Gossain,* Eighteenth Century, South Asia, Orient, yogic posture, Pranayam, Kundalini, sexuality

Invented in the Oriental imagination of the westerners India entered modernity as a land of snake charmers and naked sadhus, it was the ultimate epitome of exoticism portrayed by the stereotyped Orientalised imagery of India. Nudity of the *sadhus* smeared in ashes and carrying weapons became the stock image of the religious gathering of wandering ascetics at *Kumbh Mela* even in the post-colonial times. These power packed images represented Hindu ascetics as, by western standards of course, obscene and of a militant sort. Wearing their matted hair (*jata*) in bun overhead and carrying weapons like spear and swords they remained ingrained in

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* Sutapa Bhattacharya did her PhD from the Department of History, Bankura University, West Bengal. She is attached to Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata as Counsellor in the Personal Contact Programme (PCP) of Post-Graduate History Course.

western imagination of the Orient. So powerful was the image that it gradually entered the imagination of the Indians who began to see their own culture derivatively. Magic men and mystics, they were revered and feared, one at the same time. But what constituted the foundation of this reverence and fear? World renouncers, recluses, and practitioners of rituals perverse to social customary hierarchy, they claimed a place for themselves in the world, nonetheless. In the context of the eighteenth century, the wandering ascetics were a force to reckon with, both for the erstwhile Indian royalty as well as for the emerging colonial authority.

South Asia witnessed a meteoric rise of the Hindu ascetics to the helm of political, commercial and most importantly military order at the turn of the eighteenth century. This coincided with a transitional time when many changes were unfolding in the sub-continent. Gradual decline of the centralized administration of the Mughal State widened the scope and opportunity for the wandering ascetics to flex their military muscle, as did for many other regional powers in Bengal, Awadh and in other parts of the empire. But considering the event as the founding moment of militarism practiced by the sect would be only too hasty. It was present in the ranks and files of the sub sects of the ascetic orders since the twelfth century for establishing their legitimacy.[1] This particular event merely served as a catalyst hastening their meteoric rise. Therefore, any discussion on the wandering Hindu ascetics like Dasnamis needs to be contextualized in the complexities of the eighteenth century Indian scenario as a threshold time. Lying in-between pre-colonial and colonial times it indeed carried the memories of the past, but also the seeds of the future. Routes of commerce gained a new currency under the leadership of both Indian and western traders, as did State authority through territorialisation of nuclear zones of power into regional kingdoms. A wide market for military labour, as Dirk Kolff,[2] points out had opened up in South Asia and people had begun to make their services available therein that included the peasantry. Perhaps such complexities called into order a complete recasting of spiritual, material and secular plane. Rise of the wandering warrior ascetic sects to prominence needs to be approached as a product of the transitional time when placed in a limbo order of things were changing, and changing fast. Ceremonial expression of authority needed more than just pomp and show. It needed to be strengthened with spiritual guidance and the show of military prowess. Mystical shamanism practiced by the monks of the ascetic order through Hath Yoga and regimented physical

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[1]   D.N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History", *Journal of the American Society*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (January-March), 1978, pp. 61-75.

[2]   D.H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850,* (Cambridge 1990), pp. 15-157.

training helped them, apparently, to loosen the garb of social norms and search salvation in a higher plane of mind and being. They congregated around each other to disseminate and practice such skills in a space of like-minded practitioners, often referred to as *akhras*. The observations made by Dumont[3] and Pinch about the emblematic characterizations of Hindu ascetics as non-violent, vegetarian and theological tolerance by the colonial authorities and the anti-colonial leaders does find some resonance in such instances. Nevertheless, Dumont and Pinch let the spiritual skills and services that the ascetic order offered go unnoticed. Being world renouncers, the wandering ascetics built themselves in between spaces in the context of the eighteenth century. Existing caste or gender hierarchy did not intervene or in any way jeopardize the ascetic hierarchy that the monks created within the order. Traversing the territorial extent of various regional kingdoms the wandering ascetics created a supra-order of glory that the regional powers borrowed for acquiring military and spiritual legitimacy. Naturally, royal patronage was in order for most of the mystic cults of wandering Hindu ascetics. Treatment of preference earned from the state and existing royalties allowed them to function beyond the territorial limits of regional kingdoms. Access to such supra-state status allowed them to bring together trade and commercial networks of South Asia creating a network of commerce entirely controlled by the sub-orders of the wandering ascetics.[4] The purpose of the present research paper will be to demonstrate how the wandering ascetic orders of the Dasnamis made an innovative addition to the military labour market by not only offering their military skill and services as a product available for sale, but also their spiritual and commercial services, something that academic intervention of Kolff or even Bayly has not fully explored.

Threshold Time: Characterizing the Eighteenth Century Context

Eighteenth century in the history of the sub-continent has been characterised as the age of transition. But this transition was tumultuous as great many things underwent transformation, and new things emerged, within a very short span of time, just in the

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[3] L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, (Chicago 1970), pp. 65-67; W.R. Pinch, *Warrior Acetics and Indian Empires*, (New Delhi 2006), pp. 172-180.

[4] B.S. Cohn, "The Role of Gossains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review,* Vol. 1, No. 4, 1964, pp. 175-83; D. H.A. Kolff, "Sannyasi Trader – Soldiers", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1971, pp. 211–18; Giorgio Agamben, *The kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government,* tr. By Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini, (Stanford 2011), pp. 87-95; C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*, (Cambridge 1999), pp. 113-134. See also the review of the book, Reviewed by William Sweetman, *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 32, No. 1, 1998, pp. 245-51.

matter of a century. Two primary aspects of the age were juxtaposed against each other: on the one hand, the gradual waning of the Mughal political economy making way for regional political orders; on the other hand, a sea of change in society, polity and economy as the English East India Company steered its way into prominence in northern India after the Battle of Buxar, 1764.[5] It was a time when nuclear power zones so far bonded together by the cultural-filial bonds of *mansabdari-jagirdari* system were consolidating it into regional princedoms. Resources were now redirected from the centre to the provinces leading to growth and development to spread out over a larger area instead of being concentrated in few Imperial cities. Understandably, new cities catapulted to prominence because of this politico-spatial change of the flow of resources. Just as changes were overflowing with speedy exuberance, at the latter half of the century newer elements began to make its presence felt. A hitherto unheard of rule of law and rule of property invaded the socio-judicial lives of the people. Labour market underwent spgatial and material change in order to cope up with this impending change. It was an age when time stood in a fuzzy haze. On one side of the haze, stood an old world, fast waning, yet holding onto its last semblance, while on the other side, fermented a new world, nascent, building it up in baby steps. Thus, the essential characteristic of eighteenth century made it stand like a doorway from the old to the new: hence, time stood suspended, in a limbo, turning eighteenth century into a threshold time. Into this suspended time marched in the old: the wandering ascetic Dasnamis. Standing at the threshold, they retained many of their old selves, but also adapted to the new times (in self-defence) assuming a unique form and structure that shall be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Rites de Passage: **Passage from Scholastic Monks to Pilgrims-in-Arms**

Rise of armed ascetics as a *rites de passage*[6] can be traced as far back as the sixth century B.C.E. when it emerged and was reinforced through a constant process of *separation, liminal* and *re-aggregation.*[7]Ascetics were brought together at Benares through the extraordinary exposition of *Brahmasutras* made by Sankaracharya who enjoined these scholastic devotees into the ranks of *sastradhari* and *astradhari* monks. They followed the two-fold ideal to preserve and defend Hindu scriptural teachings, doctrinal learning and the Hindu *dharma* against heretical influences. Conversant in the religious canon and engaged in composing commentaries on it, they were men of letters who fought with their pen and word the onslaught of other

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[5]   S. Alavi, *Eighteenth Century in India,* (New Delhi 2002), pp. 1-2.
[6]   V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure,* (Ithaca 1977), pp. 96-98.
[7]   Ibid., pp. 94-95.

contending heretical sects on Hindu *Dharma*. The effect it had on the existing societal structure was not quite what was envisaged by its founder. The scholastic ascetics differed with each other as well on such hermeneutical explication leading to the emergence of several sub-divisions within the rank and file of these world renouncers. Recluse though they were the ascetics not just confirmed to the set of scholastic ideas they preached but vigorously defended it against the notions disseminated by the rival sects or groups. Thus, accounts of debating confrontations between the Jain, Buddhist and the contesting Ajivika sages frequently appears in their religious canons.[8] This can be identified as a period of separation when the scholastic monks underwent ideational (related to ideas) and material detachment from the monastic order lay by Sankaracharya and entered a phase viz., Giri, Puri, Bharti, Aranya, Ban, Saraswati, Tirtha, Ashram, Sagar and Parbat[9] breaking into several sub-orders of asceticism of dissociation.

Separation from the core cultural ethos placed the *sastradharis* into a phase of limbo or a liminal phase. A transitory phase where such conflicts seldom remained restricted to battle of words alone. In a liminal phase there were no singular attribute to distinguish one ascetic idea of monasticism from the other. It stood in a phase of limbo where it became difficult to distinguish a unique quality of the past in it, and the new was yet to take shape. Perhaps this is the time when the wandering monks entered an incognito phase and very little reference of the sub-orders can be traced in different records. Apart from some isolated events of armed clash between the Dasnami and the Vaisnava Bairagis reported in 1266 on the occasion of Kumbh *Mela*[10] the vast extent of period that lay between their initial appearance and the emergence of the warrior monks in the thirteenth century can be identified as a period of liminality. Notional and material conditions that later came to identify the wandering ascetic groups underwent constant making and remaking in this phase of

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[8] Lorenzen, op.cit., pp. 64-65.

[9] Akshay Kumar Dutta, *Bharatbarshiya Upasak Sampraday,* Vol. 1, (Calcutta 1792BS/1907AD), pp.90-95. There is a small introduction on Nagas and Bairigis. Dutta is completely silent about the other groups of obscure cults that flourished in Bengal during the period under review. Dutta 'not only charted out a comparative religious framework of Indo-European lineages in the long prefatory section, but also met special mention of medieval mystical traditions, and the world of Auls, Bauls, and other associated groups' (Soumen Mukherjee, *Religion, Mysticism, and Transcultural Entanglements in Modern South Asia, Towards a Global Religious History*, (Switzerland 2024, p. 27). Mukherjee has visualized the periphery of mystic world on Homi Bhabha's terminology (Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis,* Spring, October 28, 1984, pp. 125-133).

[10] Dutta, op. cit., p. 90.

limbo. But the re-aggregation that came post-liminal phase did not witness a reintegration into the older customs. New set of sub-orders came into being where the existing ethos acquired a different form unto each. Perhaps, the process of identifying a 'high' and a 'low', or of an 'other', during the liminal phase created a distinction among each monastic sub-orders. Though hailing from the same monastic order the sub-orders seldom saw eye to eye in matters not just spiritual, but also material. In their new state of dissociation social life resembled a form of dialectics where "high and low, communities (*an essential and generic human bond observable in any society*; Italics mine) and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality"[11] stood in a limbo. In the new state of liminality a process of initiation became the backbone of these sub-groups of monastic order.

The ascetics physically wandered and for all their mystical needs settled in *akhras*. This created, and still does, some confusion because in appearance they seemed detached and recluse, yet they formed a social association of their own tied strongly by the bonds of discipline and mystical practices. Symmetrical and immovable *yogic* posture formed the foundation of these practices. To maintain balance and to free oneself from restlessness the ascetics practiced *Padmasana* and *Siddhasana.* To control breath and stimulate *Kundalini Sakti* or spiritual force lying at the base of the spine *Pranayam* was practiced. In return this prevented seminal loss, kept the mind still and helped achieving *Samadhi*. Gross is of the opinion, these practices helped retain their 'sexual energy and spiritual power (*Kundalini Sakti*)' as one tantamount the other.[12] Mystical practice such as *yoga, Yoga- Sadhana*, *Brahmacharya* and *pranayam* along with several other restrictions viz., wearing a tight *langoti* (loincloth), taking cold baths and eating only simple static foods, helped retention of sexual energy in the form of semen and converted into *oja-sakti* (potency) that elevated the *Kundalini*.[13]

Nakedness (*naga, nanga*), matted hair (*jata)*, and ashes (*khak; bibhuti*) served as symbols of asceticism as well as of liminality.[14] Raymond Firth[15] and Victor Turner[16] opine, these features are 'multi vocalic and multi referential'. For instance, the matted hair or the *Jata* stands out as a symbol of 'ascetic liminality and status'.[17]

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11   Turner, op.cit., p. 97.
12   R.L. Gross, *A Study of the Sadhus of North India*, (Jaipur 1979), pp. 248-49.
13   Ibid., p. 249.
14   Turner, op.cit., p. 303.
15   R.Firth, *Symbols, Public and Private,* (Ithaca 1979), pp. 25, 41, 52.
16   Turner, op. cit., p. 303.
17   Gross, op.cit., p. 304.

Leach further clarified, the matted stood for ascetic transcendence into a social order that completely disregarded personal physical appearance, as is the established social norm. Things held dirty by social standards are smeared on the hair; things like cow dung, cow urine, ashes and mud from the river Ganges. The longer and intricate a *jata* superior is the spiritual attainment of an ascetic because it is considered the seat of an ascetic's magical powers or *siddhi* attained through *tapas.*[18] From an iconographic point of view it also signifies control over natural and physical forces.[19] The appearance it gives an ascetic has embedded in its very essence a certain defiance of man-made social regulations. Dishevelled appearance it gives an ascetic is associated with grief, mourning, and despair for those still attached to the dead and dying phenomenal world.[20] Similarly; the wearing of ashes conveyed a sense of death, desolation, and a complete rejection of socially prescribed physical adornment or beautification.[21] Understandably, such disregard deeply embedded in their appearance, essence and being made them stand in a plane completely separate from that of the normatively structured social order, yet having multiple numbers of nascent practices that differed from one ascetic sub-order to the other. In this state of limbo they moved beyond the order of things established in a hierarchical social relationship. As a result, the monastic order in their liminal stage passes through a new cultural realm different from the order of things of earlier state of order or cultural conditions. This liminal phase was the threshold where the old attributes had little or no similarity with what eventually emerged. Once engaged in hermeneutical debates the ascetics often broke apart from the existing order of things of the monasticism. Whether removed forcibly or as an admonishment or simply as a deviant, the monks experienced dissociation. Such dissociation and creation of new monastic identity that was relative in nature (meaning dependant on an 'other') required constant legitimization through negation of the other. Instances of conflicts between one sect with the other seeking legitimacy often appeared in various primary sources. There are a variety of figures between holy folly, mental distractedness, insanity and poverty. One of the varieties of this group of people was their deviant appearance among the common people[22]. The eccentrical and deviating behaviour of *diwana*s and *faqir*s, particularly their symptomatic fits of anger and aggression, are

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[18] E.R. Leach, "Magical Hair", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 88, No. 2, 1958, pp. 147- 164.

[19] Gross, op.cit., p. 304.

[20] Ibid., pp. 304-306.

[21] Ibid., p. 305

[22] Wolfgang Lipp, *Stigma und Charisma, ̈UbersozialesGrenzverhalten*, (Berlin 1985), pp. 71-77.

commonly interpreted as manifestations of the Islamic concept of *jalal*. Whereas a number of *diwana*s and *faqır*s, situated at the far end of the spectrum of Islamic mysticism, embody the notion of the holy fool (who has the 'free rein of the religiously confused') carrying the moral authority of the proximity (*qurb*) to God and of asceticism, others are considered by the public as mere idiots, lunatics and beggars. There is indeed a thin line between sainthood and folly. In this context, ethnographic data refer to different types of self-stigmatization, such as forms of ecstasy, eccentricity, criticism, exhibitionism, aggressiveness, abstinence and passiveness. It is said that the tomb of the Sufi saint of early modern India acted as an 'enduring spatial anchor' that made the present Indian landscape replete with a material and narrative archive of distant homelands and origin stories that animated religious and cultural life for emergent Muslim settler communities.

 This proves the plurality of these cults. The competitiveness between the Hindu and Islamic mystic groups was found as early as the Turko- Afghan period and became more prominent during the period of Akbar, the Great Mughal. They used to fight, mainly, for the collection of religious donations on the occasions of bathing ceremony not only held at Kumbha *Mela* or Ganga Sagar *Mela* but also other religious congregations. It was quite surprising that Mughal Emperor like Akbar enjoyed these types of fight as recorded not only in the oral testimony of J. N. Farquhar but also in the Mughal chronicles, Persian and Marathi sources. Besides charitable contributions, it is assumed, that, recruitment of followers was responsible behind the inter-community competitiveness, but there is no direct evidence to show either in the Persian sources or in the official documents that recruitment went on full swing before the beginning of eighteenth century. It was particularly after the death of Aurangzeb (1707 A. D) there was a decline of the central power for which recruitment of disbanded soldiers and the poorer classes of the society had no other alternative but to sell their children in lieu of money. It may be argued whether Mughal State either central or regional forced these groups of people to take shelter under their banner. Since they were expert in the art of warfare the regional powers in all- India perspective recruited them as mercenary forces in lieu of stipends, but, the Mughal State and the regional powers did not have any restriction on their monetary extortion. Even the competition among the Vaishnavas was noticeable in one of the prominent stronghold of the Vaishnavas, i.e., Braja Bhum.Habib has shown how rivalry between the Radhaballavis and the followers of Sree Chaityana over encroachment on a seat (*nishastgāh*) was so acute that state interference was

essential[23] that it was never thought of disturbing the arrangements worked out in Akbar's times. Further, perhaps for the first time, going by the Vrindavan documents, he also granted lands ranging between 12 and 50 *bīghas* to eight individuals outside the temple-based grantees. Of these eight, a woman named Kunjdāsī got 30 *bīghas* in her own right. Shāhjahān's reign sent mixed signals. According to a passage in Lāhorī's *Pādshāhnāma*, in his sixth regnal year (1633–34), Shāhjahān ordered that no temple whose foundations had been laid in Jahāngīr's time but had not been completed would be allowed to be completed; and the successors of Aurangzeb, who did not apparently share his 'prejudiced outlook', could offer further conciliatory measures. An illustration of this was the 1718 *parwāna* of Māhyār Khān, the *faujdār* of Mathura. It said, Gossains, Bairagis, and Mahants had from old times been living in village Bindrāban and people coming from different provinces left large amounts in charity for them, which were secretly divided up… (but now representatives of the Gauḍiyas (Chaitanya sect), Radhaballavis, Hariidasas, Ramanandis etc. have) agreed to distribute charity among mendicants of their respective sects in a proper manner.[24]

This hypothesis questions Lorenzen's argument that warrior ascetics emerged in the sixteenth century[25] that has also been reiterated by Elliot and Dowson[26] and William Pinch. Drawing their conclusion from the accounts of Badauni,[27] Pietro Della Valle,[28] Duarte Barbosa,[29] Peter Mundy,[30] Francois Bernier[31] and W. G. Orr[32] they have neither paid due attention to the relationship the Hindu ascetics held with each other and the Muslim Fakirs, nor have they tried to explore the communitas (explained earlier) aspect of the pre-sixteenth century monastic sub-order when they were undergoing a process of formulation and re-formulation. It is in this phase, one must

[23] Irfan Habib and Tarapada Mukherjee, *Braj Bhūm in Mughal Times: The State, Peasants and Gosāins*, (New Delhi 2020), pp. 96-97.
[24] Ibid., p, 116.
[25] Lorenzen, op. cit., p. 63.
[26] Nizamuddin Ahmed, '*Tabaqat-i-Akbari*'. Elliot and Dowson (tr.), *The History of India as Told by its own Historians*, Vol. 3 Reprint (Delhi 1991), pp. 536-538.
[27] Al- Badauni, *Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh*, Vol. 2, Reprint (New Delhi 1990), p. 228.
[28] Pietro Della Valle (ed. & tr.), *The Pilgrim: The Travels of Pietro Della Valle*, (London 1989), p. 238.
[29] Durate Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century, notes and preface by Henry E.J. Stanley*, (London 1866), pp. 99-100.
[30] *Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe in Asia, 1608-1667,* Vol. 2 *Travels in Asia, 1603-1614*, (ed.), R.C. Temple (London 1914), pp. 176-178.
[31] A. Constable (ed.), *Travels in the Mogul Empire,1656-1668; A Revised and improved edition based upon Irving Broock's translation,* (Delhi 1968), pp. 154-155.
[32] W.G. Orr, 'Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1940, pp. 81-100.

understand, the constant unmaking and reframing of monasticism of wandering ascetics perforce it to acquire a form that was both spiritual as well as militaristic.

In fact, the consolidation of the sub-orders into *akhras* that formed the spatial core of the spiritual and militaristic order has not received adequate treatment in the work of Pinch (2006). *Akhra* based records bring to light the spatial positioning of the monastic sub-orders that transcended statist boundaries.

Enjoined by fellow monks of the sub-order, who, migrated to these places and established centre of congregation, in such places, served three purposes: gathering followers, creation of commercial network and a safe haven for the wandering monks of the sub-order acting as a militarised fortification. In this connection one mention the presence of the Ukhi *math* founded by the Kedarnath order of Sankaracharya. Another principal *math* of the North was the Joshi *math* meant as the headquarters of the wandering Giri sub-order. Benares gained importance in this network of *math* for similar reasons of strategic importance and commercial benefit. *Maths* spread its wing into Mirzapur, Poona, Nagpur, and Gwalior by the end of eighteenth century because of its easy access to trade routes. Conduct of business and storage of goods became an integral function of these religious congregational centres facilitated by the provision these spaces either had or entrusted as centres of pilgrimage. The *maths* organized the Sanyasis in an interconnected network of spiritual and commercial link that was administered through an Assembly (*Panchayat*) elected by the assembly of each *math*. Spread across Awadh and Deccan *akhras* flourished in Juna, Mahanirvani, Niranjani, Atal, Avahan and Agni .In the pre-Mughal period *akhras* sprung up in Jaipur, Jodhpur and some other parts of Rajasthan[33] and at Prayag. However, due to its commercial significance Benares remained the principle centre where the *akhras* were densely concentrated with its distributaries spreading through Prayag, Nasik, Ujjain, Benares, Hardwar and Udaipur.The *akhras* provided the sub-orders an opportunity to consolidate their commercial-politico spatiality into a centre of pilgrimage, an inner spiritual frontier.

The spiritual-commercial congregation also served as centres of temporary residence for the ascetics where they engaged in commercial and administrative activities. Naturally as centres of immense importance these were zealously guarded by the ascetics. So, defence of the congregation was done in two ways: ceremonial public display of weapons by the ascetics, and militarised training of ascetics through *yogic* postures as warriors. Records show the *mahants* of Juna and Atal *akhras* known as

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[33]   G.S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*; *A Sociological Survey*, (Bombay 1964), pp. 67-68.

Siddhi Giris *mathiya* (*math*), situated at Awadh, were reportedly very militant. Even Sir Jadunath agrees that several fighting mendicants, expert in the art of warfare, frequented *akhras* like the Atal *akhras.* The militaristic training, which formed a part and parcel of their *yogic* training, also gave them a cutting edge over other sub-cults. For instance, during the bathing ceremony of Kumbha *mela* the militaristic training that the ascetics received was displayed with full pomp and show in the form of competition. Often such competitive displays led to consternations. Perhaps, it was another way of demonstrating before the other sub-cults, as well as disciples and followers, their superiority over the other mystical cult. Following of each cult was equally dependant on such demonstrative militarism. Presence of *akhras* of the Niranjani cult in distant locations like London, U.S.A. Sri Lanka and even Pakistan can be attributed to such spiritual-militaristic public performances.

Betwixt and Between[34]: Institutionalizing Ascetic Liminality

The celebrated Bhakti religious reformer Kabir noted in one his *Doha* of fifteenth century about the wandering and warrior ascetics. Disheartened by their actions he called them false ascetics, who were quarrelsome and too materialistic.[35] This makes one question the credibility of these warrior ascetics. Who were they- socially? To understand their social standing one must make some concession for the time in which they rose to prominence i.e. the time of sub-states functional under not an overtly centralized state. It was a time when within the ambit of central authority many regional sub-legates and commercial networks were functioning unhindered. Lying between the social structure and the state structure wandering ascetics developed a plane of their own. The plane lay embedded in the interstices of the *akhras* and the *maths.* Serving not merely as sub-cults but also as sub-cultural praxis where social norms and codes were denied and then reformed into a new mould. The distinctions of caste hierarchy that formed an integral part of the existing social structure did not find resonance within the sub-sets of the monastic orders. Engaged in Tantric and Saivite form of spirituality the distinctions of the socio-material world did not concern the ascetics. At least, not in principle, but in practice, caste hierarchies were not completely rejected and discarded from the day to day dealings of the order. It appears that the castes, both high and low, that formed a part of the monastic orders. Interestingly, these devotees or disciples who found a place within

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[34] Victor Turner used betwixt as a state of lying in between states where "socio-structural role playing is dominant especially between those who are of equal status." He concedes that such practices are visibly common among mendicants and ascetics. (Turner, op. cit., p. 138).

[35] Sukhdev Sinha (ed.), *Kabiradasa, Kabira-bijaka,* (Allahabad 1972), p. 172.

the ranks and files of the sub-order were professionals and based on the innovative and unique nature of their skill sets they were forged into new caste. However, new set of hierarchization was introduced in the sub-orders that, if not completely, did adopt few of the rules prevalent in the existing caste structure. As a result, lower caste recruits though allowed entrance in the sub-order could not rise up the ascetic ladder to positions reserved for Brahmins and Rajputs. Higher caste men entering monastic life rigorously maintained their circle of purity by refusing to eat food cooked or even offered by lower caste men or women.[36]

The hierarchization was overtly visible in the treatment meted out to women. Though celibacy formed a part of the ritualistic liminality of the orders, few amongst them were allowed to enter into matrimony. These monks were referred to as *gossains*. Celibacy was strictly followed and maintained by the *nagas*. But marriage was not completely unheard of among the ranks and files of the monastic order. For instance, a *gossain* of Giri sub-order could select anyone form other sub-orders but could not marry a woman of his own sub-order. Dasnamis are also known to have entered into matrimonial alliances with women of Brahmin caste and to have engaged in profession of cultivation. However, such alliances and the resultant progeny did not have any hierarchical claim to the leadership of the sub-order. Usually the leader nominated one of his disciples as his successor. The widows of the Dasnami monks were entitled to maintenance. But apart from that they had no claims over the wealth or administration of the sub-order. The Dasnamis were also practiced concubines. Many females formed a part of the household of a Dasnami monk not as legally wed wives, but as concubines. As a result Umrao Giri, the brother of Anup Giri had six sons of his own and three illegitimate children. The family of Umrao Giri was popularly known as *gossains* of Rasdhania and of Himmat Bahadur as Bandawala.[37] Thus, once they entered the ascetic order their old caste lineages were discarded in favour of new ones that reformed caste hierarchies in a new form and stature.

Juxtaposed to the marital relations and concubine practiced by the *gossains* stood the *yogic* practices of the *nagas*. Unlike the gossains who did not practice celibacy the Nagas (derived from the word nanga or naked) Dasnami ascetics had five *gurus*: *Mantra Guru*, *Langtoti Guru, Bibhuti Guru, Trishul Guru* and *Bija Guru*. The first four *Gurus* ensures the initiation of the new inductees from the liminal phase into a

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[36]   James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 6, (New York 1981), pp. 192-193.
[37]   H.R. Neviell, *Gazetteer of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Vol. I, (Allahabad, 1877), p. xxiv.

phase of aggregation by granting them *guru mantras,* ochre coloured loin cloth (symbolizing renunciation and simple living), the art of wearing *bibhuti* or ashes and the sacred trident (symbol of Shiva) for the defence of the order, respectively. Unlike the other *gurus* it was the duty of the Bija *Guru* was to acquaint a newly initiated with the *tangtora* ceremony. He acted as the semen preceptor who instructed the initiated candidate to masturbate and to offer that semen into the sacred fire as a sacrifice. Initiated Dasnami ascetic had to jerk hard on the male genitals (first to the left and then to the right) not only to control the body but also to disrupt the muscles, blood–vessels and nerves quintessential for erection. Often a special type of knife was used to sever the tissues of the genitals. Gross surmises, such practices emanated from the philosophical believe that it would ensure the end of sexual desires, hence, permanently damaging any chance of participation in worldly elusion.[38]

It helped them to prevent seminal loss, meaning prevention of the loss of sexual energy that allowed them to retain their spiritual power or the *Kundalini Shakti.*[39] Celibacy practiced by the *nagas* combined distancing of oneself from women with practice of controlling external physical desires. The loss of semen to carnal desires, the *nagas* believed, had an emasculating effect that took away their spiritual vigour. So alongside the practices of yogic postures like *mulabandha*, the contradicting of the anal, sphincter muscles *Vajrolikriya*[40] that subsumed their carnal desires, they also took the help of psychedelic elements like *ganja*. Consumption of *ganja* helped psychic transcendence that mellowed and reduced their instinctive desire for physical pleasures. Unlike the householder *gosains* who preached and practiced domestic sexuality, for the *naga* ascetics sexuality represented vigour, encapsulated in the *oja-shakti* (potency) or the semen that needed to channelize not for petty carnal desires but greater spiritual understanding and union. Gross noted the significance of rejection of sexual pleasure as a process of initiation by which the *nagas* enter the ascetic world of liminality.

The practices associated with *gossain* and *naga* order served as a means for institutionalizing the liminal or in-between nature of asceticism. Most importantly, sexuality played a key role in determining the place of each, rather subjectivity of each, in this liminal state. True, Turner[41] envisioned liminality in the same way as Arnold van Gennepp[42] had done before him, as a stage of many possibilities. But the

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[38]   Gross, op. cit., p. 346
[39]   Ibid., pp, 248-49.
[40]   Ibid., p. 345.
[41]   Turner, op.cit., p. 34.
[42]   A.V. Gennepp, The *Rites of Passage*, (Chicago 1960), pp. 57-62.

power-knowledge equation existing within the framework of ascetic order remained referential to the socio-sexual reformed within the boundary of ascetic liminality.[43] Thus, wandering ascetics reformed a possibility unique to their sub-order. Though being different from the existing social order, at least in terms of inclusion of lower castes and women, and practice of sexuality, hierarchization of the liminal sub-set that they created led to the emergence of a trope unique to their order, in-between yet referential to the existing social order.

Pre-Modern Commodity Fetishism: Into the Military and Spiritual Labour Market

Kabir, a pre-modern religious reformer, and poet Sudan[44] gave a harrowingly different account of wandering ascetics. The former identified them as uncouth and false[45], while to the latter they emerged as epitome of heroism and justice.[46] It seems moving beyond the idea and practice of asceticism, propounded (or if in a very Marxist sense- produced) by the sub-order, it acquired a fantastic life of its own accorded to it by branding. Different accounts of the sub-order emerged due to varied propaganda of such fantastic proportion. Such different accounts of a same group of people leaves one wondering about the true purpose of these ascetic sub-orders. The very in-between nature of asceticism needs to be analysed in the context of pre-modernity, the liminal time that lay betwixt between the rise of the colonial empire and the end of the Mughal imperium. It was a time of reinvention when centralizing forces were being replaced by more localised and regional authorities. Resources were redirected from centre to the locals. Naturally markets were accordingly reformulated. A shift of market was in order from the centralized capitals to more local centres of trade. Into this volatile market scenario of eighteenth century spirituality and warrior asceticism, itself a liminal trope, claimed a separate space for itself. To understand the nature of the spiritual and military services provided by the ascetics in an all-India perspective one needs to pay close attention to the patronage/branding they received from regional powers. Supported by both the common people and the regional powers the Dasanamis continued their military activities unhindered.

The spiritual plane that the ascetics created and dwelled in offered services to people across South Asia. Owing to their *Yogic* practices the Dasnamis they could make the

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[43] G.C. Spivak, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference", *Oxford Literary Review*, 1986, pp. 225-40.

[44] Sudan, *Sujan Charit*, (Varanasi 1906), pp. 147-174.

[45] S.N. Sinha, *Mid- Gangetic Region in the 18th Century, Some Observations of Joseph Tiffenthaler*, (New Delhi1976), pp. 78-79.

[46] Pinch, op. cit., pp. 247-254.

body symmetrical and virtually immovable. *Yogic* postures helped them control their breathing processes and stimulated their *Kundalini Sakti* or spiritual force lying at the base of the spine. Thus, retention of sexual energy was not a means of maintaining celibacy but a part of the spiritual experience and service that they could provide to the people. Spirituality of the ascetic had a physical presence. The elements of nakedness (naga, *nanga)*, matted hair (*jata)*, and ashes (*khak; bibhuti*) signified the ritual and magical status of ascetics, separating them and the mysticism they held from the rest. With a complete disregard for personal appearance the ascetics wore matted hairs, went about naked and smeared their body with ashes. In complete disregard of the social norm of decency the ascetics went about in social gatherings, yet earned not displeasure but respect for this very element.

Bhandaras served as the primary spiritual market for the ascetics. It formed a part of various religious congregations. For instance, Kumbh *Mela* functioned as one such religious congregation or spiritual market where the ascetics gathered to propagandize their efficacy of their spiritual skills and the benefits of the service. During *Guru Purnima* Dasnami *mahanth* seated himself on a silver throne or a *singhasana* and this served as a ritualistic gathering of lay devotees and ascetic disciples of the *mahanth* to pay their habitual obeisance to the spiritual leader. Mostly paid in cash the habitual obeisance comprised of surrendering their yearlong alms collection to the *mahanth*. '*Guru Purnima* serves to strengthen the bonds between members of sectarian sub-divisions by recognizing common linkages'.[47] Gross is of the opinion; the performance enacted at *bhandaras* was a means of strengthening the bonds between lay men and the ascetics.[48] Financed by wealthy men *such* religious congregations played the part of a spiritual market well where laymen/buyers gathered to look upon the skills and services available, and ascribe accordingly. Here, the exchange of spiritual product occurred not through change of hand of money, but through donations and patronage.

Obscure mysticism of the ascetics was propagandized by the mystics at religious congregations like fairs, as well. These emerged as spaces where the wandering ascetics demonstrated with pomp and show their spiritual vigour. The extreme penance demonstrated by *Urdhabahus* found near Parasuram Kund, which was a Shaivite pilgrimage centre in Assam, can be a point of reference. They would keep their right hand extended upwards using their left hand for daily activities. This was a way of transcending the social norms and entering a ground of union with the

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[47] Gross, op. cit., p. 318.
[48] Ibid., p. 316.

Supreme. Such extreme penance exhibited as a part and parcel of their *tapasya* or *sadhana* could not be achieved through physical penance alone. It always was combined with consumption of psychedelics like *ganja* and *charas* that helped them to rise above the normative structure of the society. In an elevated state of mind the body of the ascetic went beyond the pains and pangs of the worldly life and physical plane. It entered a stage where they did not feel any physical pain, not because of their spiritual abilities, but due to the effect of the intoxicating psychedelics they consumed. Nonetheless, the spiritual influence of the show they put up due to it certainly made them revered and extremely sought by the laity. Few mendicants were found who even 'to assist this process, heavy rocks are tied to the end of the penis…In these ritual competitions, boulders weighing as much as fifty pounds or greater were tied to the penis and lifted off the ground in an attempt to demonstrate who among them possessed the highest degree of self-control and non-attachment to sexual arousal'.[49] The obscurity of these Hindu mystic cults largely depended on their spectacularity. It was something that set them apart from the social norms, and distinguished them as deviants, but the spiritual spectacularity of the performance earned them the reverence and awe of the people. Perhaps, it will not be too out of place to refer to them as the Marvel comics' superheroes of the early age who demonstrated powers and feats unthinkable for a normal human being. But to people it was not abnormal in a pejorative sense; it was revered by them as a supernatural feat that only men close to the Supreme Being could perform. The performance had panache for theatricality, something that was common to the spectacles demonstrated by most of the obscure mystical cults, but the pattern that established a connection between them was covert, not visible to undiscerning eyes, allowing each of the obscure cults to be identified as singularly different from each other. Spectacularity of the acts ensured increased adherence to the sub-order ensuring enhanced patronage and alms collection.

Sexual promiscuity formed an integral part of the spiritual performance that the ascetics presented before the disciples. An instance of ascetics taking advantage of women declared socially barren was quite common to the pilgrimage and fairs where spiritual congregation offered a platform to the ascetics to display their superhuman qualities. In fact, indulging in socially prohibited form of sexual intercourse with either sex formed a part of their spiritual exhibitionism. Hidden in the pages of *akhra* records lay detailed account of the many dalliances of the *gossains* and the *nagas.* Deviancy of such sexual acts served as just another ladder for the ascetics to climb beyond the normative framework of the society. However, to my understanding, all

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[49]   Ibid., p. 346.

sexual deviancies like drinking menstrual urine, inhumanly postures of sexual intercourse formed a part of their spiritual ritual. These were not practiced by the ascetics to garner carnal pleasure alone. It featured as a part and parcel of their ritualistic performance and indulgence in such acts was a ritualistic means to stepping from one ritual self to another, as in any communitarian tribal society. Intoxication and influence of psychedelics had a catalytic effect on their ritualistic performance. Interactions with the ascetics and personal interviews with them have convinced me that without the insinuating impact of such sense-enhancing *ganja* and *charas* they could not have engaged in acts of unrestrained sexuality. Whether it helped them attain superior spiritual plane or not that is debatable and not wholly ascertainable through narration of these isolated incidents. But it certainly does attest ascetics were banded together in a ritualistic hierarchy where before attaining transcendence one had to attain superior spirituality in the ascetic hierarchy to allow them to maintain their membership of the community.

Royal patronage for the ascetic orders further attests the sway their mysticism held over the ruling authorities of the sub-continent. It is noteworthy that the ascetics served as moneylenders and revenue-farmers in a socio-economic system largely monopolised by the aristocrats and nobility marked with distinction by the royalty.[50] These were men of the spiritual realm who were responsible for communion with the Supreme. Yet, as the sources suggest, they were engaged in worldly affairs such as these. A Marathi source refers to the grant of rent-free tenure in Khandesh by Alamgir II to Turant Giri.[51] Emergence of the tradition of granting *lakhiraj* or rent-free tenure to ascetics was begun to acknowledge the spiritual services of the ascetics.[52] Fifty-five *bighas* of land in the village of Cundrah in the *pargana* Afferowmah in Allahabad were given to the Sannyasis.[53] In 1711, Hirdya Sal and Jugut Raj, sons of the Prince Chattrasal of Bundelkhand, granted rent-free tenures to Mohun Giri for the services rendered by the Sannyasis.[54] Though the records do not specify what kind of services were provided by the ascetics, attestation from other sources raises the speculation that perhaps the ascetics granted both spiritual and military services to the royalties, in return for which they received rent-free tenures.

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[50] Muzaffar Alam, "Some Aspects of the Changes in the Position of the Madad-i-Maash Holders in Oudh, 1676-1722", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 35, 1974, pp. 121-132.

[51] Hari Gir & Prithwi Gir, *Gosavi Vatyacha Sampradaya*, (*History of the Gossains and their Communities*), (Baroda 1901), p. 261.

[52] S.N. Sinha, op. cit., p.11.

[53] Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares 30 July 1789, Allahabad Regional Archives, Allahabad, pp. 469-72.

[54] T.A.V. Row & T.S.K. Row (eds.), *The Indian Decisions (Old Series),* Vol. 6, (Madras 1925), p. 735.

The rise of Dasanamis as obscure mystic cults needs to be contextualized alongside the rise of Indian regional powers. This will allow us to understand the distinctive pattern of fragmentary power structure held together by a semblance of regalia. Whether they were 'nuclear zones of power' or centralization of peripheral spectres or simply a Leviathan State stood upon something more than armours, swords, soldiers and horses. Giorgio Agamben rightly places this foundation on 'glory'. Beginning with the foundation of the Islamic empire of the Sultanate in the northern part of the subcontinent the foundation of the Mughal Empire was propped precariously on a balance between the Islamic identity and the identity of the subject population. Several barriers set them apart, be it language or culture. Nonetheless, the reign of the rulers of the medieval era stands out as a glorious mystique. What lends them this 'glorious mystique'? The glory of the empire largely depended on the mystical glory shared with them by religious men because it was, no doubt, the age of the Gods. The passage of the glory assumed different forms in various parts of the world but none as syncretistic as in the subcontinent. In this chapter, the trajectory of the nexus between the obscure mystic cults and the State powers will be discussed to unravel the mystery of the glory that the State assumed in the medieval era. There was no uniform kind of interaction between the secular authorities and the religious *Gurus*. Some cases of conflict would occur between the nagas, gosains, sangyogis with the state, whereas, there was no such conflict of the Islamic dervishes like Madaris, Malangs, Qalandars either with the state authority or the regional zamindars. But after the coming of English, situation began to change and bloody conflicts arose between the secular authority of English East India Company and the local zamindars who were acting as lackeys of the English East India Company

How and why was the spiritual influence of these ascetics, who mostly shunned social interactions, and lived a life recluse, leave a lasting impact on the minds of the people? In order to address this question one can draw a leaf out of the description of the Hindu wandering ascetics left behind by Kabir. He was vehement in his opposition of the ascetics as false sadhus or hermits because they indulged in worldly affairs. In context of the reallocation of resources to the regional authorities of the eighteenth century two things had definitely waned from the political scenario of the subcontinent- centralized authority and standing army. What remained were vestiges of self-trained, militant peasantry who had been identified as recalcitrant tenants since the agrarian disturbances of the late Mughal period.[55] These men offered their

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[55]   J.F. Richards, "Warriors and the State in Early Modern India", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient,* Vol. 47, 2004, pp. 390-400.

services for the infantry and as musketeers, because they lacked proper training in the use of the new gunpowder technology and did not have a horse of their own. Kolff,[56] Gommans[57] have applied the labour market theory to the late Mughal period to show how the vagrant peasantry did not wile away as victims of an oppressive system, but took up arms to earn their livelihood. But what seems wholly absent in their discussion finds a glean in the academic attempts of Pinch. He has tried to identify the Hindu ascetics as a major source of military labour in the labour market through an analysis of the lives of Anup Giri and Rajendra Giri. But even Pinch has missed out one fine point about the involvement of these ascetics, recluse and spiritual men, into worldly affairs. Perhaps, a detailed analysis of the patronage received by these men and the reasons involved in making these endowments can illuminate the hitherto unexplored zones of ascetic military labour in context of the eighteenth century military labour market.

Granting of *madad-i-mash was* a common practice not only among the Nawabs of Bengal Presidency but also among the Nawabs of Awadh that included other chieftains or local gentry. Muzaffar Alam has shown how the grantee enjoyed hereditary rights over it and lieu of which they provided mercenary services as and when required[58]. Resultantly most of the *madad-i-mash* holders began to conduct themselves like semi-independent chieftains. William Sleeman refers to them as an 'unquiet spirit' for which they were not only displaced or downgraded but removed from their position as and when the East India Company implemented revenue maximization policies. Though the Dasanami Nagas, *Yogis* or Sang-Yogis served as mercenaries to the regional powers they were often removed from their services as they lacked military skill.

It appears that Akbar, the Mughal emperor not only patronized the Dasanamis and other Hindu cults, like the Vaisnava Gosains of Braja Dham as it appears from the work of Habib and Mukherjee that Akbar issued so many *sanads* for temple management of the Vaisnava gosains that 'providing bases for delineating salient features of the Brajabhumi grants during the reigns of Jahāngīr (1605–27) and Shāhjahān (1628–58). Like the *farmāns* of Akbar, these too specified an ever-expanding list of officials who were expected to get the terms of grants implemented without any hindrance. According to Habib and Mukherjee ' Further, the grants of the two phases also contained lists of exemptions/privileges granted to the donees. High

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[56] Kolff, 1990, pp. 78-79.
[57] J.J.L. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, (London 2002), pp. 25-27.
[58] Muzaffar Alam, op. cit., pp. 199-203.

officials of the state affixing their seals were another common feature. Sometimes, however, seals of more than one officer are seen on the reverse side of the Mughal *farmāns*. Akbar's *farmān* of 1598 bears seals of as many as eight officers, of which three impressions are illegible.[59] A significant seal is that of Akbar's minister Todar Mal, affixed to his *parwānha* of 1584. It bears the legend 'Todar Mal, *Banda-i Dargāh*, *Rāmkīpanāh*', affirming both his loyalty to Akbar, and his allegiance to Rāma. Similarly Goswamy & Grewal[60] has mentioned about the land grants in the form of *madad-i-maash* or the right to collect revenue from certain lands in jakhbar (a town in the Gurudaspur district of the state of Punjab).

Sanctions of rent-free tenures were not mere outcome of the spiritual sway of the ascetics. Rather, the prowess they demonstrated in battle fields with their bands of followers and mystical appearance made their soldierly product quite revered and most sought after in the military labour market.[61] Services provided by the warrior ascetics did not emanate from any particular attachment or loyalty towards the royalty or their nobility. These men were bands of fighters who auctioned their services to the highest bidder.[62] Being disbanded, they immediately joined the service of Mirza Najaf Khan, the Regent of Delhi, who allowed them the right to live by plunder[63] as soldiers against the British, Mughal and Rajput in the battles of Lalsot, Patan and Merta.[64] But when the strategic relationship between the Marathas and the British took a turn towards worse Anup Giri did a *volte face* and switched camps.[65]

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59 Shireen Moosvi, "Charity Objectives and Mechanisms in Mughal India (16th and 17th Centuries)", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 73, 2012, p. 336; Bashiruddin Ahmed Dihlavi (ed.), *Faramin-e-Salatin,* (Delhi 1926), p 45. The Hindu ascetics of Benaras received a grant by Akbar in 1585 (Mohammed Azhar Ansari, *Administrative Documents of Mughal India*, (New Delhi 1984), Doc. Nos. 5&6, pp. 58-59). It was further extended by Jahangir (ibid, Doc. 15, p. 65) and renewed by Shāhjahān and Aurangzeb (ibid, Doc. Nos. 8 & 16; Habib and Mukherjee, *BrajBhūm in Mughal Times,* p. 85.

60 B.N. Goswami & J. S. Grewal, *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar: Some Madad-i- Maash and Other Documents*, (Shimla, 1967), pp. 87-88.

61 Ghulam Ali Naqvi, *Imad- Us- Sadat*, (Lucknow), p. 102; Select Committee Proceedings (Select) (National Archives of India, New Delhi) October 1768; Secret Committee Proceedings (National Archives of India, New Delhi) 6 July 1776 No. 4; J. N. Sarkar, *Readings in History of Hindusthan*, *1782-1789* ,(Sitamau ,   1941),p.132; William Franklin, *Military Memoirs of George Thomas*, Franklin,(London 1805), Appendix iii, p. 270.

62 A.L. Srivastava, *Shuja-ud-Daullah (1754-1765),* Vol. I. (Calcutta 1939), p. 48; Secret Committee Proceedings 24 April 1775, No. 9.

63 Jadunath Sarkar, 'French Mercenaries in the Jat Campaign of 1775—1776', *Bengal Past and Present*, (January—June), 1936, pp. 75-83; Kalikaranjan Kanungo, *History of the Jats: A Contribution to the History of Northern India*, Vol. I, (Calcutta 1925), pp. 189-190.

64 Orr, op. cit, pp. 88-89.

65 AnupGiri allied with Ali Bahadur in the conquest of Bundelkhand. But the Maratha Government's plan to turn Bundelkhand into a base of operation threatening to violate the

Though Pinch analyses Anup Giri's alliance as a defensive strategy, in essence it was an arrangement of convenience for all the involved parties. It would not be wrong to hypothesize it as a stop-gap arrangement quite representative of the time and environment in which it unfolded.

The services they provided earned them glorious titles that carry within itself the seeds of its supposed endowment. Rajendra Giri, a Dasnami warrior ascetic, has also been referred to as Himmat Bahadur, the second being an honorary title granted to him for his military services. The title 'Himmat', meaning bravado, was certainly an endowment in recognition of similar acts. One can deduce, from the practice of granting such titles by the Late Mughal aristocracy and nobility, the military services of these ascetics was infallible to the military labour marketof eighteenth century. In fact, in certain circumstances, their services were considered more valuable than those of armed peasants. While identifying the importance of warrior ascetics in military labour market Pinch and Kolff failed to identify this one point of immense importance. What set them apart, and esteemed more valuable than armed peasants, was a skill-set that the peasantry lacked and could not attain i.e. spiritual mysticism. The very performance of mysticism smeared in ashes, draped in a loincloth, matted and unkempt hair, and most importantly flouting every norms of social decency, the ascetics offered quite a spectacle, that was endearing, yet unnerving. This was a novelty available in the military labour market of the eighteenth century. Novelty not because of the spectacle alone; but the reverence it commanded. So singularly revered was their appearance that words spoken by them carried an added value of respect.

Armed Spirituality: Concluding Remarks

An alternate state of consciousness was laid by the meandering course of the Hindu mystical cults in the subcontinent. This also laid the foundation of an alternate plane of power. Functioning under the authority of the Islamic empires and the rising rule of law of the English East India enterprises, the wandering ascetics laid the foundation of an alternate space that was neither entirely temporal, nor completely secular; it dabbled in both. Combining the ritualistic performance of physical prowess with a clear demonstration of transcendence over and above sexual desires, as enacted in seasonal fairs, became the key identification marker of these cults. Such spectacular performance of prowess turned them into an object of reverence as well

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Treaty of Bassein (1802) led the British to dispatch a force there. In these circumstances an apprehensive AnupGiri left the Maratha camp and joined the British to assist them in the conquest of Bundelkhand. F.S. Growse, *Mathura, A District Memoir*, (Ahmedabad 1978), p. 308; W.W. Pogson, *History of the Boondelas* (Delhi, 1974), pp. 120-126.

as fear. Naturally, Eighteenth century that stood in a hazy limbo opened its doors of innumerable possibilities to such ascetic liminality. Perhaps, for that very reason many unlikely instances and situations stood facing each other. Militarisation of spiritual men as mercenaries can be analysed as the by-product of the age in which it dwelled. Raising from the ashes or *bibhuti* the ascetics occupied a central portion of the stage where the story of pre-modern India was unfolding just as the bomb of final collapse of the Empire was ticking fast. At this juncture when the old world was waning, while the new was trying hard to make inroads, the ascetics as a product of the age old became the ushered of a new age. Breaking free from the centralized standing army system of the age old the ascetics' participation in the military labour market did not just provide the Indian regional powers, but the European powers as well, with a source of military labour. The military labour provided by the ascetics was of special value because it had closely associated with it the essence of spirituality. The magical element that the appearance, attire, and the gestural activities of the ascetics accorded to the service added a reverence for their military actions, overall. Moreover, the extensive congregational association of the ascetics through trade or pilgrimage or even *akhra* network rendered them omnipotent and omniscient. Within the parameters of different regional states they had begun to function like supra-territories or, it will not be an overstatement to judge it as, a supra-state. The power and sway they held was not restricted to political or military arena alone. In terms of commercial exchange as well, as pointed out by Kolff[66] and others their network had spread widely over trading precious articles and moneylending. One reason, at the dawn of the modern age the Europeans thought it prudent to demilitarize the ascetics and to establish a unified rule of law over the entire land. They gave rise to a rather compelling image of an alternate order of things that chose the spiritual path not merely for a mystical union but also perhaps for transcending the established order of things. True, they seldom challenged the established order, but they did not let go of their unique order of things either. Perhaps for this very reason, people and the ruling authority deemed them formidable. Thus, they emerged as an enigma. People and the order, but none could deny their existence altogether which granted the alternate state of consciousness an alternate plane of existence order.

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[66]   Kolff, 1990, pp. 86-90; J.J.L. Gommans, op. cit. p. 22; Agamben, op. cit., pp. 27-29.