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Swinging before Śiva

Renunciation, Colonialism and a Bengali Ritual

Abstract

This paper studies the ritual of *Gājan* or “hook-swinging”, a common practice in colonial Bengal. The ritual was a show of magical power gained by undertaking asceticism and worshipping the god Śiva; devotees showed the ability to swing unsupported from high poles. The British were disturbed by the ritual in the nineteenth century, and banned it in the 1860s. In this paper, I first study how a discourse on hook-swinging being a deviant low-caste practice was actively constructed by both British and the Indian urban middle class in the 1830s. Such discourses represented hook-swinging as a transgression of Hinduism. I finally show that a much more nuanced way to look at the ritual is to see it as what I call “temporary renunciation”. Small localised rituals like hook-swinging drew on and, in turn, influenced larger religious ideologies like renunciation and asceticism, and the householder-renouncer dichotomy. Recognizing that our understanding of many rituals has largely been through the colonial lens will help us develop more sophisticated understandings of the relationship of ritual, religious ideologies and colonialism.

Note on Transliteration and Citation

The paper uses MLA parenthetical citation in general (as was asked in the class); however, sometimes footnotes were necessary. The International System of Sanskrit Transliteration has been followed; proper nouns do not have diacritical marks. The paper was first submitted on 17 December 2013, but has undergone many revisions since then.

Swinging before Śiva

Renunciation, Colonialism and a Bengali Ritual¹

The people of Gangutia in Bengal have or used to have a barbarous practice called hook swinging. They undergo the most horrible torture. A wire about a quarter of an inch in diameter and seven feet long is pierced through the tongue, and then the wretched being will dance for over half an hour.

“Hook Swinging in Bengal”, *Amador Ledger*, 12 June 1908

In spite of being a farmer, why do you stay in the town, O Śiva?

Your actions belong to this world, this area, O Śiva!

Folk Song from North Bengal (c. 19th century, my translation)

The practice of hook-swinging, linked to a ritual called Gājan in Bengal was a source of interest and horror to British authorities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries². Gājan is the springtime worship of the Hindu god Śiva in Bengal that takes place for about a month. During this period, a group of people choose to take a number of vows and become renouncers (*sannyāsīs*) temporarily. On the final day of Gājan, the ascetics perform a number of extraordinary activities, including swinging from hooks and walking on fire. It is believed

¹ The theoretical part of this paper was presented as a Plenary Address in the National Collegiate Research Conference, Harvard University in January 2014; The historiographical section is due to be presented in the New England Historical Association Conference in Springfield College in April. Parts of the paper have been submitted to the journal *History Matters* (Spring 2014 edition). I am indebted to Professor Brian Hatcher for his continuous guidance and mentorship. Prof. Ayesha Jalal (History), Prof. Kris Manjappa (History), Prof. Thomas Abowd (Arabic/Anthropology), Prof. Sarah Pinto (Anthropology) and Prof. David Guss (Anthropology), Dr. Frank Korom (Boston University), Dr. Tony Stewart (Vanderbilt University), Dr. Iftexhar Iqbal and Dr. Perween Hasan (Dhaka University, Bangladesh), Tapati Guha-Thakurata, Abhijit Banerjee and Kamalika Mukherjee (Kolkata), Sukanya Sarbadhikary (Cambridge), Upal Chakrabarti (London) and Milinda Banerjee (Heidelberg) gave important suggestions and information. Finally, reference librarians Chris Strauber and Connie Reik (Tisch Library, Tufts) and James Nye (University of Chicago) deserve special thanks for their relentless help.

² ‘Gājan’ and ‘hook-swinging’ will be used interchangeably in this paper, since they are two names of the same ritual. ‘Charak’ is a synonym too.

that the *sannyāsīs* acquire such magical powers by virtue of the ascetic practices of the previous days. For the British, the ritual was a stagnant, timeless element of a “barbarous” society that needed reform. As we will see, this was far from the case: hook-swinging was a part of larger ideas of renunciation and inversion of hierarchies that is not reflected in the colonial discourse.

The newspaper report and the folk song represent two oppositional viewpoints on the ritual. I found the curious newspaper report in the archives of a local newspaper of a small Californian county; the date of publication is almost four decades after hook-swinging was prohibited by the British. Amador County in 1908 probably had no administrative connection with India and Gangutia was a small village in south Bengal, far from the British capital in Calcutta. What is remarkable is that in spite of the difference in space and time, the newspaper found the practice revolting and intriguing enough to be published for the local population³. Since the earliest arrivals of Europeans in India, the image of naked men hanging from poles had become a recognized icon of the Orient in Europe.⁴ Responses to hook-swinging in the nineteenth-century, although dependent on the time period and social position of the person, largely reflected the panic inspired by the ‘savage’. On the other hand, the folk song from North Bengal, one sung during the same ritual, suggests a fond call to the deity to come and be one with the ritual participants. Such a call is different from invoking the deity to answer prayers and grant wishes. Hook-swinging and Gājan are rituals that,

³ Other articles show citations from other presses like The New York Sun and Philadelphia Press. The hook-swinging article has no citation or authorship, more of a general knowledge stub.

⁴ Paintings by British as well as other European s are replete with representations of hook-swinging. A few paintings describing the practice in Bengal are: 'View on the banks of the Ganges with representation of the Churruck Poojah, a Hindoo holiday'. (Figure 1) A view from 'Voyage aux Indes orientales et a la Chine, fait depuis 1774 jusqu'a 1781' by Pierre Sonnerat, Paris, 1782 (Columbia University Image Database on Hook-swinging); Fanny Parkes' depiction of hook-swinging in 'Wanderings of a Pilgrim in search of the picturesque...', London, 1850 (British Library).

contrary to European constructions, facets of society that are crucially important to maintain equality and balance in society through rituals and religious ideologies.

Hook-Swinging was anything but a “barbarous” tradition in Bengal. The practice was linked to the idea of renunciation and challenged hierarchies of caste and class. “The most striking concomitant [to the caste system]”, wrote Louis Dumont in his magnum opus *Homo Hierarchicus*, “is that there exists in the society of castes itself, and alongside the caste system, an institution which contradicts it” (184). *Samnyāsa*, or “Renunciation” was a “striking” institution for Dumont. It was an escape from caste, the vast structure of interdependence that defined Hindu society. Renunciation and the role of the body in renunciation remained a puzzle for European scholars for decades: generations of scholars have revisited, questioned and refined Dumont’s thesis by investigating renunciation in various contexts of Hinduism. One idea that remains dominant even today is that renunciation and non-renunciation are two *permanent* categories; a householder cannot be a renouncer unless he *permanently* abandons his material possessions to join a group of renouncers.

Can society and renunciation exist as fluid, interacting processes instead of being contradictory institutions? How does such fluidity interact with aspects of colonial modernity like “public space” and “public order”? Scholarship on renunciation, as we shall see, has focussed on the diversity in ideologies and practices of renouncers. Yet the classical figure of the *saṃnyāsīn*, the holy man who has left the material world for the spiritual world, defines our vision of *saṃnyāsa*. In Gājan, participants undertake *saṃnyāsa* temporarily. I describe Gājan and the festival of hook-swinging as “temporary renunciation”, an instance of householders leaving material possessions and undertaking austerities for a finite period. For me, Gājan is a lens to see renunciation as a process rather than a static institution. Hook-swinging was such an ideology of renunciation which the British represented in a negative fashion. In this paper, we will see Gājan as “temporary renunciation”; we will also note how

such a ritual contradicted with colonial notions of modernity, finally leading to the ban of the festival in the 1860s.

In this paper, I present two arguments. First, I propose that Gājan or hook-swinging, like many other folk rituals in colonial India, was fashioned as a transgression from Hinduism by both British colonial officials and members of the Bengali middle class. Such a construction was active, and necessary to define an “other”: as we will see, middle-class Bengali selfhood was defined in opposition to low-caste practices like hook-swinging. We will read letters and speeches by missionaries and curators which repeatedly emphasize that the elite are not concerned with the ritual in any way. Yet, literature and artworks of the period show that the elites patronized and profited from the ritual. Colonial discourse around hook-swinging was aimed at excluding such rituals from the new ethico-political terrain of the bourgeois middle class emerging in the nineteenth century in a colonial society like Calcutta.

The second argument aims at seeing Gājan as intrinsically related to religious ideologies of Hinduism, in an attempt to go beyond colonial discourses on the matter. To understand this argument, one needs to study terms and theories related to renunciation (for this reason I devote the first two sections reviewing translations and theories of renunciation). Theories of renunciation have continued to see the *saṃnyāsin* as a person who splits away from the householder’s world permanently. As many scholars conducted their research in the holy cities of north India, regions that have different ideas on renunciation (like Bengal) have not been explored as meticulously. Rituals like Gājan need to be seen in context of regional patterns of religious practices. I use the phrase “temporary renunciation” to understand Gājan as a ritual with elements of *saṃnyāsa*. Drawing upon Turner’s theory of liminality and Tweed’s theory of crossing and dwelling, I argue that “temporary renunciation” during Gājan allows disadvantaged classes to invert structures of power and to cross social and spiritual

boundaries. The two arguments together show the pivotal importance of rituals in society: unlike the colonial understanding of them as meaningless digressions, it is worth noting the shared meanings and subjectivities rituals help create and negotiate.

I will first review the major terminologies and theories of renunciation. The first two sections will be reviews of available scholarship on renunciation. We will then note the various ways in which the British and the Indian middle class created a discourse around hook-swinging as “a barbarous practice” in the nineteenth century. This section is a historical exercise will include analysis of colonial documents. Finally, I will analyse Gājan as an example of “temporary renunciation” in light of Victor Turner’s theory of liminality and *communitas* and Thomas Tweed’s theory of crossing and dwelling. The final section is an exercise in anthropological theory, and will argue that rituals are best understood as *processes* rather than following colonial reifications of terms like “Hinduism” and “Religion”.

Translation and its Discontents: Terms Related to *Samnyāsa*

This section is a slight digression from the main thesis, but it is essential for us to understand the nuances involved in translating religious terminology. Sanskrit words about renunciation have been translated and interpreted by scholars in various ways. In the Encyclopedia of Religion (2005), Patrick Olivelle translates *saṃnyāsa*⁵ as “renunciation of the world” (Web). Referring to the Hindu “textual traditions” he describes the ideal lifestyle of a *saṃnyāsin* (one who undertakes *saṃnyāsa*)⁶:

⁵ Some scholars like Meena Khandelwal use the Hindi version of the word: *sannyāsa* yet translate it as “renunciation” (80).

⁶ The “textual traditions” that describe *saṃnyāsa* refer to a huge body of Sanskrit texts, including the Upanishads, writings of Manu and other śāstras. Since the goal of this paper is not exegesis of texts on renunciation, I have used Olivelle’s Encyclopedia entry as a reference point for understanding “classical” renunciation in this paper. Olivelle is an authority on the subject, and for a more detailed understanding of the textual basis of *saṃnyāsa* see his book *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*

The main features of the renunciant life are substantially the same in all sects at least within the ideal rules presented in the textual traditions... They are required to wander constantly... They practice celibacy and poverty, obtaining their food and the other few necessities of life by begging. Several terms for a renouncer, such as *parivrājaka* ("wanderer") and *bhikṣu* ("mendicant"), reflect these aspects of his life. (Web)

The terms used to describe a *saṃnyāsin* reflect his lifestyle: he wanders constantly and is therefore called *parivrājaka*; he begs for alms, and is hence known as *bhikṣu*. The term *saṃnyāsa* is frequently translated as “renunciation” rather than “asceticism” (Dumont 269, Burghart 636). The term “renunciation” implies, as Olivelle suggests, something more than asceticism: it refers to the giving up of social customs and institutions. *Samnyāsa* is not merely asceticism, but a distinct way of life recognized by the *śāstras* (sacred texts of Hinduism)⁷.

There are, however, many other terms for the *saṃnyāsin* which have different connotations. Sondra Hausner, for example, uses the word *sādhu*, and translates it as “renouncer” (2). Matthew Clark notes that “*sādhu* (feminine, *sādhvī*) ... has the general sense of “a good or virtuous person” ... More specifically ... someone who, under a guru, has undergone a ritual of renunciation known as *saṃnyāsa* and formally abandoned family life and conventional worldly means” (Web). The term *sādhu* differs slightly in meaning from *saṃnyāsin*, and we may note the lack of textual reference in Clark’s definition⁸. Terms of

⁷ Interestingly, there is no article titled “Renunciation” in the 2005 Encyclopedia of Religion, and *saṃnyāsa* is the only one on the topic. The article on “Asceticism”, however, is a long one covering all religions and mentions *saṃnyāsa* only once in the “See also” section. Clearly, renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) in the scholarly discourse is a more “Indian” concept than asceticism.

⁸ Clark writes about the rise of modern Hindu politics and *akhādās* (organizations of sadhus) in modern India and terms them as *sādhu* rather than *saṃnyāsin* (Web).

respectful address to renouncers include *bābā* (father) or *mātājī* (mother) (Clark, Web)⁹. The vast number of terms used in context of *saṃnyāsa* shows the diversity of the practices involved in renunciation.

“Asceticism” is another term that may refer to a number of concepts like *tyāga*, *tapasyā* or *vairāgya*. The concept of *tyāga* means “abandonment” of material goods and desires (Heesterman, Web). The term *tapas* comes from the Sanskrit root *tap* (“heat”), and means “severely disciplined self-mortification that produces both personal and cosmic results” (Knipe, Web). The word *tapasyā*, derived from *tapas*, refers to the practice of austerities. *Tapasyā* has a distinct connotation of discipline and self-mortification, unlike words like *saṃnyāsa* or *tyāga*. The goal of asceticism is often described as a search for *vairāgya* or the “emotional disengagement from the world” (Gupta, Web). The different terms on asceticism and renunciation have informed scholarly discourses on Gājan.

Scholars have termed Gājan participants as “ascetics”, rather than “renouncers”. The term in Bengali is *Gājan saṃnyāsī*. Ralph Nicholas uses the term ‘ascetics’ to describe the initiates into the ritual throughout his description of the festival (Nicholas 53-94). Perhaps the bodily mortification involved in the ritual prompts him to term them as “ascetics”. Nicholas recognizes the difference between classical renunciation and Gājan in the first chapter:

The idea in the Gājan of renunciation as a temporary time out of worldly life, rather than the terminal phase of one’s life, is exceptional; it is followed not by *mokṣa* but by return to *saṃsāra*. (4-5)

For Nicholas, the temporary nature of the renunciation makes Gājan an “exceptional” festival, different from all other Bengali rituals. He also notes that the initiation rites include

⁹ *Fakir* is another common term used to define a Muslim “ascetic” (Openshaw 24-5); some scholars have noted had a connotation of madness in the colonial age (Green 1-3). *Sampradāya* meaning ‘group’ has been translated as ‘sect’ (Openshaw) or as “movement” (“Swaminarayan movement”).

practices like shaving one's head (5)¹⁰. Nicholas returns to the theme of temporary renunciation in the concluding chapter, pointing out the difference again: "*Sannyāsa*... is generally considered an irrevocable commitment. So final is this renunciation that the *sannyāsī* assumes his new status with the performance of his own death rites. For the *Gājan sannyāsīs*, however, it is a temporary condition" (132). Recognizing Nicholas' point on *Gājan* being an exceptional ritual, I ask a different question: how can we understand the larger concept of "renunciation" by looking at the particular example of *Gājan* as "temporary renunciation"? How does such a conception of the world enable us to critique the colonial discourse around hook-swinging?

Theorizing Renunciation: Scholarly Discourses since Dumont

Scholarship on renunciation since the 1960s has seen "renunciation" as a category in opposition to being a householder. In his essay "World Renunciation in Indian Religions", Louis Dumont saw Hinduism as a religion of "caste and renunciation", the two categories being structurally opposed to one another (286)¹¹. Being a scholar of caste, Dumont considers caste to be the "fundamental institution", which is "essentially religious" (270). Dumont's structuralist perspective looks at renunciation as a challenge to the caste structure. He further envisions the renouncer as an individual beyond the restraint of social relationships. The "man-in-the-world" lives in the world of caste, while the renouncer lives outside it. For Dumont, renunciation means a triumph of the individualism. He notes, "He [the renouncer] thinks as an individual, and this is the distinctive trait which opposes him to the man-in-the-

¹⁰ Bodily practices like shaving heads, cutting nails and taking ritual baths are followed after most Hindu rites of passage, like the death of a close relative.

¹¹ The essay was first published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology IV*, 1960. It was included as "Appendix B" in the second edition of *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980). The page numbers here are from *Homo Hierarchicus*.

world and brings him closer to the western thinker” (275)¹². Moreover, the renouncer is an agent of change in Hinduism; sects created by individual renouncers outside structures of caste have historically given rise to various movements in Hinduism. Renunciation, for Dumont, opposes caste and leaves room for individualism.

Dumont’s essay gives rise to two questions: first, is the renouncer really an individual without social obligations? Secondly, can renunciation and non-renunciation exist dialectically, as opposed to the binary proposed by Dumont? How have such rituals been shaped by forces of modernity like colonial knowledge production? The first question has been widely critiqued by scholars, some of which responses I will now summarize. The scholarly discussion on the renouncer’s individuality sets the stage for asking the second question. Using Gājan as a lens, I will then attempt to answer the second question.

Since the publication of Dumont’s essay, a number of scholars have written about the social position of the renouncer. Richard Burghart questioned the dichotomy by arguing that “renunciation” as a category has been constructed from the point of view of the householder. Dumont did not note that the renouncer’s world and the householder’s world are two different “universes” of existence. Richard Burghart puts forth the argument on separate universes while critiquing Dumont:

[Renouncers and Householders] situate themselves in different conceptual universes- the Brahman householder in an organic universe and the ascetic in a temporal one.

Each person sees the other through the terms of reference of his own world (636).

For Burghart, the idea of renunciation being constructed and viewed by the householder becomes a point of departure from Dumont. Burghart’s argument introduces the question of subjectivity. The householder and renouncer exist in two different universes: the householder

¹² Dumont was a scholar of the enlightenment too, and wrote a book called *From Mandeville to Marx*. Perhaps his scholarship on enlightenment selfhood influences his vision of the renouncer as an individual who is not bonded to social ties.

in an organic universe and the renouncer in a temporal universe. It is therefore impossible to formulate one unifying framework to compare both together. Burghart later recognizes that most scholarly works on renunciation have been based on the “Brahman householder’s point of view”, a factor that Dumont does not take into account (636). From the renouncer’s perspective, he shows, renunciation does not necessarily mean giving up caste or home. Burghart also shows that renouncers live in structured societies and are not simply “individuals”; he notes how caste is a matter of bodies and minds instead of social organization for the *Rāmānandīs* (644). Although he goes beyond Dumont’s thesis, Burghart still sees renunciation and Brahmanical Hinduism as two different universes. Renunciation, as I will explore in the case of Gājan, becomes a part of a ritual process which is intrinsically tied with the caste system and life of householders.

Studying the role of gender in lives of renouncers, Meena Khandelwal stated that renunciation is “not only highly gendered, but is sometimes gendered feminine” (79). Renouncers were not merely Dumont’s “individuals”, but individuals with gender and caste. Khandelwal agrees with Burghart’s thesis on some sects upholding the ideology of caste, and proposes a similar model for gender (85). Her thesis also challenges the philosophical background of *saṃnyāsa* that comes from *Advaita Vedānta*, Shankaracharya’s theory of ungendered absolute monism¹³. *Advaita Vedānta* argues for “a transcendence of all differences” (81). Arguing against monism, she shows that differences do exist among male and female renouncers. Khandelwal, too, continues to view “renunciation” as a category

¹³ Shankaracharya’s monistic philosophy will be further challenged by Sondra Hausner while dealing with body-soul dichotomy among the wandering sadhus. She writes, “Contrary to the popular Western or Euro-American view that Indian approaches toward the body defy dualism, I argue that renouncers’ narratives about breaking away from the householder society are reflected in the metaphor of splitting the soul apart from the physical trap of the body.” (31) Responding to notions that Hinduism is monistic and non-Cartesian, Hausner draws upon *Sāṃkhya*, a dualistic Indian philosophy, and repeatedly emphasizes that bodily practices are of utmost importance for the renouncers, and bodies were not “ensnared by illusion”.

separate from the state of being a householder. Both Burghart and Khandelwal negotiate the degree of individuality and freedom of the renouncer, yet preserve the category of the “renouncer”. Keeping the caste and gender differences in mind, can we envision a more fluid and dynamic relationship between the state of being a householder and a renouncer?

For Sondra Hausner, the trope of movement becomes important for understanding renunciation. Movement was always considered by scholars to be an important characteristic of *saṃnyāsa*; we may recall that Olivelle, in his “classical” definition in the Encyclopaedia of Religion, describes in detail how *saṃnyāsins* are homeless mendicants (*parivrājaka*). Hausner’s book is entitled *Wandering with Sadhus*, and the theme of “wandering” persists throughout her work. Hausner agrees to Dumont’s idea of the renouncer moving out of society, but for her the movement matters more than the individuality of the renouncer. I will borrow her metaphor of movement and question whether the movement in question is unidirectional; is the idea of “splitting away” from society as absolute? Does society leave room for such movement within itself through processes like rituals?

Examining the scholarly discourse on renunciation, we see that the figure of the “classical” renouncer as someone different, an “other” to society, remains persistent in our minds. The series of responses to Dumont can be broadly classified into two categories: a) questioning the “individualism” of the renouncer by analysing various subjective attributes like caste and gender; and b) understanding how renunciators interact with caste and householder society. All critiques, however, presuppose that renunciators are in some ways different from householders. This is especially clear from the methodologies of Khandelwal and Hausner, who studied the sadhus in holy cities of South Asia like Haridwar, Kathmandu and Allahabad. Furthermore, renunciation is considered to be a permanent “splitting away” from caste society, never to return again. How does our understanding of renunciation change when we see a householder in a village becoming a renouncer temporarily? The rest of the

paper takes up Gājan as a case study in “temporary renunciation”, and attempts to provide some answers to the questions I have raised thus far. The next section will show how the discourse on Gājan was actively shaped by the British as well as the Indian middle class in the nineteenth century, arguing that a) Orientalist discourses were produced by both Indians and the British, as opposed to only the British and b) Gājan has changed over time, and therefore best understood as process rather than stasis.

Fascinating Disturbance: Discourses on Hook-Swinging in Colonial Bengal

In this section, we will closely read a selection of documents from nineteenth century India: an early account by William Carey (c. 1795), a letter by G.E. Morris (1858), a speech by Ram Comul Sen of Asiatic Society (1834) and sections from a popular Bengali novel (c.1862). These sources come from different contrasting viewpoints, and often contradict each other. I use them as *representatives* of genres; these are certainly not the only texts in this regard, and my bibliography has the full list of sources available in Bengali. What is important is to note that all these texts address themes of social position, ideology and participation in ritual, from which we can be sure that rituals from this point were being defined by what Gramsci would call an “ethico-political” ideological terrain.

The first set of responses comes from two missionaries: William Carey in Bengal and G. E. Morris in South India. The two viewpoints, although different, show how hook-swinging was perceived and William Carey, the Baptist missionary who eventually became famous for the Serampore mission and its printing press, lived in Madnabati in Dinajpur, North Bengal, during his first years in India (c.1793-95)¹⁴. Geoffrey Oddie, in his discussion

¹⁴ Carey came to India upon the invitation of Dr. John Thomas who was a surgeon and a missionary in North Bengal. John Thomas was probably an indigo plantation owner, and he invited Carey to take care of his indigo plantations. The ruins of a “neel-kuthi” (indigo-planter’s house) in Madnabati of modern Dinajpur-Malda border in West Bengal support the fact. See Chute, Arthur C. *John Thomas: The First Baptist Missionary to Bengal 1757-1801* Halifax, Nova Scotia: Baptist Book and Tract Society, 1893, for a biography of Thomas and his

of protestant ideas on Hinduism, brings into light words of Carey that describe hook-swinging in Madnabati and in the southern delta region of Bengal.¹⁵ Carey writes:

I saw last year [1795] a heavy man swing. I saw the hooks put in. He swang [sic] off gently at first; but afterwards was whirled around very fast...I have never heard of an instance in which any mischief followed (Oddie 143).

Carey is fascinated by the practice. His narrative, at least in the 1790s, is frank and not very normative. He confesses that he has not heard any case in which mischief has followed. His descriptions avoid derogatory terms like “barbarian” or “savage”. Compared to the report published by the Amador Ledger about 100 years after him, Carey’s writing looks rather accommodating. Missionary perspectives were not always, however, as sympathetic as that of Carey’s early writings; even Carey’s later writings had less compassionate perspectives on Hindu practices.

By 1858, missionary perspectives in South India had changed so drastically that Reverend G.E. Morris wrote to the local magistrate asking to abolish hook-swinging:

[Morris] asks permission of the government [to ban the practice] in this instance on the grounds: 1) that this particular festival forms no part of their religious system 2) that it involves unnecessary cruelty 3) that it militates against public order and decency 4) that it is an infringement of the common laws of humanity and 5) that in

interactions with Carey. Brian Stanley’s *History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993) p.1-20 also studies the same period.

¹⁵ It is important to note the geographical spread of the practice. Dinajpur as a region in Bengal had a very different cultural and historical background of both performative and theological traditions. The fact that Carey sees the practice in North Bengal is therefore significant. See Oddie, Geoffrey. *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism 1793-1900*. New Delhi: Sage, 2006.p. 139-42.

this case it disturbed the residents in the quiet and orderly observance of the Lord's Day.¹⁶

Morris' complaint needs to be understood in its historical context. In 1857, the Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army rebelled and for the first time the British Empire in India faced an existential threat. British attitudes towards Indians changed since 1857. Moreover, by this time, the imagination of Hinduism had been well codified in the British psyche¹⁷. The idea of Hinduism as a "great tradition" had been so powerful that Morris is able to reject hook-swinging as forming "no part" of the Hindu religion system. In light of the historical trends of the time, the differences between Carey and Morris are not surprising. British approaches to orientalism underwent significant changes in the first half of the nineteenth century, from scholarly and respectful outlooks of the likes of William Jones, to Anglicans like Thomas Babington Macaulay, whose 1835 book *Minutes on Education* paved the way for institutionalizing Western education in India¹⁸.

The second response is by a Bengali scholar, who authoritatively put forward knowledge on Gājan before a British audience. In 1829, Ram Comul Sen, the Native Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, read before the society an account of the hook-swinging practices in Gangetic Bengal. Sen belonged to the Hindu middle class, and had staunchly opposed the liberal attitude of Henri Louis Vivian Derozio, a professor in the

¹⁶ Letter dated September 27, 1858, cited in Dirks, "The Policing of Tradition", 190, cited again in Schröder, Ulrike. "Hook-Swinging in South India: Negotiating the Subaltern Space within a Colonial Society" In *Negotiating Rites*, Ed. Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. P. 216

¹⁷ William Ward's four-volume *Account of the Writings, Religion, and Manners of the Hindoos* (1811) and Henry T. Colebrooke's *The Philosophy of the Hindus: On the Nyāya and Vaisesika Systems* (1824) were among the first of such codifications, followed by numerous others.

¹⁸ See Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia* (Routledge 2008), 61-2. See also Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) for more on the study of English in India.

Hindu College known for his liberal ideas among students¹⁹. Ironically, Sen's grandson Keshub would grow up to join and reform the Brahmo Samaj, the Hindu reformist movement in Bengal²⁰. He belonged to the new bureaucratic middle class that was forming in colonial Calcutta in the early nineteenth century. The account was published four years later in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (No. 24, December 1833). Sen's speech was from a curator's perspective, describing and annotating the artefacts of the festival to be preserved in the society's museum. The most revealing section, however, is his introduction to the festival, where he makes clear his view of the festival.

Sen's principal agenda in his introductory comments is to establish that the hook-swinging practice is one performed only by lower castes, and is not attested by rules of Hindu worship (which was always the central missionary argument against the practice). In the opening paragraph, he clarifies why the practice is not an example of a religious worship:

It is a festival improperly termed by many *Charak Puja* [Charak-worship]-perhaps from the notion that every ceremony observed by the Hindus of Bengal is a puja-or religious worship; and whether it be performed by a muchī [cobbler] or a chandala [another low caste], is considered as Hinduism, and the whole body of Hindus are charged with the absurdity of the act (609-13).

In popular culture, hook-swinging was known as Charak "puja" (another name for Gājan). "Puja" in Bengali refers to the worship of gods; the term in Sen's usage denotes the observation of textually certified practices of devotion. For Sen, the term "puja" is a misnomer, for it is performed solely by the lower castes, while puja is the prerogative of the upper castes. He expresses disdain on the idea that any practice by anyone regardless of caste

¹⁹ Śāstrī, Śivanātha. *Rāmatanu Lāhīrī o Tatakālin Bangasamaja*. (Kolkata : New Age 2009 [1904])

²⁰ See Kopf, David. *The Brahmo Samaj and the making of the Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) for a seminal study of the organization and Keshub Sen's life. See also Brian Hatcher's *Bourgeois Hinduism, Or Faith of the Modern Vedantists* (New York: Oxford University Press 2008) for a recent take on the matter.

is “Hinduism”, and regrets that the “whole body of Hindus” are “charged” with the “absurd” act. Sen acknowledges the British viewpoint that the practice is “absurd”, but tries to get rid of the blame on the middle class by arguing that the urban elite has nothing to do with the practice of the lower castes, and it is injustice to blame the intelligentsia for it. He further shows how the festival opposes the fundamental social values of the elite:

The original rules have mostly fallen into disuse, and new ones have been substituted, as convenience required...The ceremony which was called an act of piety, is converted into an occasion of dissipation, drinking, gambling and acts of immorality (620).

The festival is therefore a rustic practice which has undermined the value of piety in Hinduism, and is run by the fancy of people who do not have any idea about what the real Hinduism is.

It is important to remember that Sen read the paper in front of a primarily British audience of the Asiatic Society, Elites like Sen had a great role in informing the British perspective on popular festivals, for the actual fieldwork was often done by the natives and then presented to the British officials. Ram Comul Sen in particular, was a conservative Hindu who famously opposed the monotheistic reformist moves of Ram Mohan Roy, the reformer who in the same time period was challenging idolatry and other rituals of Hinduism. The agenda of people like Sen was naturally to present Hinduism in a different light to the British, arguing that the “actual” religion was devoid of any “absurd” practice like hook-swinging. In the opening lines, Sen presents his argument in the passive voice, indirectly referring to “many” people who project low-caste practices to define the whole of Hinduism. His target in this case is certainly Roy and his followers who argued on the necessity of “reforming” Hinduism. By excluding the practice as “not Hindu”, Sen strives to define Hinduism in a new bourgeois ideological terrain: the religion in itself is pristine and faultless,

but lower classes have brought in absurd practices that have defiled Hinduism. As we will see in the next section, Sen's claim can be challenged by literature from the period, where we see the elites and low castes working for the festival with each other.

Sen's claim is refuted by a wealth of popular literature from the period. In 1862, the renowned Bengali author Kaliprasanna Singha published a famous sarcastic account of Calcutta's elite society titled *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* ("Sketches by Hutom, the Barn Owl"), under the pseudonym *Hutom Pyancha* ("Barn Owl"). One of the milestones of Bengali literature, it shows a bird's view of various facets of Calcutta society. The book begins with a long description of hook-swinging, one that was organized by a wealthy landlord in Calcutta. Vivid descriptions of the process are given, along with reactions of people to the practices of ascetics. In this section, however, I will point out a few key passages from the text that help us better understand the social location of the festival, and shed light on Sen's stand on the matter. The owl writes:

Our master's four generation-old ascetic tugs a *bel* leaf over his ear, and arrives, breathing rapidly, in the living room with a handful of sacred *bel* leaves. Although he is of a lower caste, he has been elevated by virtue of following ascetic practices over the past few days: our master had to fall at his feet and show him respect. The ascetic put his dirty, muddy feet on the spotless carpet of the living room, terrifying our master, and placed the sacred flower on his head (12).²¹

There are a number of points to be noted with this passage. First, that the festival was being held almost two decades after Sen's speech, in Calcutta city, patronized by one of the wealthiest families. The text makes it clear that the "master" (*babu*) has the right to organize

²¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Bengali are my own. See Ranajit Guha's essay "A Colonial City and its Time(s)" (2008) in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* for a comparison of the text with Dickens' "Sketches by Boz", along with the context in which the story was written. Swarup Roy has recently authored a new translation entitled *The Observant Owl* (New Delhi: Rupa Publishers, 2008) with a foreword by Partha Chatterjee.

these festivals, and he does so as a religious practice; he aims to gain favours of the gods by gaining blessings from hook-swingers. Secondly, it is remarkable how the master accepts the authority of a lower caste just by virtue of his ascetic practice. The master certainly does not think that the practice is “an act of dissipation”. He looks forward to the ascetic’s blessings, and even ignores the vandalism of his precious carpet. We can seriously question Sen’s claim of *charak* being not a “puja”; the typical elite, as we see here, did assign a great amount of religious value to the practice.

Another passage in the book shows the direct participation of the elite. At the end of the hook-swinging ceremony, a flower is supposed to fall magically from the god’s body to the ground. When no such thing happened after the ceremony in the master’s house, people got concerned, and decided to call the master to pray in person before the god, so that Siva is pleased and lets the flower fall magically. The master’s reaction is noteworthy:

When he was summoned, the master was dressed up, his silk handkerchief fragrant with expensive perfumes and his phaeton carriage ready. He almost fainted hearing the call; he had no desire to go, but did not dare to halt the sacred ritual that had been going on for generations. He advanced towards the place where the ceremony was taking place in spite of being dressed...he lay prostrate in front of Siva and paid his respects (12).

Thereafter the flower fell and everyone praised the master’s power. The master, however, directly participated in the ritual. He was not swung from the hook himself, but was involved in the practice and the ritual that surrounded it. The fact that he agrees to attend the worship in spite of being ready for a party shows how much the ritual mattered to him.

James Moffat’s (1775-1815) c. 1806 painting “View on the banks of the Ganges with representation of the Churruck Poojah, a Hindoo holiday” offers supporting evidence for elite participation in the ritual of hook swinging (see figure 1). The painting depicts two people

swinging from the hooks of a wooden frame by the Ganges, and a number of people watching the audience. It is in fact the depiction of the audience which deserves attention. There are many people crowding the area, signifying that the festival was a popular and well-attended one. Moreover, there are over five wooden palanquins along with palanquin bearers.

Palanquins (*palki* in Bengali) were used only by the elite; they provided a private means of communication in which women could travel without being seen by people other than family members. Palanquins, however, were used by both men and women. In the painting, we can see an elderly lady sitting in a palanquin and seeing the hook-swingers. Moreover, there are a number of wealthy officials wearing red and white turbans, standing under umbrellas held on by their servants. The visual evidence makes it clear that both men and women from the middle class actively participated in the festival and, as Sinha's description shows, had stakes in it.

The difference between Sen's thesis and the sights of the barn owl is a critical factor in understanding how the discourse of the folk was constructed in this period. Museum curators like Sen have always played a pivotal role in creating discourses on culture, and it will be unwise to ignore their agency in determining the definition of "folk"²². This period is important as a historical moment, as the ritual starts becoming essentially a "folk" tradition for lower classes, not meant for elites to participate in. The idea of the "folk" is born only when there is another hegemonic culture to contest it.

²² For a contemporary argument on museums and knowledge production, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "World Heritage and Cultural Economics" in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham and London, Duke UP, 2006)



Figure 1: 'View on the banks of the Ganges with representation of the Churruck Poojah, a Hindoo holiday'. by James Moffat, published Calcutta c.1806. The diversity of crowd assembled shows not only lower castes, but also elite women in palanquins, merchants in turban and shawls and the elite having umbrellas held on top of them by servants.

Antonio Gramsci wrote about an “ethico-political” (developing the term from Benedetto Croce) hegemony developing a “new ideological terrain” with new modes of leadership not only in the realm of the political but also in the moral and cultural spheres (423). The locus of power becomes a “civil society” instead of a political society, and dominance operates more by consent and direction than by coercion or dominance. The idea of what is “civil” and what is not depended on the colonial idea of the body and the order of the public space and charak as a ritual questioned both. Mutilation of the body was, for the European, the epitome of savagery; and the fact that this was done publicly also jeopardized public order.

Gramsci's notion of the ideological terrain being the basis of cultural hegemony sheds some light on the response of the middle class. The colonial authorities and the bourgeoisie controlled the political economy of the period, and therefore the culture of the middle class became the dominant culture that marginalized the practices that did not suit middle-class ethics. Ulrike Schröder has cited a government document from the mid-1800s from the India Office Collections:

The efforts of the magistracy [to ban hook-swinging] will be willingly supported by the influence of the great mass of the community, and, more particularly, of the wealthy and intelligent classes who do not seem, even now, to countenance or support the swinging ceremony (226).²³

The bureaucratic idea of “the great mass of the community” or Sen’s notion of the “whole body of Hindus” actually refers to the small yet critical mass that Gramsci calls civil society, described aptly in the document as the “wealthy and intelligent” classes. Political decisions were being taken keeping in mind the interests of this civil society, and projecting it as a “great mass” which in effect it was not. The use of the word “intelligent” is significant too; it speaks of the rising meritocracy that the colonial rule nurtured, and which was soon to be the paradigm of the citizen. The quest to become an “imperial citizen” would remain a basic agenda for the burgeoning civil society in colonial India (Banerjee 20-2). The folk became the other, against whom the elite Bengali *bhadralok* created his self-image.

Ulrike Schröder has recently envisioned hook-swinging in Colonial south India as a subversive ritual that “contested the normative and coercive power of the colonial rule” (227). Schröder’s argument is about the revival of the ritual in South India in the late nineteenth century in spite of the prohibition. For her, the ritual resisted colonial hegemony

²³ Government of Madras Direction, 1854;

by challenging the bourgeois morality and ethics of public space, opposing ideas of ritual within Hindu society, and contesting colonial orders against ritual revival.

An important question that comes up after reading Schröder's work is: which social class participated in the rituals in South India? By "participation", I mean all forms of participation, including sponsors, spectators and priests. It seems highly possible that the village elite, as opposed to the urban bourgeoisie, had a direct involvement in the ritual, something akin to the description in *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*. What was the relationship between patrons and performers, given that most farmers who performed the ritual may have been labourers under the landlord or his agent? We must take seriously Schröder's citation of the report of T.E. Thomas, Superintendent of Police in Tanjore, which says that the lower caste pariahs in charge of swinging wanted to stop the ritual, but did not do so fearing the upper "Kullar" caste (226).²⁴ In South India, hook-swinging is ideologically related to practices of blood-sacrifice to the goddess, different from the context of asceticism in Bengal. While being conscious of the role of the colonial authorities we also need to study the agency of Indians in creating Orientalist discourses.

This section showed the variety of ways in which individuals like Morris and Ram Comul Sen produced knowledge about hook-swinging. They had their own agendas to fulfil, and knowledge on the ritual helped them in doing so. As Singha's popular book or Moffat's painting show, hook-swinging was far from being simply a lowly practice. Keeping the construction of the colonial discourse on hook-swinging in mind, I will now try to see the ritual in ways other than caste and class dichotomies. The next section will show how Gājan is related to larger ideologies of renunciation, and is an essential component in rural Bengali society.

²⁴ IOR P/4409 66-7

Temporary Renunciation: Structure and Anti-structure in Gājan

In this final section, we will study Gājan as “temporary renunciation” in modern Bengal. As we saw in the previous section, the nineteenth century saw a vigorous debate and creation of a discourse on Gājan by both colonial authorities and the Bengali middle class. To understand the ritual, we need to put it in context with Bengal’s religious history. Jeanne Openshaw explored renunciation traditions in Bengal while studying the *Bauls* (a group of wandering mystics in Bengal). Openshaw states that Bengal’s religious history, in context of renunciation traditions, is different from that of the rest of India. She writes:

None of these traditional all-India *sampradāy* [*Rāmānandī* or *Daśanāmī*] has its centre in Bengal, which...is peripheral to the all-India society of renouncers... Moreover, despite the presence in Bengal of the classic schematic opposition between householder and renouncer society...this is to some extent undermined by the manifestly ambiguous status of particular groups, especially the *Jat Vaishnavas*, and of particular individuals at certain times. (128)

The point on “ambiguous status of particular groups” is very important for our purpose. All the theories we have considered till now had been researched in a north Indian context. In Bengal, the renouncer-householder dichotomy has been problematized not only by Gājan, but by the “ambiguous status” of many other groups like the *Vaishnavas* and the *Bauls*. Studying sects like the *Rāmānandīs* (studied by Burghart) or the *Daśanāmīs* (studied by Hausner) confines our knowledge of renunciation to the geographical spaces in which these organizations are powerful. As we will now look into a ritual that in essentially Bengali, it is wise to keep Openshaw’s thesis on Bengal’s religious history in mind²⁵.

²⁵ Openshaw’s argument on Bengal helps us to situate Gājan in a larger regional pattern of Śiva worship in Bengal. In “classical” textual discourses Śiva or *Rudra* is often described as a “wild hunter”, “lord of what is left over on the sacrificial site”, “*Paśupati*—lord of animals,” “lord of creatures,” “lord of the soul of

Along with religious history, it is necessary to remember who participates in Gājan, and the socio-economic context of the ritual. We must take seriously Patrick Olivelle’s observation that renunciation arose at a “particular time in history-probably around the sixth century B.C.E.-against the background of momentous socioeconomic changes along the Ganges Valley” (20). Renunciation was born out of a distinct socioeconomic context. Modern renunciation continues to be in dialogue with contemporary economic and political transitions. I argue that “temporary renunciation” in Gājan can be seen as a “liminal” or in-between phase in Victor Turner’s concept of the ritual process.

Gājan can be read in the light of Victor Turner’s theory of liminality. In the chapter “Betwixt and Between” of his 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols*, Victor Turner draws upon Arnold van Gennep’s theory of rites of passage being composed of separation, liminality and reaggregation, and introduces liminality as an inter-structural phase in rituals . Because of the unclear nature of the ritual subjects in the liminal phase, they are structurally invisible and are defined by names or sets of symbols, with magical or polluting properties being attributed to

man" and the like (Kramrisch, Web). Śiva is wild hunter god, and people are frightened of him. In Bengal, however, Śiva is often envisioned as a householder farmer.

A popular *Gambhirā* song (a variant of Gājan in North Bengal) begins as:

Tumi haye cāṣī kāśībāsī kena kāśīsvara|

Tomāra karmaṣetra ei brahmāṇḍa ṣetra taba hara||

In spite of being a farmer, why do you reside in *Kāśī* (Varanasi), oh “Lord of *Kāśī*” (Śiva)?

Your place of acts is this universe, your area, Oh *Hara* (Śiva)!

(Ghoṣa 42, my translation).

Kāśī or Varanasi is a holy town for renunciators, and not for peasants who work in fields. The word *ṣetra* means both “landed property”, and “domain”, while *karma* means “action”. The poem employs a distinct agricultural metaphor to show Śiva’s cosmic strength. The word *kāśībāsī* (“one who resides in *Kāśī*”) is significant too: Śiva is worshipped in Varanasi, hence he is by definition a resident of *Kāśī*; Secondly, the word *kāśībāsī* in Bengali denotes a person who has gone to *Kāśī* due to *vairāgya*, as old people often wanted to renounce social ties and live in *Kāśī* till they died . The singers are asking Śiva to come back from his renunciation and resume his duties as a farmer. Śiva himself becomes a temporary renouncer, crossing the householder-renouncer dichotomy. The Bengali imagination of Śiva should be kept in mind while understanding Gājan.

them. In his 1969 book *The Ritual Process*, Turner further develops the equality of ritual subjects during the liminal phase in great detail, and coins the term “communitas” for the “unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated” model of society during the liminal phase (96). He looks at liminality as a political process, one that makes the high realize how life is among the lowly. In *Ritual Process*, Turner describes the dialectic of structure and anti-structure as a basic feature of society. Gājan can be seen as a liminal phase, as the ritual involves an inversion of social structures leading to communitas.

A pivotal achievement of Turner is his vision of society as a *process* rather than as a *thing*. I look at renunciation, in this case, as the part of a process rather than a category in itself. Renunciation in Gājan, like liminality, is temporary. The householder becomes a *sannyāsī* for a specific period of time. He does not leave society but rather, as Turner would say, becomes magical and powerful in the eyes of society. This renunciation is undertaken not because one wants to leave the caste system and enter a world of his own; *Gājan sannyāsīs* believe that performing Gājan will satisfy Śiva, who will grant them coveted fruits like respite from illnesses.

I have used the phrase “temporary renunciation” because I feel it is the temporary nature of the renunciation that makes Gājan special. *Samnyāsa*, a classic value in Hinduism, temporarily provides a space for the disadvantaged to challenge power structures²⁶. Seen from the perspective of the Gājan ascetic, the role of renunciation in the festival is an empowering mechanism. The ascetics do not leave caste-based society; they go around asking for food every day, and the householders see them performing the rites or the hook-

²⁶A counterpoint needs to be addressed here. As the objective of renunciation in Gājan is the gain of a coveted desire (respite from illness, cure of infertility), one may argue that Gājan is not an example of renunciation at all, as the classical idea of renunciation (leaving the world of material desire) is not being upheld. It is, however, important to remember that the process is renunciation in essence: the giving up of one’s own caste and home. Furthermore, the ascetics call themselves *sannyāsīs*, showing that they are fully aware of their position as renouncers.

swinging on the final day of the ritual (Nicholas 93-4). The people of the village ‘participate’ in the ritual in many ways, in spite of not performing Gājan themselves²⁷. “Temporary” renunciation becomes important precisely because the ascetics do not leave society. Gājan calls for an active involvement of caste society and creates a dialectic between *Gājan sannyāsīs* and householders.

It is important to note that Gājan is performed mainly by the lower castes. In Gājan, members of higher castes do not voluntarily give up their castes and enter a different conceptual universe, as the textual descriptions of *saṃnyāsa* would suggest. It is not even an “individual” leaving a caste-based society to join the family of renouncers as described by Hausner. Lower-caste farmers gain a certain amount of access and privilege through renunciation²⁸. All renouncers accept the time-worn rules of the festival, and therefore I do not see it as a triumph of individualism. Renunciation in case of Gājan is a mechanism that exists within the caste society to elevate the low to the high for a temporary period. “Temporary renunciation” helps disadvantaged classes to cross borders and gain privilege otherwise forbidden to them.

On the theme of crossing boundaries, let us return to the trope of *movement* that was used by Hausner. I find the metaphor very useful to understand the role of renunciation in Gājan. It will be appropriate to consider another metaphor of movement used by another theorist. Thomas Tweed, in his book *Crossing and Dwelling*, sees religion as primarily a

²⁷ This is a point where we need to move beyond Turner. Turner’s study of small, cyclical societies considered three kinds of participation in a ritual: the ritual subjects, the priest and the rest of society. In a modern complex society, many more economic and political relations complicate the idea of participation. Who hires the people to play the drums? Who owns the land in which the ascetics live for a month? Who funds the flowers and fruits needed for the worship of Śiva? From whose shop does one buy the flowers?

²⁸ One way of envisioning Gājan is as a “steam-valve” effect, a mechanism to release pent up lower caste frustration to make ordinary life tolerable. This is one reading of it, but certainly not the only one. As I will argue, the participants do not undertake Gājan only to feel superior to other castes. The reality is much more complex: often higher castes were patrons and profiteers who benefitted from financing the lower castes Gājan is not, therefore, only a “steam valve”.

function of movement. Religions are about “settling in” and “moving across”, and his theory is, “above all, about movement and relation” (77). Tweed differentiates religion from other cultural practices (like arts and literature) that go beyond the limits of embodied life by pointing out that religions appeal to *superhuman* forces to aid the crossing. His definition of religion is stated concisely:

Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries (54).

Metaphors of movement pervade Tweed’s theory: words like “confluences”, “flows” and “cross” show that movement is integral to his theory²⁹. Crossing boundaries can take place in various levels: social, spatial or spiritual. While writing about pilgrimages, Turner too emphasized the role of movement for creating equality. The journey eliminates differences among pilgrims, giving rise to *communitas*:

While the pilgrimage situation does not eliminate structural divisions, it attenuates them, removes their sting. Moreover, pilgrimage liberates the individual from the obligatory everyday constraints of status and role (221).

Turner’s focus remains on *communitas*, the “living model of human brotherhood and sisterhood” (221). For Tweed, perhaps, movement is more metaphorical than it is for Turner. It cannot be denied that the basis of liminality is movement in many ways: movement from lower rungs of social hierarchy to higher ones or vice versa; movement from being spiritually neutral to acquiring magical or polluting properties; and movement, spatially, to a confined space out of the normal social order.

²⁹ Tweed wrote his theory in the 2000s, in a “globalised” world where movement occurred all over the world much faster than ever before. The full force of his theory becomes clear when we understand religion in the contemporary world. A major section of Tweed’s research focuses on transnational and diaspora communities.

In Gājan, the participants draw on superhuman forces to cross boundaries at all three levels. Social structures are inverted as the lower castes are allowed to ‘bless’ members of higher castes and worship Śiva, generally a prerogative of Brahmins. Spatial boundaries are crossed too: the *sannyāsīs* are allowed in sacred spaces that may be otherwise prohibited. A spiritual crossing over is the most striking feature of the ritual. People are thought to acquire magical properties like swinging from hooks and walking on fire, because of following ascetic practices.

How does understanding Gājan as a process of “crossing over” influence our view on renunciation? Can we envision renunciation, too, as a process that similarly provides a means to transcend boundaries? Earlier theorists too had spoken about the relation between crossing and renunciation: Dumont and Burghart had argued that householders cross boundaries of worldly society and enter the temporal world of *saṃnyāsa*. I, on the other hand, argue that renunciation itself acts as a tool to cross over, rather than being a conceptual space which one enters after crossing the limits of householder society. My statement is close to Hausner’s, when she says that renouncers gain power denied to them in their householder life when they join societies of renouncers: “the power of transcendence” (184). Yet, my argument differs in one crucial point from Hausner: Gājan shows that the transcendence is done within society by means of undertaking *saṃnyāsa*, instead of joining an alternative society of renouncers.

The liminal state of Gājan is also linked to larger themes of renewal. The Bengali New Year begins the day after Gājan ends, and some anthropologists consider Gājan to be a solar festival. Asutosh Bhattacharyya defines Gājan as “the annual sun-festival of primitive character held on the day on which the sun is supposed to pass to the next sign at the equinox” (57). Bhattacharyya also argues that the festival is held before the rainy season, and may be linked to “primitive” rain-producing magical rites (59). Nicholas, too, interprets Gājan in light of the myths of cosmic origin by creation and procreation (26-9). In any case,

renewal is an important theme of Gājan. The idea of regeneration informs the specific fruits the *sannyāsīs* hope to reap from Gājan

“Temporary Renunciation”, in case of Gājan, is a process that overturns structures of power and empowers the disadvantaged. For Turner, rituals served to maintain the balance of power in society: “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is to be low” (97)³⁰. I do not suggest that the sole goal of renunciation is to empower lower classes; neither do I argue that “temporary renunciation” needs to be the only idea for conceptualizing Gājan. As we saw with theorists from Dumont to Hausner, lives of renouncers are as diverse as lives of householder. We also noted that Gājan is linked to larger ideas of renewal and solar worship. This paper attempted to provide an alternative view of renunciation using the example of a ritual from rural Bengal. Neither the ritual nor the geographical location has been dominant in scholarly discourse on renunciation. The idea of process over ideas of stasis can be used to explore a number of concepts in Hinduism: *pūja* or worship of gods during specific times of the day and times of the year; maintaining *vrata* or vows to follow certain practices for a specific period of time so that the participant receives benefit from superhuman forces; and, finally, the idea of pilgrimages (which Turner himself wrote about).

³⁰ My emphasis on Turner does not suggest that his theories are beyond criticism. Like Dumont, Turner was a great influence for anthropologists. Since the publication of his work, a number of powerful critiques have been offered by scholars. In the light of post-colonial theory, many have argued that Turner’s imagination of “ritual” as a monolithic term needs to be reconsidered keeping in mind the power relations involved in writing about rituals. Catherine Bell in her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* reads the term “ritual” as a discourse that has remained among scholars since Durkheim (Bell 44-54, see also Philip Smith’s review in the *American Journal of Sociology* 98.2). Bell offers a post-structuralist critique of Turner by arguing that rituals themselves are constructed by power relationships, and are not simply artistic representations of structure and anti-structure. In his article on the Pentecostal Church of New York, Bobby Alexander re-visits Turner and aims to correct misinterpretations of Turner’s theory and points out its limitations (27-29). Many other critiques have been offered too. Turner’s theory has been critiqued, but his idea of “process over stasis” remains a useful tool for interpreting renunciation.

Conclusion: Ritual and Religion in Colonial Bengal

Why do we need to study the history of an obscure, nineteenth century ritual that was a practice confined to only a few regions? The history of hook-swinging acts as a useful lens to view various agents and actors in the religious history of colonial India. First, the agency of creating the discourse of “folk”, as we see, lies largely with certain individuals of the middle class, who had important positions like librarians and museum curators. Identifying the critical role of certain individuals in creating categories of cultures can further nuance Sumanta Banerjee’s thesis on how elite and popular culture “travelled” away from each other (199). Secondly, great traditions and little traditions do not exist timelessly; the difference is created in moments like the mid-nineteenth century, when an ideology establishes itself as superior to others due to political and economic reasons. Hook-swinging is constructed as essentially a folk practice during early nineteenth century. Its metamorphosis from a “sacred ritual” to a “barbarous practice” provides insights into the workings of a colonial metropolis like Calcutta in the nineteenth century. The idea of religion being in constant movement is pivotal to our understanding of culture.

“The religious are always in place and moving across”, Tweed contends in the closing lines of *Crossing and Dwelling*, “The religious-and scholars too-are dwelling and crossing” (183). I looked at “temporary renunciation” as a tool to cross boundaries. During Gājan, the lower castes move up in the social hierarchy and gain privileges otherwise reserved for the higher castes. My deployment of the trope of movement to understand renunciation is different from that of Hausner. For Hausner, “splitting away” from society facilitates acceptance in an alternative society of *sādhus*. I argue that “temporary renunciation” is itself a means to achieve social mobility and to gain higher status for a short period of time. By understanding that “renunciation” exists within society, we can ask other questions: Why do Gājan performers consider themselves *sannyāsīs*? How do householders create various

meanings of *saṃnyāsa* in their everyday lives? Understanding *saṃnyāsa* as a process widens our vision to include non-classical, non-textual forms of the practice that are equally important from the perspectives of the participants. “Temporary renunciation” is a valuable conceptual tool to question colonial knowledge of rituals; rituals are best understood as dynamic processes that help the disadvantaged to cross spatial, social and spiritual borders.

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