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A Past for the Present: The Role of the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū in the Evolution of the Rāmānandī Sampradāya

PhD Thesis by
Daniela BEVILACQUA

Tutors: Mario PRAYER, Véronique BOUILLIER

Jury

Véronique Bouillier
Gilles Tarabout
Federico Squarcini
Antonio Rigopoulos

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Résumé

Le Passé pour le Présent: le Rôle du Śrī Maṭh et du Jagadgurū dans l'évolution de la Sampradāya des Rāmānandī

Cette thèse vise à décrire comment un ordre religieux subit des processus d'évolution et de transformation qui permettent d'interpréter et de satisfaire les besoins religieux de la société. L'hypothèse à la base de ce travail est que les ordres religieux et les gourous sont des éléments centraux qui caractérisent et influencent la société indienne dans le passé et dans le présent.

Dans cette thèse, je focalise mon attention sur le *sampradāya* des Rāmānandī – groupe religieux datant de Rāmānanda – qui eut un rôle primordial dans la diffusion de la *bhakti* de Ram (dévotion envers Ram) dans le nord de l'Inde vers la fin du XVème siècle. Mon but est de montrer comment la figure de Rāmānanda et l'organisation de l'ordre religieux ont évolué au cours des siècles, pour être capables ensuite d'interpréter les principaux changements survenus au XXème siècle.

A cause de ces différences internes, les Rāmānandīs n'ont jamais eu de représentant dans un centre officiel qui puisse fonctionner comme pôle directeur pour l'ordre. Donc, l'utilisation du titre de Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya et la construction du Śrī Maṭh au XXème siècle représentent un changement significatif dans l'histoire de l'ordre. C'est pour cela que j'ai formulé mes principales questions, base de ma recherche, sur ce thème :

- 1) pourquoi au XXème siècle, un *sampradāya* caractérisé par diverses disciplines religieuses (*sādhana*-s) et diffusé dans différents centres indépendants a senti la nécessité de créer la fonction de Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya comme leader principal ?
- 2) le Śrī Maṭh fait-il partie de la reconstruction du charisme du Rāmānanda et est-il un instrument pour aider à la fonction de Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya ?

Pour effectuer ce type d'analyse, j'ai utilisé une approche multidisciplinaire, dans laquelle méthodologies anthropologique et historique coopèrent pour retracer l'évolution de la tradition des Rāmānandī de leur origine à nos jours

Mots-clés : 1) Rāmānanda ; 2) Rām bhakti ; 3) Hindou gourou ; 4); Jagadguru ; 5) Tradition; 5) Traditionalisme Modern Hindou ; 6) Ascétisme

Resume

A Past for the Present: The Role of the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū in the Evolution of the Rāmānandī Sampradāya

In this dissertation, I focus my attention on the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* – a religious group supposedly formed by the religious teacher Rāmānanda – that had a primary role in spreading Rām *bhakti* (devotion toward Rām) throughout northern India, possibly from the end of the 15th century. My purpose here is to reconstruct how the representation of Rāmānanda and the organization of the *sampradāya* evolved over the centuries in order to interpret the two main changes that have occurred in the 20th century: the establishment of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya as the leader of the *sampradāya*, and the construction of the Śrī Maṭh, a monastery on the place where, according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānanda used to preach.

Because of these internal distinctions, the Rāmānandī-s have never had a single representative leader installed in a particular place that could work as directive pole for the *sampradāya*. Therefore, the bestowing of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and the construction of the Śrī Maṭh in the 20th century represent a significant change in the history of the order. For this reason, I formulated the main questions at the base of my research as follows:

- 1 Why has a *sampradāya* characterized by several religious disciplines (*sādhana*-s) and spread across several independent religious centers established the office of a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya as central leader in the 20th century?
- 2 Which role does the Śrī Maṭh play in the reconstruction of Rāmānanda's charisma and in support of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya?

To accomplish my analysis I employ a multidisciplinary approach – described in Chapter 1 – in which anthropological and historical methodologies cooperate to reconstruct the evolution of the Rāmānandī tradition from its origin until the present.

Keywords: 1) Rāmānandī sampradāya; 2) Rām bhakti; 3) Hindu guru; 4) Jagadguru; 4) Tradition; 5) Modern Hindu traditionalism; 6) Asceticism

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Jai Siya Ram

Notes on transliteration

To translate the devanagari syllabary into the Roman alphabet, I have chosen the standard system. This system is followed for the transliteration of Sanskrit words such as titles of literary works (*Veda*, *Rāmāyaṇa*), names of religious leaders (e.g. Rāmānūja, Śaṅkarācārya) and technical terms (e.g. *khaṇḍa*, *pāda*, *saṃskāra*, *saṃnyāsa*).

When I transliterate words of Sanskrit origin present in standard Hindi, I use the ISO 15919 system with some modifications to make them coherent with current pronunciation. One of these changes concerns the absence of the short vowel -a at the end of the word (e.g. *avatār*, *darśan*, *maṭh*, *pīṭh*). The short final -a is maintained in those words that end with a consonant cluster (e.g. *mokṣa* and *virakta*), words with a consonantal group ending in -y (e.g. *dāsyā*; *sākhya*, *ācārya*), and for words ending -ṅ and -y to maintain the sound created by the retroflex nasal and by the semi vowel in the spoken language.

Short -a vowel within a word will follow standard rules of transliteration, with the exception of technical religious terms that have a conventional written form like *sādhanā*. I make a graphic distinction between *āśrama* as stage of life, and *āśram* physical place.

Name of deities will follow the rules for Sanskrit words in standard Hindi, therefore I will write Rām instead of Rāma, Śiv instead of Śiva.

The names of geographic places will be transliterated when they indicate a religious center (e.g. Pañcagaṅgā, Revāsā, Galtā), but when I refer to the geographic area (e.g. Revasa, or Galta, Uttar Pradesh, Jaipur) I will avoid diacritics.

The name of writers in Hindi are translated with diacritics, unless they also write in English and have established conventional spelling for their names (e.g. Agrawal or Siddantashree). Terms which are commonly used in the English language such as yoga, dharma, guru, karma, mantra, etc. will be written without diacritics.

I made the plural form of words in Hindi and Sanskrit in -s, following the example of Winnand Callewaert (2000), ex. *paramparā/paramparā-s*.

Prologue

A few years ago, I focused my PG thesis on the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement, a religious-political campaign that aimed to free the supposed birthplace of God Rām in Ayodhya from a mosque that the Moghul Emperor Babur (1483-1530) was accused to have built there. The dispute about Rām's birthplace has its historical origin in the mid-19th century, but became a national issue when the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) made it the focus of several movements designed to create a unity among the Hindus at the beginning of the 1980s. The movement acquired a more political character when the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) exploited it for electoral purposes.¹ Towards the end of the 1980s, the Rāmjanmabhūmi had become a hot issue in the Indian political and social context. Its practical conclusion was the destruction of the mosque by a mob of Hindu zealots on December 6, 1992.

The success of the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement attracted my attention towards the causes of its success among Indian population. Although the main supporters of the destruction had all motivations but religious, many people contributed to its accomplishment in several ways. People were ready to answer 'Rām's call' to such an extent that even today the majority of the north Indian population does not consider the destruction of the mosque as a wrong action.² What were, then, the roots of this support? Which beliefs could the national Hindu organizations exploit to arise such devotion? I realized, then, that in order to answer these questions I had to understand the Rām *bhakti* (devotion) in the first place.

Therefore, I decided to focus my PhD research on the analysis of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (religious order), the biggest Vaiṣṇava ascetic group in northern India. Based

¹ The RSS is a cultural organization established in the 1920 with the purpose of modeling the Indian society according to the rightist nationalist ideology of *Hindutva*; the VHP is a religious organization born from the with the purpose of gathering leaders of those religious currents grown in India to establish general Hindu values through which to unify the Indian society from a religious point of view, especially in opposition to other religions. The BJP is a political party representative of the Indian Hindu right formed in the 1980s. Further description about these organizations and the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement will be provided below in this dissertation (cf. Chapter 4, sec. 3.1 and Chapter 6, sec. 4.3.6).

² Data from the MARG opinion poll for the *India Today* (Jan. 15, 1993) showed that, in the aftermath of the demolition, about 52,6% of the interviewees in the North approved the destruction of the mosque, as opposed to 16,7% in the South. Another survey conducted in Delhi and West Uttar Pradesh (*Asian Survey*, 33(7), July 1993) revealed that only 28% of workers supported the demolition of the mosque as against 60% among white-collar occupation and 62% of traders (Jaffrelot, 1999: 473, 476).

on Rām devotionism, it became partly involved in the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. However, my purpose was not to analyze its involvement with the political movement, but to move retrospectively to the core of the Rām *bhakti* and those who spread it.

When I began collecting information about the order, I realized that the subject would raise plenty of interesting issues concerning the value of religious leaders and religious orders in the Indian social context. From this very general idea, once in the field I focused on specific questions that became the centerpieces of this dissertation and determined its methodology.

Introduction

In this dissertation, I focus my attention on the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* – a religious order supposedly formed by the religious teacher Rāmānanda – that had a primary role in spreading Rām *bhakti* (devotion toward Rām) throughout northern India, possibly from the end of the 15th century. My purpose here is to reconstruct how the representation of Rāmānanda and the organization of the *sampradāya* evolved over the centuries in order to interpret the two main changes that have occurred in the 20th century: the establishment of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya as the leader of the *sampradāya*, and the construction of the Śrī Maṭh, a monastery on the place where, according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānanda used to preach.

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is an order in which charismatic gurus (beginning with Rāmānanda himself) had a fundamental importance in directing the evolution of various religious disciplines and geographic centers, and in which a liberal approach toward *bhakti* led to a widespread diffusion of the order among the grassroots of the Indian population. These traits resulted in a *sampradāya* highly differentiated in branches and sub-branches, concerned in Rām *bhakti* from assorted religious perspectives. Because of these internal distinctions, the Rāmānandī-s have never had a single representative leader installed in a particular place that could work as directive pole for the *sampradāya*. Therefore, the bestowing of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and the construction of the Śrī Maṭh in the 20th century represent a significant change in the history of the order. For this reason, I formulated the main questions at the base of my research as follows:

1) Why has a *sampradāya* characterized by several religious disciplines (*sādhanā*-s) and spread across several independent religious centers established the office of a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya as central leader in the 20th century?

2) Which role does the Śrī Maṭh play in the reconstruction of Rāmānanda's charisma and in support of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya?

The choice of this subject depends on the observation that, as demonstrated by scholars,³ by stories in current newspapers⁴ and simply by talking with people, religious

³ See Cekner (1983), Gold (1987), Narayan (1992), Warriar (2003), Broo (2003), Rigopoulos (2007; 2009), Bouillier (2008), Charpentier (2010), Copeman and Ikegame (2012).

leaders and religious orders in India are today still highly esteemed as bearers of a deeper insight of the reality. Religious leaders influence the behaviors and ideas of their followers through one of the roles entrusted to them: giving advice through their personal knowledge. In order to do so, they interpret contemporary issues through the religious understanding that they have, which in many cases is a *mélange* of the beliefs supported by the order to which they belong and their individual stands. Therefore, to describe the role of religion in contemporary Indian society I will find useful to analyze the role that religious institutions and their leaders have in the everyday life of individuals, how they interact with and in the society, and how they approach and interpret social and political issues. Furthermore, I will argue that such an analysis should take into consideration also a historical perspective. In fact, the diachronic study of a religious order, with the reconstruction of the context in which it arose, spread and evolved in response to social and political variables and to the religious quests that drove the society, would foster better interpretation of existing situations.

To accomplish my analysis I employ a multidisciplinary approach – described in Chapter 1 – in which anthropological and historical methodologies cooperate to reconstruct the evolution of the Rāmānandī tradition from its origin until the present. This approach led me to take into consideration various basic themes and to reconsider some terminological and theoretical issues. I have collected them in this Introduction, which has, therefore, the purpose to create a theoretical framework for the understanding of the main issue of this dissertation, the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

Firstly, I will make a comparison between Classic Hinduism, Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism, to define the position of this dissertation among other studies of religious orders. Then, I will introduce the idea of ‘evolution of tradition’ and correlate it with the idea of ‘invention of tradition’. My purpose is to demonstrate that the label ‘evolution of tradition’ can give a more complex, and likely closer, picture of how a tradition may change over the centuries and according to place.

There will then be a general outline of issues such as asceticism, *bhakti*, Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, Rām *bhakti* and the role of the guru, in order to frame the *sampradāya* and its characteristics. The topic of asceticism in the Indian context has to be introduced here for

⁴ See for examples <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Ramdev-made-Haryanas-brand-ambassador/articleshow/45900001.cms>, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Follow-Guru-Nanaks-path-of-compassion-PM-Modi/articleshow/45055559.cms>, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/modi-to-visit-odisha-on-july-16-meet-shankaracharya/article1-1092100.aspx> (Accessed: January 2015).

two main reasons: 1) to understand why Rāmānanda's stand of opening asceticism to low castes and women has been interpreted as revolutionary; 2) to demonstrate that the ascetic Indian reality is much more varied than that described in Brahmanic texts on asceticism. The topic of *bhakti* will be dealt with briefly at this stage, as it will be considered in detail in several subsequent chapters. I will also briefly introduce Vaiṣṇava and Rām *bhakti* because they are central to my research. The subsequent focus on the guru results not only from the role gurus have in the *bhakti* context, but also because of the attention I will give to the figure of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya. In fact, I interpret the creation of the role of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya to be part of the evolutionary process of the *sampradāya*, as it represents the *sampradāya's* adaptation to the contemporary Indian religious context. Moreover, through the description of the teachings and activities of a specific Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya (Rāmnareśācārya) I give a concrete example of the relationship between devotee or disciple and guru, through which to explain the influence of religious leaders on society.

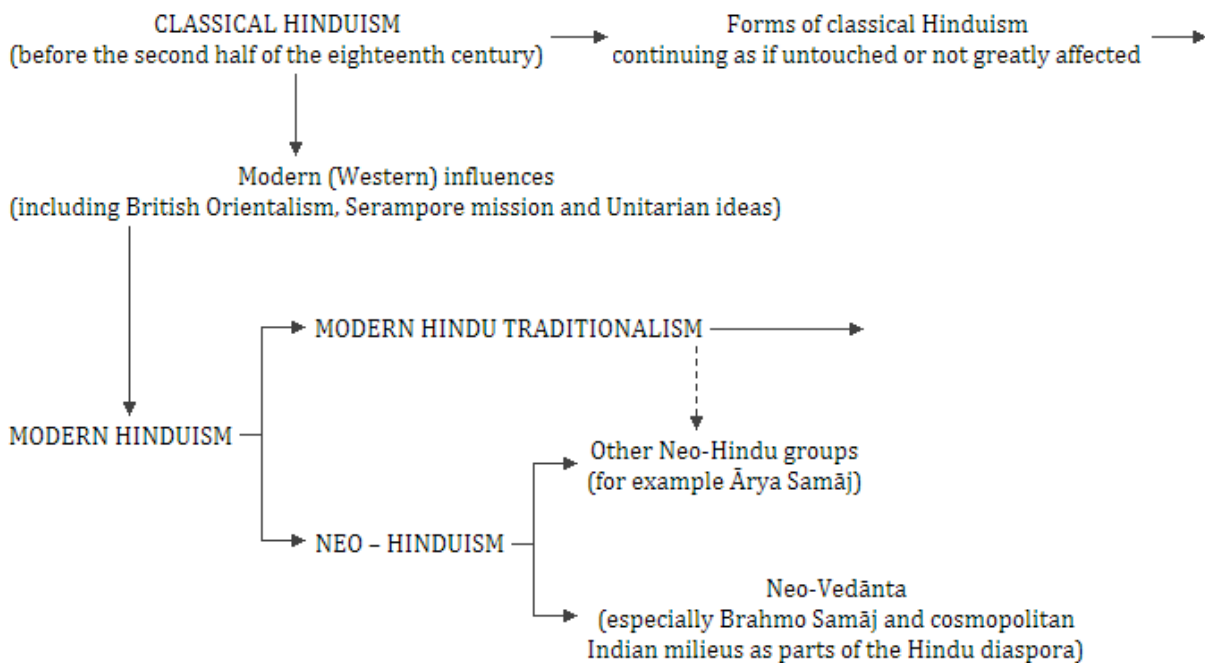
1. Which Hinduism?

It is not my intention to discuss here the meaning of the word Hinduism in general or recall the issue of the origin of the label Hinduism, since it has been extensively studied.⁵ I support here the position taken by Brian K. Smith who has stressed that whether a construction or a reality, nowadays Hinduism exists, and it is accepted as a religion by Hindus and therefore should be taken into consideration as a lived and interpreted reality by members of the real world (2002: 53). Smith suggests the need not to abandon the concept of Hinduism but to define it properly, as one religion among others. He wonders also whether the inclusion in this new analysis of the point of view of religious authorities and of the believers in a faith may not add new value to the interpretation of Hinduism

⁵ Many scholars have focused on the role of the British Raj in the construction of Hinduism, through the critics that missionaries and Orientalists arose while trying to describe the 'Indian cultures' (I use here a plural form because according to me it reflects properly the reality of the Indian environment where various cultures coexist). As a consequence, the idea that what is today Hinduism is influenced by what was thought to be Hinduism by a Western mind has found the support of many scholars. See Said (1978); Inden (1990); Dalmia & von Stietencron (1995); Pennington (2005). However, I support the considerations suggested by Richard King in his analysis of the myth of 'modern Hinduism'. In his work (1999) he places the accent on the role played 'by key indigenous informants (mostly from the Brāhmaṇa castes) in the construction of modern notions of the 'Hindu religion'. He stresses that 'to ignore the indigenous dimension of the invention of 'Hinduism' is to erase the colonial subject from history and perpetuate the myth of the passive Oriental'. The importance of the topic goes beyond the academic environment, because it is deeply involved and linked to the construction of identities, and therefore it has political consequences as well. I suggest here few titles about this aspect of the issue: Nandy (1983); Thapar (1989); Ludden (1996).

(*ibid*). That Smith’s wondering can be taken into account for opening up wider perspectives is demonstrated in this dissertation where, following his advice, I attempt to explain the *sampradāya* and the religious context by which it is affected through the voices of its members and especially through its leaders.

Widening Smith’s approach, Hinduism may be considered as an umbrella-term under which further classifications are possible. For this reason, to locate the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (or better the specific section I will deal with) in a proper ‘sector’ of Hinduism, I take into consideration De Michelis’s classification⁶ of Classic Hinduism, Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism, which I consider helpful in understanding the various aspect of contemporary Hinduism. This categorization allows us to look at contemporary Hinduism from a wider perspective, one not based on a dichotomy of new versus old, but one based on the idea that there are various ‘Hinduisms’ according to the influences they have received and assimilated and the changes that they have subsequently been produced (2004: 37):



Development of Modern Hinduism according to De Michelis (2004: 37)

De Michelis follows the definition of Classic Hinduism used by Hardy (1984) according to whom, classical Hinduism was a phenomenon present in a pre-18th century context, ‘that is before the major discontinuity [...] which arises through the advent of

⁶ De Michelis adapts and develops the work of Hardy (1984), Halbfass (1988), Kopf (1969), and Farquhar (1965 [1914]).

British colonial power in India' (2004: 37). However, the use of the term Classic Hinduism does not mean that religions in India formed a compact entity from the origin until the 18th century. In fact, the term can best be considered as a receptacle that includes not only what belongs to the Brahmanic tradition and is testified in orthodox texts, but also orders and *sampradāya*-s belonging to heterodox streams. Following De Michelis, in this dissertation Classic Hinduism is not used to mean a specific, single tradition, something immutable before the coming of British, but as a convenient, flexible term, with an awareness of its limits and caveats.⁷

Modern Hinduism follows after Classic Hinduism. It is influenced by the British presence and the process of Westernization that, with its 'imported culture', started 'to affect traditional ways of life in a noticeable degree' (De Michelis, 2004: 38). Modern Hinduism can be further divided into Modern Hindu Traditionalism and Neo-Hinduism. Modern Hindu Traditionalism appears as a middle path between Classical Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism, because it 'resisted the closer contact with the West of Neo-Hindu thought and practice, but also the views of classical Hinduism that were perceived to be outmoded' (Sardella, 2013: 236).

Although De Michelis's schema gives the idea of the presence and essence of what she calls Classical Hinduism (a development not affected by the influences of the West), and how it evolved or was maintained, her understanding of these three categories follow Halbfass's definition of Traditionalism, Modern Traditional Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism:

Traditionalism⁸ [...] has also taken in and assimilated new elements, and is by no means a mere continuation of that which existed before the encounter with the West. Similarly, it is not possible to describe Neo-Hinduism as a rigorous break with the past and its transmission. What distinguishes Neo-Hinduism and Traditionalism are the different ways in which they appeal to the tradition, the structures which they employ to interrelate the indigenous and the foreign, and the degree of their receptivity *vis-a-vis* the

⁷ A similar consideration could be promoted also for the terms Tradition and Modernity.

⁸ Although Halbfass recognizes that Traditionalism has a greater vitality in India and has many facets and levels (as does Neo-Hinduism), he deals always with an elitist kind of tradition. His idea of Hindu Traditionalism is focused on Indian philosophical systems and exegesis of the *Vedānta*, expressions of a Brahmanism that does not take into consideration the complexity of the religious Indian field represented also by non-orthodox *sampradāya*-s and *panth*-s. Halbfass seems skeptical in a understanding of the historical development of Indian religions/philosophies, given the presence of entirely non-historical and impersonal doxography of various philosophical traditions which, according to him, do not allow to outline a clear development of the Indian thought (1990: 249). As we will see in Chapter 1 and more in details in Chapter 2, to reconstruct lived religious contexts of the past I used hagiography and literary works produced by centers of the *sampradāya* as historical evidences. In so doing, I was able to have emic sights of the past through which to reconstruct approaches and behaviors from a different perspective.

West. Modern traditional Hinduism has preserved an essentially unbroken continuity with the tradition, and it builds upon this foundation, carries on what is already present in the tradition, even though additions are made and extrapolations occur. To be sure, Neo-Hinduism also invokes the tradition, tries to return to it, and hopes to find in it the power and context for its response to the West. Yet as Hacker emphasizes, this return is the result of a rupture and discontinuity. More important than the fact that foreign elements have been added to the tradition is that basic concepts and principles of this tradition have been reinterpreted and provided with new meanings as a result of the encounter with the West. (Halbfass, 1990: 219-220)

Sardella clarifies what differentiates Neo-Hinduism from Modern Hindu Traditionalism:

(1) A stronger breach with the past; (2) the tendency to give more weight to a new rational reading of the texts, bypassing traditional schools; (3) less allegiance to *sampradāyas* and gurus; (4) a tendency to regard God as abstract and aniconic, and (5) an emphasis on direct religious experience. (2013: 235)

Among these differences we should also include a diverse approach toward the idea of *Sanātan Dharma*, an emic label with which in the 19th century ‘Hindus’ began to refer to their ‘eternal’ or ‘universal’ religion. Modern Hindu Traditionalism would be composed of *sampradāya*-s that support the concept of Sanatan Dharma as ‘a pure interpretation of Hinduism, drawn from a plurality of texts, inclusive of the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and Tantras’. However, unlike Neo-Hinduism groups, they do not aim at the constitution of a unified Hindu religion but rather to the maintenance of a ‘plurality of sampradayik approaches and the flexibility of its rites and ceremonies’ (Kasturi, 2010: 123). This *sampradāyik* character (the presence of many different religious tendencies, sometimes even inside the same tradition, as we will see in the case of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*) seems to be a distinguishing trait of the category of Modern Hindu Traditionalism. For this reason, Sardella considers it to be still too vague to contribute in a more precise way to the analysis of the Indian religious field (Sardella, 2013: 236).

Rather than attempting to define Modern Hindu Traditionalism, I suggest then that it is more worthwhile to analyze various examples of Modern Hindu Traditionalism, taking the same stat as that of Chatterjee and Datta in dealing with the historical development of Hindu thought and religion. They say that:

It is not possible to write any history of successive philosophies of India but it is necessary that each system should be studied and interpreted in all the growth it has acquired through the successive ages of history. (1968: 9)

In dealing with the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* I decided to take this position and frame the present reality of a specific place (the Śrī Maṭh in Varanasi, which is the new monastery built on the place where according to the Rāmānandī tradition Rāmānanda had his *āśram*) within the successive ages of the history of the *sampradāya*. In so doing, I attempt to make a contribution to the understanding of one expression of Modern Hindu Traditionalism, because as we will see from Chapter 4 on, the position of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya (the present leader of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, dwelling in the Śrī Maṭh) is best understood as such an expression.

Dealing with the concept of Modern Hindu Traditionalism, I further realized that another theoretical hurdle to climb was the role of changes in the tradition and how to interpret those changes.

2. On tradition and change: invention or evolution?

At the beginning of my study of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* I encountered several times the idea of ‘invention of tradition’ used by scholars to interpret those ‘new’ events occurring in the *sampradāya* which are justified or explained by reference to a past tradition. However, the more time I spent in the field the more I realized the possibility that it may be reductive and constraining to use the idea of invention of tradition to explain some changes and situations in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (and *sampradāya*-s in general). The definition of invented tradition as given by E. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger has specific characteristics. They claim that an invented tradition is based on a set of practices and rules that are supposed to be in continuity with a suitable historic past but *this continuity is factitious*. Therefore, invention of tradition:

includes both traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity. (1983: 1)

Hobsbawm conceives tradition as unvaried and based on a past which imposes fixed practices; therefore ‘inventing traditions is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition’ (*ibid*: 4). The problem at the base of Hobsbawm’s conception is that his idea of tradition is similar to those which rely on the two assumptions often used to explain tradition: 1) that tradition precedes one’s knowledge and that it ‘waits’ to be registered as truth, owing little to those living in the present who are assumed to be passive recipients who conserve tradition by

merely repeating it; 2) tradition is seen as a single trajectory from the past to the present, hence its truth is chronological, and the older it is, 'the truer and more forceful it is deemed to be' (Lenclud, 2003: 83). These kind of assumptions have led to various approaches and theorizations⁹ that, nevertheless, are not able to bring to light a comprehensive definition of tradition, not do they explain or locate the mechanisms by which tradition is perpetuated. In fact, as Pouillion has argued, we have to look at tradition not as a product of the past, something passively received, but rather as a perspective developed by those living in the present on what has preceded them. Then tradition is 'finding in the past answers appropriate for today – answers which we believe are right not because they were thought of yesterday, but because we think of them now' (1975: 60).

This interpretation of tradition corresponds well with a dynamic idea, which receives further support when we look at tradition from an etymological point of view. As Federico Squarcini has demonstrated, the dynamic aspect is present in the etymology of the word 'tradition' in both western and Indian contexts. The word tradition comes from the Latin word *tradere*, which means 'to pass on'. There is someone who transmits, an object that is transmitted and someone who receives it (Squarcini, 2008: 28). It is during this process that traditions evolve. Romila Thapar claims that 'a tradition is never handed down intact from generation to generation, however appealing this idea may seem' (2005: 161). The reason for this is that the tradition which comes from the past is viewed from the present and 'that which is selected from the past goes into constructing a tradition or constructing a history' (*ibid*). Hence, considering that there are many 'presents' which follow one another over centuries, we understand that a tradition is constantly under the elaboration by those who transmit it.

This 'kinetic meaning' is present also in the two main Sanskrit terms which are used to translate the word tradition in the Indian religious context: *paramparā* and *sampradāya*. Analyzing the word *paramparā*, Squarcini focuses on its prefix *para-* which most commonly means 'one after the other'. Hence, the word *paramparā* indicates an 'uninterrupted sequence' (2008: 40). In its adjectival meaning, *paramparā* is used to denote something

⁹Lenclud reports three main approaches about tradition: 1) tradition is understood as a repetition of a model that was develop or established a long time ago. Hence tradition is something that remains unchanged, therefore is the permanence of the past in the present; 2) tradition is seen as a message passed on from one generation to the next, hence based on the social importance and cultural significance of its content. Therefore, tradition is a network of ideas that remain implicit and are articulated by experts and conveyed to an entire social group, who repeat certain practices. 3) The third approach looks at the mode of transmission of tradition rather than its content. From this perspective tradition is what is conveyed orally from one generation to another, opening the path to questioning the social and psychological mechanisms of cultural transmission (2003: 77-80).

that is inherited from the past. Therefore, Squarcini claims that *paramparā* expresses the dynamic of the act of giving and transmitting. Further, in the composite word *guru-śiṣya-paramparā* (transmission from guru to disciple) *paramparā* acquires the meaning of ‘established institution through transmission’, but suggests also a movement in the transmission (*ibid*: 42). Analyzing the term *sampradāya*, Squarcini stresses that the stem -*dāya* in its first occurrence was linked to the transfer or partition of goods. Therefore, etymologically even the word *sampradāya* refers to an act of transfer which over the centuries, began to concern ‘received doctrines or teachings’ in a religious context (*ibid*: 46). As underlined by its kinetic meaning, the transmission of a tradition does not remain static and, as a consequence, neither does the tradition itself, which is constantly being renovated.

Such changes in a tradition may occur when there is a confrontation with something new or different coming from outside or inside: a new group settling, the spread of new teachings, the presence of outstanding individuals and so on. Recalling Francis X. D’Sa’s remark that ‘to identify continuity in change [...] is to identify a tradition’ (1994: 84), I would define tradition as that dynamic nucleus of ‘ideal truth’ that lasts over a period of time to such an extent that theoretically its duration is part of its value, although its contents are constantly re-elaborated in the present. Hence an important characteristic of tradition is its capacity to provide values that people have faith and trust in, values that are reinterpreted over the centuries but that are still able to fulfill a need for ‘truth’. This is of course an abstract definition of tradition. However, I think that such a definition becomes meaningful when filled with the analysis of a specific tradition and the sub-traditions that are contained within it. In fact, we should imagine a hierarchy which goes from the most abstract to the more specific while dealing with traditions: from the general abstract idea of a tradition (e.g. a general idea of what is a religious tradition), to various actual traditions present in the world (e.g. Hinduism), to a differentiation of the actual tradition (e.g. Vaiṣṇava tradition), to an inner specification of this latter (e.g. Rāmānandī *sampradāya*), and finally to a singular identity in which the specific tradition manifests (e.g. Śrī Maṭh of Varanasi). In so doing, each tradition would be analyzed as a path, stressing its characteristics and the context in which it arises.

Therefore, to return to the idea of ‘invented tradition’, I think the term has to be used carefully, also taking into consideration that, although it can be useful in understanding some events, the concept itself may represent an act of invention because it is based on parameters that are mostly ‘etic’. Obviously, as we will see in Chapter 1, a

scientific analysis is based on an etic approach, but such an analysis sometimes proves to be unbalanced since emic parameters and the cultural values they reflect are not properly taken into account. Moreover, when a tradition is defined as invented, it becomes distant from, and unrelated to the emic explanation of it and hence can be considered to be from another point of view.¹⁰

Sometimes an inability to give assessments about an oral tradition and its transmission, and to date it properly, could drive one towards the idea of invention of tradition. However, the fact that in a tradition there are gaps in the written sources does not always mean that the tradition was interrupted. It could just as well be that the lack of evidence is because at that time it was not considered necessary to produce written documents in order to maintain continuity, or it could be that written evidence exists but can not be located. Hence, the fact that we (etic) do not find evidence for our classifications or reconstructions is certainly not enough to judge a tradition as invented.

Further, the word 'invention' stresses,¹¹ in my view, precise a systematic planning that is not always present, or even if a degree of planning is present, its purposes might be other than those (such as political and economic) that are favored by scholars. In fact, many scholars fail to take into consideration the fact that some events and changes have origins which cannot be simplified and explained as driven by political and economic reasons. Rather they may be the result of idealistic impulses such as faith and belief, which can lead a single individual or a group to act. I do not entirely dismiss the idea that these latter agents might make plans and neither do I claim that they act out of a blind spontaneity; rather I point to the necessity for further research in order to understand changes in traditions. Scholars could develop deeper understandings of an issue, a change or an innovation in a tradition through: 1) a deeper knowledge of the subjectivity of the agent, individual or group that supported a cultural change, especially (where possible) through historical reconstruction; 2) an understanding of the change and its purposes from an 'inside' point of view; 3) the retracing of the external pressures of the dominant context and the inner pressures that led to a specific change, or innovation.¹²

¹⁰ For a definition of etic and emic see Chapter 1, sec. 4.1.

¹¹ In fact, one definition of an invention is 'a creation of the imagination, a device, contrivance, or process originated after study and experiment'. (From *Imagination*, in The Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

¹² As Francis X. D'Sa has written: 'it is not possible to understand a tradition fully from the outside. To speak of a tradition from the outside is to speak of the 'outside' of the tradition and thus to miss the core. The identification of a tradition is not the same as the identity of the tradition. The identity derives from the cosmotheandric [integrated vision of the structure of the reality] experience, but the identification is determined by spatio-temporal and psychological factors. For those who are outside it, tradition is not what it

Therefore, I think that in those cases in which the 'invention' cannot be definitively confirmed, changes in a tradition should be interpreted as part of a more spontaneous process that imply the evolution of a tradition. The word 'evolution' appears to be more suitable for the interpretation of changes and innovations that are in a condition of continuity with the past, that are understandable in the historical context in which they are formulated and that are considered as such by the conveyors of a tradition. However, this does not mean that there are not inventions of tradition even inside the evolution of a tradition, because, as we will see in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and specifically with the activities of Bhagavadācārya, the creativity of charismatic people is a variable that should be taken into consideration as a vital element in change. However, as we will also see, a tradition invented *ex novo* rarely will be completely or blindly accepted.¹³

The use of the term evolution stresses not only the gradualness through which a tradition evolves (which can sometimes of course be accelerated as a result of inner and external stimuli) but also conveys the idea that a tradition (or part of a tradition) changes to allow its preservation. In fact, we will see in Chapter 3 that in certain difficult historical situations, religious leaders have to compromise (with the political power or a new social/religious context) in order to allow their centers or teachings to survive, even though this may lead to important changes. Because the evolution of a tradition has as one purpose the preservation of the tradition, it follows that a tradition does not necessarily evolve towards a more modern shape. Hence, unlike the idea of evolutionism, evolution of tradition can not be understood as a progressive path, because in some historical contexts it is possible that less 'modern' stands are introduced or supported in order to facilitate the survival of the tradition. For these reasons, I think the word evolution can be more meaningful and helpful in describing a wider range of circumstances than a label such as modernization or modernity of tradition, labels that furthermore present the problem of properly defining what is modern and what is modernity.

Once we begin to analyze a tradition by following its evolution, another issue has to be taken into consideration: that a tradition does not necessarily evolve in the same way or at the same time in different geographic areas. This means, therefore, that each tradition can present inner sub-traditions characterized by paths that should be analyzed both in their individuality and as part of the wider tradition. The example of the Rāmānandī

really is for those who are inside it. True, it might be a difficult task to enter a tradition and to see it from 'within'. This itself is a mark of the 'otherness' of the tradition' (1994: 86).

¹³ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 8.3.

sampradāya will illustrate and clarify these remarks throughout this dissertation. In fact, I will show how the use of evolution of tradition can be used to describe various situations: the history of the *sampradāya*, the history of its branches, the history of its main religious centers and the narration of the figure of its founder.

To this diachronic example of the evolution of tradition I will add a synchronic example: I will take into consideration some contemporary changes in the *sampradāya*, to show how a tradition is actualized and how elements from the past are re-interpreted and used in the present. That Rāmānanda had his *āśram* in Varanasi and he was the founder of the *sampradāya*, for example, are not new ideas but they have evolved over the centuries until they have been actualized in the present through the reconstruction of an ‘historical place’ (the Śrī Maṭh) and the bestowing of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya. It will be seen that present changes are at least in part a result of the new historical Indian religious environment in which there is a tendency to institutionalize religious orders by assigning specific places to them and making specific reference to their founders.

3. Asceticism and *bhakti*

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is an ascetic order composed of *sādhu*-s that follow various religious disciplines (*sādhanā*-s), devoting themselves to the *bhakti* of Rām in order to obtain *mokṣa* (freedom) or to remain in the state of *bhakti* itself. A characteristic of the *sampradāya* is the acceptance of low caste individuals in its branches.

To situate the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in the Indian ascetic frame, I will briefly give an historical overview of asceticism and *bhakti*. Then, I will introduce Rām *bhakti* as part of the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, in order to insert Rāmānandī-s’ asceticism in a more specific theoretical frame.

3.1 Asceticism and *bhakti*: a general overview

Although renunciation developed over the centuries alongside the development of soteriological theories and manifested in various tendencies,¹⁴ our knowledge about renunciation is mostly linked to what Patrick Olivelle calls ‘Brahmanical theology of

¹⁴ According to Patrick Olivelle, around the 3rd century B.C.E., there were two main ascetic currents in India: ‘anchorites living settled lives in forest hermitages cut off from social intercourse, and renunciators living itinerant lives in the wilderness but in interaction with towns and villages from which they begged their food’ (2008: 12).

renunciation' (*saṃnyāsa*), as it is based on Brahmanic sources (2008: 166).¹⁵ Brahmanic texts such as some *Dharmaśāstra*-s prescribe renunciation only for Brāhmaṇ-s (henceforward Brahman). According to the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, the renouncer should be a Brahman who does not perform the domestic sacrifices any more, but rather abandons everyone and wanders alone in the forest seeking 'the non-dual state of Brahma' (Burghart, 1978: 525). However, other sources, including the *Chāndhogya Upaniṣad*, the *Jābāla Upaniṣad* and the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣad*, state that *saṃnyāsa* is allowed to all the twice born (*dvija*) (Kane, 1941: 930).¹⁶

Renunciation as presented in Brahmanic sources, though, took caste into consideration, on the basis that not all individuals are equal. As Olivelle explains, in the Brahmanic religion, renunciation is possible for those who are ready to renounce to the Vedic sacrifices prescribed for the master of the house. Obviously, renouncing these rites, 'has significance only for a person who is qualified and obliged to perform' them (2008: 167).

To undertake *saṃnyāsa*, a specific ritual has to be accomplished that is described in the *Baudhayāna Dharma Sūtra*, probably the most ancient work to deal with the topic (Kane, 1941: 953-956). This ritual is marked by the effort to detach the future renouncer from his previous life: a cut from his physical appearance ('having cut the hair of the head, the

¹⁵ Olivelle argues that it is likely that Brahmins initially integrated the latter current into their religious structure as one of the possible modes of life (*āśrama*) and later on as the fourth and last stage in a pious' life. The *āśrama*-s as a system is testified to for the first time in the 2nd-3rd century B.C.E. in the *Dharma Sutra*-s, with the meaning of 'a mode of life devoted to religious exertion' (Olivelle, 2009: 155). This means that, initially, all the *āśrama*-s had the same value and represented only different lifestyles that could be adopted. Later, *āśrama*-s became codified as life stages to be followed by the hypothetical pious person of the first three *varṇa*-s (cf. note 16). The first *āśrama* was identified as a stage of study under a guru's guidance. In the second *āśrama*, a young adult married and raised a family. In the third one, a householder who had settled his children withdrew into the forest as a hermit. After a period of time in this stage, the man became a renouncer and remained in this last stage until the end of his life

¹⁶ This derives from the myth found in the *Ṛg Veda*, according to which the four *varṇa*-s originated from the sacrifice of the Puruṣa, the primordial man. Brahmins, Kṣatriya-s, Vaiśya-s and Śūdra-s were born from the four main parts of Puruṣa's body. The Brahmins were given the highest rank, as they came out from his head, as they are associated with sound and light. The Kṣatriya-s were generated from his shoulders, so they were associated with the protection of other creatures, while the Vaiśya-s, born from the thighs, were linked with trading and productive activities. The Śūdra-s, having risen from the feet of the Puruṣa, were associated with service. This myth describes a hierarchy which confines Śūdra-s to the bottom, and impedes them from receiving the sacred thread during the ceremony of *upanayana*. After this ceremony, men belonging to the first three *varṇa*-s become *dvija* (twice born), as they have received a second social and ritual birth, now making them eligible to study the Vedic texts. Śūdra-s and women were (and are still not) considered qualified to undertake the renouncing path, as understood by Brahmanic sources. The position of Brahmanic sources appears coherent about the topic of female asceticism: although only a few texts explicitly forbid it, it is always fully discouraged and considered as an inappropriate path for women. Texts such as the *Strī Dharma Paddhati* and the *Manu Smṛti* explain that women are supposed to follow a specific dharma (*strī dharma*), which depends on their nature (*strī svabhāva*) and which is fully accomplished through marriage, household life and the raising of children

beard, the hair on the body, the nails, as a theoretical cut with previous life'), and from his life in society ('he should go to the end of his village or to the extremity of the boundary of his village') (*ibid*: 952).

Any restrictions on who could undertake the ascetic path were not always respected in practice. In fact, as pointed out by Robert Gross, the *Mahābhārata* depicts ascetics from all caste groups: in certain passages of the epic, Kṣatriya-s, Vaiśya-s and Śūdra-s are said to have entered *saṃnyāsa* after they received permission from the king (1992: 32). Kane reports that the *Jābāl Upaniṣad* ordains that 'whoever feels disgusted with mundane affairs should resort to the wandering ascetic's life' (1941: 943). The *Viṣṇu Dharma Sūtra* and the *Yājñavalkya Upaniṣad* also testify to the presence of Śūdra-s as renouncers (*ibid*: 946). Further still, in other texts such as the *Jīvanmuktiviveka* and the *Kaivalya Upaniṣad*, it is stated that *mokṣa* is obtained by abandonment (*tyāga*) and that even women and Śūdra-s are eligible for it (*ibid*: 946). However, Kane explains that this abandonment did not allow women and Śūdra-s to undertake the external mode of life or symbols of ascetics. This approach is present also in the Śrīkara's *Bhāṣya* on the *Vedānta Sūtra*, which clarifies that *saṃnyāsa* is a path for the first three *varṇa*, while *nyāsa*, the abandonment of worldly pleasures and desires 'can be resorted to by women, Śūdras and mixed castes' (*ibid*).

Since several texts portray examples of Śūdra-s and women who undertook the ascetic path, we can borrow Olivelle's remark about *āśrama*-s and use it to consider prescriptive Brahmanic works about asceticism: perhaps the function of these texts was 'more at the level of theological legitimization than the level of observable reality' (2008: 57). Our knowledge depends mainly on Brahmanic texts because ascetic texts could obtain authority only if incorporated in Brahmanic categories. Proper textbooks (*paddhati*) on asceticism began to be produced only after the organization of the first monastic orders, which means in the 8th century.¹⁷ Written by renouncers, the function and authority of these textbooks was limited to specific ascetic settings (Rigopoulos, 2009: 84).

Therefore the portrait of renouncers contained in Brahmanic texts has to be understood only as a partial description of who can be an ascetic and what path an ascetic may follow.

Around that period, the ascetic landscape evolved further with the *bhakti* (devotion). The spread of *bhakti* was not a homogenized process because *bhakti* currents

¹⁷ In fact, in the Brahmanic texts mentioned, asceticism is not organized in sects yet.

differed from one region to another.¹⁸ Here, I will deal with *bhakti* only from a theoretical point of view, stressing those characteristics that are found in various *bhakti* currents, while further information will be given in the main corpus of this dissertation.

Bhakti comes from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, which means ‘to share in’, ‘to belong to’ or ‘to worship’. The term *bhakti* is a general label under which can be grouped a multitude of movements, whose common characteristic is devotion towards God. Its theistic structure can be traced back to *Upaniṣad*-s and *Purāṇa*-s and to sections of epics, among which is the *Bhāgavad Gītā*, wherein it is said that by God’s grace individuals can attain final liberation to become one with the highest God (BhG 18.54-6).

Theological differences inside the *bhakti* currents concerned the nature of the divine being as object of worship. Some groups preferred a *saguṇa* (with attributes) *bhakti*, which means they worshipped an anthropomorphic manifestation of the divine. Those who followed *nirguṇa* (without attributes) *bhakti* worshiped the divine in an unmanifest and non-anthropomorphic shape (Lorenzen, 1995: 1). As pointed out by David Lorenzen, *saguṇa bhakti* precedes *nirguṇa bhakti*, which spread in northern India around 15th century. *Nirguṇa* groups were numerically inferior compared to the *saguṇa* ones, although John S. Hawley hypothesizes that probably in that period there was not a strict *nirguṇa/saguṇa* divide (1995: 175).

Bhakti became both the goal of religious life and the means to such a goal: the grace of the divine can be obtained through it and, by consequence, *mokṣa* or salvation (Sawai, 2011: 25).

This new approach stimulated the spread of various religious orders founded by renunciators, who made devotion and renunciation central in their teachings. However, there were also groups that gave more importance to householder life rather than *saṃnyāsa* and supported the practice of an ascetic lifestyle within family life. Because all these groups were based on love for God, and gave predominance to devotion rather than to knowledge, they were less elitist, thus allowing the spread of this approach to various social levels (Olivelle, 2008: 26). As not all the *bhakti* orders followed the same *sādhana* (discipline) or identified God in the same way, the ascetic paths were highly differentiated, increasing the ‘ascetic possibilities’ that an individual could undertake compared with those described in the Brahmanic texts.

¹⁸ According to Chandra, to gain a proper understanding of the rise of *bhakti*, some issues such as the factors contributing to its growth and spread, its variations across different regions and its impact on society, politics and culture, should be studied in detail to create a more comprehensive frame (2003: 286).

This variety of ascetic paths has led Richard Burghart to affirm that ‘the only general statement which one can make concerning asceticism in the religious tradition of south Asia is that all ascetics see themselves as followers of some path which releases from the transient world (not the social world) and that all ascetics distinguish themselves from non-ascetics who do not seek such release’ (1978: 643). This statement is valuable for understanding the life of orders in both the past and the present.

Burghart points out that each order adopts a *sāadhanā* to reach liberation (*mokṣa*), each order has its own criteria to recruit ascetics and has ‘different rules concerning which social relationship must be severed in order to obtain release from transience’ (1983: 643). It follows that in dealing with caste, each order can present a specific approach. There are ascetic groups that follow caste rules and live as householders (such as the Vallabhī-s, Madhavācāryī-s, Ārya Samājī-s etc.); groups that follow caste for the recruitment but are houseless (like the Daśanāmī Saṁnyāsī-s); groups that are casteless but householders (such as the Raidāsī-s and the Śiva Nārāyanī-s etc.) and those that are houseless and casteless (such as Ājivīka-s, Buddhists etc.) (*ibid*: 642). This demonstrates that asceticism can manifest in many shapes and represents a very complex phenomenon, in which neither always living apart from society nor disregarding caste is necessary in order to be seen as an ascetic.

As a consequence, the answers to the questions ‘Who is an ascetic?’ and especially ‘Who can become an ascetic?’ depend on the criteria chosen by different religious groups.

This applies also to the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* whose criteria and approach originated in the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*,¹⁹ but evolved further as they are influenced by other religious tendencies.

3.2 Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*

A popular *bhakti* arose in South India and was spread by poet-saints known as Ālvār-s. As Tucci tells us, ‘these fools of God [...] found in the fire of faith the inspiration and the passion that turned these often ignorant individuals into great poets’ (2005: 224, my translation). Collected in four thousands hymns, the main doctrines expounded by the

¹⁹Katsuyuki Ida claims that Śaiva and Śākta traditions present some influences from *bhakti* although ‘strong feelings for and direct relationships with the divinity do not feature in most Śaivāgamas [...] in Tantric literature, roughly speaking, the word *bhakti* can be used in two different ways. First, as faith of belief in the divinity, which is clearly different from enthusiastic devotion [...]. Secondly, there is *bhakti* towards one’s own guru [...] while Devotionalism is grounded in the personal experience of mystic unity with the highest God, Tantrism regards the guru, who manages the ritual procedure and teaches the truth, as necessary for an individual’s pursuit of final liberation.’ (2011: 116-125).

Ālvār-s are: 1) Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa associated with Śrī is the *paratattva* (Supreme Truth); 2) *bhakti* or *prapatti* is the means to attain *mokṣa*; 3) service to God and godly men is an important duty of a true Vaiṣṇava; 4) *mokṣa* from bondage is the supreme goal (Srinivasa Chari, 1994: 20). In their poems, the grace of God is endless and able to transcend the law of *karma* and caste, and in fact, among Ālvār-s there were a few women and Śūdra-s (van der Veer, 1988: 97). In the 9th century, Nāthamuni, who is considered as the founder of the Śrī *sampradāya*, collected their songs and began a teaching in which their devotional approach was mixed with Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava sources.

In effect, Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava sources presented an ambivalent approach towards worship and caste. For example, Rabindra Kumar Siddhantashastree says that according to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* ‘every person belonging to any of the four castes, should perform the duties prescribed for his caste, never deviating even an inch from such duties, the former being the virtue and the latter the vice’ and that ‘a Vaiṣṇava should show respect to one and all, irrespective of the person’s caste and creed and even of his good or bad merits’ and that one can learn from ordinary people (1985: 114). Siddhantashastree reports similar approaches in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, which affirms ‘he who follows the principles of the castes and Āśramas can acquire efficiency to worship Lord Viṣṇu with devotion. The Lord cannot be propitiated by a man of the reverse quality’ (*ibid*: 125). In the *Narāda Pañcaratra* as well, it is written that:

A Śūdra may secure the same virtue by showing due respect to the three upper castes, especially to the Brāhmaṇas. Anybody belonging to any caste may secure piety by (i) devotional and faithful service to his parents and teachers, (ii) restraint of his senses, (iii) nontrespass to the works of other castes, (iv) obedience to the injunctions of his own caste, (v) submission to the rules of the sacred lore, and (vi) restraint from the act of killing’. (1985: 126)

However, the text also argues that ‘a devotee of Lord Viṣṇu is more sacred than a holy place, or even than an image of any deity’ (*ibid*: 123).

In the traditional Brahmanic Vaiṣṇava texts the *varṇāśramadharmā* is socially and religiously important, although there is also the idea of a Vaiṣṇava value common to all devotees, which is not based on caste but on personal religious excellence and devotion.

The importance of the *varṇāśramadharmā* with relation to *bhakti* will influence Nāthamuni’s successors. After Nāthamuni, the *paramparā* was continued by Yāmunaṃṇi, whose main disciple was Rāmānūja (traditionally, 1017-1137 C.E.).

According to Bunki Kimura, Rāmānūja introduces *bhakti* into the system of the Vedānta school and establishes it as a means for obtaining *mokṣa*.²⁰ Rāmānūja discussed the issues in three major works: the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, the *Śrī Bhāṣya* and the *Bhagavadgītā Bhāṣya*. These works represented the core of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. In this Vedānta, Rāmānūja identifies the Brahman with the personal God, Nārāyaṇa, characterized by countless auspicious attributes (*saḡuṇa*). He affirmed that although the *ātman* (soul) and the Brahman are not one and the same, the former is a dependent entity that cannot exist without the latter, and he established the reality of the phenomenal world as a dependent entity of the Brahman (2011: 51). Rāmānūja presented a theistic view of the world in which, after studying the *Veda*-s, one should perform the proper acts assigned by the holy texts to attain *mokṣa*. Through practice, a devotee improves his *bhakti* toward God, and may develop *parabhakti*, the step before *mokṣa*. According to Rāmānūja, the perception of God becomes clear through continuous meditation. When this perception clarifies, it leads to the knowledge of God that Rāmānūja refers to as *parabhakti*, the meditation which possesses the nature of *bhakti*. As he identified *parabhakti* with the knowledge of Brahman, *parabhakti* conformed with the means of moving towards *mokṣa* approved by the Vedānta school (*ibid*: 57-58). Rāmānūja stresses in his *Vedārthasaṃgraha*: ‘when one wishing for *mokṣa* is devoted to the meditation possessing the nature of the knowledge enjoined by passages of the *Upaniṣad*-s, unlimited and unsurpassed love is originated in him in the midst of that meditation. At the same time, the Supreme Person is grasped through it’. According to Rāmānūja, God rules the *karma* that an *ātman* accumulates in the *saṃsāra* and its possibility to attain *mokṣa*. Therefore, God is the sole master and by consequence *bhakti* is the indispensable means by which to grant the *ātman* the attainment of his grace and *mokṣa* (Kimura, 2011: 66).

From a social point of view, Rāmānūja’s teaching suggests the existence of a universal Vaiṣṇava *dharma* which did not link religious duty to social function, but rather was a commitment of individuals who, being Vaiṣṇava-s, had equal dignity before God (Clémentin-Ojha, 1995: 97). Mlecko argues that Rāmānūja based his teaching on the idea that ‘intense devotion would purify the mind of unbelief, open the individual to divine grace and thereby relieve the individual of sorrow’ (1982: 47). As a consequence, ‘even Śūdra and the outcaste could attain salvation by complete surrender to the will of the guru’ (*ibid*). However, as Siddhantashastree argues, Rāmānūja thought of *bhakti* as pure devotion

²⁰ Kimura says that before the 10th century Brahmans in the Vedic tradition scarcely recognized *bhakti* as a means of attaining *mokṣa* (2011: 51).

that could be practiced only by the three upper castes, while Śūdras could practice *prapatti* or surrender to God (1985: 139).

This attitude led to the development of two further religious approaches that also differed in their attitude towards Śūdra-s. The southern group, called Tenkalai, supported the notion that every person, irrespective of caste and creed, was entitled to practice *prapatti*.²¹ The northern group, called Vadakalai, 'strictly followed the teachings of Ramanuja that *bhakti* could be secured by the people belonging to the three upper castes only, and that the Shudras caste was entitled to tread the way of Prapatti' (Siddhantashastree, 1985: 140).²²

As the role of *prapatti* is central to the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, I will provide here some notes about its meaning and religious value.

The term *prapatti* derives from the root *pad* which means 'to move' and the prefix *pra-* that implies 'in the best manner- towards, ahead'. The term refers to total self-surrender to God, and moving towards God as the sole refuge (*śaraṇāgate*). *Prapatti* does not require the observance of any *-yoga*, (understood as 'method' in this case), and it is the easiest path by which attain salvation. According to Rāmānūja and Vedānta Deśika, it is not possible to attain *mokṣa* without observing *prapatti*:

even those who resort to *bhakti-yoga* [understood as the path to reach *bhakti*] as means to *mokṣa*, have to observe *prapatti* as a subsidiary (*aṅga*) to *bhakti-yoga*. The purpose of the observance of *prapatti* in their case is to seek the grace of God in order to overcome the obstacles standing in the way of commencement of *bhakti-yoga* and also for successful completion of it. (C. Srinivasa, 2005: 264)

The path towards *bhakti* is marked by rigorous discipline:

A person [who] takes recourse to *bhakti* should acquire philosophic knowledge and should go through the discipline of *karma-yoga* and *jñāna-yoga* leading to the direct intuition of self. *Karma-yoga* consists in the observance of the religious rituals prescribed by the sacred texts for divine pleasure without any selfish motive. *Jñāna-yoga* refers to constant meditation on the individual self until it leads to the direct vision of the self.

²¹ Ishitobi explains that the founder of this group, Pillai Lokācārya, believed that not many people can reach a goal notwithstanding their effort. Therefore, he did not consider *bhakti* an easy path whereas he regarded *prapatti* as easier to perform, in that it did not need any human effort. For him, *prapatti* implied 'to do nothing' and it is accomplished by the cessation that results from the knowledge of the true self. Unlike ritualistic forms, *prapatti* has no limitation in place, time, method or qualification and can be performed by women and Śūdra-s (2011: 79-80).

²² Vedānta Deśika, a supporter of this school of thought, argued that *prapatti* was a form *bhakti*, but that *bhakti* was superior to it. Therefore, those who cannot practice *bhakti*, such as Śūdra-s and women, can practice *prapatti* albeit with some restriction (Ishitobi, 2011: 88)

After the successful completion of *jñāna-yoga*, the person embarks on *bhakti-yoga*, which involves meditation on God. (*ibid*: 265)

Bhakti and *prapatti* are prescribed for two different categories of individuals with different eligibility requirements. *Prapatti* is essentially a kind of ethical-spiritual discipline comprising six components (*ibid*: 268-269):

- 1) A determined will on the part of the aspirants to perform only such acts as would please God.
- 2) A refrain from acts which would cause displeasure to God.
- 3) The feeling of humility arising from the helplessness of an individual in resorting to other means of salvation.
- 4) An absolute and unshakable faith in God as the sole protector.
- 5) The seeking of the protection of God.
- 6) Entrust in the burden of protecting the individual self to the care of God.

According to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānanda was a follower of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānūja and a supporter of *prapatti* as the path to spread in order to allow as many people as possible (especially women and Śūdra-s) to reach God. However, Rāmānanda did not address his devotionalism towards Nārāyaṇa but towards Rām.

3.3 Rām *bhakti*

Devotion to Rām does not seem to have a very long tradition. In fact, the earliest representations of Rām were connected to a royal iconographic context rather than to a religious worship. As argued by Sheldon Pollock, before the 12th century, Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ were used as paradigmatic figures by royal dynasties. Rām represented the perfect king, and narrative elements from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were used as ornamental forms in temples and narrations. Therefore, Rām was a popular subject for literature and art rather than a deity to worship (1993: 264, 270). This situation changed in the second half of the 12th century when few a Rām temples appeared in the present area of Madhya Pradesh. In these temples, local rulers did not compare themselves to Rām but created a complete identification with him, on the wake of a process of deification of both the rulers and Rām (*ibid*).

Even Sanskrit ritual texts of the period, such as the *Rāmapūrvatāpanīya Upaniṣad*, the *Rām Rakṣā Stotra* and the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, had begun manifesting a new devotional approach toward Rām. The *Agastya Saṃhitā* in fact was a crucial work for Rām *bhakti* since

it asserted the identity of Viṣṇu and his *avatār* Rām, leading toward the deification of the latter (Bakker, 1986: 67-78).

Actually, Ramaite theology appears eclectic in character because it claims that the best way to reach God in the Kali *yuga* is through *kīrtan* (playing) and *ārādhana* (worship), but also yoga and meditation are to be considered as tools on the path towards God (Bakker, 1986: 70). The core of Rām *bhakti*, which unifies both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* currents, is the Rām mantra.²³ Bakker explains that this mantra is understood as the highest reality, which manifests in two aspects: one is the supreme light which is the sound Rā, and the essence of all phenomena that is homologized with Ma, therefore Rā-ma (Rām) is the highest reality. The use of the Rām mantra allows the manipulation of a particular divine cosmic force (1986: 71). This mantra, according the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, was passed from gurus to *śiṣya* from the heaven till the Earth. The first guru was Rām himself: he initiated Brahmā, who in turn initiated all the other Gods and then the Rām mantra was made known to the world of man by Śiv and Brahmā. The latter initiated the seer Vasista, who then transmitted it to other sages.

Another central text for Rām *bhakti* was the *Adhyātmya Rāmāyaṇa* (14th-15th century), which reinterpreted the story of Rām in the light of his apparent deification. Vasudha Paramasiva synthetizes that: “The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* interpreted the Ram *katha* [story] within an *advaita* [non-dual] framework. In the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Ram and Sita are equated with the *saṃkhyā* concepts of *puruṣa* and *prakṛiti*, the primordial male and female principles, as well as with the *advaita* concepts of *Brahman*, or transcendental reality and *māya*, or illusion’ (2010: 33).

According to Edmour J. Babineau, it can be assumed on the basis of several passages in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* that a Rām community existed in northern India around the 15th century. This text refers to a community of devotees ‘who fast on special days, who are sacred unto Rāma, who recite the name of Rāma, who worship Rāma, and who “having observed a fast on the Ekādaśī day expound the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* to an assembly of devout persons”’ (1979: 78). This would point to the fact that, during the period of Rāmānanda, around the 15th century, a few Ramaite groups and Ramaite ascetics were

²³ Bakker suggests that between the 13th-15th century the cult of the Rām name arose as a form of *sādhana* for the movement of *bhakta* Sant-s, a movement that ‘due to the establishment of Muslim rule and the spread of Sufism [...] can be conceived of as a mediating link between Sufism and traditional Hinduism, especially Vaiṣṇavism’. Its characteristics were *nirguṇa bhakti*, no idol-worship, communal singing, *nām jāp* and *prem* (love) *bhakti*. However, in this context, Bakker explains, Rām may have meant nothing more or less than God beyond all qualifications (1986: 71).

already present in northern India, perhaps in their initial phase.

The teaching of Rāmānanda and his disciples, thus, further contributed to the spread of Rām *bhakti*, which according Bakker, became a popular tradition around the 16th-17th century with the spread of the *Rāmcaritmānas* (1982: 108). In the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsīdās's masterpiece composed in Avadhī in the 16th century,²⁴ Rām is identified as the Supreme Absolute and love of God is the central theme of the work. Therefore, although Tulsīdās does not reject the *nirguṇa* conception of the Absolute, he prefers the *saguṇa* form (Babineau, 1979: 135-136). According to Babineau, Tulsīdās was not interested in philosophical meanings, he wanted 'to propose the most beneficial, or salvific, way of considering God, namely as Supreme Love' (*ibid*: 138). Tulsīdās highlights the importance of the name of Rām to such an extent that he declares it to be greater than the two forms of the Absolute, *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* (*ibid*).

Rām *bhakti* was a devotional stream that encompassed, and still encompasses today, both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa bhakti* and, as we will see in Chapter 2, both these two approaches are present in the teaching of Rāmānanda. This versatility of the *bhakti* of Rām had been justified to me by *sādhu*-s for two main reasons: the nature of Rām and the nature of his devotees. As Rām had a life characterized both by householder and *saṁnyāsa* stages, he can satisfy the imaginary of ascetics in various way: being the perfect ascetic (personified in the *tyāgī sādhanā*), the brave and honorable warrior (personified in the *nāgā sādhanā*) as well as the righteous king and husband to whom one should be devoted (personified in the *rasik sādhanā*).²⁵ At the same time, because the nature of a human being is multifarious, the presence of various forms of Rām *bhakti* is necessary to satisfy various individual attitudes.

Another important trait of Rām *bhakti* is the importance attached to the guru. However, the role of the guru has a much longer tradition that variously evolved over centuries and according to religious contexts.

3.4 Guru as spiritual master

The word *guru*²⁶ is often used to denote someone who has a high level of expertise in a given field. In this dissertation, however, the term *guru* is used to specify a spiritual

²⁴ I will deal with Tulsīdās and his works in Chapter 3, sec. 4.3.

²⁵ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 5.2.

²⁶ According to Mlecko (1982: 33), one of the meanings of *guru* derives from the etymology which considers *gu-* to mean 'ignorance' and *-ru*, 'dispeller'. Hence, a *guru* is one who eliminates all kinds of ignorance.

teacher, someone who has soteriological expertise and can teach it to disciples who are linked to him through initiation. I will focus on this specific meaning because it properly describes the Jagadgurū in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and his relationship with his disciples, who are exclusively lay people.²⁷

The guru as spiritual master developed in several traditions, each of which stressed a given characteristic depending on the particular religious approach supported. For example, the *Jñāna-yoga* tradition established by Śāṅkara involves a guru who gives a particular emphasis to *saṃnyāsa* for both himself and his disciple and who gives high value to knowledge as a means of obtaining *mokṣa*. In Tantric contexts, though, the guru is considered as a kind of god, because of his knowledge of magic mantras and rituals. Because Tantrism is based on esoteric disciplines, the guru is of primary importance as he or she is the only one able to show and explain the path necessary to reach the union with God.²⁸ In the *bhakti* currents, instead, the guru is ‘someone who has attained the mercy of God, and who can act as an intermediary between the disciple and God’ (Broo, 2003: 75). As Broo says, for those people following a *bhakti* path:

The main qualification of the guru is his often ecstatic devotion, a qualification that can override birth in a low caste, illiteracy or other things that would disqualify a guru of the earlier types. (2003: 75)

However, once again we have to stress that there were not strict guidelines or univocal approaches toward guru-ship. As demonstrated by Rigopoulos, a text such as the *Gurū Gītā*, a panegyric hymn about the guru, associated with a Śaiva context and Śāṅkara’s non-dualist theologies,²⁹ is popular all over India and it is not linked to a specific *sampradāya*; rather, it has been thought appropriate by Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śakta groups alike

²⁷ The role of guru as teacher and spiritual master evolved over the centuries as well. Mans Broo (2003) gives an idea of the ‘stages of guruhood,’ which I would rather describe as ‘types of gurus,’ to place more stress on the specific religious context and the role that a guru had (and still has) in the life of his or her disciples than on the chronology. In fact, the evolution of one type of guru did not necessarily supplant preexisting types of gurus. The contemporaneous presence of various religious disciplines and orders allowed (and allows) different types of gurus to exist at the same time. As Broo explains, in Vedic time, for a guru to be recognized as such, he had to ‘belong to the right family, and to know the particular texts by heart’ (2003: 74). He was an *ācārya* (teacher) and his disciples were *brahmācāri*-s. His main function was (and still is among those who continue to follow this *guru-śiṣya* system of teaching) to pass on the Vedic canon. For a comprehensive historical explanation of the role of the *guru-ācārya* and his relationship with the disciples, see Rigopoulos (2009: 41-70). The *Upaniṣad*-s introduce the figure of the spiritual master but as Giovanni Torcinovich writes (2007), it is in the earliest *Upaniṣad*-s that the word guru gets its spiritual nuance. *Upaniṣad*-s concern a more mystic, otherworldly knowledge which has the purpose of realizing the union between the self and the divine. The guru for the *Upaniṣad*-s has ‘esoteric and mystic quality of metaphysical knowledge’ (Broo, 2003: 74).

²⁸ See Rigopoulos (2009: 153).

²⁹ It glorifies the *guru-tattva* (the principle of the guru) as the Absolute Brahman, model of devotion and knowledge (Rigopoulos, 2009: 225).

(Rigopoulos, 2009: 229). For example, according to Caracchi, a *śloka* of the *Gurū Gītā* is contained in one of the Hindi compositions of Rāmānanda, the *Rām Rakṣā* (1999: 221). Caracchi supposes that, as the *Gurū Gītā* was a well-known composition, it is likely that the author of the *Rām Rakṣā* naturally added some of its *śloka*-s because he was familiar with its recitation (*ibid.*).

In the following paragraphs I will focus on the guru in the Vaiṣṇava context, to give a historical framework to the idea of guru as perceived in the tradition to which Rāmānanda perhaps belonged.

3.4.1 The guru in the Vaiṣṇava context

The first text to take into consideration in introducing the Vaiṣṇava context is the *Rāmāyaṇa* and even this very early text stresses the need both human and divine beings have for a guru. Mlecko reminds us that when Rām was in the forest searching for Sītā he met a female ascetic who was his devotee and he described to her the nine typologies of *bhakti*, among which the third is service to the guru. According to Mlecko, this event is significant because it shows a shift from a Brahmanic religious education and experience towards ‘a more popular religiosity that enhanced the importance of the teacher to the lessening of the immediate importance of the priest, scripture, and even the gods’ (Mlecko, 1982: 41).

A similar value is given to the guru in the *Pāñcarātra*. Consulting three *Samhitā* compiled in the early period of the *Pāñcarātra* tradition, Hiromichi Hikita shows that the *Jayākhya Samhitā* gives a particular accent to *bhakti* towards the guru:

The most interesting aspect of this text is that it insists on *bhakti* towards a preceptor. It is one of the *bhaktis* to a preceptor (*guru*) that involves the sacrificial fire (*agni*) and the teaching of mantras (mantra Śāstra) (16.305ab). [...] Since the preceptor is considered the incarnation of the god who could save people in this world, those fearful of transmigration should have devotion to their preceptors. Hence, a devotee of Viṣṇu should devote himself to similar devotees, particularly the preceptor (16.307). In any circumstance, without devotion to the preceptor, it is impossible to even know his name (2011: 39).

The task of the guru is to teach only those devotees who have purified minds and righteous dispositions and, as Hikita says, these devotees are those who search for emancipation in God and dedicate themselves to Viṣṇu (*ibid.*).

Another group of texts to take into consideration are the Vaiṣṇava *Purāṇa*-s (*Viṣṇu*, *Padma*, and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*). Siddhantashastree stresses that in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the spiritual master is the necessary guide to lead a Vaiṣṇava on the path of devotion. This guru should be ‘well-versed in the Vedic lore, having proper realization of the Supreme Spirit and adequate experience to interpret the spiritual truth’ (1985: 112). However, at the same time, the text argues that it is also possible to learn lessons from ordinary people – and even animals – and that individuals can obtain supernatural power simply through their devotion (1985: 114). It is likely that this approach, in addition to the importance given to Viṣṇu’s *avatār*-s, creates an environment more sympathetic to the needs of common people. In fact, Mlecko claims that the doctrine of *avatār*-s directing worship to a human-like personality transformed human emotions ‘into means of religious devotion, thereby making salvation more readily accessible’ (1982: 43). Therefore:

Salvation could not be confined to persons of high birth alone if devotion was the prime qualification. Human relationships and human emotions were recognized as inherent, worthwhile goods. (Siddhantashastree, 1985: 43)

This enhanced the obedience and devotion directed towards the guru, who began to be identified with the personal deity, since only through the guidance of the guru could *mokṣa* (liberation) be obtained.

A theorization of the role of guru in the Śrī *sampradāya* is found in the *Guruparamparāsāra* written by Vedānta Deśika (1268-1369), who was part of the Rāmānūjī *paramparā*. As Francis X. Clooney explains, the *Guruparamparāsāra* is an introductory chapter of Deśika’s *Śrīmat Rahasyatrayasāra*, which is ‘a comprehensive presentation of Śrī Vaiṣṇava exegesis, philosophy, theology, practice and religious sociology, all woven into a single treatise expressive of what it means to believe and practice the truths and values’ (2005: 205). The text stresses the need to have a guru and to show devotion to him in order to obtain *mokṣa* since, as Clooney reports, ‘merit does not gain liberation, nor does sin make it impossible’ (*ibid*: 206). The reason for the need of a guru/*ācārya* is not explicitly explained but it is traditionally accepted that it is because he is part of the *paramparā* and because he personifies the guru-role of god.

In fact, the Lord is seen as the primal teacher, the ‘guru of all worlds’, and he acts through his human teachers. In the specific case of the *Guruparamparāsāra*, because the Lord works through the gurus of the Sri Vaiṣṇava *paramparā*, these men are considered to be divine persons (2005: 209). The end of the *Guruparamparāsāra* describes acts of

reverence, explaining that:

For the one whose devotion is focused on the guru just as on the Lord, everything he desires will become evident [...]. It follows that in all circumstances a person should glorify his guru by overflowing devotion for the guru. (Clooney, 2005: 212).

The role of the guru is highlighted in the *Rāmcaritmānas*. Tulsīdās describes the guru as the ocean of wisdom, he ‘is the physician, whose words are the rays of the sun to disperse the deep darkness of powerful ignorance’ (Babineau, 1979: 119). His role as preceptor is not limited to the religious field as he is the confidant, consultant and comforter of the family. Several episodes in the *Rāmcaritmānas* show kings, even Rām himself, having an obedient attitude towards the gurus, who have a prominent place in public social life and domestic circle (*ibid*). As Babineau points out Rām is frequently and explicitly described in the *Rāmcaritmānas* as the guru, to whom other characters address as ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘friend’, ‘master’ (*ibid*: 131). Respect to the guru is an important duty because he is considered as sacred.

To mention briefly other Vaiṣṇava strands, a similar attitude is found in the Nimbārka and Vallabha *sampradāya* as well. In the Nimbārka *sampradāya*, included among the basic *sādhana*-s (*karma, jñāna, upāsana, prapatti*) is also *gurūpasatti* or devotion to the guru (Mlecko, 1982: 50). In the Vallabha sect, Vallabha and his descendants were regarded as incarnations of Kṛṣṇa. In other *sampradāya*-s, the guru is associated with the highest deity of the sect: Rāmānūja is venerated as an *avatār* of Viṣṇu and Rāmānanda as an *avatār* of Rām.

To summarize, the devotion in the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* is directed towards both the deity and the guru, who is identified with the *iṣṭa devatā* (personal deity) to such an extent that she or he is both the path to the divine and the embodiment of the ultimate goal (Rigopoulos, 2009: 139). The *guru-śiṣya* relationship is based on submission and devotion: once initiated, the disciple attempts to reach *mokṣa* (freedom of his or her soul) through reverence (*upāsana*), service (*sevā*) and surrender (*prapatti*) to his or her guru.

3.5 Asceticism and guruship in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*

In this dissertation, I interpret the internally diversified nature of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as a consequence of the religious approach of Rāmānanda, who taught Rām *bhakti* to ascetics and householders and supported an approach characterized by yogic practices and devotion, in a *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* shape according to the devotee’s needs.

Rāmānanda is also said not to have taken into consideration rules of caste in accepting disciples. It is likely that Rāmānanda's disciples (and subsequently their own disciples) followed this mixed teaching and, while passing it on, incorporated new theories or developed new interpretations that led to the creation of branches of the *sampradāya* with more specific characteristics.

Today, all these branches have a common theoretical substratum based on Rām *bhakti* and Rām mantra, *prapatti*, *sevā* and *vairāgya* (detachment). This latter word is fundamental to the understanding of Rāmānandī ascetics (who are also known as Vairāgī-s) and it expresses a disinterest and detachment from sensual, worldly objects.

As Robert Gross has pointed out, the core of the Rāmānandī *bhakti* is *prapatti*:

As such, it is for them [...] the fundamental aim of renunciation and asceticism [...] the attainment of a state of complete surrender is placed substantially above the yogic goal of samadhi. Indeed, samadhi defined by those dedicated to the path of bhakti is equated with a state of intense one-pointed devotion to God. (1992: 257)

Although for Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s, *sevā* (service) has a social meaning because it benefits society as a whole and holy men (a practice very diffused in *tyāgī* centers), it is principally for God. Gross argues:

The highest form of *sādhana* [...] is *niskama-sevā* or "selfless service to God", and the highest form of selfless service is pure devotion of one's whole being to God in meditation [...] is a reflection of the enlightened state brought about by devotion and surrender leading to the realization that God Himself is this world [...] the realization that all human actions are acts of devotion and love directed and offered to God existing in all being is the vital spiritual belief and legacy of the bhakti tradition followed in the religious life of the Ramanandi sadhus. (1992: 287)

However, ways in which *prapatti*, *sevā* and *vairāgya* are achieved varies according to the particular religious discipline followed by particular Rāmānandī ascetics. In the *sampradāya*, in fact, there are three different types of ascetics: *tyāgī*, *rasik* and *nāgā*.³⁰

All Rāmānandī-s share some common features. For example, they apply on their arms the mark of the bow (on the left) and the arrows (on the right). They all apply the mark of the Vaiṣṇava *tilak* (the *ūrdhvapuṇḍra*) on the forehead, while some Rāmānandī-s also apply it on the chest and abdomen. This *tilak* usually consists of two white vertical lines and a red

³⁰ In Chapter 3, I will provide an explanation of the origin and evolution of these branches, considering influences from other *sampradāya*-s and practices.

one in the middle, but there are many significant variations according to the various *paramparā*-s. As A.W. Entwisle points out, ‘sectarian tilakas are worn according to the pattern approved by the guru who gives a devotee his tilaka at the time of the initiation’ (2003: 8). Entwisle also reports that some Rāmānandī-s interpret the form of their *tilak* as representing Rām and his brother Lakṣmaṇa standing on either side of Sītā, while the stroke at the base, that is called *siṅh āsan* (lion throne), represents Hanumān kneeling at their feet (*ibid*: 22). During my fieldwork, some Rāmānandī-s gave me this interpretation, while others told me the *tilak* actually represents the footstep of Viṣṇu. The *tilak* is normally made with *candan* that is prepared by rubbing a piece of sandalwood and adding water and clay until a white or cream colored paste is formed. However, sandal is not always necessary and clay can be used alone. Rāmānandī-s also use a yellow-brown clay called *rāmraj* and sometimes they also mix orange and yellow colors (*ibid*: 46).

The color of the *tilak* and its dimensions and other characteristics can vary considerably. Sometimes a red dot beneath the red line can be included, or it can substitute completely for the line in a form called *lāl Śrī*, which is said to symbolize Lakṣmī or Sītā. Sometimes the red line is substituted by a white dot, while other times on either side of the normal *tilak* the words ‘Sītā Rām’ are written.

The external appearance of Rāmānandī ascetics depends on their *sādhanā*.

Tyāgī-s and *nāgā*-s, who perform practices of extreme physical austerity and wandering, have mostly matted hair (*jaṭā*) and beards, while many Rāmānandī *rasik*-s, who are devotional worshippers, have long hair and beards, although sometimes instead they may have shaved heads and faces, and shaved arms and armpits.

All Rāmānandī ascetics wear a *kañṭhī* that is the Vaiṣṇava *mālā* (rosary) made of *tulsī* (basil). Some *tyāgī*-s also wear earrings made of *tulsī*.

On special occasions *tyāgī*-s and *nāgā*-s cover their bodies with ashes from the fire that they carry with them, as I will explain below. The clothing of *tyāgī*-s and *nāgā*-s is very similar: they wear just a *langoṭī* (loincloth) and when they are in a social context they may wear a cotton cloth draped around their body, or around their hips, like a *lungī* (a kind of apron). Usually the colors worn are white, ivory, and yellow, although during my fieldwork I have seen *sādhu*-s wearing grey or brownish woolen cloths in winter as well. All their clothes are usually unstitched. Similarly unstitched are those of some *rasik*-s, like the Jagadgurū, who wear white or orange clothes draped around their body. However, some *rasik* I met were wearing a *lungī* and a *kurtā*, the latter stitched.

Although each group has its proper rituals during the *dīkṣā* (initiation), a common feature is that Rāmānandī ascetics are not completely shaved but instead keep the *śikā*, the top-knot, and they change the *dvija janeu* with another sacred thread. Śaiva ascetics shave off the top-knot and remove the *janeu* during the initiation to symbolize, as we have mentioned, the abandonment of the worldly order. On the other hand, as I will stress in Chapter 6, Rāmānandī-s keep the *śikā* to demonstrate that they are not renouncers of the world, but are detached from it (*virakta*), because their main purpose is *bhakti* itself and the worship of God. From this perspective, being part of the *saṃsāra* is a way of continuing doing *bhakti* for God. The *śikā* and the new *janeu* symbolize the vow of Rāmānandī-s to keep performing and accepting Vedic rituals, even as some also follow Brahmanic rituals (for example some Rāmānandī ascetics are not buried but burned after death).³¹

Tyāgī and *nāgā* Rāmānandī-s can also carry a *kamaṇḍal*, or water pot, an accessory common among wandering ascetics, but something that *rasik* Rāmānandī-s do not carry. Some leaders (like the Jagadgurū) can carry a *tridaṇḍa* enveloped in orange cloth.³² Olivelle says that the *tridaṇḍa* is called Viṣṇu *rūpa* (the image of Viṣṇu) or Viṣṇu *liṅga* because ‘Viṣṇu or more probably an incarnation of Viṣṇu, carried a triple staff while defending the triple Veda against heretical attacks’ (2008: 235).

I will introduce now the differences in *sādhanā* of these branches, and further explanations will be given in the following chapters.

The word *tyāgī* comes from *tyāg*, which means ‘leaving’ or ‘abandoning’: these ascetics leave behind clothing, food, housing and sexual gratification (van der Veer, 1988: 107) to begin a wandering life-style. Usually *tyāgī*-s are organized in itinerant groups, called *jamāt*, but there are also *tyāgī* centers that have the purpose of doing *sevā* for other ascetics (those I visited do not host lay people). Old *tyāgī*-s live there permanently.

Tyāgī-s’ *sādhanā* consists of many practices coming from yoga *sādhanā*, which aims to produce *tapas*. *Tapas* in general means ‘to burn’ and in the ascetic context it specifies ‘penance, austerities, and self-denial’, with practices that can range from dietary restrictions to atrophying parts of the body. These have the purpose of leading to self-

³¹ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 3.7.

³² The carrying of a unique *daṇḍa* is typical of *saṃnyāsī*-s from Daśanāmī groups. Gurye states that among *saṃnyāsī*-s, only Brahmans who belong to four orders (*Āśrama*, *Bhāratī*, *Sarasvatī* and *Tīrtha*) of the Daśanāmī are required to carry a *daṇḍa* to symbolize their status (1964: 72). The word *tridaṇḍī* is generally associated with Vaiṣṇava ascetics, because Rāmānūja is said to have founded a school of asceticism with *tridaṇḍī*-s (Gurye, 1964: 54). This was also testified by William Joseph Wilkins in 1877. Wilkins said that in South India Rāmānūjī-s who enter *saṃnyāsa* carry the *tridaṇḍa* to distinguish their status (Sardella, 2013: 90).

control, to overcome the pull of the senses, desires, and the ego in order to achieve union with the Divine (Gross, 1992: 327). Without *tapas* and self-sacrifice religious realization and salvation is not considered to be possible.

Tapas is also symbolized by the presence of a fire (*dhunī*) that *tyāgī*-s keep alive because they need it for their ritual activities. It is from this fire that ascetics take the ashes with which they cover their bodies. However, during my fieldwork I have seen that *tyāgī* and *nāgā* do not always smear ashes on their body, but rather do so only on special occasions. For example, I have seen a *tyāgī* who often accompanies the Jagadgurū covering his body only before going to the Saṅgam during the Mahā Kumbh Melā.³³ On that occasion he was wearing only the *langoṭī*, whereas usually he wears a brownish cotton cloth.

Nāgā (naked) ascetics were connected to the protection of the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s and as such they were ‘militant’ ascetics associated with the use of weapons and physical training.³⁴ In the past, *nāgā*-s used to participate in trading, following and exploiting pilgrimage routes and centers; and sometimes they also used to fight as mercenaries.³⁵ Today they still have the task of ensuring that the rules of the *sampradāya* are respected.

To become a *nāgā* an individual has to be already an ascetic, because a *nāgā* guru gives only a second initiation. Furthermore, to become a ‘complete’ *nāgā* there is a long path characterized by *śreṇī* (grade).³⁶ While on this path the novice is a *yātrī* and he often travels in the company of other *nāgā*-s who he initially supports by doing simple tasks in a stage called *chorā*: the novice has to perform services such as sweeping, washing clothes, preparing the bath and so on; these services are known also as *rakmī*. Then follows the *vandagīdār* stage: the novice has to take care of the pantry and prepare food for the ascetics, he can carry the tray to the temple and take and raise the flag of Hanumān. In the *hurdangā* stage, the novice is then allowed to do *sevā*, *pūjā* and *ārtī* to the God, to give offerings, to serve the *sādhu*-s during their communal meals and he is initiated into the science of weapons. During the *mudāṭhiyā* step, the novice performs *pūjā* and *sevā* to holy people and he ministers and takes care of everybody, even of expenditures in the

³³ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.4.

³⁴ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 5.3.

³⁵ Warrior ascetics were quite common in Indian asceticism and were particularly widespread around the 16th-18th centuries. The topic deserves a proper analysis but here I can only refer to the works of Farquhar (1925), Orr (1940); Cohn (1964); Kolff (1971), Lorenzen (1978); Bouillier (1993); Pinch (2006).

³⁶ Although there are several scholars who have listed the *śreṇī*, I use here a list present in an article written by Ved Prakash Garga contained in a work produced by the Śrī Maṭh (2007: 150-151).

center; at this stage he becomes an expert in the use of the weapons. After this stage, the novice is accepted as a *nāgā* and his purpose is to protect the followers of the *sampradāya*, *maṭh*-s and temples. He can form a *jamāt* and travel the country to spread the Vaiṣṇava dharma and he can organize the Kumbh Melā.

Every *śreṇī* lasts for three years, therefore twelve years of training are necessary before becoming a *nāgā*.³⁷

Rāmānandī *nāgā*-s are organized in three sections called Anī: Nirmohī, Nirvānī and Digambar. Each Anī consists of sub-sections called *akhārā*-s. Because the role and history of these groups will be delineated in Chapter 3, here I will only mention that the word *akhārā* means ‘wrestling ground’ and refers to the place where martial arts are usually practiced in India, stressing then the physical *sādhanā* which *nāgā*-s undergo. However, there are also *akhārā*-s associated with *tyāgī*.

A social characteristic shared by *tyāgī* and *nāgā* is that neither have restrictive rules about the recruitment of novitiates and therefore anyone can accede to these branches, even women.³⁸

An important difference between the two branches, though, is that for *tyāgī*-s non-violence is part of their *sevā* (Gross, 2001: 327), while for *nāgā*-s violence is justified in order to protect the *sampradāya*. There are differences also in the interpretation of holy texts, especially the *Rāmcaritmānas*: as a way to legitimize their ascetic life-style, *tyāgī*-s emphasize the period when Rām was in the jungle, while *nāgā*-s refer to the fights between Rām and Rāvaṇa, as well as to the role of Hanuman and his army, to justify their military arrangements. *Rasik*-s, instead, stress the period when Rām lived in Ayodhyā with Sītā (van der Veer, 1988: 164).

Rasik comes from *ras*, a Sanskrit word that means juice, but in philosophy it represents the aesthetic enjoyment able to create emotions (*bhāva*) in the beneficiary of the aesthetic moment.³⁹ Therefore, Bagwati Prasad Sinha translates *rasik* as ‘emotional’

³⁷ I took this list from one produced by the Śrī Maṭh.

³⁸ During my fieldwork in Varanasi I met a *tyāgīnī* and a *nāgīnī*. This latter explained to me that she entered the *nāgā* branch because her guru was a *nāgā sādhu*, but actually she was never trained in weapons and she does not remove her clothes. The *tyāgīnī* accomplished her *tapasī sādhanā* mastering yoga properly and becoming the successor of her guru in a temple in Varanasi.

³⁹ The theory of *ras* is part of the Indian aesthetic as theorized by Bhārata in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*. Later on, it became central to the theology of *bhakti* in the Kṛṣṇa’s worship of the Gauḍīya *sampradāya*. Rupa Goswami (1489-1564 C.E.) understood *bhakti* as a *ras* in his work *Bhaktirasāmṛtasinhu*. His work influenced all of the major Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s, as well as poets like Tulsīdās. However, as we will see later, Tulsīdās’s devotional attitude did not concern the most celebrated mode of *bhakti ras* of the Gauḍīya *sampradāya*, the *śṛṅgār ras*, or love (Paramasivan, 2010: 45).

(*bhāvuk*) (1957: 141). Probably influenced by Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, *rasik sādhu*-s refer to five *bhāva*-s in order to perform Sītā-Rām *upāsana* (worship) in its *saguṇa* form: *dāsya*, *vātsalya*, *sākhya* and *śṛṅgārī bhāva*. This means that their attitude toward Rām can resemble that of a slave (*dāsya*) toward his master, that of parents towards their son (*vātsalya*), that of a person towards his or her friend (*sākhya*), or that of a lover for his beloved (*śṛṅgārī*). Among these groups, the most numerous is that of the *dās*, those Rāmānandī-s who follow the *dāsya bhāva*, to which the Jagadgurū also belongs. As I will explain, it is likely that this *bhāva* was the one on which Rāmānanda founded his teaching, because it is the *bhāva* existent in all the branches.

According to van der Veer, *rasik*-s are theological specialists because many are from high castes and they are interested in matters of doctrine and worship (1988: 164). In effect, *rasik*-s' *sādhana* focuses on an esoteric interpretation of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and other works attributed to descendants of Rāmānanda (*ibid*). Sinha claims that the *rasik* path is a middle path among the ascetic *sādhana*-s because it still gives a proper place to worldly conditions (*ibid*: 149) and a particular attention to *sevā*. Therefore, *rasik* ascetics are *sthānādhārī*-s, meaning that they are dwellers in fixed places and do not wander to take care of their temples and devotees. It follows that they have closer relations with lay people, often becoming a guru for them. Van der Veer describes the guru worship in *rasik* temples as 'remarkable', and from my fieldwork I can testify that the worship of the Jagadgurū's feet is an almost daily practice performed by his devotees and followers.

Although there are some traits that are unique in the *sādhana* of each, all Rāmānandī-s share similar devotional practices when they are in their centers: they worship Rām through *bhajan* and *kīrtan* (devotional songs) and *nām jāp* (repetition of God's name).

Ramdas Lamb, who is a Western scholar and also a Rāmānandī, explains there are no strict boundaries between the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa sādhana*-s, and that many Rāmānandī-s felt that 'saguṇ bhakti draws one too much into the world of the senses, while nirguṇ devotion helps one to transcend it' (1994: 134) However, on a more practical level, 'most sadhus find it much easier to practice nirguṇ, devotion' because the *saguṇa* worship needs images of deities such as Rām, Kṛṣṇa, and Viṣṇu that must be 'formally and properly worshipped twice daily, and this requires a good deal of time, possession of ritual articles, a supply of offerings, knowledge of various Sanskrit prayers. Images of Hanuman, on the other hand, can be worshipped or not worshipped, depending on the circumstance' (*ibid*). Therefore, a

sādhu who travels frequently may not always have the proper ritual equipment for a *saguṇa* worship – hence it will have a propensity for a *nirguṇa bhakti*.

On the other side, Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s who have householder devotees will include *saguṇa* devotion as a part of their teachings – even if they follow a *nirguṇa* path – as it is an easier path for householders. Moreover, Lamb adds, ‘it is not uncommon to find Ramanandis who stress the importance of an indwelling nirguṇ Ram at one moment and to worship a saguṇ image at the next. They see no inconsistency in simultaneously praising both the saguṇ and nirguṇ, the personal and impersonal, aspects of Ram’ (*ibid*: 135).

As already mentioned, the role of guru is of fundamental importance in all branches of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. The centrality of the guru role derives at least in part from the fact that the *sampradāya* never had a unified lineage and consequently the various branches and sub-branches depend on the presence of several traditions that descend from various gurus.

Here, I will just open a short parenthesis on Rāmānandī gurus in general, referring to the work of Ramdas Lamb, who, using his personal experience, has described the attitudes of Rāmānandī ascetics towards guru-ship. Lamb explains that:

Traditionally, at this time he [the ascetic] takes the vow to Lord Ram that he will be responsible for overseeing the spiritual advancement of the disciple to the point of the latter’s spiritual realization and subsequent release from the necessity of rebirth, no matter how many lifetimes it may take. (2006: 181)

The presence of this vow, continues Lamb, shows that the presence of a guru is ‘beneficial in order to traverse the path to enlightenment’ and that ‘the relationship between guru and disciple is a very strong long-term commitment for both individuals involved, one that potentially spans many lifetimes’. The role of the guru is then not limited to the dissemination of teachings, techniques and practices, but also includes blessings and assistance along the path (Lamb, 2006: 182). This clarifies why not all ascetics decide to become gurus.

As Lamb explains, for those ascetics who have as an ultimate goal the liberation from the cycle of rebirth, becoming a guru is problematic since it links the guru to a subsequent rebirth in order to secure the disciple’s ultimate release (*ibid*). Therefore, although many *sādhu*-s can be *sikṣā-guru* (a guru from whom one gets teachings) many are hesitant to become *dīkṣā-guru* (a guru who initiates disciples) (*ibid*). However, Lamb continues, for those Rāmānandī-s whose ultimate goal is devotion itself, ‘being reborn for the sake of

one's disciples is not viewed as an obstacle', since through rebirth they can continue their worship at the feet of Lord Rām (*ibid*).

I was explained by Rāmānandī ascetics, and I could verify during my fieldwork, that many lay individuals are attracted to the *sampradāya* because of a guru. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance to understand the relationship between a guru and his disciples.

3.6 The *guru-śiṣya* relationship

Considering the evolution of the figure of guru, it is clear that the bond between guru and disciple has changed as a consequence of that evolution, as has the figure of the disciple himself. In this dissertation, I will take into consideration the *guru-śiṣya* relationship between a guru and his devotees, lay people and ascetics, in the context of contemporary *bhakti*.

The purpose of dealing with this is that an understanding of these relationships may help us better to understand contemporary Indian society and its interactions with religious institutions, and to understand the role and influence these have in the everyday life of individuals. In fact, from my fieldwork and from spending time with devotees, but also simply from spending many months in India, and having a prolonged direct exposure to northern Indian society, and talking and travelling with common people, I realized the substantial importance that religious figures still have in the Subcontinent.

The guru is chosen as spiritual master because he is thought to be able to intercede in the path toward God. The individual's selection of a guru and the guru's reciprocal decision to accept him as a disciple is formalized through initiation, during which the guru imparts a secret mantra and a set of instructions to his follower. In this dissertation, I consider those *guru-śiṣya* relationships in which, after giving initiation, the guru remains an important figure in the lives of his disciples and devotees since he is regarded as a perfect being and a spiritual model for them. In fact, the roles that a guru can have in the life of a disciple go beyond mere religious or spiritual ones.

A frequent role that a guru fulfills is that of parent, usually a father: 'the guru creates a kind of spiritual family around himself, sometimes forming much stronger ties between the members than biological ones' (Broo, 2003: 264). As well, a guru may have the role of teacher, especially those who are *sīkṣā-guru*, although a *dīkṣā-guru* will also function as a teacher at least at the time of initiation (2003: 264-267). According to Sudhir Kakar, a guru can also perform the role of a psychologist: the surrender shown to the guru is an

expression of transference, a need to imagine the self in an external perfect figure (1991: 45-54).

From his perspective then, the shift from guru as teacher to guru as master is made possible by the fact, perhaps, that the major function of a guru is to be 'healer of emotional suffering and somatic manifestation'. These roles and their manifestations will be described as drawn from direct observation in the chapter about the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya and his devotees.

The guru-disciple relationship is not exclusive and a guru usually does not prevent his or her disciples from looking for other gurus or attending the *pravacan* of another guru. Although it is possible to receive more than one initiation, many ascetics and devotees approach other gurus and holy men just to have their *darśan* or listen their speeches.

4. Structure of this dissertation and its place in comparison with other studies of the *sampradāya*⁴⁰

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* has particular features that have made it a source of interest for scholars of several fields. Just to mention a few of those features: it is one of the largest ascetic religious groups in northern India; its founder is alleged to have opened the *bhakti* to the more disadvantaged classes, Śūdra and women; both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* teachings are attributed to Rāmānanda; the *sampradāya* has several branches following different *sādhana*-s; its history might be unclear but it had a role in the organization of the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s;⁴¹ among Vaiṣṇava *nāgā*-s, Rāmānandī ascetics have been the majority. Furthermore, the spread of the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement in the 1980s focused the attention on Rām *bhakti* and Ayodhya, the biggest Rāmānandī center in northern India, and by consequence also on the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as well.

The *sampradāya* has been object of study from three main perspectives: historical, anthropological and linguistic. What is missing in the scholarly works written in English⁴² is a unified study that, focusing both on the past and the present, and using a perspective

⁴⁰ Here, I will not discuss in detail the works of those who have actively contributed already to the study of the *sampradāya*, as these studies will be extensively analyzed and commented on later.

⁴¹ The four orthodox, Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s: the Śrī *sampradāya* by Rāmānūja, the Sanaka *sampradāya* by Nimbārka, the Rūdra *sampradāya* by Viṣṇuswāmī and the Brahmā *sampradāya* by Madhva.

⁴² In Hindi, though, there are works of Śrīvāstava (1957) and Sinha Bhagvatī Prasād (1957), which are quite comprehensive in dealing with the history of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and the figure of Rāmānanda, his disciples and the *sādhana*-s present in the *sampradāya*. Similarly in Italian there is the work of Pinuccia Caracchi (1999), although she focuses more on the teachings of Rāmānanda as found in his Hindi compositions. My work relies on these examples, but extends the description of the present situation of the *sampradāya*.

which is not exclusively religious, political,⁴³ or social, could create a more comprehensive image of the *sampradāya*. This is the main purpose of my research.

As already noted, the methodology used in this research relies on a multidisciplinary that takes theoretical and practical support from both history and anthropology.

In Chapter 1, I explain how I used the two approaches. Initially, I describe the theory behind my historical approach and how I collected historical data. Then, I describe in detail my anthropological approach. I give particular attention to framing my fieldwork (temporally and geographically), to identifying my role as individual and researcher (through issues such as positionality and reflexivity), and to describing the role of my informants and the data I have accumulated during the fieldwork. Moreover, I mention the problems I had to face in collecting my data. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the combination of anthropology and history has been functional in my analysis of the past and the present of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

The history of the *sampradāya* is presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

In Chapter 2, I reconstruct the figure of Rāmānanda through his hagiographies. I will show that the narration of his life story was enriched over the centuries to provide for specific needs, and in response to new religious feelings and expectations. Following that, I will outline the studies of Rāmānanda by scholars since the beginning of the 20th century.⁴⁴ Even in this section, it will become clear that scholars' portrayals of Rāmānanda were influenced by their historical contexts and personal backgrounds. This in turn had consequences for their attribution of literary works to Rāmānanda (both in Hindi and Sanskrit) and consequently I will also discuss those works. I will show (also through the support of the hagiographies) that it is likely that both a *nirguṇa* and a *saguṇa* teaching was imparted by Rāmānanda, who has to be considered as an *sui-generis* guru able to unify various religious tendencies of his period. To conclude the chapter I will introduce the supposed disciples of Rāmānanda, some of whom will be key protagonists in the spread of the *sampradāya* in northern India, to be analyzed in Chapter 3.

⁴³As will be seen in Chapter 4, by a 'political' perspective I mean a perspective that takes account not only of the relationships of the *sampradāya* with the central political power, but also of the policies that various branches have inside the ascetic world.

⁴⁴Cf. Farquhar (1920; 1922), Grierson (1910; 1920); Śukla (1929); Dvivedī (1940); Śrīvāstav (1957), Caracchi (1999); Caturvedī (1972); Sinha (1957).

Chapter 3 is, indeed, focused on the history of the *sampradāya*, without focusing on a specific area and moment.⁴⁵ Its purpose is to show how the *sampradāya* evolved over the centuries according to various historical and geographic influences. To underline its multifarious evolutionary strands, I will take a variety of approaches: I will describe how Rāmānanda's disciples, and in turn *their* own disciples, took different paths and established numerous centers; I will delineate the evolution of the *sādhana*-s present in the *sampradāya*; finally I will describe the history of the main historical Rāmānandī centers. Then, my attention will focus on the 20th century and the principal event that occurred in the 1920s: the movement led by Swāmī Bhagavadācārya that eventually brought the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* to a position of complete independence from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. This event led as well to two other important changes: the establishment of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya at the end of the 1970s and the construction of the Śrī Maṭh in Varanasi few years later. Following chapters will then focus on these two present changes.

Therefore, the present of the *sampradāya* is not analyzed to provide a description of Rāmānandī-s as ascetics,⁴⁶ but rather to understand the reasons behind those two changes. The bestowing of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya has been analyzed in the work of William Pinch (1996) and later Purushottam Agrawal (2010). However, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū himself, which are only mentioned briefly in the work of Pinch (1996) and Pinuccia Caracchi (1999). Hence, there has not been a detailed analysis, for instance, of the role of the Jagadgurū or of the number of Jagadgurū-s and the reasons for their appointments.

Therefore, in Chapter 4, I will describe the role of the guru in contemporary India and in particular the role of the Jagadgurū (giving at the same time a glimpse of the past of this tradition), in order to frame the historical context that could have led to the bestowing of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya. Then I will introduce Bhagavadācārya (the first Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya), his life and the lives of those elected after him. I will show that, although the title has been thought to be given exclusively to the Jagadgurū residing in the Śrī Maṭh, later on, for reasons likely connected to the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement and to the role and power of ascetics in the *akhārā*-s (represented by the Akhārā Pariṣad),

⁴⁵ Cf. the work of Horstmann (2002; 2006), Pinch (1990; 1996; 1999), Clémentin-Ojha (1995), Burghart (1978); Burchett (2012).

⁴⁶ In fact, exhaustive works have already analyzed this aspect, see Gross (1992), Burghart (1983); van der Veer (1997; 1998; 1989), Lamb (1994).

other ascetics were also given the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya. The depiction of these other Jagadgurūs will allow us to have a panoramic of the variety of contemporary gurus, and at the same time will illuminate the alliances inside the *sampradāya*. This chapter demonstrates how just one change (the election of a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya) has produced various consequences and has been accepted (or not) quite differently in different part of the *sampradāya*. At the same time this material will illustrate the statement at the beginning of this Introduction: that the evolution of a tradition may follow various paths and that these various paths (or at least their existence) have to be taken into account for a complete understanding of the tradition.

Because the second main change occurring in the 20th century was the reconstruction of the Śrī Maṭh in Varanasi, this will be the subject of Chapter 5. The Śrī Maṭh represents the core location of my fieldwork and the starting point of all my speculation about the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Although it is a modern construction, it is universally recognized as the *mul pīṭh* (root monastery) of the *sampradāya*, at the place where the founder of the *sampradāya* began his teachings. For this reason, the Maṭh is now considered to be one of the most important centers of the *sampradāya*. In this chapter, I will not only describe the Śrī Maṭh's structure as a religious Trust, but I will also give the reader an idea of its 'life', through a description of its inhabitants, the daily activities and yearly festivities performed there. In so doing, I will show that compared to other Rāmānandī centers the Maṭh has a special status that relies on it actually being a modern center without a previous organization or established traditions. This allows the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya (the Jagadgurū dwelling in the Śrī Maṭh) to intermingle old tradition with constantly renewed strands that depend on his own personality as well as his revivification of Rāmānanda's life and teachings.

Chapter 6 is then centered on the figure of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, his role and activities as an ascetic and as a guru for the *sampradāya* and for lay people. Because he has decided not to have ascetic disciples I will give particular importance to a description of his relationship with lay people. I will give examples of his views and teachings to present as vivid a portrait as possible of a guru in contemporary India who is an example of Modern Hindu Traditionalism. Doing so I will also illustrate ways in which a guru can handle and interpret political and social issues for his followers and devotees.

Final considerations about the main issues discussed in preceding chapters will be gathered in the Conclusion.

Following that there will be an Appendix based on my checking and evaluation of the data provided in the 1970s by Sinha and Saraswati about the presence of ascetics and centers in Varanasi. During my fieldwork I sought to ascertain whether the Rāmānandī centers they described were still present and whether new centers had been established. Through the data I collected, I provide various examples of *math*, *āśram*-s and temples showing how their survival depends on their history, function and the charisma of the *mahant*-s (abbot) that manage them.

Wherever possible, I have enriched the arguments of the chapters with maps and tables that are placed at the end of the dissertation. A selection of photos taken during my fieldwork will help to reconstruct visually ceremonies, places and people as well.

The dissertation will start and finish with two charismatic guru figures: Rāmānanda from the past and Rāmnaresācārya in the present. A great deal of information about Rāmānanda is based on assumptions, whereas, as result of my fieldwork, Rāmnaresācārya's activities, approaches and teachings can be properly described. In describing the activities of the Jagadgurū who dwells in the Śrī Maṭh I wanted to give a portrayal of a *rasik* group (expanding and clarifying the idea of *rasik* as present in the *sampradāya*), as well as a portrait of a guru whose teachings and approach exemplify Modern Hindu Traditionalism. In this dissertation I also attempt to present the *sampradāya* in as emic a way as possible,⁴⁷ trying to give attention to both belief and devotion. In so doing I attempt to give a hint of the ascetic point of view because, as observed by Burghart:

[...] By ignoring the ascetic's point of view, the anthropologist runs the risk of overlooking the entire field of intra- and intersectarian relations as well as the different sectarian definitions of the 'real' ascetic and non-ascetic. (1983: 651)

⁴⁷ Although within unavoidable limits (cf. Chapter 1, sec. 6).

Chapter 1

Multidisciplinarity, Methodology and Fieldwork

Introduction

To fully understand the changes that occurred in the 20th century in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, it became essential to establish a proper knowledge of the order both in the past and in the present. Therefore, I utilized historical and anthropological methodology to analyze the *sampradāya* through a diachronic perspective and participant observation. The diachronic perspective enables to verify how cultural, social and political events have influenced the *sampradāya* over the centuries leading up to the present. Participant observation enhanced this approach by adding vivid examples, anecdotes and insights that provide perspective on the past. This methodology permitted me to analyze and correct imprecise assumptions present in the literature about Rāmānandī-s and highlight the two aforementioned aspects that were not heavily studied up until now: the construction of the Śrī Maṭh and the office of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya.

1. On Multidisciplinarity

During my multiple stays in India, it has been confirmed for me time and again that it is difficult to give a univocal description of a subject or to find characteristics that remain identical across different geographical contexts and historical periods. This turned out to be especially true when dealing with the specificity of religious *sampradāya*-s. Therefore, it became helpful to use a joint anthropological and historical approach to understand a field that is characterized by heterogeneity and multifaceted connections with several aspects of Indian social life. Nevertheless, the two disciplines utilize quite different methodologies and theories, making their coordination difficult for the scholar. These difficulties and the ways to overcome them have been the center of a lively debate,⁴⁸ in which one of the most relevant voices was that of Bernard Cohn.

⁴⁸ As synthesized by Pat Caplan, the debate about the value of a collaboration between history and anthropology began in the 1960s, when Evans Pritchard suggested that anthropology could be understood as a form of historiography. Since then, the debate has sporadically continued to stimulate anthropologists and historians. (1999: 283)

In the 1960s, Cohn conducted fieldwork among historians and came up with an extensive description of the worlds and methods of anthropologists and historians. He saw the main difference between the two groups as methodological:

In loose terms, research in history is based on finding data; research in anthropology is based on creating data. Obviously the historian has to find the sources on which to base his research [...]. The anthropologist, on the other hand, often is interested in a problem, descriptive or theoretical, and the question is then one of deciding what types of materials he will need for pursuing the problem. (1962: 6)

However, from an epistemological point of view the two academic communities share much more:

Historians and anthropologists have a common subject matter, "otherness"; one field constructs and studies "otherness" in space, the other in time. Both fields have a concern with text and context. Both aim, whatever else they do, at explicating the meaning of actions of people rooted in one time and place, to persons in another. Both forms of knowledge entail the act of translation. The goals of the accounts practitioners develop are understanding and explanation, rather than the construction of social laws and prediction, the goals of the more formally constituted social sciences of economics and sociology. Both are dependent upon reporting their results in a literary form. Historians and anthropologists have struggled unsuccessfully to develop conceptual frameworks for comparison in the nineteenth-century natural history mode, so that they might arrive at generalizations about society and culture. Both have as central to their projects the study of change, but neither has been successful in developing theories of explanation which account for anything other than the status quo. (1980: 198)

Cohn imagines that the multidisciplinary approach can produce a result that is enriched by the combined methodologies of history and anthropology:

I am going to suggest that history can become more historical in becoming more anthropological, that anthropology can become more anthropological in becoming more historical. [...]

Taking the anthropological experience into the archive or library enables the historian to better appreciate the significance of what would otherwise appear to be mere trivia, to understand how other cultures can be structured and constructed. The ideal is, of course, that there be some continuity between the foci of anthropological and historical research, but this is not always possible. [...] The anthropological historian therefore

should have the working experience of both the field and the archive. (1980: 216-217,221)

This dissertation follows the combined approach described by Cohn. The use of historical and anthropological methodology enabled me to take various perspectives into account and proved helpful in spreading a more complete light on the topic at hand. Indeed, without the knowledge of the historical setback of the *sampradāya* I could not have understood present realities such as the existence of several branches and religious disciplines. Furthermore, my basic knowledge on Rāmānanda, his disciples and the *sampradāya* earned me credibility and respect within the community in which I was conducting fieldwork. This provided me with greater access to information and sources than I otherwise would have had. Additionally, my participation in the religious life of the Śrī Maṭh and observations of the relationships between lay people and *sādhu*-s, especially between the guru and his disciples, gave me clues to interpret historical sources with a greater understanding of their context. This background knowledge helped me to overcome the limits of my status as a foreigner and cultural outsider to the topic of my research.

In the next sections, I will introduce the theories that have influenced my work and the data I collected according to each discipline, with the awareness that there are areas of overlap between the various methodologies.

2. Theoretical influences

There were a number of key theories advanced by historians and anthropologists that have influenced my work throughout this project. In order to delineate the evolution of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* over the centuries, considering not only political and economic factors but also cultural and social ones, it was necessary to adopt a perspective from below. For this reason, I took into consideration two main historical paths: the Annales School and the Subaltern Group.

The Annalists⁴⁹ pioneered an approach to the study of long-term historical structures in which geography, material culture and the psychology of the epoch merged to

⁴⁹ The origins of the Annales method can be found in the work of Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) and Marc Bloch (1886-1944). Their journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* first appeared in 1929. From the beginning, the founders of Annales aspired to a discipline which both dominated and embraced all other studies of the human condition, aiming for a fusion of economic, social and cultural history (Harsgor, 1978: 1-13).

create a comprehensive frame. Furthermore, Annalists often deal with historical problems by taking a cue from contemporary facts. As André Burguière argues:

à partir d'une situation présente, [...] ou un phénomène plus complexe [...] et à remonter le temps pour reconstituer la genèse de cette situation, ou plutôt pour distinguer les permanences ou les innovations, les différents niveaux de temporalité, les combinaisons du temps court et de la longue durée qui ont fabriqué notre présent. (1979: 1355)

This approach was based on the idea that studying historical phenomena by starting with an analysis of the contemporary situation allowed one to better understand the mechanisms behind the change (Burguière, 1979: 1354-1355).

I derived important and useful insights from Subaltern Studies,⁵⁰ given the school's interest in a history reconstructed from below, especially within the Indian context.

In his article 'Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the *Subaltern Studies* Project', K. Sivaramakrishnan explains that among the Subalternists there was an anthropological current which wanted to recover the voice of the subalterns with a main concern for discovering the cultural bases of their agency (1995: 216). Their main affirmation was that this culture is mostly based on religion, as religion 'provides an anthology, an epistemology, as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics,' meaning 'when the subalterns act politically, the symbolic meaning of particular acts – their signification – must be found in religious terms' (*ibid*: 229).

Nevertheless, H. Urban has recognized that the opposite is also true: 'religious actors are also capable of appropriating secular, economic, and political discourse, while transforming it into a profound bearer of deeper religious ideals' (2003: 516), a remark that, as we will see in this dissertation, is of fundamental importance in both historical and contemporary India.

The intention of the intersection of these historical approaches was to describe the development of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* by taking into consideration different factors as the spread of new religious trends (like the Rām cult), the agency of single individuals (for example Rāmānanda or Anantānanda), and the religious support of a community (the

⁵⁰ Subaltern Studies was established by a group of South Asian scholars interested in post-colonial and post-imperial societies, with a particular focus on those of South Asia. In general, their approach focuses on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society rather than among the elite. In 2003, David Ludden (2003: 26) stressed that 'today [...] the project diversifies internally and merges externally with comparative colonialism, cultural studies, historical anthropology, and post-colonial studies'. Nevertheless, the present evolution of the Subaltern Studies advanced by Partha Chatterjee is that the Subaltern project was a product of its time and that 'given today's changed contexts the tasks set out by it cannot be taken forward within the framework and methods mobilised for it' (2012: 44-49).

grassroots composed of devotees, pilgrims and normal ascetics) that found in a religious teaching the answer to specific religious quests.

I followed the history of the *sampradāya* up until the present time, from which I collected data through ethnographic methods. My initial approach to anthropology was methodological rather than theoretical. As my fieldwork progressed, I began to realize that my notes and remarks could be contextualized by interpretative anthropology,⁵¹ since its main contributions, as Ugo Fabietti outlines, are: 1) to hold the 'native point of view' in high regard, with an emphasis on the problem of emic description; 2) to discuss the communicative processes between the anthropologist and his/her informant, which bring into question the topic of the encounter between cultures; and 3) to reflect about how the experience of cross-cultural encounters can be transcribed in an ethnographic text (2001: 223).

During my fieldwork, I found that some of my observations and intuitions had already found a scholarly expression through Clifford Geertz's works. In one of his texts Geertz holds that 'cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is' (1973: 29). This thought, which may be common among researchers, describes my feelings during fieldwork: the longer I was there, the more questions I discovered and the wider my topic became. There was, then, a constant feeling of incompleteness, which Geertz explains using Wittgenstein's words:

[...] One human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language we do not understand the people (and not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves). We cannot find our feet with them. (1973: 13)

However, my position and approach differ from by that of Geertz, because, as William Sewell underlined following the critics moved by William Roseberry⁵² to Geertz, 'Geertz does not usually circle back from the synchronic analysis to enrich our understanding of the contingent historical circumstances or structured social tensions that produced the cultural performance in the first place' (1997: 37). In a synchronic analysis Sewell explains:

[...] acts of cultural signification, rather than being treated as a temporal sequence of statement and counterstatement or as linked by causal chains of antecedent and

⁵¹ Interpretative anthropology is part of the symbolic anthropology, which considers cultures as systems of symbols and meanings, decisive in motivating social action (Fabietti, 2001: 231).

⁵² See Roseberry (1982).

consequence, are seen as components of a mutually defined and mutually sustaining universe of (at least momentarily, until the analytic spell breaks) unchanging meaning. (1997: 40)

My approach is diachronic in that it inserts the present situation of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* into its historical development. Moreover, the present is used as a practical example of how cultural and social changes have affected and continue to affect *sampradāya*-s in general, and the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in particular. I will also show that these changes did and do not take place uniformly, but rather that different changes originated in different social and geographical locations.

My contribution to the study of the present reality of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is the description and interpretation of the specific reality of the Śrī Maṭh and the role of the Jagadgurū. I chose the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū because they represent an innovation in the history of the *sampradāya* as promoted by a charismatic leader, Bhagavadācārya. Both of these developments can be understood as direct outcomes of the contemporary Indian religious field.⁵³ I will demonstrate that the role of the Jagadgurū and the presence of more Jagadgurūs Rāmānandācārya-s result from the need of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* to have national representatives in a contemporary religious culture in which the number of modern gurus increases rapidly.

Given the intermingling of history and anthropology, this dissertation can be better described as an ethno-historic work, considering ethnohistory in its more basic meaning as defined by Cohn:

Ethno-historians combine their historical sources with ethnographic fieldwork among the present-day members of the societies whose past they aim to reconstruct. Their goal is to present “rounded” history, which will take into account the social and cultural systems of indigenous people. (1968: 440)

I collected historical/historiographical data and ethnographic data mostly at the same time. While the two forms of data were initially very separate, as my research advanced they became more intermingled as the profiles of the past and the present became clearer.

As I spent time with *sādhu*-s and pilgrims both in real life and through the pages of hagiographies and other historical texts, I began to compare present situations with their

⁵³ I use the word ‘field’ in the sense advanced by the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Therefore, the word ‘field’ here means a zone of social activity in which there are subjects who create a certain kind of cultural/religious product. This product is not only the result of the subject’s mind but also of the expectations and values of the audience.

past realities – for example, the respect at the base of the relationship between the guru and the *śiṣya* (disciple), which maintains a meaning similar to that testified in the past. Following V. Narayan Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who decided to ‘utilise surviving literary sources in order to imagine’ their ‘way back into the minds of the Telugu-speaking Nayaka elite’ (2001), I used present evidence and literary sources to reconstruct pieces of the Rāmānandī past using imagination. Obviously, by imagination I do not mean a creative act, but rather the formulation of a hypothesis that, as Greg Dening suggests, can take ‘the cliché out of something that has been said over and over again’ (2002: 7).

Using my fieldwork data, I tried to overcome those interpretations that did not take into consideration specific cultural contexts. To give an example, as I spent time with the Jagadgurū and his disciples, I noticed the respect disciples show to him and how they based their religious actions on his words. Since this kind of strongly hierarchical relationship is testified in several past texts dealing with *bhakti*, I supposed that the attitude I witnessed during my fieldwork could be similar to that demonstrated by Nābhādās to his guru (16th century) and, as consequence, could have influenced his writing.⁵⁴ Hence through the present data I tried to formulate hypotheses for the past, and through the disentanglement of the past I tried to explain the present reality, combining the disciplines to produce hypotheses and analysis more effectively.

3. Collecting historical data

In this dissertation, I deal with two kinds of history of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*: the early history focused on its origin and development and its more recent history since the beginning of the 20th century. The sources for the reconstruction of these histories are obviously different. For the early history I used existing bibliographies on the subject rather than primary sources, while for the reconstruction of more recent history, I could refer to primary sources. However, for both histories my ultimate benchmark was the present, following Joseph Greenberg’s remark that ‘all the historical investigations proceed by inferences, often very complex, from evidence existing in the present’ (1968: 449).

3.1 The Early History

There are several studies on the history of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, but none take into

⁵⁴ Cf. Chapter 2, sec. 1.4.2.

account its development from the origin up to the present day. Because of the existence of valid studies about specific periods or historical places of the *sampradāya* – such as works about Galtā at the beginning of the 18th century – I will present the historiography on the *sampradāya* in a systematic way, adding my own interpretation to the events and using other sources where possible. For example, instead of consulting archives, I preferred to visit the places and take information about their history from local people and, if available, to collect texts produced by the centers.

I combined this approach with my attempt to reconstruct the cultural background and the societies of different periods using sources such as hagiographies, travellers' diaries and paintings. I used the same approach to delineate the history of Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ* (the place in Varanasi where the Śrī Maṭh was built) and the presence of a temple/*āśram* there before the 20th century.

3.2 Contemporary History

I focused especially on the contemporary history of the *sampradāya* since there are no proper studies about it; even the *sampradāya*'s most impactful event of the last century, the theological quarrel in 1921 which enabled it to become officially independent from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*, is often described only briefly.⁵⁵

I decided to focus on this event within the history of the *sampradāya* because of the consequences and developments that it rendered. I collected information about it from books produced by the Śrī Maṭh or held in its library (listed below). From these texts, I reconstructed the history of the dispute and outlined short biographies on the first Jagadgurū, particularly Bhagavadācārya, the key figure of the dispute. I collected some material written by Bhagavadācārya in the Śrī Maṭh, but most of the texts the Jagadgurū owns are in Sanskrit or in a very bad condition. Moreover, I did not have the opportunity to travel to Allahabad (where Bhagavadācārya resided) to search for his autobiography or further information. Nevertheless, I obtained part of a Hindi book written for the celebration of his centenary, *Swāmī Bhagavadācārya Śatābdī Smṛti Granth*, published by the Hindu Vibhag, which presents important information about the *Swāmī* and the religious dispute. I added to these written sources the oral statements of those *sādhu*-s who met Bhagavadācārya and still had some memories about his personality and actions.

Another contemporary event that affected the *sampradāya* was the

⁵⁵ An exception is Puroshottam Agrawal (2010).

Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. Even in this case, I found that some studies on the movement and the Rāmānandī-s who participated in it did not take into account the role of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, presenting only a partial, negative perspective of the involvement of the *sampradāya*. I gathered information on this topic through interviews with the Jagadgurū and the historian Deepak Malik (Director of the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi), since I was not able to obtain original written reports on the meetings held in the Śrī Maṭh with Prime Minister Rao and the Śaṅkarācārya-s. However, I did come across a book by Rajesh Prasad about the political role of *sādhu*-s in which he transcribes interviews with several Rāmānandī-s about the Rāmjanmabhūmi; included within this is a series of interviews with Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya as well (2014).

4. Collecting ethnographic data

4.1 On positionality, reflexivity and experience-near and experience-distant concepts

Before dealing with the data from my fieldwork, I will introduce the concepts of positionality and reflexivity, as they help to explain how my data was influenced by my role and position as a researcher.

As explained by Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, positionality refers to the fact that all the ‘researchers are positioned by age, gender, race, class, nationality, institutional affiliation, historical-personal circumstances, and intellectual predisposition’, and ethnographers have to consider that, once they enter into a community, they introduce themselves to this community and to the informants (1996: 115). Furthermore, she continues, ‘the ethnographer’s stance-position-location affects the entire ethnographic process: from data collection, theory construction, and methodological understanding, through the creation of the narrative voice and overall writing of the ethnography’ (*ibid*: 117).

On the basis of this assumption I find it necessary to analyze and explain how my ‘being me’ influenced my fieldwork.

My position as researcher was clear because I wanted it to be clear,⁵⁶ and because the Jagadgurū himself wanted to specify my role any time there was someone who did not yet know me. However, I only explained my research in detail to the Jagadgurū, and even to him, I did not specify all the issues I wanted to address or the point of view through which I would analyze the information. I did not want to influence the Jagadgurū’s approach to my

⁵⁶ On participant observation see Sec. 5.3.

research (for instance, he might have declined to invite me to meetings and events that he deemed to be far from my interests even if they actually were relevant to my work), and I was not sure what his reaction would be to my approach that relied on ‘scientific evidence’ rather than self-confident faith.

The variable that mostly influenced my fieldwork, with consequences both for personal relationships and the collection of materials, was my gender. In a country in which the majority of women still live under the protection of their fathers and their husbands, the fact that I was living far away from my family, without any help, and unmarried (and obviously childless) at almost thirty years of age piqued the curiosity of many of the people that I met. However, since I was a foreigner, this was accepted and even considered as a sign of courage – something to notice and appreciate (and sometimes to exploit, as I will explain later) but, obviously, not to take as an example.

My being a foreigner allowed men (ascetics, *brahmacārī*-s and lay men) to talk freely with me and to spend time with me while also very consciously expressing their concern for my safety and comfort. Everywhere my research drove me, I found myself surrounded by an incredible numbers of *bhāyā* (brothers). However, my being a woman limited my stay in the Śrī Maṭh. Unlike Robert Gross, who could spend time wandering with *tyāgī* ascetics (1992), I could not live in the Śrī Maṭh, a male-dominated place, with *brahmacārī*-s and *sādhu*-s. However, they gave me useful instructions on how to behave in specific situations such as in front of the Jagadgurū, with other *sādhu*-s, inside temples, and how to sit properly.⁵⁷

Generally speaking, women have less freedom in their apparel in a strict religious setting: although men can wear western clothes without any problem, women wearing western clothes or a *kurtī* that is deemed to be ‘too modern’ in a traditional environment can arouse comments and critiques. For this reason I took care of the aesthetic aspect as well: although the Jagadgurū told me I could wear western clothes as long as they were covering enough of my body, I always wore traditional Indian clothes, such as the *kurtī* and *salvār*, for which I received lot of respect from the people.⁵⁸ I also tried to wear the appropriate colors since, while orange, red and white were always appreciated, dark colors were criticized (but always in a very polite or funny way) as not *sāttvik* (pure).

⁵⁷This happened once also in a *tyāgī* camp when an ascetic scolded me for the way I was sitting. I was sitting with my legs crossed but with my knees slightly lifted up.

⁵⁸The kind of clothes I wore in India and in Italy was often the topic of discussion and comparison since many *brahmacārī*-s and young ladies from villages think of western women’s clothes as mostly short skirts and tops.

My skin color was also important to my experience in the field:⁵⁹ my being fair elicited positive comments from women devotees and also gave to them an excuse to talk to me and give advice on how to ‘look more Indian.’⁶⁰

I was extensively in the company of women and experienced many of the ceremonies I attended from the point of view of female devotees: during *darśan*-s and other functions, women and men stay in different places, and women have to follow some rules which men do not, such as covering their heads during religious functions or staying outside of the temple during their menstrual period. This female-perspective was amplified during the Kumbh Melā: I shared a room with a dozen of women; during the official events (like *pravacan* and *pūjā*-s) I had to sit on the women’s side, and, among them, I had to choose further between women from cities and women from villages, since they did not mix between each other. In the Kumbh, I had access to personal conversations that highlighted a lesser-known side of the private lives of female devotees.

My status as a foreigner gave me an elevated social status. However, my particular nationality also provided a good way to break the ice since the longtime president of the Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi, is Italian. This fact gave me the opportunity to easily talk about politics with almost anyone. However my nationality was also understood as part of a bigger entity: the West. I was a representative of Western culture, so I had to explain circumstances of ‘my’ culture that most of them knew through Hollywood gossip and scandals; most questions I was asked dealt with marriage by choice, easy divorces, sexual freedom or revealing clothing.

These descriptions of my fieldwork experiences serve in the understanding of reflexivity as well. In fact, as Maya Nazaruk explains, the social interaction between the ethnographer and his or her intermediaries influences the way in which the fieldwork is lived but also how the ethnographic account is constructed (2011: 78). This depends on the fact that a researcher has not only a position which influences the data of fieldwork, but also an emotional reaction and an inner elaboration of his/her encounter with the Other. This issue leads to the topic of reflexivity, an issue that, as Nazaruk says, ‘has been endemic in social sciences ever since the publication of Malinowski’s diaries and the onset of the

⁵⁹ Given the importance that skin color has in Indian society, and the stereotypes present in India about black people, it is likely that if I were a foreigner with a black skin this would have negatively influenced peoples’ initial attitudes toward me.

⁶⁰ Women suggested that I should wear earrings, bracelets and the *bindī* (decorative dot) on my forehead – all the typical Indian accessories of beauty, in case I was looking for an husband (and, according to them, why not Indian?). Indeed, my hypothetical future *śādī* (marriage) was for them more interesting and important than my research.

recurrent and persistent crisis of objectivity that haunts modern scholarship' (*ibid*: 73).

Guillame Rozemberg describes reflexivity as:

Une prise de distance volontaire, et volontiers critique, vis-à-vis de soi, de sa pensée, de son action, dans l'intention d'en objectiver les déterminants et les modalités. Ainsi le principe d'une anthropologie réflexive consiste-il en une posture du chercheur affirmant avec force la nécessité d'un retour systématique sur les mécanismes, les biais et les insuffisances du savoir anthropologique, celui qu'il produit au premier chef. La réflexivité vue comme impératif méthodologique engage la dissection des diverses dimensions de l'activité anthropologique, depuis les investigations de terrain jusqu'à l'énoncé des conclusions en passant par les procédés d'écriture. (2011/12: 280)

Nazaruk also claims that 'reflexivity refers to how personal an anthropological text really becomes' (2011: 78). Since the data and material collected were influenced by my attitude and personality, I realized that they were necessarily biased. James Clifford, taking into consideration similar observations present in the work of Richard Price,⁶¹ stresses that 'even the best ethnographic texts – serious, true fictions – are systems, or economies, of truth' and therefore:

Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted—and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact. (1986: 7)

Given this awareness of partiality, and as it was impossible to fully judge the quality of my collected material, I decided to write my dissertation in India. I considered even the writing process to be part of my fieldwork – it was a fluid process that gave me the opportunity to have further intuitions as I worked to organize and interpret my raw data and notes. Staying in India, I was able to reach my informants⁶² in case of doubt in my interpretation and understanding of events and sources.

I followed this methodology because one of the initial purposes of this dissertation was to attempt to report as much emic data as possible, although during my fieldwork I had to reevaluate the meaning and the use of emic and etic concepts, or as Geertz said, experience-near and experience-distant concepts.

According to Geertz, the simplest and most direct way to describe the dichotomy

⁶¹ Price (1983).

⁶² Cf. below, Sec. 6.4.

between the use of an inside versus outside approach is to make a distinction between 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts. He describes the two concepts in these words:

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one which an individual [...] might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which various types of specialists [...] employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. (Oct. 1974: 28)

However, Geertz stresses that 'the ethnographer does not and cannot perceive what his informants perceive' (*ibid*: 30).⁶³ As Geertz explains:

The trick is not to achieve some inner correspondence of spirit with your informant but [...] to grasp concepts which, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with those experience-distant concepts that theorists have fashioned [...]. (Oct. 1974: 29)

At the beginning of my fieldwork I was sometimes upset by the fact that I was searching for some information that I was unable to get from many of my informants. This derived from the fact that I was interested in the history and practical reality of the *sampradāya* – the 'why' behind my observations – but the devotees and ascetics I spoke with were not very educated about the history of the *sampradāya* and often could not provide an explicit reason for the way things were, as they often did things by repetition. In addition, many pilgrims were followers of the Jagadgurū and only had a vague idea about Rāmānanda and the history of the *sampradāya*. However, their perspectives helped me to outline a portrait of the level of devotion and faith that exists in the lay community of the *sampradāya*, which provided an emic portrait of those religious feelings that an observer cannot reach because of his or her non-involvement in the faith.

To collect the type of information that would best serve my main purposes, I relied mostly on the explanations given by learned informants and especially by the Jagadgurū. These explanations gave to me an emic reading of the *sampradāya* and its historical vicissitudes in which the role of faith and belief was evident. I attempted to recast their

⁶³ This point of view is shared by Richard Burghart, who claims that if anthropologists take the information from sources as the real, true, fundamental meaning, and other interpretations as spurious, false or superficial, they are just giving a 'duplication of an already existing native theoretical practice [which] renders the anthropological enterprise superfluous as well as dubious' (1996: 63). Burghart's position on the distinction between etic and emic is quite clear, as he calls it an 'unfortunate episode in anthropology' (*ibid*: 62).

perspectives in an etic fashion, utilizing 'scientific' interpretations and events to enhance their emic form of understanding.

Therefore, if we regard the emic method as the representation of a subject through close empathy, and the etic method as the description of a phenomenon in a neutral and objective view, it becomes evident that we are talking about two methods which can, and perhaps have to, coexist and enhance each other. Indeed, although a researcher's primary tool in the field is empathy as a means of creating a bridge to the 'Other', his or her research ultimately has to fulfill a scientific purpose. This point has been well stressed by Wouter Hanegraaff:

On the part of the researcher, the reconstruction of emic perspective requires an attitude of empathy which excludes biases as far as possible. Scholarly discourse about religion, on the other hand, is not emic but etic. This means that it may involve types of language, distinctions, theories, and interpretative models which are considered appropriate by scholars on their own terms. [...] The final results of scholarly research should be expressed in etic language, and formulated in such a way as to permit criticism and falsification both by reference to the emic material and as regards their coherence and consistency in the context of the general etic discourse. (1996: 6-7)

5. Dealing with the fieldwork

In the next sections I will describe my fieldworks in detail, and present my methodology and main challenges in the field.

5.1 Demarcation of the field: time

I began my first fieldwork in October 2011. The process was slow in the beginning because I had no preexisting contacts with any Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi. Even after I formed a connection with the Śrī Maṭh, it took time to organize the work because only at that moment I realized the innovation that this place and the Jagadgurū represented in the contemporary life of the *sampradāya*.⁶⁴ Therefore it required me to re-plan the fieldwork.

During my first fieldwork I collected a good amount of information, but it still seemed incomplete: it was my first time conducting fieldwork and I had to learn how to deal with new circumstances, settings and people, and how to manage to get information

⁶⁴ As already mentioned, the information about the Śrī Maṭh and the role of the Jagadgurū in the previous scholarship was limited.

without causing a disturbance for the people. For this reason, once I returned home in March 2012, I decided to organize a second longer trip to the field. I stayed again in Varanasi from August 2012 to May 2013.

My second fieldwork got off to a much faster start than before: I already knew the layout of the city and had some connections with various community members and resources. Even the attitude of the people toward me improved: they appreciated the fact that I returned for a second time to collect information about the Maṭh and the Jagadgurū, and the fact that I attended again ceremonies with the same people, facilitated a better sense of connection with the community. This gave me the confidence to expand my fieldwork to other centers as well.

5.2 The choice of the place: the Śrī Maṭh and its inhabitants

Since the 18th century, the city of Ayodhya has been one of the main centers of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Therefore, the city and its Rāmānandī-s have already been the subject of several studies,⁶⁵ especially following the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. To provide an innovative contribution to the study of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, I decided to focus my attention on the city of Varanasi, which, according to Sinha and Saraswati (1978), has a high percentage of Rāmānandī centers although it is known to be the city of God Śiv rather than Viṣṇu. Another reason for my choice of Varanasi was the presence of the Śrī Maṭh, the seat of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya. As already mentioned, currently there are only a few references in the literature to either the Śrī Maṭh or the Jagadgurū (Caracchi, 1999; Pinch, 1996), therefore, because of this lack of existing information, I decided to begin my research from these subjects.

By chance, the Śrī Maṭh had organized a music festival for the celebration of *Śarad Pūrṇimā*,⁶⁶ which I decided to attend. At the end of this event, the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya gave a talk highlighting the importance of the *sampradāya* and especially the teaching of Rāmānanda. Consequently, I opted for starting my research with him, because I was particularly curious about his function and role within the *sampradāya*, since the information about him was very limited. The question I most wanted to answer was: why, after centuries without a leader, did the *sampradāya* decide to elect a Jagadgurū as its representative? This initial question eventually led me to

⁶⁵ See the works of van der Veer (1987; 1989; 1992; 1994), and Bakker (1981; 1982; 1986; 1991).

⁶⁶ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.3.7.1.

the main topics of my research, the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū, since they emerged to be the most distinctive contemporary developments of the *sampradāya*. This issue also led me to discover the presence of other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s, whose presence proved the appeal of the title, and testifies the variety of approaches existing inside the *sampradāya*.

When I went to meet the Jagadgurū for the first time, he had just left for a journey in northern India, and there were only few *sādhu*-s in the Śrī Maṭh, together with a substantial number of *brahmacārī*-s (bachelor students). They became my first contact with the Śrī Maṭh and through their support I was able to form connections with other key personalities.

The *brahmacārī*-s introduced me to Vidhān Bābā, the Bābā-manager of the Śrī Maṭh, who became an important source for me. A few weeks later when the Jagadgurū returned to Varanasi, Vidhān Bābā taught me the proper procedure to follow during my first *darśan*⁶⁷ with him the day after.

When I finally met the Jagadgurū, the *darśan* was attended by many devotees and pilgrims. I was sitting and talking with a lawyer from Allahabad, so when the Jagadgurū saw me, he thought I was a foreign client of the lawyer. When I introduced myself and asked for the permission to conduct my research there, he replied simply by saying '*Calegā*', which in this context means 'It will work.' He gave me his full support and I officially began my ethnographic work.

My activities in the Śrī Maṭh depended on the Jagadgurū's schedule: when he was in Varanasi, I attended his daily *darśan*, and events and rituals organized by the Śrī Maṭh; when he was not there, I went to the Maṭh to spend time with the *brahmacārī*-s and the *sādhu*-s living there to ask questions and to form a relationship with them. I also started collecting and translating books published by the Maṭh.

I decided to settle in Varanasi for the full period of the fieldwork, from October 10, 2011 to March 24, 2012. This led to me slowly becoming recognized by people living in the Śrī Maṭh and by visitors. The Jagadgurū also appreciated that I was always present when he returned back to Varanasi. I wanted to join him on some of his travels, but I knew that I would have to wait for a personal invitation from him, so I worked at gaining his confidence and support. My patience paid off and, in my second fieldwork, he spontaneously asked me to follow him on several journeys that he thought could be useful

⁶⁷ In this context the word *darśan* means the public audience of the Jagadgurū, cf. Chapter 6, sec. 3.3.

for my research.

My second fieldwork lasted from August 13, 2012 to May 29, 2013. During this period I finished collecting all the materials I would need about the religious ceremonies and rituals that happen in one year in the Śrī Maṭh. Furthermore, I visited other Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi, Ayodhya, Jaipur and Galtā, plus I travelled in Haridwar, Delhi and Allahabad. The data that I collected during these two fieldworks consist of:

- Notes on religious festivals and celebrations.
- Interviews with pilgrims, local devotees, *sādhu-s*, *brahmacārī-s* and the Jagadgurū.
- Translations of books and materials produced by the Śrī Maṭh.
- Information about other Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi and in other cities.

5.3 Notes on religious festivals and celebrations, participant observation

During my stay in Varanasi and my travels, I attended various religious events: some were determined by the religious Hindu calendar (like the celebration of *Dīpāvalī* or *Śiv Rātri*), others were connected to the Vaiṣṇava calendar (like celebrations during the month of *Kārtik* when *Tulsī Vivāh* happens, or *Rām Navamī*), others were linked to the *sampradāya* (like the *Rāmānanda jayantī*), and others were associated with the figure of the Jagadgurū (like the guru *pūjā*).⁶⁸

The method I used for collecting my data was participant observation. The definition of participant observation can be controversial, since, as Atkinson and Hammersley have noted, the researcher can undertake several roles: he or she can be a complete observer, an observer as participant, a participant as observer or a complete participant (1994: 248). But, the two anthropologists continue, these typologies can work differently according to other variables (*ibid*: 249):

- Whether the researcher is known to be a researcher by all those being studied, or only by some, or by none.
- How much, and what, is known about the research and by whom.
- The kinds of activities in which the researcher did and did not engage, and how this locates her or him in relation to the various conceptions of category and group membership used by participants.
- What the orientation of the researcher is; how completely he or she consciously adopts the orientation of insider or outsider.

⁶⁸ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.3.

Taking these suppositions into consideration, I recognize that my participant observation changed over the course of the fieldwork: since everybody knew that I was a researcher I was never a complete participant (in addition, this was never my purpose). However, I did undertake the other three roles.

At the beginning of my first round of fieldwork, my presence in religious events created a lot of curiosity. For this reason, I preferred to sit in a corner to avoid the possibility that people would take notice of me and modify their behavior: I was a complete observer. I was also hesitant in taking pictures because I was afraid to disturb the rituals or to cause the displeasure of the Jagadgurū and of the people in attendance. Later on, when the Jagadgurū realized that my presence was persistent and that I had a genuine interest in the topic, he began to introduce me to the audience every time, so that people would understand my purpose there and accept me as he had done. He allowed me to take pictures and to record whatever I thought could be important for my research. Even so, I still did not yet feel completely at ease, especially since in the beginning I could not fully understand Hindi.

During my stay in the Śrī Maṭh, there was a progressive change in the attitude of the people. At the beginning I was a strange figure in the background who was allowed to observe, to record and to take photos. In the second fieldwork my relationships with the people of the Śrī Maṭh and some devotees were already established, so that those who already knew me would introduce me to other people, or people would sometimes come up to speak to me. In this way I became a participant as observer. Sometimes, having participated to the same event the year before, I felt more confident in asking questions and being part of conversations about it, and also in taking photos (I became the official photographer of the Śrī Maṭh).

During the second fieldwork I was always in the front line, pushed by people who wanted to help me even in situations in which I was attending for pleasure rather than for official research. In some cases I became the 'doer' (as a real devotee) of particular *pūjā*-s, because the Jagadgurū ordered me to do it, becoming an observer as participant. Although this earned me a lot of respect among the devotees,⁶⁹ I sometimes felt guilty for stealing the place of someone who would have rejoiced in being chosen by the Jagadgurū more than me. In all the events I collected photos of the celebrations and of the participants. I also occasionally made videos. I would ask questions to the officiators as well, and either take

⁶⁹ That is the reason why the Jagadgurū asked me to actively perform some *pūjā*-s.

notes if possible or try to memorize my observations to write down later.

5.4 Qualitative interviews: talking with lay people

By attending religious celebrations, I was able to meet both pilgrims and local devotees. I tried to speak with as many people as possible, sometimes without planning a real interview because many of my interactions with people were spontaneous. With lay people, I prefer to collect my information through casual conversations, or informal interviews.

Obviously, a casual conversation consists of an exchange of information – just as I was interested in knowing about the interviewees, so they were curious about me. The fact that I was a relatively young woman living abroad on my own always caused curiosity, and sometimes admiration, among the people I met. I tried to create a general survey of the population by working a set of uniform questions into all of my casual conversations, including: the person's place of residence (whether from Varanasi or not); their profession; the length of time the person has been involved with the Śrī Maṭh; whether he or she had taken *dīkṣā* (initiation); how many people from the family follow the Śrī Maṭh; their relationship with the Jagadgurū; and the reason why they follow him.

I found the approach of casual interviews very constructive, because they enabled different points of view, questions and topics to emerge.⁷⁰ Furthermore, it led people to speak with me easily, on their terms and about a wide range of topics.

Most of the people coming to the Śrī Maṭh were from Bihar (likely because the Jagadgurū is from this state), Punjab (especially Patyala District and Chandigarh), Rajasthan (mostly Jodhpur and Jaipur), Indore, Mumbai, Nasik and Chitrakut. The typical pilgrims were married adults, often arriving with their entire family. Sometimes organized groups arrived from different parts of India and were hosted in the *dharamśālā* owned by the Śrī Maṭh in Kabir Chaura in Varanasi. These groups especially helped to facilitate the arrival of women, since Indian women often only travel if accompanied by someone or as part of an organized group.⁷¹

⁷⁰ For example, during a walk with a young devotee I discovered that she was the niece of the Jagadgurū and that he financially supports her education.

⁷¹ I will describe the relation between the guru and female devotees in Chapter 6, sec. 3.1 and 3.2.

5.4.1 Talking with ascetics and *brahmacārī-s*

I mainly conducted interviews in the Śrī Maṭh with *sādhu-s* who were either living there or coming to meet the Jagadgurū. I also interviewed some other Rāmānandī-s whom I met during my travels in other cities. I had some casual conversations with the *sādhu-s*, but I mainly prepared semi-structured interviews, guided by my research questions and by the typology of ascetic with whom I was talking, since there are several branches in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

In the Śrī Maṭh I usually asked the *sādhu-s* for informal appointments for my interviews, because I did not want to bother them. I opted for this approach because often when I asked to do interviews, the common reply was 'Abhi?' (right now?), said in an uncomfortable tone. I preferred then to follow the rhythm of the *sādhu-s*, giving them the possibility to feel at ease while talking to me, or to escape from me as well.

I would start with questions on the religious discipline they followed, which branch of the *sampradāya* they were from, and whether they were *vairāgī-s* (non-attached renunciators) or had been *gṛihastha* (householder) before. This last question was inspired by the presence of several *ex gṛihastha* in the Śrī Maṭh. This demonstrated to me that it is still common to undertake a religious/ascetic path once an individual has accomplished his or her goals of seeing his or her children settled in life. For many people the *bhakti* path is the simplest to obtain spiritual achievements.

During the first fieldwork, I asked *sādhu-s* connected with the Śrī Maṭh questions about the Jagadgurū, such as the recognition of his office in the *sampradāya*.

In the Śrī Maṭh, I wanted to inquire about the *brahmacārī-s* as well. I used a questionnaire, as some of them were very shy to talk to me in the beginning. In that survey, I asked simple questions about their family, whether the family made the decision to send them to study there, what they wanted to do in their future, and general questions about their likings and hobbies. Only eleven people gave the questionnaire back to me and they all replied in the same way. Most of them said they were there because they wanted to study, and all of them were happy in studying *Veda-s* and Sanskrit and they wanted to do it for the rest of their lives. It is likely that in their futures they will become *paṇḍit-s* or teachers somewhere. However, in the questionnaire they all wanted to appear like society expects them to be, so they were very careful in replying in the most correct way possible instead of replying according to their own ideas. Nevertheless, this experience with the questionnaire demonstrated to me that if I wanted to understand the real thought

processes of the people, it was better to continue with the approach of the informal interview. Hence in the end I opted for informal interviews with them as well.

5.4.2 *Darśan-s* and interviews with the Jagadgurū

During my first fieldwork, I only interviewed the Jagadgurū once, as he was always busy and often travelling. For this reason, I obtained a lot of my information from his *darśan-s*, the public addresses he gives to devotees twice a day wherever he is. I obtained permission to record these meetings and was able to sit close to the Jagadgurū to make the sound as clear as possible. However these recordings were not always useful: sometimes because of the poor quality of the sound (caused by outside noises⁷² and people playing with my recorder or asking me questions in the middle of Jagadgurū's talks), and sometimes because, out of several hours of recordings, there might be only a few conversations that were of interest for my research. Most of the time the conversations I captured were simple, colloquial chats between the Jagadgurū and his devotees about very general topics. Nevertheless, through these moments I realized that for many disciples and devotees, this personal interaction with the Jagadgurū was as important as a proper religious speech, because it gave to them the opportunity to be close to their guru.

When I attended the *darśan-s*, I usually took written notes of the main arguments he dealt with and of the people present. Later on, I compiled these notes in order to gain a broad understanding of the Jagadgurū's perspective on political issues, other *sampradāya-s*, *sādhu-s*, and other related topics. These *darśan-s* allowed me to observe the relationship between a devotee and his guru and the role of the guru in a devotee's life, which is an essential issue in the life of a *sampradāya* and in the framework of contemporary India, especially given the considerable increase in the number of gurus over the past several decades.

In the autumn of 2012, the Jagadgurū spent many weeks in the Śrī Maṭh, which enabled our relationship to develop further. He provided me one hour each day to speak with him. I only had structured interviews with him in which I would ask him fixed questions and any follow-up questions that arose from his replies. This system was fruitful for both of us: he could organize his time and I could ask specific questions. I used this method for the rest of the fieldwork: every time I met with him, whether in Varanasi or in

⁷²Quite often the *darśan-s* happened in the large open hall, so that accidental noises coming from the *ghāt-s* and from the boats on the river sometimes obscured my recordings.

other cities, I arranged to have some time with him. Sometimes I asked my questions during the *darśan*. This experience always enriched my interviews because the other people in attendance would ask additional insightful questions that built upon my own.

My interviews with the Jagadgurū enabled me to learn his point of view on several topics, including: the role of Rāmānanda in the Indian society; differences between Rāmānandī-s and Rāmānūjī-s; the structure of the *sampradāya* and its branches; its contemporary situation; the role of Bhagavadācārya; the role of the Jagadgurū in the *sampradāya* and the number of the Jagadgurū-s; the election process and the way in which a Jagadgurū's successor is appointed; the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement and his stance on it; the Rām *bhakti* in contemporary India; the use of the modern means to be in touch with devotees; the importance of the caste system; the projects he supports.

The time I spent with the Jagadgurū and his devotees stimulated me to focus on their relationship, which was important to understanding the role of the Jagadgurū in the *sampradāya*. The presence of other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s and the range in their roles convinced me of the need for a deeper understanding of the general role of gurus in India, which in turn helped me in to frame the figure of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya in the more general Indian religious landscape and to better understand the reason for his presence in the *sampradāya*.

5.5 Translations of books and materials produced by the Śrī Maṭh

Under the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya, the Śrī Maṭh has started to intensively publish written materials. Initially I collected and translated some of the most meaningful texts for my research, such as those focused on the history of the *sampradāya*, particularly during the contemporary period.

I translated chapters on the history of the *sampradāya* and the story of Rāmānanda to understand the version supported by the Śrī Maṭh and the perspective it wants to propagate. My attention was particularly captured by the biographic chapters about the life of Rāmānanda: while both Western and Indian scholars still wonder about his date and place of birth, these chapters described Rāmānanda's life in a clear and detailed manner, in an attempt to create a historical tradition about the *sampradāya*'s founder. The *sampradāya*'s effort to locate Rāmānanda in a clear historical era is further stressed by the fact that the Jagadgurū owns a *havelī* (a mansion with a temple that he transformed in an

āśram) in Prayāg that he claims is the birthplace of Rāmānanda.⁷³

Texts such as *Tīrthraj Prayāg our Kumbh Mahāpurva* provided further information about the organization of the *sampradāya* since it contains lists of the present *akhārā-s*, *āśram-s* and *maṭh-s* approved during the Kumbh in 2007.

I also examined *pravacan-s* (speeches) given by the Jagadgurū and collected in two blogs,⁷⁴ cataloguing the arguments he talked about, noting his references to other religions and countries, and comparing this information with those conversations I recorded during the *darśan-s*.

5.6 Different settings in Varanasi

In February 2013 and September 2014, I visited other Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi. I looked for those described in the work of Sinha and Saraswati, but I also noted that the information they gave was incomplete, as they failed to mention some centers that are quite sizeable.

The places I visited represent only a part of the Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi, which, according to the *sādhu-s* that I consulted, likely number around sixty or seventy. However, some of the places are very small and hidden and therefore not as significant in the religious landscape of the city. I was not able to meet all the *mahant-s* (abbots) of some of the centers I visited, because in February 2013 many of them were at the Kumbh Melā. However, I tried to obtain information from the ascetics present. I would start by asking general information about the place, its history and the religious disciplines followed there. Then I steered the conversation toward the main focus of my research: their point of view on the role that the Jagadgurū played in the *sampradāya* and whether the *sampradāya* needed one Jagadgurū or more.

There were many places in which I did not record the conversations because I noticed ascetics would have opposed to such tactics, thereby inhibiting communication and my attempts at gaining useful information. Therefore, I could only take fast notes, trying to memorize as much as possible and writing everything down once back in my room.

⁷³ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 3.5.

⁷⁴ <http://swamiramnareshacharya.blogspot.it/> and <http://www.shreemathkashi.com/> (Accessed: February 2014)

5.7 Different geographical settings

5.7.1 Delhi

During my first fieldwork I left Varanasi only once to go to Delhi to visit the office of the Viśva Hindū Pariṣad (VHP). My purpose was to collect information from the VHP about the position of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya during and after the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement in order to confront their answers with those given by the Jagadgurū himself. I discussed the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement with the Jagadgurū several times, and I also obtained information on his role from professor Dipak Malik (Honorary Director of the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi), who told me the Jagadgurū was against the political nature of the movement and that he was part of the committee organized by Rao to confront the VHP. Unluckily, my visit to the VHP center was not successful because I was not able to meet Ashok Singhal, the leader of the Pariṣad who had had discussions with the Jagadgurū. I was only able to speak with a secretary, who was unable to give me very detailed answers, presumably because he did not know the Jagadgurū.

5.7.2 Haridwar

The first trip outside of Varanasi that I did during my second fieldwork was to Haridwar, where I had two goals: to visit the place where the Jagadgurū is supporting the construction of a new Rām temple, and to obtain information about the Akhārā Pariṣad.⁷⁵ While the first aim was not difficult to accomplish (indeed the *brahmacārī-s* living there were happy to show the site to me), finding the ‘office’ of the Akhārā Pariṣad was a failure. I only had rudimentary information about the organization collected randomly from national newspapers – I only knew that the ‘office’ was supposedly located in that city. Indeed, there’s a street in Haridwar where many *akhārā-s* have their *āśram-s* and temples, but there was nothing like a general office where I could have obtained information about the Pariṣad, its history or the number of *sādhu-s* forming it.

5.7.3 Ayodhya

My main purpose in going to Ayodhya was to visit the main Rāmānandī centers belonging to the branches of the *sampradāya*. After a visit to the Rāmjanmabhūmi site, I selected

⁷⁵ As we will see in Chapter 4, the Akhārā Pariṣad is an organization which collects the representatives of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava *akhārā-s*, ascetics group consisting of naked *sādhu-s* (*nāgā-s*) which, in the past, used to act as armies for their own *sampradāya-s*.

places and people to visit such as the Hanumān Garhī, which is the main center of the Rāmānandī *nāgā* and the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā, which is an important center of the *rasik* branch.

In Ayodhya, I wanted to clarify some information about the *sādhanā* (discipline) of the various branches and their inner differentiations, and to obtain information about the *tilak* (forehead mark) utilized in the *sampradāya* because I had tried unsuccessfully several times to recognize Rāmānandī ascetics through their *tilak*. There are many *tilak*-s used in the *sampradāya* because it is divided into many branches, which are even further divided according to the teachings of specific gurus.

I directed my questions on political matters to a *mahant* of the Hanumān Garhī and a former *mahant* of the same place, Gyān Dās, who has served as the president of the Akhārā Pariṣad. My questions to them dealt especially with the roles of the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū in the *sampradāya*. The complete opposite answers that I received from these interviews demonstrated to me the need for further research on the inner political workings of not just the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* but also other *sampradāya*-s, and on the link between *sampradāya*-s in general and pan-Indian religious organizations such as the VHP.

5.7.4 Prayāg and the Mahā Kumbh Melā

In February 2013, the Jagadgurū allowed me to stay in his *āśram* in Prayāg during the Mahā Kumbh Melā. This was a great opportunity to analyze various dynamics: the relationships between the Jagadgurū and his lay devotees; the typologies of devotees in attendance; the status of the Jagadgurū in the Melā; the types of religious activities he organized for lay people and ascetics; and the relationship between the various branches of the *sampradāya* settled in the Kumbh. During the seventeen days I spent in the *āśram*, I attended morning *pravacan*-s and daily *pūjā*-s and followed the Jagadgurū when he was invited to other camps. We went to several *tyāgī*-s camps and also went to meet the *mahant* of the Sen *sampradāya* and the Śaṅkarācārya of Puri.

I also spent time exploring the Kumbh's streets and taking notes and photos of the Rāmānandī-s' camps, although I was not able to be as extensive in this as I wished due to the size of the Kumbh and my limited amount of free time.

5.7.5 Jaipur, Galtā and Revāsā

In March 2013 I visited some historical Rāmānandī places: Galtā, Revāsā and the Balānanda

Maṭh in Jaipur.

Galtā is an important Rāmānandī center that is dated to the 16th century, when Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī is said to have conquered the place from a yogi belonging to the Nāth *panth*. Since then, the center has witnessed decisive events that marked the history of the *sampradāya*. I visited the place and spoke with the temple *pūjāri*-s, who told me that these temples are now under the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* since the *mahant* decided to change his affiliation to remain married.⁷⁶ I wanted to collect more information about the topic and tried to meet the *mahant* of Galtā, Swāmī Sampatkumar Avadheśācārya, but I did not have the opportunity because his schedule did not allow for it.

Finding the Balānanda Maṭh was not an easy task, as book references were not clear about its location. I only happened to find it by chance, after which I had to wait for over an hour to talk with the *mahant*. The wait was worth it, however, as he provided me with ample information. He explained the history of the place, its connection to the *nāgā* branch, and even answered some of my more intrusive questions on the Jagadgurū and the *mahant* of Galtā. Even though I explained to him my connection with the Śrī Maṭh, he expressed his stance against the role of Rāmānareśācārya without hesitation.

Then I went to Revāsā, which is located one hundred kilometers from Jaipur in the Sikar District. Although the *mahant* there did not have much time to spend with me because he was preparing to leave for Jaipur, he replied to some of my shorter questions on the Jagadgurū and the *mahant* of Galtā. He also gave me books and articles about the history of the Revāsā Pīṭh and asked a *sevak* to show me the place and to help me in case I had further questions after he left.

6. Problems faced during the fieldwork

6.1 Language issue and the decision not to have an assistant

Once in the field, I had to decide whether to have an assistant or not. At the beginning of my fieldwork, my Hindi was not good enough to enable me to speak fluently. However, I decided to avoid using an assistant and to speak directly with people, because I wanted to have as much of a personal connection with them as possible. In fact, I thought that an interpreter would have created more of a gap between myself and my subjects. Furthermore, I did not want to make anyone feel uneasy about having their words

⁷⁶ According to a Rāmānandī *sādhu* whom I met in Galtā, the *sampradāya* has started a legal action to take the Galtā's temples back because of the *mahant*'s stand. (Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 6.1.)

translated from Hindi to English, a language that the majority of them did not know.⁷⁷ I preferred to record my interviews with my subjects in Hindi and then to translate them with the support of my Hindi teacher. This enabled me to gain the confidence of devotees and *sādhu-s*, who appreciated my endeavors in speaking in Hindi, since it gave them the opportunity to speak with a *videśī* (foreigner).⁷⁸ The use of Hindi was an incredible tool by which to become a part of the community of lay and ascetic people.

This approach facilitated the creation of friendly relationships and I had the feeling that my presence, especially during the second fieldwork, did not alter the 'natural' process of the events in any considerable way.

However, the absence of an interpreter had some negative aspects as well, like moments of misunderstanding and a more difficult and lengthy translation process after the interviews were taken. For instance, sometimes I would not understand pieces of casual conversations and only realize later, after a proper translation, that I had missed opportunities to deepen my understanding with follow-up questions to something a person had said. Furthermore, since almost all the conversations, events and ceremonies were in Hindi, at times I was extremely tired, which made comprehension of a foreign language difficult; in those circumstances as well, the presence of an assistant would have been useful.

Another problem I had to face while speaking, translating and reading the texts published by the Maṭh was the quality of the Hindi. Frequently, the kind of highly Sanskritized Hindi used in the religious setting, particularly in religious texts, was difficult even for my Hindi teacher to understand. At other times, dialects and regional accents also created problems. Added to these problems was the fact that some of my recordings were low quality because of background noises, which made the process of deciphering the language all the more difficult.

It was also difficult to obtain a proper translation because I was not able to find a translator who had any background knowledge of the topic of my research. For instance, sometimes my interpreters would simply not translate certain parts of a recording because they did not realize that certain parts were relevant to my research. This realization led me to check every time that a translation was complete. Obviously the consequence was that a lot of time was devoted to listening and re-listening to the same record until I was sure I

⁷⁷ All my interviews and conversations were held in Hindi. I only used English in a few circumstances.

⁷⁸ Many devotees were from villages from Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, rural areas where foreigners rarely go. The simple fact that I could reply to a few of their questions made them comfortable.

had obtained all the necessary information.

6.2 Dealing with people

As aforementioned, spending time with pilgrims, devotees and ascetics permitted a reciprocal exchange of information, impressions and details about peoples' private lives. However, there were many misunderstandings as well, especially about my role among them: it was very difficult to make people understand that my aim was exclusively scientific. For instance, it sometimes became arduous to reply to questions such as 'Which God do you believe in? How did you come to be in love with Rām? Do you pray? Don't you think your presence here is a result of your past karma? Don't you think in your next life you will live in Varanasi and have a role in Śrī Maṭh?'

Most of the time I avoided giving a direct reply to such questions, since they were well-intentioned and I did not want to insult anyone's personal beliefs. Sometimes, I had to stop myself from explaining issues from my point of view, as this would have only created friction. However, with holding my opinion sometimes made me feel like I was lying to people, even though I had always declared my reason for being there clearly.

The most difficult period for balancing this personal aspect of the fieldwork was during the Kumbh Melā, even though from the point of view of my research this was one of the more successful periods. Most of the time I was sharing my room with eleven women, with no privacy at all and no chance to sit and elaborate the information I was collecting. Moreover, the impression that I was part of the religious community moved people to expect my participation in *pūjā*-s, especially the guru *pūjā*; they scolded me if I did not attend celebrations in temples or did not want to have the *darśan* of a particular *mūrti*. It also happened that some people, knowing that the Jagadgurū valued me and that I used to follow him around in the other camps, would occasionally use me as a mediator between them and the Jagadgurū when they knew that they would otherwise receive a negative reply from. I did try my best to help them, and in many occasions I was successful, but sometimes the result I got instead was disapproval from the Jagadgurū.

6.3 Limits in the quality of material

During my various fieldworks, I was satisfied with the amount of material I was able to collect. The problem was the time required to collect it all. There were periods of time that were relatively unproductive due to a myriad of delays, including appointments that were

cancelled or that only happened after I made many attempts, questions that I had to ask the same person several times in different moments to gain a complete answer, false excuses from interviewees to escape from questions, and endless waits before the beginning of a meeting, event or celebration.

Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, I had to face the reality that some of my interview subjects would be limited in their ability to talk about the *sampradāya* in a way that was helpful for my research. Indeed, many lay people followers of the Jagadgurū considered themselves to be Vaiṣṇava but not followers of that specific *sampradāya*, meaning their knowledge of the *sampradāya* was quite limited. I also found a similar phenomenon among *sādhu*-s: some of them followed a specific guru (who happened to be part of a *sampradāya*) and focused on his teachings rather than on the *sampradāya* as a whole. Obviously, from their point of view, this is what matters, but given the needs of my research, this dynamic drove me to search for *mahant*-s and learned gurus as sources rather than ‘simple’ *sādhu*-s.

6.4 The never-ending fieldwork

A particular problem I had to face while writing this thesis is what may be called the ‘never-ending fieldwork’. By this expression I mean a situation in which even after conducting all of the proper fieldwork, the researcher keeps collecting data from primary or secondary sources, especially through Internet research and social networks.

The Internet is a great tool for ethnographers because they can constantly update their data with new information and about particular issues while conducting fieldwork and doing the work of writing up their findings. For example, a large part of the information provided in my chapter about Jagadgurū-s came from on-line sources: web sites, blogs, Facebook and videos on YouTube amplified my knowledge and opened new perspectives on the material I had collected.

Online social networks were also important in providing me with information at a distance. I refer here especially to chat conversations on Facebook and on Whatsapp, a mobile application that enabled me to be in constant touch with devotees and *brahmacārī*-s. This tool was very useful in case I had doubts about a topic, found I was missing materials, or thought of some new piece of information that I needed. It was while chatting with a follower of the Jagadgurū that I came to know about the *Harijan pūjā*;⁷⁹ similarly, it was

⁷⁹ Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 4.3.4.

through a group created on Whatsapp that I could advance further my understanding of the devotion that his followers have toward him. This deluge of information initially led me to slow down my writing as I kept obtaining new information. Later on, I decided to focus solely on my fieldwork data and to use these technological means not to introduce new data but to improve and solidify my analysis of what I already had.

Chapter 2

On Rāmānanda: his life, teachings and disciples

Introduction

When it comes to Rāmānanda, we have to face four main uncertainties: his place and date of birth; whether he was a Śrī Vaiṣṇava; whether he established the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and whether he was a social reformer. These uncertainties are due to the fact that, although Rāmānanda is regarded as an iconic figure of the Indian Medieval period, and he is often mentioned in works about *Sant*-s and *bhakta*-s, there is still a lack of evidence that leaves certain aspects of his life up to debate.

The chapter will begin with an examination of the information about Rāmānanda as presented in hagiographies and scholars' retellings of his life and teachings. Our purpose is to outline how the development of Rāmānanda's life story and the ascription of works to him are connected to specific contexts and to the historical development of the *sampradāya*. At the same time, we will show that the interpretations given by orientalist and scholars in the 19th-20th century about Rāmānanda's life were influenced by the historical period in which they lived. Some parts of this chapter will present a catalogic structure to summarize the steps of Rāmānanda's life, his works, his disciples, and the scholars who have expounded upon this topic.

I will not present all the theories on Rāmānanda and his disciples, nor all the linguistic analysis made on his Sanskrit and Hindi works as these aspects have already been analyzed in several other studies. Furthermore, I will not examine in depth the historical backgrounds of the different contexts since they will be dealt with in the next chapter on the history and development of the *sampradāya*.

This chapter thus seeks to demonstrate that for the most part, all we know about Rāmānanda is based on historical reconstructions made by the branches of the *sampradāya*, which depended heavily on their historical period and religious approaches.

1. A comparison of hagiographies

François Mallison claims that the term hagiography, developed in the 18th century

Christian world to mean ‘tales of the lives of saints,’ can also be used in the Indian context, where it is still a living literary genre (2001: IX). The use of hagiographies for historical analysis may be met with skepticism due to their shortcomings that Heidi Pauwels describes:

These narratives are retrospective, they started appearing first only about half a century later, at the end of the sixteenth, and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Moreover, they have not come to us directly, but mediated by an oral and manuscript tradition and eventually by editions that have sought to promote a specific agenda. (2010: 55)

However, hagiographies can be used to understand the different layers of meanings added to the stories over time. In fact, despite the historical inaccuracies inherent within them, hagiographies can be considered as valuable historic sources about not only the lives of particular individuals, but also the communities which have produced the specific memory of those individuals.

Indeed, as N. Rao, S. Subrahmanyam and D. Shulman claim (2001), we have to bear in mind that ‘each community writes history in the mode that is dominant in its own literary practice’ since ‘what constitutes history is not a given, in some universal sense, but practices specific to time and place’.

Following this thinking, we can suppose that, in a religious community of the 16th or 17th centuries, the main history that was indispensable to transmit was that of the lives of *bhakta*-s and, later on, that of its founder. Hagiographies were the principle medium through which such stories were transmitted, making them an invaluable source for historical analysis of the process of history-making itself.

It is thus helpful to regard hagiographies as emic history to be interpreted through the model of mnemo-history suggested by Jan Assmann, who studies traditions as phenomena of collective memory:

Mnemo-history is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. [...] A mnemohistorical discourse analysis investigates this concatenation of texts as a vertical line of memory and seeks out the threads of connectivity which are working behind the texts: the intertextuality, evolution of ideas, recourse to forgotten evidence, shifts of focus, and so forth. (1998: 9,16)

This method is particularly helpful for our work on hagiographies since it underlines how ‘an individual is remembered and continually refashioned or systematically re-narrated as

an entire tradition of memory is slowly formed' (*ibid*).

The core of the Indian hagiographies is represented by the tales of lives of people involved in the spread of the *bhakti* path, a devotional current made by several streams, whose main protagonists were called *Sant*-s. As Mallison explains (2001: XI), a defining characteristic of these hagiographies is their mythological dimension, in which 'saints' are assimilated with God, and given divine characteristics.

Reflecting on the context in which the first Indian hagiographies were produced, Mallison argues that it was most likely the diffusion of sectarian movements during the medieval period and the increased competition among religious groups for economic and political support that led to the spread of hagiographies as necessary tools to attract devotees (*ibid*: XVII). Mallison explains that:

La communauté se substituant à l'auteur lui suggère ses désirs et apparaît comme le véritable auteur collectif du récit hagiographique, le rédacteur ne faisant que se conformer à une demande. [...] La fonction la plus évidente des hagiographies est de mettre en perspective le contexte religieux dans lequel elles ont été produites. (2001: XV)

However, according to Rupert Snell (1994: 4), we can see in the development of the hagiographies the growth (evolution I would say) of a tradition that the devotee regards as a process of revelation, while scholars interpret it as a process of invention. And, Snell continues (*ibid*: 3), this process was (and still it is) caused by two needs: for the writer, to illustrate exemplary lives to lay people, and for the devotee, to follow such exemplary lives. The more distant in time the example was, the more lay people wanted to know about that 'saint'. This led to additions of events to the narration, which explains why late hagiographies present stories in more details than the early ones.

In the next pages, I will introduce some hagiographies produced in the Rāmānandī environment, with a focus on those which had a particularly wide distribution and tangible impact on the development of Rāmānanda's life story.⁸⁰ Arguably, this chapter will demonstrate, this development was directed by *sthānādhārī* (settled) Rāmānandī-s who followed a *saguṇa* devotion and *rasik sādhanā*. We will see that, in the 16th-17th centuries, hagiographies display stories of *bhakta*-s from across a wide spectrum of religious communities, including both Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s and heterodox groups. The emphasis is on their exemplary status as devotees of the *bhakti* path, rather than their specific group

⁸⁰ As I am not an expert of medieval Hindi literature, I did not examine the original texts, but rather their translations and studies on them.

affiliation. In this context, the life story of Rāmānanda is narrated for its intrinsic message rather than to stress his figure.⁸¹

Later on, changed historical conditions pressed for a clearer definition of *sampradāya*-s' boundaries, also influencing the production of hagiographies. The primary purpose of a hagiography became to focus the attention of the reader on an individual's teaching, to stress the value of one sect, tradition or lineage over another. According to Snell:

The context may be either inter-sectarian, or intra-sectarian. In asserting the paramountcy of a particular teaching, the hagiographer must firstly demonstrate a reassuringly secure connection with pre-existing tradition (if not exactly 'orthodox', the implied theology must not reach out too far from a normative acceptability), while secondly showing that the sectarian attitude being promoted offers a uniquely correct perception of divine truth. (1994: 5-6)

The development of Rāmānanda's life story made a decisive step at the beginning of the 20th century as part of a precise project planned by a radical group in the *sampradāya*.⁸² As we will see, during this time the number of life details included in the hagiographies increased, especially during the 19th-20th century. Our knowledge about the sources of these details is limited: Caracchi hypothesizes they are part of a well know oral tradition spread among Rāmānandī-s (1999: 40). However, there is no clear evidence and only further studies and a comparison of hagiographies across different traditions and within the same Rāmānandī *sampradāya* could bring to light new insights.

1.1 The earliest hagiographies

1.1.1 Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*⁸³

At the beginning of the 17th century, Nābhādās wrote the *Bhaktamāl*, a work narrating the lives of *Sant*-s and devotees. In its 214 stanzas in *Braj bhāṣā*, the dialect spoken in the present western part of Uttar Pradesh, the *Bhaktamāl* dedicates the *chappaya*-s (quatrain verse) number 35 and 36 to the life of Rāmānanda. This is the first historical account we

⁸¹ This remark follows the analysis of Lutgendorf (1994: 74) on Tulsīdās's biography as presented in Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*: 'Nabhadās was of course a contemporary of Tulsīdās [...] yet this did not, apparently, inspire him to add personal details to his brief Bhaktmal eulogy. What seems to have been important to Nabha was not who Tulsī was, but rather what he represented'.

⁸² Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 8.

⁸³ For a thorough analysis of the *Bhaktamāl*, see Hare (2011).

have about him. The summary of contents is as follows:

- Rāmānanda was part of Rāmānūja's *paramparā*. According to Caracchi, the *paramparā* in the *Bhaktamāl* is not complete, as Nābhādās mentions only three gurus (Devācārya, Hariyānanda and Rāghavānanda) between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda, which seems insufficient to cover the temporal gap between the two.⁸⁴
- Rāghavānanda, the guru of Rāmānanda, taught the *bhakti* to the four *varṇa*-s and to the four *āśrama*-s after having travelled all over India and reaching Varanasi.
- In Varanasi, Rāmānanda became a disciple of Rāghavānanda.
- Rāmānanda is considered as an *avatār* of Rām, and a bridge for the well-being of the world.
- Rāmānanda had twelve disciples: Anantānanda, Kabīr, Sukhā, Sursur and his wife Sursurī, Padmāvati, Narhari, Pīpā, Bhāvānanda, Raidās, Dhanā, Sen.
- These disciples were examples of the ten kinds of *bhakti*.⁸⁵

It is difficult to give an accurate value of Nābhādās's *chappaya*-s since we do not have clear information about the author himself. Some information is from 1712 C.E., when Priyādās wrote a commentary on the *Bhaktamāl* called *Bhaktirasadobhinī*. There he says that Nābhādās was born in the 'worthy family of Hanuman',⁸⁶ but he was blind and, when he was five years old, was abandoned by his widowed mother in the forest during a famine. There, he met Kilhadās and Agradās, who questioned his name and parentage. Kilhadās sprinkled water on his eyes to restore his sight and then ordered Agradās to become Nābhādās's teacher. Agradās initiated him and brought him to Galtā, where he did *sevā* for the *sādhu*-s living there (Grierson, 1909: 620).

Let us now analyze the religious community described in the *Bhaktamāl*. Although Nābhādās speaks about Rāmānanda in a panegyric manner, he gives more attention to his disciples: the stories of *bhakta*-s and *Sant*-s are pivotal elements of the *Bhaktamāl* in a way that, to use the words of Pinch (1999: 369), 'could accommodate both [the] monastic and

⁸⁴ The traditional birth and death dates of Rāmānūja are 1017–1137 C.E. (Caracchi, 1999: 32)

⁸⁵ As explained by Caracchi (1999: 32,95), a *bhakti* classified by ten elements is typical of the *rasik* branch of the *sampradāya*. This branch added to the traditional classification (*śravaṇa*-hearing, *kīrtan*-recitation, *samsmaraṇa*-remembering, *padāśriti*-taking shelter at the feet of god; *arcanā*-worship; *vandanā*-adoration; *dāsyā*-service; *sākhya*-friendship; *ātmsamrpaṇa*-offering of the self) the *prem-bhakti*, that is the *bhakti* of pure love.

⁸⁶ Grierson says that, according to tradition, the Hanumān family was a Brahman family, but that according to the most common version of the story, Nābhādās was a *dōm* (an untouchable). Grierson adds that some of Nābhādās' commentators have asserted that the attribution of a low birth is due to a misunderstanding since in the 17th century Rajasthan *dōm*-s were musicians and singers, not beggars like they largely are today. (Jul. 1909: 621).

lay population,' addressing a Vaiṣṇava community in its entirety.

Hare shared a similar opinion:

The *Bhaktamāl* proposes a new kind of religious community. Nābhādās imagines a community, united by *bhakti*, which is not bound by region, sect, social status, or even time. It is not so much that Nābhādās challenged these boundaries [...]. These worldly institutions [i.e., *sampradāya*-s] seem to have little place in his vision of what ultimately matters: loving devotion for God and God's servants. (2011: 8)

Hare describes this community as a product of Nābhādās's religious and literary imagination, where the community of *bhakta*-s is not limited by the *sampradāya* (*ibid*: 66). However, I think that rather than imagining a community, Nābhādās was describing the mixed and heterogeneous Vaiṣṇava reality of his period at Galtā. It is likely that the main audience⁸⁷ of the *Bhaktamāl* was composed of lay people, and this could explain why greater attention is given to *bhakta*-s than ascetics: the lives of *bhakta*-s, who were mostly common men, could be used as examples to follow in the everyday life. In this lay social framework, obstacles imposed by 'definitions' were not present, and as the Indian history testifies through the example of Kabīr and Raidās, the religious value of an individual often mattered more than his or her membership within a specific group. Devotees could (as they still can today) follow more than one guru and worship *Sant*-s belonging to different traditions. What was (and still is) important is the religious insight that an individual could give and transmit.

Since tradition holds that it was Agradās who asked Nābhādās to write the *Bhaktamāl*, we may recognize in his work the effort of a *bhakta* who decided to collect the stories of exemplary lives to inspire other devotees under the consent of his guru.⁸⁸

1.1.2 Anantadās's *Parcaī*

The *Parcaī* of Anantadās brings together legends about *bhakta*-s collected at the beginning of the 17th century with the purpose of propagating the basic ideas of the *bhakti*.⁸⁹ According to David Lorenzen (1991: 75), Anantadās was a disciple of Vinodī, *guru-bhāī* of Nābhādās, and probably hailed from Revāsā.

⁸⁷ As pointed out by Pinch (1999: 373), although the stories contained in the *Bhaktamāl* were well-known, given their conciseness, they needed to be read under the guide of a guru.

⁸⁸ This point is supported by evidence recorded during my fieldwork. Even today there are lay devotees who, under the stimulus of the Jagadgurū, write about the life of Rāmānanda while staying in an *āśram*. The final reviewer of their works is the Jagadgurū himself.

⁸⁹ I will mostly follow the translation of the *Parcaī* made by Winand Callewaert (2000).

Anantadās provides more details than Nābhādās, to such an extent that his *Parcaī* seems the explanation of the untold stories of the *Bhaktamāl* (Callewaert, 2000: 12). Transmitted in oral form, he describes the lives of the most famous *bhakta*-s of his time: Nāmdev, Angad, Trilochan, Kabīr, Raidās, Dhanā, and Pīpā, these last four said to have been initiated by Rāmānanda.⁹⁰

Why did Anantadās write a *Parcaī* on Nāmdev (who probably lived around 1300 C.E.), while preferring to refer only indirectly to Rāmānanda through the portraits of his disciples and their initiations? Perhaps, following what has been mentioned above, Rāmānanda was not considered as a *bhakta*, but as an ascetic, whose life could not provide a realistic example for lay people. As Callewaert notes (2000: 2-3), Anantadās's purpose was to try to bring about sincere feelings of devotion while simultaneously imparting a moral lesson to the devotees.

Anantadās says that Rāmānanda had his monastery in Varanasi (but does not give a more specific location) where people continuously sang the name of God Rām.⁹¹ In the *Parcaī* about Pīpā, he is said to be often in a state of ecstasy and, from other sketches, we come to know that he was credited with performing miracles.⁹²

The same *Parcaī* gives precious information about Rāmānanda's dual path, as Rāmānanda explains to Pīpā:

In my service you will have a double result, never to return again in a body. Only if you are like one dead in this life, can you find liberation. The second path I show you is that of bhakti. You can choose which ever you like and thus cross the ocean of rebirth. [...] If you want to practise bhakti, do it at home. (Callewaert, 2000: 155)

Later on, Rāmānanda describes to Pīpā's wives the path Pīpā is going to face since he has decided not to stay at home:

He will wander in strange lands, living on alms, with a shaven head and the garb of an ascetic, he has given up all the attachment to caste, status and family honour. A king and a beggar are equal in his eyes. He has no thought of sleep or hunger or pain or pleasure. Sometimes he might wear clothes, at other times he will go naked. This is my path, consider whether you can walk on it. [...] If you can do the same, then you can come with us, ladies. (Callewaert, 2000: 156)

⁹⁰ For a summary of the contents of the *Parcaī*, see Callewaert (2000: 1-22).

⁹¹ Cf. below, Sec. 4.4.

⁹² For example, in the *Parcaī* of Pīpā we also find the story of Rāmānanda bringing a Brahman back to life (Callewaert, 2000: 160).

These two descriptions may be proof that Rāmānanda used to have two approaches: one completely ascetic and the other based on a ‘domestic’ form of *bhakti*. This information would support the attribution of both a *saguṇa* and a *nirguṇa* form of worship to Rāmānanda. Indeed, ascetics, lay people, low caste people and women are commonly found in descriptions of his followers, which may explain the reason for a plurality of teachings.⁹³ In the *Parcaī*, Rāmānanda emerges as a fundamental character for the development of the *bhakti*, a *sat* (real) guru who knows how to discipline his followers and who provides them with the more suitable path.

Anantadās mentions the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s (not including the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*), claiming that ‘if a person stays in one of the four *sampradāya*-s he will be loved by Hari, he will be called pure’ (Callewaert, 2000: 225). If we consider that Anantadās was likely a contemporary of Nābhādās, this reference supports the image of a Vaiṣṇava community where belonging to the same Vaiṣṇava *dharma* counted more than belonging to a unique *sampradāya*.

1.2 The 18th and 19th century

The stories narrated in the *Parcaī* became the basis for many commentaries of the *Bhaktamāl*, which spread as a genre *per se*. A comparative analysis of these texts may help outline the development of the *sampradāya*-s and also provide hints of the life of Rāmānanda. For example, in his examination of the 18th century comment to the *Bhaktamāl* written by Priyādās (who was part of the Gauḍiyā *sampradāya* of Vrindavan), Hare underlines that, during Priyādās’s period, the role of his *sampradāya* was stressed more than the role of the *bhakta*-s. For this reason, Hare regards the community described by Priyādās as different from the one described by Nābhādās (2011: 86,98).

According to Hare, what was different was not the lay community but the need of the *sampradāya* to get support from royal patrons (*ibid*: 103,125). However, it remains doubtful whether this different approach was the result of Priyādās’s belonging to another *sampradāya* or rather of changed historical conditions. It is also likely that a new historical context pushed *sampradāya*-s toward a more precise definition of their identity in confrontation with other groups and communities. In fact, as the next chapter will describe, during the 18th century, Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s gravitating around the Rajput rulers

⁹³ Indeed, it was (and still is) quite common for a guru to use different approaches according to his followers. This topic will be dealt with in the section on the literary production of Rāmānanda.

underwent a process of orthodoxization, which could have led to a reinterpretation and development of the stories contained in the hagiographies and, by consequence, also in the *Bhaktamāl*.

The 18th century was also a crucial period for the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* because various branches were organizing themselves and new centers in northern India were established.⁹⁴ On the base of the secondary data I consulted, we do not have 18th century Rāmānandī hagiographies which give further information on the life of Rāmānanda.

A mutated historic background produced a further shift in the development of these texts during the 19th century, causing them to focus on the life of the tradition's founder, which led to a proliferation of stories about Rāmānanda's life. According to Philip Lutgendorf (1994: 77) who analyzed the spread of Tulsīdās's biographical literature in the 19th century, the advent of the movable type⁹⁵ caused the diffusion of vernacular presses which began issuing popular books, while, at the same time, Christian missionaries and neo-Hindu reformers caused the rise of a Sanātan Dharma movement (a Vaiṣṇava-influenced North Indian movement established to represent the Hindus as adhering to an immemorial, faith) wherein several Vaiṣṇava currents began to stress their identity through the stories of their founders (*ibid*: 78).

Similarly, in his article on Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, the reformer of the Gauḍiyā *sampradāya*, Fuller says:

The nineteenth century was not just a period when Hindus felt compelled to defend themselves against Christian attacks in print, it was also a period when the questions of Hindu self-definition and self-representation were brought to the fore and opened for debate and intra-communal contestation. [...] In the process of defending so-called indigenous 'communities' (whether Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava or more generally Hindu) through the medium of print, these communities were themselves, in many important respects, being constructed – or at least, radically restructured. (2003: 175)

Having acknowledged these remarks, let us now turn to some of those biographies-hagiographies on Rāmānanda composed in the 19th century, and some that, although pretending to be older, were likely also produced in this period. We will show how the increase in details was accompanied by a depiction of Rāmānanda as a proper *ācārya*. Interestingly, this aspect of Rāmānanda, and especially his classic Brahmanic background,

⁹⁴ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 6.

⁹⁵ According to Lutgendorf, the movable type was 'initially developed by the British to produce missionary tracts and inexpensive pedagogical texts for students in the college of Fort William at Calcutta' (1994: 77).

was stressed when the English Raj was approaching Indian religions through their classic texts and especially focusing on those in Sanskrit.

1.2.1 *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*

Caracchi reports that around 1849 C.E., Jivārām Yugalpriyā, a Rāmānandī disciple of Rāmcarāṇadās (a famous commentator on the *Rāmcaritmānas* living at Jānkī Ghāṭ in Ayodhya), wrote a *Bhaktamāl* in which Rāmānanda, Rāghavānanda and Hariyānanda are presented as *rasik* (1999: 45). In Jivārām's story, Rāghavānanda was initially a *Śaiva*, but later Śiv disclosed to him the *rasik bhakti*,⁹⁶ which he then transmitted to Rāmānanda. Rāmānanda thus became an *ācārya* to give salvation to the world (*ibid*). Śrīvāstav claims that the main purpose of this work is to stress the *ṣṛiṅgārī bhakti*⁹⁷ and the history of the *rasik* branch of the *sampradāya* (1957: 43).

1.2.2 *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*

The *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* presents a list of prophecies about past royal dynasties and future kings. Its latest edition contains impossible historical links⁹⁸ as well as precise references and known chronologies,⁹⁹ which is evidence of interpolations and stratification of the original text. Because of the presence of episodes mentioning the English Raj, Purushottam Agrawal suggests that its latest version is likely from the second half of the 19th century (2009: 257).

In the fourth *khaṇḍa* (volume), *adhyāya*-s (chapters) 7-22, Rāmānanda appears several times.¹⁰⁰ Summarizing these *adhyāya*-s we come to know that:

- Rāmānanda was born after the 1399 invasion of Timur.

⁹⁶ It is quite particular to find that an intervention of Śiv addressed Rāghavānanda toward the *rasik bhakti* but, as in the case of Pīpā's *Parcaī*, we can suppose that there was no contradiction for the authors of these texts, since an *iṣṭa devatā* (tutelary deity) can recognize and recommend the path more suitable for the devotee.

⁹⁷ Cf. Introduction, sec. 3.5.

⁹⁸ For example, Śrīvāstav (1957: 33-34) says that once Raidās came to Kāśī and sustained a debate with Śāṅkarācārya, who, after being defeated, decided to become a disciple of Rāmānanda. Furthermore, Namdev is supposed to have received a grant from Sikandar Lodi to build the *ghāt*-s of Varanasi and to become a disciple of Rāmānanda.

⁹⁹ For instance, Akbar is said to be the son of Humayun and Śivājī is described in his war against Aurangzeb. (Agrawal, 2009: 257).

¹⁰⁰ Śrīvāstav (1957: 33-36).

- Rāmānanda was from Kāśī¹⁰¹ and his father's name was Devala, a Kānyakubja Brahman. Abandoned by his parents, he was sheltered by Rāghavānanda.
- Rāmānanda is described like an *avatār* of Sūrya (instead of Rām), and for this reason he was able to perform miracles.
- Rāmānanda had many disciples, including *Sant*-s and disciples from different religious traditions.
- During his *digvijaya*, he reconverted many Muslims to Hinduism.¹⁰²

This *Purāṇic* text places Rāmānanda in the 15th century, and it does not trace any connection between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda, who is considered to be the source of several medieval religious movements. While it seems obvious that some part of this *khaṇḍa* have a 19th century origin, it is also likely that some *adhyāya*-s may be from an earlier period. Indeed, according to Śrīvāstav (1957: 36), the main corpus of the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* was probably composed during the time of Tulsīdās or later, but the scholar does not give further explanations. It would be remarkable to know when Rāmānanda's *adhyāya*-s were added and from which traditions, since his character is highly exalted.

1.2.3 *Agastya Saṃhitā*

Pinuccia Caracchi refers to the existence of several editions of the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, among which the most famous are the *Agastya Suktīkṣṇa Saṃvāda* and the *Agastya Nārada Saṃvāda* (1989: 11). The *Agastya Suktīkṣṇa Saṃvāda* is the most common and the only one to have different editions. Furthermore, it is the only one which contains the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa*, a *khaṇḍa* on the life of Rāmānanda that was also published separately under the name *Rāmānanda Janmotsava* and translated by Caracchi (1989).

Following her translation, we find that in the *adhyāya* 132 a particular emphasis is placed on the astrological configuration of Rāmānanda's date of birth. The same is done for his disciples, who are all considered to be *avatār*-s. *Adhyāya* 133 is dedicated to the cult of Rāmānanda. *Adhyāya* 134 describes the Rāmānanda's *digvijaya*, his journey of conquest in the four directions, and his effort to protect the *dharma* and spread his teachings. *Adhyāya* 135 lists the 108 names of Rāmānanda, explaining the beneficial effects of hearing,

¹⁰¹ Śrīvāstav (1957: 33) maintains in his translation of the 53rd *adhyāya* that Kāśī is the place of birth of Rāmānanda, while Agrawal (2009: 257) claims that the *Purāṇa* places Rāmānanda's birth in Prayāg.

¹⁰² This idea of conversion and reconversion was likely influenced by the presence of Christian missionaries during the English Raj. Therefore such a reference can be used as an example to demonstrate how the context influences those who produce hagiographic texts.

studying and worshipping them, especially during his *jayantī* (1989).

The *Agastya Saṃhitā* gives us the following information about Rāmānanda's life:

- Rāmānanda was born in Prayāg in 1299.
- His father's name was Punyasadana and his mother's name was Suśila and they were Kānyakubja Brahmans.
- When he was 12 years old, he moved to Varanasi and met Rāghavānanda, who belonged to the Śrī *sampradāya* and initiated him to the Rām mantra.
- Rāmānanda was well learned in *Veda*, *Vedānta* and all the *śāstra*, and was a teacher of the Vaiṣṇava *dharma*.
- Rāmānanda became an *ācārya* and had 12 disciples, who correspond to the 10 disciples mentioned by Nābhādās with the addition of Yogānanda¹⁰³ and Gālavānanda.

Given the *Agastya Saṃhitā's* importance, further explanations about its history are necessary.

Hans Bakker, in his analysis of the work, referred heavily to the *Agastya Suktikṣṇa Saṃvāda*, which, in his estimation, is a basic text for the Rām cult, 'especially since it has a canonical status for the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the only Rāmaite of the Vaiṣṇava sects' (1982: 106). Bakker ascribes the main corpus of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* to the 12th century, proving that the original version could not have contained a biography of Rāmānanda.¹⁰⁴ It is clear, then, that the *khaṇḍa* is a later production but, as for the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*, the origin of this addition is hard to ascertain.¹⁰⁵

Agrawal has tried to accomplish this task by comparing different editions of the *Agastya Saṃhitā*. In conclusion, he argues that the *Rāmānanda Janmotsava* was added to the *Agastya Saṃhitā* between 1898 and 1903 by Rāmnārāyaṇadās, a Rāmānandī *sādhu* living in the *Bara Sthān* of Ayodhya who edited the *Agastya Saṃhitā* in 1898. According to Agrawal, information about the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* as part of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* only appears at the beginning of the 20th century and only in Rāmnārāyaṇadās's edition (2009: 246). Nevertheless, Agrawal argues that Rāmnārāyaṇadās wrote the celebration of the birth of Rāmānanda following a set of eight *śloka-s* composed by *paṇḍit* Śrī Rāmcarāṇa in

¹⁰³ In the *Bhaktamāl* he is considered as a disciple of Anantānanda. (Caracchi, 1999: 33)

¹⁰⁴ This also implies that in the 12th century there was already a cult of Rām in northern India in which the repetition of his name was an important part of the *sādhana* (Bakker, 1982: 106).

¹⁰⁵ Clues for the later addition are: the use of the word *khaṇḍa* in a work based on *adhyāya-s*; the existence of many versions of this text that do not present this *khaṇḍa*; and the absence of any historical character except Rāmānanda (Agrawal, 2009: 254-255).

1880-1881; in the second of these *śloka*-s, Rāmānanda's date of birth is given as the year 1356 of Vikram Samvat, or 1299 C.E. (*ibid*: 256-257).

Were these *śloka*-s added to the text by Rāmnārāyaṇadās (or by Śrī Rāmcarāṇa), or were they already present within the work? William Pinch maintains that another commentator on the *Bhaktamāl*, Bhagvād Prasād, gathered information on Rāmānanda from an edition of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* published by the Surya Prabhakar Press in Varanasi in 1879 C.E., that is, before the one published by Rāmnārāyaṇadās.¹⁰⁶ This could mean that even before Rāmnārāyaṇadās, the *Agastya Saṃhitā* presented a version of Rāmānanda's life story.

If we follow Agrawal, Rāmnārāyaṇadās added the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* to the *Agastya Saṃhitā* because of the activities of a radical group led by Bhagavadācārya at the beginning of the 20th century. To justify the independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* from that of Rāmānūja's, the group denied any connection between the two gurus (Agrawal, 2009: 259). However, as Agrawal himself underlines, Rāmnārāyaṇadās was not a complete supporter of Bhagavadācārya's theories and he continued to assert a link between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja.¹⁰⁷ Hence, we can suppose that Rāmnārāyaṇadās likely forged some materials in order to support the portrait of Rāmānanda as an *ācārya*, but perhaps not in the case of the *Agastya Saṃhitā*. In fact, as I will show later, during the 1921 confrontation, the radical movement referred to the *Vālmiki Saṃhitā* and not to the *Agastya Saṃhitā* when describing the life of Rāmānanda.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, I support the idea of this early floruit as part of the construction of an *ācārya* Rāmānanda, but it is likely that the 13th century floruit attributed in the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* was initially chosen to support the link with Rāmānūja (especially if we consider the short *paramparā* presented by Nābhādās) rather than to doubt it. Indeed, Wilson also claimed in 1846 that many Rāmānandī-s dated Rāmānanda's birth to the end of the 13th century, thus connecting him with Rāmānūja (1846: 30).

1.2.4 *Bhaktisudhāsvād Tilak*

This work was written by Sītārāmśaraṇ Bhagvād Prasād 'Rūpkāla' and issued in installments in Varanasi and Patna between the years 1903-1909 (Stark, 2009: 201). It is

¹⁰⁶ Pinch (Jul. 1996: 558, note 27).

¹⁰⁷ Agrawal, <http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/in-search-of-ramanand-purushottam-agrawal/4/> (Accessed: December 2013)

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 8.2.

an edition of the Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* that includes not only a commentary, but also further additions from other texts. Thereby, it is considered to be the most authoritative version of Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*, and was used by scholars (as Grierson) and Rāmānandī-s alike.

Bhagvād Prasād was a Rāmānandī resident in the Kanak Bhavan of Ayodhya. According to Pinch (1996: 558), his father was Tapasvi Rām (1815-1885), well known for 'his scholarship and elegant Rāmendra-centered poetry' and writer of the *Ramuze Mihovafa*, a Persian version of the *Bhaktamāl*. Bhagvād Prasād based his work on this *Mihovafa* and on the *Śrī Rāmānanda Yaśavali*, both inspired by the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* of the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, published in Varanasi in 1879 (*ibid*).

The text begins with a catalogue of 108 important Rāmānandī-s that Prasād portrays from a biographical point of view with a description of their contribution to the *sampradāya*. For this reason, Pinch considers it to be 'a critical examination of the fundamentals of Rāmānandī tradition, an account of a life of unparalleled importance that tried to reconcile a variety of proto-doctrinal opinions through exhaustive scholarship' (1996: 558).

The *Bhaktisudhāsvād Tilak* contains eighteen pages of biographical accounts of the life of Rāmānanda. It includes not only his date and place of birth according the information present in the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, but also many more details of his life. Following the summary given by Caracchi (1999: 35-38), the portrait that arises is as follows:

- Rāmānanda was born in a Kānyakubja family in 1300.
- Rāmānanda's original name was Rāmdatta.
- He started his studies with a *saṃnyāsī smārta* in Varanasi, but after a casual encounter with Rāghavānanda,¹⁰⁹ who revealed to him his forthcoming death, Rāmānanda asked Rāghavānanda for protection.
- Rāghavānanda initiated him into a Rāmaite cult and taught him yogic techniques to reach the status of *samādhi* through which he could trick the Death by appearing to already be dead. In this way, Rāmānanda was saved and he could continue the *sevā* for his guru.
- Later on, Rāmānanda left Varanasi to accomplish several pilgrimages. When he returned, his companions accused him of not having followed the rules of *ācār vicār*,

¹⁰⁹ Rūpkāla describes Rāghavānanda as a highly skilled *yogī*, who was known for giving initiation to people from all four *varṇa*-s and four *āśrama*-s. He transmitted this liberal message to Rāmānanda.

or conduct and behavior. Like other scholars, Caracchi supposes that perhaps Rāmānanda refused to follow some rituals of purification expected after pilgrimages, causing complaints among those Vaiṣṇava-s who cared for this kind of rituals (1999: 38). After this event, Rāghavānanda ordered him to leave the group and establish his own *sampradāya*.

- Rāmānanda is described as an *avatār* of Rāmcandra; great significance is also given to his disciples (including Galabānanda and Yogānanda) who are presented as *avatār-s*.
- Rāmānanda's life lasted for 111 years.
- Since his death, his *pādukā* has been preserved at Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ* in Varanasi, where Rāmānanda established his *āśram*. This *pādukā* is said to be in stone because while Rāmānanda's devotees were mourning his death, the *pādukā* was touched by the Ganga's water and became stone (Caracchi, 1999: 37-40).

According to Pinch, this edition of the *Bhaktamāl* is a celebration of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, whose aim was to commemorate 'Rāmcandra as lived through Rāmānanda'.¹¹⁰ Caracchi suggests that the data we receive from Rupkāla are the result of a well-based and known Rāmānandī tradition, which was orally transmitted (1999: 40).

With the exception of the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*, a common feature of all the aforementioned texts is that they were produced in a specific Rāmānandī context, that of *rasik sādhu-s*. As already stated, and as we will examine more in depth in the next chapter, for reasons determined by different historical situations, this component of the *sampradāya* was meant to underline and magnify its lineage through the glorification of its guru, Rāmānanda. Whether other branches of the *sampradāya* have specific oral or written legends that could provide further clues about the story of Rāmānanda is hard to ascertain since, to the best of my knowledge, no specific study has been conducted on this subject so far.

1.3 The 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, detailed biographies of Rāmānanda began to be produced in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* by the radical group in order to demonstrate that

¹¹⁰ In this perspective, the life of Rāmānanda becomes part of the divine *līlā*, wherein even his differentiated teachings have a specific role: to allow the understanding of human life through the participation of gods in it. (Pinch, 1996: 561)

Rāmānanda was an *ācārya* and did not have any link with Rāmānūja.¹¹¹

1.3.1 *Vālmīki Saṃhitā*

In this *Saṃhitā*, following the structure of old tales presented in the *Puraṇa* and *Tantra*, God Śaṅkar explains to Pārvatī the need in the *kali yuga* of an *ācārya* who was to be the *avatār* of Rām, namely Rāmānanda. He had to be born in Prayag since once a kid called Manasukha, who was doing *tapasyā* there, got from God a boon and he asked for the descent in Prayag of an *avatār* of Rām (Caracchi, 1999: 45).

According to Śrīvāstav, this work was written at the beginning of the 20th century, although its introduction affirms its antiquity and explains that the *sampradāya* delayed its publication because the time was not ripe yet (1957: 40). Śrīvāstav, on the basis of the explanation made at the beginning of this *Saṃhitā* by Raghuvardās Vedāntī, argues that this is one of those texts ‘luckily’ rediscovered by the Purātattvānusandhāyinī Samiti,¹¹² which stress the distance between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja (*ibid*: 40).

1.3.2 *Śrīmad Rāmānanda Digvijaya*

In 1927, Bhagavadācārya published the *Śrīmad Rāmānanda Digvijaya*, declaring it to be the authentic biography of Rāmānanda. The work is written in Hindi and Sanskrit and has the purpose to ‘correct the hagiographic deficiencies present in the Rāmānandī tradition’ (Pinch, 1996: 563) with the use of sources such as *Vālmīki Saṃhitā*, *Agastya Saṃhitā* and *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*.

The place of birth of Rāmānanda, and the names of his father and mother correspond to the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, but there is some additional information about the parents of Rāmānanda’s disciples which is not reported in any other source. Through a description of all the places that Rāmānanda visited during his travels to promote his teaching (his *digvijaya*), Bhagavadācārya stresses the ability of Rāmānanda to re-convert Muslims to Hinduism (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 47). As underlined by Śrīvāstav, this work contains many stories that are likely the product of Bhagavadācārya’s own imagination (*ibid*: 46).

¹¹¹ This topic will be analyzed later. (Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 8.)

¹¹² The Purātattvānusandhāyinī Samiti was created with the purpose of rediscovering Rāmānandī texts about Rāmānanda. (Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 8.1)

1.3.3 *Prasaṅga Pārijāt*

This work has been described thoroughly by Śrīvāstav (1957: 4-17), who claims that the first mention of the text was made in the magazine *Hindustani* in October 1932 by Śrī Śāṅkardayalu Śrīvāstav. This Śrīvāstav explains that one Mūni Bābā gave this work to Mahātmā Balkarām Vinayak, who wrote its commentary.

The *Prasaṅga Pārijāt* is attributed to Cetandās, a disciple of Rāmānanda who, in 1460 C.E., wrote it to spread the life story of Rāmānanda among his fellow disciples. To preserve the text from corruption, he wrote it in *deśvārī*, a Prākṛit language close to Sanskrit and spoken in the northwest area of the Indian Subcontinent (Caracchi, 1999: 46).

According to the *Prasaṅga Pārijāt*, Rāmānanda was born in Prayag in a Kānyakubja family, in the year 1324 of the Vikram Samvat, which corresponds to 1267 C.E. His mother's name was Murvī and his father's name Vājpeī. Rāmānanda went to Kāśī and was initiated to Vaiṣṇavism by a southern guru, Rāghavānanda (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 5). Many miracles are ascribed to him, especially those connected with the power of his conch. By using it, he was able to revive corpses to allow Rāmānanda to give *dīkṣā* to them, and to re-convert Muslims to Hinduism (*ibid*: 7). Among his disciples was Pādmateśvara, whose name appears only in this text. Śrīvāstav argues that the *Prasaṅga Pārijāt* cannot possibly have been composed in 1460 C.E., but is rather a product of modern times, as it contains contemporary events (a reference to Gandhi, for example), while there are not any references to its supposed author, Cetandās, anywhere else in the literature (*ibid*: 16).

1.3.4 *Rāmānandāyan* and *Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya*

Another work introduced by Śrīvāstav is the *Rāmānandāyan*, written in Avadhī by Swami Śrī Jayarāmdev, who was influenced by the *Prasaṅga Pārijāt*, the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, the *Vālmīki Saṃhitā* and the *Rāmānanda Digvijaya*. Its only interesting aspect is the additional information on the disciples of Rāmānanda and a reference to the composition of the *Ānanda Bhāṣya* by Rāmānanda. Similar references are also present in *Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya*, written by a certain Śrī Devdās in the wake of the above-mentioned works. This text contains the first mention of local scholars giving the title of Jagadgurū to Rāmānanda (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 48-49).

1.3.5 *Bhagvān Rāmānandācārya*

Śrīvāstav provides some information about the content of the *Bhagvān Rāmānandācārya*

(1957). He does not report the publishing date, but claims the work to be edited by Śrī Haricaranlāl Varmā Śāstrī. The *Bhagvān Rāmānandācārya* is an anthology with articles written by Rāmānandī intellectuals about Rāmānanda – his life, teachings, literary production – and the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. According to Śrīvāstav, the work is valuable because it throws light on various attitudes inside the *sampradāya* (1957: 50). In fact, not all the intellectuals share the same ideas. Many agree on the data and place of birth of Rāmānanda, the name of his mother, father and guru present in the *Agastya Saṃhitā*.¹¹³ However, there are disagreements about Rāmānanda's works.

Some writers support the authorship of all of the texts attributed to Rāmānanda, others limit their support to only a few (namely the *Śrī Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*, the *Ānanda Bhāṣya* and the *Gītā Bhāṣya*), while others also consider some *pāda*-s as compiled by Rāmānanda. Rāmānanda's philosophical approach is said to be based on the *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*. The disciples of Rāmānanda are those listed in the Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* and in its commentaries. However, one author (Śrī Bābūlāl Bhārgav) affirms that Sen was from southern India, while another (Śrī Acyutānand Datt) includes among the disciples of Rāmānanda a man called Niranjana, who was a Muslim earlier known as Nūruddīn.

It is stressed that Rāmānanda has achieved his *digvijaya* by spreading his *bhakti paddhati* (system). However, a disaccord arises about Rāmānanda's *sampradāya*. According to some authors, Rāghavānanda advised Rāmānanda to establish a new *sampradāya*, whereas others claim that Rāmānanda established his *sampradāya* independently. Therefore, with reference to the link with the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* a few different stands arise: *paṇḍit* Avadhkiśordās affirms that the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is to be regarded as Śrī *sampradāya* but with Sītā as *param-ācārya* and not Lakṣmī; according to Śrī Devdās when the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s were organized, Rāmānandī-s and Rāmānūjī-s, which were initially separated, begun to be called both with the name of Śrī *sampradāya*. Śrī Bhagvāndās describes the *ākhāra*-s and their activities in the *sampradāya*, while Bhagavadācārya explains the *pañca saṃskāra* of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 51).

1.4 Today's publications

The hagiographic tradition is still particularly active in the Śrī Maṭh. The Jagadgurū

¹¹³ A discordant voice is that of Śrī Bābūlāl Bhārgav according to which Rāmānanda was contemporary with some Jains such as Dharmasūrī, Vujyasūrī and Satyavijaya and also contemporary of Sikander Lodi, which means he supported the 15th century for Rāmānanda's birth.

Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya maintains the literary activities started by Bhagavadācārya and, through the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Smārak Sevā Nyās (Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya memorial service trust), he continues publishing works about the life of Rāmānanda and his *sampradāya*. The life of Rāmānanda is summarily dealt with in short articles, or fully described in proper hagiographies. Here, stories already present in earlier hagiographies are retold in the light of contemporary ideas. In the following pages, I will illustrate some significant features of these narrations, focusing my attention on two works: the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś* and *Swāmī Rāmānanda the Pioneer of Rām Bhakti*, an original Hindi work translated in English in 2009.

1.4.1 Hints from the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*

The *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś* is a collection of short articles divided into four sections: the history of the Maṭh, the history of Rāmānanda and his disciples,¹¹⁴ the religious characteristics of the *sampradāya*¹¹⁵ and the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s.

The life story of Rāmānanda reported here is that of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* with the additions of new details which highlight the portrait of Rāmānanda as a supporter of dharma in general and Vaiṣṇava dharma in particular.

For example, Arjun Prasād Śukla reports that during the celebration of the *annaprāśana saṃskāra*,¹¹⁶ a baby Rāmānanda wanted to eat only *khīr* although several types of food were put in front of him (2001: 41). He adds then that Rāmānanda was endowed with such an incredible memory that he used to immediately memorize religious verses heard from his father, and therefore, when he was eight years old he already had a complete knowledge of the holy scriptures. After reaching Kāśī and having obtained Vaiṣṇava *dīkṣā* from Rāghavānanda, Rāmānanda lived in a *jhoprī* (hut) at Pañcagaṅgā in order to practice *tapasyā*.

Śukla reports that the young *tapasī* became famous and people started going to meet him (*ibid*: 40-43).

Another detail that often mentioned by authors is that Rāmānanda was so powerful in blowing the conch that people used to go to his place with their own conch to follow him.

¹¹⁴ The disciples listed by Nābhādās found their place in the first section of the work. Their lives are described on the accounts reported by Nābhādās and commented by various authors or from commentaries.

¹¹⁵ A group of articles deals with general topics linked to the *sampradāya*: philosophical issues, the importance of the guru in the *sampradāya*, *pañca saṃskāra*, *upāsanā*, mantras, difference between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* and texts as the *Ānanda Bhāṣya* and the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*.

¹¹⁶ This *saṃskāra* marks the infant's first intake of food different from milk.

The legend of his conch is told to be associated to Rāmānanda's ability to re-convert Muslims to Hinduism. Possibly, the reference to some Muslim kings (such as Tamerlane and Ghiyath al-din Tuglak from the 14th century) has the purpose of supporting an early date for the birth of Rāmānanda.

Śukla also mentions a work written by a *fakir* contemporary of Rāmānanda, the *Tajkīr Tul Phukrā*, in which the author described Rāmānanda as a great soul, a guru with 400 disciples, the founder of a *sampradāya* and a propagator of the Rām mantra (*ibid*: 43). Other authors deal with the image of Rāmānanda as a supporter of a *bhakti* movement concerned with religious equality (Lāl Tiwari: 44-47; Vasudev Singh: 48-55). Singh attributes Rāmānanda's stand to his historical background in the context of the development of *bhakti* movements: in the Vedic *bhakti*, he opines, untouchables, Śūdra-s or women had no rights; in the middle aged period thanks to the Ālvar-s and *Sant*-s of Maharastra there were *bhakta*-s from low castes; in 14th-15th century social inequality increased because of the presence of Muslims and to face this condition, Rāmānanda introduced a new approach. Singh describes it as the three gifts Rāmānanda gave to his devotees: the gift of a *bhakti* whose *sādhana* could emancipate the oppressed; the gift of the name of Rām, in both its *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* understanding; the gift of the use of vernacular languages (2001: 51-53).

Unlike the *Bhagvān Rāmānandācārya*, in all the articles Rāmānanda is described as a disciple of Rāghavānanda. In fact, as today Rāmānandī-s' independence is well established, the fact that Rāmānanda was a disciple of Rāghavānanda and that this latter was part of Rāmānūja's *paramparā* does not create any particular issue. Rāghavānanda is depicted as a *mahā puruṣa* (great man) who, after many years' traveling, decided to open the *bhakti* path to all the four castes (Bhārat Śarma, 2001: 38). In fact, today authors prefer to emphasize Rāmānanda's training and skills in developing the *sampradāya*. For example, Vasudev Singh writes:

As there were differences in theoretical issues, Rāmānanda left the Śrī *sampradāya* and continued with his own independent doctrine that was called Rāmavat or Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. In this *sampradāya* there were several *akhārā*-s and *maṭh*-s, and the initiated *sādhu*-s were called *vairāgī* or *āvadhūt*. (2001: 50, my translation)

This is actually the stand of the present Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya.

1.4.2 *Swāmī Rāmānanda the Pioneer of Rām Bhakti*

Swāmī Rāmānand the Pioneer of Rām Bhakti is the English version of *Pāyāspayī*, a Hindi work written by Dayakṛṣṇa Vijayvargiya (ex-chairman of the Rajasthan Sahitya Academy) translated into English by Devarshi Kalanath Shastri and published by the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Smārak Sevā Nyās in 2009. The original title means ‘one who enjoys the milk and distributes it’. As Kalanath Shastri explains in the preface of his translation, the title refers to the austere discipline of feeding oneself only with milk, a common practice among Rāmānandī-s (2009: xii). The work is a hagiography with many dialogues and a particular attention to the details. Here, I will focus on the portrait of Rāmānanda and the reconstruction of his supposed historical background. In this narration, Rāmānanda becomes a kind of savior of the nation, someone who fights against Muslim invaders and the caste system so as to keep the Hindu people united:

He [Rāmānand] is born to pull the nation from adversities and to protect ancient culture [...] a visionary in whose hand the future of this country, religion and society is safe (2009: 9).

History is used to describe Muslim political power and divisions among Hindu Rajas.

Swamiji had a special liking for Rajasthan. He believed that as there were royal palaces in Rajasthan, the anti-religious elements would not have much effect over there. Besides, these kings only would be able to stop the rebellious and aimless blind religiosity which was then taking hold of the mind of the people (*ibid*: 44).

The relations among communities are described in quite contemporary tones. In fact, words such as nation, Hindu-nation and Hindutva find their place in the work, especially where Rāmānanda is shown to reconvert Muslims to Hinduism:

The storm of conversion into Islam was docking the ship of Sanatan Dharma. Religious scriptures were being burnt. The idols in the temples were being destroyed. The Hindutva was grief-stricken. All raised their voice against the situation, but the helpless, peace loving people of the society could not withstand the cruelty of the military regime. [...] Disappointed and defeated, the rulers sacrificed their crowns and placed them at the feet of the victors. How can dharma (religion) survive? How can our culture be saved? How can we save our heavenly eternal religion? All the experts present there gave vent to their feelings, but they were helpless against the forces of the army. Finally they agreed upon one decision – to meet Swami Ramananda Acharya, the redeemer and the country’s greatest yogi [...]. He had recently exhibited a triumphant performance of

reconverting twenty thousand Hindus back to their original religion. This was registered as an immensely significant and unique event in the history [...] Swamiji performed another miracle that night. Early morning, when the Moulavis (the muslim priests) went to the top of the mosques to proclaim the time of namaaz (the prayer), their throats got stuck (*ibid*: 47-48).

Muslims are described as rapists, destroyers and murderers, while Rāmānanda's portrait as a unifier of various Hindu groups and sects to confront Islam is similar to the project at the base of many modern Hindu organizations:¹¹⁷

A day will come when all the world will come running to India for spiritual knowledge and their material mind will receive the solace in this soil only (*ibid*: 23).

Rāmānanda is seen as a manifestation of Rām and the Śrī Maṭh as an historical center established in Pañcagaṅgā even before Rāmānanda: it was held by Swāmī Haryānanda, who passed it to Rāghavānanda to reach then Rāmānanda.

These examples of contemporary hagiographies show that writers (who are at the same time devotees) may manipulate stories not only in order to make them closer to the mindset of their readers, but also because they themselves have a particular mindset through which they interpret and recreate past stories. Therefore, these examples are present evidence that confirm the role of hagiographies in providing useful elements about the actual conditions and realities of composers and their audiences.

The narration of particular episodes becomes a hint about present beliefs, interests and needs. In fact, Rāmnaresācārya's support of this production of hagiographies in which Rāmānanda and the spot in which today the Śrī Maṭh rose is highlighted, has to be interpreted both as an instrument to spread the teachings of Rāmānanda and as a way to stress his own authority and right as the official Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya in the *sampradāya*.

It is also interesting to notice that, even today, the description of episodes of Rāmānanda's life is present in the oral narration, during *pravacan*-s or *sammelan*-s, to provide examples to devotees in the wake of the tradition of the *Bhaktamāl*.

¹¹⁷ However, as I will describe in Chapter 6, sec. 4.3.5, the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya living in the Śrī Maṭh is not a supporter of Hindutva and other rightist organizations.

2. Scholarly perspectives about Rāmānanda in 19th–20th century

In this paragraph I introduce theories on the life of Rāmānanda produced by orientalists¹¹⁸ and by later scholars in order of chronological appearance. We will see that, in the colonialist-Christian context of the 19th-early 20th centuries, it was the 'revolutionary' and social approach of Rāmānanda against the caste system (a system highly criticized by missionaries for its opposition to the principle of Christian equality) that was exalted by scholars. This praise was combined with an orthodox-Brahmanic portrait of his life, perhaps derived by the great importance given to Sanskrit.

Indeed, as underlined by Cohn, during the colonial period, specific Sanskrit texts were conceived to be the embodiment of an authentic India. As a result, to use Cohn's words, 'the idea of the primacy of the Sanskritic component in Indian civilization then became the determinant of action, policy and structure, not only for the rulers but for many of the ruled' (1987: 46). This attitude influenced even the points of view of some later scholars, both Indian and Western.

2.1 References from orientalists

The first author we must take into account is Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860), who arrived in Calcutta in 1808 as an assistant surgeon. In 1811, being interested in ancient Indian languages and literature, he was appointed secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal.¹¹⁹

In his *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, Wilson says that although Rāmānanda was 'sometimes' considered to be born at the end of the 13th century and an immediate disciple of Rāmānūja, nevertheless:

[...] There is great reason to doubt his being entitled to so remote a date, and consequently to question the accuracy of his descent from Rāmānūja: we shall have occasion to infer, hereafter, from the accounts given of the dates of other teachers that Rāmānanda was not earlier than the end of the 14th or beginning of the 15th century.
(Wilson, 1846: 31)

However, Wilson does not explain further about which teachers he refers, nor does he explain why, during his period, there were Rāmānandī-s who supported Rāmānūja's legacy.

¹¹⁸ This term is used here in its historical sense to indicate scholars who lived in India during the English Rāj and were influenced by that specific school of intellectual thought.

¹¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Hayman_Wilson (Accessed: January 2014).

Wilson reports that Rāmānanda, returning after a long pilgrimage, was accused by his brethren of not having observed the privacy of his meal (important in the Rāmānūjī sect). Therefore, Rāghavānanda pushed Rāmānanda to leave the group and create his own *sampradāya*.¹²⁰ Then Rāmānanda established his center in Varanasi, which Wilson describes without mentioning his source:

[...] The residence of Rāmānanda was Banaras, at Pancha Ganga Ghat, where a Math, or monastery of his followers, is said to have existed, but to have been destroyed by some of the Mussulman princes: at present there is merely a stone platform, in the vicinity, bearing the supposed impression of his feet, but there are many Math of his followers, of celebrity, at Benares, whose Panchait, or council, is the chief authority amongst the Ramawats in Upper India. (1846: 32)

Wilson mentions the twelve disciples of Rāmānanda: Asānanda, Kabīr, Raidās, Pīpā, Sursurānanda, Sukhānanda, Bhavānanda, Dhanā, Sen, Mahānanda, Paramānanda and Sriānanda. This list, for which he does not cite a source, differs from that given by Nabhadās.

The importance of the role of Rāmānanda in the establishment of a new *sampradāya* based on equalitarian principles, is then stressed:

[...] This individual, if he did not invent, gave fresh force to a very important encroachment upon the orthodox system: he, in fact, abrogated the distinction of caste amongst the religious orders, and taught that the holy character who quitted the ties of nature and society, shook off, at the same time, all personal distinctions. (1846: 37)

Max Arthur Macauliffe (1841-1913) entered the Indian Civil Service in 1862 and arrived in Punjab in 1864. In the same period, he converted to Sikhism and wrote an English translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.¹²¹ In his work on Sikhism (1909), he gives space to the description of the lives of Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda. According to him, Rāmānanda was a Gaur Brahman from south India and, specifically, from Mailkot or Melkota in the southern part of Karnataka, where Rāmānūja had set up an idol of Viṣṇu and ‘induced the Brahmans to renounce their devotion to Śīv’ (1909: 100). Although Wilson says that in the *Bhaktamāl* only one page and half is devoted to Rāmānanda, he describes his life with many anecdotes, but without mentioning the source. He only says:

¹²⁰ This account by Wilson is very important because it would show that the story reported by Rupkāla at the beginning of the 20th century was already known in the first half of the 19th century.

¹²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Arthur_Macauliffe (Accessed: January 2014).

[...] All the works that we have been able to obtain relating to Ramanand have been for the most part devoted to his praise. We give here such details of his life as have been gleaned from accessible sources. (1909: 100)

According to Macauliffe, the living period of Rāmānanda is inferable from the life of Kabīr, as he subscribes to the traditional belief that Kabīr was a disciple of Rāmānanda. For the followers of Kabīr, his date of death is 1510 C.E. and the date of birth might be 1398 C.E.¹²² Therefore, Macauliffe deduces that Rāmānanda must have been from the 14th century. He tells the story that Rāmānanda was disciple of a hermit who followed the *Smṛti* tradition until the day in which, on the brink of death, he met Rāghavānanda. Rāghāvananda took Rāmānanda under his wing, and told him to seek the help of God. Thanks to his yogic skills, Rāghāvananda was able to save Rāmānanda's life by suspending his life breath at the critical moment and then giving it back to him when the time fixed by destiny had passed (1909: 101). Then Rāmānanda went on several pilgrimages and, in the course of his wanderings, settled at Pañcagaṅgā in Varanasi.

It is worth noting Macauliff's description of the meeting in Varanasi between Rāmānanda and learned Muslims:

[...] It is natural to suppose that there should have been held at the ancient sacred city of the Hindus heated controversies between Mullas and Brahmans, and that the better informed classes of Hindus, who have already shown a predilection for monotheism, should have formed a just conception of the divine unity. We shall afterwards see how some of the followers of Rāmānanda at Banaras became fervent monotheists, and at the same time ridiculed the priestcraft of the Mullas and the Brahmans. (Macauliffe, 1909: 102)

From this extract one can observe a colonialist approach to Indian history, interpreted as marked by communal conflicts while strongly supporting a monotheistic approach instead of the superstition of the folkloric popular religion.

According to Macauliffe, Rāmānanda established a new group after being expelled from his sect due to differing opinions on commensality rules. Nevertheless, the theological tenets of the new faith corresponded to some extent with those of Rāmānūja (*ibid*).

On the social role of Rāmānanda he maintains that:

¹²² According to Macauliffe, this date 'may be unhesitatingly accepted', although he does not explain the reason (*ibid*).

[...] Rāmānand then applied himself to prove from the Śāstra that the observance of caste rules was unnecessary for any one who sought the protection of God and embraced his service. He laid it down (*sic*) as a rule that all persons of any caste who accepted the tenets and principles of his sect, might eat and drink together irrespective of birth. All men who serve God in the same way are brothers and of the same social position. [...] He deemed forms of adoration superfluous, and held that the supreme reward of devotion was to be obtained by incessantly uttering God's name. He called his disciples the Liberated, when he allowed them and they accepted a liberal interpretation of the Hindu social rules sanctioned by religion. At the same time he vehemently opposed atheists and those who boasted that they existed independently of God. (1909: 103)

Macauliffe calls Rāmānanda the first *vairāgī*, but he does not give any further explanation about this qualification, nor does he properly explain the fact that 'Rāmānanda had four disciples, each of whom originated a sect', in which were included *nāgā*, who practice seclusion, and *samayogis* who marry and lead domestic lives (*ibid*: 105). Considering Rāmānandī-s of his time, Macauliffe says that the majority of them belonged to the Śūdra class, but that some wore the triple cord of the twice-born. However, he adds that Rāmānandī-s have fallen away from the teaching of Rāmānanda, because they observe caste rules, which is why they are often confused with the Rāmānūjī-s (*ibid*).

In his works *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems* (1913), Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925), one of the earliest Indian scholars with an international appeal,¹²³ gives a brief description of Rāmānanda's life. He criticizes Macauliffe's assumptions on the basis of the chapter from the *Agastya Saṃhitā* analyzed above. He supports 1299 C.E. as the date for Rāmānanda's birth and believes it to be more consistent with the traditional belief that there were three generations between him and Rāmānūja. Following the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, Bhandarkar's Rāmānanda goes from Prayāg to Varanasi, where he meets Rāghavānanda, who was a teacher of the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school of Rāmānūja. The scholar does not tell us about the pilgrimage of Rāmānanda, but he says that he gave up some of the restrictive practices of the sect and separated himself from his guru (1965: 95). More meaningful is Bhandarkar's description of Rāmānanda's social role:

[...] Rāmānand now began a radical reform and made no distinction between Brahmans and members of the degraded castes, and all could even dine together, provided that they were the devoted of Viṣṇu and had been admitted into the fold. Another reform was the

¹²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._G._Bhandarkar (Accessed: January 2014).

use of vernacular for the propagation of the new creed. And a third very important reform made by him was the introduction of the purer and more caste worship of Rām and Sītā instead of that of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. (1965: 94)

Qualified for the Indian Civil Service in 1871, George Grierson (1851-1941) reached the Bengal Presidency in 1873. After a long career, he retired from the Indian Civil Service in 1903 and spent the following thirty years editing the enormous amount of material gathered on Hindi literature, *bhakti* and linguistic.¹²⁴

In 1918, Grierson writes a brief description of Rāmānanda's life in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. He reports the story of Rāmānanda as narrated by Bhagavān Prasād's commentary on the *Bhaktamāl*.

Grierson supports the idea that Rāmānanda was part of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* and that his exclusion from this sect was the most meaningful episode of his life:

[...] This quarrel thus resulted in one of the most momentous revolutions that have occurred in the religious history of Northern India. Its effects were by no means confined to Rāmānanda's immediate disciples, for his teaching worked as a leaven upon the beliefs of nearly the whole population. (1918: 570)

According to Grierson, Rāmānanda used the philosophical system of Rāmānūja, but his ethics was based 'not on a spiritual pride, but on a spiritual humility' (*ibid*). The various branches of the *sampradāya* followed two principles: that the perfect *bhakti* consists in perfect love for God, and that all servants of God are brothers (*ibid*). Grierson imagines Rāmānanda as an *ācārya* whose attitude against the caste, teaching and devotion makes him closer to the Christian approach.¹²⁵

About Rāmānanda's dates, he claims:

[...] While we may be fairly certain that Rāmānanda was born in 1299 AD, the date of his death is involved in some obscurity. The popular tradition is that he died in 1467 Samvat (1410 AD). This would give him a life of 111 years, which is improbable. We can, however, accept the tradition, borne out as it is, by the direct statement of the *Bhaktamāl* that he had an exceptionally long life, and this would authorize us to state that he lived during the greater part of the 14th century AD. (1918: 571)

¹²⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Abraham_Grierson (Accessed: January 2014).

¹²⁵ Indeed, Grierson (1909: 550) had also hypothesized that 'it was in south India that Christianity as a doctrine exercised the greatest influence on Hinduism generally. Although the conceptions of the fatherhood of God and of *bhakti* were indigenous to India, they received an immense impetus owing to the belief of Christian communities reacting upon the medieval Bhagavata reforms of the South.'

Another author who dealt with Rāmānanda was John Nicol Farquhar (1861-1929). Recruited by the London Missionary Society as a lay educational missionary and sent to India in 1891, Farquhar joined Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in 1902.¹²⁶ In 1920, he published an article entitled ‘The Historical Position of Rāmānanda’ in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. He had attended the Kumbh Melā in 1918, and he interpreted the high number of Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s (who were second only after the Śaṅkara’s Daśanāmi) as proof of the importance of Rāmānanda in the history of Indian religions (Apr. 1920: 186).

Taking into consideration the supposed date of Nāmdev (c. 1270-1350), and especially those of the most famous disciples of Rāmānanda (namely Pīpā, Kabīr and Raidās),¹²⁷ Farquhar affirms that Rāmānanda was born around 1400, was active around 1430 and died in 1470. On the *paramparā*, he takes two stands: in his 1920 article he claims that, according to the tradition, Rāmānanda was from southern India, but after the reply of Grierson in the same *Journal of the Asiatic Royal Society*,¹²⁸ he changes his position to favor a northern origin for Rāmānanda.

Farquhar rejects the idea of a religious affiliation between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja: comparing the philosophies and the ways of worship of Rāmānandī-s and Rāmānūjī-s, he finds them too different for Rāmānanda to have been a part of Rāmānūja’s *sampradāya*. According to him, there was no evidence that Rāmānanda used the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānūja’s *Śrī Bhāṣya*. Furthermore, two main practical differences separated the two *sampradāya*-s: the *dīkṣā* mantra (Rāmānūjī-s use the *Om Namō Nārāyaṇāyaḥ*, Rāmānandī-s the *Om Rāmāya Namaḥ*), and the worshipped deities (Nārāyaṇa and Rām, respectively). Therefore, Farquhar prefers to imagine a Rāmaite *sampradāya* focused on the worship of Rām that used the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Agastya Saṃhitā* to spread the Rām *bhakti* and of which Rāmānanda was a part.¹²⁹ As proof, he presents the fact that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and the Tulsidās’s *Rāmcaritmānas*

¹²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._N._Farquhar (Accessed: January 2014).

¹²⁷ He takes for granted the date of death of Kabīr, 1518, and the *guru-śiṣya* relation between the two. Then he takes into consideration the connection between Raidās and Mīrābāī, and follows the story that Mīrābāī was related to the Raja of Chittor and that she departed from there in 1470 to become a disciple of Raidās (*ibid*: 187).

¹²⁸ Grierson (Oct. 1920: 591) criticized his idea of ‘tradition,’ as, according to him, there was no evidence that this tradition was real, especially if compared with real sources such as the *Agastya Saṃhitā*.

¹²⁹ Farquhar (1920: 189) admits that there are no clues about the presence of this *sampradāya*.

(which is considered part of the spiritual and religious inheritance of Rāmānanda) are the most used texts among Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s.¹³⁰

Farquhar justifies the use of the *Śrī Bhāṣya* by Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s as resulting from the absence of a *Bhāṣya* written by Rāmānanda. As Rāmānūja's work is considered a noble theistic document, Rāmānandī scholars might have considered it as the Vedānta treatise closest to their religious positions. This would have facilitated the confusion with Rāmānūjī-s, which led to the assimilation of their *paramparā* (July 1922: 379).

Farquhar concludes by analyzing the social contribution of Rāmānanda, completely disagreeing with those scholars who bestowed to him the merit to 'have thrown the caste-system to the wind, socially as well as religiously, since so far as my knowledge goes there is no evidence that he modified the social rules of caste' (1920: 191). Farquhar's critics against the caste system derived from his personal belief in *Fulfilment theology*, a Western theory whereby Christianity was considered to be the fulfillment of other religions. According to Farquhar, only through following the message of Christ, based on freedom, progress and civic virtue, could a progressive India be built.¹³¹

2.2 Scholars of Hindi literature

Other scholars who have faced what we could call the 'Rāmānanda problem' were the historians of Hindi literature, which we will treat as a group since they share some common positions: they support the classic link between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda and give more importance to the Sanskrit compositions of Rāmānanda than to those written in Hindi. Usually they consider Rāmānanda as an exponent of the *bhakti*, mentioning him as part of the *bhakti kāl* (*bhakti* period). Among them, in his *Rāmānanda Sampradāya Tathā Hindī Sāhitya par Uskā Prabhāv*, Śrīvāstav has focused his attention mainly on Rāmānanda, trying to define his role and that of his *sampradāya* in Indian literature, comparing in a comprehensive way his own research with that of other scholars (1957: 52). The portrait that Śrīvāstav offers of Rāmānanda is quite 'classic,' in that it is based on the assumption that Rāmānanda was from Rāmānūja's lineage and further developed his teachings, overcoming concerns about commensality and social behaviors present in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. Indeed, Śrīvāstav argues that while Rāmānūja suggested that Śūdra-s and

¹³⁰ Farquhar's point of view is criticized by Bakker (1984: 108) who considers the period of production of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* to have been the end of the 15th or the beginning of the 16th century, when the cult of Rām was already popular in northern India. Consequently, Rāmānanda could not have used it.

¹³¹ Farquhar, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._N._Farquhar (Accessed: January 2014.)

women would properly follow the *bhakti* path in their next lives, Rāmānanda allowed the *bhakti* path to anyone in their current lives (*ibid*: 21).

Below I will take into consideration those scholars present in Śrīvāstav's masterpiece. In some cases I was able to find their original works and I could directly verify their positions, while at other times I referred to Śrīvāstav's remarks on them.

In 1940, in his *Hindī Sāhitya kī Bhūmikā*, Hajārī P. Dvivedī supported the southern origin of Rāmānanda, describing him as one of the most famous disciples of Rāmānūja (1940: 47). However, in 1952 he claimed that Rāmānanda was probably from Prayāg, although part of a Rām *sampradāya* present in Tamil Nadu that developed from the Śrī Vaiṣṇava (1952: 106).¹³² Dvivedī does not verify the information; sometimes he quotes the *Bhaktamāl*, but otherwise he simply passes over the issue. He portrays Rāmānanda as a *mahā guru*: his greatness is in the freeness with which he allows his disciples to choose the *bhakti* path closer to their *bhāva* (emotion), *saṅskāra* (idea), and *rūci* (inclination) and by his ability to teach and sustain several *bhakti* paths (*yogapradhān bhakti*, *nirguṇa bhakti* and *saguṇa bhakti*) simultaneously (1940: 48).

Dvivedī was influenced by the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in his acknowledgement of Sanskrit texts attributed to Rāmānanda, especially the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*,¹³³ although he is firm in the link between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda on the base of theoretical and practical reasons.¹³⁴

According to Śrīvāstav, this link is also supported by Rāmendra Śukla in his *Hindī Sāhitya kī Itihās*, and by Pītāmbhar Datta Baṛathvāl in his *Hindī Kāvya men Nirguṇa Sampradāya*, although Baṛathvāl also argues that Rāmānanda was first a disciple of an *Advaita guru*. They both recognize as original only the *Śrī Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* and the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 58-60). Baṛathvāl attributes to Rāmānanda the merit of unifying *bhakti*, *yoga*, and *Advaita Vedānta*. Moreover he supports the *nirguṇa* disciples of Rāmānanda, stressing the link with Kabīr (*ibid*: 61). This position disagrees with that of Paraśurām Caturvedī who doubts the discipleship of Kabīr, Sen, Pīpā, and Raidās, considering them from the 15th-16th century, whereas he gives for granted the date of birth of Rāmānanda as contained in the *Agastya Saṃhitā* (1972: 125).

¹³² Maybe Dvivedī was influenced by Farquhar, who had already assumed the existence of a Rām *sampradāya* in the south.

¹³³ For example, Dvivedī (1952: 103) says about the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*: 'until now there is no one authoritative voice which can maintain that this work has not been written by Rāmānand.'

¹³⁴ For example, the theory of *tattva* is similar, the *upāsanā-paddhati* is different while their *tilak* is similar (Dvivedī, 1952: 106) For more information about this comparison, see Chapter 3, sec. 8.1 and 8.2.

B. Prasād Sinha, who has written a detailed work on the *Rasik sampradāya* (*Rām Bhakti men Rasik Sampradāya*), gives a wider description of Rāmānanda and his *sampradāya*. He provides specific accounts on the life of Rāghavānanda, supporting the idea that was actually Rāghavānanda who brought the Rām *bhakti* from southern to northern India (1957: 62). However, Rāmānanda is defined as the real pioneer of the Rām *upāsana* (worship), since he made the Rām mantra the *bīja-mantra* (the seed-mantra) of his *sampradāya*, called the Rāmvāt *sampradāya*. He based his *sampradāya* on *Viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophy and *prapatti* (surrender) discipline, through which he made ‘sweeter the feeling towards *jāti* and untouchability’, using teachings that were against the old traditions, but closer to the society and its need (*ibid*: 62-63).

Sinha ascribed these works to Rāmānanda: the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* and the *Rāmarcana Paddhati* in Sanskrit, the *Rām Rakṣā Stotra*, *Siddhānta Paṭal*, *Gyān Līlā*, *Gyān Tilak* and the *Yoga Cintāmaṇi* in Hindi. According to him, in these Hindi compositions Rāmānanda gave space to teachings that reflected social and modern problems, such as caste and untouchability, and which, influenced by other religious groups, had a greater appeal among people (*ibid*: 63-64).

2.3 Contemporary studies

As already mentioned in the Introduction,¹³⁵ from the 1980s several scholars have dealt with Rāmānanda, his life and *sampradāya* from various perspectives: Richard Burghart and Peter van der Veer from an anthropological point of view, Monika Horstmann and William Pinch from an historical one, and Pinuccia Caracchi from a linguistic point of view, to mention the most renowned. Moreover, other scholars have dealt with the topic of Rāmānanda as part of their own studies on Kabīr, such as David Lorenzen, Charlotte Vaudeville, and Purushottam Agrawal. In this paragraph we will focus our attention exclusively on their interpretations of Rāmānanda’s life.

Considering the lack of information about Rāmānanda’s life, Richard Burghart suggests that Rāmānanda may not have founded the *sampradāya* and not have been such a historically important or doctrinally unique saint during his lifetimes to cause his contemporaries to note his biography (Spring 1978: 124). The absence of a sectarian literature on him would confirm the theory that the *sampradāya*’s ascetics were ignorant of Rāmānanda’s life story. Nevertheless, Burghart continues, this lack of information enabled

¹³⁵ Cf. Introduction, sec. 4.

the attribution to Rāmānanda of both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* teachings and the possibility for the *sampradāya* to host various religious disciplines. Burghart, then, speaks of a plethora of Rāmānanda-s imagined by his followers, who would also have imagined that he had established the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (*ibid*: 136).

Peter van der Veer does not consider the scarcity of information about Rāmānanda to be a proof that he did not found the *sampradāya*. Van der Veer claims that ‘the question whether Ramanand founded the Ramanandi community or not is misguided’ because, ‘none of the great religious leaders of India seems to have done such a thing as to found a formal organization, on order of celibate sadhus’ (1988: 87). Referring to the work of Sudhir Kakar (1982), van der Veer claims that the study of gurus is frustrating in India because instead of being treated ‘like individuals with distinctive names and personal histories, the gurus become “the embodiment of the same Supreme Spirit” and in a sense flow into each other’ (1988: 87). Therefore, the paucity of accounts on Rāmānanda’s life seems to van der Veer an ‘exceptionally good example’ of a common condition (*ibid*).

In her account of the literary production of Rāmānanda, Charlotte Vaudeville interprets the contents gap between the Hindi and Sanskrit compositions as depending on the presence of two Rāmānanda: one who was an *ācārya* and one who was connected with the *Sant* tradition (1978: 88). William Pinch, who does not agree with the possibility of two Rāmānanda, argues that ‘Ramanand is believed by many to have occupied an important and neglected space between two competing “Hinduisms”: one composed of sophisticated pandits, the other of radical poets’ (1996: 50). Pinch notices that given the absence of ‘hard’ biographical data, Burghart’s argument can be taken one step further to conclude that ‘Ramanand never existed but was conjured up by monks at a much later date to satisfy a drive for Brahmanic respectability within the order’ (*ibid*: 51). However, he continues, this simplification will not explain the strength through which the various branches of the *sampradāya* have kept alive his memory, ‘shadowy and mystifying though he may be’ (*ibid*).

Pinch does not focus on the life of Rāmānanda or his role, since his purpose is to analyze the monastic history of the *sampradāya*. David N. Lorenzen, instead, does provide a consistent attempt to give a date to Rāmānanda. Lorenzen, who worked on Kabīr, maintains that the only reasonable way to give a date to Rāmānanda is ‘to count backward from the better known dates of Kabīr, Nābhādās and Anantadās’ (1991: 13). According to him, it is not possible to assign a date to Rāmānanda through his link with Rāmānūja, because the link itself is not always present in the *paramparā*-s.

Considering the date traditionally assigned to Rāmānūja (1017-1137), Lorenzen claims that, if Rāmānūja's floruit was around 1125 C.E., and we assign an average of twenty-five years to each spiritual generation up to Rāmānanda, the results will be different according to the *paramparā* used (*ibid*). For example, in Nābhādās's *paramparā* there are only three gurus between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda, while in the *Rāmarchana Paddhati*, there are lists of twelve, thirteen or nineteen gurus, depending upon the edition. For this reason, Lorenzen prefers to attribute a date to Rāmānanda using the biographical data of Nābhādās, Anantadās and Kabīr: Nābhādās is said to be the disciple of Agradās and to have written the *Bhaktamāl* at the beginning of 1600 C.E., with Anantadās given a date close to that. Hence, Rāmānanda's floruit may have been from the second half of the 15th century, a date compatible with that of Kabīr that Lorenzen assigns to circa 1500/1525 C.E.¹³⁶

The link between Kabīr and Rāmānanda is central in the analysis of Agrawal as well. He says: 'We indeed know little of Ramanand; there are no certain "fact" available about his life. But the "fact" remains that all medieval mentions of Kabir concur unanimously on two points: he was born a Muslim weaver, and Ramanand initiated him'.¹³⁷ Agrawal claims that the Rāmānanda mentioned in vernacular sources and described as the guru of Kabīr, Raidās and Pīpā is the only historical ones and he was active in 15th century. According to Agrawal (2010: 255), Rāmānanda was an independent thinker who preached a form of radical and socially inclusive Vaiṣṇavism. Therefore, Agrawal talks of an original Hindi Rāmānanda and a Sanskrit Rāmānanda, the latter one a construction of efforts made in the 20th century by the radical component of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, led by Bhagavadācārya.¹³⁸

The 15th century as the most likely date for Rāmānanda is also supported by Caracchi. As already stated, Caracchi analyses the figure of Rāmānanda from an historical and linguistic point of view. Here we will just stress the main aspects she highlights about the life of Rāmānanda. According to her, the placement of Rāmānanda's during the 15th century is one of the certainties of his life, along with his link to the *paramparā* of Rāmānūja and the fact that 'he preached Ram *bhakti* to men and women of all castes and that he was the guru of Kabīr and other Sants' (2012: 314). Recognizing Rāmānanda as a master, Caracchi says: 'The greatness of Rāmānanda was his ability to answer the needs of

¹³⁶ Lorenzen (1991: 14) assigns this date to Kabīr on the basis of comparisons of biographers and references to Sikander Lodi and king Virasimha Bagel.

¹³⁷ <http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/in-search-of-ramanand-purushottam-agrawal/2/> (Accessed: January 2014)

¹³⁸ Cf. Chapter 4, sec. 2.1.1.

his own time by giving *bhakti* the opportunity to take an actual popular form, both by inspiring the *nirguṇa* Sants and by reforming Vaiṣṇava tradition' (*ibid*: 343).

3. The literary production of Rāmānanda

Both Rāmānandī-s and scholars claim that Rāmānanda used to teach in vernacular languages and that this may explain the presence of Hindi works attributed to him. However, since he is also considered to be an *ācārya*, Sanskrit works are also ascribed to him. In Rāmānanda's case, this duality of language corresponds to a duality of teaching: his Hindi compositions have been associated with *nirguṇa* teachings, while Sanskrit ones to *saguṇa* teachings. As we have mentioned, the gap between the works is such that Charlotte Vaudeville supposes the presence of two Rāmānanda since, the Hindi production does not reflect the religious discipline present in the *sampradāya*. Vaudeville regards the *sant* Rāmānanda different from the *ācārya* guru, about whom we have no information (1978: 88).

Here we will describe these two groups of works.¹³⁹ Our purpose is not to examine the teaching of Rāmānanda in detail, but to stress that even the attribution of texts to him reflects the image of Rāmānanda which the *sampradāya*, or specific branches of the *sampradāya*, needed to project or wanted to portray as their representation of it. Indeed, if we follow the portrait given by Nābhādās and Anantadās, it seems quite unlikely that Rāmānanda had made rigid differentiations of his teachings separating the *nirguṇa* from the *saguṇa* teachings.

Indeed, as already mentioned in the Introduction,¹⁴⁰ John Stratton Hawley has stressed that the consideration of the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa bhakti* as completely separate devotional traditions is a relatively new concept that crystallized in the mid-19th century as a result of the gradual consolidation of the respective religious communities (1995: 161-165). Therefore, notwithstanding the presence of great sectarian anthologies in which a separation between the two approaches is present, 'there are also a considerable number of manuscripts that cannot be forced to either side of the *nirguṇ/saguṇ* divide, and perhaps in many settings where the sectarian division was not so determinative' (*ibid*: 174). Therefore, considering the teachings of Rāmānanda as reported by tradition, his could be a case of this syncretic expression of *bhakti*.

¹³⁹ For detailed considerations on the literary aspect of the supposed Rāmānanda's production, see Śrīvāstav (1957); Caracchi (1999); Agrawal (2009).

¹⁴⁰ Cf. below, Sec. 3.1.

Recognizing that nothing can be ascribed to Rāmānanda beyond any doubt, we should interpret the Hindi and Sanskrit works as the reflex of Rāmānanda’s teachings and Rāmānanda’s character as transmitted in the different branches of the *sampradāya*. This would explain why, over the centuries, the *rasik* branch tried to Sanskritize Rāmānanda – even through a proper *ācārya* biography – whereas the *tapasī* branch preferred to attribute to him texts necessary to their *sādhanā*. Thereby, these texts should be analyzed referring to their probable origin and their actual use, using a pragmatic approach that could help illuminate the interpretations and manipulations of the original Rāmānanda’s teaching realized by the branches of the *sampradāya*.

3.1 The Hindi Production

A section of the Hindi production of Rāmānanda is comparable for philosophy, doctrines and practices to those of Sant-s, as their literature is characterized by *nirguṇa bhakti* and social stand. To use the words of Lorenzen, ‘this religious message is combined with a social message that rejects, with greater or lesser directness, the hierarchical ordering of society into inherited castes’ (1996: 2). In the Sant literature, a particular place is given to the guru as mediator with God, to the words of the guru, to the name of God and the company of the saints. According to Lorenzen, apart from the theological division between *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa bhakti*, there is a social division: Sant-s and their followers were almost from the low Indian classes, while leaders of the *saguṇa bhakti* were mostly Brahmans, but with followers from all the classes and castes (*ibid*: 147).

Another part of the Hindi works attributed to Rāmānanda is linked with the *tapasī śākhā* of the *sampradāya*, which, as we will explain in the next chapter, includes influences from the Nāth *panth* and, in general, from the *haṭha* yoga tradition. As I support the idea of a plurality of Rāmānanda’s teachings, these works may actually represent the numerous influences that yogic currents had on Rāmānanda.

Caracchi has listed all the Hindi works attributed to Rāmānanda (1999: 115). She translated and commented the *Rām Rakṣā*, the *Gyān Līlā*, the *Yoga Ciṃtāmaṇi* and the *Gyān Tilaka* edited by Pītāmbhar Datta Baṛathvāl in the book *Rāmānanda Kī Hindī Racanāem* (Caracchi, 1999: 212-349). She refers that the *Manasī Sevā*, the *Ātmabodha–Avināsī*, the *Bhagati Jaug Granth* and the *Rām Aṣṭak* have been edited by Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī in his *Parīśiṣṭha*. In addition, there are some *pāda*-s (metrical foot) attributed to Rāmānanda included in the *Sarvāṅgī* by Rajjab, in the *Sarvāṅgī* by Gopāldās and in the *Guru Granth*

Sahib. Then, there are the *Rāmānanda kī Goṣṭhī*, the *Siddhānta Paṭal*, the *Rāmamantra Jaug Granth*, the *Rāmānanda Ādeśa* and *Vedānta Vicār*.

Here we will not analyze in detail the content or the evolution of each single work, since several other scholars have already done it.¹⁴¹ We will introduce the texts on the base of the attribution scholars have given to them, taking into account their translations since I did not work on their original versions. Many of these works are ascribed to the *tapasī śākhā*, others are linked to the Sant stream and found in some of their collections, while others present a *saguṇa* nuance.

3.1.1 Texts linked with the *tapasī śākhā*

Śrīvāstav describes the *Siddhānta Paṭal* as a collection of yogic and mystic experiences, practical teachings of *sādhanā* and explanations of mantras, a fusion of Nāth *panth* teaching and Vaiṣṇava *dharma* (1957: 125). He ascribes this text not to Rāmānanda but to the *tapasī śākhā*, which actually uses it as a main source (*ibid*: 126). Śrīvāstav advances this hypothesis by pointing out the fact that in the text the name of Rāmānanda appears always in the third person and is preceded by the appellation *guru*, which is rarely used by an author writing about himself (*ibid*: 131). According to Caracchi, the style, with the exception of few Sanskrit sentences, is quite common and of low quality, with many repetitions and refrains which may indicate a popular origin (1999: 124).

As referred by Agrawal, since the composition contains a *guru-paramparā* where Rāmānanda is listed as a descendent of Rāmānūja, the *Siddhānta Paṭal* was not accepted as authoritative by the reformist branch at the beginning of the 20th century (2009: 275).

Quite similar to the *Siddhānta Paṭal* is the *Rām Rakṣā Stotra*. Carracchi says that several editions of this work exist in the Nāgrīpracārīnī Sabhā of Varanasi,¹⁴² and similar compositions are present in the collection of the Kabīr Maṭh¹⁴³ of Varanasi (1999: 217). Baṛathvāl acknowledges its authenticity, while Śukla, Dvivedī and Śrīvāstav do not ascribe it to Rāmānanda because of the existence of various editions with different authors and the low quality of the language (*ibid*).¹⁴⁴ Śrīvāstav supposes that someone has attributed the

¹⁴¹ Cf. Caracchi (1999); Śrīvāstav (1957); Dvivedī (1952); Caturvedī (1972); Śukla (1972).

¹⁴² The Nāgrīpracārīnī Sabhā is an organization founded in 1893 at the Queen's College of Varanasi, it is a prestigious library and publishing house.

¹⁴³ The Kabīr Maṭh is one of the main centers of the Kabīr *panth* in Varanasi.

¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Śrīvāstav (1957: 133) has verified that in the reports of several publishing houses, the *stotra* is ascribed to Rāmānanda, to Kabīr and to other authors as well, ascriptions which cast doubt on the idea of an exclusive Rāmānanda's authorship.

stotra to Rāmānanda to emphasize the concept of yoga *sāadhanā* present in the *Siddhānta Paṭal* (1957: 129). According to Caracchi, the variety of the editions demonstrates the importance of this work among the Rāmānandī-s (1999: 218). Indeed, as testified by van der Veer, this *stotra* is still used in the daily practice by Rāmānandī *tyāgī*-s, those Rāmānandī ascetics who follow a *tapasī sāadhanā*.¹⁴⁵

Examining the *Yoga Ciṃtāmaṇi*, Śrīvāstav assigns it to the *tapasic* branch as well as to another *sampradāya* (1957: 134). According to Śukla (1972: 85), the text was a new *granth* that pretended to have an old origin and to be produced by Rāmānanda. Śrīvāstav says he asked many educated Rāmānandī-s of Ayodhya, mostly from *rasik* center, about this work but nobody knew of it (1957: 136). Śrīvāstav's approach for understanding the origin of the *Yoga Ciṃtāmaṇi* shows a lack of pragmatism: a work essentially connected with yoga and a *tapasī sāadhanā* should be investigated firstly in a *tyāgī* environment, which would also justify the low quality of the language, considering that *tyāgī*-s were (and are) often from low castes and therefore not well educated. Moreover, both Śrīvāstav and Śukla do not give references on where they found the work.

The *Ātmabodha* is one of the texts Dvivedī found in the collection of Udaysānkar Śāstrī. It is a work of prose that consists of a dialogue between Rāmānanda and Avināsī (a word which usually is an attribute for Īśvara) about topics influenced by *haṭha* yoga and related to the *jogī* tradition. Caracchi ascribes it to the *tapasī śākhā* (1999: 123).

According to the aforementioned scholars, the references to yoga and the low quality of the language were proof that all these texts were produced by the *tapasī śākhā* and not originally produced by Rāmānanda. However, we can move two critics to this statement: if we follow the idea that Rāmānanda was an ascetic who knew yoga and wanted to teach people from low castes as well, he probably would not have used high-end language while teaching.

Since nothing can be attributed to Rāmānanda for sure, we can suppose that these works may be the collection of his oral teachings, which, once written by someone else, assumed the form and style the writer gave to them. For this reason, it would be meaningful to verify if these works have been, or are still used, by the *tapasī śākhā*, and if the various *tapasī* centers bestowed it to Rāmānanda. This kind of information could be useful in two ways: on the one hand, it could give hints about the image of Rāmānanda as

¹⁴⁵ 'The praise of the protection of Rām: these invocations have the same kind of value as the mantras: they cure, protect and lead to salvation' (van der Veer, 1989: 123).

conceptualized within this branch; on the other hand, if these works were attributed to Rāmānanda in recent times, they would demonstrate that not all the branches were in favor of a Sanskrit Rāmānanda to the detriment of the Hindi ones, but that different branches were producing their own Rāmānanda.

3.1.2 Rāmānanda in the Sant collections

In this section I introduce those works ascribed to Rāmānanda that are included in *granth-s* from the Sant tradition, and those works found in other collections that are also linked with the Sant tradition. Even for these compositions, we cannot judge their truthfulness since it is likely that when Sant-s included quotations of Rāmānanda in their *granth-s*, they altered them to make them more in line with their beliefs.

Carracchi points out some problems that undermine the evaluation of some of these works and especially of *pāda-s*: often, their ascription to Rāmānanda depends on the presence of his name at the end of the composition, which is the easiest part of the text to manipulate (1999: 119). Furthermore, some topics (like that of the deceptiveness of the world) are present not only in the Sant or Nāth poems, but also in the teaching of *Vedānta*, meaning they could have a different source (*ibid*: 268). And as usual, the same questions remain unanswered: when these works were originally produced, when they were included in these collections and the use these works have in the *sampradāya*.

Agrawal says that, in the archives of the Prācyā Vidyā Sanstān of Jodhpur, he found a small composition from 1751 C.E. called *Mānasī Sevā*, ascribed to Rāmānanda, which is very similar content-wise to compositions from the Kabīr and Dādū *panth-s* (2010: 246). Indeed, the text is rich in metaphors and remembrances of the Sant tradition, with a particular stress on the inner cult. This theme is also present in the *Bhagati Jauga Granth*, a composition not mentioned by Śrīvāstav and Agrawal, which Carracchi claims Dvivedī has found among the collection of Udaysānkar Śāstrī (1999: 120). Carracchi underlines that the subject of the work is well known in the Sant tradition: the *Bhagati Jauga Granth* describes the importance of the inner cult and of the *bhakti* path, seen as the only way in which the devotee, through the difficult path of detachment and abandonment, can offer his or her self to God (*ibid*: 121).

The *Gyān Tilak* has been found in two places. Barṭhvāl claims he discovered it among the manuscripts of the Nāgrīpracārinī Sabhā (Carracchi, 1999: 308), while Śrīvāstav says it was listed in a catalogue of manuscripts from 1917-19, a copy of which was preserved in the

Lakṣmaṇ Kilā¹⁴⁶ in Ayodhya (1957: 136). It is a poem in the first two parts and a prose in the third part, which describes a dialogue between Rāmānanda and Kabīr. As stressed by Caracchi, it is unlikely that Rāmānanda composed it. It is more likely that it was written by either a disciple of Kabīr or Kabīr himself, since in the *Kabīr Granthāvali* there are many verses similar to those present in the *Tilak*, and, in general, its contents are similar to others works attributed to Kabīr kept in the Kabīr Maṭh in Varanasi (1999: 309).

Another work linked with the Sant tradition is the *Gyān Līlā*. Caracchi gives information about it from other scholars. She says that Baṛathvāl found one edition of the *Līlā* at the Darbār Pustakālaya in Jodhpur, Dvivedī found another edition in the collection of Udaysānkar Śāstrī, and B. Upādhyāya found another one in the collection of the Nāgrīpracārīnī Sabhā, three different editions but very similar texts (*ibid*: 250). However, the *Gyān Līlā*'s authenticity is questioned. This poem describes how worldly pleasures become tragic in the perspective of death, a theme, Caracchi says, that is common in the poems of Sant-s and exists in the *pāda*-s ascribed to Rāmānanda as well (*ibid*).

3.1.2.1 Rāmānanda's *Pāda*-s

The *pāda*-s attributed to Rāmānanda have attracted the attention of several studies. For example, Agrawal's 'Hindi-Rāmānanda' is based on them and he uses them to prove the link between Rāmānanda and Kabīr, since these *pāda*-s likely belong to the 17th century (2009: 264). However, he does not analyze the other Hindi compositions, which should be included for a complete reconstruction of this Hindi-Rāmānanda. Here I will use the translations and analysis of the *pāda*-s done by Caracchi (1999: 254-282), with some remarks from the work of Śrīvāstav.

The *pāda* entitled '*Haribinu janm vṛthā khoyo re*' ('*Without Hari you wasted your time*') is included in the *Sarvāngī* of Rajjab, a collection of poems in different languages and from different authors, mostly *Sants*, which is highly regarded among scholars. According to Dvivedī, this *pāda* belongs to Rāmānanda, who explains within it the path of renunciation (mentioned by Śrīvāstav, 1957: 141). It describes the various illusions created by worldly pleasure compared to the only reality that really matters: devotion to God (Caracchi, 1999: 255).

The *pāda* '*Tatami na kachū re samsara*' ('*As nothing is permanent in the samsara*')

¹⁴⁶The Lakṣmaṇ Kilā is one of the main *rasik* centers in Ayodhya.

has also been found in several collections, among which is the *Sarvāngī* composed by Gopāldās. Again, the deceptiveness of the worldly pleasure is the main theme. The *pāda* is attributed to Rāmānanda because of its last couplet, which Caracchi translates as ‘Rāmānanda sings songs worth of a Guru, so that different people could understand him’ (1999: 269).

The *pāda* entitled ‘*Kahāṃ jāie*’ (‘*Where to go?*’) is one of the most famous *pāda*-s attributed to Rāmānanda and is contained in the *Guru Granth* and in other collections like the *Sarvāngī* by Rajjab. According to Śrīvāstav, this *pāda* began to be attributed to Rāmānanda after Macauliffe linked it to him (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 140). Śrīvāstav follows the opinion of Śukla, for whom this *pāda* has to be ascribed to another Rāmānanda and not to the ‘Vaiṣṇava bhakta Rāmānanda’ (*ibid*). Śrīvāstav recognizes that this *pāda* was probably attributed to Rāmānanda in the *Granth* from the time of its production, but he considers it to be a composition of the *tapasī śākhā* (*ibid*). The topic of the *pāda* is the research of God, which has to be conducted not through external practices but through looking inside the soul (Caracchi, 1999: 277).

The *pāda* entitled ‘*Sahaja sunna main citi vasanta*’ (‘*The mind has take abode in the sahaja sūnya*’) is said to have been discovered by Baṛathvāl in the *Sarvāngī* of Gopāldās. The topic of the *pāda* is the ineffable reality of the supreme experience, which cannot be described through common experiences but rather has to be appreciated while vanishing in the entirety of the supreme Brahman (Caracchi, 1999: 280).

The *pāda* entitled ‘*Sahajaim sahajaim saba guṇa jāilā*’ (‘*Spontaneously, spontaneously all the guṇa disappeared*’) is attributed to Rāmānanda by Baṛathvāl, based on his analysis of the *Sarvāngī* of Rajjab. However, Callewaert, who analyzed another the edition of the *Sarvāngī*, attributed that *pāda* to Nāmdev. Still other editions do not write a specific author at all (Caracchi, 1999: 271).

3.1.3 The Ramaite cult

A *pāda* that is effectively used in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is the *Hanumān Stuti*. This is the only work in which Hanumān is glorified in a *saguna* nuance. Trying to establish its origin, Agrawal finds that Baṛathvāl obtained it from Grierson, who received it from the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (2010: 263). According to Agrawal, it is difficult to attribute this *pāda* to Rāmānanda, since it does not appear in the other Hindi collections in which we find

the other *pāda*-s (such as the *Ādi Granth* or the *Sarvāngī*), and its contents are completely different from the contents of the other compositions (*ibid*).

But why should this *saguṇa pāda* be included within *nirguṇa* collections? Its origin, as Caracchi underlines, must be different. Sinha interprets the *Hanumān Stuti* as probably closer to a hypothetical teaching of Rāmānanda (who was surely a Ramaite) than those containing yogic and Nāth influences (cf. Caracchi, 1999: 259). Nevertheless, this is a popular hymn in the *sampradāya*, showing up in several different versions. Given the description of a Hanumān cult in the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* and in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, which is confirmed by the existence of this cult among the *tyāgī* and *nāgā* branches of the *sampradāya*,¹⁴⁷ whether or not this *pāda* was composed by Rāmānanda, it is part of the Rāmānandī tradition and for this reason it needs deeper investigation to understand its origin and its use.

Quite similar in approach and content to the *Hanumān stuti* is the *Rām Aṣṭaka*, found by Dvivedī in manuscript 951 of the *Āryabhāṣya Pustakālaya* published by the Nāgrīpracārīnī Sabhā (Caracchi, 1999: 119). This work is a hymn of praise for Rām, who is recognized both in his appearance as a Brahman and in his earthly manifestation as Daśaratha's son. Here the *bhakti* path (described in its nine typologies) and yogic practices are unified through a *saguṇa* Rām. For this reason, Caracchi considers, at least theoretically, that this *aṣṭaka* could be produced by the '*ācārya* Rāmānanda' (1999: 122). I would say that this *aṣṭaka* is not necessarily the work of the *ācārya* Rāmānanda but, on the base of the descriptions in both the *Bhaktamāl* and *Parcaī*, it may display the articulated teachings of Rāmānanda influenced by different religious streams.

The *Rāmamantra Jog Granth* is a *pāda* of 21 verses which, in his *Bhāgvat Sampradāya*, Upādhyāya says is part of a collection called *Sevādās kī Bāwṇī*, published in 1899. It illustrates the method for the *jāp* and for the hearing of the Rām mantra (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 137).

3.1.4 Other works and a few remarks

Śrīvāstav talks of a work entitled *Vedānta Vicār*, present in the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā in Ayodhya, but of which there is no known copy available (1957: 137). Śrīvāstav cannot give

¹⁴⁷ As it has been stressed by Burchett (with many thanks for letting me read his unpublished thesis), the presence of an Hanumān cult at Galtā is testified since the establishment of the center. This topic will be further dealt with in Chapter 3, sec. 5.1.

information about its contents but he supposes that, given the absence of any discussion about this *Vedānta* in the *sampradāya*, it probably does not have any link to Rāmānanda. Śrīvāstava has given a similar judgment about the *Rāmānanda Ādeśa*, a work that Mataprasād Gupta, in his *Hindī Pustak Sahitya*, has attributed to Rāmānanda. Śrīvāstava says that, although it was published in Ahmedabad, there are no available copies. He supposes it contained the rules for the cult according to Rāmānanda (*ibid*).

Can we actually ascribe any of these works to Rāmānanda? While Agrawal supports the theory that Rāmānanda authored the *pāda*-s, as we have seen, several scholars ascribe these compositions to the *tapasī śākhā* or they do not accept them as authentic texts at all. These scholars do not take into account the possibility that the *pāda*-s could be part of the *nirguṇa* teaching of Rāmānanda. It is likely that these compositions do not represent the exact teaching of Rāmānanda, since I doubt that any of them can be genuinely attributed to him, but they may represent the interpretation and the further evolution of Rāmānanda's teachings: the *nirguṇa* teaching spread through Sant and *tyāgī* tradition. Perhaps, as already explained above, different branches and traditions altered Rāmānanda's sayings and verses to bring them closer to their approaches and make them compliant with their respective *sādhana*.

3.2 The Sanskrit Production

According to Agrawal, the Sanskrit works attributed to Rāmānanda actually resulted from the intense literary production of the radical group that in the early 20th centuries wanted to create a 'Sanskrit Rāmānanda' to justify the independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* 'by proving [Rāmānanda's] orthodox provenance and insisting on his being a recognized *ācārya* in the great Sanskrit tradition' (2010: 217). However, our purpose here is to show that the reality was more complex and the portraits more differentiated than a simple radical-versus-Rāmānūjī-s divide.

Nowadays there are several Sanskrit works attributed to Rāmānanda: *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*, *Rāmārcana Paddhati*, *Ānanda Bhāṣya*, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, *Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*. Although for many scholars (Baṛathvāl, Caturvedī, and Śrīvāstava), the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* and the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* are Rāmānanda's works, Hans Bakker affirms that, likely, they are later productions perhaps from the 19th-20th century (1986: 120). Since the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, and *Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* are confirmed products of the radical

group,¹⁴⁸ in this paragraph we will analyze only the first two works.

3.2.1 *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*

This work exists in several editions that are, Caracchi claims, no longer accessible, but their number can be taken as evidence for the text's antiquity.¹⁴⁹ Referring to the preface of a *Bhāskara* edited by *paṇḍit* Rāmṭahaldās, Śrīvāstav says that the work was given by Anantānanda to Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī who, later on, gave it to Agradās. The manuscript was preserved in Agradās's *āśram* at Revāsā and afterwards brought to Jaipur and preserved in the Sarasvatī Bhavan, while Lakṣmīrādās, disciple of Mastarām, brought another copy to Ayodhya (1957: 101). According to Caracchi, if this Mastarām is the disciple of Rāmprasād, the author of the *Jānakī Bhāṣya* who lived around the half of the 17th century, then the text's arrival in Ayodhya could have happened between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, thereby proving the antiquity of the *Bhāskara* (1999: 87).

Agrawal, instead, takes into account the claim of Balbhadrā Dās, a Rāmānandī who prepared his present edition of the *Bhāskara* using a manuscript from Jaipur that was 364 years old (2009: 271). If this affirmation is true, Agrawal says, then the manuscript may be from 1564 C.E. However, Agrawal has a quite precise idea on this work:

It seems, however, highly improbable that Rāmānand himself composed the *Bhāskara* as it is a report of a 'dialogue' between Rāmānand and his disciple Sursurānand,¹⁵⁰ wherein the teacher explains the basic principles of his variety of Vaiṣṇavism, which does not care for the caste, purity or power, of anyone taking refuge in God. At the same time, the *Bhāskara* quite explicitly upholds the authority of Vaiṣṇava scriptures and gives detailed instruction about worshipping *sagun* Rām and other deities.¹⁵¹

The edition of Balbhadrā Dās gives a portrait of Rāmānanda as an *ācārya* who teaches *saguṇa* worship but is still a reformer against caste hierarchy in worship and everyday practice (Agrawal, 2009: 272). According to Agrawal, this Sanskrit work has a certain continuity with the Hindi works in the matter of caste, although it diverges in the matter of worship. He claims that the reason lies in a manipulation of the text by the radical group,

¹⁴⁸ As we will see in Chapter 4, sec 2.1.1, Bhagavadācārya himself admitted their forgery in his autobiography.

¹⁴⁹ Caracchi (1999: 85) has collected at least ten editions of the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*.

¹⁵⁰ Caracchi (1999: 87) summarizes the questions asked by Sursurānanda: What is the Reality? What is the *jāp*, and which deity should Vaiṣṇava-s worship? What is the *sāadhanā* to get the *mukti*? What is the highest dharma? How can one recognize a Vaiṣṇava? How should Vaiṣṇava-s spend their time? What is the ultimate aim to reach? Where is it best to live?

¹⁵¹ <http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/in-search-of-ramanand-purushottam-agrawal/5> (Accessed: December 2013).

which Bhagavadācārya admitted to as well in 1958.¹⁵²

However, it has to be stressed that this does not mean that they created it *ex novo*, since it has been said that many editions of this text exist, and since it comprises a *paramparā* that includes Rāmānūja. Perhaps a comparison among the various editions, if possible, could help in tracing the previous structure of this work, which is considered unanimously by Rāmānandī-s to be old and authoritative.

The opinion of Śrīvāstav and Śukla is that the *Vaiṣṇava Matābjā Bhāskara* is an original production of Rāmānanda, in contrast to those texts that underlie a *śṛṅgār* approach or a yogic approach and which should be attributed instead to their respective *śākhā*-s. According to Śrīvāstav, the *Bhāskara* can be considered as Rāmānanda's original product since it manifests the *dāsyā bhāva*, a feeling of servitude that is actually the main *bhāva* present in the *sampradāya* (1957: 141). This point cannot be underestimate, as it takes into consideration an important factor: the presence of many Rāmānandī *dās* who do not follow the *śṛṅgār* or the *tapasī sādhanā*.

3.2.2 Rāmārcana Paddhati

Śrīvāstav describes this work shortly: according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānanda transmitted the *Paddhati* to Anantānanda and Surasurānanda. After an incipit in which the gurus of the *sampradāya* are glorified, especially Rāghavānanda, the rules for the worship of Rām are described, with an approach that is more practical than theoretical (1957: 108). In fact, Caracchi summarizes, the text, after describing the procedures for performing the *mūrti-pūjā* to Rām, deals with the required purification rites and daily mandatory practices (*nitya karman*) (1999: 84).

With the exception of some editions from the beginning of the 20th century, there are not other clues on the origin of the *Paddhati*. The radical branch of the *sampradāya* raised some doubts about it, since in that work the same Rāmānanda declares a *paramparā* that includes Rāmānūja (Agrawal, 2009: 276). Caracchi says that Rāmānanda's authorship of this text has received unanimous consensus among scholars and among the Rāmānandī-s, but that she was not able to find a copy of it. Then, once again, we should wonder the origin of this text and its effective use in the *sampradāya*.

¹⁵² <http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/in-search-of-ramanand-purushottam-agrawal/7> (Accessed: December 2013).

3.2.3 Some remarks

As stressed by Agrawal, the spread of Sanskrit texts in the 20th century attributed to Rāmānanda pushed scholars to take a stand in favor of an *ācārya* Rāmānanda, supporting the biographies contained in texts like the *Agastya Saṃhitā* (2010: 232).

In effect, scholars seem to be more suspicious of the Hindi production than of the Sanskrit ones. To give an example, Caracchi addresses some considerations of the Hindi productions which, in reality, could work for the Sanskrit ones as well:

[...] Since Rāmānanda was and still is quite a common name, likely sometimes it may refer to another Rāmānanda instead of the guru of Kabīr. Furthermore, it is possible that the majority of the Hindī works that are now under his name, have been written actually by his disciples. [...] Besides, later arrangements of the texts would depend on the fact that Rāmānanda himself did not write down his songs but, as happened for Kabīr and other disciples, these songs were transmitted orally for long time, so that in this *in itinere* phase they integrated new and different elements while losing others. (Caracchi, 1999: 117, my translation)

In a similar way, Agrawal, while supporting van der Veer's idea that any text should be analyzed not 'as a frozen social reality, but in the dynamics of human subjects coming to terms with life through their everyday practice',¹⁵³ seems too fastened to the idea of the construction of a 'Sanskrit Rāmānanda' compared to the originality of an 'Hindi Rāmānanda', that he passes over a deep analysis of the *Rāmārcana Paddhati*. He does not give particular attention to the Hindi compositions ascribed to Rāmānanda but rather focuses entirely on the *pāda*-s. Instead, as shown above, the 'Hindi Rāmānanda' may also be the result of specific historical periods and centers. Furthermore we have seen that a Hindi work was produced at the end of the 19th century and attributed to Rāmānanda as well.

These facts show that not all the branches needed a 'Sanskrit Rāmānanda', and that different branches and centers developed an image and teaching of Rāmānanda which was more appropriate to their respective *sādhana*.

In fact, it is quite probable that the teachings of Rāmānanda transmitted in several contexts have been subjected to manipulation. As Callewaert explains while talking about Anantadās, 'it is not unlikely that the story he himself sang a couple of years later was slightly different, because of a particular need or bias in an audience or because he had

¹⁵³ http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/in-search-of-ramanand-purushottam-agrawal/5/#_ednref62 (Accessed: December 2013)

learnt something more in the meantime' (2001: 1).

Hence, I would suggest that there were several critical moments in the construction of Rāmānanda as an historical figure, perhaps first as a Sant and later as an *ācārya*. Whereas the Sant Rāmānanda only exists in the Sant-s production, another Rāmānanda, associated with *nirguṇa-yogic* practices, lives in the *tapasī* branch of the *sampradāya*, together with a *saguṇa* Rāmānanda who can be found in all the branches. Perhaps all these Rāmānanda-s are evolutions of the original Rāmānanda.¹⁵⁴ The *saguṇa* school of thought, followed by the *rasik* component of the *sampradāya*, could have later needed the construction of a proper *ācārya* Rāmānanda as well. To support this portrait, the connection between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja stressed in earlier texts such as the *Bhaktamāl* was initially used, while during the 20th century, it had to be neglected to prove the independence of the *sampradāya* and of Rāmānanda as its founder.

It is likely that we cannot find anywhere an objective historical account of Rāmānanda's life or a work ascribed to him, since different surroundings have produced their own idea of him and his teachings. As stressed by Burghart, of the 'few books and poems written by him, some of them may have, in fact, been written by his followers and then attributed to Rāmānanda in order to give legitimacy to some doctrinal tendency within the sect' (Spring 1978: 124).

Although these compositions do highlight some of the differences in Rāmānanda's teachings – such as *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*, Hindi and Sanskrit, or *śṛṅgār* and *tapasī* – they also share the same idea of *bhakti* based on the idea of *prapatti*, the surrender of the devotee to God. Therefore, we could suggest that the teaching of Rāmānanda had at its core the idea that only God with his mercy can save the human soul from the *saṃsāra*, and *prapatti* is the only means to reach God. For this reason, all human beings have the right (*adhikār*) to follow the *bhakti*, making social traditions and laws meaningless in devotion: the devotee has to follow them to live in society, but he has to recognize that his freedom does not result from them (Caracchi, 1999: 95). From this central idea various possible religious paths were derived. In the next sections I will attempt to reconstruct the role of Rāmānanda as guru through the portraits of his disciples.

¹⁵⁴ Even in the *tapasī* branch of the *sampradāya*, *sādhu*-s follow a *sādhanā* that is a mixture of yogic practices and *saguṇa* devotion. I will deal with this topic in Chapter 4, sec. 2.1.1.

4. The disciples

According to the Rāmānandī tradition, the teaching of *prapatti* led Rāmānanda to have several disciples from different social strata (like Ravidās, who was a *chamar*), religions (like Kabīr, who was a Muslim) and gender (like Padmāvati).¹⁵⁵ Rāmānanda had twelve close disciples, but their names are different depending on the sources.¹⁵⁶ The *sampradāya* follows the list proposed by Nābhādās, which includes: Anantānanda, Sukhānanda, Surasurānanda, Narahariyānanda, Pīpā, Kabīr, Bhāvānanda, Sēnā, Dhanā, Raidās, Padmāvati, Surasarī.

The stories we have about some of the disciples are just short events with dubious origins. However, we will list them to give a general idea of the contents. It is important to note that we have only some sporadic stories about the Brahman disciples, while much more is said about those with humble, low origins who were to be part of the *Sant* movement. Likely, the fact that new orders were established on the teachings of these disciples has favored the memory of their lives. Moreover, since one of the purposes of hagiographies was to give examples to lay people, perhaps the lives of the low-caste disciples were more applicable to the purpose, considering that they were married, unlike the unmarried Brahmans. Those disciples, who were not householders, were dealt with in the texts as gurus to stress the importance of *sādhanā* rather than to emphasize their life details.

4.1 Padmāvati and Surasarī

Grierson claims that nothing of Padmāvati is known, while we have information about Surasarī, the wife of Surasurānanda, from the *Bhaktamāl*: the text tells that once she was wandering alone in the forest praying, when she was attacked by Muslim robbers. At that moment, Rām took the form of a lion to protect her until she was out of danger (Grierson, 1918: 570).

4.2 Anantānanda

According to the tradition, he was the first disciple of Rāmānanda, and he succeeded him to lead the *maṭh* in Varanasi. Burghart maintains that he is probably the real founder of the

¹⁵⁵ They were also the most famous disciples of Rāmānanda, well known for both their humble origin and their active participation in the *Sant*-s movement.

¹⁵⁶ For example, Wilson (1846: 39) calls Anantānanda also Raghunāth or Asānanda.

sampradāya, or at least the one who spread the teaching of Rāmānanda in northern India (1978). Indeed, Grierson reports that Anantānanda preached in the 'Jodhpur country', whose king he converted (1918: 570). Although nothing is known about Anantānanda's life, his disciples are famous and related to the further developments of the *sampradāya*. The *Bhaktamāl* mentions Yogānanda, Gayes, Kurmacand, Alh, Payahārī, Sārīrāmdās, Shrīrang and Naraharidās as his disciples (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 19). Among them, an important place is given to Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī, who is considered to be the guru of Agradās, Nābhādās's guru. Moreover, Caracchi says that the *Bhaktamāl* stresses Anantānanda's special devotion toward Sītā, and that he wrote the *Hari Bhakti Sindhu Velā*, a work that Dvivedī affirms is conserved in Revāsā (1999: 160). Caracchi points out that, according to P. Mital (who worked on the history of *sampradāya*-s in the Braj area), Anantānanda wrote several texts in Sanskrit, which are listed in an edition of the *Bhaktamāl* from Vrindavan (*ibid*).

Anantānanda's legacy and descendants will be analyzed in the next chapter, section 4.2. Here we remind the reader that at a conference held in Galta in the 18th century, among the thirty-six *dvārā*-s (initiatory lineages) reputed to be founded by Rāmānandī-s, twenty-seven came from Anantānanda. This information should be taken as a clue of the role that this Rāmānandī had in the *sampradāya* notwithstanding the absence of information, and especially as a clue for the reconstruction of the teaching of Rāmānanda.

4.3 Sukhānanda, Surasurānanda, Narahariyānanda

We find some information about these three disciples in Grierson's notes on the *Bhaktamāl*. Sukhānanda was a poet, and his hymns have been collected in a volume entitled *Sukhasāgara* (1918: 570).

Surasurānanda was famous for his faith. The *Bhaktamāl* tells the story of some Muslims who pushed him and his disciples to eat some food in which they had mixed some meat. When they discovered the fact, Surasurānanda did not give any fault to the disciples, but rather made them vomit to rid themselves of the impure food. While doing so, he showed them how the impurity of the flesh had been transubstantiated into *tulsī* (basil) and could leave the body through the power of faith. In Surasurānanda's *paramparā*, Dādūdayāl and Sundardās are included as well (Dvivedī, 1952: 124).

We have only one legend about Narahariyānanda, in which he is cutting wood from a temple dedicated to Devī so he can prepare food for a meeting of holy men. The Devī asks him to stop, promising that she will give him a daily supply of fuel. As a neighbor listens to

this conversation, he thinks to use the same tactic for obtaining fuel. Instead, as soon as he approaches the temple, Devī attacks him and spares him under the condition that for the rest of his life he will supply Narahariyānanda's fuel needs (Grierson, 1918: 570). According to Dvivedī, Tulsīdās apparently came from Narahariyānanda's *paramparā* (1952: 124).

4.4 Pīpā

Several scholars have debated on the date to attribute to Pīpā: Macauliffe says he was born in 1425 C.E. but he does not reveal his source (1909: 106). J.D. Cunningham and P. Caturvedī, on the base of genealogical research on Rajasthani kings, have given different dates: Cunningham dates his birth around 1360-1385 C.E. while Caturvedī claims he was born around 1408-1418 C.E. (Caturvedī, 1972: 236).

According to the *Bhaktamāl* and the *Parcaī* of Anantadās,¹⁵⁷ Pīpā was the king of Gagrauni in Rajasthan and initially worshipped the Goddess Bhavānī (a form of Devī). After a frightening experience, under the advice of the Goddess he reached Varanasi to meet Rāmānanda who 'in body and soul is constantly in ecstasy' (Callewaert, 2000: 146).

When Pīpā reached the monastery of Rāmānanda with his full entourage, they were not allowed to enter. To explain this decision, the doorkeeper said:

This is not the open court of a king. This is Rāmānand's dwelling. There is no place here for kings and their men. Here all we do is to sing Rām's name day and night. (Callewaert, 2000: 150).

After this reply, Pīpā made the decision to kill himself, but was stopped by Rāmānanda, now convinced of his good intentions. He instructed Pīpā to send back all his men, to be alone and have his head shaven. Pīpā abandoned all the wealth he had with him and had his head shaven. As last proof of his faith, Rāmānanda asked him to jump in a deep well. As Pīpā was about to do it, Rāmānanda, now convinced of his intentions, stopped him once again, gave him initiation and taught him for ten days. Then he told Pīpā to go back home to practice the *bhakti* by himself for one full year. Once he returned home, Pīpā began to honor all people, from the higher and the lower castes (Callewaert, 2000: 151-152).

When Rāmānanda went to meet him, he brought with him Raidās, Kabīr and forty disciples,

¹⁵⁷The *Parcaī* of Pīpā has 756 double verses in 35 chapters, making it longer than the *Bhagavadgītā* (Callewaert, 2000: 2).

both householders and ascetics.¹⁵⁸ Since Rāmānanda was planning to go to Dvarka, Pīpā decided to leave his reign, followed by his wife Sītā. They relocated to Dvarka and remained there even after Rāmānanda's departure, as narrated by Anantadās (*ibid*: 161-226).

Twenty-two *pāda*-s are attributed to Pīpā, as well as a *Pīpā Citāvanī*, found in a manuscript dated 1789 from Udaipur (*ibid*: 288), and a collection named *Pīpājī kī bāṇī* published at Varanasi but not available (Caracchi, 1989: 17).

4.5 Dhanā

Using the local inquiries made by Colonel E.R. Penrose, Macauliffe gives us some incredibly precise information about Dhanā: he was a *jāt* (from a caste of farmers) born in the year 1415 in the village of Dhan in the Tank territory,¹⁵⁹ twenty miles from the Deoli cantonments in Rajputana. Macauliffe reports several stories about Dhanā's childhood in which he accomplished miracles and demonstrated a peculiar disposition to worshipping God (1909: 107).

According to Caturvedī, the earliest association of Dhanā with Rāmānanda is found in a song attributed to Mīrā. However, since Caturvedī places Dhanā chronologically after Raidās, he does not support the association between Dhanā and Rāmānanda (Callewaert, 2000: 100).

This relationship is instead described by Anantadās. Dhanā is said to have been told by Rām to go to Varanasi and to get initiated by Rāmānanda. The initiation 'made him experience bliss, while it made all suffering and tension vanish' (*ibid*: 102). At the time of the initiation, Rāmānanda said to him:

Practice *bhakti* at home with total devotion. Worship Hari and the guru saints as one, do not think of them as two. Meditate on Rām, serve the saints and give food to the hungry. (Callewaert, 2000: 102)

Dhanā was a married layman, and it is clear that Rāmānanda suggested him to continue a *gr̥hastha*'s life, living as a devotee while remaining a layman within society. The *sādhanā* followed by Dhanā is well described by Anantadās:

¹⁵⁸ In his *Parcaī*, Anantadās describes Pīpā while showing respect not only to Rāmānanda, but to Kabīr (whom he declares older than Pīpā) and to Raidās, both considered to be equals of Rāmānanda (Callewaert, 2000: 155).

¹⁵⁹ Macauliffe says that in his time, this land was still called *Dhanā Bhagat kā khet* 'the field of the Saint Dhanā' (1909: 109).

With equanimity Dhanā mastered all doubts, and in every creature he could see God within. He stayed at home, detached, like a traveller staying close to a waterhole. His house, his wife, all his possessions, he made them an offering to Hari. With the grace of the guru no evil was left in him, staying in the house he was immersed in Rām. [...] Dhanā practised self-control in his mind and had love for Hari alone, no one else. The Name of Rām was always in his heart; false words never crossed his lips. (Callewaert, 2000: 102)

A few miracles are attributed to Dhanā as well: the growing of the harvest despite having given away all of his seeds to an ascetic (who was actually God in disguised), and the production of wheat in a gourd for a group of ascetics and *Sants* whom he was hosting (*ibid*: 103-108).

4.6 Raidās

Caturvedī calculates Raidās's date of birth on the base of his link with Mīrā Bāī (according to tradition, confirmed by some songs of Mīrā Bāī, Raidās was her guru) and with Jhālī, queen of Chittor (Priyādās sustains this). According to Caturvedī, if this is the queen of the Maharana Sāngā (who lived from 1482 to 1527), then the date of Raidās draws near the mid-15th-early 16th century, nearing that of Rāmānanda (1972: 243).

The first portrait of Raidās comes from Nābhādās, who does not describe Raidās' caste, but, according to Hare, uses 'imagery taken from the work of cobblers [that] alludes to his social position' (2011: 77). As underlined by J.G. Lochtefeld, from Nabhadās' accounts, Raidās does not look ashamed of his birth (2005: 201). In fact, as Hare stresses, 'Nābhādās insists that Raidās explained the true meaning of caste (*jāti*) and that his followers gave up their pride in class and stage of life (*varṇāśrama*) to lay their heads at his feet' (2011: 77).

Anantadās and Priyādās recount many stories involving Raidās, particularly miracles attributed to him. He is mostly depicted during his daily worship and while defeating Brahmans in religious debates – he is shown as a great saint notwithstanding his birth as a *camār*.¹⁶⁰

Both biographers try to explain how he was born into such a low caste. According to Anantadās, Raidās was a Brahman in his previous life, but since he used to eat meat he was reborn as a *camār* (Callewaert, 2000: 307). As a baby, he refused to be nursed by his family, to the point of near starvation. However, God appeared in Rāmānanda's dream and asked

¹⁶⁰ See Callewaert (2000: 311-333).

him to help in feeding him. Rāmānanda recognized that Raidās had already been his devotee in his previous life, so he decided to save him. He stepped in and was able to convince the baby Raidās to nurse and return to good health (Callewaert, 2000: 308).

In Priyādās's work, Raidās is a *camār* because of a curse: in his previous life he was already a disciple of Rāmānanda and one day instead of taking offerings from the usual householders, he took it from a merchant who did business with *camār*-s. When Rāmānanda discovered this, he cursed Raidās to be reborn as a *camār* (Lochtefeld, 2005: 205). Following the example given by Hare in explaining Priyādās's portraits of Kabīr,¹⁶¹ we can suppose that the need to connect Raidās to a previous Brahman birth stemmed from Priyādās' historical background. Perhaps, because of the increasing orthodoxy demanded by Jai Singh II as described in the next chapter, Priyādās had to justify the presence of a *camār* and he preferred to present it as an exception rather than the norm.

To come back to Raidās's life, Anantadās says that when he was seven years old he could practice the nine forms of *bhakti*, serving the Lord with all his heart (Callewaert, 2000: 309). His *bhakti* is *saguṇa*:

He offered food to the deity in a separate temple, where only devotees came. He performed the rituals with extreme care and he knew all manner of worship. [...] I do not desire to perform asceticism or go on pilgrimage, my refuge is Rām alone. (Callewaert, 2000: 317)

However, when he is asked by the queen of Jhali to follow her to Chittor, the *bhakti* perspective is completely different: 'With *nirguṇ* knowledge and concentration firm in their hearts, they meditated on the unproduced sound' (*ibid*: 329).

Even in the case of Raidās, it seems that he utilized both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* practice. This should make us reflect on the status of these paths. As underlined by Callewaert's description of a discussion that happened among Sen, Kabīr and Raidās on the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*, it is likely that there were not 'two theologies in the way later scholars have liked to compartmentalize the *bhakti* movement' (*ibid*: 303), and this could explain the use of both the teachings by Rāmānanda himself.

To summarize this perspective with the words of Anantadās:

¹⁶¹ Comparing Nābhādās' and Priyādās' Bhaktamāl on Kabir, Hare says: 'This episode reflects Nābhādās' and Priyādās' divergent understandings of the role of the *sampradāya*. While Nābhādās straight-forwardly includes Kabīr as a member of this *sampradāya*, Priyādās sees the need to qualify this inclusion: the historical constitution of the *sampradāya* in the present requires it' (2011: 114).

This is special about *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ*: one should not have dogmatic views about them. The *nirguṇ* does not waver or change while the *saguṇ* Hari protects his devotees. It is as if *saguṇ* has the form of butter, and *nirguṇ* is the heated ghee. (Callewaert, 2000: 327)

Raidās is nowadays regarded as one of the most famous saint-poets of India: there are many temples dedicated to him, as well as books dealing with his life and miracles. He is well known in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Maharashtra (Zalliot & Rohini, 2005: 35).

4.7 Kabīr

Kabīr is another particular character of the medieval *bhakti*, more famous than his supposed guru Rāmānanda. There are many written works on Kabīr and many legends about his life.

Macauliffe, who takes for granted the link between Rāmānanda and Kabīr, says that since followers of Kabīr consider the year 1398 to be the date of his birth, then Rāmānanda's date may be fixed approximately within that epoch (1909: 101). According to Lorenzen, Kabīr belonged to the Julāhā caste of weavers and was raised by a Muslim family in Varanasi. The scholar is fairly certain about a few key facts of Kabīr's life: that he became a disciple of Rāmānanda, that he was married and had a son named Kamal, that he was a contemporary of Sikandar Lodi and that he died near Gorakhpur in 1518 (2006: 106).

Lorenzen points out that although none of the three oldest collections of Kabīr's works (the *Adi Granth*, the *Kabīr Granthvālī* and the *Kabīr Bijak*) contain references to Rāmānanda as his guru, with the exception of one verse of the *Bijak*, the story of their *guru-śiṣya* relationship has to be accepted as strongly supported by the popular tradition (*ibid*: 12).

Anantadās's *Parcaī* tells the story of how Kabīr came to be initiated by Rāmānanda: he heard the voice of God telling him to become a disciple of Rāmānanda, so he followed the advice and went at night to the place where Rāmānanda used to walk for his morning bath and lay down there to wait. When Rāmānanda arrived, he tripped over Kabīr, exclaiming 'Rām Rām.' This exclamation was taken by Kabīr as his *dīkṣā* mantra. Later on, Rāmānanda, who heard from others about the supposed initiation, met Kabīr and gave him a real initiation (Lorenzen, 2006: 108). This same story is narrated by Priyādās (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 23).

In the Raidās's *Parcaī*, Anantadās describes Kabīr's form of worship as seen by the queen of Jhali:

She saw all the dispassionate *nirguṇ* devotees, who were seated devoid of all attachment. She saw the hut made from grass and covered with torn patched robes. There was no worship, no offering, no gods or goddesses, contemplation of God was their service. There was no plate, pitcher, money or cloth, and not even water for a second day. This *nirguṇ* devotion concentrating only on the name could not at all appeal to the queen. (Calleweart, 2000: 321)

Following Lorenzen's accounts, the main theme present in Kabīr's legends is his confrontation with religious and political figures (kings, sultans, Brahmans, Muslims), which always ends in victory for Kabīr thanks to his spiritual superiority and miraculous powers (1991: 6-7).

4.8 Sen

Macauliffe gives a date to him presuming his link with Rāmānanda: since Sen was Rāmānanda's disciple and Rāmānanda lived into the end of the 14th century or even the beginning of the 15th century, Sen has to be from the same period. According to Macauliffe, Sen used to study Rāmānanda's hymns, aiming to imitate their spirit and devotional fervor (1909: 120).

According to the popular tradition, Sen was the barber for king Rāmchandra of Bandhavgar (1554-1591), and later became his guru (Caracchi, 1999: 59). Macauliffe reports the story narrated in the *Bhaktamāl*: once Sen was on the way to the palace to render his service to the king, but since he met some holy men on the way, he decided that his first duty was to attend to them and feed them. As it became late in the day, a holy man, by God's favor, assumed Sen's appearance to avert the king's wrath on him (1909: 120). When Sen finally reached the palace, ready to apologize, he found the king unaware of his tardiness. As they traded their stories about what happened, they realized that a providential event had happened. This inspired the king to worship Sen as his guru (*ibid*).

Even today there are important centers in Maharashtra established under his name, one of which will be mentioned in the chapter on the contemporary link of the Śrī Math.¹⁶²

4.9 Some remarks on Rāmānanda and his disciples

Scholars have raised doubts about various aspects of Rāmānanda's disciples: their social status, their number, the veracity of their relationship with him, and, especially, the

¹⁶² Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 2.3.

presence of Sant-s among them. I will not go through the various analyses focused on the link between Rāmānanda and the Sant-s, because it would push us toward a wide digression on the Sant world. However, to summarize the main positions, we can say that Vaudeville theorizes that the connection between Rāmānanda and the Sant-s was created by disciples of the same Sant-s in order to link them with a Brahman guru for prestige (1993: 87-92), while a complete opposite theory by Callewaert & Friedlander claims that it was the Rāmānandī-s who created the link as a way of increasing Rāmānanda's prestige (1992: 25).

Let us now do some general reflections apart from the Brahman disciples, since some of them will be dealt with in the next chapter on the development on the *sampradāya*. We have to consider that more than half of the disciples attributed to Rāmānanda continued to live a laymen's life and, from the stories we have shown, it seems that Rāmānanda himself suggested them to do so.¹⁶³ Most of these lay disciples had low origins as well. According to Burghart, the inclusion of untouchables, Śūdra-s and women among the disciples of Rāmānanda in the *Bhaktamāl* 'reveals the broadening of the criteria for recruitment into a Vaiṣṇava sect thereby enabling the sect to compete more effectively for devotees and disciples' (1978: 133). Three resources were the reason of this competitiveness: devotees and disciples, pilgrimage routes and centers, and political patronage.

Even Pinch, quoting Burghart, supports the hypothesis that Nābhādās has done an act of historical imagination with his inclusion of untouchables, Śūdras and women as first-generation disciples of Rāmānanda (1999: 379). However he has also recognized that, although Burghart judges as artificial the links between Rāmānanda and his low caste disciples, he does not question the link between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja, which could be considered as an act of historical imagination as well (*ibid*: 381).

Although I doubt that all those listed were actually Rāmānanda's disciples, I assume that he was likely a guru who accepted disciples not on the base of social considerations, but on their desire to receive his teachings. Furthermore, given the status of Nābhādās in Galtā, I do not think Nābhādās could have had the power to invent such links between Rāmānanda and low caste people. Additionally, against Burghart's hypothesis that low caste disciples were included to 'broaden criteria into a Vaiṣṇava sect,' we have to remember that Nābhādās speaks not of a Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, but rather of a Vaiṣṇava

¹⁶³ This fact has a particular importance since it explains why there are not *gaddī* and *dvārā* attributed to them during the Galta meeting. (Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 5.3.1)

sampradāya, which included within it several different sects. This demonstrates that Nābhādās's aim was not necessarily to give input on how to recruit people into his specific Rāmānandī sect. We may then suppose that his purpose was to increase the competitiveness of a comprehensive Vaiṣṇava/*bhakta* group for the sake of 'political patronage'.

However, as I will describe fully in the next chapter, the *sampradāya* had already obtained the support of the local ruler, not because of its number of ascetics, but for the religious value of its gurus. It seems likely then that Nābhādās was trying to catch the attention of the public, rather than political and social elites, so that he could recruit more devotees and disciples. If so, I think it is more likely he did so not for economic reasons, but because he believed in the value of Rāmānanda's teachings.

Indeed, how much could the presence of untouchables and low caste individuals have improved the competitiveness of the *sampradāya* among lay people? The fact that there were Rāmānandī-s from low castes does not mean that they necessarily became gurus for lay people from the same caste. Furthermore, in the 16th–17th century, what could have been the economic support that untouchables or women or low caste people in general could give to the *sampradāya* as hypothetical disciples or pilgrims?

As Jean-Baptiste Tavernier testified in the 17th century, only Brahmans and rich people went on pilgrimage to the holiest places more than once in their life:

some every four years, others every six or every eight years. [...] These pilgrimages are not made as in Europe, by one or two individual pilgrims, but the people of a town or several villages assemble and travel together in company. The poor who come from afar, sometimes 300 or 400 leagues, with all the savings which they have accumulated for that purpose during their lives, are unable to bear the expenses of the journey, and they are assisted by the rich, who expended very great sums in such alms. (1889: 190)

If the grassroots of the population were not even able to afford the expenses of the pilgrimage, how could they consistently support religious centers?

What I want to stress is that the open recruitment was already present in the *sampradāya*, as the low origin of Nābhādās himself demonstrates; it was not invented by Nābhādās for economic purposes, because there was not much economic advantage in being open to low castes. Furthermore, to assume that religious movements or preceptors who addressed and included underprivileged people have done it for economic aims ignores the role of human sensitivity in such religious leaders' decision-making processes and their ability to

act and to think beyond schemes which are merely materialistic.

For Nābhādās had no reason to invent this kind of tradition, it follows that low caste people were included in the *sampradāya* since the group's very beginning, which explains why Sant-s wanted to connect themselves to the tradition of Rāmānanda.

Although the open recruitment of the *sampradāya* could have had economic advantages for those ascetics involved in mercenary activities in the 18th-19th century,¹⁶⁴ we cannot demonstrate that the presence of these groups determined the enrichment of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as a whole. As we will see in the next chapter, we do not have data on the spread of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* among lay people, but we know that it was supported by Rajas, Nawabs and, later on, even by the English Raj, which surely were not interested in the open recruitment of the *sampradāya*. Furthermore, it is worth noting that many Rāmānandī centers established around the 18th century in places connected with the mythology of Rām, received the support of pilgrims belonging to different religious groups. These were attracted by their Rām temples rather than by their *sāadhanā* or open recruitment.

Although the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is the largest Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* in northern India because many branches have an open recruitment, this does not mean that it is the group with most lay followers.

Therefore, to repeat the argument, it is likely that Nābhādās was not inventing the existence of Rāmānanda's disciples among the low classes with the purpose of attracting more lay disciples. He rather wanted to stress the characteristic of his tradition and move all sections of society, including lower strata to undertake the Rāmānandī ascetic path.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the intricacy of Rāmānanda, a figure that seems to have acquired mythological characteristic over the centuries, and about whom several scholars have made a wide variety of hypotheses. Although the data we have about him are not entirely conclusive, taking into consideration Rāmānanda's link with Kabīr and Nābhādās, it is highly probable that he lived during the 15th century. Then, we know that he must have had a particular role in the 15th century northern Indian religious environment since he is taken into such a consideration not only in his *sampradāya*, but in several religious movements which tried to link their origins to him.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 5.3.

Moreover, we know how his descendants viewed him and how they interpreted his teachings and spread them. This latter seems the primary mission that the disciples of Rāmānanda wanted to accomplish before paying attention to fixing his date and place of birth in the historical record, thus making these details about his life questionable. However, what can be supposed through hagiographical accounts and the heterogeneous reality of his *sampradāya*, is that his teachings likely presented a *saguṇa* and a *nirguṇa* approach. Perhaps he studied with various masters and experienced both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa bhakti*, achieving a knowledge which led him toward the cult of Rām, an entity able to satisfy both these tendencies. It is hard to know for sure if these teachings assumed the shapes of proper works which were then transmitted through the written literature, but it is highly probable that the teachings of Rāmānanda were the roots of the works we have described.

Agrawal remarks that perhaps we should see Rāmānanda as an independent thinker ‘who gave fullest space to the individual choice of his disciples’ (2010: 255). However, we wonder whether his behavior was the behavior of a *sui generis* guru, or, perhaps, the behavior of an enlightened guru (but not necessarily an *ācārya*) who, stimulated by his spiritual achievements and by pragmatic considerations within his contemporary society, overcame social differences in religious matters to satisfy the religious quest of both *sādhu*-s and lay people. He created bridges among various religious tendencies of his period through the teaching both of *saguṇa* and a *nirguṇa bhakti*. The fact that a guru might have used several approaches does not appear unusual to all: when I asked the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya about the possibility that a guru could follow these two approaches, he replied that this is a proof of the real value of a guru.¹⁶⁵

The sketch just given is an attempt to give credibility to Rāmānanda as a real character, a man living in a society who was influenced by its environment. For this reason I will reconstruct in the next chapter the historical background which could have acted as catalyzer in stimulating Rāmānanda and driving him to establish, if not officially at least theoretically, a new *sampradāya* characterized by heterogeneous elements and disciples. Since all the sources agree that Rāmānanda began his teaching in Varanasi, I will focus my attention initially on that historical context. I will then focus on the spread of the *sampradāya* in northern India and on how several branches and *sādhanā*-s evolved over the centuries.

¹⁶⁵ Interview, November 16, 2013.

Chapter 3

The Historical Evolution of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*

Introduction

As we have seen, there is no indisputable data about Rāmānanda, especially regarding his date and place of birth. However, what seems probable is that Rāmānanda went to Varanasi not as a guru but as a student. There he began to teach and, likely, from Varanasi, he or his disciples travelled and spread his teachings. In this chapter, following a general introduction to the historical background of northern India from the 13th to the 18th century, I will attempt to picture the religious and cultural background of Varanasi in the 14th-15th century that may have influenced Rāmānanda's teaching. I introduce again the figure of Rāmānanda to stress his importance in the formation and popularization of the *sampradāya*, to confer on him an active role in the history of the order rather than treat him as a 'mythological' figure. In fact, many studies that analyze the history of the *sampradāya* fail to examine the part that Rāmānanda may have had in shaping the origin of this new religious order.

Following an analysis of the information we have about Rāmānanda's disciples and their subsequent disciples, I hypothesize about how the *sampradāya* spread across a wide geographic area to help provide a more comprehensive understanding of its history. As part of this examination, I will introduce the supposed original Rāmānandī *gaddī*-s (centers), particularly those developed by the Rāmānandī-s about whom we have more information, both historical and legendary. Then I will focus on the history of specific religious centers to demonstrate how historical context and significant events have influenced some changes in the *sampradāya* up to the present day. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that the history of the *sampradāya* cannot be deduced from only focusing on specific religious centers or time periods,¹⁶⁶ and that the events concerning it are so complex that they have to be analyzed

¹⁶⁶ For instance, Richard Burghart (1978: 133-134) has divided the history of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* into four main phases. He located Rāmānanda in the 15th century, describing this period as the origin, when a new *paramparā* that linked itself to Rām and Sītā spread through the *Rāmārcana Paddhati*. He says the second phase occurred in the 16th century, when Nābhādās not only introduced disciples of low origins into the *paramparā* but also created a link between his group and the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. The third moment occurred in the 18th century, when Vaiṣṇava groups were orthodoxized during the reign of Jai Singh and the conference held in Galta. The last moment was the reformist movement of the 20th century, which led to the independence of Rāmānandī-s from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. I believe that this kind of periodization does

both diachronically (across long periods of time) and synchronically (by comparing the social contexts of different places within the same period). From one side, we have to look at places in their singularity, as individual spaces in which a practice or a certain approach to the spiritual life was taught and popularized by *mahant*-s.¹⁶⁷ From the other side, however, these centers along with their residents were also part of a wider context, a social, political and religious landscape that influenced them from the outside, and were part of a particular *sampradāya* that influenced them from the inside. Examining places and individuals in a diachronic and synchronic perspective, the history of the *sampradāya* appears to be made of several paths, in which the socio-political background and the material and cultural needs of the time led different protagonists, branches and centers to develop different solutions. This perspective also seems useful to better understand how the creation of the role of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya came about.

In this chapter I will also demonstrate that the labels *tyāgī*, *rasik* and *nāgā* cannot be used as static categorizations, as van der Veer and Burghart have sometimes used them, because these terms may specify ascetic *sādhanā*-s that were often used at the same time by the same individual. Moreover, as they also underwent a process of change over time, any attempts to analyze these concepts within the firm confines of a given time period may prevent the understanding of their interconnectivity and their true historical significance within the *sampradāya*.

1. The historical background of Northern India

Between 1000 and 1700 C.E., India witnessed the transition from regional kingdoms to the centralized state of the Delhi Sultanate and, later on, the Moghul Empire. Scholars have analyzed this time period through various approaches to try to define the nature of the Indian state and its key features and organizations.¹⁶⁸ My purpose here is not to emphasize

not reproduce the reality of the evolution of the *sampradāya* because it is too focused on specific individuals, places and issues that are not necessarily representative of the *sampradāya* in its entirety.

¹⁶⁷ In fact, we can see from the history of the *sampradāya* that it was successfully spread by wandering *sādhu*-s and by charismatic and pragmatic *mahant*-s who stood for their faith.

¹⁶⁸ One of the main debates has been whether the Indian medieval state could be described as feudal or not. The various approaches proposed have been synthesized brilliantly by Kulke in his *The State in India 1000-1700*. There, he provides a clear frame of the main interpretations advanced by scholars, while focusing his attention on those who have most significantly impacted the debate: the Marxist-influenced model of an Indian feudalism, advanced by R. Sharma, in which a decentralized and fragmented feudal state presupposes the existence of an earlier strong state weakened through the feudalization of society; and the model of the *segmentary state* proposed by B. Stein, 'which allots the early medieval state in India a position on a continuum of governance formation between the tribal "stateless" form of government and a patrimonial state' (1995: 2).

the various reigns and conquests that spanned this time period but rather to examine the social and religious characteristics of the period. Hence, I will focus on the general traits that characterized the link between *bhakti* and political power. By directing my attention on *bhakti* and political power, I do not wish to claim that the spread of *bhakti* necessarily relied on 'feudal' powers, or vice versa – further studies and evidence would be needed to examine this matter. However, it is undeniable that there was some parallelism between developments in the political realm and the religious realm that should be considered to fully understand the mechanisms that drove the tradition of the *sampradāya* to begin and evolve.

1.1 Delhi Sultanate, Rajputs and Moghuls

The Delhi Sultanate as an independent political power arose under the rule of Qutb al-Din Aibak in 1206.¹⁶⁹ For the next 320 years, the Sultanate lay in the hands of one Muslim dynasty after another, becoming the dominant military power of northern India. They resisted Mongol invasions¹⁷⁰ and were able to expand the Sultanate not only in the North plain, but also in the south and east.¹⁷¹ However, two main inner dividing forces hindered the Sultanate in maintaining a united reign: the tendency of remote areas to form independent sultanates, and the occasional opposition of Hindu Rajas to the central power. Indeed, during periods of Sultanate weakness, Rajput dynasties would attempt to recover some of their power. According to Cynthia Talbot, they formed the group that suffered the greatest loss due to the rise of the Sultanate, as 'they were ousted from political control' and few 'were permitted to attain high rank in the Delhi Sultanate' (2006: 47).

Another group that was affected by the presence of the Sultanate was that of religious specialists,¹⁷² temple priests, monks and sectarian leaders, as they relied on patronage and

¹⁶⁹ For an introduction to the expansion of Turkic power, see Asher & Talbot (2006: 25-32).

¹⁷⁰ The Mongols entered South Asia twice during the reign of Iluttmish (r. 1211-1236) but remained outside the Sultanate's territory. Therefore, 'Delhi became a safety net in a time of turmoil' (Asher & Talbot, 2006: 35).

¹⁷¹ The expansionist phase of the Sultanate reached its peak during the reign of Ala al-Din Khalji. He targeted Gujarat in 1299, followed by the fortress at Ranthambhor in northern Rajasthan, which began the sultan's desire to subjugate the region situated on the route between Delhi and Gujarat and to the Deccan. After Ranthambhor, Ala al-Din seized Chittor and Mandu, capital of the Malwa kingdom in central India (Asher & Talbot, 2006: 35).

¹⁷² Talbot uses the term 'Brahmans' to describe a religious specialist. Nevertheless, I avoid using the term and use *paṇḍit*, as Brahmins could have functions that branch outside of a religious role. In fact, as Torri explains, beginning in the 8th century the Brahmanic class was given an administrative role by Muslim rulers. For example, in the *Chach Nama*, a source about the feats of Muhammad bin Qasim (695-715), it arises that

lost a part of their usual financial support with the rise of the new political force (*ibid*). However, the government of the Delhi Sultans was pragmatic and developed a cooperative relationship with merchants and other Hindu groups, who served as moneylenders and bankers to royal houses.

Additionally, the majority of the population was recognized as *simmis*, people of the book, and allowed to pursue its religion without interference from the government. In fact, when an area had been incorporated into Sultanate territory or had accepted its sovereignty, Hindu temples were rarely desecrated and on the contrary, most of the Delhi sultans allowed the construction of new temples. As Talbot claims:

Aside from the loss of a certain amount of royal patronage, therefore, Indian religions do not appear to have suffered greatly from the rise to dominance of Muslim kings [...] The life of the average Indian peasant appears little affected by the rule of the Delhi overlords. (2006: 48)

The relationship between the Sultanate and the Hindu rural aristocracy was more conflicting because the two groups were basically rivals, although Sultans tried to build what Torri refers to as an 'antagonistic collaboration' with the Hindu upper-class (2000: 216). This rural aristocracy had emerged as early as the 7th century and developed in small kingdoms that expanded their power over neighboring areas. This often involved an agrarian extension through the displacement of tribal people, who were pushed into barren tracts or incorporated into society as Śūdra-s. The kings of these early kingdoms then invited Brahmans to their areas with land grants and immunities, often establishing entire villages for them (Kulke & Rothermund, 1998: 125).

Our attention on these rulers is important not only because they represented a model followed by later Rajas that we will examine in this chapter, but also because, as R.S. Sharma has pointed out, the rise of this group coincides temporally with the spread of various currents of *bhakti* (2000).

The fragmentation of political authority facilitated the connections between those who controlled land and possessed political authority and the Brahmans, who were the legitimizers of political power. As Kulke explains: "The precarious position of the king with regard to both the control of his central area and his relations with his samantas [tributary

Brahmans were given an administrative role because they had prestige and the practical knowledge necessary (Torri, 2000: 213).

neighbors] called for a specific emphasis on the legitimacy of kingship to enhance his personal power' (*ibid*: 128).

In fact, a kingdom was conceived as a marriage between a ruler and the land, personified by his wife. The role of the ruler was to protect and nourish the land in order for it to continue producing fruit. In this role of protector, the ruler also worked to maintain the moral order of castes, acting like a father-supervisor for all the people of the kingdom,¹⁷³ exercising his control and supervision through his 'sons': servants, clients and wards (Ziegler, 1998: 199). Through devotion and service to a God or a Goddess, a ruler granted prosperity and success to his kingdom – and for a proper performance of the rituals to manifest his devotion the ruler needed the presence of Brahmins.

Kings managed to link themselves to deities, so deities installed in temples were treated as sovereign figures as well. As described by M.G. Narayanan and K. Veluthat, this elaborate parallelism between the deity and the king was meant to authenticate and legitimize new monarchies in the different regions of the peninsula. For this reason, the temple was constructed with *maṇḍap*-s, mansions surrounded by fortress walls and guarded by gate keepers, and the daily activity of the *mūrti* resembled (and still resembles) that of a human king: the statue of a God would ceremonially be awakened, bathed, dressed, fed and, in specific circumstances, carried around the village in a procession, accompanied by his consort and other statues of his 'relatives' (2000: 402).

The ruler was a worldly deputy of God, entrusted with the role of ruling God's earthly kingdom. Beneath him there were his 'vassals' to whom he transmitted his power and authority in order to rule the smaller territories that constituted his kingdom. In exchange, they would serve (or perform *sevā*) for the ruler. Service was seen as a form of worship, expressed through acts of devotion and self-sacrifice (Ziegler, 1998: 200).

R.S. Sharma claims that 'peasants or vassals would invariably carry some presents for their superiors', while 'on ceremonial occasions the superiors reciprocated by feeding visitors or distributing gifts among them' (2000: 461). This distribution of gifts also occurred between rulers and Brahmins: rulers used to offer Brahmins grants of lands in return for the rituals and worship they performed, while Brahmins used to gift rulers with holy *prasād* resulting from their celebrations.

¹⁷³ The interpretation of the favor or superiority of the landlord through the concept of fatherhood is identified by Sharma: 'The ruler and the patron were regarded as father [...] The idea was that like the father the local lord or the raja looks after all his subjects' (2000: 463). As we have seen in the Introduction of this dissertation, this attitude is typical of the relationship between guru and disciple in the *bhakti*.

This type of social relationship in which the tenants were subjected to the landlords, was similar to that between devotee and God in the various *bhakti* currents. In fact, in *bhakti* the devotee surrendered to God through *sevā* in order to obtain spiritual freedom, and offerings to God (*dān*) were part of this *sevā*. As Sharma points out, peasants practiced devotion even in pre-feudal times, but it is likely that this *bhakti* approach found a more fertile soil in the new feudal system because it had created a closer and more personal relationship, based on hierarchy (2000: 466). However, because the relationship between Rajput and Brahman dominated the scene in northern India, this might have caused a delay in the spread of egalitarian currents of *bhakti* like those prevailing in the South¹⁷⁴ (Chandra, 2003: 2869).

The way for the growth of *bhakti* in popular movements was paved by the defeat of Rajput states by the Turks in the 12th century and the following internal political stability in the 14th century under the Tughlaqs.¹⁷⁵ This event favored the spread of a number of heterodox groups, such as Tantric and Śākta and devotional movements with a more liberal persuasion. However, we have to stress that this liberalism remained constricted to the religious setting, and never led to a broad social movement.¹⁷⁶ Although some currents did critique the Brahmans, they centered their criticisms on their religious hegemony rather than their social rank. According to R. Champakalakshmi, *bhakti* ideology created delusion of religious equality, which in reality remained beyond the access of lower caste people even in the ritual area (2004: 70). Tantric and *bhakti* movements made women, Śūdra-s and others equal in the eyes of the divinity but this equality was not extended to the economic or social plane. Moreover, *bhakti* did not substitute other religious approaches, nor was it characterized by a singular philosophy; on the contrary, it was a multiplex phenomenon able to contain both 'radical' currents and conservative forces.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Introduction, sec. 3.3.

¹⁷⁵ I support here the concept of *bhakti* as a 'popular' movement in the meaning given by Lorenzen: a movement in which most of the followers (though not necessarily their leaders) 'come from middle- and lower class groups and not from the elite sections of the population' (2004: 4).

¹⁷⁶ As explained by Lorenzen, 'if a popular religious movement does not accept the dominant ideology embodied in these everyday practices, its possibilities for openly rejecting them are generally limited. This is particularly true of movement whose membership is drawn principally from low-caste and poor people [...] to subvert these norms, however, is to abandon or reject them in the context of social interactions within the membership of a given religious group and in the religious rituals of the group' (2004: 18).

¹⁷⁷ While *nirguṇa bhakta*-s like Kabīr and Nānak rejected the caste hierarchy and all the social conventions based on caste distinctions, a *saguṇa bhakta* like Tulsīdās upheld the value of the caste system and the role of the Brahmans (Sharma, 2004: 292). Even Satish Chandra supports the idea that those popular Sant-s (such as Chaitanya, Surdās and Tulsīdās) who advocated devotion to a personal living God, and the ritual of idol-worship, indirectly encouraged and reconfirmed the necessity of Brahmans as a social class (2003: 43).

The sack of Delhi in 1398 by Amir Timur led to the rapid decline of the central power and the reshaping of the political scene in the 15th century: some provinces (such as Bengal, Jaunpur, Gujarat, Malwa and Deccan) became independent sultanates, while Hindu aristocrats took power or at least tried to become independent (such as the Rajput of Mewar and Marwar who conquered back the majority of Rajasthan). According to Talbot, this period was characterized by considerable religious tolerance and an increase in culture sophistication in which pan-Indian trends combined with the promotion of regional identities (2006: 84). Regional kingdoms incorporated local cultures, literature and regional languages, and religion also acquired new forms in both the Muslim and Hindu traditions:

[...] some movements seeking ways to bypass the traditional ulama in the case of Islam or brahman priests in the case of Hinduism. Thus, saints and devotees, intense in their emotion for the divine, infused society with an impassioned discourse that was transmitted in literature and religious practice. (*ibid*: 84)

Hence, this new politically fragmented reality corresponded to a period of considerable cultural innovation led by emerging new religious movements.¹⁷⁸

This multifarious religious environment was maintained and strengthened in 16th century during the rise of the Moghul Empire and its consolidation under Akbar, who was able to overpower the various Sultanates and Rajput principalities scattered throughout northern India. As Talbot argues, the 'empire was a top-down enterprise: the many local societies it ruled were not eliminated or merged but rather kept together through the imposition of a set of administrative practices and a class of ruling nobles' (2006: 115). Rajput kings became an active participant in the enterprise of Akbar's empire. Akbar has begun the process of incorporating Rajputs into the ruling elite as early as 1561, when he married a princess of the Kachavaha house of Amer, which, as we will see later, had a particular role in the spread of Rāmānandī in Galta.

Among Turko-Mughal tribes there was a concept of complete and unflinching loyalty to the chosen leader, that was patrimonial in nature and gave the ruler, especially Akbar, full freedom to choose the people to assist him. The officials who served the emperor were called his *naukar-s* (servants), a term which displays a subservient attitude similar to that existent in the Rajput – and *bhakti* – tradition. According to John Richards,

¹⁷⁸ In fact, also Francesca Orsini has stressed that although northern India was not a 'homogeneous region in political terms', it was likely a 'fairly well-connected cultural and linguistic region' that enabled local productions of songs and tales to spread (2012: 227).

the Mughal system led to a more impersonal, imperial pride in which honor was understood in terms of unconditional service and obedience to the emperor, and promotion was seen as a 'movement nearer to the person of the Emperor' (1998: 128-129). This new dynastic ideology that glorified devotion, loyalty, and service of Mughal officials towards Akbar – considered to be the living embodiment of the Empire – might suggest interesting parallels with the attitude offered by Vaiṣṇava *bhakta*-s to God (Burchett, 2009:40). Following the example given by Kumkhum Chatterjee (2009), Burchett thinks about the similarity between the ceremonial of the imperial court and that of the daily rituals in Vaiṣṇava temples in the Braj area – such as the ceremony of awakening the deity, the *darśan* of the deity by devotees at specific times of the day, and so on (2012: 40).

Akbar showed a genuine interest in religions, which led him to have a liberal policy toward them. He extended tax-free lands to Hindu and Jain temples and was influenced by Sufi mysticism, considering himself to be an enlightened king (Asher & Talbot, 2006: 129). In fact, according to Talbot, the purpose of the *Din-i Ilahi*¹⁷⁹ created by Akbar was a system of discipleship whose vertex was the holy figure of the Emperor, seen as a master (*pir*) in the Sufi sense. Even in this system, the master-Emperor bound to him the highest-ranking nobles, who were in complete loyalty to him (2006: 130).

The personal religious attitude of Akbar and his relations with Rajput dynasties (especially the Kachavaha) were also reflected in the land grants that Akbar allocated to temples, as we will see in Section 6.8.

To conclude then, it is likely that this environment favored the rise and spread of Hindu religious orders throughout northern India.

2. The historical and religious environment of Varanasi

In the 14th century, Varanasi became a part of the Jaunpur sultanate, which had broken off from the Delhi Sultanate in 1396. Delhi and Jaunpur alternated as the aggressors in military confrontations: The Jaunpur armies were able to enter Delhi twice, but by 1494 Sikandar Lodi (r. 1489-1517) had sacked Jaunpur, rendering it nearly impotent by the beginning of the 16th century. However, even during this period political insecurity, the ruling Sharqi dynasty tried to make their capital a cultural center where Indian and Muslim cultures could intermingle, especially in the arts. Because historians from the Jaunpur sultanate

¹⁷⁹ According to Talbot, the *Din-i Ilahi* was not a new religion invented by Akbar, as many scholars working on him have suggested. Their claims would be based on a wrong interpretation of Abu al-Fazl's writings (2006: 130).

period are generally silent about non-Muslims, it has been assumed that there was little interaction between Muslim and non-Muslims during this time. However, this seems unlikely, considering that a cultural center like Varanasi was only 60 kilometers to the southeast of the city of Jaunpur (Talbot, 2006: 96-97).

According to Moti Chandra,¹⁸⁰ the existence of Muslim rulers, although characterized by the destruction of important temples in Varanasi over a span of several centuries, did not affect the city as a center of religious and cultural matters (1962: 153). Since the 12th century the city also saw a strong Ramaite influence as testified by the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, a work presumably composed in Varanasi in Vaiṣṇava Brahman circles of the time.¹⁸¹ The text, which does not mention any specific holy place within the city, declares Varanasi to be 'the place where the six-syllable *rāmamantra* was revealed on earth for the first time' (Bakker, 1982: 107). The content of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* seems quite close to the future teachings of Rāmānanda: it focuses on Rām as Viṣṇu's *avatar* and the means of release; it describes yogic techniques; it gives particular attention to the concepts of *mūrti* worship, the *pūjā* and the role of *dīkṣā*. Furthermore, the *Saṃhitā* states that Rām appeared on earth for the good of all and recommended the repetition of his name for those who had no access to esoteric liturgy (*ibid*).

Using the *Kāśī Mahātmya*¹⁸² as his source, Moti Chandra says that during the Jaunpur Sultanate, Viśvanāth was the main *devatā*, although the total number of popular deities was almost impossible to count. The most popular religious routines included bathing in the Ganga river (*Gaṅgā snān*), making vows (*vrat*) to God, worshiping God (*dev pūjā*), fasting (*upvās*), and feeding and worshiping Brahmans. The city was populated by *parivrājak* (wandering ascetics), *saṃnyāsī-s* (renouncers), *jaṭādhārī-s* (those with matted hair), *yogī-s* and tantrics. The presence of *yogī-s* from the Nāth *panth* was very strong in the area around Varanasi and in Bihar (1962: 155-156).

This ascetic dimension of the city has led Bakker to observe that spots associated with ascetic achievements found a prominent place in religious texts like the *Skanda Purāṇa*. According to Bakker, the sacred space of Varanasi was differentiated in two 'mutual permeating but nevertheless contrasting religious spheres, one devotional, catering for

¹⁸⁰ Moti Chandra (1909-74) was one of the most eminent scholars of his generation. His work focused on a wide range of subjects, including art history, historical geography, epigraphy and literature. Born in Varanasi, he received his education at the Banaras Hindu University and the University of London. In 1974, the President of India honored him with the award of the Padma Bhushan.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Introduction, sec. 3.3.

¹⁸² The *māhātmya-s* are texts that glorify the city or God to which they are dedicated.

emotional needs, for the benefit of those pursuing happiness and religious merit, the other geared to the transmundane aims of ascetics and the moribund' (1996: 37).

Two other key groups in 12th century Varanasi religious life were the local Sufis and Sant-s. In order to understand the influence that they might have had on Rāmānanda, I include here a brief description of their belief system.

The contents of Sufis and Sant-s' literature are quite similar: they both worship a God that is without attribute or physical form (although there were Sant-s following *saguṇa bhakti*). Sant-s and Sufis were both mystics, extolling devotion to God as a primary religious practice. They both used to write their poems in local languages. A trait shared among Sufis, Sant-s (and Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*) is their loving and personalized approach towards God – an approach that, as we will see later, also influenced the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. As described by Milanetti (1988), the *prem-marga*, or the path of love, as preached by the Sufis and Sant-s, is one of the liveliest path of the Indian devotional traditions.

According to Giorgio Milanetti, Sufis had a prominent role in emphasizing love as a spiritual path and in reconceiving the various expressions of human love as various means to express love for God (1988: 92). Ramcandra Sukla has also argued that the Sufi approach is reflected in the ideology of Caitanya, an Indian mystic of the 15th-16th century: just as Sufis attained the state of *hāl* (state of ecstasy) while singing, in the same way the devotional groups of Caitanya used to sing and dance themselves into a state of higher consciousness (1929: 31). Similarly, some particular Sufis' expressions of love for God in states of frenzy, madness or blessing are present in poems of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Hence, according to Sukla, the love of the *nirguṇa* sects is 'absolutely similar to the love of Sufi-s' (*ibid*). Sufis were also influenced by other religious traditions of India. Talbot claims that 14th and 15th century Sufi texts show the influence of yogic methods that are usually associated with the yogic tradition of Nāth ascetics, such as breath control, postures and retention of bodily fluids (2006: 89). Therefore, we may wonder whether the yogic teachings of Rāmānanda were influenced by direct contact with the Nāth ascetics or by his interpretation and use of the techniques as taught by Sufis.

What arises is that the nature of the religious environment of Varanasi was composed of a diverse pool of religious currents, of which the *bhakti* was just one part. Patton Burchett gives a helpful description of the period:

Throughout the entire medieval period, bhakti is often understood to be closely intertwined with, even inseparable from, practices of yoga, tapas, renunciation, and

tantric visualization [...] from the sixth to the thirteenth century, South Asian religiosity was dominated by tantric ideology and ritual and, in this context, bhakti usually appeared as one element, one dimension, among many in the religious life [...] the term bhakta seems to be an entirely non-exclusive identity that simply marks one as having a participatory relationship with God, one in which—especially after the BhP—the cultivation and expression of deep emotion were often seen to be central; however, the form of the bhakta’s “participation” and the means to his/her emotional experience in no way precluded, and in many instances actually called for, renunciation, asceticism, yoga, or tantric ritual technique. (2012: 106-107)

Looking at more orthodox influences, we can suppose that whether Rāmānanda belonged to the *paramparā* of Rāmānūja or not, he could have been influenced by the philosophical *Viśiṣṭādvaita* system. As we have seen in the Introduction of this dissertation, Rāmānūja had already slightly opened the *bhakti* path to Śūdra-s, especially the Tenkalai branch of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*. Furthermore, according to Nābhādās’s *Bhaktamāl*, Rāghāvananda in Varanasi taught the *bhakti* to all four *varṇa*. Hence, if Rāghāvananda belonged to the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*, it is also likely that he was a follower of the Tenkalai school.

Another possibility is that Rāghāvananda was a *tridaṇḍī*, a proper Rāmānūjī ascetic, although very little is known about this specific section of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.¹⁸³ We do not have concrete evidence of the presence of Rāmānūjī-s in Varanasi in the 14th and 15th centuries, although it is probable that among the *sampradāya*-s mentioned but not specified by Moti Chandra, one was that of Rāmānūja, given the impact that his *Viśiṣṭādvaita* had on the Indian religious landscape (1962: 155).

There were also other Vaiṣṇava influences in Varanasi from the South. According to Nilakanth Purushottam Joshi, a Vaiṣṇava sect named Vāraakarī was established in Paṇḍharapur, Maharashtra during the 13th century. They worshiped Viṭṭhal, a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa and did not preach any distinction of *varṇa*, as each man was believed to be God. The sect was very influential in Maharashtra but also had (and still has) temples in Varanasi (2006: 95). The founder of the order was Jñāneśvara, described by Joshi as a *yogī* of the Nāth group as well as a *saguṇa* worshipper of Viṭṭhal (*ibid*: 97). His residency in Kāśī is not known, but according to Joshi he encouraged Nāmdev in 1292 to go to Kāśī.

¹⁸³ Ghurye recognizes that Rāmānūjī ascetics are very few in number. He gives the example of the Kumbh Melā of Ujjain in 1932: Rāmānūjī ascetics did not even take part in the procession (1953: 152). As we will see below, when they did attend the Melā, they were carried in their palanquins by Rāmānandī-s.

Nāmdev (1270-1350) is another outstanding figure of Indian religious history who, despite not dwelling in Varanasi, might have influenced Rāmānanda. In fact, Nāmdev is a Sant to whom both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* compositions are attributed: his *pāda*-s in Hindi reveal a *nirguṇa bhakti*, while his *abhang*a-s in Marathi represent a *saguṇa bhakti*. Nāmdev, initially an ardent devotee of Viṭṭhal, decided to receive the Nāth *dīkṣā* as well, which introduced him to the *yoga-marga* (the path of yoga). For this reason, in his teachings the *bhakti* path and the yoga path overlap (Milanetti, 1988: 60).

A last probable religious tradition that might have influenced Rāmānanda is the Smārta tradition. As Clémentin-Ojha has argued, given the direct link between the *Smṛti* tradition and Vedic rituals, the Smārta cult likely became popular under Śaṅkara, although there is no concrete evidence of this (2000: 319). In general, the Smārta cult is oriented towards the *pañcāyatan pūjā*, the worship of five deities – Śiv, Viṣṇu, Gaṇeś, Devī and Sūrya. In northern India, it is popular among specialists of the Smṛti, while in southern India it is popular only among specific Brahmanic castes (Clémentin-Ojha, 2000: 319). Paramasivan adds that the Smārtas of northern and southern India also have different practices because in the North the term refers to Vaiṣṇava-s, while in the South, Smārta-s are generally associated with the worship of Śiv (2010: 44).¹⁸⁴

This is a further demonstration that generalization and strict categorization cannot give a comprehensive and thorough description of a complex religious group, whether Rāmānandī, Smārta or any other.

A connection between the Smārta tradition and the Rāmānandī tradition would explain the presence of the worship of Śiv in the latter and in works like the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās. It is also interesting to notice, as Paramasivan does, that Bhagvān Prasād Rūpkalā¹⁸⁵ places Rāmānanda with a Smārta Śaivite guru when he went to Varanasi to begin his studies (2010: 79).

¹⁸⁴ I would like to stress one point brought into light by one of the informant of Clémentin-Ojha. A young Brahman from Mithila said to her: ‘Chez nous au Mithila, la plupart des gens sont Smārta. *Ils sont Smārta sans le savoir* [italics mine]. C’est que tous les rites (*kāryā*) relèvent de la tradition (*paramparā*) sont Smārta; toutes les observances (*vrata*) sont Smārta. Ils sont obligatoires pour ceux qui les considèrent obligatoires. Les Vishnouites se sont mis à part des Smārta. Ils font les mêmes rites qu’eux mais avec certaines différences. [...] Les Smārta, eux, respectent tous les dieux. Ils les mettent tous sur le même plan. Ils font le culte-des-cinq-divinités, mais pas obligatoirement tous les jours. Ils célèbrent toutes les fêtes associées aux différentes divinités. Chacun a toutefois une divinité préférée à laquelle il rendra quotidiennement culte’ (2000: 328-329). As we will see in Chapter 6, this description reflects the activities of the contemporary Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya, and in general that of the majority of modern day Hindus who, despite having a favorite *iṣṭa devatā*, celebrate the main festivities connected to other deities as well.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Chapter 2, sec. 1.2.4.

As the aforementioned examples have shown, the landscape of 13th century Varanasi was marked by heterogeneous religious currents that coexisted, interacted and influenced each other. We must understand the figure of Rāmānanda within this rich and diverse religious world. In doing so, it does not seem unexpected that Rāmānanda supported both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa bhakti* and that he decided to develop a liberal approach to *bhakti* to spread his teaching through vernacular languages and to insert yogic methods into his practice.

3. A new *sampradāya*?

As we have seen in the previous chapter, some accounts about Rāmānanda report that he was condemned to eat apart from his Śrī Vaiṣṇava brethren because they accused him of not observing the privacy of his meal after a long pilgrimage, thus violating Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition. His guru Rāghavānanda supported their claims, pushing him to leave the group and to create his own *sampradāya*. I will focus here not on the truthfulness of this story, but rather on what it would have meant to create a new *sampradāya*.

The word *sampradāya* has various nuances of meaning: it can mean a teaching tradition based on a particular doctrine; it can specify a specific ascetic order that centers itself on a particular doctrine; or it can specify a sub-group within an order that follows a doctrine or a religious discipline distinct from that of the umbrella group to which it belongs. For example, the *rasik* branch or the *tyāgī* branch can be defined as *rasik* or *tyāgī sampradāya*-s within the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

Therefore, if we consider the hypothetical circumstances under which the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* was established and we consider the history of the *sampradāya* in general, it seems that the connection to the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* was attested from the 17th century (according to Nābhādās) to the beginning of the 20th century.

Hence, we can suppose that Rāmānanda, broadly speaking, did not create a new *sampradāya*. As we have reconstructed through hagiographies, Rāmānanda was a guru who demonstrated a liberal approach to *dīkṣā* by giving it to both men and women of high and low caste, and to *gṛhastha*-s (householders). He might have considered himself connected to the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* because his guru came from a *Viśiṣṭādvaita* theological background, but, as he was influenced by the religious environment in Varanasi and in northern India, he was attracted by the Rām cult and a more liberal approach. For this reason, he preferred to focus his worship on the Rām mantra and introduce more

liberal rules.¹⁸⁶ It is important to remember that in those centuries there were no rigid boundaries between *sampradāya*-s and the vibrant religious landscapes allowed new gurus to find audiences for their teachings.

Unfortunately, these can be only conjectures, since we do not have concrete evidence about those first decades of the *sampradāya*. I received an explanation for this lack of information from the *mahant* of the Bālānanda Maṭh (Jaipur), Lakṣmaṇāndācārya. According to him, the initial purpose of the *sampradāya* was to spread Rāmānanda's teaching in a kind of *sevā* for the society. Therefore, Rāmānanda and his disciples used to wander the land without paying attention to establishing religious centers that could serve as the source of historical documentation for their movement.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, the liberalness of Rāmānanda and his *sādhana*-s, and the lack of a main center, would have prevented the establishment of precise rules to guide their religious life. These codified rules did not develop until later, under the guidance of other charismatic gurus and in specific centers. Rāmānanda represents only the starting point of a *sampradāya* that spread over the centuries, eventually evolving the core of Rāmānanda's teaching. Those disciples that continued to have a life as *gṛhastha*-s established their own sub-groups, *panth* or orders, while those who followed a path of renunciation decided to continue on the ascetic lineage of Rāmānanda.

Therefore, although specific details about the disciples of Rāmānanda are unknown, I suggest we should take them into account as representatives of those first Rāmānandī-s that spread the *sampradāya* throughout India. While lay disciples may have not continued the ascetic tradition, they did, nevertheless, transmit the core of Rāmānanda's teachings. We have seen in the previous chapter that Pīpā, Dhanā and Raidās came from present-day Rajasthan, while Sen came from Madhya Pradesh. Pīpā was a king and the others obtained

¹⁸⁶ In fact, innovation in a *sampradāya* may also manifest itself through a change of the mantra. Burghart has argued that, when comparing among spiritual genealogies, 'there can be significant differences in the records of the transmission of the mantra from guru to disciple'. According to Burghart, every genealogy is a record of a strategy in which the sect has reinterpreted its past in order to compete more effectively (1978: 127). However, in reference to the *guru-paramparā*, the present Rāmānandī Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya has written in the *Śrī Maṭh Smārikā* that, because a guru can initiate a disciple through the mantra he himself received from his guru, if Rāmānanda was transmitting the Rām mantra, he must have had a Ramaite guru. According to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāghavānanda was the *dikṣā-guru* of Rāmānanda – hence he was part of a specific *guru-paramparā* and *sampradāya* that worshipped Rām. This *sampradāya* could not be the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* because it has never followed the Rām mantra nor considered Rām to be the main God to worship. Rāmnareśācārya, therefore, concludes that Rāghavānanda was a free thinker who decided to be a devotee of the Rām cult without following any specific orthodox tradition, or that he was part of another *paramparā* (Swāmī Rāmnareśācārya, 1989: 19-20). However, we may also take into consideration that Rāmānanda could have been a disciple of Rāghavānanda, and therefore was assimilated into his *paramparā*, while also being initiated by a guru who worshipped Rām.

¹⁸⁷ Interview, March 12, 2013, Jaipur.

the supports of kings.¹⁸⁸ Hence, if we accept the main background information in the stories narrated about these individuals one century after their lives, we can guess that these disciples created a mechanism for the spreading of Rāmānanda’s teachings,¹⁸⁹ especially in Rajasthan, where we find the first Rāmānandī establishments. It is likely that the presence of these disciples in Rajasthan may have pushed other disciples, or their own disciples, to move there. Furthermore, the presence of Hindu Rajas in Rajasthan made the region more attractive to the proto-Rāmānandī-s of Varanasi, who still did not have much support among the local population and would have found relief in the less hostile environment in the West.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, Rāmānanda and his disciples are said to have reached the city of Dvarka (in present Gujarat), and that Pīpā remained there for a longer time.

To my knowledge, there are no studies on the presence of Rāmānandī-s in Dvarka, but there is a *gaddī* under the name of Pīpā and, if we support the story, there may have been Rāmānandī centers during his time. We can then suppose that wandering Rāmānandī ascetics and *gr̥hastha* that started following Rāmānanda’s teachings were the main promoters of the Rām *bhakti*, which spread to places that eventually become main centers for settled Rāmānandī-s.

4. The *gaddī*-s¹⁹¹ of Rāmānanda’s disciples

In this section I focus my attention on the Rāmānandī *gaddī*-s listed by Rāmṭahaldās¹⁹² in his work *Rāmānanda Sampradāya kī Dvārā Gaddī* as mentioned by Śrīvāstav (1957: 196). Each of these *gaddī*-s was supposedly established by a disciple of Rāmānanda, following the criteria of the 36 *dvārā*-s (spiritual clans organized in the 18th century), which I will describe in Section 5.3.1.

I will initially introduce those *gaddī*-s established by the disciples of Rāmānanda about whom we do not have much information and then I will introduce those established

¹⁸⁸ However, we have to remember that Pīpā decided to take *virakta dīkṣā*, which is why we also find *dvārā* linked to his name (cf. below, Sec. 5.3.1).

¹⁸⁹ For example, during a conversation in Delhi with a group of engineers from Rajasthan who were not involved in the *sampradāya*, they enthusiastically told me that they knew about Rāmānanda through the story of Pīpā and his role in spreading Rām *bhakti* in some areas of Rajasthan.

¹⁹⁰ This idea is also present in P. Mital, who supposed that the Sultanates’ presence could have pushed Rāmānanda to move toward the Braj area (1968: 162).

¹⁹¹ The word *gaddī* literally means throne, but by extension it is used to specify a sectarian center. Those religious centers that are reputed as *gaddī*-s have a symbolic throne, on which only the *mahant* of the *gaddī* can sit.

¹⁹² Rāmṭahaldās (who lived at the beginning of 20th century) was a Rāmānandī from Daraganj, Prayāg. He was a *paṇḍit* who wrote several commentaries about the Sanskrit works associated to Rāmānanda. He also supported the hypothesis of a link with the Rāmānūja’s *paramparā*.

by Anantānanda and his disciples. The main purpose of the exploration is to give an idea of how the *sampradāya* may actually have spread in areas such as modern day Uttar Pradesh, the northern part of Madhya Pradesh and especially Rajasthan, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh.¹⁹³

According to Srivastav, these *gaddī*-s still exist, however many places that he mentions are very difficult to localize. Moreover, some of them do not seem to be real *gaddī*-s but rather places that preserve a Rāmānandī story.

4.1 *Gaddī*-s established by less known disciples of Rāmānanda

The centers I list here¹⁹⁴ are in various areas of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat. Although their history may not have actually begun with the disciples of Rāmānanda, and some of them cannot be identified with specific places, the existence of these *gaddī*-s (or their remembrance) nevertheless testifies to the longstanding presence of the Rāmānandī order in various areas.

1) Sursurānada's *gaddī* was located in a place called Sorūnjī *ghāṭ*, which is said to have been destroyed by the flood of the Ganga river, but its precise location is not mentioned.¹⁹⁵ Today, a place in Abu known as Siddha Bābā Sthān is also considered to be Sursurānada's *gaddī*.¹⁹⁶

Sursurānada had a disciple called Keval Kūbā¹⁹⁷ who established a center close to Jodhpur. Srivastav adds that other places in Ayodhya, namely the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā, the Śaraṇ and Cirānd Sthān-s, were established by Sursurānada.

2) Narharyānanda's *gaddī* is called Gaṛhkhālā and is located in Riyasat in Rajasthan.

3) Sukhānanda has two *gaddī*-s, one in Dhortaya (Sekhavati, Rajasthan) and another in Jamdholi on the outskirts of Jaipur.

4) Rām Kabir's *gaddī* is located in Kadmakhaedi (Braj, close to Govarddhan). To introduce this disciple, Srivastav reports a story told by a certain Mādhav Dās to Rāmṭhaldās (which, I remind, is the source used by Srivastav for the list): once

¹⁹³ A schema of the hypothetical *gaddī*-s is in Tab. 1.

¹⁹⁴ As already stated, this list (like those that I will report in the next section) is a partial translation of Śrīvāstav's Hindi work in which the scholar mentions Rāmṭhaldās's description of the *gaddī*-s.

¹⁹⁵ There is no more specific information available about the place of the *ghāṭ*.

¹⁹⁶ A place known as Siddh Baba Sthān is found among the more important places in Orcha.

¹⁹⁷ Śrīvāstav is not clear in his presentation: he says that he was a disciple of Sursurānanda, Mādhavānanda, Garībānanda, Lakṣmī Dās Gopāl Dhūghariyā and Narharyānanda. It is not sure from this list if he received *dīkṣā* from all of them or if this list represents a kind of *paramparā* (1957: 198). Nevertheless, this list includes so many gurus that he would have had to have lived much before Nābhādās' lifetime.

Rāmānanda planted a twig of a *nīm* tree in a place named Śukla *tīrth*, on the bank of the river Narmada in today's Gujarat. From this, a huge tree grew, under which Rāmānanda gave the *pañca saṃskāra* to a Brahman who was known as Rām Kabīr Dās. The place developed into an important religious center.¹⁹⁸

- 5) Bhāvānanda established two centers, one in the city of Fatehpur located in the Sekhavati district of Rajasthan, and the other in a place named Gaṛh Bithnī Sthān in Gujarat.¹⁹⁹ Anabhayānanda, his disciple, is said to have established a *gaddī* in Jaipur that became the main place for the *nāgā* branch of the Rāmānandī-s under the guidance of Bālānanda.²⁰⁰ Two other *gaddī*-s from Bhāvānanda's *paramparā* are that of Bābā Hāthī Rām in southern India²⁰¹ and a place named Karālā in Haryana. A disciple of Anabhayānanda, Dundurām (also known as Dāmodar Dās), established a Rām *tīrth* in Punjab (Śrīvāstāv, 1957: 198).
- 6) Pīpā is said to have lived in a hut in Ramra, near Bet Dvarka,²⁰² which became one of his *gaddī*-s; another is Gangaronagaṛh (likely Gagaron, the birth place of Pīpā). Srivastav adds that he has monasteries in Mewar (South Central Rajasthan), and in Kathiawar (Gujarat).

From these *gaddī*-s we can deduce that Rāmānanda's disciples traveled about in areas close to Rajasthan. Furthermore, we have a glimpse of the differentiation of early Rāmānandī centers: some were mere caves, while others were proper monastery. They all shared the

¹⁹⁸ Rām Kabīr is not included among the disciples listed by Nābhādās. Caracchi, after reporting the theories about this disciple espoused by various scholars (1999: 186-187), tells us that a Rām Kabīr did exist and is mentioned among the disciples of Kabīr under the name Gyāni. He reportedly became a disciple of Kabīr at Śukla *tīrth*, on the bank of the river Narmada. It is said that even today there is a tree worshiped there under which Gyāni is said to have received the *dīkṣā*. There is now a temple dedicated to Kabīr in the area. We do not know whether at that time Kabīr considered himself as belonging to another *panth*. Perhaps, if Kabīr regarded himself as still part of Rāmānanda's *paramparā*, his disciple should be linked more with Rāmānandīs than with Kabīr Panthīs. As Caracchi affirms, Rāmkabīr's disciple, Gopāl Dās, established a movement with a *sādhana* based on the repetition of the name Rāmkabīr, from which a Rāmkabīr *panth* began. Even Śrīvāstāv (1957: 170) talks about a Rāmkabīr *panth* in Ayodhya with a center known as Hanumān Nivās; its *bhakta*-s define themselves as Vaiṣṇava Rāmānandiye and its *pradhān ācārya* is Rāmkabīr.

¹⁹⁹ The information that Śrīvāstāv provides does not allow us to identify a specific place, only a vague area in northern Rajasthan. In the second case he gives the name of the place but not the city.

²⁰⁰ Therefore, we can assume that Anabhayānanda was the initiator of the *akhārā* tradition.

²⁰¹ There is a *maṭh* called Bābā Hāthī Rām in Tirupati. On a board outside the *maṭh* it is written that Bābā Hāthī Rām (Vairagī) arrived from Rajasthan around 600 years before (meaning the 16th century). He was a devotee of *bālā*, which means Hanumān. I was only able to find some scattered information about it on Internet, cf. <http://anushankarn.blogspot.in/2010/12/tirupati-part-7-hathiramji-and-his.html> and <http://www.lambadiwala.tk/2012/06/brief-story-of-baba-hathi-ram-ji.html#.U-USioCSwVo> (Accessed August 2014)

²⁰² This place could be a reference to the time in which, according to Anantadās, Pīpā remained with Sītā in Dvarka after Rāmānanda left.

common trait that they were considered valuable enough that someone decided them worthy of demarcation as a *gaddī*. To this list, I surmise that we should add many more small centers that had an ephemeral life span that, nevertheless, played an important role in the spread of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

4.2 Anantānanda's *gaddī* and those of his secondary disciples

It is said that Anantānanda, Rāmānanda's first disciple, became his successor in the *āśram* in Varanasi.²⁰³ It is also said that he spread the Rām *bhakti* in the northern Indian cities of Jodhpur and Mathura. Furthermore, in Varanasi there is a *pīṭh* whose *mahant* claims the place was founded by Anantānanda himself.²⁰⁴

Anantānanda's disciples were: Yogānanda, Gayeś, Karmcandra, Alh, Payahārī, Sārī Rāmdās, Śrī Rang, and Narharidās. As in the case of Rāmānanda, the only information we have about the life of Anantānanda comes from sources composed after his death. In the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*, Jīvārām writes that he was a *śṛṅgār bhakta* (a devotee with a love-focused approach) and that whenever he was in *samādhi* (deep meditation), tears used to flow from his eyes. In a commentary of the same text written by Śrī Jānkī Rasik Śaraṇa, Anantānanda is depicted as the most devotee of the *caraṇa pādukā* (foot print) of Rāmānanda.

In his commentary on the *Bhaktamāl*, Rūpkalā reports a miracle performed by Anantānanda while he was in Sāmbhar, a city in Rajasthan. The gardener of the local Raja refused to give any *viḥī* fruit to Anantānanda and his disciples. The next day, the gardener was surprised to find there were no *viḥī* fruit trees in the area. As soon as the Raja came to know about this event, he went to the feet of Anantānanda, became his disciple and declared his kingdom to be a place of Rām *bhakti* (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 168-169).²⁰⁵

According to P. Mital, Anantānanda was a scholar and a *dharmācārya* (a teacher of dharma). Mital says that he lived in a place called Yadvadri, close to Mathura, which explains his devotion for both Rām and Kṛṣṇa as described by Nābhādās. Mital also refers to the words of one Śrī Parāṅkusācārya, who wrote in his *Siddha Yogī Śrī Kildās jī* that there was a school in Mathura established by Anantānand, and called Anantvārā, where Kīlhdev studied (1968: 162).

²⁰³ Khare (2001: 67).

²⁰⁴ Cf. Appendix, sec. 2.1.3.

²⁰⁵ These references are quite typical of the period of their production. The texts were produced by the devotional branch of the *sampradāya* that further developed its theology during the 18th and 19th century.

There is very little information about Anantānanda's disciples in the *Bhaktamāl*. Sārīram Dās is said to have made the Raja of Citrakuta a *bhakta*, and Narharidās is claimed to be the guru of Tulsīdās. Alh is said to have had a disciple, Rāmrāvā, whose disciple was Rāghvadās (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 286).

Rāmthaldās's text about early Rāmānandī centers refers to Anantānanda's *gaddī* by the name Anant Guphā and describes it as being located in the Antapuri neighborhood in Mathura. However, Mital says that there is no place in Mathura known by that name and that the only cave in that area is associated with Kīlhdev and is located in the so-called Kīlh *maṭh* (monastery). That cave is known as the place where Kīlhdev used to practice his *sādhanā*, but according to Mital, it was also the place where Anantānanda used to play his *bhajan* (1968: 163).

Many other *gaddī*-s arose from Anantānanda's disciples. Here I will list those that arose from the least famous disciples:

- 1) Yogānanda's centers are located in Ramkot,²⁰⁶ in Jaisalmer and in the area of Riyasat that is south of Jaipur. A *gaddī* is located in Dariyabad, close to Lakhnau, one is said to be in Tirchi, a place impossible to identify, and another in Shushnera, which is in Madhya Pradesh. A disciple of Yogānanda, Alkhrām, is said to have established a center called the Brahm Śeher, and the Hanumān Gaṛhī, but Srivastav does not give further explanations about the location of these places. Alkhrām had also a cave in 'Kāmrūp Kāmāgya', which possibly refers to Kamakhya in Assam.
- 2) Khojī was a disciple of Gayeś and established a *gaddī* in Palri Gram, a village south of Lohanagar, close to Sekhavati district in Rajasthan.
- 3) There are no *gaddī*-s linked to Alh but there is one linked to his disciple, Rāmrāvā who established the Khoṛ Sthān in Jodhpur. His own disciple, Rāghvacet, established the Bhāṇḍārej Sthān in that same city. He was famous for performing *sevā* for *sādhu*-s.
- 4) Karmcanda is said to have his *gaddī* in Revasa Gram.²⁰⁷

It is unclear when this tradition of *gaddī*-s originated. It is likely that this list is intended to link up a group of centers from which the *sampradāya* was supposed to have spread.

Among the disciples of Anantānanda, Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī and his own disciples are

²⁰⁶ Śrīvāstav writes the name of the places without a clear reference system.

²⁰⁷ To justify the presence of another Rāmānandī center in Revāsā, I suppose that Rāmānandī centers were initially small in size. Furthermore, as we will see below, the Revāsā *piṭh* was not immediately prosperous. Therefore, we can assume the presence of more centers in the 16th century and, although some decayed (like that of Karmchanda) others continued to develop.

particularly notable. The next section will explore their teachings and legacy in depth.

4.2.1 Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī

Kṛṣṇadās is given particular emphasis in the hagiographic accounts of Nābhādās,²⁰⁸ as the former was the latter's *dādā* guru.²⁰⁹ As various scholars have narrated the hagiographic stories about the life of Kṛṣṇadās,²¹⁰ here I will focus only on those elements that could help us in reconstructing the early period of the *sampradāya*.

Nābhādās tell us that Kṛṣṇadās was called Payahārī, which means 'he who feeds himself with milk.' He was from a Dāhimā Brahman family, which Horstmann says was a common Brahman caste group in Rajasthan at the time (2006: 152). Nābhādās describes him as endowed with incredible energy by the *bhajan* of Śrī Rām, and as someone who was able to be a *mahāmuni* and an *urdvaretā*, meaning he was an ascetic who was able to keep a vote of silence (*mahāmuni*) and to forward his energy upward²¹¹ (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 287). Hence, according to this depiction and the legend about him, Kṛṣṇadās was able to perform yoga and he possessed particular powers, which allowed him to conquer the monastery of Galtā, in Amer state, which became his *gaddī*.

The story of Kṛṣṇadās' conquest of Galtā also creates a link between the Rāmānandī and the Kachavaha dynasty of Amer. It is said that the Maharaja Pṛthvīrāj (r. 1503-1527) was a devotee of the Nāth *yogī* Tārānāth²¹² who lived near Galta hill. One story spread in the 18th century claimed that Tārānāth was a powerful *yogī*, he was defeated in a magic clash by Kṛṣṇadās, who then occupied the place and obtained the favor of the Raja.²¹³

However, a version of the story as presented in a book published in Revāsā by Ratanlal Mishra narrates that Pṛthvīrāj had Cāndanāth as guru, whose disciple was

²⁰⁸ As noticed by Caracchi, Nābhādās dedicates a *chappaya* (number 38) and a *kundaliyā*, a stanza of six verses, to Kṛṣṇadās (1999: 161).

²⁰⁹ *Dādā* means grandfather. In fact, as Kṛṣṇadās was the guru of Agradās (therefore a kind of spiritual father), he has to be considered to be the *dādā* of Nābhādās.

²¹⁰ See Caracchi (1999), Śrīvāstav (1957).

²¹¹ According to Caracchi, this is an attribute of a *yogī* who has the power of retaining his semen and making it flow upward (1999: 337).

²¹² However, as Arik Moran has shown (2013: 8), the presence of a Tārānāth is typical of those stories that attempt to describe a duel between a Vaiṣṇava and another ascetic. Sometimes a Tibetan Tantric, other times a Kanpata *yogī*, Tārānāth became the archetypal opponent of Vairagī-s in Vaiṣṇava sources.

²¹³ As Burchett stresses, Nābhādās (c. 1600) and Rāghavdās (1660) did confirm some elements of the legend at Galta in mentioning that Kṛṣṇadās fed his own flesh to a tiger and that he was the guru of Pṛthvīrāj. However, neither they nor Priyādās ever mention a confrontation between Payahārī and any Nāth *yogī*-s. Therefore, Burchett suggests that the tale of the magical battle was not significant in the early historical memory of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* communities, and did not take written form until at least the mid-18th century, if not later (2012: 82).

Tārānāth. The relationships among them would be proved by the fact that Cāndanāth's and Tārānāth's *samādhi*-s²¹⁴ are close to each other in Amer, and the cenotaph of Pṛthvīrāj is close to both of these *samādhi*-s. Therefore, according to this other story, Payahārī was the guru of Bālābāi, one of the wives of Pṛthvīrāj and, only in a second time Pṛthvīrāj also began visiting Kṛṣṇadās. According to Mishra, a relatively unknown story says that Bālābāi had a home built with three private rooms for his guru and his disciples in the area of Amer. However, later on, Kṛṣṇadās moved to Galta and established his *gaddī* there to better practice his religious discipline (Mishra, n.d.: 21-22).

In the aforementioned Rāmṭhaldās's list of *gaddī*-s, the establishment of Galtā is associated not with Kṛṣṇadās, but rather with his disciple Kīlhdev. It is likely that Kṛṣṇadās would sometimes stay on the hill but did not remain stable there, instead spending the majority of his time wandering the countryside. Furthermore, as reported by Horstmann, the sanctuary of Galtā was constructed mostly in the 17th century, which would imply a later date than the beginning of the 16th century as the supposed period for Kṛṣṇadās (2002: 148).

Śrīvāstav lists the *paramparā* of Kṛṣṇadās as described in the *Bhaktamāl* (1957: 188): Kīlhdev, Agradev (Agradās), Caraṇa Dās, Bratahṭhīnārāyaṇa, Sūrya Dās, Purūṣa (Purūṣottam Dās), Pṛthu Dās, Tripur Dās, Padmanābh, Gopāl Dās, Ṭekārāy, Tila, Gadādhārī, Devā Paṇḍā, Hem Dās, Kalyāṇ Dās, Gaṅgāvāi, Viṣṇu Dās, Kānhar Dās, Śrīrangārām, Śrī Cāndan, Sabīrī and Govinda Dās. However, he then adds that the main disciples of Kṛṣṇadās were Kīlhdev, Agradev and Ṭilā. While I will examine the first two at a later point, here I will report Śrīvāstav's analysis of the *gaddī*-s established by Kṛṣṇadās's other disciples:

- 1) Ṭilā had *gaddī*-s in Jaipur and in the area of Riyasat. His disciple Lāhārām is also said to have a *gaddī* in Riyasat. Śrīvāstav gives some information about the main disciples of Ṭilā: Lāhā had numerous disciples; Paramānand Dās (who was his son) was a yogi;²¹⁵ Khartar Dās, Khem Dās, Dhyān Dās and Keśva Dās, were great *bhakta*-s; Tyolā was from the *lohār jatī* (a social group present in Hindu, Muslims and Sikh communities); Harī Dās was a devotee of Hanumān (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 195).
- 2) Haṭhīnārāyan founded his *gaddī* in the neighborhood of Akhupur, Sekhavati.
- 3) Rāmthambhan was a disciple of Sūrya Dās and established his *gaddī* in Punjab at

²¹⁴ In this case the term *samādhi* refers to the tomb built to honor a guru. Often, the tomb is built on the place in which the ascetic performed a *samādhi* (deep meditation) till death.

²¹⁵ This affirmation is quite noteworthy because Rāmānandī-s are supposed to be celibate. Therefore, we can suppose that Ṭilā was actually a *grhastha* who later decided to take *virakta dīkṣā* and whose son followed his path, or else that at that time there were no strict rules on celibacy.

Dadurkhan Pinda, but he may have also had a *gaddī* built in a village over the spot of his *samādhi*.

Kīlhdev and Agradās deserve particular attention because they are considered to be the ones who established the *tapasī* and *rasik* paths from which the *tyāgī* and *rasik* branches would originate. The devotion of Kṛṣṇadās for Sītā and ‘his contemplation over the love for Rām’²¹⁶ may testify to the *rasik* aspect in Kṛṣṇadās’s *sāadhanā* that was further developed by Agradās, while his *tapasī* practice, described through his magic powers, was further developed by Kīlhdev.

Although it may be true that Kīlhdev and Agradās represent the outsets of two branches that have characterized the *sampradāya* up to today,²¹⁷ we should not forget that these paths were already in existence, and probably Kṛṣṇadās was following the dual path preached by Rāmānanda. Furthermore, as I will explain in the next section, it is likely that Kīlhdev and Agradās were also following both religious approaches, giving perhaps prevalence to one rather than the other due to the influence of other *sampradāya*-s.

4.2.1.1 Kīlhdev (Kīlh Dās)

Nābhādās describes Kīlhdev as an expert of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*. Some portrayals of Kīlhdev claim that his yogic skills gave him special powers: the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* depicts him as a *yogī* who was able to go so deep into meditation that he could lose any contact with the external world; others claim that he decided the time of his death by causing himself to stop breathing. This skill was the source of Kīlhdev’s name: the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* says that one day while he was sitting in meditation, a royal cortège passed and someone, seeing him so immobile, put a nail (*kīl*) in his head. Not only did Kīlh Dās remain still, but the nail disappeared as well. From this episode, he would have obtained the name Kīlhdev (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 189).

Analyzing three *pāda*-s associated with Kīlhdev, Burchett demonstrates that his figure appears to be more complex than that of the simple *yogī*. In these texts, *bhakti* and asceticism merge together with yoga, although the latter became the prominent element through which Kīlhdev was characterized in later hagiographic works (2012: 94). Mital

²¹⁶ Mishra (n.d.: 22).

²¹⁷ In his analysis of the *Bhaktamāl*, Burchett has stressed that Nābhādās used different specific words to describe the two Rāmānandī-s. The description of Agradās emphasizes words such as *bhakti*, *haribhajan* (the singing of Hari/Viṣṇu name), *sevā* (service), and *smaraṇa* (remembering God). Kīlh is characterized by his mastery of yoga, through which he was able to subdue his body and conquer death, choosing the time of his own passing by leaving through the *brahmarandhra* opening at the top of his skull (2012: 92).

also argues that Kīlhdev used to spend most of his time travelling because of his commitment to *tapasī* discipline. However, to perform his *bhakti sādhanā*, which consisted in meditating on the God Rām all day and night, he used to go to Mathura and dwell in a cave (1968: 468).

According to Horstmann (2002: 156), it was Kīlhdev who built an Hanumān temple in Galtā, which means that the oldest shrine in the area was dedicated to this God.²¹⁸ The presence of a Hanumān temple and the description of Kīlhdev's extraordinary yogic power have been associated by Horstmann to a *mélange* of various religious influences from Śaiva groups present in the area at the time (2002: 155).²¹⁹ However, she also recognizes that the presence of Hanumān could be an effort to integrate various religious strands of the time. Vaiṣṇava ascetics associated Hanumān not only with the yogin *avatār* of Śiv, but also with the humble devotee of Rām.

In fact, among Rāmānandī-s Hanumān is considered to be the ideal *dās* (servant), and this is the way in which Tulsīdās portrays him in his *Rāmcaritmānas* (Babineau, 1979: 81). Because an analysis of the role of Hanumān would lead us too far from the purposes of this section,²²⁰ I will just suggest that the *mūrti* of Hanumān was chosen for Galtā by Kīlhdev, presumably because it was able to represent both the religious strands followed by the Vaiṣṇava ascetics living there.

Nābhādās reports the *paramparā* originated by Kīlhdev: Āśkaran (Rājṛṣi), Rūp Dās (who was a guru *bhakt*), Bhagvān Dās, Catur Dās, Chotar Swāmī, Lākhā (who was said to have been a performer of miracles, or *adbhut*), Rāymal (who was said to have obtained *mokṣa* during his life), Rasik Rāymal, Gordās, Devā Dās, and Dāmodar (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 190).

Nābhādās informs us that Rājṛṣi worshipped both Jānkī and Rādhā and that he was the Raja of Narvaragrih and son of Bhīm Singh,²²¹ descendant of Pṛthvīrāj Kachavāhā (*ibid*). Some of the disciples seem to have embraced a *tapasic* religious path, while others displayed a more *rasik* attitude. The fact that also Kīlhdev's disciples followed a range of *sādhanā*-s

²¹⁸ In fact, Kṛṣṇadās was associated with the *mūrti* of Sītārām, which is said he had with him and which began to be worshipped by the Kachavaha rulers. This *mūrti* was installed not in Galtā but in a temple in Amer, and worshiped by the ruling dynasty because they claimed their lineage descended from Rāmchandra himself (Horstmann, 2002).

²¹⁹ The influence that Nāth ascetics or Śaiva groups might have had on the first period of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* has been the subject of an interesting analysis by Patton Burchett (2012), which will be briefly summarized below, Sec. 5.3.

²²⁰ For a remarkable study about the subject, see Burchett (2012).

²²¹ This Bhim Singh may be the successor of Purunmal (who had succeeded to Pṛthvirāj), who died at the battle of Mandrail in 1534.

demonstrates that this approach was in agreement with the policy of the *sampradāya* and with the designated role of its gurus, who were supposed to discern which discipline was more suitable for a given disciple.

According to Rāmṭhaldās, Kīlhdev's *gaddī*-s are located in Galta, Galta Kunj in Mathura and in his personal cave called Prayāg *ghāt*.

Caracchi reports that Kīlhdev had a strong influence over the Raja of Amer, Mān Singh (1550-1614), who was his disciple. This demonstrates another link between the Kachavaha dynasty and the Galtā center.

4.2.1.2 Agradās

According to Nābhādās' portrait, Agradās was an ascetic focused on the repetition of the name of God, the singing of *bhajan* (devotional song), *sevā* to the feet of God, and God's *smaraṇa*, remembrance (Śrīvāstav, 1957:191). Priyādās says that one time, the Raja of Amer, Mān Singh,²²² went to meet Agradās, who was sitting beneath a tree in his garden. When the Raja saw the guru's deep devotion, he became speechless and decided to support the center (*ibid*).

Mital says that Agradās would frequently follow the examples of Anantānanda and Kīlhdev and travel to Mathura, where he was deeply influenced by the city's various devotional strands. In fact, according to Mital, Agradās modified the approach of the Rām *bhakti* in Galtā from a *maryāda dāsya bhakti* (devotion based on the ideal behavior of servitude) to a *mādhurya bhakti* (devotion where the devotees feels to be in a conjugal love with God). Ratanlal Mishra tells us in his *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīṭh* that when Agradās was in Galtā under the influence of Kīlhdev, he was practicing *tapasyā* (n.d.: 30).

In effect, we can guess that when Agradās and Kīlhdev met Nābhādās in the jungle they were there for their practices. It is likely that he modified his *sāadhanā* once he encountered other practices. Mital explains that to go to Mathura and meet well-known *mahant*-s or *Sant*-s was common practice for Rāmānandī-s who wanted to improve their *sāadhanā* (1968: 403).

Nābhādās lists the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* of Agradās: Ganjī, Prayāg Dās, Vinodī, Pūrṇa Dās, Banvārīdas, Narasinhadās, Bhagvān Dās, Divākar, Kīśor, Jagat Dās, Jagannāth Dās, Salūdho, Khem Dās, Khīcī, Dharm Dās, Ladhu-udho. Among them, Prayāg Das was the

²²² The link between Agradās and Mān Singh, one of the main generals of Akbar, suggests a probable date for Agradās's life around *samvat* 1623 (1566 C.E.) (Śrīvāstav, 1957:191).

closest disciples of Agradās (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 192).

There were numerous *gaddī*-s created by Agradās and his disciples:²²³

- 1) Agradās's *gaddī* was Revāsā. According to the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*, Agradās established Revāsā under the advice of Kīlhdev.
- 2) Agradās's disciple Bhagavān Nārāyaṇa established the *gaddī* of Piṇḍorī located at the boarder with Himachal Pradesh.²²⁴ Many more *gaddī*-s are associated with this original center.
- 3) Tantulsī Dās (also known as Caturbhujī) is presented as a *śiṣya* of Tyāgī Jangī jī, a disciple of Agradās who is not included in the list given by Nābhādās.²²⁵ His *gaddī* was Muḍiyā Rāmpur, located in Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh. Tyāgī jī is said to have established a *gaddī* in Patyala, Punjab and to have a cave in Prayag. Tantulsī Dās had a disciple, Devmurārī (or Abhayamurārī) who established a *gaddī* in Daraganj, located in Prayag.²²⁶ His disciples also founded several centers: Malūk Dās established a center in Prayag; Dev Bharhāgī had a *gaddī* in Dagar, an unidentified place; Lāl Turangī had a center at Hariya Gram, in the area of Riyasat, while Siddhāi is said to be popular in Punjab and to have a *gaddī* in Dhanpur Gram in the area of Gurudaspur.²²⁷
- 4) Pūrṇa Berāṭhī (who in Nābhādās' list is referred to by the name 'Pūrṇ Dās') had a *gaddī* called Sarphā Sthān,²²⁸ located in a place close to in Gwalior. Pūrṇa Dās's disciple Kālū Naynā established a *gaddī* in Meṛhmomna Gram, Jodhpur.²²⁹ He wrote a *granth* called *Doha-Mālikā*.
- 5) Nābhādās's *gaddī* is in Ajmer, near the lake Ānāsāgar; he is said to have a *garhī* (small fort) close to the mountain Revālsar, a *gaddī* in Puskar at the Hanumān *ghāṭ*

²²³ In fact, in the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīth, Revāsā Ek Sankṣipta Paricaya*, Ratanlal Mishra underlines that among the fifty-two traditional *dvārā*-s (cf. below, Sec. 5.3.1), fourteen are associated with Agradās's *paramparā* (n.d.: 4).

²²⁴ Cf. below, Sec. 6.3.

²²⁵ It is interesting to note the addition of this disciple of Agradās whose name would link him to a *sāadhanā* different from the *sāadhanā* to which Agradās supposedly followed. Nevertheless, we have to remember that most important among the skills of a guru is the ability to direct the disciple towards the most suitable religious path, and that the word *tyāgī* means 'the one who has renounced' and, therefore, can be used to describe any ascetic in general.

²²⁶ As we will see in Chapter 5, sec. 3.5, the oral tradition tells of a Rāmānandī center in Daraganj.

²²⁷ In the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīth, Revāsā Ek Sankṣipta Paricaya*, by Ratanlal Mishra, only the first *gaddī* is associated with Lāl Turangī.

²²⁸ In the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīth*, the place is called Sarayyā (Mishra n.d.: 5)

²²⁹ Ratanlal Mishra identifies this *dvārā* as Meḍgom (*ibid.*).

and another *gaddī* located in Barata village, difficult to localize.²³⁰ Govind Dās, who is said to have been a disciple of Nābhā, had a *gaddī* in Lohagarh, close to Jaipur.

6) Śrī Rāmramāni was a disciple of Khemdās, disciple of Agradās. He has a *gaddī* in Mehtā, in the Jodhpur district. Another was located in a yet unidentified place named Braj Gunorā Vast Ban.

7) Divākar had a *gaddī* called Jāmal Sthān and another called Chālkaṭoṭhā, in Jodhpur. He was the son of Karmaṇḍ and disciple of Agradās.

8) Hanumān Haṭhīle's *gaddī* is in Maihandipur in Alwar, a district in Rajasthan.

According to the Rāmānandī tradition, Agradās wrote several compositions, among which the *Dhyān Manjarī*, a text comprised of seventy-nine versus, is considered one of the most important works of the *rasik sampradāya*.²³¹ As already mentioned, Agradās is considered to be the founder of the *rasik sampradāya* although I submit that he did not so much found the *sāadhanā* tradition, but rather helped push along its evolutionary process according to the influence of the Kṛṣṇaite worship.

4.3 A few remarks about Tulsīdās

Although there are no *gaddī*-s associated with Tulsīdās, I insert here a section about him based on Paramasivan's account of his life (2010). In fact, there are some characteristics of Tulsīdās's work that could be useful to our reconstruction of an image of Rāmānanda and the origin of the *sampradāya*.

According to Paramasivan, the relationship between Tulsīdās and the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* was created by the *rasik* component of the *sampradāya* in the 18th century to obtain royal patronage in Varanasi and Ayodhya (2010).²³² Her remark is based on the fact that there is no evidence of a relationship between Tulsīdās and Rāmānandī's *paramparā* before the 18th century. Although this is true, it is also true that there is no clear

²³⁰ According to the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīṭh* only two *dvārā*-s are attributed to Nābhādās (*ibid.*).

²³¹ In the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīṭh* we find a list of twenty-one works attributed to Agradās: *Dhyān Majarī*, *Kuṇḍaliyān*, *Agrasāgar*, *Aṣṭyām*, *Gurū-Aṣṭak*, *Prahlādacarit*, *Śrī Sītārām Aṣṭak*; *Śrī Methilī- Śaraṇāṣṭakam*; *Śrī Rāmrapatti*; *Rām Jevnār*; *Viśv Brahmagyān*, *Harinām Mālā*, *Haripriyā Nām Mālā*, *Harinām Pratāpjas*, *Rahasya Tray*, *Rāmsār Sangrah*, *Śrī Rām Mantrarāj Paramparā*, *Caturvinsvay Namāni*, *Druv Carit*, *Dhartīlīlā* (*ibid.*).

²³² Paramasivan adds that there are no references to any specific guru or teacher for Tulsīdās, and that beginning in the 19th century, Rāmānandī-s referred to the eulogy of the *Bāl Kāṇḍa* of the *Rāmcaritmānas* to establish a link with their *paramparā*. In that text, Tulsīdās says: 'I bow to the lotus feet of my preceptor who is an ocean of mercy and Hari himself in human form, whose words are like rays of the sun that dispel the intense darkness that is (my) profound ignorance.' The presence of the word 'Hari' has been interpreted as a reference to Narharidās, disciple of Rāmānanda (2010: 21). Tulsīdās may not have taken the *virakta dīkṣā*, which would explain why Nābhādās is not concerned with the *paramparā*, or he may have taken it later on.

information about Tulsīdās's life in general, and that available information could bring to light a different understanding if looked at with a different perspective.²³³ By referring to excerpts from Paramasivan's work, I will show that we can actually suppose that Tulsīdās had a Rāmānandī background that greatly influenced his work.

According to the information accepted by many scholars, Tulsīdās was born in 1532 and composed the *Rāmcaritmānas* in 1574. Details about his place of birth are almost absent, but from his texts and the exegesis of them, we can affirm that Tulsīdās spent most of his life in Ayodhya, Citrakut and Varanasi, and died in 1623.

As reported by Paramasivan, Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* offer few clues about Tulsīdās:

To help individuals surmount the ordeals of the Kali age, Valmiki took the form of Tulsi. [...] (Like a bee) maddened by the nectar of Ram's (lotus) feet, this taker of vows repeats (Ram's name) day and night. To cross the difficult (ocean) of existence, (he) took this easy boat. To help individuals surmount the ordeals of the Kali age, Valmiki took the form of Tulsi. (2010: 10)

As usual, Nābhādās does not provide enough details to satisfactorily reconstruct Tulsīdās's life since, as in the case of the other *bhakta*-s that he describes, he synthetizes their main traits in just few verses. It seems that he mainly wanted to keep his account of Tulsīdās focused on his value as a poet, rather than focusing on the details of his life.

More interesting from our point of view are the few autobiographic notes that can be found in Tulsīdās's texts. Paramasivan says that in his *Vinaya Patrikā*, Tulsīdās writes:

I told of my poverty from door to door, I grit my teeth and fell at peoples' feet [...] some holy men said, "Do not let your heart grieve, animals were even more wicked and sinful, yet Ram did not abandon them." When Tulsi became Ram's, even without love and faith, he became content. (2010: 21)

Hence, as Paramasivan also argues (2010: 22), as a young man Tulsīdās apparently joined a group of itinerant Vaiṣṇava worshipper of Rām. Given what we have said about the early nature of the Rāmānanda *sampradāya* at the geographic area of Tulsīdās, we can suppose that the wandering ascetics that Tulsīdās met may have been Rāmānandī *dās*-s.

²³³ Furthermore, the fact that there are no critical interpretations of the *Rāmcaritmānas* before the 18th century does not mean that the text was not part of the Rāmānandī body of religious knowledge. In fact, as Gross argues, the *sādhana* of Rāmānandī *tyāgī*-s is based on Tulsīdās's masterpiece. It is likely that these wandering ascetics were transmitting the content of the work in various northern India locations, and Nābhādās read it. The absence of written commentaries by the side of *tyāgī*-s might reflect the life style of these Rāmānandī-s. We can also suppose that, given the Kṛṣṇaite influence in Galtā, the *Rāmcaritmānas* did not receive particular attention at the beginning.

I will not analyze here the content of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, as this topic has already been covered in depth by various scholars.²³⁴ Rather, what I wish to stress is that if we look at the text in its entirety, it seems very close to the supposed teaching of Rāmānanda. Paramasivan did stress that that ‘the choice of Avadhī as the language for this work, and indeed the metrical format of the narrative of the *Rāmcaritmānas* are both indebted to the genre of Sufi narrative literature’ (2010: 25).²³⁵ However, we must also take into consideration that the poet may have utilized Awadhi to follow Rāmānanda’s example. In fact, Rāmānanda’s choice of preaching in vernacular is one of the basic pieces of information that Nābhādās gives us about him. It is likely that Tulsīdās had heard of Rāmānanda’s approach from Nābhādās, who was a contemporary of his. Therefore, we could suggest that the use of vernacular by Tulsīdās might have been influenced by the direct contact with Rāmānandī ascetics, or by his being aware of the fact that Rāmānand had taught in vernacular.

According to the text, it seems that Tulsīdās gave a written form to the oral teachings that we hypothesized for Rāmānanda. In fact, even in Tulsīdās we find that *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa bhakti*-s are compatible conceptions of God. Tulsīdās stresses the importance of the name of Rām as a common feature between the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* tradition, which is also a key ideas in the teaching of Rāmānanda that we examined in the previous chapter. Moreover, Tulsīdās not only stresses the importance of listening to and reading the story of Rām but also lists in the *Aranya khaṇḍa* the *bhakti* of the nine folds.²³⁶ As noticed by Paramasivan, not all of the nine paths correspond to those that are traditionally present in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*:²³⁷ the last four forms diverge from the

²³⁴ Cf. Grierson (1909; 1910a; 1910b); Lutgendorf (1994; 1997; 2001)

²³⁵ Paramasivan refers to the tradition of the Sufi literary romance known as the *masnavī*, which shifted the register from Persian to Avadhī already in 1379 C.E. with the *Candayan* written by Moulana Daud. She explains, ‘By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the genre of the literary romance, which became known as the *premākhyān*, became fully crystallized as the most popular genre of narrative literature in North India’ (2010: 26).

²³⁶ ‘I will now tell you the nine forms of bhakti, listen with attention and take them to heart. The first form of bhakti is to seek the fellowship of holy men and the second is a love of my stories and tales. The third form of devotion is humble service to the lotus feet of one’s guru and fourth form is in the singing of my praises with a guileless heart. Reciting my name with firm faith is the fifth form of devotion as revealed in the Vedas. The sixth is the cultivation of self-discipline and virtue, the avoidance of too many activities, and the constant pursuit of good conduct. The one who practices the seventh form of bhakti sees me in the entire world and holds the saints in greater esteem than me. The eighth form of bhakti is the cultivation of contentment with what one has and the refusal to even dream of seeking faults in others. The ninth form is to be kind and forthright in one’s dealings with others and to cultivate implicit faith in me, without happiness or sorrow (Ramcaritmanas 3.36.1-3)’ (Paramasivan, 2010: 35).

²³⁷ They are: (1) *śravaṇa*, listening to the tales of Viṣṇu, (2) *kīrtan*, praising and singing songs to Viṣṇu, (3) *smaraṇ*, focusing the mind on Viṣṇu at all times, (4) *pādasevan*, rendering service to Viṣṇu’s feet, (5) *arcana*, the worship of the image of Viṣṇu, (6) *vandan*, prayer and paying homage, (7) *dāsyā*, the love and worship of

Purāṇa inasmuch as they represent ideal human behaviors. According to Paramasivan, Tulsīdās ‘chose to reinterpret the practices of *navadha bhakti* in his most famous composition, the *Rāmcaritmānas*’ (2010: 36). Tulsīdās gives more emphasis ‘on one’s involvement with the world and one’s behavior towards one’s fellow human beings’ because according to him the means to devote oneself to Rām ‘lies primarily in one’s moral attitude and not merely in ritual practice’ (*ibid.*).

It is interesting to point out that a moral approach has also been associated with Rāmānanda. Actually, this constitutes the main difference between the teaching of Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja’s *sampradāya*. In her study about the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* in Gujarat, Haripriya Rangarajan observes that while ‘Ramanuja laid greater stress on the philosophical and doctrinal aspects [...], Shri Ramananda shifted the stress on the religion from the philosophical and doctrinal to the moral and social aspect of life. He preached the gospel of mercy, charity and good life and enjoined the worship of Rām name’ (1996: 170).

There are other traits that suggest a link between Tulsīdās and Rāmānanda or his *sampradāya*. It has been noted that Tulsīdās tries to reconcile Śivaism and Vaiṣṇavism, perhaps under the influence of a referential text like the *Agastya Saṃhitā*. This approach is also seen in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. In fact, not only does Nābhādās consider Śiv in the *paramparā* of Rāmānanda (Śiv is supposed to have got *dīkṣā* from Brahmā), but Śiv’s presence can also be seen in Rāmānandī centers: all of the Rāmānandī centers I have visited contain *liṅga*-s, which they regularly worship.²³⁸

Another common feature between the teaching of Rāmānanda and Tulsīdās is their stances on the matter of social hierarchy. David Lorenzen describes the *Rāmcaritmānas* as ‘the maximum champion of a conservative interpretation of *varṇāśrama dharma* within the *saguṇī* camp’ (1995: 14). Many scholars have pointed out that the work of Tulsīdās supports the *varṇāśramadharmā*. As Paramasivan argues (2010: 19), the approach of Tulsīdās is two-fold: ‘On the one hand, Ram stresses that the true devotee is dear to him regardless of caste status [...] On the other hand, Tulsidas does not alienate the Brahmanical orthodoxy either.’ This remark appears very close to our considerations about Rāmānand, the liberal guru who, nevertheless, did not act in opposition to the *varṇāśramadharmā*.

Tulsīdās can also provide us with a clue about the evolution of the *rasik sampradāya*.

Vishnu in the role of a servant, (8) *sākhya*, the love and worship of Viṣṇu in the role of a friend, and lastly, (9) *ātma nivedan*, complete self surrender (*ibid.*: 36).

²³⁸ Cf. Appendix.

In fact, his approach can be described as *rasik* in the comprehensive meaning we have described before. Tulsīdās's residence in Varanasi and his general approach to philosophical matters may demonstrate that the devotional/*rasik* element already existed in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* by beginning of the 16th century and that there were Rāmānandī *rasik*-s wandering in the areas of Varanasi, Ayodhya and Prayag.

In fact, as Paramasivan argues, Tulsīdās's approach is based not on *śṛṅgār rasa*, but on *vātsalya*, which is the worship of Rām as a child (2010: 45). Hence, Tulsīdās demonstrates how the *rasik sampradāya* consisted of various devotional styles and that the *śṛṅgār* approach became predominant later in the *sampradāya*'s history.

To come back to Paramasivan's assumption about the link between Tulsīdās and the *rasik* Rāmānandī-s of the 18th and 19th century, I propose that these Rāmānandī-s decided to make the *Rāmcaritmānas* fit more soundly within their own *rasik sādhanā* tradition and therefore began to write religious commentaries based on a more esoteric interpretation of it. They also tried to fit Tulsīdās within the oral tradition of their *sampradāya* by considering him part of the historical background that they wanted to trace. We should also remember that at the same time, the same centers in Ayodhya and Varanasi were also working on the hagiography of Rāmānanda. Therefore, the use and interpretation of Tulsīdās's figure within these texts should be interpreted not only as an attempt to gain the attention of potential patrons, but also as an instrument to affirm the *sampradāya* identity by emphasizing the tradition's connection to remarkable historic individuals.

What I wish to stress here is not only the plausibility of a link between Tulsīdās and the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, but also of an influence that the teaching of Rāmānanda in particular may have had on Tulsīdās that has not yet been examined closely and that will require further study.

5. Assumptions about of the evolution of Rāmānandī *śākhā*-s (branches)

5.1 *Tapasī śākhā/tyāgī*

As I have already explained, it is likely that Rāmānanda's philosophy laid the groundwork for the evolution of various religious approaches that continued to evolve and increasingly differentiate from one another over the course of centuries. One of these paths emerged from Rāmānanda's interpretations of some yogic²³⁹ traditions that were popular in the

²³⁹ As Burchett reminds, 'what is considered to constitute "yoga" and to what degree that "yoga" is central in the religiosity of any us given "yogī," varies greatly. Depending on the time period, region, and specific

Varanasi area, which his later disciples further developed into a distinct *sāadhanā*.

There are several studies about the practices of *tyāgī* ascetics²⁴⁰ but it is very difficult to recreate a history of this sub-tradition within the *sampradāya*. There are several factors which have led to the lack of documentation of this tradition compared to the information we have about the *rasik* branch: the wandering lifestyle of these ascetics; their living in solitude or in small groups of just a few people; their low social status and lack of education, which in turn means that they may have been unable to document their history in writing.

I support the hypothesis that the *tapasī* group evolved over the centuries through the contact between wandering Rāmānandī-s and other renunciators, and through the influence of local ascetics in urban centers.²⁴¹ However, it is not possible to claim with total certainty the origin of their *haṭha* yoga influence. Mallinson supposes that the practitioners of the early *haṭha* yoga were ascetics of an ancient non-Vedic celibate tradition.²⁴² Although the composition and character of these ascetics are still unclear, it seems clear to Mallinson through his ethnographic research that the heirs of those ascetics are the Daśanāmī Saṁnyāsī-s and Rāmānandī-s (2012: 12).

There are Nāth works on *haṭha* yoga originating from the 14th and 15th centuries, which is the time in which an order of celibate Nāth ascetics likely started to take shape, particularly in the northern and western parts of the subcontinent (Mallinson, 2012: 7). It is therefore possible that Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī and Kīlhdev were influenced by Nāth *yogī*-s who lived in Rajasthan even before they became Rāmānandī-s. However, when we examine the details of their religious practice, we see that the *yoga sāadhanā* and the approach of the Rāmānandī-s and Nāth-s are quite different from each other.²⁴³ As Burchett explains, the Nāth-s practiced a tantric yoga based on visualization, which was quite distinct from that of the Rāmānandī-s as testified in Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*, which describes Rāmānandī ascetics as practicing 'a liberation-oriented, tapas-rooted *haṭha-yoga* in the 16th and 17th centuries' (2012: 142).

community in which the term is being used, what is meant by the label *yogī* may be something quite different, and scholars writing about yoga and yogis must remain cognizant of these differences' (2012: 167).

²⁴⁰ See Gross (1984); van der Veer (1987; 1988; 1989); Lamb (1994); Burghart (1978; 1993).

²⁴¹ In effect, taking into consideration that today *tyāgī*-s have their centers, it is likely that even in the past there were *tyāgī*-s's *āśram*. Nevertheless, it is also quite probable that initially Rāmānandī centers were not differentiated by the *sāadhanā* followed by the ascetic, as is the case today.

²⁴² Cf. also Bronkhorst (1998).

²⁴³ For a comprehensive study on the Nath panth see Bouillier (1976; 1986; 1998; 2008) and Mallinson (2012).

According to Mallinson, *tyāgī*-s continue to practice those ascetic techniques that are first observed in early texts. For example, the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra*, dated to between the 4th and 8th centuries, describes yoga practices of celibate hermits that are still typical of today's Rāmānandī *tyāgī*-s: sitting down between five fires, remaining in a pot of water, sitting in *vīrāsana*, maintaining silence, inverting the body and standing on one foot, meditating on Viṣṇu with *bhakti*, and devotion (2012: 12).

In fact, Rāmānandī-s' yoga 'had little to do with the predominantly siddhi-oriented (*bubhukṣu*) practice of the proto-Nāths' (Burchett, 2012: 141). The reason for this difference lies in the fact that Rāmānandī-s were (and are) above all *bhakta*-s, meaning their religious practice was primarily aimed at an emotional experience of the Divine, while the Nāth *yogī*-s' practice is aimed at accessing powers to become divine.

This *bhakti* approach is what still characterizes *tyāgī*-s today and, as already mentioned in the Introduction, the heart of their *bhakti* is the attainment of *prapatti* that they attain through renunciation and asceticism. Gross says:

Many sadhus identified with this view and added that the primary purpose of yoga-sadhana is [...] the preparation for surrender in order to experience God's grace, *bhagwan-kripa*, or to use a term more common among them, *ramasreya*, the "grace of Rama". (1984: 257)

Presently, there are several sub-groups of the *tyāgī* branch²⁴⁴ that demonstrate how a central *tapasī* core split into further sub-branches over the centuries. Van der Veer interprets the symbolic differences between these sub-groups as marks of various historical circumstances. Sub-groups may indicate several different kinds of historic events: a schism between members of a group that resulted in a parting of ways; organizational differences (1988: 110); or some other occasions. Unfortunately, a detailed description of these groups and their history would drive us too far from the main purpose of this chapter.

Van der Veer talks about the settlement of *tyāgī*-s in the present day. According to his sources, the number of *jamāt* (itinerant groups) has declined in the present and many groups have also renounced their peripatetic life. In reference to Ayodhya, van der Veer associates the sedentarization of *tyāgī*-s with a decline of outlets for long-distance trade and the growth of the number of temples (1988: 130).

²⁴⁴ Van der Veer gives a list of those present in Ayodhyā: Barabhai Dāriyām, Saket Khalsa, Terabhai Tyāgī from which two other groups separated, the Caudabhai Mahā-tyāgī and the Mahā-tyāgī Camp. This latter slip further in Saptarishi, Sankadhik Cārbhai and Mahāviraṅka (1988: 109-110).

During my fieldwork, I went to a few *tyāgī āśram*-s (although not in Ayodhya), and it seemed to me that *tyāgī* centers appear and function more like shelters than proper places for the welcoming of lay people. The number of dwellers is usually small, sometimes only including the *mahant*, although the number of ascetics may change during the year, including the occasional presence of Śaiva ascetics. Old *tyāgī*-s usually settle in one place, and it seems that this need existed even in the past. However, a *tyāgī āśram* can also go into disuse if ascetics stop attending it or if a *mahant* dies without leaving successors – for this reason not every founder has left behind an oral tradition.

I noticed during my fieldwork that when people go to a *tyāgī* center, they go not for the *darśan* of the temple, but because they believe in the religious strength of the *tyāgī*-s. In fact, as testified by Ramdas Lamb, families prefer to have rituals performed by Rāmānandī ascetics, even if they are low caste rather than Brahmans, because ‘the former is traditionally considered to have greater power’ (1994: 140).

5.2 *Rasik śākhā*

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Rāmānanda was associated with a *saguṇa* form of Rām worship. In this section, I argue that this original *saguṇa* approach should be considered as the initial core of what later became the *rasik* branch of the *sampradāya*. This branch differs from the others because it produced unique literary works that distinctly trace the evolution of the sub-group.

In this dissertation I use the term *rasik* in a comprehensive way, knowing that it includes Rāmānandī-s that today would not refer to themselves as *rasik* even though they accept that their specific *sāadhanā* comes from *rasik sāadhanā*. In fact, my fieldwork showed that the main component of the *rasik* branch today consists of *dās* ascetics. For Rāmānandī *dās*-s, the *rasik sāadhanā* is that followed by those Rāmānandī-s who adopt a female form of worship towards God, attitude that appeared in the *sampradāya* around the 18th century.²⁴⁵

I believe that the *dās* nucleus, which is characterized by a *saguṇa bhakti* free from esoteric interpretations, may represent the legacy of the *bhakti* of Rāmānanda,²⁴⁶ as

²⁴⁵ It is interesting to report a remark by Talbot, who notices that: ‘as early as in 8th century south India, Tamil *bhakti* poets addressed Vishnu as if they were helpless, lovesick women yearning for an end to their separation from the male beloved. The adoption of the feminine voice was deemed fitting even for male poets because the weaker and more dependent position of women in India’s patriarchal society was analogous to the subservient position of a devotee in relation to the gods’ (2006: 110). It would then be helpful to know the evolution of this devotional path to verify if it could have somehow influenced the later Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

²⁴⁶ Mital also stresses that the Rām *upāsana* (Rām worship) is based on a *dāsya bhakti* that follows a path of correct behavior (*maryādāmārgīya*) (1968: 503). Even Bagavati Prasad Singh has underlined that the *rasik*

testified by the fact that the suffix *-dās* is present in all the branches of the *sampradāya*.

The presence of this *dās* approach may also represent a specific Rāmānūjī origin. In fact, the suffix *-dās* was (and still it is) typically given to Rāmānūjī-s who were not *ācārya*-s to stress their adherence to the *prapatti* approach.²⁴⁷ Also Bakker has pointed out that the Rām *bhakti* was initially more puritan compared to the Kṛṣṇaite *mādhurya-bhakti*, as it was mostly concentrated on the *dāsyā-ras*, or the sentiment of service (1986: 139). Hence, the devotional attitude of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* did not begin in Revāsā or Galtā, but it did assume a more composite structure there, becoming a reference point from which further developments and splits arose.

Moreover, it is likely that the word *rasik* as found in the works of Agradās²⁴⁸ initially had a more general meaning influenced by the theology of *bhakti* as a *ras* of the Kṛṣṇa's worship. As Mital has demonstrated, Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s were frequenters of the Braj area. Nābhādās gives the examples of various ascetics that dwelled there for a period of their life, receiving the teachings of local gurus: Mohan was a *rasik bhakta* who was taught *ras-dhyān* by Bhagvāt Rasik and Mouni Jānkī Dās went to Vrindavan to practice *śṛṅgār sādhanā*. Until the end of the 18th century, Rāmānandī-s took the Kṛṣṇa *upāsanā* of Braj area as a reference point for their Rām *ras sādhanā* (1968: 503).²⁴⁹

In the 18th century the Rāmānandī-s' attention moved towards the East, especially towards centers linked with the story of Rām, such as Ayodhya. A key figure for the consolidation of the *rasik sampradāya* in this city was *mahant* Rāmcarāṇḍās (1760-1831 C.E.). Paramasivan reports that Rāmcarāṇḍās went to Ayodhya and, after getting the *dīkṣā* in the *sampradāya*:

visited the major centers of rasik devotion – Chitrakut, Mithila and Raivasa – in order to receive instruction in the tenets and principles of rasik devotion. He returned, however, to Ayodhya, where he established his own gaddī, or seat at Janaki Ghat, where he became famous for his Rāmcaritmānas katha and was known popularly as 'Karuṇāsindhu' (ocean

path of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* did not begin with the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* because of pre-existing *rasik sādhanā*-s (1968: 539).

²⁴⁷ Rangarajan (1996).

²⁴⁸ As stressed by Paramasivan (2010: 72), in the *Dhyān Mañjarī* the term *rasik* is used as a term of self-identification.

²⁴⁹ Very little attention has been given by scholars to the Rāmānandī presence in Mathura. According to Mital, one of the main *gaddī*-s (the one of Anantānanda) was located in Mathura and the *sampradāya* spread from there. Mital also lists the main Rāmānandī spots in the area: Rām Bāg, established by *mahant* Sankarsan Dās in Vrindāvan, which contains a temple of Rāmbhadra; Khāk Chouk, founded by Svāmī Narsingh Dās on the Vansī ghāt, has a Rāmendra temple and a temple of Jagannāth; Kāliyadah and Vārāh Ghāt, which have Rām temples; and Kāliyadah's temple, which is the Narsingh Ṭekrī. There are several *akhārā*-s, among which the Rām Digambar *akhārā*, the Rāmānandī Nirvāṇī *akhārā* and the Rāmānandī Nirmohī *akhārā*.

of mercy). He enjoyed the patronage of Asaf'ud daula (r. 1775-1797), the Shi'ite nawab of Awadh who granted him the land around Jānkī Ghāt, and also that of Maharaj Vishvanath Pratap Singh (1789-1854) of Rewa. (2010: 95)

According to Caracchi (1999: 173), Rāmcarāṇḍās and his disciple Jīvarām promoted further development of the *rasik sampradāya*. Rāmcarāṇḍās promoted a sub-group called *svasukhī*, while Jīvarām another one called *tatsukhī*, in which a different role was attributed to the *sākhī*-s, the female companions of Sītā. In Rāmcarāṇḍās's *sādhanā*, the devotees identified themselves as the *sākhī*-s who desired to have a *pati-patnī-bhāva* (husband-wife) relationship with their Lord Rām and craved for a union with him. The *tatsukhī sākhā* was based on the *sākhī-bhāva*, which means the female friends of Sītā did not look for a union with Rām, and simply shared in the happiness of the holy couple (*ibid*: 173-174).

It is likely that, given the importance that Ayodhya's *rasik* centers have held since the 19th century, and due to the spread of the more esoteric and sensual approach followed in other centers, the word *rasik* began to be associated with those Rāmānandī-s who follow a specific *sādhanā* in which their devotion takes a female shape. To give an example, during my fieldwork I went to the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā, which is one of the most important *rasik* centers in Ayodhya, and I asked a *sādhu* to explain to me his *sādhanā*. He said that in that center they worship the *saguṇa* form of Sītā and Rām, regarding Sītā as their sister and Rām as their brother in-law. Their worships therefore emphasize the feeling of being a young lady. For this reason, during ceremonies they wear female clothes or accessories. He distinguished his *sādhanā* from that of *dās* ascetics, saying that they both are Rāmānandī but they come from a different *sākhā*.²⁵⁰ This was another source of proof for me that the *rasik* groups make a clear distinction among themselves, which has led the *sākhī* sub-group to be the one that is generally identified as *rasik* from an emic point of view.

5.3 *Nāgā sākhā*

The origin of a militant *nāgā* Rāmānandī branch is not clear. Although its genesis is traditionally traced to the *akhārā*-s at the beginning of the 18th century,²⁵¹ it is more likely that Rāmānandī *nāgā*-s, or to be more general, Rāmānandī ascetics with a certain training in the use of weapons, already existed in the 16th century.

I suggest that *nāgā*-s evolved from *tyāgī* Rāmānandī-s. We can suppose that

²⁵⁰ Interview, October 20, 2012.

²⁵¹ Cf. below, Sec. 6.5.

wandering *tyāgī*-s started to learn a few military techniques to protect themselves from *nāgā* belonging to other *sampradāya*-s, or that some *tyāgī*-s became influenced by the training of *nāgā* ascetics. The constitution of *jamāt* would have helped in the formation of small groups of trained ascetics who, later on, decided to organize themselves into distinct groups. This supposition is also confirmed by the fact that an individual cannot obtain a *virakta dīkṣā* as *nāgā*, but rather the *nāgā* is a second step in his ascetic life.²⁵²

Moran reports that a local historian from Kullū, named Satyapal Bhatnagar, claims that the Vairagī *akhārā*-s of Kullū town (formerly Sultanpur) were established in 1525 (2013: 14).²⁵³

According to Moran, one piece of evidence that support this theory is a famous clash that occurred in 1567 in Thaneshwar between two groups of ascetics. The exact identity of these groups has caused some doubts among historians. Pinch examines the eyewitness accounts of three people – Abu’l-Fazl, Al Badauni and Nizamuddin Ahmad – to conclude that the ascetics involved were *saṃnyāsī*-s, from the group of Kur (identified as the Girī) and Purī.²⁵⁴ However, according to Mallinson, who based his conclusion on a study of miniature sketches of the event, the ascetics that were on the field were Vaiṣṇava as demonstrated by the *tilak*-s on their foreheads as depicted in many of the paintings.²⁵⁵

We should take into consideration other possible explanations for the rise of militant Rāmānandī-s. As we have already noted, Srivastav reports that a disciple of

²⁵² In fact, the word Vairagī addressed both *tyāgī*-s and *nāgā*-s, although the militants were *nāgā*-s.

²⁵³ This date would mean that these *akhārā*-s were established before Piṇḍorī.

²⁵⁴ I report here the description of Abu’l-Fazl from *The Akbar Nama* translated by H. Beveridge: ‘While he has encamped at Thānesar, a dispute arose among the Sannyāsīs which ended in bloodshed. [...] Near that town there is a tank which might be called a miniature sea [...] Hindus, from various part of India visit it at stated times and distribute alms, and there is a great concourse. In this year before H-H’s arrival, the crowd had gathered. There are two parties among the Sannyāsīs [...] Their leader Kīsū Pūrī came to Umballa and did homage, and made a claim for justice, saying that the Kurs had fraudulently come and taken their place [...] The two sides drew up in line, and first one man on each side advanced in a braggart fashion, and engaged with swords. Afterwards bows and arrows were used. After that the Purīs attacked the Kurs with stones. As the Pūrīs were few in number, H.M. signified to some men who understood fighting with stones [...] to assist the Pūrīs. They joined the Purīs in their attack on the Kurs and so exerted themselves that the Kurs could not withstand them and fled. [...] The Pūrīs [...] came up with their Pir and head, who was called Anand Kur, and slew the miserable creature’ (1972: 423-424). According to Pinch, *kur* is synonymous of *gir*, as the two terms appear almost identical in the Perso-Arabic script (2006: 42).

²⁵⁵ Mallinson introduces an interesting theory about the actual Vaiṣṇava identity of Girī and Purī ascetics (2012: 15-17). This assumption might explain the presence of *nāgā* ascetics in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, although further verification of this theory is needed. In fact, there should be an explanation of when Girī and Purī decided to split into the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva currents as well as why those who became Śaiva-s would have maintained their name while those who became Vaiṣṇava-s would have changed it (to my knowledge there is not a Girī or Purī branch in the Vaiṣṇava *akhārā*-s or among the *tyāgī*-s). However, I consider Mallinson’s remark a good starting point to deepen the research on the history of wandering ascetics and to stress once again that the religious atmosphere in those centuries (15th-16th) must have been a fluid one in which an ascetic was recognized for his *sādhanā* rather than his membership within a specific *sampradāya*.

Bhāvānanda named Anabhayānanda established a *gaddī* in Jaipur-Cāndpol, which was to become the Bālānanda Maṭh. The *paramparā* of this *gaddī* is: Anabhayānanda, Vicitrānanda, Vimalānanda, Brahmānanda, Vrajānanda, Bālānanda (Śrīvāstāv, 1957: 201). The belief that Anabhayānanda was the initiator of the *akhārā* also emerged during the Ayodhya issue on the Rāmjanmabhūmi.²⁵⁶ Several ascetics testifying on behalf of the *akhārā*-s claimed that ‘the military training commenced in the sect by Sri Anubhavānandācārya²⁵⁷ in the 16th century and was given a final shape by Sri Balanandacharya’.²⁵⁸

A proof of the existence of Rāmānandī militant ascetics before the 18th century is given by an imperial order of Aurangzeb in 1692 or 1693 that authorized five Rāmānandī commanders ‘to move freely about the whole Empire with standards and kettledrums, at the head of companies both of horse and foot’ while instructing *zamindars* ‘that no obstacle or hindrance be put in their way, so that they may travel without molestation from one province to another.’²⁵⁹

According to Horstmann, despite the fact that clashes between Śaiva-s and Vaiṣṇava-s have existed since the 16th century, Rāmānandī ascetics did not organize themselves into more structured armies until in the 18th century due to the political situation. In the words of David Lorenzen (1978: 68): ‘in periods of political instability, in inter-sectarian conflicts or conflicts between politics and religious groups, (fighting ascetics) gained prominence and organizational momentum.’²⁶⁰ Furthermore, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava ascetics were also

²⁵⁶ <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/795354/> (Accessed: August 27, 2014).

²⁵⁷ Although the names, ‘Anubhavānandācārya’ and ‘Anabhayānanda’ do not coincide, I suppose that they may be descriptive of the same individual. Moreover, the name Anubhavānandācārya is used again in an article of the *Tīrth rāj Prayāg our Kumbh Mahāparv*, wherein Śrī Mahant Govindānanda Brahmācārī claims that around 1475, Anubhavānandācārya, disciple of Bhāvānanda, established the Vaiṣṇava *akhārā*-s after a meeting among the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s in Vrindavan (2007: 143). Although the date would seem too early considering the *paramparā* and the birth date we have estimated for Rāmānanda, it is interesting to notice that the tradition of Anubhavānandācārya is well known, and likely should be taken into consideration as a starting point of the *akhārā* tradition in Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s.

²⁵⁸ To support this submission, the Rāmānandī side presented the 30th edition of a book named *Smṛti Granth*, published by Sri Ramanand Darshan Shodh Sansthan on January 27, 2000. Page 543 contains details of Śrī Anubhavānandācārya, declaring that he lived during *Samvat* 1503-1611 (1446-1554 C.E.). Page 695 provides details about Śrī Bālānanda, declaring that he lived during *Samvat* 1710-1852 (1653-1795 C.E.). Although the correctness of these dates is unsure, they still demonstrate the presence of an *akhārā* tradition with a proper history that is claimed to be prior to Vrijānanda.

²⁵⁹ I report here Orr’s words mentioned by Pinch (2006: 72). As Pinch writes, Orr refers to a *farman* in possession of the Bālānanda Maṭh in Jaipur (Orr, 1940: 87).

²⁶⁰ Pinch has also suggested that the increased number of militant ascetics can be explained by three causes: a relaxation of social restrictions in order to spur recruitment; the influx of peasants and others of low or marginal status into monastic communities; and monastic soldiering has been used by conservative high-caste elements to explain the presence therein of Śūdras, untouchables and women (1996: 29).

involved in commercial activities as merchants and bankers (Pinch, 1996: 24). Hence, all these activities led to clashes, with Śaiva *nāgā*-s²⁶¹ opposing *Vaiṣṇava* groups,²⁶² particularly Rāmānandī-s, as many Vairāgī-s involved in commercial activities were from the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

As a result, at the beginning of the 18th century, *Vaiṣṇava sampradāya*-s decided to create a proper organization to gather their fighting *sādhu*-s under one roof. Horstmann tells us that the first conference was held in Vrindavan in 1713 to consolidate the military organization. Although it is said that Bālānanda conducted the meeting, it is more likely that his guru attended as a representative of the Rāmānandī group.

According to the Nimbārkī and Bālānandī traditions, the conclusive meeting for the organization of the *akhārā*-s took place at Gamvari-Ganeshvar in the Nīm kā Thānā Tehsil of the Sikar district in Rajasthan in 1734 (Śarmā, 1978: 57, in Horstmann 2005).²⁶³ It is claimed that Bālānanda convened the conference in partnership with Vṛndāvandevācārya from the Nimbārka *sampradāya* (Mītal, 1968: 358).

According to a Rāmānandī oral tradition, written down in a registered document from 1949 (Sub-Register, Faizabad under Registration Act, 1908 on 26.03.1949), Śrī Vrijānanda and Śrī Bālānanda constituted three Anī about 500 years ago:²⁶⁴ the Nirmohī, the Digambar and the Nirvānī. The *Vaiṣṇava* Anī were organized into eighteen *akhārā*-s, among which seven consisted of Rāmānandī ascetics: 1) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Nirmohī Akhārā, 2) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Nirvānī Akhārā, 3) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Digambari Akhārā, 4) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Santoṣī Akhārā, 5) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Khākī Akhārā, 6) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Niralambi and 7) Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Mahā Nirvānī.²⁶⁵

²⁶¹ Pinch suggests that the long militant tradition in the Śaiva *sampradāya*-s was a means by which to include the low castes into the ascetic groups. The fact that the *nāgā* group survived amidst the monopolization of arms by the East India Company in the late 18th-19th century and continues to represent an important section of both Śaiva and *Vaiṣṇava* orders, suggests that its contribution to religious life was, and is, more social than militaristic (1996: 29).

²⁶² Ghurye quotes that 'one Bhairava Giri Gosāvi had vowed not to take his daily meals without killing at least one *Vaiṣṇava* Bairāgi.' Ghurye also explains that the enmity between the two divisions of ascetics was so great that frequent bloody fights happened, especially in occasion of Kumbh assemblage (1964: 177).

²⁶³ Horstmann says that it seems strange that the 1734 conference did not leave traces in contemporary documents: '1734 was the year of Jaisingh's horse sacrifice. In the run-up to this event, many reforms were carried out in the various religious orders. I wonder if the conference of 1734 was not rather a process of agreements and rapprochements that, in the light of the eventful year of 1734, were in hindsight interpreted as a single conference.'

²⁶⁴ According to Ghurye, *anī* is the short form of the Sanskrit word *anika*, meaning army (1964: 179).

²⁶⁵ A description of these *akhārā*-s in Ayodhya is given by P. Canergy, who was officiating Commissioner and Settlement Officer at Faizabad, in his work, *A Historical Sketch of Tahsil Fyzabad, Zillah Fyzabad*. Carnegy writes (1870: 19-20): 'There are seven Akharas or cloisters of the monastic orders, or Bairagis, disciples of Vishnu, in Ajudhia, each of which is presided over by a Mahant or Abbot; these are: 1 Nirbani, or silent sect,

However, Horstmann points out that in 1734 Bālānanda would have been a young man, because he lived until 1795. Horstmann supposes that since during his time Bālānanda had an active military and diplomatic role for Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s, ‘this fact may have been projected on his role in the said conference’ (2005). In fact, in a bond addressed to the Maharaja of Jaipur dated to 1730, Vrijānanda still appears in his role of leader of militant Rāmānandī groups.

5.3.1 Rāmānandī *dvārā*-s

The conferences that led to the formation of the *akhārā*, led also to the recognition of fifty-two Vaiṣṇava *dvārā*-s. According to Alrik Barlo Shivaji²⁶⁶ these fifty-two *dvārā*-s were based on the model of the fifty-two *maṛhi*-s of the *saṃnyāsī*-s. In fact, Barlo argues that Daśanāmī *akhārā*-s are divided into *dāvā*-s (sections) which in turn have subsections called *maṛhi* (literally hut, pointing perhaps at a *śākhā* like in the case of *dvārā*). He says that in the Girī group there are four *dāvā*-s, and twenty-seven *maṛhi*-s, while all the other groups have four *dāvā*-s for twenty-five *maṛhi*-s, for a total of fifty-two *maṛhi*-s. Over this schema of fifty-two, Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s would have decided fifty-two *dvārā*-s as well:

the word *dvārā* has the same meaning as *dvār* (door), but in the Vaiṣṇava *sādhu* society, a *dvārā* refers to the place occupied by the *śākhā* of a *sampradāya*. Among these fifty-two *dvārā*-s, thirty-six are Rāmānandī. (Barlo, 2007: 172, my translation)

The planning of *akhārā*-s and *dvārā*-s was likely decided in the first half of the 18th century. However, scholars are not in agreement about several key details of the meetings in which these issues were discussed: the dates during which the meetings were held, the exact matters discussed, and who organized them – whether Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s or Jai Singh. Sometimes scholars make claims about these meetings without providing clear evidence to back up their conclusions. For example, Pinch claims that the *dvārā*-s were established in 1713 (1996: 27), although he bases his conclusion on a reading of Burghart, who does not actually give any specific temporal reference for the conference. Burghart only says that ‘at the turn of the 18th century [...] according to the sectarian bards [no reference to a specific

who have their dwelling in Hanuman Garhi; 2 The Nirmohi, or void of affection sect, who have establishments at Ramghat, and Guptarghat. 3 Digambari, or naked sect of ascetics; 4 the khaki or ash-besmeared devotees; 5 The Maha-nirbani, or literally dumb branch; 6 The Santokhi, or patient family; 7 The Niralambhi, or provisionless sect.’

²⁶⁶ His very comprehensive article about *akhārā*-s, “Kumbh ke Pratibhāgi Akhāre evam Dhārmik Sampradāya,” is included in the *Tīrthraj Prayāg our Kumbh Mahāpurva*.

tradition]’ the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s met in Galtā. Burghart also never mentions Jai Singh II (1978: 130).

Caracchi refers to van der Veer, who in turn refers to Thiel-Horstmann to claim that there were meetings held in 1713, 1726, 1734 and 1756. However, both scholars also claim that Jai Singh II set up his conferences for the systematization of the four *sampradāya*-s in 1726 and 1734. Scholars differ on the year that the fifty-two *dvārā*-s were organized: Caracchi says it happened in 1726, while van der Veer claims (following Mital, 1968: 389) it occurred in 1734, and Ghurye claims it happened in 1713 C.E. (1964: 178).

According to Ghurye (1964: 182), *nāgā* ascetics could establish their identity as Vaiṣṇava Vairāgī through an esoteric formula that involved the *dvārā*. This explanation, however, cannot be confirmed. According to Saraswati and Sinha the *dvārā* organization is a unifying force among the Rāmānandī ascetics, as it creates a sense of brotherhood: all those who belong to a *dvārā* are recognized as *guru-bhāī*, or guru-brothers (1978: 120).

According to Burghart, the thirty-six Rāmānandī *dvārā*-s represent thirty-six separate spiritual clans. At the time of their formation, there was a specific choice made by the gurus in attendance not to include low caste and female disciples of Rāmānanda (1978: 131). The reason for this decision lay in the fact that these *dvārā*-s were ‘merely a genealogical arrangement to purge the sect of impure elements and to attract the patronage of householders. Having served their purpose, they became at once vestigial organs. At present, membership in a spiritual clan confers no rights and duties upon the Ramanandi ascetic’ (*ibid*: 138). Van der Veer has supported Burghart’s claim, interpreting the choice of the *dvārā*-s as compelled by the need to create a sense of respectability and recognition for the Vaiṣṇava idea of Jai Singh (1989: 100).

I support Caracchi’s observation (1999: 188-189) that there are some points missing in this interpretation. Burghart assumes that there was an official decision to exclude low-castes people and women because there are not *dvārā*-s named after Kabīr, Raidās or Sen. However, before interpreting this absence as a ‘genealogical arrangement’, it has to be remembered that Kabīr and Raidās had started their own *panth*-s and therefore were not directly part of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Secondly, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Kabīr, Raidās and others like them do not seem to have taken a *virakta dīkṣā*, meaning they were not renunciators. In fact, the only *grhastha* who is said to have become a renouncer is Pīpā, who is recognized among the *dvārā*-s.

Therefore, taking into consideration that approximately the *gaddī*-s that Rāmṭahaldās mentions correspond to the *dvārā*-s listed by Barlo, we can suppose that

these *dvārā*-s were planned with the purpose of having an official structure similar to that of *saṃnyāsī*-s, as it had happened for the official organization of the *akhārā*-s. Following the interpretation of Barlo, these *dvārā*-s represented the initial *śākhā*-s of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Therefore, supporting Burghart’s interpretation, *dvārā*-s can be understood as spiritual clans, or simply, as *paramparā*-s that originally spread out from the disciples of Rāmānanda.

6. Historical Rāmānandī centers

In this section I will describe the Rāmānandī places about which we have historical evidence, notwithstanding some gaps in the historical record. My aim is to show that, despite the common Rāmānandī characteristics that they shared, each center followed an individualistic history that depended in large part on its own specific historic context and on the *mahant*-s who managed them.

6.1 Galtā²⁶⁷

As already mentioned in the section on Kṛṣṇadās and Kīlhdev, the origin of the Rāmānandī settlement in Galtā may be dated to the beginning of the 16th century, perhaps on the foundation of a previous ascetic settlement. As we have seen, Kīlhdev is associated with a *sāadhanā* that actually does not seem to characterize the atmosphere of Galtā in the centuries that followed.

According to Rāmānandī tradition, the center received the support of the Kachavaha dynasty and, later, Muslim emperors. This seems to be confirmed by historical evidence. Horstmann gives the example of a document from 1640, which confirmed a grant given by Akbar in 1605, according to which the Galtā Rāmānandī-s²⁶⁸ were the recipients of 2592 *bīghā*-s in Ranthambor (2002: 157).

Jai Singh I (1621-1667) built temples of Gopālji and Raghunāth, the water architecture and the gardens in Galtā. According to Horstmann, these works built in concomitance with the palace of Amer, illustrate that the Galtā complex was part of the symbolic status of the ruling power (2002: 157). However, the power affiliated with Amer

²⁶⁷ Fig. 1.

²⁶⁸ It would be interesting to know the exact wording of the grant because if it is addressed to the Galtā Rāmānandī-s, it may indicate that during the late 16th century and early 17th century, Rāmānandī ascetics referred to themselves by this label. This information would enable us to reevaluate Horstmann’s statement that Rāmānandī-s identify themselves as such not prior to the 1730s (2002:145).

declined during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb. Jai Singh II (1688-1743) became ruler of Amer at the age of eleven after his father died in 1699. He was soon called to Deccan by the Emperor Aurangzeb, where he had the opportunity to demonstrate his value as the new ruler of Amer. Soon after, however, his bit of fortune was overturned by Aurangzeb's death in 1707 (Ratnawat, 1989: 28). The situation precipitated into a crisis in January 1708 when the new Moghul Emperor Bahadur Shah arrived in Amer before heading on to Deccan. Instead of remaining with the Emperor, Jai Singh II and Ajit Singh of Marwar left the imperial cortege. The Emperor punished them by confiscating their domains. Jai Singh was deprived of the throne of Amer, which was bestowed to his brother Bijai Singh. However, that same year, Jai Singh was able to expel the Moghul army from Amer and was restored to power in 1710 (Horstmann, 2006: 9). When Bahadur Shah died in 1712, Farrukhshiyar came in possession of the throne and appointed Jai Singh as the Subedar of Malwa in 1713 (Ratnawat, 1989: 29).

Since then, Jai Singh began to claim his status as Hindu king,²⁶⁹ embodiment of dharma, and made it the centerpiece of his rule. However, 'the question was only what dharma exactly would suitably deliver its purpose of upholding the state and the cosmic order' (Horstmann, 2006: 20). Jai Singh embraced the Gauḍīya *sampradāya*, which had become prominent in Jaipur: Govindadev, its main deity, became the new state deity. Horstmann explains that since the last decades of the 17th century, 'Vaiṣṇava groups from the area of Braj had moved westward in order to protect their deities from desecration and thereby themselves from ruin.' This movement modified the balance of religious power in the Kachavaha state as the newly arrived groups had to be accommodated into the religious system of the state (2006: 20).

There was also a devotional approach in Galtā, where the *mahant* Rāmrapanna, who later became known as Madhurācārya, is said to have organized a *Ras Līlā*²⁷⁰ for a period of twelve years. According to the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* the activities of the *mahant* created envy among Vaiṣṇava orders:

[...] his enemies, eager to disparage him, saw no other way than to make the then king Ramsingh (*sic!*) organize a sacrifice. As he was the rājguru, he had to be present at the sacrifice together with his wife and was consequently urged to get married. He rejected

²⁶⁹ As stressed by Horstmann (2006: 10), the meaning of Hindu in this context most closely means 'dharmic'.

²⁷⁰ In this context *ras* means 'sweet devotion' while *līlā* means 'play' or dance. Usually the *Ras līlā* refers to the playful and erotic activities in which Kṛṣṇa sports with the *gopī*-s.

this proposal, immediately resigned from office, and went to Cittrakut. (Horstmann, 2002: 159)

At the beginning of the 18th century, Jai Singh II revived ancient Vedic sacrifices, put the Hindu ritual on the Smārta Vaiṣṇava basis and attempted to integrate Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* orders into the system (Horstmann, 2002: 159). Furthermore, he demanded that each group demonstrate its membership in one of the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s or display its right to claim an autonomous status. It is within this context that Rāmānandī ascetics stressed their link with Rāmānūja as it is attested in the *paramparā* of the *Bhaktamāl*.

This link with the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* has created a huge debate among scholars, who often interpret it as an act of ‘invention of tradition’. According to Burghart, this link was created in this period simply for convenience, as this *sampradāya* had a much longer tradition and high esteem in the Indian religious landscape of the period (1978: 127). I hypothesize that Rāmānandī-s already considered themselves to be a branch of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava, since Nābhādās inserted Rāmānanda in a *paramparā* which includes Rāmānūja. Perhaps the Galta meetings²⁷¹ created an official context in which this affiliation was properly recognized and accepted by Rāmānūjī-s as well.²⁷²

From the historical evidence collected by Horstmann, it arises that Jai Singh II began pressing the *mahant* of Galtā during the time of the *aśvamedha*²⁷³ (which was performed in 1730s). His concern revolved around the marital status of those *mahant*-s who had to attend the sacrifice. Under the pressure of the Raja, *mahant* Madhurācārya wrote a document, included in the Kapad Dvārā Collection of the Jaipur City Palace (document no. 1520), which is reported by Horstmann (2002: 161):

Śrī

Written [to testify that] Madhurācārya has agreed to the following and that Svāmī Sukh Rām has agreed to its contents.

Written by all Rāmānandī Vaiṣṇava *mahants*: In accordance with the authority of all the *śāstras*, we have decided that at meals no one shall partake of someone else’s left-overs; the four *varṇas* shall not eat together; they will be served their meal in separate lines. A Vaiṣṇava boy may be kept performing worship up to the age of fifteen. After that he shall

²⁷¹ As I have explained, there is certain confusion among scholars about these meetings and those organized by the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s (Cf. Sec. 5.3.1)

²⁷² In fact, as we will see below, Rāmānūjī-s participate in the debate with Rāmānandī-s, and later they give their support to the *mahant* of Galtā. Hence the relationship between the two groups seems cooperative.

²⁷³ According to Ratnawat, the *aśvamedha* – the horse sacrifice – was performed twice, in 1734 and in 1742 (1989: 29).

be married within his own sub-caste. If, however, he is determined [to remain celibate], he shall be examined and kept as a *brahmācārī*. And no Vaiṣṇava mahant will make an outcaste his disciple. Brahmins Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas –these three *varṇas* may be invested with the sacrificial thread, but under observation of the ritual prescribed. It must not be given to a Śūdra [...].

It is likely that this position was taken according to the *aśvamedha*, so that the king could have had representatives of all Vaiṣṇava orders who behaved according to the *Śāstra*-s and *Veda*-s.

However, it seems that the Raja's decisions affected those *sampradāya*-s involved in his personal religious activities, and those places in which the Raja wanted religious leaders chosen by him.²⁷⁴ As the *mahant* of Galtā was the *rājguru*, he became the main target (among the Rāmānandī-s) of the new rules.²⁷⁵

By contrast, the *mahant* of the Laśkarī center²⁷⁶ in Jaipur was not put under pressure to get married (Horstmann, 2002: 162). The *mahant* of the Revāsā Pīṭh was only admonished to follow the *śāstra*-s and to not brand their body (*ibid.*).²⁷⁷

Therefore, among Rāmānandī-s in Amer, Galtā Rāmānandī-s (or the Galtā *mahant*) were those who actually changed their religious practice. In fact, *mahant*-s have been householders in Galtā since the time of Jai Singh II.

As documented by Clémentin-Ojha (1995), during the period of *mahant* Hariprasādācārya in Galtā, Rāmānandī-s again became entrenched in royal disputes about religion because of the Śaiva faith of Raja Rām Singh II (r. 1833-1880). Although a lot of attention has been given to Jai Singh II and his reforms, only Clémentin-Ojha (1999) has examined the activities of this Raja, particularly the consequences they had on Vaiṣṇava orders.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ For example, following the death of the Nimbarkī *mahant*, he substituted him with a Smārta Vaiṣṇava Brahman *mahant* from Maharashtra (Horstmann, 2002: 165)

²⁷⁵ Also the Gauḍiia *mahant*-s, who were the custodians of the other main *mūrti* of the Raja and had to get married (Horstmann, 2002: 162).

²⁷⁶ Cf. below, Sec. 6.5.

²⁷⁷ As we will see later, Jai Singh tried to control also Vaiṣṇava *akhārā*-s in Jaipur. However, his action only had a longlasting effect in the religious routine and organization of Galtā.

²⁷⁸ It should be noted that in the same period, the Raja of Jodhpur Mān Singh also had a change of religious faith, leading to a resurgence in Jodhpur of the political influence of Nāth *yogī*-s. Gold explains that the Raja was under the influence of his guru, Dev Nāth, who offered both psychological and logistical support to Mān Singh, who was in the Jalor forth waiting to reclaim the Jodhpur throne. The power the Nāth obtained through the support of the Raja, who considered himself a Nāth, was not reciprocated by the population, especially by those social sections that had seen their social positions and rights trampled on by Nāth-s (Gold, 1995: 120-30). Clémentin-Ojha also claimed that the main supporter in the *tilak* dispute began by Rām Singh was a Nāth ascetic from Jodhpur called Lakṣmaṇ Nāth (2009: 149). These instances (Rām Singh and Mān Singh) display

Because the Raja considered the existing form of Vaiṣṇava worship to be in discordance with the precepts of the *Śāstra*-s, he organized a Dharma Sabhā in 1864 ‘summoning the heads of the Vaiṣṇava sects of Jaipur to interrogate them on their beliefs and practices’ (Clémentin-Ojha, 1999). According to the Raja, their religious practices, doctrines and social ideologies did not respect the prerogatives of caste because they allowed Śūdra-s to join the *sampradāya*.²⁷⁹ His main complaint was that those orders enabled Śūdra-s to perform tasks intended for Brahmans.²⁸⁰

It should be noted that Rām Singh addressed his inquiry to the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* rather than the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, contrary to Burgart’s claim that during the Galta meeting the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* took the place of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* in the *catuḥ* group (1978: 131). Clémentin-Ojha reports that the *mahant* of Galtā called up Rangācārya, a Rāmānūjī of Vrindāvan, to reply to the sixty-four questions asked by the Maharaja, for he was not well-versed in theological debates (1999). This event demonstrates that Rāmānandī-s recognized themselves as part of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* and that Rāmānūjī-s were cooperative with them. Furthermore, it also stresses that Rāmānandī ascetics did not have to have a particular theoretical background to be part of the *sampradāya*.²⁸¹ This seems particularly plausible if we consider that the *mahant* of one of the most famous Rāmānandī center needed the help of a Rāmānūjī. Hence, it is likely that Rāmānūjī-s were identified as the real *ācārya*-s of the Śrī *sampradāya*, whereas Rāmānandī-s performed more devotional or physical endeavors, as many ascetics were part of *akhārā*-s or practiced various devotional styles of worship.²⁸²

The Raja’s interference grew to the point that he eventually asked Vaiṣṇava-s to change their *tilak* to fit the style used in the Śaiva tradition. This request generated great concern among Vaiṣṇava *mahant*-s: their replies demonstrated that religious people were not

several key facts: (1) that the 19th century might have seen a kind of resurgence of non-Vaiṣṇava orders; (2) charismatic religious leaders played an important role in political matters; and (3) a ruler’s personal faith was a determining factor in the politics of his reign.

²⁷⁹ The Raja’s preoccupations demonstrate that low castes were still included in the recruitment of Rāmānandī ascetics and, therefore Jai Singh’s restrictions and attempts at orthodoxization did not affect the *sampradāya* in its entirety.

²⁸⁰ As extensively analysed by Clémentin-Ojha, the role of Śūdra-s in Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s was considered to be a ‘Vaiṣṇava dilemma’ resulting from the effort to reconcile orthodox teachings (*Vedānta*, *Vaidika*, *Tāntrika*) with those heterodox ones like *Pāñcarātra* and *Bhāgvata* (1995: 100).

²⁸¹ In fact, Rāmānandī-s profess the absolute superiority of *bhakti* over *jñāna*, knowledge. Therefore, specific Brahmanic training or skills were not required to be part of the *sampradāya*.

²⁸² This would explain the status and the relationship between the two groups up until the 20th century, when the behaviors of superiority showed by Rāmānūjī-s led a radical group of Rāmānandī-s to discard the Rāmānūjī legacy.

disposed to compromise with their faith in order to obtain or maintain patronage. Clémentin-Ojha has transcribed a missive that the *mahant* of Galtā sent to those in charge of *nāgā* monasteries in centers such as Patna and Ayodhya asking for help. It reads as follows (the explanation in brackets are the words of Clémentin-Ojha) (1999: 5):

Our Lord Śrī Rāma

[eulogy in Sanskrit]

The Vaishnava dharma with the mantras of Nārāyaṇa, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the worship (upāsana) of the chosen deity (iṣṭa), the vertical mark (ūrdhva-puṇḍra), the tilaka of gopi-candana, the necklace of basilica (tulasī) and lotus seeds, the marking with the “hot disc” (cakra-aṅkita) and with the “cold” disc (śītala), the nine-fold bhakti, the tantric rites (anuṣṭhāna), etc., all of these have always existed. At present, two or three persons belonging to Śrījī [the Maharaja] have invented new rules; they oblige the followers of this [Vaishnava] dharma (dharmavāle) to wear ashes, the triple [horizontal] sign (tripuṇḍra) and the rudrākṣa [necklace] and they make them do expiation (prāyaścitta). It has therefore been decided that a disputation (śāstrārtha) be organized. That is why all the sant mahatmas and pandits who are followers of the Vaishnava creed, must absolutely all come together to the help of the dharma and respond without fail. Tell us if you would accept to come to the place to be decided upon for the disputation. Reply without fail to this letter by post. Do not delay.

Śrī Rām Dās

The position of Rām Singh created a real threat for Vaiṣṇavas, for those who did not obey him had their property confiscated. For instance, this occurred for eleven of the villages belonging to the Rāmānandī monastery of Revāsā (Clémentin-Ojha, 1999). In 1867, Rāmānandī-s wrote to the ruler of Ujjain, asking him to give aid in the trial with the Maharaja of Jaipur. According to Clémentin-Ojha, Rāmānandī-s have had numerous supporters in Ujjain since 1850 when they first became predominant in the Kumbh Melā. The ruler of Ujjain assured his devotion to the *mahant* of Galtā but he did not interfere with the inner religious policy of Rām Singh (1999).

The *mahant*-s of the Vallabhī and Nimbarkī *sampradāya*-s, as well as most of the other Vaiṣṇava-s, decided to escape from Jaipur, bringing with them the *mūrti*-s of their *iṣṭa devatā*-s.²⁸³

²⁸³ Clémentin-Ojha reports that the Vallabhīs went to Bikaner and that their departure left the inhabitants of Jaipur in shock. ‘In addition to the genuine grief at having lost two very beloved divine images, they also undoubtedly experienced great economic disappointment since the temples, by attracting numerous pilgrims and visitors, promoted trade’ (1999).

The *mahant*-s of the Bālānanda *Maṭh* and that of the Govindadev temple asked the Raja for permission to leave too but it was not granted. 'In 1869, the custodian of Govindadev accepted to wear the *tripuṇḍra* mark and the *rudrākṣa* necklace and his possessions were returned to him. In January 1872, it was Hariprasād of Galtā's turn to give in. He was driven to this by the need to get his daughter married, for which the Maharaja was refusing to give permission till he had duly atoned for his errors' (Clémentin-Ojha, 1999).

Those Vaiṣṇava centers that remained, lost part of their grants and revenues, although they were still supported by lay people and rulers from other reigns.

The reign of Rām Singh further demonstrates that specific religious attitudes taken by Rajas could have dramatic effects on all those living within their kingdom, and that these attitudes could have been led by pragmatic reasons influenced by personal faith. However, it also shows that some effects were temporary (such as the wearing of *rudrākṣa* or the use of a *śaiva tilak*) and did not affect the *sampradāya*-s in their entirety.

Horstmann gives a quite detailed description of the succession of the *mahant*-s in Galtā (2002: 169-170). I focus here on those who rose to power after the 1921 Ujjain Kumbh, when the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* proclaimed its independence. After Hariśaraṇācārya (1922-1938), a council of Rāmānandī-s decided to bestow the *gaddī* to a young ascetic who was endowed with the specific characteristics to become *mahant* of Galtā, Ramodharācārya.²⁸⁴ However, because the new *mahant* decided to marry, it created such a disappointment among Rāmānandī-s that the *sādhu maṇḍal*, led by the *mahant* of the Bālānanda *Maṭh*, decided to exclude him from the lineage. Furthermore, the *sādhu maṇḍal* of Jaipur passed a resolution that no Rāmānandī *mahant*-s and *sant*-s could participate in any program or feast organized by the Galtā community and they also had to refrain from inviting Ramodharācārya to events (2002: 171-172). However, the Maharaja of Jaipur sanctioned his office, which allowed Ramodharācārya to retain his position.

The present *mahant* of Galtā, Śrī Avadeśācārya, claims to be a Rāmānūjī rather than a Rāmānandī. For this reason, on the Galtā web-site, Rāmānanda is never mentioned and Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī is described as belonging to the *paramparā* of Rāmānūja.²⁸⁵ By consequence, Horstmann says that 'there were also rumors of intentions of people to capture the seat of Galtā' to restore his monastic *dharma*.

I received confirmation of this intention during my visit to this place: although Galtā

²⁸⁴ Horstmann explains: 'the rule of succession applying for Galtā required that the incumbent belong to (1) the line of Rāmānūja, (2) the Tingal (northern) branch of it, and (3) the Kīlha-dvārā.' (2002: 171).

²⁸⁵ <http://www.galtaji.org/about-us.html> (Accessed August 2014).

is nowadays occupied by Rāmānūjī Brahmans, there is a little Nirmohī *akhārā āśram* on top of the hill that has apparently been there for the last eighteen years. A *nāgā* from the *āśram* told me that Rāmānandī-s are trying to solve the dispute through the court, and that in case of an inconclusive result, *nāgā sādhu*-s would be ready to march toward Galtā in protest.²⁸⁶ The married status of the *mahant* represents a huge problem for the *sampradāya* because its members consider the celibate state to be a requirement for membership in the group. The present Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya, told me that the *sampradāya* asked the *mahant* to renounce his married status or to leave Galtā, but he refused. In 2011, Rāmnareśācārya scolded him publicly during a visit to Jaipur. He told me that the *mahant* did not reply 'because he knows he is guilty.'²⁸⁷

6.2 Revāsā Pīṭh²⁸⁸

According to the Revāsā tradition as reported in the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīṭh*, as soon as Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī died and Kīlhdev became the *mahant* of Galtā, Agradās moved to Revasa, where he sat under a tree and began his *sādhanā* (Mishra, n.d.: 27). He reached the city around the year 1604 Samvat (1547 C.E.) and he died in 1632 Samvat (1575 C.E.).

I share with Burchett the same doubt about this story. In fact, according to Burchett:

There may be good reason to believe that Raivāsā did not exist until the early eighteenth century and that Agradās never actually went there and, perhaps, never left Galta. It is noteworthy that Raivāsā is mentioned neither in Nābhā's *Bhaktamāl*, Rāghavdās's *Bhaktamāl* of 1660 CE, nor Priyādās's *Bhaktamāl* commentary of 1712 CE [...] I have not found Raivāsā mentioned by name or associated with Agradās in any sectarian document until Jivārām Yugalpriyā's *Rasik-Prakās-Bhaktamāl* of 1839 CE. (2012: 198)

That Nābhādās never mentions the Revāsā Pīṭh is significant. However, we could also suppose that Agradās reached Revasa later on, when Nābhādās had already finished writing his work. This explanation, however, would in turn require a rethinking about the date of production of the *Bhaktamāl*.

As Burchett explains, it is a complicated issue to solve. On one side there are oral

²⁸⁶ A completely different perspective was given to me by Rāmānūjī Brahmans that I met in the temples. According to them, Rāmānūjī-s and Rāmānandī-s are just two branches of the same *sampradāya*, under the umbrella of Vaiṣṇavism. They therefore considered meaningless the question of which tradition could claim ownership over the center. (Interview, March 12, 2013). We should wonder, however, if their explanation is truly an example of the inclusive Rāmānūjī-s position towards Rāmānandī-s or if it is just an excuse to hold onto the center that they manage.

²⁸⁷ Interview, October 5, 2012.

²⁸⁸ Fig. 3 and 4.

traditions about Agradās and his dwelling in Revāsā that are still so carefully maintained that ‘there may be no compelling reason to deny the claims of tradition.’²⁸⁹ On the other side, Burchett continues, the first formal document that mentions Revāsā as a Rāmānandī place is from the period of Jai Singh II. Contained within the Kapad Dvārā collection, it is an agreement between Jai Singh II and Rāmsevak, the *mahant* of the Revāsā Pīṭh during that period, who had been given the *jāgīr* of Revasa (2012: 199).

Further information is provided by the *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīṭh*, which lists the *paramparā* in the Revāsā Pīṭh after Agradās and gives us some information about the historical context of each *mahant*. We come to know that Śrī Vinodācārya, who succeeded Agradās, was the *mahant* till the year 1611 C.E. His successor was Śrī Dyāndās, whose abbotship lasted until 1633 C.E. After him, Śrī Caraṇḍās was *mahant* until 1658 C.E. and his disciple and successor, Śrī Bālkrṣṇācārya, was *mahant* until 1688 C.E. The text reports the name of these *mahant-s’* disciples as well as some works that they wrote. Then, it is said that under the abbotship of Śrī Sukhrāmdās the Pīṭh further developed as *sant-s* began to actually dwell there. Furthermore, the Pīṭh began to receive the economic support of merchants and Maharajas, who gave the religious community the ownership of a few villages. In 1727, in response to Jai Singh’s new religious stance, Śrī Sukhrāmdās decided to leave the Pīṭh as the *mahant* of Galtā had done because he did not want to renounce his celibate life and be forced to marry. His main disciple was Śrī Rām Dās but the *gaddī* was given to Śrī Rāmsevakācārya. For this reason, Śrī Rām Dās tried to take the *gaddī* back; we know from a *pratilipi* (copy) written in 1733, that he was able to reclaim his right to the *gaddī*. Nevertheless, this move was not appreciated by Jai Singh II, who asked Ṭhākur Gumān Singh Lādkhani to remove Rām Dās from the *gaddī* and confirm Rāmsevakācārya as *mahant*. Later on, Rāmsevakācārya received the support of the Raja of Jodhpur and Gumān Singh, who donated *jāgīr-s* (estates) to him. This donation was detailed in the document written by Jai Singh II that Burchett describes. Śrī Rāmsevakācārya died around the year 1803 his successor was Śrī Kesvācārya.

Śrī Kesvācārya is described as a *sādhu* who highly emphasized ascetic practices. His *sādhanā* improved the fame of the Pīṭh and he became the guru of the Rani and the Maharani of the Cundavat dynasty (Mewar). Śrī Kesvācārya was *mahant* from 1803 to 1818 C.E.

²⁸⁹ Revasa’s fame derives from Agradās’s supposed residence there. When I went there, the main places that a *sevak* of the *mahant* showed me were the tree under which Agradās used to meditate, his garden (which was actually in bad condition) and the cave (now a kind of basement) where, according to the tradition, Agradās had his *dhunī*.

With Śrī Jānkī Dās the Revāsā Pīṭh was furnished by a proper abode. Jānkī Dās and the *mahant* of the Nimbārki *sampradāya* were the gurus of the Maharani of Jaipur. For this reason they received a lot of honor and support from Rūpā Baḍāraṇ,²⁹⁰ who welcomed their procession (*juḷūs*) in Jaipur. That day, Rūpā gifted Jānkī Dās with a *dakṣiṇa* of 50 thousands rupees, through which the *mahant* was able to built the adobe and a large masonry well. Śrī Kesvācārya's died in 1833 C.E.

There is no information about the abbotship of Śrī Kesvācārya's successor, Śrī Sahajrām. The date of his death is also unsure. The *Śrī Agradevācārya Pīṭh* says that the Pīṭh was very successful during his lifetime and that it could host many ascetics thanks to the rent from the villages.

Śrī Bhagīrath Dās was the *mahant* during the period of Rām Singh. The Raja confiscated the villages that belonged to the Revāsā Pīṭh as he had already done with some villages belonging to the Bālānanda Maṭh and to Galtā. However, even though the Bālānanda Maṭh and Galtā were eventually given back their possessions, the Revāsā Pīṭh did not receive his possession back. The lack of *jāgīr*-s worsened then the condition of the center. Śrī Bhagīrath died in 1865 C.E.

Śrī Rāmānūjdās became *mahant* when the Pīṭh was in a very bad condition. Nevertheless, Rāmānūjdās did is best to improve the situation and gained the support of a man named Ṭhākur Śrī Ciman Singh, who gave him two large buildings and a field of five hundreds *bīghā*-s.

After Śrī Rāmānūjdās, Śrī Caturbhujdās became *mahant*. No special events are mentioned from his period. Under his successor, Śrī Jagannāthācārya, the Revāsā Pīṭh once again versed in an impoverished condition, and the number of visiting *sādhu*-s decreased. No specific dates are provided for these *mahant*-s.

Śrī Jānkīballabh became the *mahant* in 1927. Although the condition of the Pīṭh was still not good at this time, he worked hard to gather devotees and *bhakta*-s. He began a school that also contained a refectory for students. He restored the place and acquired a silver throne (*siṅh āsan*), in 1939. When he was older, he welcomed to the Pīṭh two well-known *sādhu*-s from Cittrakut, Śrī Balrāmdās and Śrī Śālgrāmācārya. They decided to make the Pīṭh a trust, which was finally realized in 1979. In the same year, Śrī Śālgrāmācārya became the *mahant* of the Pīṭh. During this period the Pīṭh was very well managed and it

²⁹⁰ After the death of Jai Singh III (r. 1803-1818) the rule of Jaipur fell into the hands of the *zanana* (the female apartments), and all the orders were communicated through Rūpā, a female servant who maintained the power in Jaipur from 1818 until 1836 (Sreenivasan, 2006: 148).

included a temple, the school, and an Ayurvedic center.

Śrī Śālgrāmācārya greatly improved the place. He also improved the street to allow people to easily reach the center and brought electricity to the village and the Pīṭh.

Svāmī Śrī Rāghvācārya Vedāntī is the present *mahant*. He was born in 1952. He combines a traditional *sāadhanā* with more modern actions. He studied Sanskrit in Citrakut and Varanasi but he was a disciple of Śrī Śālgrāmācārya. When his guru died in 1982, he travelled to the Revāsā Pīṭh and was bestowed as the *mahant* (Mishra, n.d: 37-50).

From these accounts we can suppose that until the 19th century, Revāsā was a small center that was not very well developed and was supported by only few patrons. The lack of further supports and charismatic leaders, combined with some negative historical conditions left the center in a lowly state that was only overcome in the last century. This would explain why there are no specific records about the Revāsā Pīṭh before the 18th century, why it did not capture too much of Jai Singh II's attention and why Rām Singh did not consider it necessary to give Revāsā back its *jāgīr*-s.

6.3 Piṇḍorī Dhām (abode)

Very few studies have focused their attention on Piṇḍorī Dhām, which is said to have been established in Gurdaspur (modern day northern Punjab) by Bhagvānjī, disciple of Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī. In the *Bhaktamāl*, Nābhādās does not mention him among the disciples of Kṛṣṇadās: a Bhagvāndās is found among the disciples of Kīlhdev and another among those of Agradās. In the list of *mahant* Rāmṭhaldās, the founder of Piṇḍorī Dhām is recognized as Bhagvānjī, disciple of Agradās (Śrīvāstav, 1957: 198). Whether Bhagvānjī was a disciple of Kṛṣṇadās or Agradās, what is important for us is the example that this center offers to understand the spread of Rāmānandī-s and their spread and influence across geographic areas beyond Amer.

B.N. Goswamy and J.S. Grewal reconstructed the history of the place through fifty-two Persian documents that cover the period from 1695 to 1859, but they also attempted to reconstruct the history of the origins of the Dhām.

Using the *Piṇḍorī Dhām kā Itihās* as their source Goswamy and Grewal say that the story of Bhagvān is rich in legends and miracles. His birthplace was Kahnuwan, eight miles south of Gurdaspur district. Bhagvānjī's birth was blessed by a *jogī* from the Nāth order, whose name was Tārānāth. According to Goswamy and Grewal, 'this association [...] with

the Jogi-s is full of significance because it survives in diverse forms to this day' (1969: 5).²⁹¹ According to the tradition transmitted in Piṇḍorī, Bhagvānjī spent his early years meditating in a cave with a Nāth *yogī*. Later on, he became Vaiṣṇava due to the influence of Śrī Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī: during a pilgrimage that drove him to Galta, Bhagvānjī met Kṛṣṇadās and became his disciple. According to the scholars, Kṛṣṇadās induced Bhagvānjī 'to make the district of Gurdaspur as the base of his activity,' which was to carry the message of Vaiṣṇavism to those parts, especially the hill areas.

The center of his activity became Piṇḍorī, although he had to oust a *jamāt* of *yogī*-s before he could occupy the place. According to local tradition, Bhagvānjī gained control of the place after a contest of wills and miraculous powers (Goswami & Grewal, 1969: 6). The date of Bhagvānjī is uncertain but there is a tradition preserved at Piṇḍorī that claims he was a contemporary of the Emperor Jahangir (1569-1627), at least during his late years. According to the *Piṇḍorī Dhām kā Itihas* the year of Bhagvānjī was born in 1493, while Ghurye claims that the Dhām was established in 1572 (1964: 166). If we take into consideration the link that he had to Jahangir, and the fact that Nābhādās mentions Bhagvān as a disciple of Agradās, Ghurye's claim seems quite plausible.

Bhagvānjī and his disciples Nārāyaṅjī are both described as possessing special powers. However, as Goswami and Grewal argue, Bhagvān was also a *bhakta* as is testified by several drawings which represent him carrying his *vīṇā* (a stringed instrument) on his shoulder, a sign not only of his love for music but also of his *sādhanā*.

Over the years, Piṇḍorī became one of the most influential Vaiṣṇava establishments in northern India, obtaining the allegiance of numerous hill chiefs. The prosperity of the Dhām is especially linked to a grant of land that the Emperor Jahangir conferred to Piṇḍorī around the year 1621-1622, after a demonstration of ascetic power by Nārāyaṅjī. It is important to note that Nārāyaṅjī and Bhagvānjī would have told their disciples to found small *gaddī*-s at different places (Goswami & Grewal, 1969: 11).

Through the histories linked with the *mahant*-s who succeeded Nārāyaṅjī in the Dhām,²⁹² we can better understand the status of the center and its relationship with the

²⁹¹ In fact, as the scholars claim: 'the association of the Pindori gaddi with the Nathapanthis is commemorated in a significant practice that is still followed. On the ceremonial occasion of the installation of a new mahant at Pindori, two objects, a *seli* or black woolen thread, and a *topi* or cap, are received from the Jogi establishment of Jakhbar and placed upon the person of the mahant' (Goswami & Grewal, 1969: 6).

²⁹² This is the *paramparā* I found in the text *Darbār Śrī Piṇḍorī Dhām kā Sankṣipt Itihās*, published by the present *mahant*, Śrī Raghuvīr Dās: Bhagvanji; Nārāyaṅjī; *mahant* Anand Dhan (n.d-1676), *mahant* Hari Rām (1676-1718); *mahant* Sukhnidhān (1718-1727), *mahant* Rām Dās (1727-1761), *mahant* Rām Kṛṣṇa (1761-1778), *mahant* Keshav Das (1778-1807), *mahant* Narotam Dās (1807-1843), *mahant* Gaṅgā Dās (1843-1861),

political sphere, which I will briefly summarize here.

The third *mahant* Ānandghan (?-1676) had as a devotee the Rajas of Nurpur, a locale in the district of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. During the *mahant* Hari Rām, Piṇḍorī was invaded by a group of militant Śaiva ascetics, but the center was able to successfully resist the attack. Later on, a prince from Jammu gifted Hari Rām with three villages in the Jammu territory. *Mahant* Sukh Nidhan is said to have purchased 410 *bīghā-s* of land in the village Khojapur in 1724. The sixth *mahant*, Rām Dās, had the merit to spread Vaiṣṇavism across the hills, and the seventh *mahant*, Govind Dās, is said to have founded new branches in Lahore, Pur Hiram, Mukerian, Chinapattan, and Gangath. The eighth in succession, *mahant* Keshav Dās, was revered by Sikh and Panjabi chiefs. The ninth *mahant* was Narotam Dās (1807-1843) and Maharaja Ranjit Singh is said to have had great favor toward him, to grant him several villages for the maintenance of the *gaddī*. Moreover the Raja 'is also said to have appointed some of his own soldiers to remain in attendance upon the mahant and ordered his officials to adopt an especially considerate and reverential tone towards his establishment' (Goswami & Grewal, 1969: 19).

Sinha and Saraswati make a list of some of the *gaddī-s* established by the *mahant-s* of Piṇḍorī Dhām that I report here. There were at least thirty-nine main *gaddī-s* in different parts of the country associated with Piṇḍorī Dhām: one *gaddī* in Hyderabad; one *gaddī* in Parshottam (Panjab); three *gaddī-s* in Lahore; two *gaddī-s* in Kangra (Himachal Pradesh), one *gaddī* in Mandi (Himachal Pradesh), seven *gaddī-s* in Hoshiarpur (Panjab), two *gaddī-s* in Ambala (Haryana), two *gaddī-s* in Jullundur (Panjab), one *gaddī* in Amritsar (Panjab), one *gaddī* in Saharanpur (Uttar Pradesh), five *gaddī-s* in Ayodhya, one *gaddī* in Varanasi, one *gaddī* in Nagpur (Maharashtra), one *gaddī* in Thaneshwara, one *gaddī* in Girnar (Gujarat), one *gaddī* in Chinapattan and two *gaddī-s* in Jammu.

This list of *gaddī-s* together with that presented by Rāmṭhaldās provide a meaningful example of how a *sampradāya* and his branches spread (1978: 120).

According to Moran (2012), who reconstructs the move of renunciators from Piṇḍorī to Kullu, the ascetics of Piṇḍorī were *Vairāgī-s* who might have been involved in military activity. He says that their strength, coupled with the spread of Rāmānandī centers across the region, led rulers of those areas to convert to Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya-s*.

However, I doubt that the Rāmānandī-s of Piṇḍorī Dhām could have had a military nature. Considering the aforementioned summary of events that involving Piṇḍorī *mahant-s*, there

mahant Rādhikā Dās (1843-1887), *mahant* Brahm Dās (1887-1908), *mahant* Rām Dās (1908-1980), *mahant* Śrī Govind Dās (1980-2004), *mahant* Swāmī Vaiṣṇavācārya Śrī Raghuvīr Dās (2004-).

is no record from the episode in which the Dhām was attacked by Śaiva ascetics of a defense by Rāmānandī-s living in the Dhām. Moreover, the fact that Raja Ranjit Singh decided to leave some of his generals at the Dhām demonstrates that it did not possess a proper army. The present *mahant* of Piṇḍorī has confirmed that the Dhām never had an ascetic army. The fact that in Muslim records the *mahant*-s of Piṇḍorī are called Gosain-s,²⁹³ does not mean that they had any military or economic activities, since that term was used as a common label by Muslims to describe ascetics and priests.²⁹⁴

It appears more difficult to identify the *sāadhanā* of the place. Based on the stories about Bhagvānjī, it appears likely that the atmosphere of Piṇḍorī was similar to that of Galtā (and probably to that of Rāmānandī centers in the 16th and 17th centuries): that is, open to various *sāadhanā*-s, and conducive of *bhakti* and yoga intermingling in devotees' religious practices.²⁹⁵ The Dhām was also the abode of wandering *tyāgī*-s²⁹⁶, who had contacts with Nāth and other Śaiva orders and who became regular fixtures in the mountain area of Kullu. In fact, Moran argues that a literary local source of Kullu, the *Majma Tawarikh-i-Kohistan-i-Punjab* (History of the Punjab Hill States), writes that 'Kullu had become a regular halting place on the itinerary of peripatetic *bairagis* from the Punjab' (2013: 16).

Over the centuries, Piṇḍorī was able to maintain his role, although there were never Hindu Rajas ruling the area and supporting the new establishment until today.²⁹⁷ The Dhām is today under the abbotship of a young *mahant* who was born in 1983, Raghibīr Dās, who was bestowed with the *gaddī* on March 26, 2004 (*Darbār Śrī Piṇḍorī Dhām kā Sanksit Itihās*: 77).

²⁹³ In the documents used by Goswami and Grewal, Piṇḍorī *mahant*-s are often described as Gosain (such as document 3 p. 94, document 6 p. 119, document 8 pp. 135-139).

²⁹⁴ E-mail correspondence, August 15-16, 2014.

²⁹⁵ The *mahant* replied to the question about the *sāadhanā* in Piṇḍorī by saying that they are devotees of Sītā-Rām, and they follow the *prem-bhakti*, with a particular direction toward *sevā* for the society. He stressed that because there are nine paths that a *bhakta* can follow, anyone can choose the path which he or she prefers.

²⁹⁶ These wandering ascetics were also generally known with the term Vairāgī-s, which appears often in the sources of the period.

²⁹⁷ For example, under the *mahant*-ship of Śrī 1008 Svāmī Vaiṣṇavācārya Mahant Govind Dās social and religious activities were supported: he built the temple of Yogīrāj Bhagvān Nārāyaṇ and also a school open to all in Dīnā Nagar (Gurdāspur); he established the temple of Navnirmī Bhagvān Nārāyaṇ in Kaṭhā (Jammu and Kashmir), and he provided the Piṇḍorī Dhām with a place for the *satsang* (the so-called Gītā Bhavan); he also had an hospital constructed that was attached to this building (*Darbār Śrī Piṇḍorī Dhām kā Sanksit Itihās* n.d.: 72).

6.4 Kullu

The link between the Kullu area (in present-day Himachal Pradesh) and Rāmānandī-s traditionally goes back to Kṛṣṇadās. According to Priyādās, Kṛṣṇadās reached the region of Kullu and settled there in a cave. As demonstrated by Moran, the introduction of Vaiṣṇavism and of the Rām/Raghunāth cult in the Kullu area is dated to 1661, when the Raja Jagat Singh converted to Vaiṣṇavism.²⁹⁸ According to Moran, this event was the capstone of the longstanding gradual move of Rāmānandī ascetics to the mountain area after they settled in Piṇḍorī Dhām (2013: 4).

To justify the conversion of the king, the *Majma Tawarikh-i-Kohistan-i-Punjab* reports that the king had accidentally contributed to the suicide of a Brahman, who cursed him before dying: ‘whatever dish he was served was instantaneously infested with worms, while his drink was transformed into blood’ (Moran, 2013: 5). In response, the king went to ask for help from a Vairāgī ascetic living in a cave, who, according to the Kullu tradition was Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī. Kṛṣṇadās announced that in order to achieve redemption, the king would have to relinquish his kingdom to Raghunāth, whose *mūrti* was kept in a temple in Ayodhya (*ibid*). Therefore, the king asked a disciple of Kṛṣṇadās to go and bring the *mūrti*, which he did a few weeks later, although the Brahmans who were presiding over the temple in Ayodhya tried their best to take their *mūrti* back. Because both parties wanted the statue of Raghunāth, king Jagat Singh proposed as a solution to keep the *mūrti* in his reign but giving in exchange a portion of his daily offerings that had to be sent to the priests of Ayodhya. The Ayodhya Brahmans agreed and the *mūrti* of Raghunāth was ceremoniously installed in the temple. The curse was removed and the Raja became a devotee of Raghunāth and Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī. As a result, the faith of Viṣṇu was spread throughout the valley and Vairāgī-s began to come to install their *mūrti*-s in religious institutions on state-gifted lands (Moran, 2013: 6).

Considering the fact that Kṛṣṇadās is generally said to have lived at the beginning of the 16th century, the possibility that he was actually guru of Jagat Singh seems dubious. However, Burchett stresses that to this day, ‘carefully guarded and worshipped in the royal palace at Kullu are footwear and a tattered garment allegedly belonging to Payahārī [...] Furthermore, not far from Kullu, in the mountain village of Jhiri, just a couple kilometers outside of Naggar, is the cave where Payahārī is said to have resided as well as a temple

²⁹⁸ Moran says that the cult of Viṣṇu was present in the valley as early as the 9th century (2013: 4). It would be interesting to know which kind of worship was most popular then and whether this could have somehow influenced the conversion of the king.

dedicated to him that also claims to have some of his earthly possessions in its safekeeping' (2012: 72).

Considering the wandering behavior of Kṛṣṇadās as described above, we can suppose that he might have reached the mountains in Kullu, which was already a well-known shelter for ascetics from several other orders. Hence, based on the local stories about him, it seems likely that he was regarded as a representative of the Vairāgī-s,²⁹⁹ a class of Vaiṣṇava ascetics that populated the area, and was pointed to as the explanation for the Raja's change of faith. It should be noted that Priyādās inserted the story of the conversion of the Raja into his commentary of the *Bhaktamāl*. According to Moran, this reference demonstrates that just '60 years after the adoption of Raghunath as state deity' a 'Vaishnava devotionalist in Braj [Priyādās] deemed this story worthy of inclusion in the BM [Bhaktamāl]'. This may suggest that the ruler of Kullu came to 'exemplify devotionism among Vaiṣṇava circles in the subcontinent, and his kingdom [had become] a significant center of patronage for its adherents' (2013: 10).

6.5 The Bālānanda Maṭh of Jaipur³⁰⁰

The settlement of Rāmānandī *nāgā*-s in Jaipur dates back to the 1720s. There is a court protocol from this decade in which the *mahant* Vrijānanda is mentioned as 'mahant of nāgās' (Horstmann, 2013). It is quite difficult to reconstruct the past of this lineage, as there are no such documents available. Horstmann reports that it is written in an undated document addressed to Maharaja Pratap Singh of Jaipur (around 1778 and 1803) that 'a temple standing on a land belonging to the Maharaja and administered by a Rāmānandī temple priest and disciple of Bālānand had enjoyed royal patronage since the regnal period of Maharaja Bisansingh (r. 1689-99), the father of Jaisingh II.' This could serve as a hint about the antiquity of the lineage that would be connected with Amer at least from the end of the 17th century (Horstmann, 2005).

The *mūrti* of the religious center, God Rādhāvinodīlāl, was given to Vrijānanda in 1720 by Kṛṣṇadev Bhaṭṭācārya, who was the *mahant* of Govindadev temple and he held a position of great importance in the court of Jai Singh. The gift of the *mūrti* and of the grant associated with it, allowed Vrijānanda to obtain powerful status in Jaipur, as it was a 'precious object of religious legitimacy and a source of wealth in a location that provided

²⁹⁹ According to Moran (2013: 12), the Vairāgī-s were from Piṇḍorī Dhām. This would explain the link with Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī and their common tutelary deity, Raghunāth, in Piṇḍorī and Kullu.

³⁰⁰ Fig. 2.

him and his soldiers' mobility' (Horstmann, 2005).

As already mentioned, Vrijānanda had to sign a bond for Jai Singh in 1730. This bond displays Jai Singh's attempts to control the *akhārā* branch as well. Pinch maintains that in the 1730s Jai Singh 'not only sought to block the entry of the low-born into the akharas but to disallow arms among Vaishnava ascetics generally' (2006: 72). He solicited four bond agreements from prominent Vaiṣṇava *mahant*-s, nine of which identified themselves as Rāmānandī. Horstmann, who analyzed the document (Kapad Dvara 1176), reports that Vrijānanda heads this list of Rāmānandī-s. The nine Rāmānandī-s abjured carrying arms and forbade armed monks to join their communal feasts, declaring that the contraveners would be expelled from the 'seven [-branched] Śrī Rāmānand sampradāya of Śrī Sītārāmājī' (Horstmann, 2005). Considering the military strength of Bālānanda a few decades later, we can guess that these agreements did not last for long. However, from this document it seems likely that in the 1730s, the military organization of the *akhārā*-s was shaped into seven groups.

In 1745, the *mūrti* of Rādhāvinodīlāl was taken back from Vrijānanda, who then installed a *mūrti* of Sītārām. He successfully requested that the grant associated with Rādhāvinodīlāl was transferred to Sītārām. The deity became the object of charitable grants issued in its favor by the Shekhavati nobility (Horstmann, 2005).³⁰¹

Vrijānanda died in 1752 and was succeeded by Bālānanda, who remained *mahant* until his death in 1795. During his *mahant*-ship, Bālānanda 'broadened the basis of patronage extended to him by the ruling houses and the chiefs of Jaipur, Bharatpur, Shekhavati and Alwar. He fought for the Jats against the Mughals and in the Mughal-Rajput coalition against the Marathas. A turning point of his career was the battle of Barsana (1773) where he fought for the Jats against the army of Najāf Khān, who led the campaign in the name of the Mughal emperor' (Horstmann, 2005).

The military power of this center began to vacillate only in 1818, when the British took root in Jaipur and the kingdom of Bharatpur, where the Bālānandī Rāmānandī-s had also gained great support, was conquered by the army of the East India Company. *Mahant* Sevānanda resigned in 1844 to retire to the pilgrimage place of Lohargal in the Sikar district (Horstmann, 2005).

Today the Bālānanda Maṭh is a trust that was registered in 1965 under custody of the state. The present *mahant* is Svāmī Lakṣmaṇānanda, who received the abbotship on

³⁰¹ The first grant of two hundreds *bighā*-s of land was issued in the summer of 1745; BM, document of Śrāvaṇa b. 1, V.S. 1802/3 July 1745 (Horstmann, 2005).

February 2, 1982 during the Ardh Kumbh Melā of Prayag under the supervision of the *mahant* of the Revāsā Pīṭh Raghvācārya (*ibid*). Horstmann claims that the *mahant*, in keeping with his traditional role as representative of a political and militant branch of the *sampradāya*, became a 'leading figure on the Board of Religious Advisers for Rajasthan of the Viśva Hindu Pariṣad, and organizer for the state of the *kār-sevā* conducted by the VHP within the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement' (*ibid*).

Horstmann has underlined that the economic condition of the place was not good at the time of her fieldwork. When I met the *mahant*, the center appeared to be desolated, although undergoing restoration, with the names of donors written on a well-displayed board. Lakṣmāṇanda told me that the center is called Laśkarī (meaning 'soldier') because those *sādhu*-s living there were real warriors involved in the wars between various rulers.³⁰² He defined the Laśkarī Rāmānandī-s as a kind of umbrella for *nāgā* ascetics, as they represent all the *akhārā*-s. The *sādhu*-s initiated in the Maṭh are recognized as Laśkarī by their *tilak*, which consists of the three white lines that are characteristic of the Maṭh.³⁰³

6.6 Ayodhya

Because many authoritative studies have been written about Ayodhya and its history,³⁰⁴ I will present here only a few pieces of information that are relevant to our study about the city from the 13th century to the present.

Starting in the 13th century, Ayodhya's rulership fell under a succession of powers: first the power of the Delhi Sultanate, then that of Jaunpur Sultanate and later under the power of Moghuls Emperors. Ayodhya during the 16th century is described in the *Babur Nama* as a flourishing Hindu city. In fact, as Bakker stresses, in the 16th century Ayodhya 'rose to greatness as a religious centre,' thanks to the relative stability and welfare brought by Muslim authority (1982: 109). It is in this period that Tulsīdās came to the city and began to write the *Rāmcaritmānas*. According to Bakker's analysis of various versions of the *Ayodhyā Mahātmya*, this period saw the re-discovery of holy places connected with the life of Rām, which were occupied by local Brahmans who were able to benefit from the

³⁰² Interview, March 13, 2013.

³⁰³ Rām Vinayak Dās, a Rāmānandī who belongs to this Maṭh and is very close to the Jagadgurū, told me the story linked to their *tilak*. He said that one time, a group of Rāmānandī-s had just come back after the morning bath, when a group of Saṃnyāsī-s attacked them. Because they did not have time to properly apply the *tilak* to their foreheads, they took a white colored dye and made three fast vertical lines. Since that day the *tilak* has remained with the same shape and completely white.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Bakker (1982), van der Veer (1988).

tolerant reign of Akbar (1986: 135-136).

Tulsīdās also lived in 16th century Ayodhya; hence we can also suppose the presence of ascetics and of Rāmānandī-s living in the city at that time. Given the Rām *bhakti* influence that has existed in the city since the 13th century and its closeness to Varanasi, it seems probable that some Rāmānandī ascetics or lay people had moved to Ayodhya and established small Rāmānandī *āśram*-s that did not survive over the centuries, as they did not receive the necessary support. One should also consider that there might have also been a strong Śaiva *nāgā* presence in the city. This could have discouraged the settlement of Rāmānandī ascetics, who would have preferred a more favorable environment, such as Rajasthan.

The settlement of large numbers of Rāmānandī-s in Ayodhya only began in the 18th century. According to Paramasivan, Rāmānandī-s suffered the interference of King Jai Singh II and preferred to search for new sites eastwards (2010: 89). Although the Bālānanda Maṭh in the 18th century was experiencing a period of splendor supported by various nobles and kings, it was restricted in some ways by Jai Singh, perhaps inspiring some ascetics to leave in search of new opportunities. Also Rāmānandī *nāgā*-s travelled East, as the political environment had changed: the collapse of Moghul Empire had allowed various regional kingdoms to arise. Ayodhya, which until the first decades of the 18th century was a center of the Moghul administration, was left behind by the Nawabs who decided to move their court to Faizabad (1740) and later on to Lakhnau (1775).

This change in the political landscape made possible the expansion of various Hindu groups in Ayodhya who supported the construction of new temples and institutions. According to van der Veer, the reason for such strong patronage ‘can be found in the process in which Awadh under its Nawabs passed from the status of Mughal province to that of an autonomous regional state, during which it doubled its original size, attained great economic and political power, and began to develop its own cultural and historical identity’ (1988: 144).

The first historically recorded Rāmānandī institutions are *nāgā akhārā*-s. As reported by van der Veer, they had to compete with the Daśanāmī-s and were only able to become a strong religious force in the city when they settled in the Hanumān Gaṛhī.³⁰⁵ Van der Veer gives examples of the patronage from which they benefited: Safdar Jang (r. 1739-1754) awarded seven *bīghā*-s of land to Abhayrāmdās, the *mahant* of the Nirvānī *akhārā*,

³⁰⁵ Van der Veer reports that the Hanumān Gaṛhī was occupied before by the Juna *akhārā*, which was attacked and defeated by *nāgā*-s of the Nirvānī *akhārā* (1988: 146).

while Asaf-ud-Daulah (r. 1775-1793) raised fund to build part of the present fortress of the Hanumān Gārhi (1988: 144).

The expansion of the *akhārā*-s is described by Canery in the 19th century. I report here a part of his report because it not only gives a vivid description of the *akhārā*-s and their power in the city, but also illustrates recruitment of discipleships, showing once again that the injunction of Jai Singh II had not been effective in the long term except for Galtā:

The expenses of these different establishments [...] are met from the Revenues of lands, which have been assigned to them; from the offerings of pilgrims and visitors; and from the alms collected by the disciples in their wanderings all over India. There appear to be as I have already pointed out in my "Notes on Races, &c.," several grades of discipleship in connection with these establishments.

I. There are the ordinary worshippers of all the different Hindu castes, who still retaining their position in the world and their home ties, become disciples in the simple hope that their prayers offered under the auspices of their spiritual guides, will be heard and their temporal wishes granted.

II. There are also those who forsaking the world and their homes, join the fraternity of devotees in view solely to their eternal well being, a privilege which is within the reach of all castes of Hindus. Of these latter those who were Brahmins and Chhatris [Kṣatriya] before initiation are exempted from manual labour, while the menial offices of cooking, sweeping, water drawing &c. devolve upon those of the brethren who were originally of the lower castes. A disciple of the 2nd is for a time admitted as a novice and entrusted with unimportant secular offices only. He is then required to make a round of the great places of pilgrimage such as Dwarka Jagarnath, Gya &cs. &c., and on his return thence he is finally admitted to all the privileges of the order; celibacy is enforced, and those who surreptitiously marry, or steal, are expelled from the brotherhood. Brahmins and Chhatris are admitted to membership without limit as to age, but candidates, of other castes must be under the age of sixteen years, so that they may readily imbibe the doctrines of the order. The orders of the Mahant and his advisers, the heads of Thoks, must be implicitly obeyed. The best of the disciples are chosen to remain at the temple to conduct the devotions in solitude.

Nirmohi sect.- It is said that one Gobind Das came from Jaipur some 200 years ago and having acquired a few Bighas of revenue-free land, he built a shrine and settled himself at Ram Ghat. Mahant Tulshi Das is the sixth in succession. There are now two branches of this order, one at Ram Ghat, and the other occupying the temples at Guptar Ghat. They have rent free holdings in Basti, Manakpur and Khurdabad.

The Digambari sect.- Siri Balram Das came to Ajudhia 200 years ago, whence it is now known, and having built a temple settled here. Mahant Hira Das is the seventh incumbent. The establishment of resident disciples is very small being limited to 15; they have several revenue free holdings in the district.

The Khaki sect.- When Remchandr became an exile from Ajudhia his brother Lachhman is said in his grief to have smeared his body with ashes and to have accompanied him. Hence he was called Khaki, and his admiring followers bear that name to this date. In the days of Shuja-ud-Dowla one Mahant Dya Ram is said to have come from Chitrkot, and having obtained 4 bighas of land, he thereon established the Akhara, and this order of Bairagis now includes 180 persons, of whom 50 are resident and 100 itinerant. This establishment has some small assignments of land in this, and in the Gondah district. Ram Das the present Mahant is seventh in succession from the local founder of the order.

The Mahanirbani sect.- Mahant Parsotam Das came to Ajudhia from Kotah Bundi in the days of Shuja-ud- Dowla [1732-1775 A.D], and built a temple at Ajudhia. Dial Das the present incumbent is the sixth in succession. He has 25 disciples, the great majority of whom are itinerant mendicants. The words Mahanirbani imply the worshipping of God without asking for favours, either in this world or the next.

The Santoki sect.- Mahant Rati Ram arrived at Ajudhia from Jaipur in the days of Mansur Ali Khan, and building a temple founded this order. Two or three generations after him the temple was abandoned by his followers, and one Nidhi Singh, an influential distiller in the days of the Ex-king, took the site and built thereon another temple. After this Khushal Das of this order returned to Ajudhia and lived and died under an Asok tree, and there the temple which is now used by the fraternity, was built by Ramkishn Das the present head of the community.

The Niralambhi sect.- Siri Birmal Das is said to have come from Kotah in the time of Shuja-ud-Dowla, and to have built a temple in Ajudhia, but it was afterwards abandoned. Subsequently Narsing Das of this order erected a new building near Darshan Sing's temple. The present head of the fraternity is Ram Sevak, and they are dependent solely on the offerings of pilgrims (Canergy, 1870: 19-20).³⁰⁶

Once the Rāmānandī-s' presence was safeguarded by *nāgā-s*, *rasik* Rāmānandī-s also began to pour into the city. As we have seen, *rasik* Rāmānandī-s in Rajasthan had come under the influence of other Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya-s*, especially those linked to Kṛṣṇa. As Paramasivan

³⁰⁶ From Canergy's account we infer that low caste disciples have always been accepted among Rāmānandī-s, although there were differences in the treatment of novitiates of different castes, perhaps I would suggest, as a means to make them expiate their original impurity. It has also to be noticed that these differences disappeared, according to the account, once the ascetic was considered to be completely formed (after the pilgrimage). Another extremely important trait is that celibacy – which had been called into question in the Galta's meetings – was an essential requirement for those who wanted to join the *sampradāya*.

argues (2010: 87):

The earliest Vaishnava *sampradays* (which were centered on the worship of Krishna) displayed a heightened preoccupation with physically locating mythical sites that had thus far existed only *literarily* in the landscape of North India. From the early sixteenth century onward Vaishnavites of all the major sectarian affiliations (Nimbarkis, Gaudiyas and Vallabhans) began to converge in the area known as Braj or the *vraja-maṇḍala* made famous in the tenth chapter of the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*.

Rāmānandī-s followed this wave of discovery of the religious abode only at the end of the 18th century. Paramasivan suggests that they were pushed to search for new areas by the religious interventions of King Jai Singh II (2010: 43), but it is likely that they were also influenced by the possibility to further enlarge the *sampradāya* in places linked with the story of Rām once the patronage had changed and the hostile ascetics who had previously occupied the area had left.

The earliest *rasik* institutions established in Ayodhya were the Baṛā Sthān in the 18th century by Rāmānandī Rāmprasād Bindukācārya and the Kanak Bhavan temple that remained quite small until it received the patronage of the Maharaja of Orcha in the 19th century (Paramasivan, 2010: 91).

Beginning in the 19th century, Rāmānandī-s became dominant in the religious life of the city.

6.7 Citrakut and Janakpurdham

We have very little information about Citrakut and its re-discovery.³⁰⁷ We have mentioned that in the 18th century there were *sādhu*-s who left the Braj area to discover places linked with the story of Rām.

We know that a certain Sārīram Dās moved towards Citrakut, and that when Jai Singh II ordered Rāmrapanna to marry, he left Galtā and went to Citrakut as well. According to Burghart (1976: 139), Citrakut had already been ‘discovered’ in the 16th century. However, Burghart does not give further explanation of his claim and further evidence that would support this theory is scanty.

According to the Rām legend, Citrakut is the place where Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ spent part of their exile from Ayodhya. Rām Dās Lamb says that in Citrakut, Rām is mostly thought of

³⁰⁷ Lutgendorf explains that this tradition of rediscovering religious places was typical of ‘Chaitanyaite goswamis’ of the 16th century. Through their meditative wandering, they rediscovered lost sites associated with Krishna. However, such repossession of religious landscapes had political implications. As Lutgendorf argues, ‘the holy places of the region needed rediscovery, it is said, because they had become hidden during century of mlecch (barbarian) rule’ (1991: 264).

his ascetic role – a renouncer who is unattached, homeless, and a practitioner of austerities. Despite the lack of evidence on the city’s history, we can have a sight of the present religious context through Lamb’s observation:

The region is still sparsely populated and rural, mostly surrounded by woods and jungle. Nevertheless, within a day’s walk of the main bazaar there are well over 500 temples and shrines devoted to Rām, Sītā and or Hanumān [...] Approximately one to two thousand *vairāgīs* reside in the area at any one time, and there is a great deal of emphasis on various forms of *tapasya*, or ascetic practices, including yoga, silence, solitude, fasting, baring oneself to the elements, personal rituals, and so forth. Many *vairāgīs* see Chitrakut as an ideal place to undertake strict and austere forms of *sādhanā*. Pilgrims who travel there often seek out ascetics to talk to and learn from. Some *vairāgīs* will avoid them, preferring to practice rather than preach while they are there. (1994: 130)

To understand the city of Janakpur, located in modern day Nepal, we can refer again to the study of Burghart. We have seen that during the reign of Jai Singh II, some Rāmānandī-s in Galta decided to leave the place to avoid breaking their vow of celibacy. Among them was Sūr Kiśor, who we find in the oral traditions collected by Burghart about the discovery of Janakpur.

According to the story reported by Burghart, Sūr Kiśor lived in Lohargal (Sikar) about three hundred years ago. He was such a fervent devotee of Sītā that he used to carry her *mūrti* everywhere, but he was still not satisfied with his devotional practice because he could not perform it in Janakpur, the legendary place of Sītā’s birth. One day the *mūrti* herself suggested that he go and find her and her palace in the land bounded by the Himalayas, the Ganges, the Kosi and the Gandaki. During his journey, when he had reached the jungle of northern Mithila, his idol of Sītā, which he had not brought with him, appeared before him. He took this to mean that he had found the ancient site of Janakpur (Burghart, 1976: 139-140).

Burghart’s informants, who were ascetics and *paṇḍit-s*, said that only after ascetics began to live in the place did householders also start to come (*ibid*: 145). Later on, rulers from nearby kingdoms also began to support and develop the area.

Burghart points out that the Terai region had already been settled by Hindu peasants who were organized into small kingdoms and who possessed a sufficiently large surplus to build large temples. When Vaiṣṇava-s arrived in the region, they found that these hypothetical patrons worshipped deities other than Rām and Kṛṣṇa. However, starting in the beginning of the 18th century, there were several land donations to Rāmānandī *sādhu-s* (to Jānkī

monastery in 1727; Kuwa monastery in 1730; Lakṣmaṇ monastery in 1753): ‘Elsewhere in the Mahottari district the Sen kings gifted land to the Ramanandi sadhus who founded monasteries at Basahiya, Simardehi, and Matihani’ but at the same time they also gifted Daśanāmī *sādhu*-s (1976: 164). Even during the Shah dynasty (1768-1846), grants were offered to local ascetics, although they were less generous in size. Burghart explains that a king used to offer land to *mahant*-s for the performance of religious activities, in order to secure the favor of the deities and the wealth of his kingdom (1976: 165). In his detailed study, Burghart describes the role of these Rāmānandī *mahant*-s, who were like local rulers and were part of organizations known as *maṇḍal*-s, whose function was similar to a regional sub-caste council:

This maṇḍal comprises those Vaiṣṇava ascetics who dwell in the same region and who by virtue of their propinquity meet one another on formal and informal occasions. The circle is usually directed by an ascetic who is known as the Blessed Abbot (Śrī mahant). The blessed Abbot is entrusted with the authority to witness and to approve the customary procedures of the sect and to deal with breaches of customary law by the members of the circle. The circle is usually known by the name of the village in which the monastery of the blessed Abbot is located and Bairagis of the region see themselves as being members of that village’s circle. (1976: 312)

Janakpur is then another example of the ability of Rāmānandī-s to settle in a place and successfully gain the support of local patrons.

For a present sketch of the city, I refer again to Lamb:

As in Ayodhya, the forms of practice there are temple-centered devotion and rituals, and the focus is on the lover/beloved relationship to Ram as typified in his relationship with Sītā. In varying degrees, many of the Rāmānandīs there identify themselves as the *sākhīs*, or female friends of Sītā, and emphasize that relationship with her as their form of bhakti. This is similar to the way in which some Kṛṣṇa devotees view themselves as *gopīs*, the female friends of Rādhā. However in Bansana, the place most associated with Rādhā’s *līlā* she becomes the primary deity and is worshipped as a goddess, while in Janakpur, Sita is not worshipped as such but specifically as the wife and female counterpart of Rām. (1994: 132-133)

The role that the city still has for the *sampradāya* is testified by the *yātrā* that the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya organized from Varanasi to Janakpur in November 2014 to perform a *mahā yajña* (fire sacrifice) to celebrate the marriage between Rām and Sītā.

6.8 A few remarks on patronage

By analyzing the behaviors of various rulers, we can see that the patronage to religious centers or leaders followed two paths that depended on whether a ruling dynasty or religious center was the first main source of power there. For example, B.N. Goswamy and J.S. Grewal describe the power of a well affirmed religious center in their work about the Jogis of Jakhbar, Punjab. They have argued that the center was supported first by Moghuls and later by Sikhs for specific reasons:

Favors upon the *mahants* of Jakhbar by the Mughal rulers may have been on their part an act alike of piety and prudence. [...] The fact of the *mahants* wielding enormous local influence must undoubtedly have been yet another consideration with the Mughals when they conferred these grants on this establishment, for by these gifts they were creating what could easily be called vested interest. (1967: 15-16)

As *mahant*-s had a certain control over the local population, Moghuls used to donate villages and fields to them. Goswamy and Grewal say that in Moghul's written documents, religious leaders, be they Hindu or Muslim, were regarded as the 'army of prayer':

[...] which from the political point of view, was equally important with the imperial army. [...] the "army of prayer" contributed in its own way towards the acceptance of Mughal authority by a considerable number of people. (*ibid*: 23)

This attitude can be generalized to all those rulers who supported religious centers but believed in a different God, and interpreted with the mechanism described by Manesh Sharma as 'consent-to-rule'. Sharma argues that when a political power has cultural or religious symbols that differ from that of the local population it seeks to control, then it builds its consent through the co-existence of disparate symbols to receive the approval of the local population (2009: 15).³⁰⁸

By consequence, it seems that in these circumstances it was not the religious leader who looked to obtain patronage, but rather the political ruler, who gave support to religious communities in order to achieve the society's acknowledgment. In this case, we can infer that those *sampradāya*-s with a wider social appeal attracted the attention of rulers. This type of patronage could not affect the religious life of a Maṭh in its *sāḍhanā* for

³⁰⁸ Sharma specifies the difference between legitimation and consent-to-rule. The first 'is the process whereby an act, process, or ideology is attached to the tradition-norms and values within the given society.' however this can spring 'from the dominant cultural symbols maintained by the tradition or arrogated by the ruler.' When the ruler is not part of the cultural symbols of the main tradition, he has to obtain a consent-to rule (2009: 15).

few reasons: the patrons could have a different religious faith and consequently not be involved in the doctrinal matters of the center; or the religious center could have had various Hindu patrons from different geographic areas that followed different branches of types of devotion, hence making it difficult to appease all of them.

The other kind of situation, in which the ruler is already in power, usually tells a story of conversion. In fact, as noticed by Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot, rulers in the 16th century increasingly addressed their worship to Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* orders, moving away from those of tantric Śaivism and Śāktism.³⁰⁹ Arik Moran argues that the stories of most rulers' conversion to Vaiṣṇavism often present a similar pattern:

(i) peripatetic ascetics venture into a kingdom and gain the raja's favour by supplying spiritual, military and/or economic support; (ii) the sadhus become sufficiently powerful to attract extensive royal patronage, which leads to the foundation of a temple for their presiding deity in the capital and is usually accompanied by the adoption of their belief system as a state religion; (iii) the peripatetic sadhus establish permanent settlements in the kingdom and/or are joined by sedentary temple officiates affiliated with their movement. (2013: 7)

In this case, it seems that the charisma and value placed on an ascetic was the main vehicle for a new religious belief, or at least provided a good justification for the move from one order to another.

Rāmānandī ascetics were known for their wandering lifestyle, which put them in close contact with the lower strata of society and thus helped facilitate the spread of the *sampradāya* and of Rām *bhakti*. What we do not know for sure is why the population was ready to accept this Vaiṣṇava wave in particular. As reported by Burchett, Keith Thomas says: 'beliefs derive much of their prestige from their social relevance, if we want to understand why the beliefs are held or rejected, we must examine their relationship to the society in which they operate' (1975: 102).

As we have seen, the society was a multi-religious one in which sants, bards and wandering ascetics approached God in both the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* tradition, often addressing him with the same name, Rām. Rām was already part of a collective consciousness due to the impact of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the different roles he played in his

³⁰⁹ As underlined by Burchett (2012: 38), this shift was not an erasure: 'tantric Śaivism and Śāktism in no way disappeared, rather, generally speaking their role (especially their public presence) diminished and they became subordinate to the ideologies, institutions, and symbols of devotional Vaiṣṇavism [...] this shift was not a universal fact, but was incomplete and uneven, occurring at different times in different locations and in a few places not occurring at all.'

life – as a king, husband, brother, ascetic – clearly exemplified qualities in which anyone could find an applicable teaching. Furthermore, it was not necessary to be a Rām worshipper to know the story of Rām. This created a fertile soil for the acceptance of wandering ascetics who were ‘publicizing’ a new religious approach based on Rām *bhakti*.

This consideration leads us toward further questions: Did a new religious approach spread across the region because of its circulation among the common population or because of the support it received from rulers? Did its social relevance push a given ruler to support one religious center instead of another, or were the ruler’s actions based on his respect for a specific charismatic leader or faith? Were grants to religious centers a way to have areas under control without giving power to other nobles or were they a symbol of the importance that rulers and nobles placed on faith and religious traditions? And, most broadly: what was the role of local religion and religious leaders in medieval India?

In posing these questions I wish to demonstrate that there are many variables that should be taken into consideration for determining the evolution of a specific religious center and a *sampradāya* in one direction rather than another over a given span of time.

7. Rāmānandī-s during the English Raj: a glimpse from below

We have mentioned in the previous chapter that the political presence of the English Raj, the technological innovation they brought – particularly in print media – and their critique of Indian religions led traditional *sampradāya*-s to reflect about their origins.

Some branches of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* began to modify their activities as a result of the British presence. In fact, beginning in the late 18th century, the East India Company started a campaign to limit the movement of armed ascetics. In 1773 Warren Hastings proclaimed a ban for all ‘Biraugis and Sunnasses’ from Company Bengal, with the exception of those who were settled who ‘quietly employ themselves in their religious function’ (Pinch, 2006: 18). Hastings’s ban did not address those wandering ascetics not involved in military activities. In fact, as already said, the word *vairāgī* specifies a lifestyle that is shared by several Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s and in particular by Rāmānandī-s. This term did not necessarily mean *nāgā*-s ascetics. Reporting the words of Buchanan, Pinch claims that in the 19th century, the majority of *vairāgī* Rāmānandī-s were known as *brikat*-s, likely a vulgar form of *virakta* (meaning ‘recluse’ or ‘detached’), to be distinguished from the group of *nāgā*-s. These wandering, detached ascetics were the religious figures who were the most in contact with the grassroots of the population (1990: 108-109).

The East India Company tended to favor and support those renouncers who more closely corresponded with the Western concept of a monk-priest, who was committed to the retired life and concentrated on God's worship – the type of ascetic that was already presented in the Indian religious landscape. In fact, as Pinch reports, there was 'an increasing desire on the part of these Indian religious reformers, especially those promoting a loving relationship with the divine and all that that implied, socially as well as politically, to rein [wandering ascetics] in' (*ibid.*) Furthermore, Pinch claims that Hastings was 'aware of this, since he himself invoked sedentary Ramanandis – the primary authors of that reformist sentiment – as emblematic of the kind of monastic-priestly ideal he had in mind'.

As we have seen before, *rasik* centers especially in Ayodhya had already found the support of Nawabs and, with the added support of the English Raj, could spread even further. S. Śrīvāstav reports that after the mutiny of 1857, the Vairāgī-s in Ayodhyā received grants in the city and adjacent areas because they had supported the English (1991: 45).

Leaving aside those centers supported by political powers and focusing our attention on the reports of foreigners in India, the image of Vairāgī-s (Rāmānandī-s) that arises is more vivid.

Wilson describes Rāmānandī-s as 'by far the most numerous class of sectaries in Gangetic India [they] have numerous votaries, but they are chiefly from the poorer and inferior classes' (1846: 44). Between 1868-1875 John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye describe Vairāgī-s in their account, *The People of India*, which includes observations from 1868 to 1875: 'In penance and mortification Byragees far exceed Gosais, and never indulge in the luxuries which many of the latter adopt. As a rule, Byragees are very charitable, and if their offerings exceed their own requirements they are distributed to the poor' (1868-75: 403). Through the reports of Buchanan, Pinch stresses that the majority of Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s had a great influence over the population as village guru, who represented the 'point of contact between rural peasants and the monastic networks that crisscrossed the subcontinent' (1996: 32).

Although we do not have evidence about the activities of this wide group of Rāmānandī-s, we know that from the 19th century their appeal over the population in northern India, especially in Eastern areas like Bihar, increased. According to Pinch, the reason lies in 'the liberal social philosophy of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, which would have attracted many low-status groups into the institutional and ideological ambit of the Vaiṣṇava belief

(1996: 38).

At the beginning of the 20th century groups of peasant Śūdra-s claimed the social status of Kṣatriya, on the basis of past 'historical evidences' and through the use of Vaiṣṇava morality and symbolic vocabulary, based on the lives of Rām and Kṛṣṇa (Pinch, 1996: 81-114). Pinch supposes that those lower castes that could improve their economic condition under the English Raj, were attracted by Rāmānandī ascetics since they 'were overtly directing their new economic resources toward an articulation of a religious, as well as social, identity' (1990: 127). Rāmānandī-s not only had always attracted followers from low castes into their *sampradāya*, but also had encouraged 'a pure lifestyle as a way of undermining the caste discrimination that stigmatized low-status populations' (Pinch, 1996: 39).³¹⁰ This approach permitted Rāmānandī-s to increase their strength in the Gangetic area and facilitated the social ascent of low Śūdra and *achhut* (untouchable) *jāti*-s, which became the base for the *jāti* (Kṣatriya) reform movements in the late 19th and early 20th century.³¹¹

It is interesting to note that while Vaiṣṇavism gave some castes an ideology that formed the basis of their identity, Rāmānandī-s were also influenced by the spirit of reform, identity and independence growing in 20th century India. One of the most important figures of this century was Bhagavadācārya, who was an ascetic supporter of Gandhi and of the Indian National Congress and was also influenced by the Ārya Samāj. I would suggest that some Rāmānandī-s were influenced by the changing political and religious landscape of their day, which in turn brought changes to their *sampradāya* community;³¹² however, my hypothesis needs further studies to be confirmed.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a movement arose within the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* to declare the total independence of Rāmānandī-s from the Rāmānūjī

³¹⁰ Vaiṣṇavism was associated with a 'pure life' as the followers of Viṣṇu were (and still are) strict in their dietary rules and behavior, while followers and ascetics of other groups could indulge in activities not considered pure (such as drinking alcohol). Hence, through the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, enriched low-caste individuals could enter in the Vaiṣṇava orthodox realm, and following Vaiṣṇava behaviors and rules (such as not consuming meat or fish, not drinking liquor, studying Sanskrit etc.) and could thus demonstrate self-respect.

³¹¹ These movements could be defined as a case of Sanskritization. As has been explained by M.N. Srinivas, social movements had often the purpose of creating a space for specific groups under the Brahmanic umbrella. To create these changes there are two mechanisms: one is called Sanskritization and the other is Brahmanization. Sanskritization is a process whereby low castes modify their beliefs, rituals and practices in order to be closer to those who are dominant in the religious landscape. Brahmanization is the process by which members of the higher castes modify a sectarian movement to support orthodox values (1971: 6).

³¹² For example, Pinch refers the case of Baba Ramcandra who was 'very much part of the Rāmānandī, Vaishnava ethos' and 'a man who would have been disparaged as a political sadhu by the government but who was in fact the central instigator of peasant dissent in Awadh between 1919 and 1922.' Pinch stresses that he used a morality founded on the *Rāmcaritmānas* to combat landlord tyranny (1996: 11-12).

sampradāya with the purpose of eliminating some elitist behaviors that Rāmānūjī-s displayed towards Rāmānandī-s and to bring back to the *sampradāya* the egalitarian spirit that had been at the core of Rāmānanda’s teaching.

8. Changes in the 20th century

8.1 The starting point and the turning point

In Galta, the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* was recognized as part of the *catuḥ sampradāya-s*, and specifically of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*, although the two *sampradāya-s* did have some key differences on religious beliefs and behaviors. Because not all Rāmānandī-s followed commensality rules or had specific rules for the recruitment of new *sādhu-s*, it is said that Rāmānūjī-s used to treat Rāmānandī-s as inferiors.

The negative view that Rāmānūjī-s held of Rāmānandī-s was well-known at the beginning of the 20th century, as testified by the article written by Vijaye Raghav Prapann, “Ācārya-paramparā ke Apratīya Puruṣa: Swāmī Bhagavadacarya”, contained in the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*:

[...] Rāmānūjī-s did not respect Rāmānandī-s, and used to not respect even the murti of Ram, whose feet they refused to worship.³¹³

In the Rām temple, Rāmānūjī-s were ashamed to prostrate themselves following the *saṣṭāṅg daṇḍavat*³¹⁴ and to recite the Rām mantra as well. In fact, they considered the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as a part of their own *sampradāy*. This theory was followed by some ‘half’ Rāmānandīs, where half means that, although they worshipped Rām, they followed Rāmānūj’s teachings. Nevertheless, they were not learned *sādhu-s*, but more *pahlvan* (wrestler), who knew something about the *sampradāya* only for having spent time with Rāmānūjī-s. Against this group of supporters of the dependence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* from the Rāmānūjī ones, there was the group composed by Bhagvadās, Raghuvardās, other mahant-s and the *akhārā-s*. (2001: 293, my translation)

Another author, *paṇḍit* Rāmcharitrācārya, wrote in an article entitled “Sarvobhuama Paṇḍit Rāj Swāmī Śrī Bhagavadācārya Jī Mahārāj” and published in *Swāmī Bhagavadācārya Shatabdi Smṛti Grant*, that these half Rāmānandī-s were not educated, which served as other reason why Rāmānūjī-s considered them inferior:

Before the independence, Rāmānandīs were considered as *sādhārṇ* Vaiṣṇavas (simple or rough), to such an extent that Rāmānūjīs could employ them as *gulāmī-s* (slave) during

³¹³ There is a specific puja in which the devotee has to drink the water remaining after the washing up of the feet (*carāṇa*) of God.

³¹⁴ To touch the floor with eight parts of the body: forehead, chest, both shoulders, hands and feet.

the Kumbh Melā, where Rāmānandīs used to carry their palanquins. Moreover, the same Rāmānandīs considered Rāmānūjīs to be their *ācārya*-s, so that they had to show them respect. (1977: 110, my translation)

Both scholars and Rāmānandī-s claim that the situation worsened because of the behavior of the *ācārya* of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava Totadri Maṭh, *mahant* Swāmī Anantācārya. He did not prostrate before the images of Sītā and Rām in Rāmānandī temples, refusing even to accept *prasād*, the ritual offering of food or drink (Pinch, 1998: 65). When the *mahant* was travelling around India, whenever he met Rāmānandī-s, he obliged them to remove their *kañṭhī* (necklace). Nevertheless, when he reached Ayodhya, many people were still ready to listen to him speak because he was so famous (Prapann, 2001: 294). Pinch gives the example of Swāmī Dharnidharācārya, who was so impressed by Anantācārya's discourses in Kanak Bhavan, that he decided to become his disciple (1998: 64).

Van der Veer describes other episodes that could have added to the tenseness of the atmosphere in Ayodhya: another *ācārya* from Mysore refused commensality with Rāmānandī-s, despite showing respect before the *mūrti* of Rām. Later on, a Śrī Vaiṣṇava who was teaching Sanskrit in the Catuḥ Sampradāya Vedānta Vidyalaya, refused to teach those who did not have Śrī Vaiṣṇava marks (the disc and the conch), claiming that the mantra given by the Śrī Vaiṣṇava was stronger than that given by Rāmānandī-s.³¹⁵

After all these events, feelings of disdain began to spread in the *sampradāya*, to such an extent that a radical group was established as a form of backlash. Although scholars claim that the person behind it was Bhagavadācārya, Purushottam Agrawal proposes another possibility, considering what Bhagavadācārya declares in his autobiography:

Chāonī³¹⁶ is actually the source from which the “Ramanandiness” sprang. It was the late Mahantji who in his 51 years long term made Pandit Bhagvadacharyaji the leader of the sampradāya. [...] The present image of Ramanandaji is actually Mahantji's creation. [...] He was the sole boatman of the movement and was the guiding force behind the leaders like Raghavaracharya and Bhagavadācārya. (2010b: 250)

Hence, it was the *mahant* Rāmsobhadās of Maṇirām kī Chāonī of Ayodhya that after the umpteenth humiliation, decided to get rid of Rāmānūja's legacy. To accomplish this project, he turned to Bhagvaddās and Raghubardās, who were well-versed in Sanskrit and

³¹⁵ Nevertheless, van der Veer does not mention any source from which he obtained this information (cf. 1988: 103)

³¹⁶ Chāonī is a Rāmānandī *tyāgī* center in Ayodhya.

competent in religious questions.³¹⁷ These two young Rāmānandī-s belonged to the Baṛā Sthān and were brilliant scholars of Sanskrit (Agrawal, 2010: 250).

The main purpose of the radical group was to demonstrate that Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda were not connected, because Rāmānanda could not have been member of another person's *sampradāya*.

In 1919, Bhagavadācārya established the Śrī Rāmānandiya Śrī Vaiṣṇava Mahāmandal (Association of the Rāmānandī-s Śrī Vaiṣṇava) and the Purātattvānusandhāyinī Samiti (Archaeological Research Committee) to find materials and evidence that could support the Rāmānandīs' request for independence (Swāmī Ramcharan Śāstrī, 1977: 123).

Bhagavadācārya himself describes this time period in his autobiography, as reported by Agrawal (2010: 251):

The times were terrible. We had to change the *guru-parampara*. The difficulty of such a task among the sadhus is beyond imagination for outsiders. [...] We also needed a committee to do research into the *paramparas* and find from them that there was no connection between Ramanuja and Ramananda.³¹⁸

As a result of the committee efforts, a new *Samhitā* of Śrī Madvalmiki and a new *guru-paramparā* were found in Revāsā. Raghuvardās declared to have found it just by chance because the page on which it was written was being used as wrapping paper (Swāmī Ramcharan jī Śāstrī, 1977: 123).

The *paramparā* supposedly discovered by Raghuvardās is the only one in which there is no connection between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda: it begins with Rāmchandra, who is followed by twenty-one gurus, and ends with Rāmānanda. Bhagavadācārya declared it to be the only *paramparā* composed by a Rāmānandī *ācārya*, Agradās, who was third in the lineage from Rāmānanda. As consequence the *paramparā* had to be considered as true (Agrawal, 2010b: 252).

As Agrawal notes, the main names of the lineage, such as Devānanda, Haryānanda and Rāghavānanda – which were also cited by Nābhādās – were included in the list but those gurus with a southern origin were not. This *paramparā* begins with Sītā and Rām does not include any link to Rāmānūja. Furthermore, because this *paramparā* transmits the

³¹⁷ These were the original *dikṣā* names of the two Rāmānandī-s, as *-dās* is a common ending among Rāmānandī names. Later on, after the victory against the Rāmānūjī-s (cf. below, Sec. 8.2) they substituted *-dās* with *-ācārya*, a common ending instead among Rāmānūjī-s.

³¹⁸ *Swami Bhagavadācārya*, vol. 1, p. 86.

Rām mantra, it supports the independence of Rāmānanda as founder of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. In fact, as we have mentioned in the previous chapter, there are various *paramparā*-s assumed to be Rāmānanda's *paramparā*.

Burghart compared the *paramparā* proposed by Nābhādās to two other *paramparā*-s: that of the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* and the one discovered in the 20th century.³¹⁹ Nābhādās's *paramparā* begins with Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī, and included Rāmānūja and, after three successors, Rāmānanda; in this lineage the Rām mantra was not transmitted. The *paramparā* presented in the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* still shows a link between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja,³²⁰ but because it begins with Rām and Sītā, and bequeaths the Rām mantra, the presence of Rāmānūja is unexplained because he is associated with the 'wrong' *iṣṭa devatā*. In the *paramparā* promoted by Bhagavadācārya, Burghart explains: "The mantra was divulged by Ram Candra and was transmitted down through twenty-two generations to Ramanand without passing through any of the Dravidian preceptors of the Sri sect" (1978: 128-133).³²¹ As Srivastav reports, Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s questioned the possibility that Agradās and his disciple Nābhādās had written two different *paramparā*-s (1957: 265).

It is still not clear to me why Bhagavadācārya decided to support claims that 1299 was the year that Rāmānanda was born. According to Agrawal, Bhagavadācārya wanted to use a new *paramparā* and a precise date for Rāmānanda's birth to narrow the gap between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja and make their relationship seem less probable.

Of course, from another perspective, any attempt to narrow the accepted timeframe of the two men's lives would seem to have the opposite effect. Agrawal opines that Bhagavadācārya might have rejected the idea that more than twenty generations had passed in just three hundred years between the lifetimes of Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda, so he proposed the 1299 as a date for Rāmānanda's birth.³²² However, I wonder if Bhagavadācārya truly would have followed this train of thought. In fact the *paramparā* that he proposed presented twenty generation of guru but started with Rām himself, rather

³¹⁹ As Pinch argues, 'the ability to postulate the details of guru parampara constituted the ability to control the past and was the logical route to prominence and power in the sampradāya' (1996b: 556).

³²⁰ The *paramparā* reported by Burghart is: Rām Candra, Sītā, Visvakṣen, Sathkop, Nathmuni, Pundrikaksa, Rām Miṣra, Yamunācārya, Mahāpurnācārya, Rāmānūja, Kureṣa, Madhvācārya, Vopodevācārya, Devācārya, Puruṣottam, Gaṅgādhara, Rāmeśvar, Dvārānanda, Devānanda, Śrīyānanda, Hariyānanda, Rāghavānanda and Rāmānanda (1978: 128).

³²¹ The *paramparā* reported by Burghart is: Rām Candra, Sītā, Hanumān, Brahmā, Vasistha, Prasara, Vyāsdeva, Sukadeva, Puruṣottamācārya, Gaṅgācārya, Sadācārya, Rāmeśvācārya, Dvārānanda, Devānanda, Syamānanda, Śrūtānanda, Cidānanda, Pūrṇānanda, Śrīyānanda, Hariyānanda, Rāghavānanda and Rāmānanda (1978: 132).

³²² <http://pratilipi.in/2008/10/in-search-of-ramanand-purushottam-agrawal/7/>

than Rāmānūja – and obviously does not take Rāmānūja into consideration as he wished to stress the fact that the two gurus were unrelated to each other.

As it has already been demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is likely that an early date for Rāmānanda’s birth had already been advanced (for reasons that are still unclear). Therefore, Bhagavadācārya should be considered as the ascetic who successfully established this date as the official year of Rāmānanda’s birth through the production of a new *paramparā*, which was used to establish Rāmānandī independence.

8.2 The dispute begins and develops

The first result of all this intense activity was a clash between those Rāmānandī-s who supported the inclusion of Rāmānanda in the lineage of Rāmānūja, and those who supported Rāmānanda’s independence.

The first dispute occurred in 1920 in the Hanumān Gaṛhī in Ayodhya, when the *mahant* of the Baṛā Sthān, Śrī Rām Manohar Prasādācārya (once the guru of Bhagavadācārya) came to face his disciple in a *śāstrārtha* (theological dispute) based on a comparison between the Rāmānandī and the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. Despite the nature of their *guru-śiṣya* relationship, Bhagavadācārya was not afraid to argue with his guru, especially because he knew he had the support of one *mahant* of the Hanumān Gaṛhī, Sītā Rām Dās, and of the *mahant* of the Baṛābhai Dariyam *tyāgī*, Rām Dās (van der Veer, 1988: 103).

The first question that Bhagavadācārya was asked was whether he could explain the evidence that Rāmānandī-s presented to claim their right to independence. The atmosphere of the dispute and the replies that Bhagavadācārya gave are summarized in twenty-five points reported in the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*:

[...] Gurudev said: “The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* are the same.”

Bhagvadās replied: “No, Gurudev, they are different.”

In response to his answer, the *mahant* (Gurudev) started to abuse him verbally, so the *mahant* of the Nashil *gaddī* told him: “*Mahant* jī, please ask what you want to ask, but do so peacefully. You cannot use abuse. Right now Bhagvadās is not your disciple, but rather the spokesperson of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*”.

Hence the guru, addressed Bhagvadās and asked him to explain how the two *sampradāya*-s could be different.

The disciple came in front of the guru and started listening the reasons:

The Rāmānūjī *paramparā* began with Lakṣmī and continued with Nāthyamuna up until his present *ācārya*; the Rāmānandī *paramparā* began with Sītā and continued with Rāmānanda up until his present *ācārya*.

The behaviors and views of the two *sampradāya*-s are different.

Although Rām and Nārāyaṇa are not different, Rāmānandī-s worship Rām while Rāmānūjī-s worship Nārāyaṇa.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, all the mantras addressed to God are accepted, even though the main one utilized is the Rām mantra. By contrast, the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* considers other mantras to be useless.

Rāmānandī-s appreciate any mantra, while the Rāmānūjī-s view the Rām mantra in a negative light.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the four *Vedas* are consulted, while the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* consults works that are more Dravidic.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* the *tulsī* necklace is always worn: it is a sign of dharma to keep it, and without it one cannot even give water to some else. This tradition does not exist in the other *sampradāya*.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there is the habit to end some names with the words -*prasād* (ritual offer) and -*śaraṇa* (shelter), habit that is not present in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.

Rāmānandī-s take food from the hands of Brahmans from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*, while Rāmānūjī-s do not reciprocate by accepting food from Rāmānandī Brahmans.

Another name for our *sampradāya* is *Śrī sampradāya*, while they do not use this name.³²³

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* anyone can follow the path of devotion, while in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* only educated *dvija* can follow the path.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, secret instructions are given since the beginning, which does not happen in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the *pūjā* is always commenced with the sound of the conch, while the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* does not utilize this instrument.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, there is a tradition to keep the *śaligram* together with the *chakra*, while the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* does not do the same.

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* has used the *pañca saṃskāra* for centuries, while the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* does not use them.

³²³ It is likely that, Bhagavadācārya claimed this because Rāmānūjī-s call their *sampradāya* Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*, and they are also known as Śrī Vaiṣṇava. However, this affirmation turns out to be inconsistent when we take into consideration Rāmnareśācārya's explanation of the two *sampradāya*-s. In fact, according to him they both are part of the Śrī *sampradāya* but belong to two different branches (cf. below, Sec. 8.3).

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there is the habit of all the ascetics having their meal together.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* the *pūjā* to Hanumān is performed and its *prasād* is also accepted, while the same is not done in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.

One of the principles of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is that Rām gave the Rām mantra to Jānkī, and she gave it to her disciples. Śrī Rām Prasād jī Mahārāj described this in several *śloka*-s, and the same is stressed by Śrī Raghunat Prasād jī Mahārāj. The same principle, until few days ago, was accepted by my guru as well. But in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*, there are no signs of the Rām mantra being used.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the water used for the *ārtī* is disposed of outside in a respectful manner, which does not happen in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.

There are no connections between the hymns of the Rāmānandī-s *ārtī* and those of the Rāmānūjī-s.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are several groups: *raktśrī* (red), *śuklaśrī* (white), *laśkarī*, *golśrī* (spherical), *luptśrī* (missing). Instead, there are no differences in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.³²⁴

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are *kāthiyā*, *munjiyā*, *khākī*, *tapasvī*, *jaṭādhari*, *pañckośī* - all of which are not present in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.³²⁵

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are only two stages of life (*āśrama*) among *sādhu*-s: *brahmacārī* and *saṃnyāsī*. Instead, among Rāmānūjī-s there are all the *āśrama*-s.

In the temples of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are statues of Rām, Lakṣmaṇ and Jānkī, while in those Rāmānūjī-s there are only statues of Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī.

When Rāmānandī-s go to temples belonging to one of the other *Catuḥ sampradāya*-s, they always worship the main *mūrti* with the *saṣṭāṅga daṇḍavat*, while Rāmānūjī-s do not do the same.³²⁶ (2001: 295-298, my translation)

³²⁴ Here, Bhagavadācārya is describing the different *tilak*-s used in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, which are differentiated by color (red or white) and shape (line, dot or nothing) of the inner element between the two vertical white lines of the *ūrdvapundra*. Each *tilak* is connected to a sub-group of the order.

³²⁵ Here, Bhagavadācārya distinguishes the various groups according to their distinctive traits: those who wear the fixed *langoṭī* made of wood for twelve years as a mark of austerity; those covered with ash (*khākī*); those involved in *tapas*; and those who wear *jaṭā*, or matted hair.

³²⁶ If we consider the Bhagavadācārya's list to justify the Rāmānandī-s as an independent *sampradāya*, many differences depend on praxis, the *upāsana* (rules of cult) and *acārā* (rules of conduct) that they follow. Bhagavadācārya's points are shared by the present Jagadgurū, who especially overemphasizes the difference based on *dikṣā*, the way of wearing the *tulsi* necklace, and the stages allowed in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. According to him, the fact that Rāmānūjī-s get married and have families, while Rāmānandī-s are *virakta* is a meaningful difference that demonstrates their separate origins. While explaining commensality rules to me, the Jagadgurū compares Rāmānūjī-s to those who do not accept black or poor people among them in Western countries. Although their *tilak* is similar, Rāmānandī-s wear their *tilak*-s on the space between the eyebrows with a different shape. Even the symbols applied on the arms are different: Rāmānandī-s wear the arrows and the bow while Rāmānūjī-s display the disk and the conch. (As I observed, sometimes Rāmānandī-s draw the Vaiṣṇava *tilak* on their bodies, not only on the arms but on the chest and abdomen as well, instead of Rām's

After his reply, Bhagavadācārya asked his guru if Rāmānandī-s should be considered as a *sampradāya* or a *panth*. It is said that the *mahant* was unable to give a reply and left the hall. The 'Rāmānūjī side' reacted to Bhagavadācārya's victory with a booklet named *Śrī Sampradāya-dik Pradarśan* (Demonstration from the Śrī sampradāya's side) to prove the ability of the term Śrī *sampradāya* to cohesively address both Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* and the Rāmānandī ones. Bhagavadācārya replied with the *Śrī Sampradāya Pakṣa* (Protection of the Śrī sampradāya), in which he restated the uniqueness of the Śrī *sampradāya* as a label to indicate the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (*ibid*). Unfortunately, I do not have more specific information about the theoretical exchanges presented in these works.

The main dispute took place in 1921, during the Ujjain Kumbh Melā. As usual, some Rāmānūjī-s wanted to go to take bath with the palanquin, but this time Rāmānandī-s were not willing to carry it. This led to a theological dispute, this time between Rāmānūjī-s and Rāmānandī-s. The Rāmānūjī front was represented by the *swāmī* of the Totadri Maṭh, Śrī Rāmprapann Rāmānūjdās, while the Rāmānandī front was represented by Bhagavadācārya. It was decided that the debate would happen in the camp of the Digambar *akhārā*. The judges of this *śāstrārtha* were Śrī Mahant Rāmdularedās from the Digambar, Śrī Mahant Sītārāmdās from the Nirvāṇī, *mahant* Śrī Jagannathdās from the Nirmohī and Śrī Kamaldās from the Baṛābhai Dariyam.³²⁷ The dispute had to be conducted in Sanskrit and any speech had to be presented in written form, which should be translated into Hindi as well. Each speaker had fifteen minutes at their disposal (V. Prapann, 2001: 14-15).

The main source of debate was the *guru-paramparā* and the different mantras (Rāmcāran Śāstrī, 1977: 124).

Bhagavadācārya won the first exchange of the debate, but the theoretical contest had just begun. After the first *śāstrārtha*, a pamphlet called *Tattvodbodhan* was presented by *swāmī* Anantācārya as a reply to the *Rahasyodghāṭan* of Swāmī Bhagavadācārya, which the Rāmānūjī faction claimed has some inaccuracies. They exhibited this work for only three days before the end of the Kumbh, so as to impede the Rāmānandī-s' ability to reply. However, Swāmī Bhagavadācārya was able to write another pamphlet called *Tattvodbodhan Mīmāṃsā* published by the Śrī Lakṣmīni Vilas Team Press of Indore,

symbols).

³²⁷ As noted by van der Veer (1988: 104.), the jury was composed by the chief *mahant*-s of three *akhārā*-s and *tyāgī*-s, so that a conclusion in favor of the Rāmānandī position was assured. However, we must wonder why some of the judges of a *śāstrārtha* who were nominated were not known for their theoretical skills. It is likely that the choice was made not only to favor the Rāmānandī side, but also because of the importance that *akhārā*-s have during the Kumbh Melā. Below, I will show that in other situations, the sacred space of the Kumbh bestowed particular powers to these ascetics.

through which he obtained the match point for the Rāmānandī case. From that moment on, Rāmānandī-s were no longer obliged to carry Rāmānūjī-s palanquins.

Before the Haridvar Kumbh in 1926, there was a one-month Kumbh held in Vrindavan³²⁸ during which Rāmānūjī-s organized to use palanquins for the *pradakṣiṇa* (circumambulation) during *ekādaśī*.³²⁹ When Rāmānandī-s refused to carry it, two more *śāstrārtha*-s were settled, one in the camp of the Char Sampradāya Khalsa and one in the temple of Śrī Govind. This time the topics were whether insults against Rām and Kṛṣṇa were present in Rāmānūjī-s' *granth*-s, and whether the behaviors of Rāmānūjī-s could match with those of other Vaiṣṇava-s from the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s, especially the Rāmānandī-s. As Rāmānūjī-s were found to be too different in various regards, they were supposed to no longer be part of the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s, nor be allowed to share ground with Vaiṣṇava at the major festivals.³³⁰

To justify themselves, Rāmānūjī-s published a work, *Prastut Prasaṅga* (Relevant Subjects) to which Bhagavadācārya again replied with the *Śrī Paramparā Paritrāṇ* (Protection of the tradition)³³¹ and *Prastut Prasaṅgabhang* (Disappointment of the Relevant Subjects) through which he declared the difference between the two *sampradāya*-s once and for all (Swami Ramcharan Shastri, 1977: 124).³³²

³²⁸ I could not find any reference about the Vrindāvan Kumbh Melā except on line. According to a website called Vrindavan Online (<http://www.vrindavanonline.in/city-guide/vrindavan-kumbh>), the *Purāṇa*-s describe a transcendental universe where the Kumbh Melā is held in eight different places, including Vrindavan. The link between Vrindavan and the Kumbh Melā is related to the story of the origin of the Kumbh Melā in which Garūd, while flying with the *amṛit* produced by the churning of the ocean during the creation, sat on the Kadamba tree at Kalidah in Vrindavan, and since then that tree has remained ever-green. It is then added that the Vrindāvan Kumbh is different from the others as aspiration for spiritual gain is seen as unholy and unethical. The devotee's desire is to dip into the overwhelming love and affection for the Lord, filling his soul with *bhakti*.

³²⁹ *Ekādaśī* is the eleventh lunar day of the bright or dark fortnight of every lunar month in the Hindu calendar (cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.3). Because it is considered a spiritually beneficial day, during this day it is beneficial to fast.

³³⁰ This is what Svāmī Rāmcarāṇa has written, but I could not verify whether these actions were truly implemented.

³³¹ Purushottam Agrawal describes this work as 'no-holds barred attack on anybody not agreeing with Bhagavadācārya's position [...] characterized by an aggressively missionary tenor, intolerant about even slight dissent' (2010b: 230).

³³² In reality, according to Agrawal, Rāmānūjī-s recognize Rāmānanda as a disciple of Rāmānūja, but they have never considered him to be an *ācārya* (2010a: 236). However, when I spoke with a Rāmānūjī *mahant*, he told me that there are many different positions about the guru-*paramparā* issue, and that the Rāmānūjī side still has to decide whether they want Rāmānūja to be included in the Rāmānandī *paramparā* or not. Nevertheless, this *mahant* recognizes that on a theoretical and philosophical level, Rāmānūja's impact on the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is significant, especially if the *siddhānta* is considered. I asked him whether Rāmānūjī-s recognize the figure of Rāmānanda as a guru and he confirmed it but did not specify whether there are specific references to him in their tradition. He explained to me that Rāmānūjī-s worship not only the couple Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa, but also Sītā-Rām, Narasiḥṃa and all the different shapes of Viṣṇu. They are therefore not so strictly tied to Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa, as Rāmānandī-s want to believe. On the question of marriage, he replied to me that not all Rāmānūjī-s are married. Most of the *mahant*-s from the South are

To summarize, Bhagavadācārya was a charismatic individual who led a radical movement to demonstrate the independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* from that of Rāmānūja. In order to accomplish this task he stressed the differences between the two orders taking into consideration several issues: behavior, mantra, physical appearance, religious texts. Not all Rāmānandī-s reacted positively to his position, however, because he encouraged the *sampradāya*'s liberal political stance (which did not take caste into consideration and did not adhere to commensality rules) and he cut from the tradition the link with Rāmānūja that had been taken for granted up until that time. As we have just seen, although Bhagavadācārya won the debate, it is interesting to see what changes this victory actually brought, as the next section will examine.

8.3 Rāmānandī-s' considerations about the independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and its consequences

Here we will consider the various reactions that Rāmānandī-s had towards the radical movement outside the context of the Kumbh Melā.

According to Peter van der Veer, after the independence movement, three groups took shape in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, differentiated by their response to Bhagavadācārya's position: the pure Rāmānandī-s, who completely supported Bhagavadācārya; the pure Rāmānūjī-s who had long supported the connection with Rāmānūjī-s and after the events, became Śrī Vaiṣṇava; and those who do not take a specific position. Van der Veer does not properly describe who was in these groups, nor does he explain whether he is talking about householders or *sādhu*-s, since he speaks about Kurmi and Barhai castes (van der Veer, 1988: 106). Furthermore, he claims that:

grhashta, but in the North, maybe due to the influence of the *virakta* Rāmānandī-s, this tradition is not widespread, and many are *sādhu*-s or remain *brahmacārī*-s. On the matter of *dīkṣā*, the *mahant* said that although Rāmānandī-s accused Rāmānūjī-s of only giving initiation to *dvijā*, there actually was a schism in the 14th century because of the participation of Śūdra-s in the celebrations. From this schism, two branches were established: the Vedankalai or Northern School, and the Tengalai, or Southern School. This conversation proved to me that the debate about Rāmānūjī-s and Rāmānandī-s should be analyzed without creating an insurmountable conflict between sources and opinions of the two sides. I suppose that the analysis of Rāmānūjī-s sources could give us some hints about the origin of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Perhaps, the study of the evolution of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* (an analysis of its branches in northern and southern India and their hypothetical differences, and their historical trajectory over the past few centuries in Northern India etc.), would allow us to understand whether the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* could have originated from it or not. As Rāmānūjī-s were 'using' Rāmānandī-s in the Melā, it would be interesting to know the origin of this tradition and, therefore, how Rāmānūjī-s thought of Rāmānandī-s and the origin of their positions. The absence of a proper study from the Rāmānūjī-s point-of-view leaves a gap, because as we have demonstrated, it is likely that up until the 20th century, Rāmānandī-s considered themselves in general to be part of the Śrī *sampradāya*, although in practice their *sādhana* and their lifestyle was based on the teachings transmitted by their *paramparā*.

some high-caste Brahman abbots of rasik institutions, who might secretly have preferred to be Ramanuji, did not disown their Ramanandi affiliation, since that would have incurred considerable disadvantages in North India, where only the Ramanandis are strong. In public they will never disown their Ramanandi affiliation, but in secret they still adhere to the position of Rammanoharprasad (*ibid*).

Why might they have preferred to be Rāmānūjī? As important as the recognition of the *paramparā* is for a *sampradāya*, so is the *sādhana* and the mantra that the *sampradāya* uses. Because the discipline of *rasik sādhū-s* was quite different from that of Rāmānūjī-s, there was no reason to secretly wish to be a Rāmānūjī. In addition, the victory of Bhagavadācārya did not create new rules that had to be followed – he did not change the approach that the *sampradāya* took with regards to the recruitment of new ascetics or the stance that single *āśram-s* or *maṭh-s* took toward the issue of castes. Furthermore, the *mahant-s* of Baṛā Sthān and Kanak Bhavan, who were the main opponents to Bhagavadācārya, did not become Rāmānūjī, and they continued to control two of the most important and worshipped places in Ayodhya.

Although Bhagavadācārya won the *śāstrārtha-s*, these did not affect the position of the *sampradāya* in its entirety, or to be more precise, it did not affect the internal rules of Rāmānandī centers. In fact, there are still *rasik* Rāmānandī-s who do not agree with the decisions and the activities of Bhagavadācārya.

I had a conversation about this topic with a learned Rāmānandī whom I met in the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā of Ayodhya, one of the biggest *rasik* centers in the city. According to him, Bhagavadācārya was a talented scholar and intellectual, but he maintains that no one had the right to change the *paramparā* or to create a *Bhāṣya*,³³³ because a *Bhāṣya* can only come from God's inspiration. This divine inspiration is a gift that is said to have touched people such as Rāmānūja and Tulsīdās. Tulsīdās, in fact, wrote a *Rāmāyaṇa* that was able to reach the grassroots Indian population, and it is said that this was only possible with God's intervention. Bhagavadācārya, by contrast, made two mistakes: he wrote two *Bhāṣya-s*, the *Jānkī* and the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*, which created confusion among the *sādhū-s*, without having a big effect on the *sampradāya*. In fact, according to this learned Rāmānandī, Rāmānandī-s

³³³ In the introduction to the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*, Swāmī Raghavarācārya not only declares the non-involvement of Rāmānanda in the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*, but also re-writes the history of the two *sampradāya-s*. He claims that at the very beginning there was a unique *sampradāya* established by Rām himself. Later on, differences arose on the matter of behaviors, discipline, and worship, leading to the formation of two different branches: one related to Rām, the other to Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. Because of a period of decadence, the first branch was absorbed by the Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa *sampradāya*, whose members tried to overrule it by concealing its holy texts. Only with Rāmānanda and his *Ānanda Bhāṣya* was the original Rām *sampradāya* renewed.

continue to follow the *Bhāṣya* written by Rāmānūja because Rāmānanda did not write any *Bhāṣya* – he simply made the teachings of Rāmānūja available for more people.

The ascetic whom I consulted instead supported the old *paramparā*, and explained the events of the 1920 as the result of the ignorance of the Rāmānandī-s of that time. However, notwithstanding his position, he considers himself part of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* because his *sāadhanā* has nothing in common to share with that of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.³³⁴

Agrawal notices that those Rāmānandī-s who supported the traditional *paramparā* claimed that, after Rāmānūja, two traditions were established in the Śrī *sampradāya*: one followed by *ācārya gṛhastha*-s and the other by Rāmānandī *vairāgi*-s. This would explain why in the *ācārya paramparā* there is no mention of *vairāgi*-s (2010a: 279).

The present Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya believes that the misunderstanding lies in thinking that these *sampradāya*-s were started by human gurus. Instead, he says, both of them were founded by a form of Śrī after receiving instruction by Rām and Nārāyaṇa. It is not that the Rāmānūjī preceded the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, as both are eternal. However, according to the Jagadgurū, the Rāmvat *sampradāya* experienced a period of decline and it was not until Rāmānanda's influence that it was restored. That the Rāmvat *sampradāya* descends from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* would be a mistaken interpretation of the word *paddhati* included in Nābhādās's *chappaya* about Rāmānanda:

*śrī rāmānuja paddhati pratāp avani amṛta hvai anusaryo*³³⁵

To deduce from this sentence that Rāmānandācārya was part of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*, would mean to give to the word *paddhati* the meaning of 'line'. Instead, it has to be intended as *siddhānta*, meaning 'principle'. Hence, although the two *sampradāya*-s share the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophy, the fact that they do not share the deity, the same mantra and the *upāsana* is a sign of their fundamentally different natures (Swāmī Rāmnaresācārya, 2001: iii-iv).

From the point of view of the commensality and caste rules, some Rāmānandī-s shared with Rāmānūjī-s a few caste restrictions. In fact, not all Rāmānandī-s accepted Bhagavadācārya's liberal position in regard to these issues and in general each center kept following its own internal rules.

³³⁴ Interview, March 20, 2012.

³³⁵ I would translate this sentence as 'Being a follower of the glorious and immortal principle of Rāmānūja'.

For example, according to Lala Sita Ram, author of an important Vaiṣṇava history of Ayodhya in the 1930s, there were numerous exceptions for high-caste novitiates of major nāgā *akhārā*-s. Among these exceptions were a waiver of the thirteen-year age limit for initiation as well as freedom from having to perform any lowly tasks that novitiates usually had to perform for the *ācārya*-s. However, Lala Sita Ram also maintains that in Rāmānandī-s *akhārā*-s, Śūdra-s of all classes were freely admitted and invested with the sacred thread, an action that explicitly undermined the hierarchy and rule of caste.³³⁶

Van der Veer has assumed that during the 1920s and 1930s, three factions emerged on the question of whether an individual retained caste status after becoming a Rāmānandī. According to the egalitarian view proposed by Bhagavadācārya, there was no *varṇa* system among ascetics; the orthodox faction, by contrast, maintained that the *varṇa* system existed among *sādhu*-s to keep the rule of purity, meaning that Brahmans should not eat with Śūdra-s; the moderate faction claimed that a Śūdra who acts within certain prescribed modes of behavior can be considered pure, although he will never obtain the same level of purity as the others (1988: 105-106).

As we have seen before, it is possible that this focus on caste began in specific branches of the *sampradāya* when the issue was officially related to the Śrī Vaiṣṇava. In the early 20th century, although re-discussed, the topic was discussed publicly without reaching a final resolution, since the different positions on the matter that had existed in the past were more or less maintained. Of course, Bhagavadācārya's group exercised substantial authority in the *sampradāya*, but it was not able to successfully modify the Rāmānandī centers as a whole. This is shown by the work of Peter van der Veer in Ayodhya, who found that most of the Rāmānandī centers there follow caste rules, as well as the Rāmānandī studies conducted by Richard Burghart in Janakpurdham.³³⁷

9. Conclusion

The multi-faced evolution in the history of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* reflects the order's

³³⁶ According to Pinch, this practice of giving investiture of the sacred thread even to Śūdra was part of the 'kshatriya identity movement' of the early 20th century, a movement through which members from low castes such as Kurmi, Yadav and Kushvaha, following a Vaiṣṇava ideology, tried to assert their origin from Ramchandra to obtain the status of Kṣatriya (1996: 98). Nevertheless, the main purpose of this movement was not to fight the caste system, but to upgrade the status of a few groups. In addition, the choice to follow a Vaiṣṇava dharma did not necessarily signify a wish to be part of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. After the independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, most of the members of these groups decided to support and follow the Rāmānūjī-s, because they wanted higher status and recognition as a higher caste (Caracchi, 1999: 65).

³³⁷ Cf. van der Veer (1988); Burghart (March 1978).

internal differentiations. I have suggested that the reason at the base of these differentiations is the dual teaching of Rāmānanda that allowed his disciples to choose between a *tapasī* or a *rasik* discipline according to their personal attitude. We have seen that in the earlier period of the *sampradāya* many individuals were possibly following a mixed path, in which these two tendencies coexisted and were used according to need.

Therefore, I support an early presence of the core of both these religious disciplines (the *tapasī* and the *rasik*) on account of their likely presence in Rāmānanda's original teachings. As they specialized over the centuries, they also originated two distinct groups. For this reason, I do not agree with van der Veer's suggestion that an 'original' *tyāgī* group was affected by a long-term process of sedentarization and domestication that would have led to settlement in pilgrimage centers such as Ayodhya and pushed *sādhu*-s toward more devotional (*rasik*) practices (1987: 686).³³⁸

What seems plausible is that, over the time and, perhaps, under the influence of other *sampradāya*-s, some gurus marked a path rather than another, stressing the features of a specific *sāadhanā*. In fact, from our exploration of the Rāmānandī history, it has arisen that the guru had (and still has) a particular power of interpreting and adapting the tradition according to his personal religious attitudes. As noted by van der Veer, the theological flexibility and the presence of only few theological restraints, endowed the Rāmānandī-s with an 'open identity' which can satisfy the different nuances of Rām *bhakti* (1988: 175).

I have described changes that affected the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in a synchronic and diachronic perspective. Synchronically we have seen that different centers in a particular area developed different *sāadhanā*-s in accordance with the religious propensity of gurus and *mahant*-s. We have also seen that some centers suffered from interferences coming from local rulers, while others were much less taken into consideration. From the diachronic point of view, we have seen how a center developed over the centuries, adapting its rules, discipline and religious approach in accordance with the attitude of succeeding gurus and *mahant*-s, as well as with a changing historical context.

³³⁸ In fact, sedentarization is not a prerogative of *rasik*-s, because also *nāgā*-s historically had monasteries that were proper centers in cities. They were not orthodox, nor, as we have seen, was orthodoxy a necessary trait to receive patronage. Furthermore, from my personal experience in the field, there are many *tyāgī* centers, both small and large centers, in which wandering ascetics are hosted and that attract many lay people. Therefore, *tyāgī*-s have to be understood as a vivid part of the movement both in the past and in the present. Unlike van der Veer, I do not think that the number of *tyāgī*-s has decreased (at least not more than the number of ascetics in general) in favor of *rasik* Rāmānandī-s, but simply that it is more difficult to count them.

In fact, in the 18th and 19th centuries some Rāmānandī centers were influenced by decisions promulgated by different rulers. However, since Rāmānandī-s had no centralized authority, the effect that a change could have had on *āśram*-s and *maṭh*-s in one locality was not necessarily replicated elsewhere. In other words, we cannot consider changes that occurred in one place to have systematically occurred in the entire *sampradāya*. Hence, it does not seem exactly true that, as Burghart has claimed (1978: 243), after the Galtā conference there was a turn towards orthodoxy in the whole *sampradāya*, so that Rāmānandī-s would be able to compete more effectively for the patronage of householders and the Hindu kings. There are two main flaws in Burghart’s argument: first, Rāmānandī-s had the support of the kings even when they were not the royally chosen *sampradāya*; second, the Rāmānandī-s could count on other patrons as well.

From the events analyzed in this chapter, it also appears that vicissitudes which occurred in some centers – like Galtā – were the result of a need for survival, rather than the result of simple competition for patronage. In fact, there were *mahant*-s who decided to leave their religious centers in order to avoid submitting themselves to new religious rules, which they disliked.

Such events demonstrate that the importance of faith and belief is a variable that must be taken into consideration, in addition to more pragmatic considerations, when the relationship between a political power and a religious power is analyzed.

Through the schema of the *gaddī*-s I demonstrated that Rāmānandī-s ascetics were well widespread in northern India, and that likely there was a Rāmānandī presence also in the area of Ayodhya much before the 18th century.³³⁹ Literary sources of the period also manifest a well established Vairāgī-s (Rāmānandī-s) presence in different area of northern India that would testify not only the numeric significance of Rāmānandī-s among the ascetic population, but also that wandering ascetics were always an important component of the *sampradāya*. This leads us to argue that although in the 18th century some branches and centers of the *sampradāya* underwent a process of orthodoxization, its grassroots was composed of wandering ascetics (*tyāgī-vairāgī*) that might have actually contributed the most to the spread of Rām *bhakti*, without leaving behind a documentation of their historical role within the *sampradāya* because of their life style.

I propose that also wandering ascetics should be taken into consideration in the reconstruction of the *sampradāya* history, to avoid describing the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*

³³⁹ Cf. Tab.1 and Map. 1.

only from 'above', or from the point of view of its 'ruling centers'. To rely on an exclusively top-down view would ignore the huge core of 'subaltern' individuals about whom the lack of documentation, has removed from the reconstruction the history of the *sampradāya*. In fact, as Pinch suggests (1990: 108): 'it is important to draw a distinction [...] between the semi-urban, Rāmānandī institutions [...] and the rural, largely populist Rāmānandī enclaves.'

The presence of these Rāmānandī-s demonstrates that the *sampradāya* maintained its liberal and inclusive position, notwithstanding some centers had to modify their internal rules due to specific historical reasons. It is likely that these wandering *sādhu*-s were the real tools that spread the Rām *bhakti* across northern India regions.

Therefore, the history of any given center or group cannot be taken as a model by which we can interpret the history of the entire *sampradāya*, nor the histories of different centers and areas can be joined together to attempt to create a model of a homogenized history of the *sampradāya*.

This multiplicity of approaches was manifested also in the aftermath of the events at the beginning of the 20th century. Although Bhagavadācārya had won the *śāstrārtha*-s and led the *sampradāya* to claim independence from that of Rāmānūja – which had visible consequences in the Kumbh Melā (Rāmānandī-s were no longer carrying the palanquins of Rāmānūjī *ācārya*-s) – this did not affect the *sampradāya* in its entirety, or to be more precise, it did not affect internal rules and beliefs of each and every Rāmānandī center.

The main concrete outcome of Bhagavadācārya's activity was a general recognition of the independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and a more precise portrait of Rāmānanda as founder of the *sampradāya*. These led to two further developments: the construction of Śrī Maṭh built on the location where, according to the tradition, Rāmānandācārya had built his *āśram* and founded the *sampradāya*, and the bestowing of title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya to an ascetic meant to become the leader of the *sampradāya*.

In the next chapters I will analyze the meaning of this title and the consequences its creation had for the contemporary evolution of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

Chapter 4

The development of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya

Introduction

This chapter aims to frame the election of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s in the religious context of 20th-21st century India, demonstrating that the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* has taken various positions even on this subject consistently with its characteristic feature of being internally differentiated.

In order to understand the value of the title of Jagadgurū in modern times, this chapter outlines the religious authority and leadership that gurus still exert over contemporary India. In effect, although their roles and powers changed over the centuries, gurus can still be considered religious and social leaders. This position derives from the role that they have in the lives of their followers as advisors in religious and social issues³⁴⁰ and the increasing number of guru reveals that they still fulfill this function.

The parameters for determining who is a competent guru are elusive (Broo, 2003: 76), to such an extent that Kirin Narayan has claimed that ‘the role of a guru is open to anyone who can convince disciples to follow him/her’ (1992: 85). Hence, questions like ‘*Who is a guru?*’ and ‘*What does a guru do?*’ receive different answers according to the religious order, group or disciples under consideration.

The authority of a guru can depend on tradition (*paramparā*) as well as on charisma, since both are (and were) necessary in India to draw the attention of devotees. In this chapter, it will be shown that to be part of a recognized *guru-paramparā* is still crucial for the growth of a guru – and the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya is no exception.

After an overview about the modern guru (which will complete the argument presented in the Introduction)³⁴¹ and the additional authority that the title of Jagadgurū bestows as compared with a regular guru, this chapter will focus on the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya, beginning with Bhagavadācārya. For his long life and accomplishments, Bhagavadācārya was the first to receive the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya, which was retrospectively assigned to the historical figure of Rāmānanda as well. Later, I will

³⁴⁰ Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 4.2 and 4.3.

³⁴¹ Cf. Introduction, sec. 3.4.

introduce Bhagavadācārya's successors, Śivarāmācārya and Rāmnaresācārya, and then, I will try to reconstruct the elections of other contemporaries Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s.

1. Modern Gurus and gurus dealing with modernity

I have already described in the chapter on Rāmānanda and in that on the development of the *sampradāya* how Indian religiosity was affected by the English cultural influence and government in the 19th-beginning of 20th century. Here I will focus my attention on the changes that this new background caused with regards to the role and figure of gurus. I will describe the characteristic features of modern gurus showing, however, that today modern and *sampradāyik*³⁴² gurus often can share similar approaches.

According to Rigopoulos, the *Pax Britannica* 'lead many gurus and religious institutions to seek new roles and identities in order to redefine and reaffirm their intellectual, socio-economical, and even political stature' (2007: 219). Some of these gurus came from already extant *sampradāya*-s, while others were independent. In fact, the new historical background enabled the launch of gurus who did not belong to a specific religious tradition, but rather captured the attention of devotees through their charisma and their teaching of the so-called neo-Hinduism. This form of Hinduism offers a spiritual path based on devotion, social service, meditative practices and yoga, which posits a wider, simpler version of Hinduism worldwide spread, which became the reference point for many modern day Indians (Rigopolous, 2009: 190).

While this specific version of Hinduism became globalized, another significant change occurred: the emergence of gurus among western groups. Indian gurus started to travel to Western countries, accepting participants from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, emphasizing a congregational mode of worship and dissociating their gatherings from organized religion (Hausener, 2006: 20). This type of guru, which was to be described by scholar like 'modern guru', found a fertile terrain in independent India, as described by Christophe Jaffrelot:

With modern gurus, the emphasis was on "individual growth", "social concern" and religion "as a code of conduct for every man to make life a success" [...] their spiritual practice is based on discourses in English with messages adapted to the urban middle class with whom they often share the same background [...] the *guru-śiṣya* relation is

³⁴² I borrow this term from Kasturi (2009). By *sampradāyik* gurus I mean those gurus who belong to *sampradāya*-s and are part of Modern Hindu traditionalism as described in the Introduction of this dissertation.

accorded less importance than that of mass contacts [...] they do not emphasize their sectarian affiliation but rather their Hindu allegiance and they attend conferences all over the world. (1999: 195-196)

As C.J. Fuller and J. Harris demonstrate (2005), the spread of modern gurus can be linked to the emergence of new economic and political forces in India in the late 20th century. In their treatise they show how industrialists modified their relationship to gurus over time. In the 1960s, industrialists could be divided between those influenced by Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gītā* and other religious scriptures, and those influenced by more traditional gurus and teachers, such as the Śāṅkarācārya-s. Both groups, however, shared a view of 'their success as a product of devotion to their calling and duty and their careers as one path to salvation' (2005: 216). By contrast, at the turn of the 21st century, many businessmen were more fascinated by modern gurus. By the 1990s, the national policy of economic liberalization opened up India's markets to the world, and businessmen began to operate in a more competitive global economy (*ibid*: 226). In the same period, the religious nationalism of the BJP and the continuous propaganda of the VHP and RSS transformed the public sphere. This became increasingly religious in tenor, with Hindus more assertive about celebrating their religion and their identity publicly in direct opposition to Muslims and Christians (*ibid*: 227).

Lise McKean argues that the expansion of gurus' activities and organizations can be related to transnational capitalism in India and its support for Hindu nationalism (1996: 2). Therefore, those gurus with a particular knowledge of modern political issues were able to represent an emergent Hinduism that captured the attention – and the donations – of those Indians politically influenced by religious nationalism.³⁴³

Nevertheless, gurus can get involved in modern activities without being necessarily 'modern' according to the aforementioned definition, and without necessarily sharing 'modern' ideological-political positions or teachings. The role of a guru in contemporary times has further expanded together with the needs of the population, but this has not had consequences only for modern centers, also for traditional ones.

Influenced by the new contemporary context, ancient *sampradāya*-s may attempt to 'modernize' through a mix of traditional and new approaches, in a constant evolution that allows their tradition to survive, a subject that is central in this dissertation. As pointed out earlier, throughout the history of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* it was not unusual for new

³⁴³ However, I will not focus here on the involvement of gurus in religious nationalism, as this would drive us too far from the more general frame I am describing.

religious approaches to be re-absorbed in old ones. This happened because they attracted some gurus, or because they were recognized as better tools to satisfy the religious quest of society, and thus became instruments to attract more followers.

To give a present example, in her study about Nāth *yogī*-s, Bouillier has described how monasteries and gurus adapt to contemporary religious trends as a strategy to counteract the negative impact caused by the lack of royal patronage and land reforms.³⁴⁴ Van der Veer has presented the case of the Śāṅkarācārya of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, who started a campaign for the protection and renewal of the Hindu spirit, most notably through the construction of hospitals and social development among untouchables (1994). This involvement in social matters is a new concern that was not shared by that Śāṅkarācārya's immediate predecessor (*ibid*: 660), which demonstrates that 'even gurus with a much longer pedigree and a firm footing in established high caste community like the Śāṅkarācārya' had to turn their attention to social activities in order to follow the changes taking place in society (*ibid*: 659).

In reality, many gurus are engaged in institutions for the betterment of society, particularly schools and hospitals. This humanitarian trend has been defined by Copeman and Ikegame as guru 'governmentality' (2012: 35),³⁴⁵ a term that aptly describes the ability of gurus to exercise power through institutions which should actually be in the hands of government. As pointed out by Ikegame, when religious institutions become centers of locally focused welfare activities, the gurus who manage them represent a new form of leadership among local people (2012: 47). They often receive more support than governmental officers since lay people believe that gurus will not spend the money on their own needs or families, compared with politicians who are often perceived as misusing public money for their own benefit (2012: 56).

The fact that gurus are more present in social activities should not be interpreted as an interference in the secularized State or as a sign of the politicization and commercialization of religion but rather as a further evolution of a pre-existing attitude.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ In her study on the Nāth monastery in Fatehpur, Bouillier argues that today monasteries show a less sectarian approach and are open to those who want to 'conjuguer une démarche individuelle de quête spirituelle et d'affirmation de soi caractérisant nombre de citoyens des nouvelles classes moyennes, avec le recours à la tradition d'une secte établie et familialement révéree'. As result, forms of reinvented Vedism are mixed with *bhakti*, *haṭha* yoga, and a personal relationship with the guru (2008: 280).

³⁴⁵ Copeman and Ikegame describe modern guru, however, I consider their explanation useful also for the description of the activity of many *sampradāyik* guru. The case of Rāmbhadrācārya below will provide an example.

³⁴⁶ Cf. Jaffrelot (1999); McKean (1996).

Even in the past, religious leaders used to manage centers that had political importance. For example, Clark says that in 13th century South India there were *śaiva maṭh*-s which,

besides being educational institutions which were frequently in receipt of grants and donations to further educational activities [...] were also often involved in charitable activities, including feeding arrangements for pilgrims and the poor, and in some cases setting up hospitals and maternity centres (2006: 185).

This led some centers to become not only place of religious learning but also administrative centers (*ibid*: 183).

The adaptability of gurus is also reflected in the use of modern technologies. Hausener has stressed that new technologies were a decisive factor in creating support for modern gurus, as they allowed people to create new kinds of online communities (2006: 20). This situation is not only true for modern gurus but for all of those gurus who can avail themselves of an Internet connection. This has permitted the proliferation of gurus and religious centers from a wider range of society – even smaller centers have their own personal websites or Facebook pages through which they keep their followers updated on ceremonies and events. Usually a handful of the page's followers also serve as the administrators who maintain the virtual community.

These new conditions have produced popular and, sometimes, high-profile devotional organizations established by gurus, which Maya Warriier considers to be 'the most dramatic and important developments in present-day Hinduism'. A successful guru, she explains, can become the head of institutional empires, financed by hundreds of thousands of devotees both in India and abroad (2003: 31).

Warriier also claims that the number of gurus has created, among educated middle-class urbanites,³⁴⁷ a situation of 'religious secularization' wherein the individual exercises a free, personal choice with regards to their religious-spiritual life. Warriier says:

By secularization I mean therefore a decline in the public, community-affirming and socially-binding aspect of religion, and a growing trend towards the internalization of faith such that it is personal choice, inner spiritual striving and self-fulfillment that become central to religious life rather than the affirmation of shared community orientations, affiliations, aspirations and identities. (2003b: 214)

³⁴⁷ However, in her analysis Warriier addresses a specific urban middle class – that of English-speakers, linked with the well-to-do urbanites in white-collar employs, with a formal education up to graduate level, and many qualified in specialized areas – as she recognizes that the category 'middle classes' is too vague and includes people from a range of different educational backgrounds and occupational categories. (2003b: 225).

These remarks, in turn, raise several questions that may need further enquiry but that enables us to bring to light some aspects of the role of gurus both in the present and in the past.

For instance, is the socially-binding aspect of religion truly declining among these groups? Is the internalization of faith a new element of Indian religiosity compared to community orientation? How binding has a person's membership to a particular guru traditionally been, and how binding is it today?

It seems to me that the socially-binding aspect of religion is more in the hands of the *paṇḍit-s* or *pujārī-s* than in those of a guru. In fact, those rituals that integrate an individual into society may be independent of his or her discipleship to a guru, especially considering that a person may not choose a guru until late in life. Hence I deem the role of gurus as different from that of other ritualistic figures whose role in Indian society is effectively decreasing in the urban centers. However, gurus were and still are centers around whom a community is created. As we have seen, this is one of the meanings of *sampradāya*, which can refer to lay and ascetic society and is important also for followers of modern gurus. During my fieldwork, I realized that this aspect of being part of a group is an important element for many individuals despite their middle or lower class status, even when their belonging to the community is only temporary.

It is undeniable that today the number of gurus and religious organizations have increased, and that a spiritual seeker has a wider range of available options from which to choose – one can even tap into a religious community while sitting at home on the internet. There is, indeed, a 'process of conscious choosing and selecting from a range of possibilities and options' (Warrier, 2003b: 214). However, although the importance of modern gurus among middle-class people is undeniable, it is also true that there are many more *sampradāyik* gurus than modern gurus, and there are also many more individuals from the lower classes who take part in the process of personal guru selection. The freedom to choose a guru or have more than one guru is not new, as demonstrated in ancient texts (Rigopoulos, 2009: 136). Also the *Bhaktamāl* of Nābhādās demonstrates that the concept of having more than one guru or following the example of holy individuals from a range of religious backgrounds was highly encouraged.

Even today, a guru supports and, if necessary, refers his disciples or followers other gurus if these can be useful for the disciples' religious growth. Therefore, I would suggest that this idea of 'secularization' is a characteristic of Hindu religiosity that evolved even further in the contemporary India because the range of guru has increased as well.

To summarize, I suggest that both modern and *sampradāyik* gurus from a practical point of view – that is, the way in which they may ‘work’ in society or be in touch with devotees – can be very similar.³⁴⁸ Both modern and *sampradāyik* gurus are still able to fill the needs of people and act as their social leaders thanks to the inclination to evolve their role, adjusting themselves to changed social conditions, crossing domains or extending their range of action. The power that gurus have on their followers allows them to obtain social influence as well as political power, to such an extent that we can agree with Rigopoulos when he says that, ‘the figure of the guru is the load-bearing axis which, for centuries, perhaps millenia, supports and fosters, generation after generation, the religious traditions of India’ (Rigopoulos, 2009: 11, my translation).

A characteristic feature that is proper of *sampradāyik* gurus is that they are connected to a specific tradition, that confers religious authority and also respond to a demand of authenticity by the part of the faithful. In some cases, a traditional religious title – like that of Jagadgurū – can draw the attention of followers also because of its historical importance and the symbolic meanings it implies.

2. On the title of Jagadgurū

The title of Jagadgurū commands respect in India as it denotes the universal (*jagad*) knowledge and high value of a particular guru. In this usage, Cenkner describes the Jagadgurū as an instructor in liberating knowledge with distinctive spiritual excellence, someone who possesses universality in both teaching and personality (1983: 179). Cenkner says that the function of the Jagadgurū is different from that of a normal guru:

The responsibilities and capacities of world-teachers are greater than those of ordinary gurus. The former live a more comprehensive life of teacher, administrator, ritualist and religious leader; their spirituality is a composite of *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma yoga*. Their life and spirituality should stand out in the sight of all the world. Jagadgurū-s should be vital figures for all sectors of society. (*ibid*)

The relevance given to textual knowledge creates the main difference between a Jagadgurū and a guru, for whom it is not necessary to be a scholar of any *Śāstra* (Jacobsen, 2012). By contrast, a Jagadgurū becomes an *ācārya* after having completed his Brahmanic

³⁴⁸ The examples I provide in this chapter and later while describing the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya will demonstrate it.

education.³⁴⁹ As Cenkner points out, ‘teachers emerge from the context of a specific tradition. The importance of the tradition determines the significance of the teacher’ (1983: 188). An *ācārya* can also establish a new order based on his philosophical systems – in that case he is honored with the title of Jagadgurū. For this reason, the title is attributed to Rāmānūja, Madhva, Nimbārka and Vallabha, as they began their own *guru-paramparā*.³⁵⁰

In the past, the word Jagadgurū also held some political authority that persists to some degree today. A. Malinar tells us that this title was conferred to Śaṅkara in his *Śaṅkara Digvijaya*,³⁵¹ a biography traditionally ascribed to the 14th century, which describes Śaṅkara as the founder of the Daśanāmī *sampradāya* (2001: 94). According to Malinar, the text was written during the period in which the Śṛṅgeri Maṭh had a role in setting up the Vijayanagara Empire (15th century). At that time, the Maṭh had rights over the lands, including the ability to claim taxes from the villages attached to it. Therefore, she explains, the production of the text:

might also have had the internal function of re-creating the position of the original founder, the Ādi Śaṅkara, as an intellectual world-conqueror with royal support who nevertheless kept to his ascetic lifestyle. Thus he could continue to serve as a model for the community to emulate in times when the *maṭha* had become a firm institution. As such, it had to compete with other recipients of royal patronage and to defend its claim for an all-India authority, when its influence was by and large confined to the South. (2001: 95)

Hence, in this case, the title of Jagadgurū had a precise functional role in creating authority and rights. This authority was justified through a specific portrait of Śaṅkara as Jagadgurū. The *Śaṅkara Digvijaya* offers precise examples. Śaṅkara’s leadership is established on the model of other saints described in traditional epic and *purānic* sources and it subsumes three value-structures:

³⁴⁹ As described by Gianni Pellegrini, the usual Brahmanic education has several stages, beginning with the study of grammar, necessary to properly understand and interpret the most complex texts. It follows the study of *Nyāya*, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Vedānta* and the other *Śāstra*-s, through which one obtains the title of *śāstrī*. After three years of becoming a *śāstrī* and two years of intense study on a chosen subject, one obtains the title of *ācārya*. The *ācārya* is one ‘who reveals supreme knowledge and behaves accordingly [...]. The *ācārya* is one who is entitled to offer his teaching (*upadeśa*) in any field of knowledge, destroying ignorance.’ (2004: 314-316). Usually, an *ācārya* teaches a religious system, often the tradition of the *sampradāya* to which he belongs.

³⁵⁰ These *ācārya*-s gave different interpretations of the Advaita philosophy (with the exception of Madhvācārya who founded the Dvaita school), establishing specific *sampradāya*-s according to their interpretations.

³⁵¹ However, it is not clear when the word Jagadgurū came into use for the first time.

(1) He is vested with the martial, royal task of the “conqueror of the regions” for the sake of the Vedic tradition, i.e. the prescriptions of *varṇāśramadharmā*, as the “king of the teachers”; (2) he is made to advocate theism (i.e. *saguṇa brahman*); (3) he is made the representative of the highest knowledge of salvation, the “king of ascetics”. (Malinar, 2001: 96)

In such a guise, the role of Śaṅkara as Jagadgurū is fully rooted in the Vedic tradition. He possesses a superior knowledge that enables him to defeat his opponents and gain recognition as an *avatār* of Śiv. This canonization of Śaṅkara as Jagadgurū allowed his supposed successors to claim the title of Jagadgurū and, along with it, royal patronage (*ibid*: 93). As Clark argues, this explains why several *maṭh*-s asserted to have been established by Śaṅkara: the legitimization of a place as founded by Śaṅkara gave the *mahant* the right to be called Jagadgurū and, consequently, to collect tributes, receive honors and travel in a palanquin (*aḍḍā-pālakī*) (2006: 122).

Although today’s successors of Śaṅkara do not have the right to collect tribute, they still maintain a special authority. The Śaṅkarācārya-s are the heads of the four monasteries of the Daśanāmī orders founded, accorded to tradition, by Śaṅkara in four strategic positions: Purī (Orissa), Sṛṅgeri (Karnataka), Dwārakā (Gujarat), Jyotirmaṭh (Badrināth).³⁵² These Śaṅkarācārya-s are considered to be, at least theoretically, spokespersons of the ten ascetic orders. They are religious leaders not only for the ascetic community, but also for lay Hindus, because they are still considered to be holders of a traditional religious authority and knowledge. Their authority is due to their being part of an uninterrupted chain of gurus which ties them to the teaching of Śaṅkara.

As the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya explained to me, this uninterrupted *paramparā* transmits an original teaching through the years and it is this flow that ‘creates’ a *sampradāya*, a community that incarnates that knowledge.³⁵³ Since many *paramparā*-s trace back to a God as their real initiator and their human initiator are regarded as *avatār*

³⁵² According to Clark (2006), the link between Śaṅkarācārya and the Daśanāmī orders is the result of social, religious and political processes of the 16th-17th century, when lineages of *nāgā*-s integrated with monastic institutions (*ibid*: 227). Similarly, the claim that Śaṅkarā had built the four *maṭh*-s emerged during that time. In fact, in Śaṅkara’s earliest hagiographies there is no link between the guru and the four *maṭh*-s, which instead appears in a few short Sanskrit texts known as *Śrī Mathāmnāya*-s, supposedly written by Śaṅkara (*ibid*: 173). The *Śrī Mathāmnāya*-s explain the concept of dharma and the designation of the four jurisdictions to the four *ācārya*-s. Clark argues that before the 16th century there are no references to a link between the *maṭh*-s and the Daśanāmī. Hence these *Śrī Mathāmnāya*-s are not original and present fictitious account. Nevertheless, they are to be taken into account, as they demonstrate the formation of a ‘formal identity for various lineages of ascetics as an organised sect under one founder’ (*ibid*: 115).

³⁵³ Interview, October 5, 2012.

of that God, it follows that those Jagadgurū who belong to that *paramparā* are thought to possess divine characteristics as well.

In the case of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya, the Jagadgurū is supposed to be an *avatār* of Rāmānanda who, in turn, is considered as an *avatār* of Rām.

This characteristic, added to the meaning of the word Jagadgurū, explains why the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya can confer prestige to a guru or someone who wants to be recognized as such.

2.1 The attribution of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya

The title and office of Jagadgurū in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* has a very recent use. It seems that the number of *ācārya*-s in the *sampradāya* has always been limited compared to that of *sādhu*-s coming from low classes. Therefore, Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s were never recognized for their doctrinal or theoretical knowledge and, as described in the previous chapter, they were considered part of the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* until the beginning of the 20th century, when Swāmī Bhagavadācārya was able to assert the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*'s independence. Because of this victory and his accomplishments on behalf of the *sampradāya*, Bhagavadācārya received the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya in 1977, when he was almost 100 years old.

We should now pose one of the questions that arose repeatedly during my fieldwork: why, after centuries, would a *sampradāya* characterized by various disconnected branches need a Jagadgurū? I will briefly advance some hypotheses here.

As I have already said, the title of Jagadgurū could have been given to Bhagavadācārya to glorify a *sādhu* who had dedicated his life to the *sampradāya*.³⁵⁴ Since he was the representative of a specific position in the *sampradāya*, we could interpret the bestowing of that title as an attempt to affirm that specific position and to maintain it through his successors. This might have been necessary because not all of the Rāmānandī-s agreed with the stand taken by Bhagavadācārya. Even today, some branches do not recognize some of the works Bhagavadācārya had attributed to Rāmānanda, or they still consider Rāmānūja to be included in Rāmānanda's *paramparā*.

Furthermore, it is likely that in the 1970s, in a religious atmosphere characterized by the spread of modern gurus and religious centers based on charismatic figures, the

³⁵⁴ Vijaye Rāghav Prapann says that the title of Jagadgurū was given to Bhagavadācārya as a reward for all his efforts. However, as Bhagavadācārya did not want the title, he initially claimed he would have refused it (2001: 300).

sampradāya thought of Bhagavadācārya as the ideal man to start a *paramparā* of charismatic leaders who could represent the *sampradāya* among lay people on a national level. This idea of the Jagadgurū as a bridge between *sādhu* society and lay society was actually the explanation I obtained among devotees of the Jagadgurū and that the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya himself supports. However, Rāmnareśācārya also stressed the *sampradāya*'s need for a Jagadgurū as the necessary link between the many branches of the order.

Therefore, Bhagavadācārya not only provided the *sampradāya* with an official version of its history and that of its founder but also indirectly began a tradition of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s. The title was retrospectively conferred on Rāmānanda as well, not only to give a semblance of antiquity to an office that was actually new, but also to stress further the idea that Rāmānanda was an *ācārya* and the founder of a new *sampradāya*.

Similarly, Bhagavadācārya decided to build the Śrī Maṭh, a temple/monastery on the spot where, according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānanda used to have his own *āśram* in Varanasi. This construction is an example of what Singer calls a 'traditionalizing validation.' In fact, the tradition Bhagavadācārya was supporting aimed 'to restore an original status that for some reason has been lost or forgotten' (1972: 400).

As we will see in the next chapter, the Śrī Maṭh became the official seat of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and symbol of the institutionalized charisma of both Rāmānanda and Bhagavadācārya. In fact, after Bhagavadācārya's death the office and title passed to Śivarāmācārya and after him to the present Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya. Below, I will introduce the lives of these Jagadgurū-s.

2.1.1 Swāmī Bhagavadācārya (1880-1977)

Swāmī Bhagavadācārya was a radical and a nationalist with a Gandhian imprint; he was a strict *tyāgī* and a political *sādhu*. His life was long and intense, and it would deserve a proper study,³⁵⁵ even creating comparison with other *sādhu*-s of the same period but who had a completely different approach, such as Swāmī Karpātrī.³⁵⁶

355 One of the reasons for this scarcity of information on Bhagavadācārya may lie in the fact that scholars often give priorities to those political *sādhu*-s who could be depicted as traditionalists, zealots, or modern gurus who are connected with religious and political organization from the Hindu right, instead of focusing on more liberal *sādhu*-s.

356 Swāmī Karpātrī was an orthodox *saṃnyāsī*, strict follower of the *Advaita Vedānta* and of the Hindu dharma.

The information I collected about him comes from books published in Hindi by the Śrī Maṭh and from a *Granth* published for his centenary (*Swāmī Bhagavadācārya Śatābdī Smṛti Granth*). From the latter, I was able to get some selected parts of Bhagavadācārya's autobiography chosen by one Swāmī Nigamanānda Paramhans. The Śrī Maṭh houses some of Bhagavadācārya's books, most of them in Sanskrit but in very bad condition. I also attempted to collect information about Bhagavadācārya through conversations with Rāmānandī-s I met during my fieldwork. However, I realized that although Bhagavadācārya gave the *sampradāya* its independence not many Rāmānandī-s, especially young ascetics, have a clear idea about him. Among those who had at least heard of Bhagavadācārya, very few could really explain who he was and what he did.

According to an article by Vijaye Rāghav Prapann in the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś* (2001), Bhagavadācārya was born in Syal Koth (Punjab) in 1880. His father was Gangadat Trivedī, a *Kānyakubja* Brahman, and his mother was Mārākṣī Devī. His original name was Sarvajit. When he was eight years old, he began studying Sanskrit with his older brother. Since his father was a fervent devotee of Rām, the young Sarvajit learned chapters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Hanumān Cālīsā*, which he memorized in just a few days. In fact, he was so good at repeating the *Hanumān Cālīsā* that people started calling him the *Hanumān bhakta*. When he was thirteen years old, he could speak Hindi, Urdu and a little of Farsi and English. At the same age, he moved to Varanasi to continue studying Sanskrit, specializing himself in grammar, *Vedānta* and *Nyāya*.

Sarvajit wrote poems in Hindi that were published in *Vasundharā*, a magazine from Lucknow. Later on, he moved to Kolkata to study the *Veda*-s with *paṇḍit* Śrī Satyavrat Sāmśramī, but he later returned to Varanasi to obtain the titles of *Veda-tīrth* (Shrine of the *Veda*) and *Veda-ratna* (Jewel of the *Veda*). There, thanks to his skills, he was called *paṇḍit-rāja* (king of *paṇḍit*). He also spent some time studying at the Ārya Samāj but did not stay there long (2001: 292). Swāmī Nigmanānda gives us some hints about Bhagavadācārya's perspective on the Ārya Samāj. Bhagavadācārya wrote in his autobiography: 'The founder of the Ārya Samāj, Swāmī Dayānanda, was a self thinker (*svayam vicārak*). But his thinking is too illiberal (*sankucit*). He was a revolutionary, but his revolution was limping and lame. He was not very far sighted.' Then, he admits that the Ārya Samāj influenced his feeling toward the nation but he did not agree with Dayanand's statements that characters from *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* should be literally followed for what they did and said (1971: 119).

Coming back to the description given by Vijaye Rāghav Prapann, Sarvajit went to

Haridwar and later on to Ayodhya. There, while walking on the banks of the Sarayu river, Sarvajit met *paṇḍit* Raghubardās, who appreciated his skills as a scholar and suggested that he join his *sampradāya*, the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Raghubardās asked the *mahant* of the Baṛa Sthān of Ayodhya, Śrī Rāmmanohar Prasādācārya, to accept Bhagavadācārya as his disciple. Śrī Rāmmanohar Prasādācārya accepted him and asked *paṇḍit* Gādvācārya to confer the five Vaiṣṇava *saṃskāra*-s to Sarvajit and to name him Bhagavadās. It is said that the *sādhu*-s of the *sampradāya* were very excited to have among them a well-learned scholar like Bhagavadās (2001: 291-301).

However, this is not the only version we have of Bhagavadācārya’s life. Van der Veer reports the story supported by Bhagavadācārya’s opponents – who do not mention their source – without explaining why he chose this version rather than the official one. According to this alternative history, Bhagavadācārya was an orphan from a low caste who was brought up in an Ārya Samāj orphanage in Dhanapur, Bihar. He was taught Sanskrit until his teacher discovered his origin and refused to continue teaching him due to his lowly caste. However, the son of a *paṇḍit* continued to give him lessons. Bhagavadācārya also learned English and, after finishing school, moved to Kolkata. Later on, he went to Ayodhya and became a Rāmānandī (1988: 101).

Vijaye Rāghav Prapann tells that Bhagavadācārya was apparently able to simultaneously write two works on different subjects at the same time using both hands. He attended and won several public debates. For example, in an incident dated to around 1925 or 1926, Bhagavadācārya went to Jodhpur to face an Ārya Samajist who was challenging the Vaiṣṇava dharma. Once there, although feverish, he took part in the debate and promptly won (2001: 300).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Bhagavadācārya had a determined character and a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit that enabled him to lead Rāmānandī-s towards their independence. Pinch tells that after the ‘tumultuous 1920s’ Bhagavadācārya retired to a cave at Mount Abu,³⁵⁷ where he wrote his first work, the *Mahākavya Rāmānanda Digvijaya* (2004: 68). In the 1930s, he moved to Ahmedabad – thanks to the financial assistance of a

³⁵⁷ Perhaps Bhagavadācārya retired on Month Abu because, according to him, Rāmānanda had established a temple of Raghunāth there. (Śrīvāstava, 1957: 66)

prominent businessman –³⁵⁸ where he continued his political career, eventually joining the activities of the Bhārat Sādhu Samāj.³⁵⁹

Bhagavadācārya held a great amount of respect for Gandhi, who inspired him to write three works in Sanskrit: *Bhārat Pārijātam*, *Pārijātāpahār* and *Pārijātsaurambh*.³⁶⁰ Bhagavadācārya was an active supporter of social movements, especially those to eradicate untouchability.³⁶¹ His involvement in the Gandhian movement to allow untouchables entrance into Hindu temples earned him the opposition of the Hindu conservators, to the extent that *sādhu*-s like Swāmī Karpātrī³⁶² used to call him *nāstik*, meaning one who has no respect for the *Veda*-s.

Swāmī Niḡmānanda reports a few lines from Bhagavadācārya’s autobiography on the topic, in which Bhagavadācārya writes (1971: 116):

I’m an old atheist, although I received the Vaiṣṇava initiation I do not believe in God.

[p.418]

I said to Swāmī Karpātrī that anyone could call me *nāstik* or atheist. Nevertheless, I gave a unique support to God Ram. [p. 378]

During a gathering of Sanskrit scholars on December 1957 in Mumbai, Bhagavadācārya sought to explain the passage of the *Veda* in which the *varṇa*-s were formed by the body of the Puruṣa. He claimed that although Śūdras come from the feet of the Puruṣa, they were not inferior to Brahmans and should be treated with respect. As cited by Agrawal, Bhagavadācārya affirmed: ‘The fact of the matter is, we touch and worship the feet of a deity or God. Nobody worships the mouth of any god. And, still we have been continuing with this nonsense [of untouchability].’ (2010: 251).

In another article printed in the *granth* for Bhagavadācārya’s centenary, *mahant Śrī Rām Kumārdās Khākī* claims that Bhagavadācārya wrote about eighty *granth*-s, although he

³⁵⁸ Cf. Pinch (2004: 189, note 84).

³⁵⁹ Tripati tells that the Bhārat Sādhu Samāj was founded 1956 by Gulzarilal Nanda, the then-Home Minister of India, with the purpose of integrating the ‘scattered moralizing forces lying in the unorganized community of sadhus and utilizing the same for the moral regeneration of the masses’. However, according to Tripati, the Samāj did not make significant contributions because of non-cooperation from the *sādhu*-s, displeasure among *sādhu*-s over the State’s interference in the world, and introduction of rules that proved non-effective among sadhus. (2007: 170-171).

³⁶⁰ Paṇḍit Śrī Kṛṣṇa Śaraṇācārya, who wrote in Bhagavadācārya’s centenary *granth*, says that Bhagavadācārya also wrote a *Gandhi Mahākāvya* in Gurjari language (1971: 94).

³⁶¹ Bhagavadācārya and Gandhi exchanged letters once because the Swāmī wanted to ask Gandhi if he thought he should continue to work against untouchability or not (Agrawal, 2010: 251).

³⁶² In fact, when some untouchables entered in the Kāśī Viśvanāth temple in Varanasi, Swāmī Karpātrī declared that they had defiled it. To pursue his protest, he raised another Kāśī Viśvanāth temple in the city (Tripati, 2007: 225).

only reports the titles of some works without providing any further information on them.³⁶³ Among Bhagavadācārya's works, there are articles and books both in Sanskrit and Hindi about Rāmānandī doctrines, social themes and commentaries on religious books, especially *Veda*-s. Furthermore, Ghurye says that Bhagavadācārya was the editor of a journal, called *Tattvadarśī* (Reflections on the Supreme Spirit).³⁶⁴

In 1958, he published *Śrī Janakī Kripa Bhāṣya* (The Discourse of Śrī Janakī) and, soon after, authored another treatise entitled *Śrī Rāmānanda Bhāṣya* (The discourse of Rāmānanda), purported to be Rāmānanda's commentary of Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahmasūtra* (Pinch, 2004: 189). Bhagavadācārya claims in his autobiography that his friend Raghubarācārya was the real author of the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*. He explains that he and Raghubarācārya simply modified the *Janakī Bhāṣya* of Rām Prasād into the *Ānanda Bhāṣya* of Rāmānanda. He also confesses to having altered the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*. Swāmī Nigamanānda has also extracted some parts from Bhagavadācārya's autobiography that display his presumptuous attitude. For example, he reports that Bhagavadācārya wrote (1971: 116):

God forgot to write in my destiny the habit of asking forgiveness in front of my enemies.

[This sentence is from page 389 of the original autobiography]

My father and my mother made me to be a champion. [...] There is no one in the group of *dās* who can compete with me as a *tyāgī* or truthful in behaviors. [p. 515]

Although Bhagavadācārya was considered to be one of the main voices of the *sampradāya*, in other passages of his autobiography he presents an attitude toward the community that is quite critical and (*idem*: 118). He writes:

³⁶³ I report here the list: *Śukla Yajurveda Bhāṣya*, *Sāmaveda Bhāṣya*, *Vedāntdarśan par Vaidika Bhāṣya* (*do Adhyāy*), *Vedāntdarśan par Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, *Śrī Bhagavadgītā ke 6 Adhyāyan par Bhāṣya*, *Isāvāsyaopaniṣad ādi dās Upaniṣadon par Bhāṣya*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita darśan (Sabhāṣya)*, *Śrī Rāmānanddigvijaya Mahākāvya*, *Bhāratpārijātam Mahākāvya*, *Parijātaphār Mahākāvya*, *Parijātasourambh Mahākāvya*, *Gujarātī Mahākāvya*, *Gujarātī Bhāṣya Ka Vyakaran*, *Śrī Divyadarshanam*, *Matristav*, *Śrī Lokotrāmbacaranāshrayanam*, *Bhaktkalpadrumah*, *Bhaktasarvsvam*, *Catushpadī*, *Svārājanubhavam*, *Prempīyushapravāhah*, *Prapannakalpadruumah*, *Purūṣottam-Pranayah*, *Śrī Bhagavatstavah*, *Śrī Mārutistavah*, *Śrī Yatirājstavarāj*, *Śrī yatirājmangalam*, *Saptasati*, *Śrī Maghtindravinshanti*, *Stutikusumaanjamih*, *Prashnottar Ratnamāla*, *Śrī Rāmānand Bhāṣya*, *Lekh Ratnamanjuusha*, *Gurjarashabdānushāsanam*, *Vedaprashnottar*, *Gītā par Nibandh*, *Swāmī Bhagavadācārya bhag 1-7*, *East Africa ke Upadesh*, *Bhakti Śāstra*, *Vedānt kā Abhyās*, *Triratni*, *ārshramkantakoddhār*, *Śrī Sampradāya Raksha*, *Śrī Rāmānanda Sampradāya men Kranti kī ek Jhalak*, *Bhaktibhāgirathi*, *Tattvarthapancak*, *Ācāryavacanāmrit*, *Sanmārgadīpika*. (1971: 133)

³⁶⁴ Ghurye says that he was a progressive ascetic who, contrary to sectarian practice, wore an ochre-coloured garment. It is likely that from that point on, the Jagadgurū started to wear this kind of dress to distinguish themselves from the common Rāmānandī ascetics (who wear white clothes) and to be closer to the appearance of the Śāṅkarācārya (1964: 168).

For what concerns the *sampradāya*, it is something terrible. It has been established with the purpose of censuring mankind. [p. 127]

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there has never been faith in the guru, nor in the *ācārya*, nor in the *sampradāya*, and even today this faith is not arising. Every one is attached to his own desire. [p. 474]

As Swāmī Nigmananda does not give the general context from which he extrapolates these sentences, it is difficult to judge their meaning. It is likely that he is addressing the section of the *sampradāya* that generally opposed him, However, in other sentences he seems eager to justify himself (*idem*: 118):

I am not against any *tilak* nor *ākhāra*. I have always looked at the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* with respect in all its aspects. [p. 227]

I did not leave this *sampradāya*. I had to do its *sevā*. [p. 473]

In another article written by Swāmī Rāmcaraṇśaraṇa Śāstrī, it is said that Bhagavadācārya tried to spread the cult of Rām internationally, but when his passport was ready, his health worsened. He was only able to go to South Africa,³⁶⁵ where he taught Hindu dharma, Śrī Vaiṣṇava dharma and ‘Ārya culture.’ After spending some time in Africa, he returned to Gujarat (1977: 126). Furthermore, Swāmī Rāmcaraṇśaraṇa claims that not only did Bhagavadācārya decide the place for construction of several new Rām temples, but he also decreed the celebration of the *Rāmānanda Jayantī* (1971: 127).³⁶⁶

On October 14th 1971, Bhagavadācārya celebrated his centenary in Ahmedabad.³⁶⁷ Attendees included *mahant*-s from the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s, as well as the State Governor Rājyapal Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. Because the *sādhu*-s of the *sampradāya* considered Bhagavadācārya to be *apar-Rāmānandācārya* (the other Rāmānanda), they decided during the 1977 Kumbh Melā of Prayāg to confer the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya to Bhagavadācārya. He became the first Jagadgurū since Rāmānanda and twenty-third in descent from Rāmchandra (Pinch, 2004: 69). However, Pinch adds that, according to a publication from 1987, a disciple of Raghubarācārya named Rāmprapannācārya was ‘declared Jagadgurū Ramanandacarya in 1974 by scholars and students connected to the Shri Ramanand Sanskrit Mahavidyalay in Varanasi.’ However, this declaration was not

³⁶⁵ Ghurye states that Bhagavadācārya was preparing to go to Africa (he does not specify South Africa) in 1950 (1964: 170)

³⁶⁶ However, as seen in Chapter 2, sec. 1.2.3, the celebration of the Rāmānanda *jayantī* was already mentioned in the *Agastya Saṃhitā*. It is likely that Bhagavadacarya officialized and actualized this celebration.

³⁶⁷ If we take for granted the date reported by the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*, according to which he was born in 1880, at that time he was 90 years old.

accepted in the *sampradāya*, thus perhaps providing the stimulus to declare Bhagavadācārya as Jagadgurū in 1977 (2004: 189).

As Vijaye Rāghav Prapann reports, Bhagavadācārya died soon after he became Jagadgurū.

2.1.2 Jagadgurū Swāmī Śrī Śivarāmācārya jī Mahārāj (?-1988)

We know about the Jagadgurū Swāmī Śrī Śivarāmācārya through a short article written by Śrī Mādhavācārya in the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*. Śrī Mādhavācārya reports that Śivarāmācārya was born in Uttar Pradesh, in a Brahman family living in the Parampur district of Bahraich. His father's name was Śrī Nārāyaṇa Miśra, a pious Brahman and a follower of the Śrī *sampradāya*. He pushed his son to study Sanskrit and brought him to Ayodhya to ask the *mahant* of the Baṛī Chāvnī, Īśvardās, to accept his son as his disciple. Since one of the most famous *sant* of the Hanumān Gaṛhī, Śrī Baba Nārāyaṇdās, was from the same village, he hosted the young boy and initiated him. Later on, Śivarām continued his studies in Kāśī, where he met Bhagavadācārya and others learned holy men.

He began to be known in the *sampradāya* as a talented scholar, and was bestowed with the title of Jagadgurū after Bhagavadācārya passed away. He was in charge of the Śrī Maṭh for ten years, during which he focused on developing the *sampradāya* as a community. Śrī Mādhavācārya tells us that in October 1988, just a few months after retiring from his charge in the Śrī Maṭh, Śivarāmācārya died suddenly during a speech (2001: 302-303).

2.1.3 Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Swāmī Śrī Rāmnaresācārya Jī Mahārāj

According to the *paṇḍit* Śantjīv Miśra, the present Jagadgurū, Swāmī Rāmnaresācārya, was born in Bihar in a village called Parsiya on January 31, 1952 (2001: 304).³⁶⁸ His given name at birth was Kṛṣṇa Śarmā. Since he was a brilliant student, he went to Varanasi to study at the age of sixteen. There, under the guidance of the *mahant* Raghuvar Gopāldās,³⁶⁹ he received the Vaiṣṇava initiation and the name of Rāmnaresdās on December 29, 1968. He started studying philosophical matters, *Yoga*, *Samkhyā* and classical subjects under Swāmī Rāmlakṣmaṇācārya, the organizer of the Vidyā Mandir. To obtain the title of *śāstrī*, he

³⁶⁸ That day was *Vasant Pañcamī*, the day that marks the beginning of spring and the *Holi* season and on which the Sarasvatī *pūjā* is celebrated. For this reason, today the date of birth of the Jagadgurū changes according to the celebration of *Vasant Pañcamī*: for example during the Mahā Kumbh Melā of 2013, it was celebrated on February 15, and in 2014 it was celebrated on February 4. In this way, the *jayantī* of the Jagadgurū is connected with a wider Hindu celebration, that in some occasions (like the Melā) makes the coincidence even more meaningful (Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.3.11.2).

³⁶⁹ As the Jagadgurū told me, the guru of Raghuvar Gopāldās was from Ayodhya and belonged to the *paramparā* descending from Anantānanda. (Interview, November 15, 2013)

settled in the Dakṣiṇāmūrti Maṭh, where he studied *Siddhānta* (with Śrī Goyādīn Miśra), *Nyāya* (with *ācārya* Badrināth Śukla) and *Mīmāṃsā* (with *paṇḍit* Subrahmaṇyam Śāstrī). He also received a modern education at the Nāgarī Prachārīnī Sabhā.

After passing the exam to obtain the title of *śāstrī*, he went to the Vidyā Mandir to take the exam for the title of *ācārya*. He then took up teaching. It is said that at least sixty students every day attended his class. He obtained the title of *Nyayācārya* at the Sampurnananda Sanskrit University in 1981. Recalling that period during an interview by Rajesh Pradhan,³⁷⁰ Rāmnareśācārya said:

My main interest in coming to Banaras was to study Philosophy and advanced Sanskrit, I wanted to be free and did not want any restriction and any responsibility in my pursuit of knowledge. Then I did not have any intention to become a sadhu. All I wanted to do was to study and remain unmarried. I had studied under Swami Ramdasji and through him I met another influential sadhu, Sri Brahmachari Ramkishoredasji who also meditated near my birthplace. I was attracted, and he initiated me in the Ramanandi community as a sadhu. He was by nature a true sadhu, very simple with a large heart. I wanted to be free like him. [...] A person who has managed to become free from worldly attachments – as a true sadhu – will welcome whatever comes his way, as if that is what he always wanted. The sadhu type is not unhappy, because he is disenchanted and detached. (2014: 263)

His life as a *sādhu* started in 1983. Later on, he went to Haridwar to teach *Nyāya* to both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava disciples and he began to give speeches that were praised by *mahant-s* and ascetics of both faiths.³⁷¹ Even the number of his lay followers increased, eventually including people from all over India. As the Jagadgurū told me several times, his life plan was to continue teaching to earn enough money necessary to survive and then spend the rest of the day in his religious *sādhanā*.

However, life turned out differently: a group of *sant-s*, *mahant-s* and the committee of the Śrī Maṭh Trust under the advice of Śivarāmācārya pushed him to be *ācārya* for the Rāmānanda Pīṭh (that is, the Śrī Maṭh). After the group pleaded with him for three years, he

³⁷⁰ Author of *When the Saint go Marching in: Sadhus in democratic politics in late 20th century India*, Pradhan interviewed *sādhu-s* with various political stands, choosing them according to their involvement (or lack thereof) in the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement.

³⁷¹ According to *paṇḍit* Mishra, Rāmnareśācārya was able to establish a good relationship between the two factions that had seen centuries of conflict (2001: 307).

finally acquiesced in July 1987.³⁷² Among the *sādhu*-s who had chosen him, Rāmnareśācārya listed a few: Śivarāmācārya; Rāmbhakt Balarām Dās from Lodara in Gujarat; Śrī Mahant Nritu Gopāl Dās ji Mahārāj from Ayodhya; Nārāyan Dās from Rajasthan; Śrī Ram Subhag Das Śāstri from Ayodhya; Śrī Mahant Viṣṇu Dās from Surat, Gujarat; Śrī Mahant Gopāl Dās from Kalola in Gujarat; Śrī Mahant Īśvar Dās from Varanasi and Śrī Mahant Rām Busan Dās from Varanasi.

As reported in the Śrī Maṭh Trust Registration Act, Rāmnareśācārya's *abhiṣeka* (consecration) as Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya in the Śrī Maṭh was held on January 11, 1988, which coincided with the Śrī Maṭh's celebration of the Rāmānanda *jayantī*. It is likely that this date was chosen according to Śivarāmācārya's resignation.

The Act notes also some of the donations offered to Rāmnareśācārya. The *mahant*-s and Brahmans of the *sampradāya* organized huge *bhaṇḍārā*-s for the *sādhu*-s. Rāmbhakta Balarām Dās organized the festivities for the Śrī Maṭh and Nārāyan Dās from Rajasthan undertook the planning responsibilities for the Kabīr Mandir in Varanasi and in Haridwar. On January 12, there was a symposium of intellectuals at the Śrī Maṭh,³⁷³ sponsored by Sant Prava Prabhudās from Haridwar. The *siṅh āsan*³⁷⁴ (throne) was made by the *mahant* Nārāyan Dās from Haridwar. The umbrella, that is traditionally held over the Jagadgurū, was donated by the Narasinh Dhām in Haridwar. The fan – made from yak's tail – was provided by the *mahant* Dayārāmdās from the Radhūvir Bhavan in Haridwar, while the *daṇḍa* was provided by the *mahant* of the Rām Mandir, Rāmdās. Śrī Avadhās from Citrakut led the worship of the *caraṇa pādukā*, and the *mahant* of the Barodar Mandal performed the worship ritual of the silver *caraṇa pādukā*. *Mahant* Śrī Mādhavdās, from the Amrdhām, gave the Jagadgurū a *thāli*, a glass and a bowl in silver. The *mahant* Śrī Nārāyan from Trivenī in Rajasthan brought fifteen thousands rupees worth of farming tools for the fields of the Śrī Maṭh. The *mahant* Premdās gave five thousands rupees for the renovation of the Śrī Maṭh.³⁷⁵

During our interviews, I asked Rāmnareśācārya why the *sampradāya* needed a

³⁷² According to *paṇḍit* Mishra, they pushed Rāmnareśācārya for three years before he accepted (2001: 308). If this is true, it means that Śivarāmācārya, together with the Trust, wanted to select his successor, or at least name a successor in his will.

³⁷³ The event was likely a *vidvān sangīt*, a meeting in which intellectuals give speeches to honor the date, the *sampradāya* and the celebrated man. This type of meeting is often organized in the Śrī Maṭh today.

³⁷⁴ Actually, before the Kumbh Mela 2013 I have never seen this *siṅh āsan* in the Maṭh.

³⁷⁵ Śrī Math Registration Act, p. 11-12.

Jagadgurū after being leaderless for so many centuries.³⁷⁶ Here, I summarize his replies.

According to Rāmnareśācārya, like any other organization, a *sampradāya* needs someone who can represent the group and its beliefs on a national level and who has the competence to lead the community in decision-making processes. However, for many centuries the *sampradāya* did not have a leader because the Śrī Maṭh was destroyed and India went through a series of political upheavals: Rajas were subjugated by the Moghul empire, which was then replaced by the English Raj. In the same way that India was divided into several reigns, so the *sampradāya* spread in northern India as several separate branches that lacked any real cohesion. After India achieved independence, there was a need to recreate unity within the *sampradāya*, as symbolized by the reconstruction of the center in which Rāmānanda began his teaching and with the establishment of the office of Jagadgurū. Rāmnareśācārya said that his task is to continue the work that Bhagavadācārya has started:³⁷⁷ to return the *sampradāya* and Rāmānanda³⁷⁸ to their previous status, to provide the *sampradāya* with a guide and to attend to the needs of those lay people who come to him.³⁷⁹

According to a general opinion, Rāmnareśācārya accepted the office of Jagadgurū to build a link between the *vairāgī sampradāya* (the community of Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s) and the society, to improve the relationship between Vairāgī-s and Saṃnyāsī-s³⁸⁰ and to re-establish the glory of the Śrī Maṭh as a main place for the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

Today the Śrī Maṭh has a particular value in the *sampradāya* since it is considered as the *mūl pīṭh*, the original (root) center of the community. However, the role of the Jagadgurū in the *sampradāya* seems to be more nominal than practical. Because the *sampradāya* has historically never had a unique leader, there is a certain flexibility in the bestowing of the title.

³⁷⁶ Interviews, November 2012.

³⁷⁷ Rāmnareśācārya has great respect for Bhagavadācārya and his accomplishments on behalf of the *sampradāya*. He describes him as a real *vairāgī*, meaning someone completely detached from materialistic purposes.

³⁷⁸ Rāmnareśācārya once told me he wants to make Rāmānandācārya as famous as Gandhi. He thinks this is possible, given his admirable stand against social inequality.

³⁷⁹ On the activity of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, cf. Chapter 6, sec. 3.

³⁸⁰ As confirmed by Gianni Pellegrini, a scholar who worked with the Śāṅkarācārya for long time, Rāmnareśācārya has always had a collaborative attitude with *saṃnyāsī*-s and their representatives. He has a particularly friendly relationship with the Śāṅkarācārya of Puri.

3. The creation of new Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s

Although the Śrī Maṭh is universally accepted as a main Rāmānandī center, the status of Rāmnaresācārya as Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya is still seen as up for debate by many within the *sampradāya*, leading to the appointment of new Jagadgurū-s over the years.

The number of Jagadgurū-s is not clear. Some of them are considered fake and often many ascetics do not even know their names. For this reason, it was difficult for me to collect information about them, especially qualitative materials about how they obtained the title. My methodology included: asking other *sādhu*-s of the *sampradāya* for information on them, sending e-mails to other Jagadgurū-s' centers, and conducting online research, including watching their videos on their YouTube channels. I could not organize meetings with them as I did not have precise information about where they live and whether they were at their *āśram*-s, as most of them spend the year travelling in India and abroad.

Although some Rāmānandī-s try to justify the existence of more Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s on the model of the number of Śaṅkarācārya,³⁸¹ their presence may actually be linked to the spread of the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement and the power of those Rāmānandī-s associated with the Akhārā Pariṣad. Below, I will introduce the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement and the Akhārā Pariṣad to give a framework for my later description of the Jagadgurū-s.

3.1 The Rāmjanmabhūmi movement

In the 1980s, the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement spread dramatically across India. The movement was both religious and political in nature, and had the primary aim of removing the Babri Masjid, a 16th century mosque, from the site reputed to be the birthplace of god Rām (*Rāmjanmabhūmi*) in Ayodhya. When the religious and the cultural organizations that were fuelling the movement, namely the Viśva Hindū Pariṣad (VHP) and the Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), gained the support of the Bhāratīya Janatā Party (BJP), it culminated in the destruction of the mosque on December 6, 1992.

Given the complexity of the issue, I will only briefly present an historical framework of the movement to show the involvement of Rāmānandī-s. I will not deal with the various

³⁸¹ As we will see, the Jagadgurū Narendrācārya claims the presence of four Rāmānandācārya-s, equivalent to the number of the four Śaṅkarācārya-s.

political issues of the movement, as it would lead us too far from the main issue of the chapter.

The history of the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement has its outset in the middle of the 19th century, when tensions began to arise between Muslims and Rāmānandī-s from the Hanumān Garhī over the issue of territory. However, there are no precise indications about which place specifically was being disputed or who started the argument. Rajesh Pradhan gives a comprehensive summary of the various historical interpretations: Four stories converge leading certain sadhus to stake a claim over the Babri Masjid: (i) A corrupt Hindu mahant (abbot sadhu) of the Hanumangarhi temple complex –arguably the most important religious institution in Ayodhya– was expelled from Hindu ascetic orders. In order to take revenge, he converted himself to Islam and goaded Sunni Muslim leaders, who were angry even otherwise by the temple-building and liberal policies of Shia nawabs, to capture Hanumangarhi and assert orthodox Islam; (ii) Under the leadership of the Sunni leader Shah Gulam Hussain, the Sunni Muslims attacked the Hanumangarhi complex in 1855, instigated by a propaganda that a temple had been built there over the ruins of a mosque at that very spot³⁸² –an ironic precursor in reverse to the Ramjanmabhoomi conflict of the 1980s; (iii) The new mahant-sadhu of Hanumangarhi, with an army of Vaishnav sadhus (or *bairagis*) drove out the Sunni Muslims and attacked the invading Muslims who had taken shelter in the Babri Masjid; and (iv) Fearing the prospect that Muslims’ claim to build a mosque at Hanumangarhi may renew in the future or actually be accepted by the British, the Hanumangarhi sadhus filed a preemptive claim that the Babri Masjid had been built over the ruins of the Ram temple. (2014: 118)³⁸³

Whoever started the dispute and for whichever cause, the consequence was that, in 1859, to prevent clashes among communities, the English Raj built a separated *chabūtrā* (platform) for the Hindus, so that both the communities could perform their religious activities on the spot. Srivastava interprets this act as a way to requite the support that Rāmānandī-s had given in the aftermath of the Mutiny in 1857. Rāmānandī-s obtained fields in Ayodhya and neighboring places, while lands owned by Islamic institutions were confiscated (1991: 44-45). Since then, the Babri Masjid came to be known as the

³⁸² According to K. Panikkar, the Sunnis tried to chase away the Vairagī-s, but without any success. For revenge the Vairagī-s occupied the Babri masjid. However, Panikkar argues that this occupation was not based on a religious claim, and that the idea that the Babri masjid was built after the destruction of the *Janmasthan* was invented later by a mahant of the Hanumān Garhī (1991: 31-32).

³⁸³ According to S. Srivastava, Vairagī-s also occupied the mosque and when the Nawab attempted to convince them to leave the place, they refused. Therefore, a Sufi organized a small army to re-conquer the place. However, he was defeated by Colonel Barlow (1991: 44-45).

Janmansthān, although there were other places in Ayodhya claiming the same. A first legal dispute over the ownership of the place ended in 1885 when the judge simply decided to maintain the *status quo*, allowing both communities to worship there.

After a period of quiescence, the Ayodhya issue was politicized for the first time in 1949. On December 23, some Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s – with the support of the Hindu Mahasabha –³⁸⁴ entered in the Babri mosque and installed a statue of the infant Rām, claiming that the event was a miracle. Their purpose was to create a strong religious symbol that could capture the attention of the Hindu society and to create political support for their cause in Uttar Pradesh (Jaffrelot, 1999: 91). In 1950 the cult of the Rām *mūrti* was legalized, but the inner gate of the mosque was closed so that any offering for the god would have been given through the gate.³⁸⁵ However, the central government led by Nehru took a strong stance on the matter, utilizing preventive arrests to impede any attempt to fuel the event (*idem*: 94).

The movement did not take a more organized structure until the 1980s. It was at this time that some Rāmānandī-s participated actively on the side of the VHP and RSS. Rāmānandī-s from Ayodhya, such as *mahant* Rāmchandra Dās Paramahans and the *mahant* Nitya Gopāl Dās, organized committees and events to promote the cause.

Van der Veer, in an article written in 1987, describes the first attempt to bring public attention to the Rāmjanmabhūmi issue: the organization of an event in 1984 called the Ram Janmabhumi Mukti Yajna, or a ‘sacrifice to liberate the spot on which Ram was born’ (1987: 290). However, van der Veer describes that during this event, the main Rāmānandī speaker, Rāmchandra Dās Paramahans, lamented the absence of other local Rāmānandī-s while *sādhu*-s from all over India and various religious orders were present (1987: 293). For example, there were no representatives of the Hanumān Gaṛhī. According to van der Veer, this group ‘feared the success of the movement’ because it would have disturbed the status quo of the city and limited the predominance of the Hanumān Gaṛhī. Furthermore, van der Veer continues, *nāgā*-s of the temple were known for having ‘a long tradition of easy accommodations with the powers that be,’ and were supporters of the Congress party (1987: 295).

I do not completely agree with van der Veer regarding the reason for an absence of

³⁸⁴ For a comprehensive report on that night and the involvement of the Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu nationalist organization established in 1914, see Krishna Jha & Dharendra K. Jha (2012).

³⁸⁵ This gate was to be opened in 1986 by Rajiv Gandhi as result of a policy directed to please Hindus after the Shah Bano Case. (Jaffrelot, 1999: 370)

local Rāmānandī-s. In fact, van der Veer does not take into consideration that there were *sādhu*-s who simply did not support the VHP and RSS, both for personal religious convictions and because part of a well established tradition that does not need an external support. For example, one of the *mahant* of the Hanumān Gaṛhī, Gyān Dās, was never a supporter of the VHP and challenged the movement's political approach. Moreover, van der Veer does not take into consideration that the other litigant for the place, the *nāgā*-s of the Nirmohi *akhārā*, were already legally fighting for control of the space since 1885, and that *mahant* Raghubar Dās had even filed a suit for the land in 1959, which continued until 2010.³⁸⁶ The *mahant* who represents the Nirmohi *akhārā* today, Bhaskar Dās, has never supported the VHP and has tried to maintain good a relationship with local Muslims.

Included among the Rāmānandī-s who took part in the movement as heads of committees was the Jagadgurū Śivarāmācārya, who was declared chairman of the Rāmjanmabhūmi Trust in 1986 (Jaffrelot, 1999: 372). Rāmnaresācārya, who had taken the office as Jagadgurū in the Śrī Maṭh in 1988, supported the theoretical idea of the movement but did not want to have any political involvement and therefore avoided participation. However, he later changed his mind and became part of the Ramalaya Trust organized by Narasimha Rao, the Prime Minister of India.³⁸⁷

It seems to me that the establishment of other Jagadgurū-s may be caused in part by the spread of the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement and the fact that various groups in the *sampradāya* with different stands were searching for representatives.

3.2 At the wish of the Akhārā Pariṣad

The Akhārā Pariṣad is an organization that assembles the heads of fourteen *nāgā akhārā*-s from different Hindu orders. Although Jaffrelot affirms that it is based in Haridwar (1999: 471), when I tried to search for it, I realized that an office does not really exist and that, perhaps, *sādhu*-s gather only occasionally, varying the place each time. To the best of my knowledge, there are no proper studies on the Akhārā Pariṣad to better understand its functions and activities. The information I collected comes from interviews, Internet searches and newspapers.

The Akhārā Pariṣad has an important role in the organization of religious events like

³⁸⁶ As Pradhan reports, on September 2010 the High Court of Allahabad declared that the three contestants, the Muslims' Sunni Waqf Board, the Hindu Mahasabha that represented Rām-Lalla and the Nirmohi Akhārā, had equal titles of holders of the property in dispute and by consequence the total area was divided in three parts (2014: 298).

³⁸⁷ Cf Chapter 6, sec. 4.3.6.

the Mahā Kumbh Melā,³⁸⁸ during which it appoints titles and supports the election of new *mahant-s* or *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara-s*. As some ascetics told me, *akhārā-s* have also appointed titles in exchange for economic gain. However, not all the *akhārā-s* work together in these kind of circumstances. One notable case happened in the Kumbh Melā in 2013 when Swāmī Nityānanda, a controversial Swāmī accused of sexual harassment in 2010, was elected *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* by the Mahānirvani Akhārā. On February 15, 2013, the *Deccan Herald* reported that Gyān Dās (president of the Akhārā Pariṣad) accused Nityānanda of having paid for the title, amidst protests from other prominent *akhārā-s* and *sādhu-s* who did not approve of his appointment.³⁸⁹ The purchase of a title seems quite a widespread practice in contemporary Hinduism because a prestigious title can attract lay disciples and therefore more donations. A further example of the practice is evident in the case of Swāmī Amritānanda Devi, who in 2003 was conferred the title of Śāṅkarācārya of the Kashmir *pīṭh*. As reported by journalist Shrawan Shukla, this event ‘is said to have split the 150-year-old Kasi Vidwat Parishad, the only recognized body to confer such a title.’ In fact, the general secretary of the Kāśī Pariṣad, Ācārya Batuk Prasad Śāstrī, alleged that he was offered a bribe to confer the title, causing him to distance himself from the election of the new Śāṅkarācārya.³⁹⁰

Similarly, several Rāmānandī-s told me that, during the Kumbh Melā, the Akhārā Pariṣad took money in exchange for the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya.³⁹¹ The historical adaptability of the *sampradāya* and the absence of a traditionally fixed number of Jagadgurū-s have allowed the Akhārā Pariṣad to exploit the bestowing of the title, and in few cases, it seems that the *akhārā-s* have given the title of Jagadgurū to ascetics from among their own ranks, perhaps to give prestige to the *akhārā* itself. These kinds of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s appear more concerned with having a title than with working for the *sampradāya* or spreading Rāmānanda’s teachings.

³⁸⁸ As Maclean affirms (2003: 895,897), ‘before the consolidation of East India Company rule in northern India the Kumbh-s were controlled by *akhārā-s*, as the Melā-s were arenas in which *sādhu-s* from the *akhārā-s* battled for economic and spiritual supremacy, with the victorious sect winning the right to control the Mela and collect lucrative taxes’. However, the establishment of East India Company eroded the sadhus’ social and economic role in Indian society so that ‘the only arena in which sadhus could enjoy their former status was in the Kumbh Mela.’

³⁸⁹ <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/312446/nithyananda-skips-shahi-snan-mahakumbh.html>

³⁹⁰ http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main40.asp?filename=Ne291108swami_and.asp (Accessed: April 2014).

³⁹¹ Rājūdās, disciple of Santarāmdās, one of the *mahant* of the Hanumān Garhī, repeated this concept several times and he wanted to be sure that I was recording what he was saying (Ayodhya, November 2012).

3.3 Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s in the *sampradāya*

Below I list those Jagadgurū-s about whom I was able to collect information. Some of them were elected because of the religious environment created by the aforementioned Rāmjanmabhūmi movement, whereas others probably bought the title.

3.3.1 The Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmbhadrācārya

The Jagadgurū Rāmbhadrācārya is a well-known figure within the Rāmānandī community. I gathered information about him from his assistants, other ascetics and the Internet. His personal website displays a portrait of his life in the style of hagiographic narration:

Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Svāmī Rāmbhadrācārya incarnated in a most pious Sarayupārīṇa Brāhmaṇa family of Vaśiṣṭha Gotra in Shandikhurd village of Jaunpur district in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. He took birth in the wee hours of the Makara Saṅkrānti day of January 14, 1950 (Māgha Kṛṣṇa Ekādaśī, Vikrama Saṃvat 2006), born to mother Śacī Devī Miśra and father Paṇḍita Rājadeva Miśra. He was named as Giridhara (a name of Lord Kṛṣṇa) by a cousin of his paternal grandfather, who was a devotee of Mirābāī.

The one Lord of the universe, Śrī Rāma, wished Giridhara not to see the horrors of Kaliyuga, but regale in the sight of mother Sītā and Lord Rāma through divine internal vision; the very same vision with which Arjuna and Sañjaya saw the universal form of the Lord in the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. At the age of two months, the lotus-eyes of the infant were infected with Trachoma. Modern medicine was unavailable in the village in those days, and local treatment was tried. Giridhara lost his physical eyesight for ever, and has since then perceived everything through his divine sight. He never had to read or write in any way, and nor [*sic*] did he have to ever use the Braille system. Mastering a scripture by listening to just a single recitation and composing beautiful poetry by dictating is nothing for somebody who has the grace of the Lord Rāma. Giridhara's initial education was started at home by his grandfather, Paṇḍita Sūryabalī Miśra. With a remarkable memory, Giridhara memorized the entire Bhagavad Gītā in Saṃskṛta (approximately 800 verses) with chapter and verse numbers by the age of five years. By the age of eight years, he had memorized the entire Rāmacaritamānasa of Saint Tulasīdāsa (approximately 10,800 verses) assisted by the efforts of his grandfather. Later, he went on to memorize and master the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, major works of Saṃskṛta grammar, and all works of the poet-saint Tulasīdāsa. His Upanayana Saṃskāra was performed on the Nirjala Ekādaśī day of June 24, 1961.

On this day, besides being given the Gāyatrī Mantra, he was initiated (given Dīkṣā) into the mantra of Rāma by Paṇḍita Īśvaradāsa Mahārāja of Ayodhyā.³⁹²

As explained by Bouillier, the use of hagiographies to describe the life of a guru founder of a center has a specific purpose: 'le récit de la vie exceptionnelle du fondateur contribue à réunir autour de son culte une communauté et à légitimer l'institution qui s'en réclame' (2004: 278).

Giridhara took *vairāgī dīkṣā* in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* on November 19, 1983, and he was given the name of Rāmbhadrādās. In 1987, Rāmbhadrādās established his own religious center, the Tulsī Pīṭh at Citrakut, in Uttar Pradesh where Lord Rām is said to have spent twelve out of his fourteen years of exile. In 1988, only one year after the nomination of Rāmnareśācārya, the Kāśī Vidvān Pariṣad³⁹³ bestowed the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya upon Rāmbhadrādās (from then on Rāmbhadrācāryā), although the Akhārā Pariṣad did not officially recognize him until 1995, after the Digambar *akhārā* gave its full support.³⁹⁴

Rāmbhadrādās worked closely with the VHP on the Rāmjanmabhūmi issues, possibly because of a personal firm belief on the topic and as well as for personal advantage. On the other side, a well-known guru with a religious faith and a knowledge focused on Rām *bhakti* was also proving useful for the VHP. Furthermore, considering that Rāmnareśācārya was not supporting the movement, we can guess that Rāmbhadrādās's election as Jagadgurū was supported by those sections of the *sampradāya* involved with the movement and the VHP which wanted a distinguished leader to represent them. In fact, when the case finally arrived at the High Court of Allahabad, in 2003, he deposed as an 'expert witness for religious matters.' His website describes the event:

In the year 2003, Jagadguru Rāmabhadrācārya deposed as an expert witness for religious matters in the Allahabad High Court. As the infant Rāma is a minor, Jagadguru Rāmabhadrācārya, being a descendant of sage Vaśiṣṭha and thus a Brāhmaṇa from the

³⁹² <http://jagadgururambhadracharya.org/biography.php> (Accessed: March 2014)

³⁹³ The Kāśī Vidvān Pariṣad is an organization of intellectuals located in Varanasi and established for the purpose of dealing with religious matters. The Pariṣad, together with the Akhil Bhārtiya Dharmasangha, had an important role in the 1941 election of the Śāṅkarācārya of the Jyotirmaṭh, as it had been vacant for a period of 165 years. However, as Sundareshan explains, once Swami Brahmānanda Sarasvatī was appointed, theoretically no other external opinions were necessary. Nevertheless the two organizations continued to interfere with the succession issue over the years: In the 1950s the groups cited a controversy over Brahmānanda's will; in the 1990s they decided to intervene against Svarūpānanda Sarasvatī when he took charge of Dwarka as well. (<http://indology.info/papers/sundareshan/> Accessed: April 2014)

³⁹⁴ As we will see in Chapter 6, sec. 2.4, in that year Rāmnareśācārya reached Ayodhya for a *yātrā* and the Digambar Akhārā openly opposed him precisely because of disagreements over the Ayodhya issue.

Gurukula of Lord Rāma, defended the Lord in the case. Portions of his affidavit and cross-examination are quoted in the final judgement by the High Court. In his affidavit, he cited the ancient Hindu scriptures (Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa, Rāmatāpaniya Upaniṣad, Skanda Purāṇa, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda, et cetera) describing Ayodhyā as a city holy to Hindus and the birthplace of Rāma. He cited verses from two works of Tulasīdāsa - eight verses from the Dohā Śataka which describe the destruction of a temple and construction of mosque at the disputed site in 1528 CE, and one verse from Kavitāvalī which mentions the disputed site. Refuting the theory of the original temple being to the North of the disputed area (as pleaded by the pro-mosque parties), he described the boundaries of the Janmabhūmi as mentioned in the Ayodhyā Māhātmya section of Skanda Purāṇa, which tallied with the present location of disputed area as noted by Justice Sudhir Agarwal. The verdict on September 30, 2010, ruled in the favour of Lord Rāma - the prayers of crores of Hindus were answered, and Jagadgurū Rāmbhadrācārya's testimony was vindicated.³⁹⁵

As a witness, Rāmbhadrācārya declares his status and he makes reference to other Jagadgurū-s of the *sampradāya*:

My name is Ram Bhadracharya and the name of office I hold is Jagadguru Ramanandacharya. Presently, in India there are only four Jagadguru Ramanandacharya. Selection of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya is made by Kashi Vidwat Parishad and Ramanandi Ani Akharas and four Sects. Up till October 1988 there was only one post of Ramanandacharya, but thereafter the number became four. Creation of four posts was done by Ani Akharas. In June 1988 Kashi Vidwat Parishad had coronated me and that was approved by majority in Prayag Kumbh after 1988. With the consent of Kashi Vidwat Parishad, Ani Akharas created four posts. Besides me, there are three other Jagadguru Ramanandacharya, namely, Haryacharya, Rajeev Lochanacharya and Rameshwaranandacharya. Existence of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya had been since 700 years before.³⁹⁶

Therefore, unlike Rāmnareśācārya, Rāmbhadrācārya believes in the presence of other Jagadgurū-s, but he neglects to mention Rāmnareśācārya. It is possible that Rāmbhadrācārya was among those Rāmānandī-s who did not support Rāmnareśācārya's election. Nityandra Mishra, a lay disciple of Rāmbhadrācārya who takes care of his website and e-mail correspondence, wrote to me about the Rāmbhadrācārya's stance on the plurality of Jagadgurū:

³⁹⁵ <http://jagadgururambhadracharya.org/biography.php> (Accessed: February 2014)

³⁹⁶ <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/795354/?type=print> (Accessed: March 2014)

You must be aware that many Sampraday-s in India have several holders of the Jagadguru title. The order of Sankaracharya has four Jagadgurus from four original Pithas, a fifth one in Shringeri, a sixth one in Kashi, and many others. The order of Ramanuja has at least 50 holders of the Jagadguru title in India today, the 50th one was anointed in the Kumbha of 2013. Similarly, Ramananda order also has several Jagadgurus. Gurudeva has worked with other Jagadgurus also, including Jagadguru Narendracharya of Dakshina Peetha (Maharashtra), Jagadguru Hamsadevacharya of Uttara Peetha (Haridwar) et cetera. He of course knows about the other Jagadgurus in the Sampradaya.

We think every Sampradaya needs leaders, and the Ramananda Sampradaya is blessed to have seen Jagadguru Bhagavadacharya and Gurudeva (Jagadguru Rambhadracharya) who both authored Samskrita commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi - the Ramanandabhashya of Bhagavadacharya and the Sriraghavakrpabhashya of Gurudeva. In ancient India, the title Jagadguru was used only for those who authored Samskrita commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.³⁹⁷ So we believe Bhagavadacharya Ji and Gurudeva have done justice to this title by authoring Samskrita commentaries.

Several other Sampradayas continue to have holder of the Jagadguru title today. We all think they are relevant in today's world. In addition, the Ramananda Sampradaya is the largest Sampradaya in India today, the most influential Sampradaya with the masses, and is the true leader of Hindus and practices the egalitarian Hinduism of Ramananda, of Tulsidas (author of Ramcharitmanas) and of Nabhadas (author of Bhaktamal). Despite their claims, the Gaudiya Vaishnava (as claimed by ISKCON) and Samnyasi Sampradaya (as claimed by some Samnyasis and Advaitins) do not match the Ramanandis in numbers and influence. Hence being the natural leader of Hinduism, it was only just that the Ramananda Sampradaya had their own Jagadguru title, as this Sampradaya is indeed the Guru (the elder, and the guide) amongst the Jagat (world) of Sampradayas in Hinduism.³⁹⁸

Today Rāmbhadrācārya's position inside the *sampradāya* is not 'rosy'. A serious argument erupted in 2005 when he published a critical edition of Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* that provoked a gloving reaction among Rāmānandī *nāgā*-s of Ayodhya. The Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya said that they had accused Rāmbhadrācārya of committing blasphemy by altering several verses of the text. Because of this 'mistake', the Jagadgurū added, Rāmbhadrācārya had to pay several lakh rupees.

³⁹⁷ This word literally means *three sources*. He uses it to refer to three canonical texts of Hinduism: *Upaniṣad*-s, *Brahma Sutra* and *Bhāgavata Gītā*.

³⁹⁸ E-mail, February 15, 2014.

However, an article recently published on *Scroll.in*³⁹⁹ provides a more complete account of the event: in November 2009, a council of Rāmānandī-s asked Rāmbhadrācārya to withdraw his blasphemous version of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, which he refused to do. This led to a violent quarrel in the Haridwar Kumbh Melā of 2010, in which Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s entered Rāmbhadrācārya's camp and assaulted him. They removed his tents and debarred him for the *sampradāya*, unless he acknowledged his mistake and gave a *bhāṇḍāra* of 5 lakhs.

According to the article, after the Kumbh Melā, Rāmbhadrācārya began once again giving speeches based on his compromising version of the *Rāmcaritmānas* which again caused his expulsion from the order and the ban from the following Kumbh Melā-s.

However, from the data I collected during my fieldwork it seems that Rāmbhadrācārya is still part of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* – in fact he also enjoys the support of various groups – and was actually present with his camp in the Mahā Kumbh Melā 2013.

This would prove, once again, that several positions can coexist in the *sampradāya* and that the *nāgā*-s are those *sādhu*-s who are less disposed to changes unless these pass through their permission.

3.3.2 The Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Haryācārya

I was not able to collect specific dates about Haryācārya, who, according to my informant, passed away a few years ago. However, it seems that he was elected Jagadgurū during the 1990s and that he was a Rāmānandī from the *akhārā*-s.

According to Pinch, the Jagadgurū Haryācārya was the dominant claimant to the position of Jagadgurū in 1995, as his guru was Śivarāmācārya, the successor of Bhagavadācārya. In reality the information about this Jagadgurū is conflicting. According to both Rājūdās and Gyān Dās,⁴⁰⁰ he was an ascetic of the Hanumān Garhī who was bestowed the title of Jagadgurū in 1999. However, as reported by Jaffrelot, when Chandra Swāmī organized a gathering of three hundred *sādhu*-s in 1993 to urge the Hindu religious figures to abjure politics, Haryācārya actively participated (1999: 470).

On May 15, 1993, *India Today* reported: 'Despite his influence, Swami stayed in the wings during the show, leaving the stage to Jagadguru Ramanandacarya Haryacarya of

³⁹⁹<http://scroll.in/article/704059/A-Padma-award-from-Modi-government-has-reopened-an-old-rift-in-Ayodhya> (Accessed: February 2015)

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. below, Sec. 3.5, p. 254.

Ayodhya'.⁴⁰¹ As the journalist Zafar Agha stressed, this group of *sādhu*-s emerged in the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement as a third front, distinct from both the VHP and the Government initiative, with the aim of de-politicizing the dispute.

Rajesh Pradhan categorizes Haryācārya as a moderately pro-Hindutva *sādhu*. However, Pradhan's inquiry does not introduce Haryācārya as Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya, and it seems strange that Haryācārya did not present himself as such (2013: 14).

On June 23, 2002, Haryācārya participated in a meeting that took place in the Bhagvatacarya Smarak Sadan of Ayodhya, to try to ban the VHP from the Rām issue in Ayodhya for restoring the harmony between communities.⁴⁰² In fact, although Pinch reports that Haryācārya lived at the Śrī Maṭh Ācārya Pith in Rāj *ghāṭ* in Varanasi (1996: 191, note 120), in reality Haryācārya had his *āśram*, the Haridhām Pīṭh, in Ayodhya.⁴⁰³ Haryācārya was heard as a witness for the Hindu side for the Ayodhya case along with Rāmbhadrācārya at the High Court of Allahabad.⁴⁰⁴ This file reports:

Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Swami Haryacharya D.W.3/14, claims himself to be the 25th superior of Ramanandi Sampradaya, holding the office of Ramanandayacharya at the Principal Seat of the said Sampradaya.⁴⁰⁵

3.3.3 The Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmeśwarānandācārya

Rāmeśwarānandācārya is the fourth Jagadgurū mentioned by Rāmbhadrācārya in his court statement. However, it seems he was named Jagadgurū not because of any link to an *akhārā* or to the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement, but rather because of his position within the *paramparā*. According to Pinch, he was a scholar of the Kosalendra Maṭh in Ahmedabad and claimed the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya because his guru was Rāmprapannācārya, disciple of Raghubarācārya, who was appointed Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya in 1974. As Pinch notices, although his guru *paramparā* descends from Raghubarācārya, Rāmeśwarānandācārya was 'regarded as an important contributor to the compilation of Rāmānandī tradition and scholarship' (1996: 191-192, note 120).

⁴⁰¹ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/sants-urge-hindu-holy-men-to-stay-away-from-politics/1/302181.html> (Accessed: April 2014)

⁴⁰² Cf. http://www.siliconeer.com/past_issues/2003/january2003.html and <http://hindu.com/2002/06/26/stories/2002062603900100.htm> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴⁰³ In fact also in this web site it is affirmed that Haryācārya is from Ayodhya: <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Satyendra-Das/235999729> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴⁰⁴ <http://elegalix.allahabadhighcourt.in/elegalix/WebShowJudgment.do?judgmentID=1176034> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴⁰⁵ <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/795354/?type=print> (Accessed: March 2014)

3.3.4 The Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rajeev Lochanācārya

From Rāmbhadrācārya's court statement, I came to know about the Jagadgurū Rajeev Lochanācārya. Through Internet research, I found the news that he passed away on February 25, 2004.⁴⁰⁶ He was part of the Yoga Śakti Pīṭhadheśwar and disciple of Barfani Baba, who established the Barfani Dham Āśram in Malviya Nagar, Indore, Madhya Pradesh. Further information available tells us:

Swami Ji belonged to Akhil Bhartiya Digambar Ani Akhara and was bestowed with the title of Jagadguru at a very early age. He was a part of Barfani Dham Khalsa. Swami Ji preached the technique of "Om Kriya Yoga" and had disciples in Canada, Australia, USA and UK.⁴⁰⁷

From these lines we can suppose that Rajeev Lochanācārya was appointed Jagadgurū by the *akhārā*-s perhaps to provide the Digambar Anī *akhārā* with its own Jagadgurū. This Jagadgurū was not politically involved, and from another website, I found statements about his retired life spent doing *tapasyā* on the island of Omkāreśwara, seventy kilometers from Indore. The article reports, for example, that he had two people to take care of him because he would often go into *samādhi* and remaining in that status for days. His helpers were instructed by Barfani Dada to stay with him, protect him and ensure he ate food.⁴⁰⁸

3.3.5 The Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Narendrācārya

From the Jagadgurū Narendrācārya's Facebook page, I was able to access a short biography that outlines the details of his birth and life:

Narendracharyaji was born at 10:30 pm on Friday, October 21, 1966, in the village of Nanij in Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra, India. His parents were Baburao Surve and Subhadra Devi. Being born in the Capricorn zodiac, the child was slated for a monastic way of life. As Saturn governed over the birth sign, the child was predicted to possess valour, fame and oration skills. Narendra spent time in spiritual pursuits from his early childhood. He became a devotee of the revered Saint Gajanan Maharaj. He became so engrossed in his beloved deity that not only did he think about Gajanan Maharaj at all times but also dreamt of him. His parents arranged for him to be married in order to bring him back to the mundane. His marriage took place on October 15, 1985. He was

⁴⁰⁶ <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/blogs-news/hindu-press-international/jagadguru-ramanandacharya-swami-rajeev-lochanacharya-ji-passes-away/3816.html> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁸ <http://seekingtheself.com/?p=373> (Accessed: March 2014).

blessed with a son, Kanifanath, on October 24, 1988. After the birth of his son, Narendra felt that he had fulfilled his duties to the family and gave his life completely to spirituality. His devotion increased with each passing day. As Saint Gajanan Maharaj was aware of Narendra's future role, he advised him to seek initiation from a Guru. Following his guidance, Maharaj became the disciple of Samarth Sadguru Kaadsiddheshwar Maharaj of Kanheri, in January 1991. Samarth Sadguru Kaadsiddheshwar Maharaj was a sage of very high calibre of acclaimed lineage.⁴⁰⁹

From this last sentence I tried to reconstruct Narendrācārya's lineage. His guru was part of the Incheheri *sampradāya*, a *sampradāya* whose *paramparā* is linked with the Nāth *panth*. This may raise doubts about a Vaiṣṇava *dīkṣā* for Narendrācārya, especially because a Vaiṣṇava guru from whom he could have taken another initiation is not mentioned.

His web page also informs us that the Sadguru Kādsiddheśvar advised Narendrācārya to establish the Swarūp *sampradāya*, which he did on February 24, 1992. However, it is not clear which Swarūp *sampradāya* he established, since a Swarūp *sampradāya* was already present at that time.⁴¹⁰ He also founded the Nanji Dhām in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra but it is not clear how he became a part of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* to claim the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya.

As described earlier, the *paramparā* is of fundamental importance for gaining recognition as part of a tradition. In fact, taking the Śāṅkarācārya-s as examples, if a Śāṅkarācārya does not leave a clear will with his decision for his successor, his disciples advance claims for the title. Perhaps in Narendrācārya's case, the importance and appeal of the title could have led him to pursue the title despite being an outsider of the Rāmānandī tradition. In fact, on the Nanji Dhām's website, the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya is said to be the supreme preceptor of the Vaiṣṇava-s and a *Dharmaguru* of the Hindu religion. Moreover, Nanji Dhām is considered to be the *Dakṣiṇ* Pīṭh, the most southern of the four Rāmānandācārya Pīṭh-s and the one that 'has been involved in contributing massively for the betterment of the current state of Hindu religion and the followers of the Hindu religion'.⁴¹¹

Narendrācārya was ordained Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya on October 21, 2005. There are videos on YouTube that show his *abhiṣeka* (investiture) in Ayodhya, which was

⁴⁰⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/nanijdham.official?v=info> (Accessed: February 2014)

⁴¹⁰ Even in this case, I could find some information on the Internet. There is a Swarup *sampradāya* that lists Śāṅkarācārya in his *paramparā*, and which is a branch of the Dattatreya tradition. It was established in the 18th century by Śrī Swāmī Samarth Mahārāj. Several branches developed from it but no one under Narendrācārya's name. <http://www.swamisamarth.com/swamicharitra/page103.html> (Accessed: February 2014)

⁴¹¹ <http://www.dharmakshetrananijdham.com/editorsnote.aspx> (Accessed: March 2014)

attended by Gyān Dās and the Jagadgurū Haryācārya.⁴¹² Several other *mahant*-s also attended the event, and from their claims it seems that representatives from all the branches of the *sampradāya* were present, including members of the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s. In one scene of the video, Narendrācārya pays tribute to Gyān Dās, who then declares Narendrācārya to be the next Jagadgurū as chosen by many *akhārā*-s and *khālsā*-s of the *sampradāya*.⁴¹³ I was not able to discern the reasons for the Rāmānandī *akhārā*-s' support of his *abhiṣeka*, but for mere economic reason.

Narendrācārya is very similar to the prototypical modern guru as described earlier. In fact, he travels and speaks to audiences all over the world, particularly in the United States and Canada, sometimes even holding events at shopping malls. If we look at his website, we can recognize some traits of the modern guru as described by Jaffrelot. For instance, an internet-brochure says:

[...] He advises on meditation to train our mind stronger, more powerful and capable. His blessings help us to improve self-qualities such as vision, self-control, decision-making, time management, planning & execution, leadership.⁴¹⁴

His approach is similar to that described by C.J. Fuller and John Harriss dealing with Dayānanda Saraswatī, the *saṃnyāsī* successor of Swāmī Chinmayānanda, who gave a less spiritual and more worldly interpretation of Vedantic concepts, including an emphasis on Western ideas about individual self-fulfilment (2005: 224). As Dayānanda, Narendrācārya represents a modern Hinduism, closer to the needs of spiritual seekers who are from the middle class and who support Hindu nationalism.⁴¹⁵ In fact, Narendrācārya uses a populist approach based on a rhetoric that seems influenced by VHP-RSS themes: the pride of India as a nation to rise up against those who are trying to keep it down; the need to reconvert those who were forced to join Islam and Christianity back to Hinduism;⁴¹⁶ the need to protect the Dharma, and so on. These ideas are collected in a monthly magazine supported

⁴¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wUj5y5V2w8> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kd9fpMG9H0> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴¹⁴ This web-site from which I found the first information is not active anymore.

http://janamgf.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=104&Itemid=101?tmpl=component&ask=preview (Accessed: September 2013)

⁴¹⁵ C.J. Fuller and John Harriss stress that this Hindu nationalism is based on the idea that Indians can become modern not by becoming Western but becoming more Hindu, through the support of the Hindu cultural tradition (2005: 221).

⁴¹⁶ In fact, both in videos about him and on his web page, it is stressed that he reconverted thousands of people in Maharashtra to Hinduism.

by Narendrācārya, whose 'only objective has been to spread awareness about the religion and culture of Hinduism amongst people across the globe'.⁴¹⁷

3.3.6 The Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rām Rājeśwarācārya

A Jagadgurū who may probably follow the path of Narendrācārya is Rām Rājeśwarācārya, who, according to the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, was elected in the Mahā Kumbh Melā of 2013, thanks to a bribe of two and half crores (about twenty five million rupees). The only information that I was able to collect came from his Facebook page, which he opened immediately after his appointment to the position. Both the page and his personal website were only in use for a few months. However, his Facebook page does provide some details about him, including that he obtained the title of Jagadgurū when he was only 30 years old and that his *āśram* is called Cakratīrth Dhām and is located in Badhwa, in Maharashtra.⁴¹⁸

3.4 Few remarks on the actual relevance of Jagadgurū-s in the *sampradāya*

Despite what one might assume, these various Jagadgurū-s do not form a single 'team' that works for the well-being of the *sampradāya*. Rather, each of them lives in a separate *maṭh* with their own personal and community-based agendas. In the case of Rāmnareśācārya, an *ācārya* was elected to take the seat in the Śrī Maṭh and to continue a decade-old tradition. His teachings are based on traditional texts and, as we will see in the next chapter, his main endeavors are focused on spreading Rāmānanda's teachings, the history of the *sampradāya*, and the Rām *bhakti* through speeches, books and magazines.

Although Rāmnareśācārya does not have the power to interfere in the election of new heads of *āśram*-s or *maṭh*-s, he does have economic power, through which he helps other Rāmānandī centers. For example, during my fieldwork, *tyāgī mahant*-s from *āśram*-s in Rāmnāgar came several times to the Śrī Maṭh to ask for economic support for the organization of *bhaṇḍārā* and other ceremonies.

Despite all that Rāmbhadrācārya accomplished for the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement, we have seen that today his role in the *sampradāya* is disputed. He is focused on his own religious center, which is also a social service institution. After starting a primary and secondary school for people with disabilities, he established the Jagadgurū Rāmbhadrācārya Handicapped University in Citrakut in 2002. The education is provided at

⁴¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.dharmakshetrananijdham.com/aboutmagazine.aspx> (Accessed: March 2014).

⁴¹⁸ Cf. <https://www.facebook.com/jagadguru.ramrajeshwaracharya> (Accessed: March 2014)

nominal cost to visually impaired, hearing-impaired and mobility-impaired students as defined by the Disability Act of the Government of India, 1995. To date, Jagadgurū Rāmbhadrācārya guides the day-to-day functioning of the university.⁴¹⁹

The Jagadgurū Rāmbhadrācārya is very traditional in his teachings, emphasizing the importance of the Rām *bhakti* in general rather than of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in particular. He is also an author of many treatises and interpretations of the *Rāmacaritamānas*. He has written commentaries on *Brahma Sūtra*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and eleven *Upaniṣad*-s.

Whilst Rāmbhadrācārya, like Rāmnareśācārya, refers to classic religious texts from the *Vaiṣṇava* tradition such as the *Rāmacaritamānasa* or the *Adhyātma Rāmāyana*, Narendrācārya is more inclined to a generic 'Hindu' approach, relying primarily on the use of universally known texts, like the *Bhagavad Gītā*. A Jagadgurū like Narendrācārya seems more inclined to create a personalized kind of power instead of a 'Rāmānandī power,' as he is more interested in publicizing himself than in publicizing the *sampradāya*. In his case, the title becomes more of a means to attract devotees than to represent a particular tradition. Indeed, the fact that someone is willing to pay for the title of Jagadgurū highlights the esteem that comes with an officially sanctioned, traditional title, and the power of such respect to attract devotees.

Jagadgurū-s use similar means to address lay people, notwithstanding their different philosophical stances. The most popular method of outreach today is of course the Internet, through the use of websites, blogs, Facebook pages and videos. These tools allow the Jagadgurū-s to be in touch with followers and to be more visible to possible recruits. They generally do not utilize these social media outlets themselves, but their followers do, as part of the *sevā* for the guru. For those living in villages who are not used to modern technology, even a simple mobile phone can provide an easily accessible bridge to the guru's words and advice.⁴²⁰

However, the Jagadgurū-s' roles do not remain static: they may evolve their teachings and activities over the course of time. This tendency to adapt may be simple self-interest or it may be a guru's attempt to answer to the new needs of devotees and disciples as new cultural forces emerge.

It should be noted that only Rāmnareśācārya does not promote the presence of

⁴¹⁹ Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rambhadracharya> (Accessed: March 2014)

⁴²⁰ Also Bouillier recognizes the prominent use of mobile phones as a means to maintain contacts with the guru, even if for only a short greeting. She calls this 'a telephone darśan' (2012: 378).

other Jagadgurū-s. He lives in the Śrī Maṭh that is a Trust managed by Rāmānandī ascetics, of whom he is the president. By contrast, the other Jagadgurū-s own their monasteries, and they have full decision over them. Consequently, as Bouillier argues in his essay on personal monasteries in the Nāth *panth*, 'leur existence dépend de facteurs plus aléatoires telles que le charisme du fondateur et de ses successeurs, les patronages, la relation à l'environnement local' (2008: 278).

In this dissertation I have focused my attention on Rāmānandīśācārya and the Śrī Maṭh. Nevertheless, I think that further research on the activities of the other Jagadgurū-s may lead to a better understanding of the value of tradition and the high levels of respect that traditional titles can garner among the ascetic and lay population.

3.5 Rāmānandī-s perspective on one or more Jagadgurū-s

New Jagadgurū-s could be accepted by the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* because historically the group had never had a leader to organize it into a homogeneous unit. According to the *mahant* of the Gopāl Mandir in Ayodhya, Phalahārī Bābā, there was a big gap in leadership after the era of Rāmānanda and his disciples, until the office of Jagadgurū was re-established in the 20th century, following the example of other *sampradāya*-s.⁴²¹ The idea of a gap in the tradition is a recurring image in talks with Rāmānandī-s, and it also appears in works published by the Śrī Maṭh. As already mentioned,⁴²² the cause of this gap is found in the itinerancy of the direct disciples of Rāmānanda. Their purpose was to spread the teachings of Rāmānanda throughout the society. As a consequence, they did not have a specific center of their activities and they also did not have a hierarchy within the group. Hence, when Rāmānandī centers began to flourish, there was no central authority. This lack of hierarchy was augmented by the fact that Aurangzeb had destroyed the original Śrī Maṭh in the 17th century.

The absence of a 'central church,' as well as the presence of many branches with different disciplines and historical developments, has caused each center to have its own internal rules and hierarchies. When I asked Rāmānandī ascetics for their opinion on the role of the Jagadgurū and how many Jagadgurū-s should be in the *sampradāya*, I obtained answers that can be summarized in three main stances: *sādhu*-s who do not care about the number of Jagadgurū-s because they have their own center and therefore are not interested in this

⁴²¹ Interview, November 20, 2012.

⁴²² Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 3, p. 144.

issue; *sādhu*-s who support only one Jagadgurū, Rāmnareśācārya; and *sādhu*-s who do not support Rāmnareśācārya. Here I will give some examples of these three positions.

The first position is well represented by the answer I received from *mahant* Rāghavācārya of the Revāsā Pīṭh:

What is a Jagadgurū? For the *catuḥ sampradāya* and in general, the Jagadgurū is an *ādhyātmik* (spiritual) person, someone who has a particular knowledge that places him above other people. However, he cannot have control or any right on other places.⁴²³

This explanation demonstrates that, those centers that are well-rooted and self-sufficient are not bothered by the presence of one or more Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s. Hence, their *mahant*-s can avoid taking a specific position on any one given Jagadgurū and support all of them. The *mahant* of the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā in Ayodhya provides an example of this point of view. He said that after Bhagavadācārya, there was lot of confusion about the election of Rāmnareśācārya, which is why some Rāmānandī-s supported him and others did not. He said he accepted Rāmnareśācārya as Jagadgurū,⁴²⁴ but he also insisted that only Rāmānanda was a true manifestation of Rām. When asked for his opinion on the increasing number of Jagadgurū-s, he laughed and said that as the crowd is becoming bigger, one Jagadgurū alone cannot control it. To him, the growth in the number of Jagadgurū-s was a logical development and should not be perceived as a threat.

In the Hanumān Gaṛhī in Ayodhya, I was told by Rājudās⁴²⁵ that the prevailing opinion among the *mahant*-s of the Hanuman Gaṛhī is that there can only be one Jagadgurū. When talking about the Jagadgurū's election, Rājudās stated that it is wrong that other Jagadgurū-s were elected after Rāmnareśācārya. According to him, since Rāmnareśācārya was elected Rāmānandācārya by the Śrī Maṭh Trust and since the Śrī Maṭh is recognized as the modern building of an ancient place, Rāmnareśācārya is the only one who holds the right to that title. Those who hold this belief also support their claims by pointing to the fact that unlike Śaṅkara, who established four centers, Rāmānanda only established one – therefore only one Rāmānandācārya can be allowed to maintain the tradition.⁴²⁶ Rājudās further explains that the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* should have only one Jagadgurū in order to maintain credibility and to become a singular point of reference for the society, which would bring good consequences for the *sampradāya* as well.

⁴²³ Interview, March 13, 2013.

⁴²⁴ In fact, during the Kumbh Melā in 2013 he came to pay homage to Rāmnareśācārya.

⁴²⁵ Rājudās is a disciple of Śrī Santarāmdās, one of the four *mahant*-s who manage the Hanumān Gaṛhī.

⁴²⁶ Interview, November 19, 2012.

Rājūdās also told me that the main opponent of Rāmnareśācārya is Gyān Dās (the president of the Akhārā Pariṣad), an uneducated *sādhu*. Rājūdās says that Gyān Dās is better fit to be engaged in politics than to be a *sādhu*, and that he had ties to Chandra Swāmī, the controversial tantric guru of Narasimha Rao. The two men lived in the same place and have forged connections to politicians to gain personal advantages.⁴²⁷ Rājūdās reports that after the election of Rāmnareśācārya, Gyān Dās supported Haryācārya's attempt to oust Rāmnareśācārya from Varanasi. He slandered Rāmnareśācārya, saying that he was involved in criminal activities and owned guns. Gyān Dās also called for the election of another Jagadgurū in 1999, but he was unsuccessful because he does not have a base of power beyond Ayodhya and Rāmnareśācārya has powerful disciples among members of the Congress Party.⁴²⁸

However, Rājūdās stressed to me that Gyān Dās is a powerful man in the Akhārā Pariṣad,⁴²⁹ as he has been its president for a long time,⁴³⁰ meaning he is able to name a Jagadgurū of his choice in exchange for money. As Rājūdās clearly explains, all the *āśram*-s need money, which they have to raise from the support and *sevā* of lay people, but some *sādhu*-s use the money collected from their devotees only for their own personal gain.

A similar opinion is shared by the *mahant* of the Rām Jānkī Mandir at Rājā Darvāsa in Varanasi. He used to go to the Śrī Maṭh under Śivarāmācārya. However, he does not frequent the place anymore, as he became *mahant* of the temple and 'once a *mahant* has his own place he has to take care of it [and] does not go in the house of other *mahant*-s'.⁴³¹ Notwithstanding this absence of a close link, he considers the presence of other Jagadgurū-s

⁴²⁷ As Jaffrelot explains (2012: 86-87), in the 1970s Chandra Swami became counsellor of several politicians, justifying his activities 'by referring to the traditional ties between men of power and men of God in classic Hinduism.' However he was considered also as a 'Mafioso' since he used his status to act as intermediary in questionable affairs. As Jaffrelot says, 'With disciples in the business world – and international contraband – as well as in Indian political circles, he was well placed to intervene in transactions among them.'

⁴²⁸ In one Rāmānandī *āśram* in Assi *ghāt*, the son of a devotee said to me that today if a guru wants to keep his position he must have the support of politicians, which leads them to be involved in political issues. (Interview, February 22, 2013)

⁴²⁹ I cannot say what the truth is about Gyān Dās, but it is clear that he is a powerful man who needs some protection: he does not live anymore in the Hanuman Gaṛhī but he has his own house close to it, monitored by four policemen armed with rifles. To meet him, they had me undergo a security check and asked Gyān Dās if he wanted to meet me. However, this security check depends also on the contemporary situation of Ayodhya, where many temples have become centres of crime and often *sādhu*-s utilize bodyguards. For a recent inquiry on the topic cf. <http://www.tehelka.com/the-guns-godmen-of-ayodhya-2/> (Accessed: March 2014).

⁴³⁰ However, even inside the Akhārā Pariṣad there are several internal debates, especially regarding the presidency of the group. For example, in the Kumbh Melā 2013, Gyān Dās threatened to boycott the holy bath because another President had been elected from a section of the Akhārā Pariṣad. (Cf. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/306922/dispute-akharas-threatens-shahi-snan.html> Accessed: April 2014)

⁴³¹ Interview, February 25, 2013.

as a degeneration of the system caused by money. According to him the 'Jagadgurū's issue' only exists because of ascetics who want to earn money through the sale of a title.

The *mahant* of the Balanānda Maṭh of Jaipur also thinks that there must only be one Jagadgurū and that he should not be elected but rather demonstrate his potential to be a Jagadgurū through his nature. Otherwise, he warns, anyone with money can become a Jagadgurū. However, although he believes the Śrī Maṭh to be the original *pīṭh*, he does not support the idea of Rāmnareśācārya as Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya. Rather, he believes Rāmbhadrācārya to be the real Jagadgurū, since, according to him, he is a learned man whose nature is more *sīdhā-sādhā* (simple, correct), while Rāmnareśācārya has a different nature that he describes as more *guṇḍā* (criminal). According to him this is the position of many Rāmānandī centers in Jaipur.⁴³²

Those Rāmānandī-s who have a particular role in the Pariṣad and those *nāgā*-s linked to them do not acknowledge Rāmnareśācārya because he was not elected by the Akhārā Pariṣad. This is, as we have seen, the position of Gyān Dās, whom I interviewed in Ayodhya. He claims that Rāmnareśācārya decided to confer the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya to himself after becoming the president of the Śrī Maṭh Trust. In fact, according to him, Śivarāmācārya died without ever naming a successor. Therefore Rāmnareśācārya had no right to be appointed as new Jagadgurū, as he did not have the support of Śivarāmācārya or that of the *akhārā*-s and *khālsā*-s. Gyān Dās said that if he had not been so short tempered, perhaps he would have received the title and the immediate support of the *akhārā*-s, as he is a *vidvān*.⁴³³ But at the beginning Rāmnareśācārya acted too conceited, pushing the *akhārā*-s to elect Haryadās (Haryācārya) as Jagadgurū as well. Gyān Dās mentioned one Jagadgurū in Haridwar (although he did not mention the name) who was appointed by the *akhārā*-s in the Kumbh Melā in 2010 because one seat was vacant after Lochanācārya's death, and he mentioned Narendrācārya and Rāmbhadrācārya. While discussing the latter, Gyān Dās told me that he is a *vidvān* but he used his position with arrogance, criticizing the vocabulary used by Tulsīdās which, as we have seen in Section 3.3.1, costed him the opposition of the *akhārā*-s.

From Gyān Dās's words two main concepts arose. First, that there must be more than one Jagadgurū following the model of the Śaṅkarācārya. Second, that notwithstanding the title and the theoretical leadership of a Jagadgurū, the real political power in the

⁴³² Interview, March 12, 2013.

⁴³³ However, as I will describe later, they collaborated together in the Rāmālaya Trust, where Rāmnareśācārya participated as leader of the *sampradāya*.

sampradāya is held by the *akhārā*-s and their *nāgā*-s, whose support or opposition is of fundamental importance and can decide the fate of a guru.

The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya's idea is exactly the opposite: he told me that theoretically *nāgā sādhu*-s have no right to elect anyone, as they do not even have the right to give *saṃnyāsī dīkṣā* to disciples. In fact, before becoming a *nāgā*, a Rāmānandī has to get his *dīkṣā* from a non-*nāgā* guru and then the guru directs the disciple towards the *nāgā* branch. As they have no right to make disciples they should have no rights in appointing a Jagadgurū as well. But according to Rāmnareśācārya, they do it because they are greedy, which is, he says, the only explanation for why new Jagadgurū-s are created.⁴³⁴

To understand the power of the *akhārā*-s and their *nāgā*-s over the election of important titles I think it is necessary to look at their history: the development of their role and the political economic powers that *nāgā*-s accumulated in the past centuries as well as the religious charisma they possess because of their *sādhanā*. It would be interesting to know when actually *nāgā*-s began to bestow titles during religious gatherings, like the Kumbh Melā where, significantly, they also have an important organizational role.

4. Conclusion

The role of the Jagadgurū was established initially with two main purposes: to glorify the work of Bhagavadācārya and to give the *sampradāya* a representative who could work as a bridge between the community of *sādhu*-s and that of lay people, since the majority of the Rāmānandī-s are wandering ascetics.

However, as we have seen in the previous chapter,⁴³⁵ not all the branches of the *sampradāya* supported Bhagavadācārya's claims and some centers maintained their own point of view. Thus I have supposed that the title of Jagadgurū could have been given to Bhagavadācārya to re-affirm a specific perspective within the *sampradāya* after the disciples of Raghubarācārya tried to gain recognition as Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya.

The decades following Bhagavadācārya's appointment have demonstrated that not only various approaches still persist in the *sampradāya*, but also that the role of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya underwent a process of change due to ideological and pragmatic reasons. From the ideological point of view, the position of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya during the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement did not entirely satisfy the internal plurality of the

⁴³⁴ Interview, November 16, 2013.

⁴³⁵ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 8.3.

sampradāya; from a pragmatic point of view, some branches of the *sampradāya* see in the title an economic source that could be exploited without changing the power relationship inside the *sampradāya*.

These two reasons led to the emergence of other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s that, in the last analysis, have no real organizational and decisional power. In effect, because there are several independent centers, the office does not have yet such an effective impact on the politics of the *sampradāya*.

As Pinch says:

The *sampradāya* remains, fundamentally, a populist organization, the monastic systemics of which depend on recognition, respect, and support individual gurus and swamis receive in villages, towns, and cities throughout north India. (1996: 80)

We have seen that this populist aspect is also emphasized by the Jagadgurū-s, who are able to gather a wider lay community according to the model given by a well-known tradition of guship (the Śāṅkarācārya) while developing it according to the tendencies of the *sampradāya* and of contemporary India. I have shown that these Jagadgurū-s are representative of *sampradāyik* gurus who mix the authority bestowed by a *paramparā* and a title with personal religious beliefs and stands that can be – some more than others – in tune with the principles upheld by the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

Despite the presence of other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s and despite the presence of various power centers, there is a faction in the *sampradāya* that supports the distinctiveness of the office and the goal of reinstating the originality of the Rāmānandī tradition. This quite wide faction is represented by the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya who, years after years, following the path opened by Bhagavadācārya tries to create a unity among the various branches of the *sampradāya* and support among lay followers.

As we have seen, the source of his authority lies in the fact that he was elected Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya by the Śrī Maṭh Trust and he is the Jagadgurū who actually dwells in this center, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

The Śrī Maṭh

The Śrī Maṭh was established in the 1980s in Varanasi on the steps of Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*, the place where Rāmānandī tradition says Rāmānanda once had his *āśram*. Since its construction, the Śrī Maṭh has been considered the *mul pīṭh*, the root from where the *sampradāya* originated and the physical symbol of the importance of its founder.

Because Pañcagaṅgā has a specific importance in the Vaiṣṇava tradition of Varanasi, I will start by giving a general introduction to the area to explain why it is thought that Rāmānanda gave his teachings there. I will then describe the present structure of the Maṭh as a Trust and the places connected to it, including the characteristics of the succession there. Then I will introduce the inhabitants of the Maṭh and explain the religious ceremonies and activities that occur there and in a other few places linked to it.

I will show how the figure of Rāmānanda and the historization and concretization of his teachings, the status of the Śrī Maṭh and the activities there help to support the role of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya. In fact, events and places described here became instruments through which the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya can display his authority in a multifarious *sampradāya* and diversified modern religious context.

The next chapter will provide a more detailed look at the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnareśācārya.

1. Viṣṇu's Varanasi and Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ* - A mythological perspective

Varanasi as a sacred city has been explored and analyzed in innumerable works.⁴³⁶ Although the place is generally known as the city of God Śiv, there are several myths describing the creation of the city and its maintenance in which Viṣṇu has a predominant role. Because a detailed description of these myths will lead us too far from the purpose of this chapter, I will report here only some passages from two myths in order to highlight the value of Pañcagaṅgā in the Vaiṣṇava context.

⁴³⁶ Cf. Sherring (1868); Eck (1982); Freitag (1989); Bakker (1993; 1996); Lutgendorf (1996); Singh (2002); Gengnagel (2006).

The story of Viṣṇu's presence in Varanasi can be traced to a myth of the creation of the universe by Śiv and Śakti. They initially created Kāśī⁴³⁷ and Viṣṇu who, in turn, generated the cosmos. It is said that Viṣṇu accomplished this task by digging the Maṅikarṇikā well with his discus and filling it with 'the perspiration generated by his own austerities' (Eck, 1982: 203).

Another story presented in the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa*⁴³⁸ describes Viṣṇu as the central figure who led to Śiv settling in the city. The story tells us that during a drought that lasted for sixty years, Brahmā began to worry about the survival of the Earth so he turned to a sage-king named Ripunjaya for help. When Brahmā asked him to assume the kingship of the city, Ripunjaya accepted upon one condition: that all the gods would retire from the Earth to return to their place in the heavens. Because this condition was accepted, Ripunjaya – after changing his name to Divodās – began to reign. Śiv was forced to leave the city, but he could not tolerate the separation for long. Śiv and Pārvatī decided to destabilize the reign of the king so that they could return to the city. They sent gods and goddesses to accomplish the task but they all failed. As last, Viṣṇu intervened and went to Kāśī to settle the matter. The place where he supposedly descended from the heavens has been associated with the Vaiṣṇava cult ever since:

When he arrived in Kāśī, Vishnu bathed first at the confluence of the Varanā and the Ganges Rivers, a place that later became known as the Pādodaka (Foot-Water) Tīrtha, where Vishnu washed his blessed feet. His image at that place became known as Ādi Keshava, the First Keshava. Many other places also became *tīrthas* because Vishnu sanctified them by his presence as he made his way from Pādodaka toward the center of Kāśī (1982: 154).

Viṣṇu transformed himself into a Buddhist monk and, by spreading Buddhist doctrines, was able to weaken the support for the king among the lay population. Having put the king in a difficult position, Viṣṇu took the shape of a Brahman and advised Divodās to establish a *liṅga* for Śiv and to abandon the city. Divodās followed the advice of Viṣṇu and gave control

⁴³⁷ Kāśī is the most ancient name for the city of Varanasi. Although there have been various interpretation for the origin of this name (Eck, 1982: 25), the most common explanation is that it derives from the Sanskrit root *kāś*, which means to shine. In the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* it is reported that 'because that light, which is the unspeakable Shiva, shines here, let its other name be called Kāśī' (*ibid*). This is actually the name that is used most often in religious contexts. When the Jagadgurū discussed Varanasi in a specifically religious context, he refers to it as Kāśī.

⁴³⁸ To follow, I use the translation made by Diane L. Eck (1982), according to whom the *Khaṇḍa*, whose origin is uncertain, acquired a shape similar to its present one around the mid 13th century.

of the city back to Śiv by installing the Śiv *liṅga*. After successfully accomplishing his goal, Viṣṇu remained in Kāśī:

He sent the divine bird Garuda to inform Shiva of the news, while he himself sought out a good dwelling place in Kāśī. He found the pool of the “Five Rivers,” Panchanada, bathed there, and settled down to stay (*ibid*: 155).

This story thus explains the link between Viṣṇu and Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*. Nevertheless, the faithful do not limit their conception of Viṣṇu to this spot: as reported in the *Kāśī Rahsya* ‘Vishnu dwells partially in other cities, but he dwells fully in Kāśī. Kāśī is the very embodiment of Vishnu, where he himself shines forth’ (*ibid*: 210, from *Kāśī Rahsya*, 18.38). Furthermore, during my fieldwork, I was told by locals and *brahmacārī*-s that the stretch of Varanasi from Maṅikarṇikā to Ādi Keśvara⁴³⁹ belongs to Viṣṇu. In between these two spots, the Bindu Mādhav temple and Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ* are the main Vaiṣṇava places.

As the Śrī Maṭh is located in Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*, I will focus now on this spot.

As reported by Madhuri Desai, similarly to Maṅikarṇikā and Daśāśvamedh *ghāṭ*-s, Pañcagaṅgā is one of the main *tīrth*-s of the city, described in the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* and other Purāṇic texts as a space of concentrated ritual activity (2007: 286). A board displayed prominently on the *ghāṭ* claims that the location was initially called Bindu Mādhav Ghāṭ, although the area has famously been referred to as Pañcagaṅgā since the time of Ādi Keśav and has long been the second most important Vaiṣṇava place after the temple.

The name Pañcanad or Pañcagaṅgā stems from the story that five (*pañca*) rivers merge there. In 1868, M.A. Sherring, using Mr. Prinsep’s observations, tells us:

A virgin named D’horātpāpā, whom Brahmā pronounces to be more pure than three and a half crores of the holy *tīraths* (places of pilgrimage), having cause of complaint against her admired Dharma, politely pronounces a malediction upon him, and turns him into the Dharmanada (river of virtue). He, in revenge, converts her into a rock; but her father, Vedāsoor, in compassion, metamorphoses her again into the Chandrakānta moon stone, which, melting in the moon, forms a stream called D’horātpāpā (channel of sin), an appropriate bride for the river of virtue. The third stream, called Kirnnaddā (brook of rays), was produced from the perspiration of the Sun, while performing penance in honour of Mangulgouree (a form of Devi), on an adjoining ghāt. These three, with the Ganges and Saraswati complete the number of Panchanada, to the satisfaction even of

⁴³⁹ According to myth, this was the place where Viṣṇu first came as an emissary of Śiv. The temple, which is located at the northern hedge of Varanasi beyond Rāj *ghāṭ*, is an ancient site mentioned in the oldest *Purāṇa*-s. Today it is rarely visited, even though it was one of the more important temples of Varanasi up until the 12th century and still remains a part of some pilgrims’ routes.

the deities themselves, who condescend to bathe on the spot during their residence in Kashi. (1868: 108)

The *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* and the *Kāśī Rahsya* also mention five rivers – Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Kirṇā and Dhūtpāpā – which are also represented in a shrine close to the river:

The first two are small rivulets: the Dhuutapāpā (“Cleansed of Sin”) and the Kiranā (“Sun’s Ray”), whose waters are said to join in a stream called the Dharmanada (“River of Dharma”). The other three rivers are the Ganges, shown standing on her crocodile, the Yamunā, standing on her tortoise, and the Sarasvatī, riding her peacock. The three joined together at Prayāga, one hundred miles upstream, and they arrived together in Kāśī long ago, when Bhagīratha led the Ganges across North India (Eck, 1982: 237).

The confluence of these rivers creates a powerful *tīrth*: a bath in Pañcagaṅgā has the same result of a monthly bath in Prayag during the month of Māgha.⁴⁴⁰

The collocation of a *mul pīṭh* (the Śrī Maṭh) in Pañcagaṅgā thus becomes understandable given the Vaiṣṇava influence there, which could in turn explain why Rāmānanda is said to have had his *āśram* there.

2. In search of Rāmānanda’s *āśram*

Nābhādās does not talk about any specific spot in Varanasi as the place where Rāmānanda used to teach. However, later authors claimed that Rāmānanda began his teaching in Pañcagaṅgā.⁴⁴¹ It is difficult to determine the truthfulness of this affirmation, but as we have seen, Pañcagaṅgā has a particular Vaiṣṇava dimension that makes it a plausible area for a Vaiṣṇava or a devotee of Rām to live and worship. However, it is also possible that because of the Vaiṣṇava nature of the area around Pañcagaṅgā, Rāmānanda’s hagiographers from the 19th century on decided to fix his *āśram* there. However, we do not have concrete evidence about the presence of this *āśram* there; we simply have some scattered information about its remains.

It is said that the *āśram* was destroyed by Aurangzeb⁴⁴² at the same time that he demolished the Bindu Mādhav temple. The 17th century traveller Tavernier described the temple as an ancient structure that occupied a large part of Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*:

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. below, Sec. 4.3.11 and 4.4.

⁴⁴¹ Cf. Chapter 2, sec. 1.1.2

⁴⁴² Madhuri Desai tells us that the Dharhara mosque (also known as Aurangzeb’s mosque) was built in 1669 and is one of the oldest structures on the river front. The other buildings were constructed almost one century later (2007: 283).

From the door of the pagoda [Tavernier uses the term pagoda to indicate temples] to the river there is a descent by stone steps, where there are at intervals platforms and small, rather dark, chambers, some of which serve as dwellings for the Brahmans, and others are kitchens where they prepare their food. [...] The idolaters prepare their food without anyone but themselves touching it, through the fear they have lest anyone who approached it might be unclean. (1889: 179)

Notably, Tavernier does not record the presence of an *āśram*, which could be the Rāmānanda's *āśram*, before the destruction of Aurangzeb. Even if he accidentally confused the *āśram* for the dark chambers that he depicts, the approach towards food that he describes does not seem to match the supposed teachings of Rāmānanda. However, it is also true that the exact spot that Tavernier is talking about cannot be inferred; his writing could thus simply describe a different part of the *ghāṭ* than the spot where Rāmānanda's *āśram* might have been.

According to Maruti Nandan Tiwari, writing in the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*, the evidence that the Maṭh was on Pañcagaṅgā is given by the presence of a *mūrti* of Rām Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ from the 14th century: he says that in a text from 1582 (of which he does not give the name) this *mūrti* was described as part of the cult established by Rāmānanda, and that the *mūrti* was moved to the Kangan Vālī Havelī to save it from Aurangzeb's destructions (2001: 27).⁴⁴³

By the 19th century, Rāmānandī tradition had fully accepted the claim that Aurangzeb had destroyed the *āśram* and that only the *caraṇa pādukā* of Rāmānanda was saved from the demolition and kept at Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*.⁴⁴⁴ H.H. Wilson also wrote that:

The residence of Ramanand was at Benares at Panchaganga ghat where a Math or monastery of his followers is said to have existed but to have been destroyed by some of the Musalman Princes. At present there is a merely stone platform in the vicinity bearing the supposed impression of his feet. But there are many Maths of his followers of

⁴⁴³ In his analysis of the *ghāṭ*-s of Varanasi, Hari Shankar says that this *havelī* is on the left side of the mosque. It was built in a Rajasthani style in the 17th century by Maharaja Jai Singh of Amer. According to a folk story, the place is named 'the Havelī with the bracelet' (*kangan vālī*), because when the wife of the Raja reached Kāśī, she lost her bracelet while bathing in the Ganga. When she realized she did not have her bracelet anymore, she asked a sadhu, who told her it fell in the river. Then he dove into the river and found it immediately. The Maharani was so happy that she decided to build a *havelī* where pilgrims, *sādhu*-s and travelers could be hosted (1996: 75) It is likely that this is the same place that Tavernier describes as the college established by Raja Singh (1889: 183). In fact, even today the Havelī stands as a traditional school.

⁴⁴⁴ As reported by Caracchi, Rūpkalā dealt with the *caraṇa pādukā* in 1852. Caracchi also claims that according to a popular legend, the *pādukā* became stone as soon as they were touched by the water of the Ganga (Caracchi, 1999: 39).

celebrity at Benares whose panchayat or Council is the Chief Authority amongst the Ramavats in upper India. (1846: 32)

This note confirms that the belief that an *āśram* of Rāmānanda had existed on the banks of the river was already established by the beginning of the 19th century.

Wilson also describes the presence of a platform on the *ghāṭ* wherein the *pādukā* was contained. Because there are several famous paintings of the river from the 19th century, I tried to see if there was any visual evidence of this platform and where it was. The oldest painting that I could find was a map of the *ghāṭ*-s of Varanasi from the British Museum dated to 1770.⁴⁴⁵ In the fragment that depicts Pañcagaṅgā, we see a mosque, some small structures with *mūrti*-s close to the river and, on the spot where today there is the Śrī Maṭh, a structure similar to a pavilion (Fig. 5). Although this flat image does not clearly show the shape of the structure, the representation made by Thomas Daniell in 1802 is more explicative (Fig. 6). There, we see an open structure with columns that does not seem to be part of another building. This structure, which lies on the *ghāṭ* and has only a ground floor, is close to the tall lamp⁴⁴⁶ that is still used by the Śrī Maṭh during Divālī. Similar representations were made in 1826 by Robert Smith (Fig. 7) and 1833 by Robert Elliot (Fig. 8) and James Prinsep (Fig. 9). In this latter image, we look at the mosque from the lowest part of Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*, but it is difficult to decipher if the narrow passage of steps depicted is the same staircase on the left side of the present day Śrī Maṭh. The pavilion is also visible in this painting, but there is still no visual evidence to conclude with certainty that it is the spot where the *pādukā* was contained.

Photos from the beginning of the 20th century show that this pavilion is a self-standing structure and not part of another building. In a photo from *Banares the Sacred City* by E.B. Havell, there is a clear image of Pañcagaṅgā in which the tall *dīyā* is to the right of a white, pillared structure. It also appears that the building that later became the kitchen of the Maṭh is already present, as well as a small temple that does not appear in the drawings (Fig. 10 and 11).⁴⁴⁷ This photo confirms that the present Śrī Maṭh was built where the

⁴⁴⁵ I am thankful to Savitri Jalais, who permitted me to take a copy of the photo she took of this map.

⁴⁴⁶ According to Hari Shankar, this column, which can bear one thousands *dīpa*-s, was built by Ahilyābāi Holkar in the 18th century (1996: 75).

⁴⁴⁷ The construction of Pañcagaṅgā was sponsored by Marathas in 1735. Therefore, we have to wonder whether the platform described by Wilson, which is likely the pillared structure presented in many drawings from the end of the 18th century, is a Maratha construction to preserve an already existing structure or is a completely new one.

pavilion once stood, and that the Śrī Maṭh temple with the *pādukā* is located on the exact same spot that Wilson described as the location of the platform.

Considering, then, the Rāmānanda's *āśram* to be located near the Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*, we can advance three hypothesis:

- 1) Rāmānanda had his *āśram* somewhere in Pañcagaṅgā although not exactly on the *ghāṭ*, which would explain why Tavernier does not mention it;
- 2) Rāmānanda's *āśram* (or Rāmānanda's place) was located on the *ghāṭ* but it did not survive there very long because many of his disciples moved towards Rajasthan, and only his *pādukā* remained there in a pavilion that went unnoticed by Tavernier;
- 3) Rāmānanda used to go to Pañcagaṅgā to bathe and teach but never established an *āśram* there, perhaps due to his wandering lifestyle. However, his *pādukā* was kept there. This would explain why Tulsidās, who lived in Varanasi and wrote his *Rāmcaritmānas* while based there, does not mention any *āśram* dedicated to Rāmānanda.

Thus, whether Rāmānanda actually had his *āśram* on the Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*, the traditional belief that this was the case led to the Śrī Maṭh being built on the same *ghāṭ* (Fig. 12). In the next section I will focus my attention on the Śrī Maṭh as a Trust and a *maṭh*. I will also describe other centers owned by the Maṭh to complete the portrait.

3. The reconstruction of the Śrī Maṭh

3.1 The Śrī Maṭh Trust

In the *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*, *mahant* Rāmādās claims that Bhagavadācārya first suggested the reconstruction of Rāmānanda's *āśram* in 1948, but it was only in 1977 when he became Jagadgurū that he could actualize the project (2001: 19). Rāmādās reports that when he was elected as president of the Akhil Bhartiya Ramananda Pith Samiti, Bhagavadācārya went to him and said:

Brother, from here go straight to Kāśī. There, you have to meet Śrī Paramahansa Rāmhridayadās and exercise the authority of the Samiti on behalf of the Śrī Maṭh. We have to rebuild it there, as that is the place of our root and no one else should take that place. (2001: 19, my translation).

The *mahant* followed the advice of Bhagavadācārya and, despite some initial obstacles, was able to obtain the authority over the spot (however he does not explain how he was able to accomplish this task).

He was helped by Śrī Rāmchordās and his disciple Śrī Arvind Maphtlāl who provided the economic backing for the reconstruction. The work started in 1983 and was completed under the Jagadguru-ship of Rāmnareśācārya. As already mentioned, the Śrī Maṭh was organized as a Trust.⁴⁴⁸

The Śrī Maṭh Trust consists of eleven members with decisional power who form the Executive Samiti.⁴⁴⁹ The group is led by a president, two vice-presidents, two undersecretaries, one treasurer and one officer. There is also a Mahā Samiti, a more general organization that has the purpose of representing various sections of the *sampradāya*. In fact, the Trust Record Act claims that the members of the Mahā Samiti were chosen among Rāmānandī-s from *akhārā-s* and *khālsā-s*.

The number of the members of the Executive Samiti can increase if necessary. The charge is for life, but if a member does something wrong he can be dismissed; he can also decide to resign. If there is a vacant position in the Samiti, it is given to someone who believes in the *siddhānta* of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

The purposes for which the Śrī Maṭh was established are listed in the memorandum section of the Trust Registration Act (p. 1). These are:

- 1) To protect Indian culture and to cooperate with institutions that publish books and magazines.
- 2) To improve the level of morality in the Indian society on a national level.
- 3) To spread and publicize Indian literature.
- 4) To make practical the discipline of *vasudeva kuṭumbakam* (the whole world is one family)

⁴⁴⁸ Actually, it is a quite common that a *maṭh* or a religious center is organized under a Trust. This form of organization was suggested during the colonial time, as an instrument to better regulate the status of *maṭh-s* and religious center. Kasturi explains that between 1863 and 1927 the Charitable Endowments Acts 'differentiated between private religious endowments (belonging to specific families, communities and ascetic orders) and public endowments (dedicated to idols and worshippers) managed by a board of trustees' (2009: 1044). Successively, in the Charitable and Religious Trust Act 1920 was declared that, any person having an interest in creating a trust of a charitable or religious nature, might apply by petition to the Court to establish one. Kasturi says that 'few ascetic orders designated themselves as public charitable trusts before the twentieth century, in deed or in spirit' until they realized that such status could be helpful in some legal (*ibid*).

⁴⁴⁹ I list here the members of the executive Samiti given by the Registration Act (p.4), excluding the Jagadgurū: Śrī Svāmī Revāsā Gaddācārya Śrī Rāghvācārya; Rāmbhakt Svāmī Balrām Dās (Revāsā Lodrā); Śrī Mahant Narayan Dās (Fathpur); Mahāmaṇḍaleśvar Śrī Kesav Dās (Sāmlā jī); Śrī Mahant Bhagān Dās (Dehgānv); Mahant Madhusūdas Dās Mahārāj Śrī Siyām; Mahant Siyārāj Dās Pancārhi; Śrī Mahant Rām Śaraṇa Dās Kosh Rāmā Dās; Mahant Balrām Dās Parlāgarh; Śatrunandās Jāgobind (Bihar). However, as the Jagadgurū told me that not all these *sādhu-s* are still part of the Samiti, I supposed that the Act was written at the beginning of his Jagadgurū-ship in 1988.

- 5) To cooperate with institutions for future *sevā* to support suffering people and victims of natural disasters.
- 6) To repair the structure of the historical place of Rāmānand in Pañcagaṅgā.
- 7) To provide proper aid to students of Sanskrit and to enroll them in centers.
- 8) To support the development of the institution and its movable and immovable proprieties.

Although the Trust is organized under a president, who is the Jagadgurū, it is written that the ownership of the place is in the hands of the Samiti. For this reason, once a year there is a meeting of the Samiti to decide the main issues related to the Maṭh. In order for the meeting to be effective, there must be a minimum of five participants. If there are not enough people, another meeting is organized wherein the minimum number of participants is not requested. If the president wants to call a meeting, he has to inform the members eight days in advance. However, even the members of the Samiti have the right to ask for a meeting. Those proposals approved by the Samiti are registered.

The Samiti takes care of the maintenance of the Maṭh through donations (which have to be done in the name of the Maṭh) and grants. Money can be taken only with the signature of the treasurer and the manager. For gifts that are more than five thousands rupees, it is obligatory to give a paper with the request. These funds are considered as charitable gifts, among which movable and unmovable properties are also accepted. Any modification or change to the rules is decided according to the majority of the Samiti in the meeting.

3.2 The Structure of the Śrī Maṭh

Although the Śrī Maṭh is a new structure, it is considered one of the main Rāmānandī places because it physically represents the origin of the *sampradāya* and contains the office of the Jagadgurū.

On the sides of the main entrance of the Śrī Maṭh there is a board that explains the importance of the place. I reproduce here the text in the original English that is displayed there, without edits for grammar or spelling (the same text is present also in Hindi):

Śrī matha is the founder preceptor seat of the Rama devotional school and Śrī tradition, which is beginning less, full of auspicious elements and the combination of attribute and non attribute of the devotional flow of the Śrī Rama. The Śrī matha is situated on sacred place of Panchganga, which is famous as Vishnu-Kaśī. It is also the main spiritual land of

the preceptors, saints and devotees of the Vaishnava sects. The preceptors of Rama devotional tradition had made it the head office to propagate the spiritual message of that tradition because the lord Siva is also very respectable god of this tradition.

According to the great saints, Śrī-maṭh was the fertile land of the dharma and the spiritual thoughts. This is because that, distinguished saints like Anandananda, Bhavananda, Kabir, Sukhananda, Surasurananda, Padmavati, Naraharyananda, Pipa, Raidasa, Dhanna, Sena Suraseri etc. the divine dignities received the spiritual teaching from the teacher of the universe Ramanandacharya, and illuminate this samsara with their velour and it is also a landmark in the history of spirituality.

According to Historian it is said that Śrī-maṭh is spreaded about five k.m., at the period of Jagadgurū Ramanandacharya. The Muslim ruler of that period destroyed this spiritual centre. This is very shameful activities for the humankind.

Śrī-maṭh is the vital urged source of all saints sects of the world. Now a days more than hundred schools such as Kabir Dasi, Garib Dasi, Ghisa panthi, Rama Senehi, Dadu Panthi, Pipa Panthi, Ravi Dasi and Barkari etc. are serving of the humankind.

Śrī-maṭh is important, respectable and stimulated sacred place for the Rama devotional school like Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakuta, Prayag, Nasik and Baxer.

Jagatguru Ramanandacharya has compiled (sic) Prasthanatrayi, Anandabhasya, Adhyatma Ramayana, Vaisnavamatabja Bhaskara and Ramarchan Paddhati at this very place. These books propagate the spiritual thoughts of Rama devotional school. There are 52 Pithas of four Vaiṣṇava Sampradaya (Śrī sampradāya, Madhava, Vishnu and Nimbarki). Among the sects 36 Pithas are possessed of Śrī sampradāya. So this is the fact that many saints ashram are separated in the whole spiritual world. [...]

The writer Tulsi Das of Great epic like Ramcharitmansa is the diamond of Śrī-maṭh. Mirabai also connected to this Śrī-maṭh.

The present Swami of Śrī-maṭh is Jagatguru Shri Ramanareshacharya Maharaja.

This 'emic' description stresses the holiness of the place through its connection to Viṣṇu and portrays Rāmānanda as an *ācārya* who transmitted his teaching to renowned disciples. In order to support the presence of the Maṭh, the text uses the testimony of historians who have declared the size that the building had in the past.⁴⁵⁰ Then, Varanasi is compared in the text to other Rāmānandī centers that are directly linked with the story of Rām, perhaps to justify the fact that Varanasi is not part of the Rām *kathā* (story of Rām).

⁴⁵⁰ This mentioning of historians as scientific proof for the rightness of a statement is often used in works published by the Śrī Maṭh. For example, the journal *Rāmānanda Prakāś*, published in July 2000, reports the description of H.H. Wilson we have already mentioned (Cf. Chapter 2, sec. 2.1, p. 95), as historical proof of the existence of the Maṭh.

The topic of the Śrī Maṭh's location is discussed in other literary productions of the Śrī Maṭh. In the magazine *Śrī Rām Rāmānanda Bhāvābhiṣikta Yātrā Prakāś*, Rāmnaresācārya asks the question 'Why has the Śrī Maṭh been built so far from Ayodhya?' He concludes that the Śrī Maṭh should be regarded as a limb of Ayodhya, because the two places have been linked since time immemorial, and the existence of one supports the other in Hindu mythology. Because Rāmānanda was an *avatār* of Rām and an exceptional guru, he was able to focus on the worship of Rām even in the city of Śiv (Varanasi). Since he held a lot of prestige, he also indirectly highlighted Ayodhya and the cult of Rām (2008: 1).

Although the Śrī Maṭh is linked to a form of worship that is typical of the *rasik* branch, and the Jagadgurū himself is part of the *dās* component of the *rasik* group, in reality it lacks a specific *sāadhanā* identification, as it is the original *pīṭh* and therefore open to all types of Rāmānandīs. In fact, Rāmnaresācārya regards the Śrī Maṭh as a place for Rām devotion in both the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* tradition; for this reason, he always surrounds himself with representatives of the various branches of the *sampradāya*.

A white building with four floors,⁴⁵¹ the Śrī Maṭh stands out on Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ* with an austere and modern style⁴⁵² that clashes with the architecture and structure of the *ghāṭ*, which is made of ancient ochre bricks and hints of the past in the form of the nearby mosque (Fig. 15). The Maṭh occupies a large part of the *ghāṭ* and has two floors directly reachable from the steps.

The lower floor is made of two open rooms that are enclosed by iron grills. Wandering *sādhu*-s stay on this floor and when all the other spaces of the Maṭh are occupied, pilgrims may also dwell here. A carved wooden door marks the main entrance of the Maṭh and leads into the Rāmānanda temple. The hall, made of marble, contains a statue of Rāmānanda flanked on his left by Kabīr and Raidās, and on his right by Anantānanda and Pīpā (Fig. 16). On the right side of these five *mūrti*-s, a wooden chair marks the spot of Rāmnaresācārya when there are events in the temple. This chair represents one of the

⁴⁵¹ However, just at the beginning of 2015, the Śrī Maṭh has been colored in a bright pink. I suppose that the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya wanted to give a colorful touch to the place for his *Rajat jayantī*, the celebration of twenty-five years of Jagadgurū-ship. He also added a board on the wall close to the entrance in which Pañcagaṅgā is defined as an historical place.

⁴⁵² The present structure of the Śrī Maṭh is the result of a construction process that lasted for several years, due to the fluctuating availability of donations. As the Jagadgurū told me, the construction began in the place during the time of Bhagavadācārya, but it still did not have a defined structure by the time of Śivarāmācārya. Rāmnaresācārya was able to complete the building but over the years. The third floor was added later in time. This probably influenced the aesthetic aspect of the Śrī Maṭh, which was projected as a simple structure that can be enlarged according to need. Moreover, it is likely that its shape and color were decided by taking into consideration the flood of the river that in August covers the lower parts of the city and fills it with clay. Unfortunately, there are no photos that show the construction since the very beginning.

thrones (*gaddī*) of the Jagadgurū in the Maṭh.⁴⁵³ The disposition of the throne next to the *mūrti*-s seems to visually represent the idea of *paramparā* by lining up the present guru after those who have come before him. However, this *paramparā* is not literal, because the place is a new building and therefore lacks any real sense of continuity over several centuries. Although the Maṭh has not been constructed under the principle of Rāmānanda's *samādhi* (and of his successors)⁴⁵⁴ it has been built to include the *caraṇa pādukā* of Rāmānanda. The marble feet of the statue of Rāmānanda are the most important elements of the hall and are worshiped daily, especially during the celebration of the Rāmānanda *jayantī*. Another important object of worship is another pair of *caraṇa pādukā* made of silver, contained in a little shrine close to the main door.

Religious celebrations are usually organized in this hall, which has a seating capacity of approximately one hundred people. Because very few people visit the Maṭh, devotees and *bhakta*-s use this area for resting or for playing *bhajan*, and there are often *brahmacārī*-s studying as well.

An external flight of stairs leads to the first floor of the Śrī Maṭh, which is composed of another wide hall with three rooms. This hall contains the Rām temple, the office of the Maṭh, which is also the room of the Vidhān Bābā,⁴⁵⁵ and another room that today is used as storeroom for religious items.

The room of the Rām temple has a thick silver door decorated with carved Vaiṣṇava marks (bow and arrows) and floral decorations. Inside, a stone model of a temple contains the silver *mūrti*-s of Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ. There is also a statue of Viṣṇu, several *śaligram*-s (which represent Viṣṇu)⁴⁵⁶ and a Śiv *liṅga*. The common area contains the wooden white swinging sofa (*jhulā*), on which the Jagadgurū sits when he gives *darśan* in the hall (Fig. 18). On the left side of it is located the main *gaddī* of the Maṭh, the first throne installed in the Maṭh to mark the spot of the Jagadgurū. The *gaddī* is there because the Jagadgurū used to sleep in the room on the right of the temple, since the third floor was still under construction.

Today the third floor is reserved only for the Jagadgurū. He has a small room with just a bed, some shelves to hold books, a personal kitchen and a bathroom. As we will see in

⁴⁵³ This chair, on which only Rāmnaresācārya can sit, represents together with those in the other floors the *gaddī* of the Maṭh.

⁴⁵⁴ For an explanation of *samādhi* and its value as a mark of transmission, see below, Sec. 3.7.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. below, Sec. 4.1, p. 285.

⁴⁵⁶ The *śaligram* is a spherical black ammonoid fossil that is used as an iconic representation of God Viṣṇu.

the next Chapter, only a few people – usually *brahmacārī-s* – are allowed to prepare food for the Jagadgurū.

The open hall in front of the Jagadgurū's room is usually used for his *darśan*. Large carpets are unrolled onto the marble so that people can sit on the floor, while the Jagadgurū sits on a simple wooden chair. Even this chair has to be considered to be a *gaddī*, according to fact that only the Jagadgurū can sit on it.

On the left side of the Śrī Maṭh building, there is a small Kṛṣṇa temple (Fig. 13) to which is attached the so-called *Sītā kī rasoī* (the kitchen of Sītā, Fig. 14), where *brahmacārī-s* prepare food for themselves and the guests. Food is consumed while sitting on the floor, using plate and bowls made of leaves. In the back of this dining area, there are some beds that belong to some of the *brahmacārī-s*, while others live in another *āśram* in Kabir Chowra.

The Śrī Maṭh also owns two other places in Varanasi: the Śrī Vihāram in Kabir Chowra and a *bhagīcā* on the other side of Ganga.

3.3 Śrī Vihāram

The Śrī Vihāram is an *āśram/dharmśālā* located close to Kabir Chowra, a few kilometers from the Śrī Maṭh. It was donated to the Maṭh in 1992 by the *mahant* Raghuvar Gopāl Dās Vedāntī from the Jānkī *ghāṭ* of Ayodhya, who was a disciple of the famous *paṇḍit* Śrī Rām Vallabhāśaraṇ, and who was the guru of Rāmnareśācārya.⁴⁵⁷ The building have five floors that are still under construction but almost completed. When completed, it should contain about fifty rooms. The purpose of the place is to host *sādhu-s*, students and pilgrims.

The main hall (dedicated in the memory of Amrā Bāpū, a devotee of the Jagadgurū who was particular wealthy) serves as an auditorium for events such as *sammelan-s* and religious celebrations like the Rāmānanda's *jayantī*.

On the ground floor is an office that is often utilized by Vidhān Bābā, a main hall, a small temple that holds the *mūrti-s* of Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ and several *śaligram-s*, and a raised ground floor where *brahmacārī-s* can study.

On the first floor there is an open space where wandering *sādhu-s* can stay, using simple mattresses to mark their spot.

On the second floor there is a small room with an attached kitchen and bathroom for the Jagadgurū and several rooms that are for the pilgrims and devotees.

⁴⁵⁷ *Jagadgurū Rāmānanda Śrī Rāmnareśācārya Prākatya Parva*, p. 5.

On the third floor there are other rooms for people to sleep, and on the fourth floor there is a kitchen and a hall for *bhaṇḍārā*-s. During the *cāturmās* 2014, a silver throne of the Jagadgurū that had been gifted to him the previous year was located there as well. The Jagadgurū has also had a lift installed to accommodate older people who are limited in mobility.

3.4 *Bhagīcā* (garden) and *gośālā* (cowshed)

On the other side of Ganga in the district of Gangapar Ḍumri, there is the *bhagīcā* of the Śrī Maṭh.

It is reachable by a twenty minute boat trip, or by car along the road that crosses the Ganga from North. It lies along the right bank of the river, which is mostly used as a farming area. The place owned by the Maṭh is a vast five *bīghā*-s (about 12500 square meters) and is composed of two main buildings and a cowshed. This is where they grow vegetables and produce the milk used in the cooking at the Maṭh. Sometimes the surplus allows the Maṭh to donate their products to other Rāmānandī *āśram*-s in the area. In the courtyard there are the *mūrti*-s of Rāmānanda, Kabīr and Tulsidās that used to be kept in the Śrī Maṭh. Any time the Jagadgurū is in Varanasi, he goes to visit the *gośālā* and sometimes organizes celebrations there.

The farmers that work in the garden are Brahmans from Bihar and their work is regarded as *sevā* for the Maṭh, although they also receive a small salary. There are three families working there and they live in houses near the *bhagīcā*.⁴⁵⁸

3.5 Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir

The Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir is one of many temples dedicated to Viṣṇu in his Mādhav form. It is located in Daraganj, the oldest suburb of Prayag, and has been under the jurisdiction of the Śrī Maṭh since the late 1990s.⁴⁵⁹ Daraganj's bathing *ghāṭ* is the last *ghāṭ* on the Ganga before the river joins the Yamuna. There, together with the underground

⁴⁵⁸ I was told that the *bhagīcā*, like other fields on that side of the river, is in danger because of a project which envisages the construction on that side of the river of the so-called Nayā Kāśī, a new Varanasi with a highway close to the river. The plan was to take the fields from the farmers in order to begin construction, but farmers created a movement to stop it. However, if the plan is approved, the field of the Maṭh will be confiscated.

⁴⁵⁹ The word 'dārā ganj' means 'the place of the stream' or 'current of water.' The name of the place has also been associated with Dara Shikoh, the elder brother of Aurangzeb. Dara Shikoh translated many of the *Upaniṣad*-s and *Purāṇa*-s into Persian, and is thought to have done his translation work at Daraganj. (<http://www.harekrsna.com/sun/features/12-12/features2657.htm>. Accessed September 2014).

river Sarasvati, the waters form the *triveni saṅgam*, the Holy spot in which millions of pilgrims and ascetics gather during the Kumbh Melā.⁴⁶⁰

The Ṭhākur Harit stands among the other Mādhav-s for the green (*harit*) color of its Viṣṇu *mūrti*. As the Jagadgurū explained to me, the appellation Ṭhākur has a meaning similar to that of Swāmī, but it gives the nuance of ‘the one in whose hands there is power.’ Hence, to call God by the name Ṭhākur is to stress that he has the most power because he is the creator.

The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya received the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir as a donation by the Caudhrī family of Vrindavan. There is some information about the place included in an article written by a member of the Caudhrī family (Kṛṣṇadās Caudhrī) for the Śrī Maṭh and published as a pamphlet to publicize the Jagadgurū’s renovation of the place. From this article we come to know that the Caudhrī family obtained the land in 1803. When they visited the place to decide whether to buy it, a family member noticed the presence of many Rāmānandī ascetics who explained to him the holiness of the area. The holy men explained that it was the place where Rāmānanda was born, which is why the area was populated by so, many Rāmānandī-s.⁴⁶¹

Kṛṣṇadās Caudhrī claims that the Rāmānandī-s allowed the Caudhrī family to buy the place because his forefather agreed to make it a *dharmśālā* where *sādhu*-s and *sant*-s could perform *sevā*. The *dharmśālā* and the temple were built in 1803. The family took care of the place for generations and also bought a large *zamindar* (field) for the *dharmśālā* (2007: 204).

In 1933, Rām Prasād Caudhrī decided to establish a trust to have some support in managing the place. The Trust was called the Śrī Rādhārman Sevā Samitī Kāśī and had its headquarter in Varanasi. Nevertheless, the Samiti Trust was unable to successfully manage the place, which allowed a man named Sankarshan Gosvāmī to take the property under his name in 1979. From that date on, a legal case started between Gosvāmī and the Caudhrī family, which ended with the dispossession of Gosvāmī from the place. The Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir again fell under the control of the Samiti and Caudhrī family in 1989.

In October 1994, the president of the Samiti, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caudhrī offered the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya to take the Mandir and manage it properly. The Samiti Trust

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. below, Sec. 4.4.

⁴⁶¹ Kṛṣṇadās Caudhrī claims that Rāmdās went through his *sādhana* in the same place and had established a Hanumān temple that is today known as Sankat Mocan Choṭe Hanumān. Because the author seems to take for granted the identity of who this Rāmdās was, I suppose that he was the gurū of Śivā jī, the Maratha Raja of the 17th century.

transferred the holding to the Jagadgurū on November 27, 1999. The Jagadgurū then organized another Trust to begin the restoration of the property. The Trust included people from Varanasi, Allahabad, Indore (Madhya Pradesh) and Kolkata. One year later the place was officially entrusted to the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū was named its manager.

The Jagadgurū's nominal ownership of the Śrī Maṭh and the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir temple links him with 'original' spots connected to the life of Rāmānanda. Sometimes when he publicizes his religious events, he will describe himself as 'Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Padpratiṣṭit Rāmnaresācārya jī Mahārāj,' to stress that he is situated (*pratiṣṭit*) on the *pad* (seat) of Rāmānanda (the Śrī Maṭh), and describes the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir as '*ādya Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya prākatya dhām,*' meaning the abode of the original Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya.

With this attitude, Rāmnaresācārya attempts to actualize information existent in Rāmānanda's hagiographies: that Rāmānanda had his *āśram* in Pañcagaṅgā and that he was born in Prayag.

Considering the current debate about Rāmnaresācārya's role as Jagadgurū and the presence of other competing Jagadgurū-s, Rāmnaresācārya's possession of these places bestows him with much needed prestige and religious authority.

3.5.1 The contemporary structure of the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir

Today the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir is under the management of the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya, who has provided the economic support for its restoration and development. He successfully guided the construction to completion before the Mahā Kumbh Melā of 2013.⁴⁶²

The place includes not just a temple, which is actually quite small in size, but also a complex structure that mainly functions as an *āśram* or *dharmśālā*. For this reason, before the Kumb began, efforts were made to finalize the rooms of the *āśram* and to finish the main facade that faces the river Ganga. The river-facing façade is the main entrance to the building, which looks like an old magnificent *havelī*. On the riverside, a gate opens to the lower floor where small rooms have been placed.

The two flights of stairs on the sides lead up to the first floor, where there are two small temples containing the statues of Rāmānanda as a baby and as an adult. Between the two, an open pillared hall contains several paintings representing Rāmānanda's life. The

⁴⁶² Cf. Fig. 49.

first image shows Rāmānanda's father and his mother. The second image is a representation of the ceremony of his *nām saṃskāra* and the portrait of Rāmānanda blowing the conch when he was only three years old. The third depicts Rāmānanda performing *ārāadhanā* for Viṣṇu's *avatār*-s and for the *śaligram*. It follows the image in which he performs *ārāadhanā* at the Kāśī Viśvanāth temple in Varanasi and another in which he is shown meditating in a cave. Then, Rāmānanda is represented while writing the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*, and giving *dīkṣā* to Anantānanda. The disciple represented in the next image is Kabīr, lying on the steps of Pañcagaṅgā, and then Raidās. In the description below the image in which Rāmānanda is among his disciples, he is described as a Jagadgurū teaching various *siddhānta*-s. There is, then, a representation of him with Padmāvātī, Pīpā and Sen, as well as giving *dīkṣā* to many *bhakta*-s. Subsequently, Rāmānanda is portrayed using the power of his conch to fight both Muslim and Hindu opponents of the *dharma* and to convert twenty thousands Muslims in Avadh to Hinduism. After the image of Rāmānanda's *yātrā* for spreading Rām *bhakti*, the last image represents only the *pādukā* of Rāmānanda to symbolize his death. These paintings do not contain any reference to Rāmānanda's guru, Rāghavānanda, nor any link to Rāmānūja.

Usually, *sādhu*-s from Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s⁴⁶³ sing *bhajan* or do their religious practices in this open hall.

A flight of stairs from this hall lead to the main hall, which is actually on the ground floor level is if one arrives at the *āśram* from the entrance on the side of Daraganj. On this ground floor there is an audience hall bordered by four small rooms on the extremities that are split into two levels: the rooms on the higher level lodge the Jagadgurū's close helper, the Vidhān Bābā and Padmānabham,⁴⁶⁴ one of the rooms on the lower level is used as a storage room, while the other is where the Jagadgurū lives. This room has just enough space for a bed, a small night table and a hanger for the Jagadgurū's *tulsī mālā*-s.

Close to this room, there is a small bathroom and kitchen where the food for the Jagadgurū is prepared by his *sevak*-s. The *darśan* hall is a wide white space decorated with a few paintings of God Rām, the Jagadgurū and Rāmānandī-s that have a connection to the place. Two of the walls in this hall are made of glass so that the Jagadgurū can have a sight of the *saṅgam* and can control what goes on outside in the courtyard. All around the courtyard there are various structures with rooms. The left structure is part of the original

⁴⁶³ However, during the Mahā Kumbh Melā there were also Śaiva ascetics, and I have seen that Śaiva ascetics are often hosted by *tyāgī*-s in their *āśram*-s or camps.

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. below, Sec. 4.1.

structure of the *havelī*, while the right and southern sides are new constructions. The rooms are quite austere – only a few of them have proper beds and toilets inside. People staying in the other rooms use shared external bathrooms. The furniture of a room depends on the economic support received: before the Kumbh Melā, those wealthier devotees of the Jagadgurū who wanted to spend time there financially supported the construction of the rooms in which they were going to stay.⁴⁶⁵

The kitchen is located close to the main gate. It is a wide room that is managed exclusively by Brahmins when the Jagadgurū is meeting with his followers, so that anyone can eat the food prepared there without second thought. The meals are served in the terraced area of the courtyard, which can host around 80 people for each meal.

On the left side of the main building, there are a few steps that lead to the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav temple. The temple is not actually what one would consider a ‘proper’ temple: there are just two platforms facing each other, one of which contains the *mūrti*-s of Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ and various *śaligram*-s and the other that contains the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav.

According to the project of the Jagadgurū, the *dharmśālā* will be further improved in the coming years to become similar to a guesthouse to accommodate students who cannot afford to pay rent for a room.

3.6 The Premānanda *āśram* Jilehrī Ghāṭ in Jabalpur

The Premānanda *āśram* is located in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. I add here a little information about the place I found in the *Jagadgurū Rāmānanda Śrī Rāmnareśācārya Prākatya Parva*. The *āśram* was established by Svāmī Premānanda Purī, a *sant* of the Jūnā *akhārā*, and was given by his disciple and successor Svāmī Mahendrānanda Purī to the Śrī Maṭh in 1997.⁴⁶⁶ The *āśram*, which is on the Jilehrī *ghāṭ* on the bank of the Narmada river, has one hundred acres of lands eligible for cultivation, which allows it to produce all the necessary food for the religious community’s maintenance. In the *āśram* there is a *maṇḍap* dedicated to Rāmānanda that it is hundred-sixteen feet long, fifty-five feet wide and fifty feet high. It was built in 2001 to commemorate the seventh centenary of the birth of Rāmānanda.

⁴⁶⁵ About donation as *sevā*, cf. Chapter 6, sec. 3.7.

⁴⁶⁶ As an informant told me, the Śaiva *sādhu* held the Jagadgurū in great esteem because Rāmnareśācārya used to teach to him in Haridwar during his youth. For this reason, when he decided to marry, which thus ended his *saṃnyāsī* life, he donated the place to the Jagadgurū.

In addition to organizing religious festivals, the *āśram* supports a Sanskrit school named after Gopāl Padmāvati; it organizes an *akhaṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa paṭh* (the continuous repetition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for twenty-four hours) and it promotes *sevā* to cows.

This *āśram* is famous for its almost daily *bhaṇḍārā*: generous portions of food are served to everyone who goes. Here devotees, students, and sants gather to perform the *parikramā* of the Narmadā river⁴⁶⁷ and receive exceptional *bhaṇḍārā* without any distinctions.

3.7 Succession in the Śrī Maṭh

The line of succession in a *maṭh* depends on its nature since, generally speaking, there are two types of *maṭh*-s: the *pañcāyatī maṭh*-s, or community monasteries, and the personal monasteries.⁴⁶⁸ The first kind refers to those centers in which succession is decided by election and in which the internal organization is arranged through a council (*pañcāyat*) of ascetics, while the second, being founded by a specific guru, has a succession established through the spiritual lineage leading from guru to one of his disciples (Bouillier, 2008: 48). Although the election in a *pañcāyatī maṭh* may follow various rules according to the *sampradāya* and center,⁴⁶⁹ in a *maṭh* that follows the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, the election is always between candidates that are all disciples of the *mahant*/guru. With this latter type of succession, a guru may write the names of his favorites on a piece of paper so that at his death his disciples will choose among those listed who will become his official successor, or he may choose his successor in life and train him personally.⁴⁷⁰ I have already mentioned that the Tulsī Pīṭh established in Citrakut by Rāmbhadrācārya and the Nanjī Dhām of Narendrācārya follows the transmission system, and their respective Jagadgurū-s have already chosen their successors.

Further examples from the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* are given by van der Veer. He

⁴⁶⁷ Cf. below, Sec. 4.3.2.

⁴⁶⁸ Taking into consideration the work of Paras Diwan, Bouillier mentions three categories of *maṭh*-s, adding to the two aforementioned that of a *maṭh* 'where the founder has reserved the right of nominating the mahant.' However, as she reports, this category is not only imprecise but also rare (2008: 47).

⁴⁶⁹ For example the *pañcāyatī maṭh*-s described by Bouillier in the Nāth *panth* elect a *mahant* for a limited time, and only during a specific time, which may vary from center to center. The elected *mahant* cannot leave the *maṭh*. A similar interdiction against travel exists in the Rāmānandī *pañcāyatī maṭh* that van der Veer describes, namely the Hanumān Gaṛhī, in which the inhabitants of the *maṭh* decide upon a head who is appointed for life (1988: 153).

⁴⁷⁰ Clémentin-Ojha gives the example of the *mahant* of the Nimbarkī monastery of Salemabad. The *mahant* in charge selected an 11 years old Brahman as his *uttarādhikārī* (next-in-charge). According to Clémentin-Ojha, this early assignment reflects three concerns: first, the need to display a continuity in the succession of abbots as a symbol of dynastic force; second, a pedagogical need to educate the successor from a young age in order to help him acquire the right kinds of habits; and third, concern about sexual continence, as the selection of a child is best suited to ensure this goal (2006: 10-11).

explains that among Rāmānandī *akhārā*-s succession is managed by the ‘democratic spirit’ of the *pañcāyatī* system, while *rasik* centers adopt the pupillary succession (1988: 154). I will give attention to his description of this latter case because, to simplify, I will consider the Śrī Maṭh to be a *rasik* center (according to a perspective that is not emic).⁴⁷¹ Van der Veer claims that *mahant*-s of the *rasik* centers are not chosen by election but by transmission:

The inhabitants of a *rasik* temple commonly form a small community of *sadhus*, mostly no more than fifteen to twenty persons. The principal guru is the abbot who chooses one of his disciples to become his successor. The abbot actually owns the temple and the disciple is his heir. This makes it possible for some *rasik* temples to pass into the hands of one family, as when, for example, an abbot makes one of his cousin his disciple and heir. [...] At any rate, the fact that he owns the temple makes the position of the abbot-guru in a *rasik* temple definitely more powerful than that of his *tyagi* or *naga* colleagues, which is in a way reflected in the way his religious status is almost equal to that of God. (1988: 160)

According to van der Veer, the high status afforded to the abbot-guru is due to the guru worship that characterizes *rasik* centers, which lead toward a ‘totally uncritical, reverential attitude of the *sadhu* and lay disciples towards their guru’ (*ibid*).

Although it is undeniable that *rasik* centers have a strong devotional approach towards the guru – which I do not consider to be *rasik* prerogative because *tyāgī*-s show the same devotion for the Jagadgurū and for their gurus – the pattern of succession in the Śrī Maṭh follows a very different path. The place is not simply a Rāmānandī *gaddī* but is also the *mul gaddī* (the root *gaddī*), and the Jagadgurū is theoretically the leader of the *sampradāya*. Moreover, the Maṭh is a religious Trust and only its Samiti – composed uniquely of Rāmānandī-s who are not inhabitants of the Maṭh – can designate the successor of Rāmnareśācārya.⁴⁷² Rāmnareśācārya can give his preference about who may be his successor (as did Śivarāmācārya when choosing him), but his vote will still just be one among those of the Samiti.

The thing that makes the choosing of a successor unique in the Śrī Maṭh is that the Samiti will not choose among the disciples of Rāmnareśācārya or among the Rāmānandī inhabitants of the Śrī Maṭh (as in a *pañcāyatī maṭh*). Rāmnareśācārya explained to me that

⁴⁷¹ Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 2.1.

⁴⁷² As it is prescribed in the Registration Act, an elected *ācārya* can renounce his charge due to inability to perform the duties or based simply on his individual desire to leave, but all the donations he received become the property of the Maṭh. The *ācārya* who retired has to be respected by the new *ācārya*.

when there are disciple candidates for a seat, they may begin to fight for it.⁴⁷³ Hence, to avoid any possible fight over the issue of succession, Rāmnareśācārya has decided not to give initiation to ascetics but only to lay people. In this way, there will not be any Brahman ascetic disciple who could demand to take charge after him. This rule is quite uncommon, because usually gurus have ascetic disciples precisely for the purpose of transmitting their *paramparā*. As we have often stressed, it is the idea of *guru-śiṣya* and of an uninterrupted transmission through it that justifies and authorizes a tradition. It seems that, by contrast, the Jagadgurū in the Śrī Maṭh is appointed according to a different conceptualization of *paramparā*. In fact, even Śivarāmācārya was not a disciple of Bhagavadācārya, and Rāmnareśācārya also was not a disciple of Śivarāmācārya. When I asked the Jagadgurū about the *paramparā* to which his guru Vedāntī Śrī Raghubar Gopāl Dās belonged, he initially replied by simply saying the ‘Rāmānanda *paramparā*.’ He then he added that he belonged to a *paramparā* from Ayodhyā.⁴⁷⁴

It is likely that, since it was impossible to reconstruct any *paramparā* for the Śrī Maṭh because it was supposedly destroyed, the best solution seemed to be to elect a worthy representative of the *sampradāya* chosen by a committee of *sādhu*-s. In this way, the choice is obviously more unpredictable because it is open to all the Brahman Rāmānandī-s.⁴⁷⁵ This process also gives the idea that the person who is elected will be chosen because he is the worthiest to represent the *sampradāya*.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷³ Striking examples are reported by Cenknier: in Dvārka Pīṭh, ‘a case was pursued for thirty-five years before it ended in a favorable court decision for the reigning guru in 1951; similarly the court resolved the Purī case in 1950 by giving the reigning and renowned teacher, Śrī Bharati Krishna, a favorable decision’ (1983: 111).

⁴⁷⁴ The Jagadgurū only said he was from that *paramparā* when I asked for more precise information about the *paramparā*’s origin and I gave as example the *paramparā* from Anantānanda.

⁴⁷⁵ It is likely that the decision to choose the Jagadgurū only among the Brahmans is due to the fact that the Jagadgurū has to be an *ācārya*, title that it is associated with the classical education usually achieved by Brahmans. Furthermore, because it is said that Rāmānanda was a Brahman and the Jagadgurū is thought to be an *avatār* of Rāmānanda, the Samiti probably prefers to address ascetics from the same caste.

⁴⁷⁶ This supports the idea of regarding the Śrī Maṭh as a representation of a routinized charisma. In fact, when the charisma is routinized, problems may arise in the succession following the charismatic leader. Weber identifies six types of solutions for the succession problem, some of them identifiable with positions taken by the Śrī Maṭh Trust. They are: (a) ‘the search for a new charismatic leader on the basis of criteria of the qualities which will fit him for the position of authority’ (b) revelation through oracles (c) designation of a successor by the charismatic leader himself –in our case we have seen that the Jagadgurū in charge can only give his vote; (d) ‘designation of a successor by the charismatically qualified administrative staff and his recognition by the community. [...] It is not a matter of free selection, but one which is strictly bound to objective duty. It is not to be determined merely by majority vote, but is a question of arriving at the correct designation, the designation of the right person who is truly endowed with charisma’ (e) hereditary and (f) transmission by ritual (1964: 364-365). Considering the succession in the Śrī Maṭh, we can say that the solution described in (a) is present, as the Samiti has prescribed some characteristic that the Jagadgurū has to possess, but the solution described in point (d) seems to most closely describe the manner in which a new Śrī *sampradāyācārya* is chosen the Śrī Maṭh.

Another consideration that has to be made related to the process of succession is what happens to the dead *mahant*. In the Śrī Maṭh there are not (and there never will be) *samādhi*-s of the *mahant*/Jagadgurū, only the *caraṇa pādukā* of Rāmānanda. The *samādhi* of a guru is his tomb, which may be the spot that he chose to bury himself while he was still alive (*jivit samādhi*) or the spot where others decided to bury him after his death. The *samādhi* of an ascetic may become a place of worship for his *sampradāya*, and a place where followers may choose to construct a religious center focused on the supposed holiness of the tomb itself. In the Śrī Maṭh, the cult of the *pādukā* is well-attested, especially during the Rāmānanda's *jayantī*.⁴⁷⁷ However, given the absence of a real *paramparā* for the Śrī Maṭh, there are no other *samādhi*-s present. This lack of tombs is caused not only by the lack of space in the Maṭh and the gaps in the historical record,⁴⁷⁸ but also by the ritual after death followed by ascetics in some branches of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

When I asked the Jagadgurū about the *samādhi* of his predecessor, Śivarāmācārya, he said that he did not have a *samādhi* because he was not buried, nor was his body placed in a holy river. Rather, he was cremated and the ashes were poured in Ganga.⁴⁷⁹ The Jagadgurū pointed out that a Rāmānandī ascetic usually takes *dīkṣā* not with the ideal of renouncing the physical world (*saṃnyāsa*), but rather detaching from the world (*virakta*). Therefore, he explained, a Rāmānandī may continue following *Veda*-s' injunctions and *saṃskāra*, such as the *agni saṃskāra*, in this case.⁴⁸⁰

However, as usual, the reality in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is more complex and in fact both the procedures of cremation and sepulture are present. Through a correspondence with the *mahant* of the Piṇḍorī Dhām, I came to know that, for example, they also respect the tradition of cremation. When a *mahant* dies, they take the mark of his feet on a cloth with sandal powder in order to build his *samādhi*. By contrast, I learned through correspondence with Ramdas Lamb, who took Rāmānandī *dīkṣā* from a *tyāgī*, that *tyāgī*-s usually follow the burial tradition or immersion of the body in holy river. Ramdas Lamb wrote to me the following explanation for why this is:

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. below, Sec. 4.3.11.1.

⁴⁷⁸ In fact, there are only portraits of Bhagavadācārya and Śivarāmācārya.

⁴⁷⁹ As already stated in the introduction, there are various ways to interpret and experience asceticism and renunciation. Although the image of the renouncer that takes *dīkṣā* and performs his death by covering himself with ashes is the most common image for a *sādhu*, we have to keep in mind that there is not only single path of a renouncer. This is especially the case in a *sampradāya* with several branches, such as the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

⁴⁸⁰ The *agni saṃskāra*, better known as *antim* or *antyesti saṃskāra*, is the ritual that is performed after a person's death, which involves the cremation of the body.

The determining factors can be several: what was the status in the order, i.e. was he a guru with living chelas [disciples], was he previously married or bal brahmacharya [brahmacarin since youth], did he leave specific wishes/orders regarding disposal of his body, etc. [...] The immersion practice is actually rather common for the bodies of many tyagis who have departed, especially those who were never married [...] If a Ramanandi is a guru, has an ashram, and has many disciples who are very devoted to him (or her), when death occurs, the body may be buried there with a covering to mark the spot, which will typically be referred to as the guru's "samadhi sthal." There, devotees can go for pray, remembrance, and blessings [...] Previously married Ramanandis will usually be cremated.⁴⁸¹

The different procedure in the Śrī Maṭh derives from the different *sādhana* followed by Rāmānandī-s – like the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya – and the attention they give to Brahmanic rituals and texts (both the Jagadgurū and the *mahant* of Piṇḍorī Dhām are from the *rasik* branch and are Brahmans). Perhaps because *tyāgī*-s are often from low castes, they prefer to follow a procedure that stresses their life choice to become an ascetic rather than their previous social status. Thus, their practice is similar to that of *saṃnyāsī*-s, who also give less importance to Brahmanic rituals, although for different underlying reasons.⁴⁸² However, a specific study on the topic among the various branches and centers would be required to decisively reach this conclusion.

4. The Śrī Maṭh, inhabitants and activities

4.1 The inhabitants of the Śrī Maṭh

My description of the main inhabitants of the Maṭh will help illuminate those characters who are generally present in religious institutions (*brahmacārī*-s, *sādhu*-s and *sevak*-s). This exploration will enable us to see who drives the daily rhythms of life of the Maṭh when the Jagadgurū is not there. We will see the particular character of the Śrī Maṭh, in which there are very few ascetics and the environment is dominated by *brahmacārī*-s. What should be noted is that in the life of the Maṭh, there is a seamless cooperation between laymen and ascetics. Before describing the inhabitants of the Maṭh, I will briefly list the rules articulated in the Śrī Maṭh Trust Registration Act (p. 2) that guide the behavior of all those who live there:

⁴⁸¹ E-mail conversation, September 16, 2014.

⁴⁸² In fact, as I have already stressed, the purpose of many Rāmānandī ascetic is not *mokṣa* but *bhakti*.

- Those members who live in the Maṭh must respect and follow the tradition of Vaiṣṇava *paramparā*-s, which are in accordance with the *Śāstra*-s. For example, they must wake up at *brahma muhūrta* (the moment before the sunrise); be present at the morning *ārtī*, and ask for permission before they leave.
- Members cannot use radio, video or television.⁴⁸³
- All must maintain a simple lifestyle.
- No one can smoke or drink alcohol.
- Those members who do not act in accordance with the rules must be punished.
- Those who live in the Maṭh cannot behave in the company of *bhakta*-s as they prefer.
- Those students who live in the Maṭh should wear traditional Indian clothes.
- *Sant*-s from various *sampradāya*-s and *gṛhastha*-s who protect the tradition of the *āśram*, can obtain facilities in the Maṭh.

The main inhabitants of the Maṭh are the *brahmacārī*-s who are supported in their studies by the Jagadgurū. They are young Brahmans coming from different areas of northern India. Most of them come from a family of devotees of the Jagadgurū who cannot finance the education of their son. However, it is not necessary to follow the *sampradāya* to have this opportunity. For example, during my visit to the Maṭh, I met a pair of brothers who belong to the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* as well as boys from the Mādhva *sampradāya* who were recognizable by their different *tilak*.

I tried to make an inquire among the *brahmacārī*-s because I thought the information might prove helpful in constructing a better portrait of the community. However, after passing out twenty-five survey forms, I received back only ten and the answers were all similar. It seemed that they might have filled out the forms together and replied according to what seemed to fit the theoretical ideal of a ‘good’ Brahman and future *paṇḍit*. In fact, all of them wrote that they wanted to become a *paṇḍit* or scholar so that they could perform *sevā* to their parents, their village and India in general. It is most likely that many of them came to the Maṭh on their parents’ decision, but they wrote that they were happy and that they liked life there.

Some *brahmacārī*-s come to the Maṭh for a short period, as they keep moving from one *maṭh* to another. For example, Maheśvara was a young man in his twenties whom I spoke with on March 22, 2012, about six or seven months after he had arrived in the Maṭh. He

⁴⁸³ These technologies are not even available in the Maṭh, but anyone living there has a mobile phone, and there is a computer that is used by *brahmacārī*-s.

was from Darjeeling and his father was a *paṇḍit* there. He went to various places to study, and he reached the Maṭh with another boy who had previously studied in Mathura in a *maṭh* belonging to the Vallabha *sampradāya*. Maheśvara claimed that all of the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s are equally helpful places for a Vaiṣṇava student to learn. However, there are *brahmacārī*-s who came to the Maṭh in their childhood and remain there since they finish their studies. They often follow the Jagadgurū in his travels to help him perform ceremonies with the support of professional *pujārī*-s.⁴⁸⁴

Their connection to the Maṭh puts them in contact with many lay Hindus who may need their services in the future, thus creating a remarkable consumer base for them. For example, Upendra⁴⁸⁵ and Akhileś, who are roughly the same age, are known for being the more acknowledged by the *brahmacārī*-s. The Jagadgurū asks them to perform the temple rituals for the most important ceremonies. Upendra is in the Maṭh most often and, after taking the *śāstrī* title, began to teach Sanskrit to children while finishing his course to obtain the title of *ācārya*. Akhileś, perhaps an even more brilliant student, finished his Sanskrit classes not in Varanasi but in Madhya Pradesh and in 2014 was about to start his PhD in Delhi. However, even if he is travelling out of town, if the Jagadgurū needs him, he goes back to Varanasi or wherever the Jagadgurū is. They told me with a bit of mixed embarrassment and excitement that when they finish their studies they will get married.

The *brahmacārī* par excellence in the Maṭh is Padmānabham. Born in 1983, he has been a *brahmacārī* of the Maṭh since he was a child. After finishing his studies, he did not leave the Maṭh to begin his life as *gṛhastha* but rather decided to remain in the Maṭh and do the *sevā* of the Jagadgurū. Now he is the *sevak* who accompanies the Jagadgurū wherever he goes, taking care of his food, clothes, and everything that has to be preserved in a specific way. He is a kind of personal secretary, although he is not a *sādhu* because he did not take *virakta dīkṣā*.

Another close *sevak* of the Jagadgurū is Ajay. He was once a *gṛhastha* with a wife and two sons. However, ten years ago he decided to leave his family to do the *sevā* of the Jagadgurū. He did not like family life very much, because his main interest was the *Rām*

⁴⁸⁴ When the Jagadguru organizes important ceremonies usually he asks to specific *pujārī*-s to attend. They do not seem to be followers of the Jagadgurū, in fact I have never met them in a context different than that of rituals. Furthermore, they are Śaiva-s, as the *tilak* on their forehead demonstrates. As I will display also in the next chapter, the Jagadgurū does not have partiality and chooses these *pujārī*-s not for their belonging faith, but because they are well known *pujārī*-s in the area of Pañcagaṅgā.

⁴⁸⁵ Interestingly, the brother of Upendra, Pravin, also lives in the Maṭh but he does not attend any Sanskrit University. Rather, he is studying at a college to become an engineer. For this reason, he does not really participate in the celebrations, but he does provide for the more practical, technological needs of the Maṭh.

Kathā and his teaching, which his father used to repeat to him from the time he was a baby. He decided to dedicate his life to it, and doing the *sevā* of the Jagadgurū became a way to realize that goal. According to him, an ascetic life allows a human being to obtain spiritual achievements and constant *prasād*. However, he is not a disciple of the Jagadgurū; in fact, he took the *virakta dīkṣā* from a guru of the *sākhī* branch of the *sampradāya*, while the Jagadgurū belongs to the *dās* branch. Ajay is still in touch with his family: his wife Sunita is a follower of the Jagadgurū, who economically supports her and her children. One of them is studying in a village close to Varanasi, while the other plans to study in the Maṭh. Sometimes Ajay goes back to his village to visit his family. The fact that he was a *grhastha* and that Sunita is his wife is not hidden. In fact, when they meet during some events organized by the Jagadgurū (as the Kumbh Melā) she often takes care of him.

Another man at the Maṭh is an elderly *sādhu* who is known for always singing the *Sītā Rām bhajan*, and because of this he is called *Sītā Rām*. After the death of his wife, as his two sons were already married, he decided to leave everything and start an ascetic wandering life to dedicate himself to the *Rām bhakti*. Therefore, he went to Ayodhya and took *dīkṣā* with a *Rāmānandī* guru who give him the name of *Rāmnagar Dās*. He was in Ayodhya when the Babri mosque was destroyed, but he told me he could not give any information about the episode because he was uneducated and did not really know what was going on. He joined the *Śrī Maṭh* six years ago, where his role is to play *bhajan*. Although his life is ascetic, he does not hold *sādhu-s* in high esteem: he considers the life of a *grhastha* to be tougher than that of *sādhu-s*, because he views *sādhu-s* as beggars who are primarily concerned with getting food. In fact, that was actually his main anxiety before deciding to remain in the Maṭh. He supports himself carving *tulsī* wood used to make Vaiṣṇava bracelets. His days are spent chanting the name of *Rām*, playing a *dholak*, doing *nām jāp* and making bracelets. *Sītā Rām* seemed to me a typical elderly man who preferred to retire from his lay life, perhaps because his family could not support him, and ended up finding a shelter in religion and in a religious organization such as the *Śrī Maṭh*. He does not have any more contact to his family.

An example of a *grhastha* doing *sevā* is *Gopāl Singh*, who is the factotum of the Maṭh and the one who handles the *Śrī Vihāram*.⁴⁸⁶ *Gopal* organizes all the logistics when there are people to host. He had a family but he left them eight years ago to do *sevā*. He initially did *sevā* for the *Annapūrṇa Maṭh*, but as soon as the *mahant* died, the situation there

⁴⁸⁶ Interview, February 23, 2012.

worsened and he decided to join the Śrī Maṭh. He was dubious if he would continue doing *sevā* for all his life, but he was sure that he wanted remain a *grhastha*. According to him, the life of a *grhastha* is more generous than that of a *sādhu* because usually a family man has to take care of his family, while *sādhu*-s think only about themselves. However, he will not go back to his family. He told me that his family used to be landlords who owned many fields. They also donated piece of land to the Sankaṭ Mocan temple. He said he is not a Brahman but rather a Kṣatriya, descending from the same genealogy of Rāmcandra. Hence, Gopāl is a layman who decided to leave everything to do *sevā* without abandoning his label of *grhastha*, which he considers to be worthier than that of a *sādhu*.

The main *sādhu* of the Maṭh is Vidhān Bābā. His name is explained by his function: *vidhān* means ‘legislation’ or ‘dispensation’ and he manages the Maṭh and its relationships with other centers from a practical point of view. He also acts like a father or educator for the *brahmacārī*-s, controlling them, giving them tasks or assigning punishments. Vidhān Bābā is a middle-aged man from Bihar. A *brahmacārī* told me that he became a *sādhu* after the death of his wife. However, he has never said this to me directly. During our interview, he said that initially he did not intend to follow the ascetic path but that God lead him to follow it because, as he says, God decides who is worthy for it.⁴⁸⁷ The Vidhān Bābā keeps his hair and beard long and only cuts it twice a year: after *cāturmās* and before Rām Navamī. He always wears a white garment as a short *luṅgī*, and applies the signs of Vaiṣṇava *tilak* on his arms and stomach. However, he seems more attached to the Jagadgurū as an individual than to the *sampradāya* as a community: when I asked him about the organization of the order, he could not answer me, instead referring me to the Jagadgurū. It could have been that he did not want to refer private information, or he might not have actually known.

Vidhān Bābā has left his family but not all communication with them, as he is still in touch with his sisters and mother. They are devotees of the Jagadgurū and they also attend events organized by the Maṭh like Sunita.

A Rāmānandī *sādhu* who is highly esteemed in the Maṭh is the so-called Choṭā Mahārāj, Rām Vinay Dās. Although he is a *tyāgī* from the Balānānda Maṭh of Jaipur, as symbolized by his completely white *tilak*, Rām Vinay Dās does not look like a *tyāgī*: he

⁴⁸⁷ However, according to another inhabitant of the Maṭh, he did not take *virakta/saṁnyāsī dīkṣā* from the Jagadgurū when they first met in 1995. My source says that, given the lifestyle and the religious status of the Bābā, he is considered a *bhagat*, or a holy devotee man. For this reason, he receives the respect of all the followers of the Jagadgurū. Vidhān Bābā, instead, told me that he has taken the *saṁnyāsī dīkṣā* but he does not remember when.

wears saffron clothes and does not have *jaṭā*.⁴⁸⁸ He is often with the Jagadgurū during important meetings, but he also travels according to his own religious agenda.⁴⁸⁹

There are very few *sādhu*-s in the Maṭh because, as Padmānabham told me, the Maṭh does not have enough space to host ascetics. There are usually two or three ascetics staying on the ground floor of the building. They may belong to the various branches of the *sampradāya* or to other *sampradāya*-s as well. Sometimes ascetics will come to the Maṭh just to eat lunch. During the main religious celebrations, their number can increase and in that case, the ground floor of the Maṭh may host ten *sādhu*-s, but those *sādhu*-s who come from other *āśram*-s usually prefer to stay in other Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi.⁴⁹⁰ However, thanks to the construction of the Śrī Vihāram, many more *sādhu*-s can be hosted. In fact, during *cāturmās* 2014, the Śrī Vihāram had a floor available for wandering *sādhu*-s while making private rooms available for more important *sādhu*-s.

4.1.1 Few remarks about the floating nature of Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s and *sevak*-s

As seen in the aforementioned descriptions, the worlds of ascetic Rāmānandī-s and that of lay people are not separate from each other; they intermingle in the Maṭh. Although roles and hierarchies are known and respected, in practice ascetics and lay people contribute to the life of the Maṭh in similar ways in many cases. It is likely that, while doing *sevā*, the nature of the individual is not important since the purpose is the same. For this reason, ascetics, lay people and *brahmacārī*-s can work together for the realization of activities, which can range from serving food to arranging a *saṅgīt* or a religious event.

Moreover, we have seen that the link between ascetics and society may also come in the form of a connection to their previous family. This is not the case for all ascetics, but some of them still have connections with their family⁴⁹¹ and still go to visit them, while some

⁴⁸⁸ I suppose that he tries to physically resemble the appearance of the Jagadgurū. In general, the absence of *jaṭā* in a *tyāgī* can have two simple explanations: a *tyāgī* may have shaved for the death of his guru or he may simply be bald. One time I asked the *mahant* of a *tyāgī āśram* in Varanasi why he did not have *jaṭā*. This question turned out to be a bit of a gaffe, because he turned his head to show me he was completely bald on the back of his head and was therefore unable to have them.

⁴⁸⁹ I am not sure about the position of Rām Vinay Dās in the Maṭh, as he no longer lives in the room close to the Rām temple of the Maṭh. An informant told me that there were some problems with the Vidhān Bābā, but I retain that it is more likely that, being a *sādhu* and a *tyāgī*, Rām Vinay Dās decided to move to another center for some time.

⁴⁹⁰ However, thanks to construction projects in the Śrī Vihāram, the Śrī Maṭh can now host many more *sādhu*-s. However, as the Śrī Vihāram is quite far from the river, it is not always the best choice for a *sādhu*.

⁴⁹¹ Even the Jagadgurū's brother moved to Varanasi and the Jagadgurū helped him and his family to settle there, although his nephew told me that very few people know about this.

sevak-s who are still *grhastha* have completely cut ties with their family. Therefore, it is not necessary to become an ascetic to carve out an individual path separated from the family, as even a lay man or a lay woman can find shelter in a religious institution and spend his or her life doing *sevā*. Moreover, both *grhastha*-s and ascetics can be rewarded for their religious activities and receive economic compensation for their ‘job’ as *sevak*-s. Similarly, whereas there are *sādhu*-s that still consider *grhastha* life to be better than that of an ascetic, there are lay people that, as soon as they are in the Maṭh environment, act and wear clothes that make them resemble ascetics more than lay people. Even the Jagadgurū may address an ascetic or a layman in the same manner, although, as we will see in the next chapter, not all the devotees of the Jagadgurū can ‘work’ for him.

Hence, the spirit in the Śrī Maṭh that I perceived was one of collaboration among lay people and ascetics. Furthermore, the respect that lay people show toward ascetics is mainly addressed to those whom they know properly and are acknowledged by the Jagadgurū.⁴⁹²

It is interesting to notice that both ascetics and lay people have the purpose to support the activities of the Jagadgurū: well-known ascetics bringing prestige to the Maṭh through their spiritual practices and austerities that can attract further devotees and other ascetics, while lay people support the Jagadgurū with a more practical and economic *sevā*. The more both groups perform well according to their roles, the stronger the Maṭh community becomes. As the Śrī Maṭh is a place that has to conquer and create its own space in the religious Indian landscape, both ascetics and lay people work to facilitate its evolution over the years to help it grow, gain followers, construct more buildings and perform activities and ceremonies not only in Varanasi but across northern India.

4.2 Daily activities in the Śrī Maṭh

The daily routine I will describe here mostly concerns *brahmacārī*-s, as they are the main occupants of the Maṭh. I will describe the daily activity of the Jagadgurū in the next chapter.

The daily routine of a *brahmacārī* begins around 4 o’clock in the morning, with the *nitya karma*, ritual actions that are supposed to be performed daily by all Hindus.

⁴⁹² It is interesting to remark that these two communities do not address each other in the same way: ascetics call lay people as *bhāī* (brother) and *dīdī* (elder sister), maintaining an informal approach, while lay people always show more respect to ascetics and they call them Bābā (father) or Mahārāj jī (roughly meaning ‘respected leader,’ used in the case of a respected *sādhu*). Rāmānandīs who came to visit the Jagadgurū always called him Mahārāj jī or, talking amongst themselves, would refer to him as Jagadgurū. The Jagadgurū addresses *sādhu*-s by their name and charge or branch (calling them *tyāgī* jī or *nāgā* jī).

Particular attention is given to the application of the *tilak*: unlike Śaiva *tilak*, the Vaiṣṇava one requires particular care in the drawing of the two vertical white lines and of the red line in between them. For this reason, a small brush and mirror are used to ensure accuracy. *Brahmacārī-s* also privately do the *nām jāp*, or repetition of God's name through the use of a rosary, at different times during the early morning.

After the *brahmacārī-s* do their individual practice, the *pūjā* in the temple is executed, usually by the elder *brahmacārī*. The leader will perform *ārtī* in front of the silver *pādukā* of Rāmānanda and in front of the statues of Rāmānanda and his disciples. Not all of the *brahmacārī-s* attend the *ārtī*, but those in attendance recite texts and, at the end of the *pūjā*, blow the conch while a mechanic drum beats the time. This ceremony is followed by the *pūjā* in the Rām temple, which is a closed ceremony: the door of the temple are open but a curtain is put in front, so that nobody can see the *brahmacārī-s* waking up the God. Only after the curtain is removed can anyone have the *darśan* of the *mūrti*.

From the time they get up, *brahmacārī-s* spend most of their time studying. They usually have their breakfast around 7 to 8 in the morning, after which some of them go to Sampurnananda University, famous for the teaching of Sanskrit and classical subjects. However, some *brahmacārī-s* study in the Maṭh: there is a *paṇḍit* who comes almost every day to teach the younger children, but in the evening he also teaches the elders, and sometimes the Jagadgurū himself gives private lessons.

Around noon, the *brahmacārī-s* in charge give offerings to the deity in the temple and close the temple door to allow the deity to rest. At the same time lunch is prepared in the kitchen, not only for regular residents in the Maṭh but also for those *sādhu-s* and lay people who are visiting and in need of a meal. Food is always prepared by *brahmacārī-s*, although when there are big *bhaṇḍārā-s* Brahman cooks are called. As we have seen, vegetables and milk are produced in the fields of the Śrī Maṭh. These products are also cultivated by Brahmans. In this way, anyone can receive food from the Maṭh without worrying about the provenience and who cooks it. This becomes particularly important during wider *bhaṇḍārā*, in which many lay people are present. A rule that is almost always respected during *bhaṇḍārā* is that *sādhu-s* eat first, followed by Brahmans and guests and then the rest.

Before starting the lunch, a *sādhu*, usually Vidhān Bābā, proclaims the names of the main sants of the *sampradāya* from the past, the main deities of Varanasi, the most important places for the *sampradāya*, and the name of the present Jagadgurū. To each name, those in attendance reply with 'Jay!', which means 'victory' until the leader of the

ceremony ends with a long ‘Sītā Rām!’, repeated by all.

People sit on the floor with a plate and bowl made out of leaves and wait for the *brahmacārī-s* to serve food. The food is flavorful and of a high quality because the Jagadgurū has a duty to feed people properly. The meal usually consists of chapatti, lentils, vegetables, a sweet and rice (called *mahā prasād*). Everyone who eats in the Maṭh has to clean the spot where he or she has eaten and throw away the plate. This is a rule of the Maṭh for all the objects that are used for eating and drinking.

After lunch, people usually rest or study. However, at 4 o’clock in the afternoon, the temple is opened again and remains so until 8 o’clock in the evening, when, after giving *prasād*, *brahmacārī-s* prepare the deity for the night. In the evening there is also the Ganga *ārtī*, a ritual which is celebrated in nearly all the *ghāṭ-s* of Varanasi, which I will describe below. After this, dinner follows.

When there are not particular celebrations or the Jagadgurū is not there, the life in the Maṭh is quite relaxed. Everyone follows his daily routine, which usually includes rest and collective recreation. It is not unusual, when the Ganga’s level is high after the monsoon, to find *brahmacārī-s* swimming and diving in the river from the lower floor of the Maṭh, or in the winter to go on the other shore of the Ganga to play.

The daily routine of those *sādhu-s* or *grhastha-s* who live in the Maṭh is marked by a religious *sādhana*, which is quite simple and characterized by what is generally called *pūjā-pāṭh*, worship through the reading of religious texts. However, as we have seen, *sādhu-s* and *grhastha-s* are in small numbers in the Maṭh, and since they have to take care of the place, they are usually kept busy with activities related to the upkeep and management of the place and handling the relationship between the Maṭh and other centers.

4.2.2 Considerations about commensality in the Śrī Maṭh

In the Śrī Maṭh – but also in other centers managed by the Jagadgurū – Rāmānandī-s usually sleep and eat in the same communal space, even sharing with *sādhu-s* from other *sampradāya-s*. I did not observe any biases based on commensality between *sādhu-s* from different branches. During *bhaṇḍārā-s* organized by the Jagadgurū, Rāmānandī-s from the various branches eat together. Additionally, when the Jagadgurū announces the opening of the *bhaṇḍārā*, he invites all the *sādhu-s* to participate without giving particular recommendations about who should attend or where they should sit. This situation is opposite to that reported by van der Veer. He tells that ‘during bhandara the internal

differences among the Ramanandi sadhus come into the open. Among the tyagis, members of different khalsas may decline to eat with one another. Tyagis may also refuse to dine with non-tyagi sadhus of Ramanandi persuasion' (1988: 125). Even Burghart (1978: 44) claims that Rāmānandī-s maintain commensality rules in a very strict fashion.

We can suppose that Rāmānandī-s coming from centers in which the commensality rule is followed may eat separately or eat different kinds of food. However, it is also likely that, as they respect the leadership of the Jagadgurū, they follow the rule of the Śrī Maṭh. For example, during a *bhaṅḍārā* in *cāturmās*, the Śrī Vihāram was filled with Rāmānandī-s from all the Rāmānandī *āśram*-s of Varanasi. The only rule that was respected was their arrival time and their status, as *mahant*-s are usually invited to take a seat before the others. Only very important *mahant*-s or some leaders avoid eating with others, but in this case it seemed to me an issue of hierarchy rather than a commensality rule.

It seems then, that the liberal approach in the Śrī Maṭh represents quite an innovation for a Rāmānandī center. This innovation, I suppose, originates from the modernity of the center and from the focus placed on implementing the teaching of Rāmānanda. As the Maṭh is a new construction, there were no previous rules about commensality that needed to be heeded and, moreover, as the Śrī Maṭh is constructed on the spot of the original Rāmānanda's *āśram*, the Jagadgurū can support behaviors that are as liberal as the supposed teaching of Rāmānanda.

4.3 Annual ceremonies in the Śrī Maṭh

Because I began my research in October 2011 and I continued to go to Varanasi until January 2014, I was able to attend several celebrations more than once. For those that were impossible to attend, I asked my informants for descriptions. The celebrations officiated at the Maṭh are, however, only one part of the religious events organized by the Jagadgurū, since his travels are always connected to religious functions.

Most of the celebrations I will describe were performed in Varanasi, but there were some events (like the Kumbh Melā or the *cāturmās*) that occurred in Prayag. I will give my descriptions of religious events according to the Hindu calendar.⁴⁹³

The basic unit of the Hindu calendar is not the solar day, but the lunar day (*tithi*). Approximately thirty *tithi*-s form a lunar month, structured over the four phases of the moon. The lunar month is divided in two halves (*pakṣa*) of fifteen *tithi*-s; the halves

⁴⁹³For a schema of the celebrations, see Tab. 2.

beginning respectively with the full moon (*pūrṇimāvasyā*) and the new moon (*amāvasyā*). The *pakṣa* that begins with the new moon is called *śukla pakṣa* (bright half), and the other is the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa* (the dark half). Every month starts and ends with *pūrṇimā*, hence the first *pakṣa* is the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa*.⁴⁹⁴

The year is divided into six seasons which consist of two months each: spring (*Vasanta*) includes the months of Chaitra (March-April) and Vaiśākha (April-May); summer (*Grīṣma*) includes Jyēṣṭha (May-June) and Āṣāḍha (June-July); the rainy season (*Varṣā*) encompasses Śrāvaṇa (July-August) and Bhādrapada (August-September); autumn (*Śarad*) consists of Āśvin (September-October) and Kārtik (October-November); the winter season (*Hemanta*) contains the months of Mārgaśīrṣa (November-December) and Pauṣa (December-January); and the cold season (*Śīśir*) includes Māgha (January-February) and Phālguna (February-March).

I will list for each month the ceremonies that are held in the Maṭh, including details about the ones that hold the most importance.⁴⁹⁵

4.3.1 Chaitra (March-April)

Usually the year in the northern Indian calendar starts in Chaitra, a month associated with spring and the celebration of some of the most important events for the religious life of the Śrī Maṭh, such as the Rām Navamī.

4.3.1.1 Rām Navamī

Rām Navamī is the celebration of the birth of the God Rām. The day falls on *navamī* (the ninth day) of the *śukla pakṣa* of the month of Chaitra. In many places the festival lasts the whole nine days leading up to *navamī* and is called Navarātrī (the nine nights), so that the period is known as Śrī Rām Navarātra. In the Śrī Maṭh the celebration is held for the full nine days, which included an intense daily program. I report here an example of the schedule of 2013, to give an example:

6:00 A.M. to 8:00 A.M.: the collective repetition of the Śrī Rām mantra

8:30 A.M. to 10:30 A.M.: *abhiṣeka* and collective *pūjā* of God Śrī Rāmcandra through the

⁴⁹⁴ Cf. Basham (1954: 499).

⁴⁹⁵ According to my *brahmacārī* informants, during the year there are four main celebrations shared by all the Hindus: Śravaṇi which is the day of *rakṣa bandan*, Daśerā in Vijay Daśmī, Divālī in Kārtik and Holī in the *śukla pūrṇimā* of Phalguna. According to my informants, these four celebrations are linked to the four castes: the first is related to Brahmans, the second to Kṣatriya-s, the third to Vaiśya-s and Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, and Holī to the Śūdra-s.

mantra from the *Ṛg Veda* (*pavamān suktra*)

10:30 A.M. to 11:30 A.M.: *Śrī Rām Yajña Havanātmak*

11:30 A.M. to 12:00 A.M.: *pūjā* to the *ācārya Śrī* (Rāmnareśācārya)

12:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M.: *bhaṇḍārā*, Vaiṣṇav *ārādhanā* (propitiation)

4:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M.: evening *bhajan* to *Śrī Rām*

5:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M.: *Śrī Rām kathā*, by the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya

8:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.: *mahā ārtī* to God *Śrī Rām*

9:00 P.M.: collective lessons from the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, *Adhyātmya Rāmāyaṇa* or *Rāmcaritmānas*.

For Navarātrī, the *brahmacārī*-s shaved their heads and the Vidhān Bābā shaved also his beard. Only the *śikhā*, a little wisp of hair, was left on the back of the head. During the *nām jāp*, the Jagadgurū, the *brahmacārī*-s, some ascetics and a few devotees gathered in the temple hall and practiced the repetition of the *nām* of God while sitting on the floor. The hall was filled with the soft sound of the beads of the *mālā*, which is usually kept in a little cotton orange sack. Women had their heads covered. Only one man prayed without his *mālā* and simply held his hands in a prayer posture. The Jagadgurū was absorbed in his whispered recitation; the Vidhān Bābā directed new-comers to a spot on the floor, while Padmānabham was the only one reciting aloud from a text. The peace of the place was disturbed only by the arrival of some journalists who wanted to take photos of the event.

At 8 o'clock the Jagadgurū stopped his repetition, washed his right hand and did a few minutes of *prāṇāyām*. Later, he whispered a mantra, paid homage the statue of Rāmānanda and left.

After the *nām jāp*, the *brahmacārī*-s prepared the hall for the *abhiṣeka* of the *śaligram*, over which a Vaiṣṇava *tilak* was applied. The Jagadgurū came back and sat in the center of the hall and two *pūjārī*-s sat in front of him. Initially not many people attended the ceremony; however, speakers placed on the corners of the Śrī Maṭh spread the religious verses all over the *ghāṭ*-s.

The *pūjā* to the *śaligram* was quite long (Fig. 19). As usual, the Jagadgurū began the *pūjā* by lighting some incense, drinking some sips of water, and wearing the *pavitri* ring (made of *kuś* grass) on the *anāmikā* finger (the ring finger),⁴⁹⁶ while *brahmacārī*-s chanted

⁴⁹⁶ Akileś and Upendra, two among the *brahmacārī*-s of the Maṭh who perform *pūjā*-s for the Jagadgurū, explained to me that the *kuś* grass is picked only once a year, in *kusotpātnī amāvasyā* that is the *amāvasyā* day (new moon) of the month of Bhādrapān. During this day, *pūjārī*-s and *sādhu*-s collect enough *kuś* grass to last for the entire year. The ring can actually last for a long time and it is kept until it spoils. It is said that this

some *śloka*-s. Then, the Jagadgurū washed the *śaligram* with water using the conch. The *śaligram* was put in a plate over pipal leaves and covered with white clothes while the offerings were given. The offerings were a wide range of things: flowers, holy water, white scarves, *mālā* of flowers, holy threads, yogurt, honey, fruits, etc. During the *abhiṣeka*, a brahmacārī usually repeats *śloka*-s from the *navam maṇḍal* of the *Ṛg Veda*.

Then a red and yellow thread was tied to the Jagadgurū's wrist, and this thread roll was tied to a metallic bowl that was hanging over the *śaligram*, and the thread was passed among those present so that anyone could handle a piece and participate in this collective union.

The last offering made was milk that was poured by the Jagadgurū over the *śaligram* through a kind of metallic horn. By the end of the ceremony, the *śaligram* was almost submerged by milk. It was then washed again with water and the Jagadgurū dried it with a cloth.

After the *śaligram pūjā*, some brahmacārī-s, lay people chosen by the Jagadgurū and a group of people who had requested permission went to the kitchen where the fire for the *havan* (sacrificial fire) was held (Fig. 20). There was only one woman attending, who was the wife of one of the officiants. There were two *sevak*-s and a *paṇḍit*. As an informant told me, the *havan* is a means to talk to the gods and the *havanīya dravya* (a substance for the *havan*, made of a specific mixture of sesame seeds, barley, rice, sugar⁴⁹⁷ and *ghī*) and other offerings are given to the fire to facilitate this communication. The Jagadgurū performs it for the wellness of all those in attendance, while other people ask for specific things.

After the initial offerings of flowers and fruits, the *havanīya dravya* was slowly thrown in the fire: while the *paṇḍit* was reciting *śloka*-s, a small amount of this mixture was put in the fire by some people repeating the mantra *svāhā*.⁴⁹⁸ At the end, the *paṇḍit* repeated the mantra alone for 108 times. Then he chanted the names of gods, while people emulated the previous gesture of pouring herbs in the fire, just moving their right thumb from the base to the tip of the second and third fingers. In the end, people joined their own hands moving them in a rotatory way: so doing, an informant explained, they ask God to forgive the accidental mistakes that they committed during the *yajña*. With the same tool

grass has the power to purify the instruments used in religious activities. Hence, this ring is always worn before starting a *pūjā*.

⁴⁹⁷ This four are called all together *sākal* or *śākalya*.

⁴⁹⁸ As explained by Wade T. Wheelock, *svāhā* is an exclamation of dubious meaning 'uttered when the *adhvarayu* [presiding priest] offers a libation into the fire from a seated position' (1989: 104). He adds that this mantra 'is an expression of reverence directed to the manifest god. And, surely, it is a form of praise to use the mantra to bring the deity to mind and fix one's thoughts on her or him' (*ibid*: 114).

used to pour the *ghī* in the fire, some ash powder was taken and used as *prasād*: people marked six spots on their body (the chest, shoulders, throat, forehead and the top of the head) to make it free from suffering.

After the *havan* followed the guru *pūjā*. First the devotees washed the Jagadgurū's feet and applied turmeric colored powder and some grains of rice on his toenails.⁴⁹⁹ Then they touched the feet with flowers. Subsequently, they put garlands on his feet, arms and neck, while someone lit the incense and the *dīyā*-s for the *ārtī*. A tray with the candles was passed among the participants as they chanted for the Jagadgurū. The water used to wash his feet was kept in a tray and after the *ārtī*, distributed among those in attendance, who each sipped a few drops. The faithful drink this water because the lowest part of a *sant*-s' body is the only accessible part for those who revere him and are below him. As Broo says: 'while the dust of an ordinary man's feet – or the water that has washed them – would be extremely polluting, in the case of a saint the opposite is true. For this reason, the feet (often called "lotus feet") of the guru are often used to represent him, both in iconography and writing' (2003: 254).

After the *bhaṇḍārā* and the evening *darśan*, the Jagadgurū collected his followers in the temple hall for a reading of the *Adhyātmya Rāmāyaṇa* (Fig. 21). They then performed *ārtī* to the *mūrti* of Rāmānanda and his disciples, the silver *pādukā* and the *Adhyātmya Rāmāyaṇa* (Fig. 22).

During Ram Navamī, the regular daily activities were maintained but, in addition, a special *pūjā* was performed in the temple of Rām. Six *brahmacārī*-s sitting outside the temple started chanting mantras from the *Ṛg Veda*, while others inside the temple and hidden behind the curtain prepared several plates of *prasād* to give to the *mūrti*. When the Jagadgurū came, the Vidhān Bābā celebrated the *ārtī* inside the temple while the Jagadgurū stood at the door of the temple waving the *camar* (flywhisk made with hair from a yak's tail). Plates with five small *dīyā*-s each were prepared and given to those in attendance, so that small groups of people could hold a plate and perform the *ārtī* together. When all the *ārtī* plates had been placed inside the temple, people invoked the name of god together by saying 'Jay Sītā Rām' one time.

⁴⁹⁹ This *pūjā* not only displays devotion towards the guru but also, as Fuller stresses and Broo recalls, demonstrates that in this act there is a 'difference between the worshipper and the worshipped, but the act of worship signifies the momentary coming together of high and low' and that 'this communion does not affect the status of the god [in our case of the guru], but it does affect that of the worshipper, who is purified and temporarily given a higher status' (2003: 249).

4.3.2 Vaiśākha (April-May)

During this month, the Jagadgurū travels to his *āśram* in Jabalpur, where he celebrates the Narmada *parikramā*. This *parikramā* is a circular journey along the river Narmada, which is one of the holy rivers whose waters are said to wash one's sins away. Sometimes, the Jagadgurū performs the *parikramā* of the Narmada by car so that he can perform the *parikramā* over the course of roughly nine days by organizing religious ceremonies at various stops. However, more often he remains in the *āśram* to arrange special *bhaṇḍārā*-s for pilgrims and celebrations.

4.3.3 Jyeṣṭhā (May-June)

During Jyeṣṭhā, Gaṅgā Daśerā is celebrated to commemorate the day in which, thanks to the asceticism of King Bhagīratha, Gaṅgā descended on the Earth, breaking her fall on the head of Śiv to shy away from shattering the Earth. By touching the soil from the Himalayas down to the Gulf of Bengal, the river fertilized the entire region. For this reason, on the 10th day (*daśamī*) of the Jyesta *śukla pakṣa*, a special Gaṅgā *pūjā* is celebrated in the Śrī Maṭh.

4.3.4 Āṣāḍha (June-July)

During this month, *cāturmās* starts. As described by Pintchman:

The chaturmas begins right after eleventh of the bright fortnight of Ashad, a day known as Shayani Ekadashi, "sleeping eleventh". It is believed that on this day Vishnu retires to sleep, floating in a vast ocean on the back of his serpent Ananta. For the duration of his slumber, which lasts for four months, some individuals observe a special *vrat* and abstain from various foods that are prohibited during this time. Vishnu finally awakens from his slumber on the eleventh of Kartik's bright fortnight, a date known as Prabodhani Ekadashi, "waking eleventh". (2005: 76)

The first time I met the Jagadgurū during *cāturmās* was in August 2012 in the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir. The place was populated by many devotees from Punjab, Rajasthan and Mumbai. Some people were there to spend just a few days, while others planned to stay for the entire *cāturmās*, pending the permission of the Jagadgurū. For those people who have time to stay in the *āśram*, it is the Jagadgurū who decides how long they can stay and when they can come. When I met the Jagadgurū he introduced me to a woman from Mumbai named Śweta who could speak English and who, from that day on, became an important informant for my research. Here I will give an account of a common day during *cāturmās* in

the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir.

Every morning at 8 o'clock, the Jagadgurū would go to the *saṅgam* bank for the morning *pūjā*. Few people had the honor to accompany him; most would go by themselves. Once on the bank, the Jagadgurū sat on a wooden platform installed in the water and, with the support of a *pujārī* and the *brahmacārī*-s from the Śrī Maṭh, began the Ganga *ārtī*. He would pour flowers, ghee, milk and several other offerings down in the river. The participants would repeat his gestures for the entire *pūjā* and also give offerings to the river. The last offering was money, which the Jagadgurū also gave as *dakṣiṇā* to the *pujārī* and *brahmacārī*-s.

After the *ārtī*, the Jagadgurū went back to the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir to perform the *pūjā* to the *śaligram*. The black stone was first 'nurtured' with milk, yogurt, ghī and honey and then it was properly washed. Other offerings were also donated, similarly to the Ganga *ārtī*. After the *pūjā*, the *śaligram* was brought on a tray into the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav temple. The Jagadgurū performed another *ārtī* there, although this second ceremony was not attended by many people.

Next in the process was the *yajña*. A few different people helped to perform this ceremony: men sat around the sacrificial fire wearing only *dhoti* while their wives sat in the back with their right hands on their shoulders.⁵⁰⁰ After the *yajña* followed a *pūjā* for *ṛṣī* and the forefathers. This was a very simple ceremony: the Jagadgurū poured water from a brass jug to a large recipient. The next ceremony was the guru *pūjā*, which the Jagadgurū asked Śweta and me to do.

After these ceremonies, the Jagadgurū read and explained the *Śandilya Bhakti Sūtra*. Many people attended. Some of them took notes, especially *brahmacārī*-s. For every sentence of the text, the Jagadgurū gave a comprehensive explanation, including examples from daily life and contemporary society.

The morning ended with lunch, prepared by Brahmans and served by people staying in the *āśram*.

The second part of the day started at 5 P.M., with another *darśan* of the Jagadgurū.

At 7 P.M. the Jagadgurū and those people who wished to join him went to the Bindu

⁵⁰⁰ According to Śweta, the female presence signifies the female energy, which has to be restrained as it was when the Gaṅgā flowed from the sky to the Earth: it had to be contained by Śiv to avoid destruction. For this reason, every woman should remain in that position of support for the man.

Mādhav temple, also known as Veṇī Mādhav, in the middle of Daraganj.⁵⁰¹ Once in the temple, the Jagadgurū celebrated a short *pūjā*. After the *pradakṣiṇa* of the *garbhagṛha*, he went back to the *āśram*. There, it was time for the *pravacan* of Rām Vallabācāryānda Rām Vinay Dās, which focused on *prapatti* and *bhakti*.

This daily routine was more or less repeated during the *cāturmās* 2014 that the Jagadgurū spent in the Śrī Vihāram of Varanasi, as the Śrī Maṭh is a difficult spot for pilgrims to reach during the rainy season – if the Ganga’s water rises too high, part of the steps of the *ghāṭ* are submerged.

During the *pūrṇimā* of Āṣāḍha, *guru pūrṇimā* is celebrated. This day is dedicated to spiritual and academic teachers; therefore the *guru pūjā* for the Jagadgurū is performed with more attention and participation.

4.3.5 Śrāvaṇa (July-August)

The celebration of *cāturmās* continues into the month of Śrāvaṇa. However, a *rūdrābhiṣeka* is also performed (*viśāl rūdrābhiṣeka*) during this month every day, together with other celebrations (Fig. 23).

In the fifth day of the *śukla pakṣa*, a ceremony called *Nāg pañcamī* is honored. The ceremony celebrates *nāg-s*, ancient deities with a snake shape. According to the Jagadgurū, they deserve to be worshiped due to their presence as deities in the *Purāṇa-s*. There is a specific *pūjā* performed by *pujārī* for these snake gods: the *pūjā* gives them happiness and bring their blessings to ensure the welfare of those who worship them.

This attitude of great respect towards other gods and goddesses is characteristic of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and especially of the devotional practice of the Jagadgurū.

In fact, the Jagadgurū told me that they worship other deities because their idea of Rām is *vyāpak* (pervasive, meaning Rām is in everything) and for this reason they accept all other deities as well. The clearest example of this belief is the respect that Rāmānandī-s have for Mahādev (who is regarded as a devotee of Rām), for which reason they always have in each of their temples a Śiv *liṅga*. They also support the worship of other deities because they think of them in the shape of Rām (*Rām jī ke rup men*) for male deities, and Jānkī for female deities. The Jagadgurū explained to me:

⁵⁰¹ This temple is considered to be the most ancient of the town, and there is evidence of its existence in the 15th century. It is said that when Caitanya visited Prayag, he regularly engaged in *kirtan* in the temple, as testified also in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛita*, in *Madhya* 17.149: ‘Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu then went to Prayāga, where He bathed at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamunā. He then visited the temple of Veṇī Mādhava and chanted and danced there in ecstatic love.’ (<http://vedabase.net/s/sri> Accessed: May 2014)

When one has realized the uniqueness of god and the presence of god in his other forms, you realize that all the deities should be respected in the same way, although this is not always what happens in reality [...] It is not always the case that the *mūrti* and temples of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā are equally respected, which is a mistake because there should not be a hierarchy among deities [...] In the same way, there should not be discrimination among people.⁵⁰²

During the *saptamī* (seventh day) of the *śukla pakṣa* of Śrāvaṇa, the faithful also celebrate the Tulsīdās Jayantī. However, one of the most interesting celebrations of Śrāvaṇa is the Jhūlan Mahotsav, which I have never attended. However, thanks to photos and descriptions from my informants, I can report on it here.

4.3.5.1 Jhūlā Mahotsav (the swing festival)

The Jhūlā Mahotsav is a ceremony dedicated to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and it is celebrated in the Śrī Maṭh for five days (Fig. 24). My informants could not explain how the celebration came to be five days here, as this celebration usually lasts thirteen days: it starts at the beginning of the *śukla pakṣa* of Śrāvaṇa and it ends on *tritiya* (thirteen days later). Instead, the celebration in the Maṭh begins on *ekādaśī*, and it ends on *pratipadā* (the first day of the next lunar month). During these five days, devotees decorate a swing for the *mūrti* of Rām, every day using a different decoration: the first day it is completely covered with vegetables, the second day with flowers, the third with money and other days with a mix of decorations. As I could see from the photos of the event, there were many people who attended and performed the swing worship. The Jagadgurū also swung the *mūrti* together with some special visitors as the Senācārya.⁵⁰³

My informants said that the worship of the *mūrti* of Rām through a swing is connected with the rain season: during Śrāvaṇa the rain season is at its apex, and according to the Indian aesthetic, rain causes a feeling of sadness for the absence of one's lover. For this reason, the *mūrti* of Rām is put on the swing without Sītā.

However, this interpretation is not suitable to describe the celebration of the *jhūlā mahotsav* among Kṛṣṇaite *sampradāya*-s. In fact, for those who have Kṛṣṇa as *iṣṭa devatā* (tutelary deity), the event aims to reenact the childhood pastime of Kṛṣṇa with Rādhā by placing the divine couple on the swing. It would be useful to know if this *mahotsav* is

⁵⁰² Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 4.3.3 and 4.3.4.

⁵⁰³ Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 2.3, p. 338.

celebrated in other *rasik* centers in order to understand whether it is a form of worship among Rāmānandī-s, or it is an innovation integrated by the Jagadgurū.

4.3.5.2 Rākhī or *rakṣā bandhan* (knot for protection)

The celebration of the *rakṣā bandhan* occurs in the *pūrṇimā* of Śrāvaṇa and it represents another celebration particular to the Śrī Maṭh. During this ceremony a sister ties a *rākhī*, a ceremonial bracelet, on her brother's wrist. The bracelet symbolizes the sister's love for her brother, and his lifelong vow to protect her. However, the bond does not necessarily have to be biological – any woman can tie a *rākhī* to a male individual she considers as special in her life, including a female devotee of the Jagadgurū. Those women who are considered in high esteem by the Jagadgurū, are pious devotees and do not have a male supporters in their lives,⁵⁰⁴ are allowed to tie a *rākhī* for him. After the *rākhī* is tied, the Jagadgurū recognizes those women as his sisters. I could not attend any *rakṣā bandhan* ceremony, but I was able to obtain some photographs in which a few women were tying the *rākhī* to the Jagadgurū and he was putting his hand on their head to signify his protection and blessing over them. The Jagadgurū considers those women that tie *rākhī* on him to be his sisters.

4.3.6 Bhādrapada (August-September)⁵⁰⁵

The *cāturmās* continues into Bhādrapada and the ceremonies pertaining to it continue to be performed during this month. However, there are other important events celebrated in the Maṭh: the Kṛṣṇa *jayantī* (*janmāṣṭamī*) is celebrated on the *aṣṭamī* (eighth day) of the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa* of Bhādrapada; the Ganesh Caturthī (the festival in honor of the birth of Gaṇeś) begins on the *caturthī* (fourth day) of the *śukla pakṣa* of the month, and lasts ten days until the *ānanda caturdaśī* (fourteenth day) of the *śukla pakṣa*. In 2014, I reached Varanasi a few days before the end of this festival, although that year it was not celebrated in the Maṭh because the Jagadgurū was sick. For this reason, the daily routine of *cāturmās* changed during those days: the morning ceremonies (*śaligram pūjā* and *havan*) were performed by one of the oldest brahmacārī, and the Jagadgurū avoided *darśan-s* and *pravacan-s*.

⁵⁰⁴ As I will describe in the next chapter, a single woman, or a family in which women are left alone, may find in the Jagadgurū a composite male figure, which becomes at the same time father, brother and uncle, as well as guru and a human form of God.

⁵⁰⁵ According to Śweta, the month of Bādrapada (August-September) is particular propitious and it is said that all the good results from offerings and actions done during it are multiplied thousands of times.

4.3.7 Āśvin (September-October)

During Āśvin there are two main celebrations in the Hindu calendar: Pitru Pakṣa and Navarātrī. Pitru Pakṣa is a period of 16 days calculated from the beginning of the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa* of Āśvin. During that time, Hindus worship their ancestors by donating to them food offerings called *piṇḍa*. In the Maṭh, this ceremony is performed by the Jagadgurū but, because he is a *sādhu*, he performs it not for his biological ancestors, but rather for his gurū.

Navarātrī begins with the start of the *śukla pakṣa* of the month and, as the name displays, it lasts until *navamī* (the ninth day). According to my informants, Navarātrī and Daśerā are not celebrated in the Maṭh in a particular way. During the month of Āśvin the *Rām Līlā* is extensively celebrated in Rāmnagar: it is held over 31 days, ending in *navamī*.⁵⁰⁶ Because it is the performance of Rām's life, I thought the Jagadgurū would attend it. I was told that many years ago, he used to go, but he does not anymore because of lack of time and the distance of the place from Pañcagaṅgā. Hence, in the Śrī Maṭh nothing special happens during this time, even though it is the day that celebrates the victory of Rām over Rāvaṇa. It is likely that, because the *vijaya daśamī* (the victorious tenth day of Āśvin) celebrates Rām in his role of Kṣatriya, this celebration is less suitable for the *rasik* tradition that holds sway in the Śrī Maṭh.

However, an important event that does take place in the Maṭh at the end of Āśvin is the *śarad pūrṇimā*, which I will describe below.

4.3.7.1 Śarad Pūrṇimā

The full moon of Āśvin marks the end of the monsoon and is celebrated as *śarad pūrṇimā* (autumn full moon). A *brahmacārī* explained to me that during Āśvin the rains clean the sky from the pollution, but the clouds cover the sky, thus preventing people from seeing the moon. When it stops raining towards the end of the month, the sky clears. Furthermore, during this period the Moon is said to be closer to the Earth, so that its rays reach the soil

⁵⁰⁶ The *Rām Līlā* is the dramatic performance of the *Rāmcaritmānas* in Rāmnagar, a little city built around the forth of the Maharaja of Varanasi on the other side of the Ganga river opposite to Assi ghāṭ. There, the *Līlā* is held over 31 days instead of the usual ten: there are permanent structures and several temporary structures that serve as sets. The entire city turns into a giant open-air set, and the audience moves along with the performers with every episode. For a proper description of the Rām Līlā in Rāmnagar, see Lutgendorf (2001).

better. These moon rays are understood as *amṛit* (immortal nectar).⁵⁰⁷ For this reason, people believe that being exposed to the moon rays during the full moon of Āśvin allows the *amṛit* to fill their body. For the same reason, the evening before *śarad pūrṇimā* they prepare *khīr* to leave under the moonlight, so that it can absorb the *amṛit*, which they can take in later when they eat it.

The Śrī Maṭh organizes a three days festival called the Śrī Maṭh Śarad Pūrṇimā Mahotsav that ends on the *pūrṇimā* night (Fig. 25). This night is also often referred to as *Kojārī* because, according to popular tradition, Lakṣmī wanders from home to home asking ‘who is awake?’ (*Ko jāgratī?*).

The festival is settled on Rām *ghāṭ*, which has a wide, flat area to host the stage, some rows of chairs and a place for mattresses and pillows. The program usually starts at 8 o’ clock P.M. and lasts until midnight. Artists from all over India, many of whom are well-known, are invited by supporters of the Jagadgurū who are involved in the organization of music festivals in Varanasi. On *śarad pūrṇimā*, Vidhān Bābā and some *brahmacārī*-s offer *khīr* as *prasād* to those people who have attended the concert (Fig. 26). The Jagadgurū usually attends according to his pleasure, but he is always present for the last night and after the program he gives a short *pravacan* from his boat to end the event.

The Śrī Maṭh Pūrṇimā Mahotsav has helped given the Maṭh the image of supporter of the cultural panorama of the city. Although the center has just been organizing the Mahotsav, the event is acquiring more visibility each year as the quality of the program improves and the audience grows. The organization of the festival does not have a direct economic profit for the Maṭh because the programs are free, but it confers esteem to the Maṭh, which has to carve out its authority and image in the crowded landscape of *maṭh*-s in Varanasi.

4.3.8 Kārtik (October-November)

Kārtik is the second month of the autumn season and is considered the most pleasant month in Varanasi, when the heat and rain are both finally gone, and the cold has yet to come. As explained to me by professor Udai Pratap Singh, Kārtik is the most important

⁵⁰⁷ Tracy Pintchman argues that this nectar is considered to be a lunar version of the divine nectar that the gods pulled from the ocean of milk (2005: 55). However, my informants did not know about this version of the story.

month for Vaiṣṇav *sampradāya*-s because it is considered the month when Viṣṇu arises.⁵⁰⁸ During this period, there are several *vrāt* (votive observations) that are followed, especially by women.⁵⁰⁹ These *vrāt*-s include a number of injunctions for actions and behaviors which have the purpose to discipline the mind, body and personal conduct.⁵¹⁰

As we will see below, the auspiciousness of the month derives from its association with Lakṣmī, who is celebrated during *śarad pūrṇimā*, and with *Divālī*, the festival of lights. The lighting of lamps is important during the entire month of Kārtik and this is especially visible in Pañcagaṅgā: every evening, small lamps (*dīyā*-s) are placed in baskets and suspended on bamboo sticks several meters high (Fig. 27).

As the Jagadgurū explained to me, the presence of lights during Kārtik is essential everywhere but, as it is written in the *Skanda Purāṇa*, the main spot to celebrate Kārtik is Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*. Since there are many people who go to bathe in Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*, the hanging *dīyā*-s help them to see the steps during the dark early morning. According to the Jagadgurū, they represent a kind of *sevā* for the devotees, a donation of light (*prakāś*) for their ablutions. The lights are not lit for the entire day – only in the early morning and the evening. However, according to the Jagadgurū, the presence of light has another meaning. It symbolically represents knowledge, which shows the path that a devotee must follow: without the light of knowledge people cannot talk and act properly, and this light is a tool that only a guru can light in his disciples.⁵¹¹

I attended the celebration of Kārtik three times in the Śrī Maṭh. I was able to most

⁵⁰⁸ Interview, November 10, 2011. As reported by Tracy Pintchman, the merits of Kārtik are extensively celebrated in sections of the *Skanda* and *Padma Purāṇa*, which take the name of *Kārtik Māhātmya* (Glorification of Kārtik) (2003: 329).

⁵⁰⁹ An example is given by the Chaṭh *pūjā* that is celebrated on Kārtik *śukla śaṣṭhi*, the sixth day of the *śukla pakṣa* of the month. This ceremony is dedicated to the Sun in order to thank it for sustaining life on Earth and to request the granting of certain wishes. I attended this ceremony in Varanasi in November 2011: the *ghāṭ*-s of the city were completely filled with devotees who had been camped out there since the night before. However, many locals began to join the crowd around 3:30 in the morning. Women formed the majority of this crowd, as they are the performers of the *pūjā*. Many of them follow a *vrāt* of eating just once a day for the period of the festival (which is usually four days). Women await the sunrise to give offerings to the sun and to bathe. This *pūjā* does not need the presence of any *paṇḍit*, probably because of the female character of the ceremony. People I asked about the meaning of the event replied that women perform it to bring prosperity to their husband and family.

⁵¹⁰ For further information about the *vrāt*-s in Kārtik, see Pintchman (2005: 23-33).

⁵¹¹ Pintchman found an explanation of the sky lamps in a booklet produced by the same Śrī Maṭh, which I was not able to get: the *Rāmānanda Prakāś* of 1995 (2005: 331). She reports this short part from page 32 of the *Rāmānanda Prakāś*, wherein to the lamp is associated with a spiritual meaning: “These lamps hidden inside wicker baskets hanging from bamboo have probably been lit for gods. They have become a mediator between people “down below” and “people” “up there.” [...] But heaven is nowhere up there, nor do the gods reside somewhere “up there.” [...] Hanging the lamp in the sky means awakening consciousness in one’s mind. [...] These sky lamps are nothing but an effort to elevate this consciousness. The gods reside only inside us, and whatever good there is in the outside world is nothing but an expansion of this inner divinity’.

fully understand the ceremony when I went in October 2012, because I had more time to stay for the ceremonies, and people already knew me by then and attempted to help me. I could attend the *darśan*-s of the Jagadgurū daily and notice all the planning done behind the scenes by the Jagadgurū and his lay supporters in the city.

Kārtik is a very busy month in the Maṭh with pilgrims who continuously come and go. The Maṭh is open to everyone and people often occupy every space available. In this period, the *darśan* of the Jagadgurū can last for hours.

In 2012 the daily program, which was described in a poster outside the Maṭh, consisted of:

- *Akhaṇḍa Bhagvān Nām Sankīrtan* (uninterrupted chanting of the name of god)
- *Satsang Mahā Yajña* (*Mahā yajña* in the presence of devotees)
- *Sant Brāhman tathā Abhyāgat Bhaṇḍārā Mahā Yajña Pañcagaṅgā* (offerings of food for *Sant*-s, Brahmans and all the visitors)
- *Ākāsh Dīp Sevā Mahā Yajña* (service for the lamps touching the sky)
- *Pañcagaṅgā Pūjan tathā Dīpdān* (*pūjā* at Pañcagaṅgā and at the *dīpā*)
- *Bhagvān Bindu Mādhav kā Viśiṣṭh Pūjan* (exclusive *pūjā* at the Bindu Madhāv)
- *Śrī Rām Mahā Yajña Havanātmak* (great *yajña/havan* for Śrī Rām)

In addition to this daily routine, there are a few specific days during Kārtik that have a particular importance for Vaiṣṇava-s and are celebrated accordingly.

4.3.8.1 Divālī⁵¹²

Divālī, also know as the festival of lights, takes place during the new moon of Kārtik and is generally celebrated as the festival of Lakṣmī and Gaṇeś. Nevertheless, for many people, *Divālī* is also the anniversary of the return of Rām to Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile after he defeated Rāvaṇa. Therefore, it is also the celebration of the symbolic victory of light over the darkness.

However, in Varanasi as well as in the Śrī Maṭh, the day is completely dedicated to Lakṣmī and Gaṇeś, whose *mūrti*-s fill the street of the city.

People wear new clothes and illuminate their house with lights, both *dīyā*-s and electric lights. They worship Lakṣmī with colorful drawings and altars that they make in their homes. It is said that Lakṣmī will visit those houses that are clean and well-lit, so that her positive influence may last the full year. After dinner, the sky is filled with fireworks

⁵¹² The word *Divālī* is derived by the fusion of the Sanskrit word *Dīpāvalī*, formed from *dīp*, lamp/light and *āvalī*, lines. *Divālī* thus means a lines of lights.

and firecrackers. Trucks bearing the *mūrti*-s pour out in the streets of Varanasi, followed by devotees marching and dancing. The *mūrti*-s are bathed in the Ganga and after their *pūjā*, *prasād* is usually distributed.

There is not a special program in the Śrī Maṭh during *Divālī*, although the local tradition is followed and Gaṇeś and Lakṣmī receive a special *pūjā* in the temple. The day after *Divālī* is celebrated with the *Annakūṭ pūjā*.

4.3.8.2 Annakūṭ Pūjā (the *pūjā* of the pile of food)

Annakūṭ pūjā is celebrated the first lunar day of the *śukla pakṣa* of Kārtik. According to the Jagadgurū, this *pūjā* praises Bhagvān (god Viṣṇu) for his role as creator of the Universe. During *Annakūṭ*, Bhagvān is considered as a special guest who has to be given new clothes but especially who has to be fed with as much food as possible.

When I asked the Jagadgurū which myth was at the origin of this celebration,⁵¹³ he gave a reply that became valid as an explanation for many other festivities. He said:

You cannot say when these kinds of traditions started [...] they are like the Sṛṣṭi [creation], you cannot know when it began [...] It is *anādi*, "since ever." It is not the case that, before, this did not exist and then it started. It is not like that; many *utsav*-s have been celebrated forever, and the *Annakūṭ* is one of them. *It is wrong and worthless to look for an origin.* The *Annakūṭ* is a celebration of the creation that Viṣṇu has made. Through this old celebration a devotee can demonstrate in a practical way through the gift of various foods his *bhāv* toward God. In this manner the personal faith is exercised too.

The Jagadgurū's position is based on the idea that the *Sanātan dharm* is not a *dharm* with a beginning that is limited to a specific time, but rather indicates a religion that has always existed: 'it exists now and it will continue to exist in the future.'⁵¹⁴

To come back to my observations of the celebration: the night before *Annakūṭ*, *brahmacārī*-s cooked different types of food to fill the requested fifty-six bowls of food to

⁵¹³ In fact, according to a more common Vaiṣṇava story, this ceremony is linked to Kṛṣṇa and to the *pūjā* at the mountain Govardhan, near Mathura. As reported by Tracy Pintchman (2005: 65), this *pūjā* recalls an episode of Kṛṣṇa's life as told by *Viṣṇu* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in which Kṛṣṇa convinced the cowherds of Braj to stop giving the harvest offering to the god Indra and to give it instead to the god of Govardhan mountain. When Indra decided to enact revenge by harassing the people of Mathura with torrential rains, they approach Kṛṣṇa for help. He lifted up the Govardhan Mountain like an umbrella, sheltering the people in the cavity below the mountain. After seven days, Indra withdrew the clouds and Kṛṣṇa restored the Mountain and its people to its rightful place. Since then, people believe that Lord Kṛṣṇa helps in clearing problems and for this reason they invite him into their homes during *Annakūṭ pūjā*.

⁵¹⁴ This last sentence was pronounced by the Jagadgurū during our conversation. To contrast his beliefs to the traditions of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Jainism, he said that all of them are linked to an individual that started them, while the same cannot be said about the *Sanātan dharm*.

present as offerings to the deity.⁵¹⁵ The food was collected in the Rām temple on the second floor. Initially, the ceremony was hidden from view by a curtain as the *pujārī* (in this case one of the older *brahmacārī*) fed the deity (Fig. 28). However, toward the end of the ceremony, the curtain was removed so that those in attendance, who numbered less than ten, could receive the *darśan*. The Jagadgurū and the Vidhān Bābā stood at the two sides of the door waving the *camar*, while inside a *brahmacārī* performed the *ārtī* to the *mūrti* of Rām, in front of which there were small bowls with food (Fig. 29). After the *ārtī*, the participants were sprinkled with water and the conch was blown. The ceremony was fast, only lasting about thirty minutes. The food was then distributed in a huge *bhaṇḍārā*, where many more people came and received it as *prasād*.

4.3.8.3 Amvālā/Amlā Pūjā⁵¹⁶

In the *Encyclopedia of the Hindu World* edited by Garg Ganga Ram, *amlā* is defined as a tree that is worshipped because it is believed that Hari and Lakṣmī reside in it (1992: 357). The *Amlā pūjā* is celebrated on *akṣaya navamī*, the ninth day of the *śukla pakṣa* of Kārtik. In the Śrī Maṭh it is organized in the *bhagīcā*, as there is a grove of *amlā* there. I asked the *pujārī* who was about to perform the ceremony for an explanation about this *pūjā*. He told me that people consider the *amlā* tree as Dhātrī (mother Earth) and that during Kārtik, Amlā is worshipped as the lover of Viṣṇu. The *pujārī* told me that all the offerings given on this day are rewarded with good results, which explains the meaning of *akṣaya*.⁵¹⁷

Some of people reached the *bhagīcā* by boat and others came by minibus. Both modes of transportation are owned by the Maṭh. Coming from the river, we had to cross the sand shore of the Ganga and enter the property from the back. In this way, we came out directly into the *amlā* garden. Some *brahmacārī*-s were already there to prepare the place with the help of some women: they were decorating the soil around the trees with colored powder, drawing floral motives and swastikas. When the ceremony began, women formed

⁵¹⁵ As a *brahmacārī* told me, fifty-six is the minimum offering, as more items are allowed.

⁵¹⁶ Cf. Fig. 30-34.

⁵¹⁷ Pintchman provides a useful description of the origin of this *pūjā*. She explains that the *Kārtik Mahātmya* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* (KMSP) dedicates the entire Chapter 12 to the Amlā *pūjā*. According to the KMSP, Amlā is a goddess similar to Lakṣmī or other Vaiṣṇav goddesses. Therefore, worship of her promotes auspiciousness. Amlā is also called Dhātrī, meaning supporter or sustainer. Dhātrī is a name for the goddess of the Earth, Bhudevī, who like Lakṣmī and Tulsī, is a consort of Viṣṇu. The celebration of Amlā during Kārtik signifies then the fecundity of the Earth during the autumn season, when the fruits ripen. The KMSP also describes the origin of the Amlā at the beginning of the time cycle: the Amlā was produced by the tears of Brahma that sprung up when he was performing the *jāp* of the names of God. These tears fell to the ground and the Amlā tree grew and sprung up, laden with fruits (2004: 75-76).

groups around each tree, leaving a place in the center that was prepared for the Jagadgurū, the *pujārī-s* and the *brahmacārī-s* who would perform the *pūjā*. Around each tree were collected several offerings and female accessories: *bindī-s*, bracelets, *sindūr-s* and saris.

The actions performed by the Jagadgurū were repeated for each tree by groups of women: he gave the usual offering of water, yogurt and milk, flowers, perfumes and food. Then he gave objects that are less connected to the ritual life but have social significance. He applied *sindūr* in several spots of the trunk, then draped cloths, mostly saris and scarves, around the tree and fastened them with a thread. The last offering was money, which was also given as *dakṣiṇā* to the *pujārī-s* and *brahmacārī-s*. However, instead of eating under the tree, as tradition would dictate, we all ate in the courtyard of the *bhagīcā*. Food was distributed by *brahmacārī-s* and a few lay men, as *sevā*.

After the *prasād*, we went to a temple close to the *bhagīcā*, called Jānki Bāg, Sthānādīpati Kīrtan Mandir, established in 1987, whose *mūrti* is a statue of Hanumān with five faces.⁵¹⁸

4.3.8.4 Tulsī Vivāh (the marriage of Tulsī)

Tulsī (Indian basil) is another plant that during the month of Kārtik is the subject of worship in Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya-s*. It is thought to have purifying properties. Vaiṣṇava-s usually put a *tulsī* plant in their house in this period and wives follow *vrata* and maintain an exemplary conduct as it is thought that from their behaviors will determine the length of their husbands' lives.

The story about Tulsī my informants reported to me is similar to that presented in the *Kārtik Mahātmya* of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, although with a different ending. The tale begins with a battle between the gods and the demon Jalandhar, who was born when Śiv threw a flame into the ocean. Jalandhar was invincible to all the gods but Śiv. He obtained as wife Vrindā, the daughter of a demon, and thus gained sovereignty over the gods. When Viṣṇu realized that the power of Jalandhar was linked to the spiritual power of his wife,

⁵¹⁸ This specific *mūrti*, called Śrī Pañcamukhī Hanumān, recalls an episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Hanumān has to fight against Mahirāvaṇa to rescue Rām and Lakṣmaṇ. In order to kill him, he has to simultaneously extinguish five lamps that burn in five different directions. Therefore, he takes the Pañcmukhī shape, with the head of Narasimha, Garuda, Hayagrīva and Varāha, and he kills Mahirāvaṇa. Despite classical representations in which Hanumān has ten arms and weapons, here he has only two arms. In the right one is the *abhaya mudra* (the *mudra* of the absence of fear). On the wall there is a description of the meaning of each face: East, the monkey face destroys the enemies; South, Narasimha deters obstacles created by phantoms and demons; West, Garuda protects from all kind of poisons; North, Varāha ensures all kinds of prosperity; and facing upwards, Hayagrīva masters all the creatures in the heavens.

who was a *pativrata* (a devotee of her husband), he decided to weaken him by tricking Vrindā. He went to her in the form of Jalandhar and they made love. Jalandhar became vulnerable by his wife sleeping with another God and Śiv was able to kill him. When Vrindā came to know of Viṣṇu's deception, she asked Viṣṇu how she could now survive without a husband. To take care of her, Viṣṇu married Vrindā and transformed her into Tulsī.⁵¹⁹

As Tulsī is regarded as the bride of God, the wedding of Tulsī and Viṣṇu is celebrated during the eleventh day of Kārtik *śuklā pakṣa*. This day also marks the end of *cāturmās*, and is also known as *prabodhinī ekādaśī* (the awakening eleventh) because on this day Viṣṇu supposedly woke up from his sleep began in *śayanī ekādaśī*. The end of *cāturmās* marks the beginning of the Hindu wedding season, which is prohibited in the four months of *cāturmās*.

In the Śrī Maṭh the celebration of *Tulsī Vivāh* (the wedding of Tulsī) is usually performed by a couple chosen by the Jagadgurū⁵²⁰ to perform the marriage rituals in the place of the divine couple of Viṣṇu and Tulsī.

In 2012, the temple hall on the first floor was decorated as a pavilion, with flowers and *mālā*-s hanging on the walls and carpets on the floor to host the guests. In the evening women prepared the Tulsī, transforming the plant into a female figure. They created a proper structure with a face and 'shoulders' to put clothes on it and decorated it as a bride, with jewels and a wedding sari, and a silver female mask that was applied to the structure (Fig. 35). Once it was ready, the *mūrti* was locked in a room to avoid the sights of men, just as is done for a real bride.

At the time of the ceremony, three *pujārī*-s made offerings to the *mūrti* of Viṣṇu,

⁵¹⁹ There are several versions of the story that relate Tulsī to Viṣṇu. A few of them are summarized by Pintchman (2005: 79-82). The story in the *Kārtik Mahātmya* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* ends with Vrindā cursing Viṣṇu and performing self-immolation (*satī*). Viṣṇu, who was infatuated with Vrindā, was so devastated by her death that the gods appealed to the Great Goddess to solve the situation. She produced three seeds that sprouted as Jasmine, Tulsī and Amlā, which were meant to substitute Vrindā. Hence, Tulsī is regarded as a form of Vrindā and as a goddess who embodies the quality of a devoted wife. In the *Padma Purāṇa*, a dormant Viṣṇu arises from his oceanic rest to face Jalandhar who fought the gods to try and steal Pārvatī from Śiv. Again, using his power of illusion, Viṣṇu tricks Vrindā, sleeps with her and weakens Jalandhar. The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* tells one of the most well-known versions. Here, Tulsī is an incarnation of Lakṣmī, born during the night of Kārtik's full moon. Tulsī had to marry the king of the demons (identified as a childhood friend of Kṛṣṇa, Sudam) because in their previous lives, Tulsī and Sudam were cursed by Rādhā. Brahmā had promised Tulsī that after her marriage to the demon she would obtain Kṛṣṇa as her husband. The story of Sudam, whose name in his demon life is Shankhacud, is similar to that of Jhalandar. Even in this case, Viṣṇu seduces Tulsī and makes love with her. As soon as Shankhacud dies, his bones became conch shells, while Tulsī curses Viṣṇu to become a stone, which results in his *śaligram* shape. Viṣṇu invites Tulsī to become his wife, proclaiming her to become a sacred tree.

⁵²⁰ In 2011, the ceremony was performed by a couple that has followed the Jagadgurū for the last twenty-four years. However, in 2012 there was no such couple available, so he asked a *brahmacārī* and a young girl to celebrate it.

which was treated as a groom and was brought into the hall by a group of men. This worship lasted about thirty minutes. Later on, a group of women including the human bride brought the Tulsī downstairs, accompanied by a few *brahmacārī*-s who played cymbals and cleared the path for the bride with the *camar* (Fig. 36). After a few circles around the male *mūrti*, Tulsī was put on the right side of Viṣṇu. When the ceremony began, the human couple gave offerings to the divine ones; as usual, the man was the main performer. The Jagadgurū supervised the ceremony, intervening and asking the *pujārī*-s if everything was going according to tradition. Once all the offerings were given and the *sindūr* was applied, the man lit a *dīyā* in front of the holy couple. Then, while the people stood up, a scarf was tied between the two statues, which had been moved to be one in front of the other. They were then moved around again and, when the two *mūrti*-s were put side by side again, Tulsī was now on the left of Viṣṇu, to symbolize that he had his right side now free to take on the world (Fig. 37 and 38).

At the end, *brahmacārī*-s recited some *śloka*-s for the prosperity of the couple while people threw rice over the *mūrti*. After this official celebration in which men performed the main tasks, the female part began. The Jagadgurū gave a signal and women began to sing traditional marriage songs that were linked to their village or state.⁵²¹ After this song session, the *ārtī* was prepared to bless the divine couple. The ceremony ended with women donating saris and bracelets to Tulsī. After the ceremony, tea and *prasād* were offered to all the participants.

4.3.8.5 Parikramā

The day after the Tulsī Vivāh, the Jagadgurū always makes a *parikramā* in specific temples of Varanasi that are not necessary connected to the Vaiṣṇava cult. This *parikramā* is not specific to Kārtik, as the Jagadgurū performs it several times during the year – especially during *cāturmās* – to demonstrate his respect to the main deities of Varanasi and Pañcagaṅgā. During Kārtik, he gives particular attention to Bindu Mādhav, as Kārtik is the month of Viṣṇu.

When I attended this *parikramā*, the Jagadgurū first went to the Kāśī Viśvanāth temple, the most important temple in Varanasi and a main symbol of the city, to perform

⁵²¹ In 2012 a *brahmacārī* wanted to sing as well. This surprised the people in attendance and they all reacted with curious smiles, but the Jagadgurū supported him.

the *rūdrābhiṣeka*.⁵²² Because the temple is hidden in the narrow lanes (*galī*) of old Varanasi, the Jagadgurū and his followers made it there by traveling to Lalitā Ghāt by boat and crossing the *galī* to emerge in front of the southern entrance of the temple. As we were with him, the police security check was superficial and we could access the temple easily and stay in its open space without any problems. Everything was already prepared for the *yajña* in the central *maṇḍap*: the Jagadgurū sat in the middle with *brahmacārī*-s all around him while offerings were given to the sacred fire. After the *yajña*, the Jagadgurū went to the shrine of the Kāśī Viśvanāth *liṅga* to perform the *rūdrābhiṣeka*: hundred liters of milk, oil and water were poured on the *liṅga*. The purpose of this ceremony was to remove all evil influences and to help one obtain prosperity and answers to their desires. Because the room was not wide, most of the followers were left outside, pushing to grasp a *darśan* of the ceremony. However, once the milk offering was finished, the *liṅga* was decorated with *mālā*-s and *rūdrākṣa* and it became accessible to all the devotees. In the meanwhile the Jagadgurū came back to the *maṇḍap* for a few other offerings. A betel leaf containing a mixture to put the *tilak* on the participants' forehead was passed around. Later, small pots with milk were handed out so that we could wash our eyes. Next, the Jagadgurū gave *prasād* and *dakṣiṇā* to the *paṇḍit*-s and *brahmacārī*-s, and we all moved to the Annapūrṇa temple, which is also part of the Viśvanāth complex. In this red temple dedicated to the Goddess of nourishment, the Jagadgurū performed the *pūjā* and the *pradakṣiṇā* to the goddess before moving to the next temple, the Dundhirāj Gaṇeś.

Although a small *mūrti* inserted in a kind of aedicule in a crossroads of the *galī*-s of Old Varanasi, the Dundhirāj Gaṇeś is considered to be one of the most important *mūrti*-s of Varanasi. It is said that the *mūrti* of Gaṇeś sits at the center of the *maṇḍal* of Kāśī, while around him fifty-six other Gaṇeś are placed in protective formation (Eck, 1983: 182). After this temple, we moved to the Sakśī Vinayak temple, another temple stuck in the narrow streets of Old Varanasi, which looks like a shop from the outside when the temple doors are closed. The *mūrti* is a large Gaṇeś with eyes, ears, hands and feet made of silver. This Gaṇeś is especially visited at the conclusion of pilgrimages as a completion of the pilgrimage rite (*ibid*: 188). As usual, flowers, a *janeu*, a scarf, incense and ghee were offered to these *mūrti*-s. After this last *pūjā*, the group descended on the Daśāśvamedh *ghāṭ*, where the boat of the Jagadgurū was waiting to go back to Pañcagaṅgā.

⁵²² This *pūjā* involves prayers while bathing the Śiv *liṅga* with milk, yogurt, or butter. Then the Śiv *liṅga* is decorated with flowers, *rūdrākṣa* and is finally presented to the devotees for worship and for them to ask for His blessings.

During Kārtik, the Jagadgurū accomplishes another *parikramā* to visit the five main temples in the area of Pañcagaṅgā: the Bindu Mādhav temple, the Brahmācārīnī temple, the Daṇḍapāni Bhairav temple,⁵²³ the Kāl Bhairav temple and the Maṅglā Gourī temple. Dandapāni is a major figure only in the pantheon of Varanasi, where he has two main functions: he is the sheriff ‘who runs the unworthy out of the city’ but at the same time he also had a ‘beneficent role as the provider of food to those who dwell in Kāśī’ (Eck, 1983: 198). His role is similar to that of Kāl Bhairav,⁵²⁴ described by Eck as the ‘police chief of Kāśī’, appointed by Śiv himself. Eck tells us that Kāl Bhairav ‘keeps the record of people’s deeds in Kāśī [...] therefore it is of great importance to stay in Kāla Bhairav’s favor. According to tradition, he should be honored by all who visit Varanasi’ (*ibid*: 192).

Eck claims that Maṅglā Gourī, known as the goddess of auspiciousness, is one of the nine mother goddesses, and her temple in Pañcāgaṅgā is one the most ancient of the area – it is said to have already been present during the original Bindu Mādhav (*ibid*: 239). The temple of Maṅglā Gourī marks the end of the *parikramā* and the return to the Maṭh, where *bhaṇḍārā* is usually offered.

During his *parikramā*-s, the Jagadgurū visited the female and male forms of the divine, from both the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva pantheon. As he does *pūjā* to these deities during Kārtik, the Jagadgurū asks for support, benevolence and auspiciousness for him and his devotees. Furthermore, he depicts himself as a supporter of the *dharma* in all its shapes, which overcomes differences of *sādhana* and *iṣṭa devatā*. During these *parikramā*-s, he demonstrates to his devotees a path of devotion which does not consider differentiation along lines of sub-groups, and at the same time he demonstrates his power because the *mahant*-s of the various temples honored him. This strengthens his role and image as Jagadgurū.

4.3.8.6 *Arcanā*⁵²⁵ /*Arpaṇa* of Bindu Mādhav temple with *tulsī* leaves

Another important ceremony connected to the Tulsī Vivāh is a ceremony held in the Bindu Mādhav temple, considered to be Varanasi’s Vaiṣṇav temple par excellence. Today the

⁵²³ As Eck explains, in Kāśī mythology Dandapāni ‘was a former yaksha who left the yaksha ranks to become a devotee of Lord Shiva’ (1983: 189).

⁵²⁴ Kāl Bhairav is the ‘terrible one’ and is considered a fearsome manifestation of Śiv. For more information about Kāl Bhairav mythology, see Eck (1983: 189-197).

⁵²⁵ *Arcanā*, which means ‘honoring’ or ‘praising,’ is a *pūjā* in which the name, birth star and family lineage of a devotee are recited by a *pūjārī* to invoke individual guidance and blessing. It also refers to chanting the names of the deity, as in our case.

temple, which contains a silver *mūrti* of Viṣṇu, is quite modest, painted in an old pink color.

To perform this ceremony, people sat in the central nave of the temple in two lines facing each other. After a *pūjā* to the *mūrti*, the *arcanā* began: *brahmacārī*-s gave *tulsī* branches to the people, who had to remove the leaves and offer a *tulsī* leaf for each of the thousand names of Viṣṇu. The leaf was taken only with the right hand and picked with the thumb and the third finger: the thumb, with a slow motion, slides the leaf from the fingers to the plates placed between the lines of people (Fig. 39). Those leaves that fell on the floor rather than on the plate were not accepted. *Brahmacārī*-s walked continuously among the people to provide them with new branches, following the words of the *pujārī* who was chanting the name of Viṣṇu. While picking up the *tulsī* leaf, people replied to the *pujārī* with the mantra 'svāhā.' This activity lasted almost one hour. Afterwards, all the leaves were collected by the *brahmacārī*-s and poured on the Bindu Mādhav *mūrti* (Fig. 40).

Udai Prat Singh⁵²⁶ told me that this celebration is linked to the story of the Bindu Mādhav temple: it is said that when the ascetic Agni Bindu was visited by Viṣṇu, he bowed down in front of him and began chanting the God's names. He was then told that worshipping Viṣṇu with *tulsī* leaves would provide blessings for the devotees.⁵²⁷

4.3.8.7 Devdipāvālī

Devdipāvālī, or *Dev Divālī* (the Divālī of the Gods) is a festival exclusively celebrated in Varanasi during Kārtik *pūrṇimā* fifteen days after *Divālī*.⁵²⁸

The preparation of *Devdipāvālī* begins few weeks before, as people have to clean up the *ghāṭ*-s from the clay left by the reduction of the Ganga's water. In so doing, they clear the path for thousands of small *dīyā*-s that will be placed all over the *ghāṭ*-s as decoration. When the full moon rises, thousands of lamps light up the *ghāṭ*-s all along the river with an astonishing effect. During Kārtik *pūrṇimā*, bathing in the Ganga and especially in the Pañcagaṅgā is seen as extraordinarily meritorious.

⁵²⁶ Udai Pratap Singh is a professor (and former student of Sinha Bhagvatī Prasād) who organizes the cultural events in the Maṭh and its publications. He is also a writer about Rām *bhakti*.

⁵²⁷ Interview, November 10, 2012.

⁵²⁸ As usual, there are several myths connected to this day. The *Kārtik Mahātmya* explains that the lighting of lamps during this *pūrṇimā* is linked to the victory of Śiv over the Tripura-s, three demons who destroyed the three worlds. Pintchman says that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* recounts that Śiv attacked the demons and was able to kill many of them, but Maya, a master craftsman, was able to revive them by placing their bodies in a pond of nectar. When Viṣṇu and Brahma discovered this trick, they took the shapes of a cow and calf and drank all the nectar. So doing, Śiv was able to completely defeat the demons. Therefore, the lighting of the lamps on this day is said to commemorate the lamp offering that the gods made to Śiv to celebrate his victory (2005: 83-85).

In the Śrī Maṭh, *brahmacārī*-s and devotees prepare the building, putting *dīyā*-s all along the contours of the structure (Fig. 41). The main effort is to fill the 720 wicks of the huge pyramidal lamp outside the building (Fig. 42). During this preparation, the Jagadgurū ensures that everything is done carefully and in a proper manner. When the building is ready and the sun goes down, the Jagadgurū makes his boat available for his followers: for a couple of hours the boat will bring people to see the amazing sight offered by the *ghāṭ*. After Kārtik, the Jagadgurū usually leaves Varanasi and does not return until January for the celebration of the Rāmānanda *jayantī* (month of Māgha).

4.3.9 Mārgaśīrṣa (November-December)

Although nothing occurs in the Śrī Maṭh during this month, it is nevertheless important for Vaiṣṇavas. It is advised to recite the name of Viṣṇu every day during this time. As it is believed that Lord Kṛṣṇa explained the *Gītā* to Arjun on the *vaikunta ekādaśī* of this month, the *Gītā Jayantī* is also celebrated during this time.

4.3.10 Pauṣa (December-January)

There are no celebrations in the Maṭh during this month.

4.3.11 Māgha (January-February)

As explained by the Jagadgurū, Māgha is one of the months dedicated to Viṣṇu. (The others are Kārtik and Vaisat.) For the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and especially for the Maṭh, this time is particularly important because Rāmānanda's *jayantī* falls in this month, as well as the *jayantī* of Rāmnareśācārya.

4.3.11.1 Rāmānanda's *jayantī*

As we have already mentioned in the previous chapter, Bhagavadācārya suggested that the faithful celebrate Rāmānanda's date of birth (his *jayantī*). The commemoration of the date of birth of a gurū or a great man is a characteristic of the Indian social and religious landscape: in fact, not only are the birthdays of religious characters such as Rām or Kṛṣṇa are celebrated, but also that of Śaṅkara, Dayānanda Sarasvatī and Gandhi. Despite the fact that the *jayantī* of more contemporary and nationally famous characters is fixed, the *jayantī* of many religious leaders is celebrated following the specific astrological configuration under which they were born, so that their *jayantī* is celebrated on a different day every

year, according to the Hindu calendar. Hence, whereas the western calendar is perceived as a secular linear time, the moon calendar articulates what is seen as the sacred approach to time, which is marked by rituals.

The Rāmānanda's *jayantī* occurs in *kṛṣṇa pakṣa saptamī*. I have attended the celebration of the *jayantī* twice: one time in January 2012 and one time in February 2013. The programs were different because the first one was held for a few days in Varanasi, while the second one was organized in Allahabad during the Mahā Kumbh Melā.

The Rāmānanda's *jayantī* in 2012 lasted three days. The program was a mix of cultural activities and religious ceremonies. In the afternoon of the first day there was a *vidvān sangoṣṭi*, a meeting with scholars, intellectuals, and lay people, during which a prize of one *lakh* (100,000) rupees called the 'Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Puraskār' was awarded to a writer who distinguished himself with regards to the biography of Rāmānanda.

The Śrī Vihāram was packed for the event. There were about one hundred people, including journalists and a few *sādhu*-s from the Rāmānandī and other Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s. In fact, the main guest of the day was the *mahant* of the Gopāl temple, who came with a few followers.

After an introduction to the event by professor Udai Pratap Singh, the Jagadgurū and the other *mahant*-s bestowed the prize to Doctor Viveki Raya from Gājīpur. The second part of the event was focused on scholars' speeches about the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and the *bhakti* movement.

The second day's events were held in the Śrī Maṭh temple and consisted of the celebration of the *caraṇa pādukā pūjā* (Fig. 43). After the *darśan* of the Jagadgurū, people gathered in the temple where the *mūrti* of Rāmānand and his *pādukā* are kept. The Jagadgurū then performed the *pūjā*, accompanied by *pujārī*-s and *brahmacārī*-s.

Before starting the main *pūjā*, the *pujārī* applied a *tilak* with a few grains of rice on the forehead of the Jagadgurū. Then the Jagadgurū drank some water and washed his hands. A *pujārī* gave him the *kuś* grass ring.⁵²⁹ A *brahmacārī* prepared some *kuś* grass to put in a brass pot with some water, which the Jagadgurū covered with his hands. Then the *brahmacārī* washed the conch and some flowers with water were placed inside. Bells were rung. Initially the offerings (some white clothes, a flower necklace, sweets, flowers, incense, camphor and fruits) were placed on a plate on which two small rolls of thread were placed over rice. Then the same offerings were placed in the bowl with *kuś* grass and

⁵²⁹ Cf. *supra*, note 496.

a coconut. After this ritual, a roll of the red and yellow thread that is tied during religious ceremonies was passed among the participants sitting in the front line. They held it during the worship time, while the Jagadgurū had it tied on his right wrist.

At the beginning of the *caraṇa pādukā pūjā*, the *pādukā* was washed properly and there were offerings of a red thread, a white scarf and the *janeu* sprinkled with water. Then the Jagadgurū picked a bit of *candan* and applied it on the fingers and feet of the *pādukā*. A flower *mālā* and one made of *tulsī* leaves were offered. Various food offerings were placed before the *pādukā*, while the *pujārī* passed the incense to the Jagadgurū. The sounds of bells accompanied the *ārtī* made by the Jagadgurū to the *pādukā* and Rāmānanda's disciples, over which Ganga water was also sprinkled. The last offering was money, which served also for the *dakṣiṇā* of the *pujārī*-s and *brahmācārī*-s.

In the last part of the celebration, the Jagadgurū asked the Brahmans to chant *śloka*-s from all the four *Veda*-s. *Dakṣiṇā* was given again, and the red *tilak* was applied with rice in the middle for each *brahmācārī*. The *pūjā* did not finish until a *mahant* from Vrindavan came and gave *dakṣiṇā* to the *brahmācārī*-s as well.

Following the *pūjā* was the time for the *sant sammelan*. More *sādhu*-s came to this part of the program: there were initially thirty-forty Rāmānandī-s, but over time they filled the hall. Among them were also two female Rāmānandī-s. Only three *sādhu*-s gave a speech: one from the Gopāl temple in Varanasi, one from Citrakut and one from Vrindavan. They talked about the relevance of the figure of the *ācārya* and the need to worship his feet, as not all the people can approach the path of God. Those who do not follow the *dharma* cannot meet God. The teaching of *prapatti* also held relevance in their talks. They recalled the story of Rāmānanda, giving special emphasis to the originality of his *sāadhanā* based on Rām and Sitā. They also discussed the priority of *sevā*, not only in the religious context, but also in everyday life.

The number of *sādhu*-s in attendance increased toward the end of the *sammelan*, likely because a *bhaṇḍārā* was held in the kitchen of the Śrī Maṭh and attracted many ascetics from the neighborhood.

On the 16th, there was an evening program with a *saṅgīt* organized by those followers of the Jagadgurū who are well known for their involvement in cultural activities. A couple of singers sang *bhajan* and compositions attributed to Kabīr and Mīrābāī. The *jayantī* closed with a discourse by the Jagadgurū and *prasād* for everyone.

The celebration of the Rāmānanda *jayantī* in 2013 was held in Allahabad at the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir during the Mahā Kumbh Melā. It was an intense one-day

program that began in the morning. In the *darśan* hall, a group of Śaiva *brahmacārī*-s waited for the beginning of the *pūjā*. The Jagadgurū explained that he was economically supporting their *maṭh*, the Vedānti Sthān in Allahabad. One floor down, the Vidhān Bābā hung paintings reproducing the main events of Rāmānanda's life on the wall of the open area. In that vicinity there are also two temples that contains the *mūrti* of baby Rāmānanda in the arms of his mother and the *mūrti* of Rāmānanda (Fig. 44). This is the place where the main *pūjā* was about to begin.

The Jagadgurū first performed the *pūjā* in the temple with the baby Rāmānanda, accompanied by the chants of *pūjarī*-s and *brahmacārī*-s from the Śrī Maṭh and a Śaiva *maṭh*. Later on, he held the *pūjā* in the other temple as well.

Many Rāmānandī ascetics arrived for the ceremony, especially *tyāgī*-s and *nāgā*-s (Fig. 45). For many of them it was their first time in the *āśram* – hence some gave more attention to the structure than to the ceremony. A *sādhu* also made a video while several others took photos. When the Jagadgurū went in the audience hall after the two *pūjā*-s, the Rāmānandī-s followed him and, as soon as he sat on his chair, started bowing to him energetically. One informant told me that many of them were from the Digambar *akhārā*.

The main celebration was conducted in a pavilion established on the field in front of the *āśram*. It was a meeting of *sant*-s and intellectuals. The talks focused on Rāmānanda and the history of the *sampradāya*. The *mahant* of the Digambar *akhārā* of Baroda underlined that the *sampradāya* only had one Jagadgurū, who was the Jagadgurū living in the Śrī Maṭh in Pañcagaṅgā. The *ācārya* of the Sen *sampradāya* from Jodhpur was also on the stage. He is a great supporter of the idea that Rāmnareśācārya is a representative of Rāmānanda.

During this *jayantī*, the literary prize in honor of Rāmānanda was bestowed.

When it was the turn of the Jagadgurū to talk, he focused his speech on a glorification of Rāmānanda through a confrontation with Christianity. He claimed that there were no black Christian saints (*sic*), and even on a social level, only now was a black Prime Minister allowed in America, while, by contrast, the 14th century Rāmānanda had fought for social justice. He exalted the teaching of Rāmānanda as exemplary and necessary for contemporary Indian society, stressing that in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, representative of all castes can find a place, unlike others (such as those formed on Śaṅkara's or Rāmānūja's teaching) that are based on caste bias and stratification.

During the celebration of this *jayantī* the Jagadgurū also talked about himself and his office. He explained that since he became Jagadgurū, he has done all that is required to carry the

title with honor, and because of his honesty and his devotion to the *sampradāya*, meaningful events occurred, such as the donation of the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir on the soil where Rāmānanda was born.

During the celebration of the Rāmānandī *jayantī*, a Rāmānanda *Līlā* was also performed: a troupe of actors from Vrindavan and some *brahmacārī*-s performed a play about the life of Rāmānand that lasted for several hours.

It seemed to me that this second *jayantī* had more ‘strategic and political’ nuances, which can be explained by the location (Prayāg and the supposed place in which Rāmānand spent his childhood) and the period (the Kumbh Melā). It was more evident during this celebration that Rāmnareśācārya aimed to exalt and glorify Rāmānanda and his successors – including himself – as having particular religious authority.

4.3.11.2 Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya’s *jayantī*

The birthday of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya is celebrated during *vasanta pañcamī* of the *śukla pakṣa* of Māgha, which corresponds with the celebration of Sarasvatī.⁵³⁰

I attended Rāmnareśācārya’s *jayantī* in 2013 during the Mahā Kumbh Melā. Because there were many people in the *āśram*, the event was organized by his devotees in a very precise manner.⁵³¹ The people began to celebrate the Jagadgurū following the guru *pūjā* in the morning, placing a royal turban on his head and crowding the hall to perform the *pūjā* to him (Fig. 46). Later on, as usual, the Jagadgurū went into the shed on the other side of the *āśram* for his morning *pravacan*.⁵³² During the *pravacan*, the birthday of the Jagadgurū was also commemorated: several people, both ascetics and laymen, went on the stage to put *mālā*-s on him and throw rice on him.

After the *pravacan*, the Jagadgurū and his followers went back into the main hall of the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir, where *pūjārī*-s and *brahmacārī*-s performed a *pūjā* to pray for his long life. The room was crowded with people. The Senācārya waited for Jagadgurū near his seat.

In front of the seat of the Jagadgurū, a copper vessel was placed over a small pile of rice (Fig. 47). Inside of it was water, while the top was covered with a copper plate under which

⁵³⁰ *Vasanta pañcamī* is one of the biggest festivals of the year because it introduces the season of spring. The *pūjā* of this day is devoted to Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning. She bestows the greatest wealth to humanity: the wealth of knowledge. She is only the central figure of worship once a year.

⁵³¹ Women were the main organizers of this event. It was decided that all of them had to wear yellow clothes because yellow is the color of Sarasvatī, so the wealthy people tried to arrange proper clothes for the poor.

⁵³² Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 4.1.

there were betel leaves and over which there was a coconut. A red and yellow thread was rolled around the coconut. Near the jar were a conch, incense and *mālā*. However, the most interesting elements of the *pūjā* were small piles of rice laid out in three lines: two lines with nine piles and one line with three piles. On top of each of these small piles of rice, an areca nut (seed of the areca palm) was gently placed. During the ceremony, the Jagadgurū marked each nut with a red *tilak* and some rice grains. The unbroken rice denotes longevity and blessings for a long life, which is why it is also applied on the forehead. The areca nut also symbolizes strength and blessings for a long life. At the end of the *pūjā*, the *pujārī* put the *tilak* with rice on the Jagadgurū's forehead.

The second part of the celebration occurred in the evening, when a concert was staged for the Jagadgurū, who enjoyed it while sitting on his throne (Fig. 48). After the concert, a group of young girls went on the stage with flowers to donate to the Jagadgurū, followed by devotees and female devotees who started dancing around the Jagadgurū. A golden turban was placed on his head while gold foils were applied on his forehead and arms. Petals were poured on him and various *dīyā* were lighted for his *ārtī* (Fig. 49).

4.3.12 Phalgun (February-March)

During the *pūrṇimā* of Phalgun, Holī is celebrated. This is the festival of springtime, when people have the license to act without following the usual social order. It is a colorful carnival celebrated by throwing colored powders and water on one another's face and body.

People and ascetics belonging to Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s generally celebrate Holī by singing songs connected to Kṛṣṇa's love for his herdswomen, as it is believed that Kṛṣṇa used to play Holī with them in Vrindavan. Vrindavan is the most famous place to celebrate Holī in India. It is also celebrated in the Śrī Maṭh, although on a smaller scale. I could not attend it because during Holī it might be dangerous for a foreign woman to go out into the street alone because many young men are under effects of local drugs, and the inhabitants of the Maṭh discouraged me to go there.

Hence, I learned from talking with the Jagadgurū about their way of celebrating Holī. They try to maintain the tradition of Vrindavan, where only natural colors are used and people wear white clothes. As they believe that any *tyohār* (festival) has to remain focused on God, the Jagadgurū and his devotees begin Holī by putting color on the *mūrti* of Rām (or Bhagvān, to use his word), and then they throw color on the *pujārī*-s. Afterwards, the

Jagadgurū usually throws color on devotees and *brahmacārī*-s and then they do the same to him. After the throwing of dye, which people refer to as 'playing Holī,' *bajan*-s of the festival are sung for a couple of hours. The celebration ends with the distribution of *pakhvān* (a pastry or sweet fried in *ghī*).

4.4 The Kumbh Melā of Prayāg⁵³³

The Kumbh Melā is one of the most significant religious events in the Hindu calendar, hosted in four cities: Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nasik.⁵³⁴ During this festival (which generally lasts one and a half months) millions of people gather to bathe in the holy rivers, especially on specific days. As a comprehensive description of the Kumbh from an astrological or historical point of view will drive us too far from the purpose of this section, I will report here only few direct observations before describing the religious events and daily routine of the Mahā Kumbh Melā that I attended in 2013 at the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir. In the next chapter I will focus on the power relationships that come to light during the Kumbh.

The Melā is actually a religious fair⁵³⁵ in which guru-s and ascetics compete to prove their religious and spiritual credibility and capture the attention of pilgrims who have arrived from all over India and the world. The Kumbh Melā in Prayag begins in *makar saṅkrānti*⁵³⁶ and lasts for fifty-five days. Everything is properly organized, with temporary streets and town squares formed in a place that normally is only a wide expanse of sand.

Walking down into the streets of the Melā, a pilgrim will come across many middle-aged *sādhu*-s, usually ex *grhastha* who opted for an ascetic life. In fact, many of them do not seem to bear any religious knowledge or have any kind of religious practice, and tend to be there to find a place to eat and to sleep. As this type of *sādhu* are considered suspicious by lay people, they subsist thanks to the support of religious centers rather than lay people's

⁵³³ For a comprehensive description of the Kumbh Melā of Prayāg from an historical perspective, see Kama Maclean (2008).

⁵³⁴ The Kumbh Melā is held every third year at one of the four places by rotation, starting from Haridwar. *Ardh* (Half) Kumbh Melā is held only at Haridwar and Prayāg every sixth year, while the Kumbh Melā occurs every twelve years. In Prayāg, the Melā is organized in Māgh, at Haridwar in Phalguna or Chaitra, in Ujjain it is fixed in Vaiśākha and in Nasik it takes place in Śrāvaṇa.

⁵³⁵ This feeling of a market comes from the presence of innumerable posters that publicize gurus, *svāmī*-s, ascetics and speakers, advertising their activities and their abilities.

⁵³⁶ *Makar saṅkrānti*, apart from a harvest festival, is also regarded as a 'holy phase of transition' that marks the end of the inauspicious phase which, according to the Hindu calendar, begins around mid-December. It is believed that any auspicious and sacred ritual can be sanctified in any Hindu family from this day onwards. *Saṅkrānti* also marks the termination of winter and the beginning of spring. The calculation for determining *makar saṅkrānti* is done according to the solar calendar; therefore it always falls on 14th January.

alms. In their case, asceticism is more the result of necessity than a real spiritual quest, as their purpose is mostly to simply survive rather than to obtain *mokṣa* or *bhakti*. However, this is just one category of *sādhu*, taking into consideration that there are as many types of *sādhu*-s as there are *sampradāya*-s.⁵³⁷

The real protagonists of the Kumbh are not ‘simple’ *sādhu*-s but rather gurus and *mahant*-s. A guru/*mahant* may have his own camp or share with someone from the same branch, while similar groups are gathered in a same area: for example all the *akhārā*-s are in the same sector. The most important element of a camp is its entrance, which has to be attractive in appearance so that pilgrims want to go inside and perhaps give offerings. The presence of a *mūrti* and the construction of a temporary temple is another important element for the success of the camp, as well as the programs scheduled, including *pravacan*-s, *saṅgīt*-s and *bhaṅḍārā*-s. However, having attended some *pravacan* in random camps, I realized that not many people who were sitting there were paying attention to the words of the speaker. Therefore, it seemed to me that a pilgrim’s main aim is to simply be at the Kumbh and to have the *darśan* of holy people, as a passive kind of way to experience religiosity rather than an active form of participation.

The inner organization of a camp is another way to display the power and the status of a guru or a group. A well-built *āśram* or camp will attract pilgrims and therefore possible supporters. However, a camp that is properly constructed also shows what kind of supporters a guru has. It is thanks to the devotees’ donations that a camp can be constructed, and the same devotees will be living there during the Melā. Hence, a well-constructed camp also demonstrates to the guru’s devotees that their donations have been spent properly for their own comfort as well.

As we have seen in Section 3.5, the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir allows the Jagadgurū to have a privileged position during the Kumbh Melā. Because the place is located right in front of the Ganga and is part of the Kumbh area, the Jagadgurū do not have to ask for any permission or wait for the *akhārā*-s to decide the position of his camp. Although the camp is located about one and half kilometers from the *triveni saṅgam*, the fact that it has a solid (*pakkā*) structure instead of a temporary one, confers a certain level of prestige to the Jagadgurū. Moreover, it has a history and several small temples inside, which allow the Jagadgurū to present himself as the protector of the Rāmānandī tradition

⁵³⁷ Cf. Introduction, sec. 3.1.

to those who visit him during the Kumbh.⁵³⁸

The Jagadgurū also occupied a part of the soil just in front of the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir to build a dozen *jhopṛī-s*, or very basic straw huts where pilgrims and *sādhu-s* were hosted during the most important days of the Kumbh. The Jagadgurū had toilets constructed in back of these huts and parking and an area for *bhaṇḍārā* on the side of the huts.

When I reached the Kumbh on February 1, 2013, the *āśram* was not full yet, as the more important bathing days were about to come. The *pakkā* rooms were given according to the guests because some rooms were completely empty and people had to put straw on the floor as a base for their mattress, while other rooms had beds and a bathroom inside. Therefore, the best rooms were given to the wealthier devotees and pilgrims because in many cases they financially supported the construction of the place.

During the Kumbh there was a daily routine, although sudden meetings could change the schedule. There were no specific rules to follow in the *āśram*, including no specific required waking time. However, every morning the *gurū pūjā* was held around 8 o'clock, with lay people gathering in the main hall (Fig. 59). Only after the *pūjā* was a light breakfast provided. The programmed events of the day were lectures given by the Jagadgurū from 10 A.M. to 12 noon and attended by *sādhu-s* and *brahmacārī-s*: the Jagadgurū would read a book about *bhakti*, explaining every single sentence exhaustively, providing real life examples, and repeating the same concepts several times. After this lecture, there was usually a short chat before lunch.

The lunch was usually served by *sevak-s* (in this case, anyone staying in the *āśram* who wanted to help) to those in attendance, who had to sit on the floor in rows.

During the afternoon, everyone was busy in various activities. Around 5 o'clock in the evening, it was time for the Jagadgurū's *darśan*. This was usually followed by *pravacan*, held in the big temporary hall built in front of the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir, in which ascetics spoke about *bhakti* and Rāmānanda (Fig. 58). The Jagadgurū was always the last to speak. After the evening *pravacan*, dinner was served.

As I will describe in the next chapter, the Kumbh Melā is a moment in which various branches within a *sampradāya* and various separate *sampradāya-s* have the opportunity to meet and pay their respects to each other. It is during the Kumbh Melā that alliances are tied and projects organized. For this reason, the Jagadgurū's daily routine included a large

⁵³⁸ One of my sources told me that during the Mahā Kumbh Melā in 2001, the Jagadgurū did not have his own camp, and that he was in the camp of the Śaṅkarācārya of Purī.

number of meetings: sometimes he would go visit the camps of a *tyāgī*, a *mahant* or a Śāṅkarācārya (visits that were usually organized for the late morning or evening time, after dinner). However, quite often, the Jagadgurū received visits from politicians, *sādhu*-s from other *sampradāya*-s, journalists,⁵³⁹ and *mahant*-s of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

Around February 8, the number of people arriving in the Thakur Harit Mādhav Mandir had grown to an incredible number. There were people from all over India and from all social backgrounds. The *āśram* is not one of those modern centers that can charge people a lot of money for a room because of the Kumbh. The *pakkā* rooms were assigned to the devotees of the Jagadgurū who also paid for their construction, but they were also filled with other people from the same background. The *jhoprī*-s were full, and other common rooms were also filled with people. Straw was distributed to use as a bed over which put a blanket. In my room, twelve women shared one small space, although they were in high spirits the whole time because of the excitement of the events.

The date that all these pilgrims and *sādhu*-s were waiting for was the *mauni amāvasyā* bath, to be held on February 10.⁵⁴⁰ It is said that *mauni amāvasyā* is the day in which the ṛṣi (sage) Manu appeared in this world but, more importantly, it is the day the universe was created. Therefore, whoever takes a holy bath in the river on this day will have his sins washed off completely. For this reason, *amāvasyā*, which is the second *śāhī snān* (royal bath) of the Kumbh Melā after *makar saṅkrānti*, is considered to be the most auspicious of all the bathing days. The Jagadgurū bathed in the Ganga only during this time. He gave instructions to his devotees about how to properly bathe as well: bare foot, without using any soap or playing in the water, and demonstrating maximum respect for the holiness of the moment.

On February 10, the Jagadgurū prepared his walk toward the *triveni saṅgam* for the *mahā snān*. All the people who wanted to go with him gathered at 10 o'clock in the morning and all of us went bare foot from the Thakur Harit Mādhav Mandir to the *triveni*. The Jagadgurū was at the head of a procession composed mostly of lay people and some *sādhu*-s that walked next to him carrying his flag and carrying a banner with the name of the Śrī Maṭh embroidered on it (Fig. 60). Because the Jagadgurū was recognized as a significant

⁵³⁹ An independent group who was producing a documentary about the Kumbh and *sant*-s came to interview him about the meaning of Prayāg and of the Kumbh Melā. Because the *mahā snān* of February 10 was about to happen, they also asked the meaning of this and the right way to reach the *triveni saṅgam*. A few days later, a French troupe also came to interview the Jagadgurū.

⁵⁴⁰ During the Prayāg Kumbh Melā, there are three main baths: in *makar saṅkrānti*, *mauni amāvasyā* and *vasant pañcamī*.

person, we were allowed to take a short cut to reach the bath area. For this reason, the group had to be very compact: linked hand in hand, the group moved like a single organism trying to open up a path toward the river.⁵⁴¹

As soon as we reached the bank, a path was created for the Jagadgurū: he slowly removed his clothes, keeping only a cloth on his lower half, while *nāgā*-s and *tyāgī*-s started to uncover themselves down to their *langoṭī*.⁵⁴² Before the Jagadgurū entered the river, two rows of people went into the water to create a kind of path for him. With the water up to his hips, the Jagadgurū gave offerings of flowers and money to the Ganga. Then after removing the *kuś* ring, he walked across the river to the opposite bank, where a fence marked the limit of the bathing area. There, surrounded by many of his devotees, he did his dipping. Afterwards, people began pouring water over him, because, as I was told, it is an honor to bathe the Jagadgurū and to take a bath where he did. After the bath, the Jagadgurū went back on the shore and a more organized *pūjā* for the Ganga began. Some people remained in the river in order to direct the flow of offerings, which included fruits and saris. After the *ārtī*, the Jagadgurū wore his clothes again and began to distribute *prasād*, which came in large pots full of *halvā* (a sweet made of semolina and *ghī*, Fig. 63). As suggested by the Jagadgurū, after the bath nobody changed clothes and people went back to the *āśram* in groups.

Once in the *āśram*, a guru *pūjā* was celebrated, and the water used to wash the Jagadgurū's feet was distributed among the devotees. Afterwards, another *pūjā* was performed in which the Jagadgurū distributed blankets and money to *sādhu*-s. The day after the *snān*, the Rām *kathā* began. A national channel recorded the speeches of the Jagadgurū⁵⁴³ for two hours, for five days. Even with the daily two hours of *pravacan* for the television channel, the Jagadgurū did not stop doing the evening *darśan/pravacan*, always preceded by the talks of other *sādhu*-s.

⁵⁴¹ While headed towards the *triveni saṅgam* and during the bath, the main feeling I had was the excitement of being part of something huge. I think this feeling is one of the main things that also leads pilgrims towards events like the Kumbh Melā: not only the possibility to have one's own sins redeemed, but to feel part of a collective and to share the same belief in something. The *snān*, the efforts to reach the shore, and the happiness in taking a holy bath with one's family, relatives, friends, and millions of other people, produce an added value that emphasizes the meaning of the religious event. Probably, without collectivity, the meaning of the bath would not be the same. Furthermore, for many people, especially women, travelling from their houses to the *saṅgam* represents an adventure that goes beyond their everyday, normal routine. This creates a feeling that increases the value of the experience.

⁵⁴² The *langoṭī* is an undergarment worn by Indian men as a loincloth. Made of a rectangular strip of cotton cloth, the *langoṭī* covers the genitals with the help of the strings which are connected to the four ends of the cloth and which are used for binding it around the waist of the wearer.

⁵⁴³ Cf. Chapter 6, sec. 4.3.7.

A few days after the *mahā snān*, we went in the afternoon for a Ganga *pūjā* in which sixteen offerings were poured in the river (Fig. 61 and 62). The Jagadgurū went with a group of about sixty people. He put a kind of bench between the shore and the water and sat down and the offerings were put all around him. Among the offerings were flowers, perfumes, milk, money, sweets, dry fruits and saris (as the Ganga is a female deity). Offerings like money and saris were put in the river and then picked up again so they could be donated to poor women. The *pūjā* was followed by the *ārtī*: the Jagadgurū carried a tall *dīyā* holder with a pyramidal structure and several plates, while plates with *dīyā*-s were distributed among those in attendance in order to allow to anyone to perform the Ganga *ārtī*. Dry fruit, fresh fruit and *halva* were given as *prasād*. In the end *dakṣiṇā* was distributed to the *brahmacārī*-s and *pujārī*-s.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I demonstrated the particular position that the Śrī Maṭh has in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. It is universally recognized as the *mul pīṭh* by all the branches of the *sampradāya*, even by those Rāmānandī-s who are not supporters of Rāmānareśācārya. This depends on the fact that the authenticity of the place is based on the well-known tradition that Rāmānanda began his teaching at Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*. It is because of this tradition and the fact that it was transmitted until today that the Śrī Maṭh holds its status.

Because it is the *mul pīṭh* of the *sampradāya*, the Śrī Maṭh does not present a specific religious inclination or particular commensality rules: people from all castes are accepted, they can eat in its kitchen and rest in its rooms; *sādhu*-s from various backgrounds and people from other religions can find a shelter there and follow their own religious habits, but on the condition that they respect the few internal rules of the Maṭh; the celebrations conducted in the Maṭh vary among a plurality of religious tendencies some of which may derive from other *sampradāya*-s. On account of these characteristics we could look at the Śrī Maṭh as the ‘physical’ re-creation of the teaching of Rāmānanda.

Let us now focus our attention on the religious celebrations that occur in the Śrī Maṭh and in places connected to it. Unfortunately, to my knowledge there are no studies about religious celebrations in Rāmānandī *rasik* centers, hence I cannot compare them with those organized by the Śrī Maṭh.

As we have seen, the Śrī Maṭh celebrate ceremonies that are commonly observed by Hindus (e.g. *Holī*, *Gaṇeś Caturthī*, *Rakṣā Bandhan*), some that belong to specific Vaiṣṇava

traditions (e.g. the *Jhūlā Mahotsav*), and others that refer to Rām *bhakti* (e.g. *Rām Navamī*). The celebration of religious events not exclusively connected with the Rām *bhakti* can be the result of two factors: 1) the following of a religious attitude that actually is not only typical of the Śrī Maṭh but historically part of the religious approach of the *sampradāya*; 2) the individuality of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya. Both these components are faces of the same coin, i.e., the passing on of a tradition. In the first case, we look at those elements which persist, while in the second we refer to the role of the agent who passes on a tradition, because it is this agent – in our case the Jagadgurū – who decides what to pass on and, in case, whether it is necessary to make some additions. Such additions, then, would depend on his personal religious attitude or on pragmatic considerations.

Taking into account the history of the *sampradāya* described in Chapter 3, it is likely that the celebrations of *pūjā*-s in Śaiva temples, the performing of *rūdrābhiṣeka* and the celebration of ceremonies from different Vaiṣṇava backgrounds are performed in other Rāmānandī centers as well. As we have seen, since the very beginning of the *sampradāya*, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava *mūrti*-s were used by Rāmānandī ascetics, who have often adopted religious concepts and practices from other groups. Furthermore, this characteristic seems to belong to the Rāmānandī tradition, whereas the particular propensity towards ceremonies with a *rasik*-Brahmanic component has to be interpreted as resulting from the personality and individuality of Rāmnareśācārya.

As I will argue in more detail in the next chapter, the Jagadgurū is a Rām *bhakta* who firmly believes in Rāmānanda's teachings and tries to accomplish them in several ways, even on the basis of more pragmatic considerations.

We can also interpret the religious ceremonies performed in the Maṭh as expressions of the faith and devotion the Jagadgurū puts at the service of his followers. In effect, the Jagadgurū organizes religious ceremonies for the wellbeing of his lay community and, as we will see in the next chapter, he is a source of support other than religious. His activities are considered to be a form of social *sevā*, a definition that we have referred to earlier while discussing Rāmānanda's approach. On the other hand, his followers and disciples, being attracted by the charisma of the Jagadgurū, practice another form of *sevā*, more organizational and economic in nature, that is the actual source for all the Jagadgurū's activities. Therefore, it is likely that the Jagadgurū chooses to celebrate ceremonies that satisfy his personal religious approach as well as the religious quest of his devotees.

In effect, if we look at the religious annual celebrations from the perspective of the attendants, we realize that lay people form the majority. We may suppose that many *pūjā*-s

(such as the *Amlā pūjā* and the *Tulsī Vivāh*) have a particular value and attraction not only for those *sādhu*-s who follow a specific devotional *sādhana* based on the divine couple, but also for those lay people who feel close to celebrations whose purpose is to bring prosperity to the householders' life.

However, we can interpret some religious celebrations in a more pragmatic perspective. If we look at the celebration of Rāmānanda's *jayantī* and the publication of works about him, we can assume that for the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, the life story of Rāmānanda can be told with some certainty. As his role depends on the figure of Rāmānanda and his authority is based on the fact that he is located in the supposed original place where Rāmānanda taught, it is also in his interest to spread and canonize a specific portrait of Rāmānanda, a portrait that he did not invent but that is part of an evolution of Rāmānanda's figure. Therefore, Rāmānanda's *jayantī*, the importance given to the place of birthplace of Rāmānanda and the reconstruction and preservation of places linked with his life history (the Śrī Maṭh and the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir) become instruments through which he can claim the authenticity and authority of his role in contrast with other Jagadgurū-s who cannot prove any 'traditional' link with Rāmānanda.

This path followed by the Jagadgurū may be interpreted according to Squarcini's argument that, when a representative of a tradition has to affirm the value of his authority and role, he attempts to reproduce objective and cognitive structures of his tradition that have played a role in the establishment of his position. Such an attempt depends on a competitive atmosphere within the same institution (2008: 34). This analysis seems to fit well with the Jagadgurū's position. However, it has to be pointed out that this 'etic interpretation' is not always recognized or accepted from an emic point of view. We should ask ourselves whether actions in support of a specific tradition are fully conscious projects or rather the result of a system of beliefs that an individual takes seriously and applies in earnest to his or her life. In fact, while on one hand a researcher may well interpret the activities of the Jagadgurū as the result of a competitive environment, on the other side, the Jagadgurū's position could also be interpreted as the manifestation of the faith of a man who follows his beliefs in the manner he considers to be the most appropriate. I have observed that, during our conversations, he never revealed anything that could be interpreted as a veiled spirit of rivalry.

From his point of view, the Jagadgurū does not act in order to emerge against a competitive background but rather to accomplish a mission: to improve the *sampradāya*, to strengthen the role of the Śrī Maṭh in it, and to spread Rām *bhakti* and Rāmānanda's

message. This mission is accomplished not only through the religious celebrations that he organizes but also through his twin roles as a guru of lay disciples and a leader of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, which will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya in relation to the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and his followers

As Chapter 4 has already included a short biography about the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, in this chapter I will focus my attention on Rāmnareśācārya as a guru and as the head of the Śrī Maṭh and of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. I will describe his relationship with ascetics, lay followers and devotees and I will delineate his teachings on religious, social and political issues through the use of his speeches, our conversations and his actions.

The argument in this chapter will serve two purposes: firstly, to introduce the novelty of the Jagadgurū as *sampradāya*'s leader analyzing what his figure brought into the *sampradāya* and what he is doing to be recognized as the only Jagadgurū; secondly, to use the figure of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya to describe a contemporary *sampradāyik* guru as representative of what we have defined as Modern Hindu Traditionalism.

1. Swāmī Rāmnareśācārya, a Rāmānandī *sādhu* head of the Śrī Maṭh

1.1 Rāmnareśācārya as a Rāmānandī *sādhu*

Rāmnareśācārya is a *sādhu* who belongs to the *dās* group of the *rasik* branch, which we have explored in Chapter 3. His *dīkṣā* guru was Vedāntī Śrī Raghubar Gopāl Dās, who was the *mahant* of the Sant Nivas,⁵⁴⁴ which today is known as the Śrī Vihāram. Rāmnareśācārya's devotion towards Rām falls within the *saguṇa* tradition. His theoretical approach is based on the *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta* and on the ancient specialized knowledge of the earlier *Śāstra*-s, which he studied while undergoing his Brahmanic training as an *ācārya*. He considers the *saguṇa bhakti* to be more difficult than the *nirguṇa bhakti* because it consists of several rules and rituals that are not easily to understand for the average person.

Compared to the *dās*-s I met in Ayodhya, which are characterized by white clothes and long hair but not *jaṭā*, Rāmnareśācārya looks more like a Śaiva ascetic, as he wears

⁵⁴⁴The Jagadgurū wanted to point out that he was a *vedāntī* and, at the beginning, he taught him for no more than a few years. He was a Rāmānandī and a very well-known *ācārya*. In fact, he taught many Rāmānandī-s.

only orange clothes.⁵⁴⁵ These are, however, unstitched, as Rāmānandī tradition wants. The use of this color is quite new in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and, as we have seen,⁵⁴⁶ Bhagavadācārya was among the first to use it. Rāmnaresācārya wears an orange cloth that is draped around his body and tied on the shoulder, and a headscarf that he ties under his chin. All the accessories he wears, as slippers, gloves or sweaters, are orange. This color choice and the headscarf distinguish the Jagadgurū from the majority of the Rāmānandī-s, although today prominent Rāmānandī-s and *mahant*-s have started wearing orange clothes as well.⁵⁴⁷

The Jagadgurū has always had his head shaved except for the *śikhā*.⁵⁴⁸ While not all the Rāmānandī-s shave their heads, all of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s do. Most of them also cover their heads. Rāmnaresācārya also carries a *tridaṇḍa* enveloped in orange cloth. As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, the *tridaṇḍī* is generally associated with Vaiṣṇava ascetics. Gurye reports that in the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*, a *tridaṇḍī* ‘is one who controlled his body, speech and mind with the help of intellect’ (1964: 72). Tripathi argues that ascetics in the Nimbarka *sampradāya* also carry a *tridaṇḍa* (2007: 28). Hence the presence of the *tridaṇḍa* among the Jagadgurū’s paraphernalia may be a way to display his affinity with a specific ideal of asceticism as well as a way to mirror those Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s in which the *tridaṇḍa* was already utilized.

The resulting portrait makes the Jagadgurū appear similar to the traditional image of Śaṅkarācārya. In fact, it is likely that this kind of attire was initially chosen because it was more consistent with lay people’s expectation of how a Jagadgurū should look.⁵⁴⁹ However, the Vaiṣṇava religious affiliation is quite evident in Rāmnaresācārya’s appearance: on his

⁵⁴⁵ In fact, among the rules that the Rāmānandācārya has to follow, in the Śrī Maṭh Registration Act it is written that he has to wear orange clothes (*gerūvā vastra*), as orange is the color traditionally associated with asceticism and *tapas*.

⁵⁴⁶ Cf. Chapter 4, sec. 2.1.1.

⁵⁴⁷ For example Rām Vinay Dās only wears orange clothes; the *mahant* of the Jabalpur *āśram* also wears the same color.

⁵⁴⁸ As we have seen in the Introduction and Chapter 5, the fact that the *śikā* is left unshaven holds great symbolic importance for demonstrating the position of the Rāmānandī in relation to the world: they are not renouncers of the world, but they are detached from it (*virakta*).

⁵⁴⁹ Sardella has also emphasized the choice of the saffron color in the case of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (6 February 1874 - 1 January 1937), son of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākur (cf. Chapter 2, sec. 1.2, p. 81) and spiritual reformer of the Gauḍīya *sampradāya*. Sardella tells us that Bhaktisiddhānta created the first monastic branch in the Gauḍīya *sampradāya* to revive the tradition, because it had lost its message and support as a religious movement. Bhaktisiddhānta (whose Gauḍīya *dīkṣā* name was actually Śrī Varṣabhānavi-devī dayita Dās), had remained celibate for the duration of his life. Hence he appointed himself as a renouncer bestowing on himself the name of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Gosvāmī, and providing to his movement ‘not only with a new look’, but also ‘a new ethical profile’. The color choice had a specific purpose: ‘the glowing saffron vestments of a swami, even in the interwar period, signaled to those whom Bhaktisiddhānta encountered that he was caste, and upright individual, selflessly involved in the spiritual uplift of society’ (Sardella, 2013: 90-92).

arms he applies the marks of the bow (on the left) and the arrows (on the right),⁵⁵⁰ while on the forehead he applies the Rāmānandī *tilak*.⁵⁵¹ His apparel is completed by one of his *kaṅṭhī* (specific name for the *tulsī mālā*).

1.2 Rāmānandī as head of the Śrī Maṭh

To be the head of the Śrī Maṭh, a Rāmānandī has to possess characteristics listed in the Śrī Maṭh Trust Registration Act, that qualify him as an *ācārya* capable of acting as a Śrī *sampradāyācārya*. I interpreted this title as meaning someone who can be in charge of the Maṭh but also act properly in the role of Jagadgurū for the *sampradāya*. The qualifications listed are:

- He should belong to a Brahman family and have a proper foundation in *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta* and other philosophic disciplines.
- He cannot be married at any time during his life.
- He cannot be employed in any institute from which he is receiving a salary before the *abhiṣeka*.
- He should not have any disability.
- He should be initiated in a *paramparā* of the Śrī *sampradāya*.
- He should not reside with any family members.
- He should not ever be connected to any criminal issue.
- His actions should serve the interests of the Indian nation and the *sampradāya*.⁵⁵²
- He should be reverent toward older *ācārya*-s.

In addition to these requirements, there are rules about post-election behavior as well. For example, the *ācārya* cannot be the head of another private organization while all the proprieties the *ācārya* acquires are under the ownership of the Śrī Maṭh. However, he has the individual right to use funds to develop the society and the *sampradāya*.⁵⁵³

This *ācārya* at the head of the Śrī Maṭh is supposed to follow a strict daily regime

⁵⁵⁰ These marks are painted with a little brush and usually are in ochre or white.

⁵⁵¹ The Jagadgurū claimed that the *tilak* is a necessary sign to apply before going in front of god. The *tilak* for *sādhu*-s is a *saṃskāra* not a sign of fashion. Therefore, they have to wear it on themselves at all times.

⁵⁵² About the Jagadgurū and his idea of Indian Nation, cf. Sec. 4.3.5.

⁵⁵³ As the Jagadgurū nominally possesses fields and other proprieties, he has the sovereignty in those places as well. For this reason, any time he can, he goes to ensure that everything is being appropriately managed there. His visit is usually expected and he is greeted with great honor from the people. His visits enable people such as farmers in the *bhagīcā* or followers in other of his centers, to receive his *darśan*.

that is scheduled in the Registration Act.⁵⁵⁴ After getting up at *brahma muhūrta*,⁵⁵⁵ the Jagadgurū does *mānas pūjā* (interiorized *pūjā*). He then performs the *nitya karma*, daily ritual actions that focus on taking care of the physical body. Particular importance is given to the bath.⁵⁵⁶ The Jagadgurū does not perform the *pūjā* in the Rām temple, as it is performed by the *brahmacārī*-s, but he goes to pay homage to the *mūrti*. After his breakfast, he gives *darśan* in a time that is variable according to his schedule. It can start as early as 8:30 A.M. or as late in the morning as 10:00 A.M. and it lasts until the Jagadgurū decides to retire to eat. The food is prepared in his personal kitchen and only by Brahmans.⁵⁵⁷ Usually they are *brahmacārī*-s from the Śrī Maṭh but sometimes they are also devotees, mostly Brahman women. Meals and cutlery (in silver) are separated for the Jagadgurū, who told me that since he was elected, he has always had his meals alone. Some devotees said that he has to do so because he is purer than other people and he has to maintain this purity. However, this is not felt like a commensality rule but as a necessity connected to the importance of the office and the figure of the Jagadgurū.

After his lunch the activities of the Jagadgurū can vary: he may meet people privately to discuss work such as a religious paper to write or an event to organize, but in the late afternoon-evening he will always have another *darśan*.

More or less this is the schedule that the Jagadgurū follows when he is in the Maṭh, but as we have said, he is often absent during the year to attend and organize religious celebrations and to stay in contact with his devotees and followers.

Rāmnareśācārya's yearly routine is similar to that of other *sādhu*-s because it is dictated by religious events. For example, he always respects the *cāturmās*: during this period he stops all of his travels and dwells in a religious center for four months. He

⁵⁵⁴ The Registration Act lists: *mānas pūjā* from 3 A.M. to 4 A.M.; *nitya karma*; *abhiṣeka*, *ācārya pādukā* and the *sevā* of God; *darśan* from 8 A.M. to 11 A.M.; lunchtime at 12 A.M. (and the *ācārya* has to eat only the necessary for his sustenance, or if he has followed the *phalāhārī vrat*, to eat only fruits); discussion about *śāstra*-s and daily issues from 1 P.M. to 4 P.M.; *nitya karma* of the evening from 5 P.M. to 6 P.M.; *ārti* from 7 P.M. to 8 P.M.; dinner from 8 P.M. to 9 P.M.

⁵⁵⁵ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.2.

⁵⁵⁶ Gross has described in detail the daily routine of *tyāgī*-s, stressing that there is a particular attention towards physical purity and personal cleanness, which is observed twice a day, morning and evening (1992: 381-411). Gross's study brings to light a typical day of a *tyāgī*, showing, as he writes, that 'all aspects of the Tyagis's daily life from waking, defecating, eating, sleeping and so forth, involve some ritual form that is mantrically guided. Their ritual practices touch life on all levels, transforming mundane acts into sacred offerings to God. [...] The ritual path of Tyagis follow blends elements of austerities, sacrifice, and devotion into a cohesive synthetic approach to religious transcendence' (1992: 411).

⁵⁵⁷ In the Maṭh it is forbidden to buy pre-made food from the market. All the people living in the Maṭh follow this rule.

switches off his mobile phone so that anyone wanting to contact him has to go through his *sevak-s*.⁵⁵⁸

In keeping with his *saguṇa* approach, which mostly consists of following rituals, he shares his devotional practices with his followers. However, he is able to find time for his personal *sādhana*. For example, Vidhān Bābā told me that on February 2012 the Jagadgurū went to spend a month in Dvarka to practice his religious discipline by himself.

As we have already said, Rāmnareśācārya is not simply the *mahant* of the Śrī Maṭh, but, as a part of the Rāmānandī *paramparā*, he is supposed to possess the divine quality of Rāmānanda, who is regarded as an *avatār* of Rām. Both *brahmacārī-s* and disciples have told me that the Jagadgurū is considered to be the representative of God on earth and therefore should be revered as a God himself. Although people recognize him in such a divine image, Rāmnareśācārya does not seem to give much importance to his divine role. He focuses instead on his role as a *sādhu*. For this reason, he has a lifestyle that does not show any ‘royal opulence.’⁵⁵⁹ Even the buildings constructed under his advice show austerity and simplicity. In the Śrī Maṭh he does not have a silver throne, but rather a wooden chair. In the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir, he used to sit on a kind of *cārpai* and only changed it because his devotees gifted him with a sofa. The only throne I have seen him sit on is the one donated to him by a *mahant* of Vrindavan during the Kumbh Melā 2013, which is now in the Śrī Vihāram.

However, when Rāmnareśācārya is invited to other Rāmānandī centers, he is often accommodated on a silver throne. The Jagadgurū is not attentive to the material of the throne, but he does ensure that the hierarchic height of the seats is respected. He expects to sit higher than other people, with the exception of other important gurus.⁵⁶⁰

I will now complete the portrait already outlined in Chapter 4 by dealing with his position as leader in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

⁵⁵⁸ However, although I was told this during *cāturmās* 2013, I have seen that in *cāturmās* 2014 the Jagadgurū was using his mobile. Perhaps, this arose from the fact that 2014 was a very busy year for him, as it was the celebration of his 25th year of Jagadgurū-ship and his devotees in several cities had planned events for him. For this reason, the Jagadgurū did not spend all the *cāturmās* in Varanasi.

⁵⁵⁹ Broo gives an explicatory description of the guru’s opulence and royal behavior: ‘Gurus that wish to emphasize this lordly role often do so by increasing the royal opulence around them. They may sit on high, throne-like seats [...] engage servants for the smallest tasks, use costly garments, and so on [...] together with such behavior it often occurs that the guru isolates himself from his followers, interacting with them rarely and only on his own terms, to clearly maintain the status-difference between himself and them’ (2003: 203).

⁵⁶⁰ For example, when he organizes meetings with other Jagadgurū-s or head of *sampradāya-s* their chairs are always placed on the same level.

2. The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya as leader of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*

2.1 The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* explained by the Jagadgurū

In this section, I will report various excerpts from interviews with the Jagadgurū in which he discusses the *sampradāya* and its organization. Because he focuses on the same issues in various different interviews, I have selected the excerpts that give an emic representation of the *sampradāya*.

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is called Śrī *sampradāya* like the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. In effect, they are two branches of the same current. However, the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* was started by Lakṣmī while the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* was established by Sītā... by Rām and Sītā. The full name of our *sampradāya* then is Śrī *sampradāya* Rāmvat, to distinguish the iṣṭa devatā.

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is composed of various groups, but all the Vairāgī-s share the same mantra and the iṣṭa devatā are Rām and Sītā. The branches are differentiated by the bhāv [emotion] through which a Rāmānandī worships God: some consider him to be a swāmī [master], some others as a putra [son], a pati [husband] or some feel to be his female sākḥī [friend]. However, Rām is always at the center of their devotion. Tyāgī and nāgā consider themselves to be dās, slaves of God. Despite these differences, however, the word dās synthesizes the common feeling that is at the base of these various religious paths.

Rāmānandī-s look different but they all seek to emulate Rām in their appearance. For example, tyāgī and nāgā who wear long hair and go half naked or completely naked recall the time in which Rām was in the forest. Rāmānanda has promoted the cult of Rām but also his teachings that we can find in the holy books about his life.

Those *sādhu*-s who are in the *akhārā*-s are dedicated to a particular martial discipline, but they worship as other Rāmānandī-s ... They follow the same rules and do *tapasya* and *nām jāp*. However, not all the *sādhu*-s who belong to the *akhārā* are *nāgā*-s. In the *akhārā*-s there are not only places to learn how to fight, but also places to study Sanskrit. Those who are *tyāgī*-s instead, follow the style of Rām in the forest: they have *jaṭā*, beards, rub *vibhūti* [ashes] on their bodies, do not wear any jewels and go bare foot. Among them there are *sādhu*-s who do *tapasyā* and *anuṣṭan* [rituals]. There are many *tyāgī*-s, who are mainly wandering ascetics and therefore rarely establish *āśram*-s. Under the main umbrella of *tyāgī*-s, there are further sub-groups such as *māhā-tyāgī*, *bhāī* and others, but they all share the same *sādhanā*. Some of them have *jaṭā* so long that they sleep over it.

Rasik-s are also in Kṛṣṇa *sampradāya*-s. They play the role of a female companion of Sītā and, as a consequence, wear female clothes and bracelets during the celebrations [...]. They think that their *bhava* will bring them closer to Rām [...] However, compared to the number of *tyāgī*-s, the number of *rasik*-s is much smaller, because this path is quite difficult to follow.⁵⁶¹

The majority of Rāmānandī is represented by *sādhu*-s who consider Rām to be their *malik* [master] and themselves to be his slaves. This is the group of *dās*. The *dās* group is the largest.

There are some rules that are universal across the various branches [which he calls “inner rules”], such as how to do the *pūjā*, what kind of mantra to use, which *devatā*-s to worship, how to celebrate Rām [...] All Rāmānandī-s have to celebrate Rām Navamī and respect *ekādaśī* [...] There are also specific nutritional rules to respect [...] and rules about how to install the deity in the temple, how to worship Śiv, how to do a *yātrā*, how to organize themselves in the Kumbh [...] when and how to cut hairs and what kind of clothes to wear...

Moreover, we do not use soap and we do not iron our clothes.

There are some common rules in the Rāmānandī society, which a *sādhu* will be punished for breaking.

Every *gaddī* has its own register that contains the history of the place and the succession of *mahant*-s. In some cases there can be gaps in the history, because the transmission is not always continuous. Sometimes a bad *mahant* can change the rules of the center to get married and transmit ruling authority to his sons. This destroys the tradition and ruins the value and the image of *sādhu*-s.

In these excerpts, what has to be noted is the description of the Rāmānandī branches and especially, the consideration of the *rasik* group. In fact, as already mentioned, the use of the term *rasik* in the *sampradāya* is highly specialized and refers to a specific sub-group. However, the term can also have a more general meaning and be used to describe all those branches that do not follow *tapasī sādhanā*-s. Similarly, the term *dās* describe a sub-branch of this comprehensive *rasik* group but, at the same time, it can refer to Rāmānandī-s in general as the *dās bhāva* exists among all the branches of the *sampradāya*.

Rāmnareśācārya’s description also stresses a typical feature of the *sampradāya*: the presence of some common rules that are shared by all the Rāmānandī-s, whereas certain

⁵⁶¹ In fact, even a Rāmānandī from the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā told me that this kind of *sādhanā* is not for all the ascetics. It is also difficult for lay people to understand completely. He said: ‘Imagine if I say to someone who does not understand our worship that I feel to be the sister of Sītā [...] What can he think? If a man wears female clothes, how can be perceived by others who do not know the meaning? Even in the past, Raja-s thought it was a mis-en-scene’ (November 20, 2012, my translation from Hindi).

other rules are determined by a specific branch or center. This reflects the internal differentiation of the *sampradāya*, and the recognition that this differentiation is a functional and vital feature of the *sampradāya*.

The existence of common rules, in turn, necessitates someone who in charge of their being duly followed. In Chapter 4, I have given a few examples of the role of *akhārā*-s as the controllers of the *sampradāya*. Nevertheless, I found in the Śrī Maṭh Registration Act that also the Śrī Maṭh and, therefore, the Jagadgurū, can have a role of controller in the *sampradāya*.

2.2 The role of the Jagadgurū in the *sampradāya*

In the Śrī Maṭh Registration Act it is written that if any *mahant* of the *sampradāya* does not behave consistently with the rules of the *sampradāya* (for instance, if he gets married, misuses the property of God or sells it), then the Samiti of the Śrī Maṭh has the right to admonish him to change his conduct. If after being warned, the *mahant* continues to misbehave, then the Śrī Maṭh can dismiss him and replace him with another *sant*. For the new selection, special attention is given to the *paramparā* of the place. The dismissed *mahant* cannot appeal to the court.⁵⁶²

The Jagadgurū told me that it is the *akhārā*-s' tas to set up a kind of Supreme Court for all the four Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s, possibly a kind of remainder of their past role of protectors of the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s. If someone breaks tradition, a meeting with representatives from the *catuḥ sampradāya*-s is formed and the *akhārā*-s are those that ensure that the guilty party pays.⁵⁶³ To demonstrate this, Rāmnareśācārya said that a few years ago the *nāgā*-s⁵⁶⁴ decided that Rāmbhadrācārya had to pay a fee of several lakhs,

⁵⁶²This point is quite important as it gives special power to the Śrī Maṭh as leader of the *sampradāya* in specific and serious situations. For example, the Jagadgurū told me that when the *mahant* of Galtā married, he went there to take action against him. He did not win in that instance, but there is now a court case for the destitution of the *mahant* who justified his position declaring to be a Rāmānūjī and therefore allowed to get married. However, as we have already seen the contemporary situation of Galtā is quite specific.

⁵⁶³It is interesting to notice how the role of the *akhārā*-s can affect the lives of Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s and how they can simultaneously act as time maintainers of the order and vendors of religious titles. This may depend on the absence of a further organization that 'controls the controllers'. However, specific studies should be done on the organization and the role of the *akhārā*-s in practical issues to locate the origin of this role, and to verify whether other traditional organizations among Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s exist and how they function.

⁵⁶⁴Rāmnareśācārya described the role of *nāgā* as not exclusively linked to the *akhārā*-s. He described *nāgā* as the *senik*, the army of the *sampradāya*. I believe that his differentiation relies on the fact that several *tyāgī*-s' groups are mentioned among *akhārā*-s as well (Cf. also Gross, 1992: 153). This would explain the power of *akhārā*-s in the *sampradāya*, as they can represent a wide majority of Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s (*tyāgī*-s and *nāgā*-s), and the specific identification of *nāgā*-s as *senik*, to distinguish their role as controller of order and rules.

because he had altered the wording of some verses of the *Rāmcaritmānas*.⁵⁶⁵ During the meeting, Rāmnareśācārya sat on a throne, while Rāmbhadrācārya sat on the ground (*nīce*). Rāmnareśācārya’s narration aimed to demonstrate that although Rāmbhadrācārya (like other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s) uses the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya, practically he does not have any power compared to Rāmnareśācārya. However, in view of the *akhārā-s*’ specific role as controllers, Rāmnareśācārya does not seem to have actual judiciary powers in the *sampradāya*, rather he has a representative role as testified by his sitting on the throne.

The Jagadgurū tries to create a unity in the multifarious Rāmānandī environment. In effect, although the various branches are all part of the same *sampradāya*, it is also true that each branch forms a sort of separate *sampradāya*, as the term *sampradāya* can specify a community represented by a specific religious *sādhanā*. Rāmnareśācārya tries to underline a common Rāmānandī identity that unites the various branches through a shared connection to Rāmānanda, whose life and teachings he publicizes as much as possible. Rāmnareśācārya has affirmed several times that one of his aims is to ‘restore the *sampradāya*’ and the same idea has been repeated by many Rāmānandī-s I met. The Jagadgurū also gives the idea of a unified *sampradāya* by surrounding himself with Rāmānandī-s from various branches and supporting various centers, both in Varanasi and other places. In fact, it is not rare for Rāmānandī-s from other centers to come to the Śrī Maṭh to ask the Jagadgurū to attend a religious ceremony they are organizing, or to ask the Jagadgurū to visit their *āśram-s*.⁵⁶⁶

As I have already mentioned in Chapter 4, I asked *sādhu-s* I met in Varanasi and elsewhere about the position of Rāmnareśācārya as Jagadgurū, but I especially noticed the hierarchies present in the *sampradāya* in regard to Rāmnareśācārya during the Mahā Kumbh Melā 2013. This will be the subject of the next section.

2.3 An example of religious hierarchy: the Mahā Kumbh Melā 2013

Attending the Kumbh Melā in 2013 offered me a great opportunity to see the relationship between the various branches of the *sampradāya* and the Jagadgurū.

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Chapter 4, sec. 3.3.1.

⁵⁶⁶ The Śrī Maṭh is particularly connected to a *tyāgī āśram* on the other side of the Ganga. During my fieldwork, the young *mahant* of the *āśram* came several times to the Maṭh to pay homage to the Jagadgurū and ask for his help in the organization of religious celebrations. In return, the Jagadgurū went to the *tyāgī āśram* and a ceremony was held for him.

In the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir, there were *sādhu*-s from different branches and *sampradāya*-s, as well as *sādhu*-s that were always with the Jagadgurū as part of his entourage. In general, during normal *darśan*-s and the *pravacan*-s held in the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir, there would be about twenty *sant*-s present.

It is likely that the limited number of Rāmānandī ascetics in the *āśram* depended on the fact that each branch had its proper camp in the Melā ground.⁵⁶⁷

I came across my first clue as to the position of the Jagadgurū among Rāmānandī-s during the Rāmānanda *jayantī*. More *sādhu*-s came to the celebration than normal. There were *nāgā*-s from the *akhārā*-s (mostly from the Digambar *akhārā*)⁵⁶⁸ and *tyāgī*-s. Initially, they came to assist at the *pūjā* in the small temple dedicated to Rāmānanda.⁵⁶⁹ Later, they moved with all of us to the *darśan* hall. As soon as the Jagadgurū arrived, they stood up and then bowed in front of him. I could tell that they were representatives of several various branches because their *tilak*-s were highly differentiated. During the *darśan*, the number of *sādhu*-s kept increasing.

When we went in the pavilion for the main celebration, there were several *mahant*-s among the speakers. Among those introduced with more emphasis, there was a *mahant* from the Digambar *akhārā* of Ayodhya; the *mahant* of the Digambar *akhārā* of Baroda and that of Puri; Vedāntī Ram Vallabha Saran Dās (who is a *nāgā*) and the Senācārya from Jodhpur.⁵⁷⁰ The speakers sat on the stage while many others sat on the left of the stage, separated from lay people. No female ascetics were present.

⁵⁶⁷ I list here the camps present in the Kumbh in the Sector Three, where the *akhārā* – both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva- were located. I was unable to visit many of the sectors, particularly the sectors containing the *tyāgī*-s camps, as I was limited in terms of time and they located quite far from the Jagadgurū's *āśram*. Through this list we can see the highly differentiated nature of the branches, which would require a specific study on their own. There were: Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Nirmohī Anī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Rāmānandīya Khākī Akhārā, Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Harivyāsī Khākī Akhārā (Nirvāṇī); Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Harivyāsī Nirvāṇī/ Rāmānandīya Tāṭambarī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Balbandrī Akhārā (Nirvāṇī); Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Syām jī Digambar Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Terhe Bhāi Tyāgī Khālsā; Śrī Bārhe Bhāi dāṇḍyā Khālsā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Viṣṇuswāmī Nirmohī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Rāmānandī Nirmohī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Nirmohī Anī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Jhaṛiyā Nirmohī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Rāmānandī Santoṣī Nirmohī Akhārā; Dākoḍ Indor Khālsā; Akhil Bhārtīye Pañca Rāmānandī Mahā Nirvāṇī Nirmohī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Śrī Pañca Santoṣī Nirmohī Akhārā; Akhil Bhārtīye Cār Mālādhārī Nirmohī Akhārā. The meaning of the label Śrī Pañca has been explained by Gross (1992: 149). He says that each *akhārā* preserves a certain degree of autonomy as it has its own *pañcayath* that is referred to as Śrī Pañca.

⁵⁶⁸ As we have seen in Chapter 3, sec. 5.3, there are three *Anī*-s: Nirvāṇī, Nirmohī and Digambara, each of which is comprised of several *akhārā*-s.

⁵⁶⁹ Cf. Chapter 5, sec. 4.3.11.1.

⁵⁷⁰ As we will see below, he is the leader of a *sampradāya* that declares the founder Sen to be the disciple of Rāmānanda.

As usual, the number of the *sādhu*-s increased during the *bhaṇḍārā*, because the food is free during this time and the *sādhu*-s are usually served as first (Fig. 51). However, *sādhu*-s also came because after the *bhaṇḍārā*, money is distributed to them. On that occasion, for example, there was a fight because some *sādhu*-s were expecting a more consistent *dakṣiṇā* (donation). A *tyāgī* told me that there are many *sādhu*-s who are not real renunciators and roam around only to get money – and the Kumbh offers the biggest opportunity for them.

The support that some groups of *tyāgī*-s have for the Jagadgurū was manifested the next day, when the Jagadgurū went to the *mahā-tyāgī* camp managed by the *mahant* Sītā Rām Dās.⁵⁷¹ The welcome he received in the *mahā-tyāgī* camp was rich: many *tyāgī*-s were ready with *mālā* of flowers, while some presented offerings and others simply demonstrated their devotion by laying down in front of his feet. The arrival of the Jagadgurū was announced with a megaphone to summon the attention of the people staying in the camp, including lay people who found shelter with the *mahā-tyāgī*-s. Tens of *tyāgī*-s arrived, their *jaṭā* collected in knots or in a kind of turban, and some bearing a walking stick. A little stage with a throne was built for the Jagadgurū (Fig. 52). He was invited to receive the guru *pūjā*, which included the participation of a large number of *tyāgī*-s that did not necessarily have any connection to the *mahant* who organized the ceremony.

The food they offered the Jagadgurū was enough to feed all the people who attended the ceremony. However, he ate only *prasād* made of *gulab jamun*, a typical Indian sweet, while sitting on a silver throne (Fig. 53).⁵⁷² Later on they brought the Jagadgurū to meet a *tyāgī* who is supposed to be 113 years old. Since there were many people surrounding them, I was not able to hear their conversation. The Jagadgurū did not give any speech in the camp – rather the event seemed to be more of a demonstration of support and recognition of his leadership in the *sampradāya* from the *tyāgī*. A few days later, the Jagadgurū returned to the camp of the *mahā-tyāgī* but because he did not tell me about the trip, I was unable to participate. An informant told me that he went for *prasād* and to give *dakṣiṇā*.

⁵⁷¹ The importance of the Jagadgurū is symbolically represented by his entourage when he visits other religious centers: a *sādhu* (or a *brahmacārī*) always carries the *tridaṇḍa*, the silver scepter, the umbrella and the *cāran*. Those who carry the *tridaṇḍa* and the scepter usually remain behind him for the length of the event. Giving his status as guru and Jagadgurū for the *sampradāya*, it is not unusual for other Rāmānandī-s to bow at his feet as soon as they see him, often lying on the floor to demonstrate great respect for him.

⁵⁷² This attitude is different from his approach during the *tyāgī āśram* in Varanasi. On that occasion, although he was offered a *bhaṇḍārā*, the Jagadgurū ate the food he had brought with him from the Śrī Maṭh, while his followers and other ascetics from the Maṭh ate the food prepared by *tyāgī*-s. The Jagadgurū simply followed his normal behavior of adhering to his own commensality rule, although he did give them *prasād*. In the Kumbh Melā, as I will clarify below, his behavior slightly changed.

The following night he went to the camp of the Terah Bhāi Khālsā.⁵⁷³ According to my informants, the Jagadgurū went to meet other *mahant*-s almost every night.

On the evening of February 9, the *mahant* of the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā of Ayodhya came with other *sādhu*-s from his center to meet the Jagadgurū. The Jagadgurū introduced the *mahant* to me, saying he was ‘the Manmohan Singh of the *rasik sampradāya* in Ayodhya’. The Jagadgurū was sitting on his chair and the *mahant* was on the floor near him. Their conversation initially consisted of pleasantries because they were in the *darśan* hall. Later they went in the Jagadgurū’s room and discussed privately.

Another evening, the Jagadgurū went to the camp of a very important Rāmānandī *mahant* from Vrindavan, Balrām Dās, who is a great supporter of the Jagadgurū. On this occasion, Balrām Dās gifted the Jagadgurū with a *siṅh āsan* (lion throne) made of silver. The event participants were mostly lay people, with the exception of a few *mahant*-s from the Gauḍīya and Viṣṇuswāmī *sampradāya*-s who were on the stage.

After this meeting we went to the camp of the Senācārya, the leader of the Akhil Bhārtīye Sen Bhakti Pīṭh, center of the Sen *sampradāya* (Fig. 56). The camp was organized like a little resort, with bungalows for the guests and a richly decorated hall. The *mahant* welcomed the Jagadgurū with highly honors. The Jagadgurū described the *mahant* as ‘his Hanumān’ because the Senācārya’s devotion towards him is similar to the devotion Hanumān offers to Rām. Rāmnaresācārya was also pleasantly surprised to notice that in the pavilion there were paintings and photos to represent the *paramparā*: on one side were paintings of Rāmānanda and Sen and on the other side the images of Rāmnaresācārya and Senācārya.

The Senācārya is a renouncer, whose *bhakti* is focused on *kīrtan* and *bhajan*: after the speech of the Jagadgurū, the Senācārya incited those present to sing and clap, while he sang and danced in front of the Jagadgurū. At the end of the ceremony, the Senācārya collected money and gave it as *dakṣiṇā* to the *Jagadgurū*.

The day after, the young *mahant* of the Piṇḍorī Dhām⁵⁷⁴ came. The Jagadgurū said that they first met in 2010. In the Kumbh Melā occasion the young *mahant* seemed very

⁵⁷³ Gross claims that there are four *tyāgī* subsections: 1) Tyāgī, 2) Bhaktamāl Tyāgī; 3) Terah Bhāi Tyāgī and 4) Mahā-tyāgī. According to his description, the Bhaktamāl Tyāgī-s are the least austere and devote their time to studying Nābhādās’s Bhaktamāl, while the Terah Bhāi Tyāgī-s are more rigorous in their ascetic practice and perform radical austerities. Their name comes from the thirteen original guru-brothers that are supposed to have started this spiritual lineage. Presently, there are thirteen gurus that manage this sub-order. The Mahā-tyāgī-s are the most extreme *sādhu*-s, constantly engaged in the practice of *tapas* and *haṭha yoga* (1992: 153-154).

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Chapter 3, sec. 6.3.

glad to be in the presence of the Jagadgurū and he demonstrated his devotion and submissiveness. He asked some from his entourage to take a photograph of them together in order to immortalize the moment of the Jagadgurū giving him *āśīrvād* (Fig. 54).

That same night we went to the Mahā Tyāgī Chokṛī Khālsā camp because the Jagadgurū was invited to recognize a new *mahant* and to meet a very old *mahā-tyāgī*. The new *mahant* introduced a *mahā-tyāgī*, who was 108 years old and from Ayodhya, and the group of *sādhu*-s talked amongst themselves while they waited for the ceremony to begin. The *mahant* started by performing the *ārtī* for the Jagadgurū, after which he offered the *bhaṇḍārā*, in which all the *tyāgī*-s of the camp and guests participated (Fig. 55). In this case, the Jagadgurū also had a meal with the *mahant* and the *mahā-tyāgī*, to whom he showed great respect. Taking into account the interactions between *mahant*-s described by van der Veer (1988: 126), it is likely that because the Jagadgurū went to recognize the *mahant*, he had to accept his food in order to demonstrate that he supports him. In the religious dimension of the Kumbh Melā, these ceremonies are a means to create links between the Śrī Maṭh and other Rāmānandī centers and branches. Therefore, although the Jagadgurū usually does not eat with other *sādhu*-s, he can accept this type of ‘compromise’ to show his support for the idea that *sādhu* and Brahman are equally adequate for preparing food.⁵⁷⁵ Before leaving the place, the *mahant* gave the Jagadgurū a very generous *dakṣiṇā* that the Jagadgurū did not want to accept at first because he considered it too much in light of the limited resources of the camp. However, they insisted and he finally acquiesced.

After this camp, we moved to the camp of the Śāṅkarācārya of Puri, Jagadgurū Nīścalānanda Sarasvatī (Fig. 57). This was a more private encounter, as the two are close friends who hold each other in esteem.⁵⁷⁶ This visit highly contrasted with other visits: the camp was almost deserted and there was no crowd waiting to welcome the Jagadgurū. We found the Śāṅkarācārya in his room. The Jagadgurū introduced us to him, and then he sat on a bed close to that of the Śāṅkarācārya. Unfortunately, the meeting was monopolized by

⁵⁷⁵ As we have seen in Chapter 3, the issue of food and the rules regarding whether a Rāmānandī can accept food from those inside or outside the *sampradāya* has long been an important matter of debate. The Jagadgurū seems to respect a personal commensality rule for his office rather than for his position as *sādhu* belonging to a specific branch. Similarly he gives priority in eating or a particular treatment only to very important *sādhu*-s or *mahant*. Nevertheless, in the Śrī Maṭh there are not commensality rules.

⁵⁷⁶ In 2000, when the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya organized the celebration for the seven hundredth anniversary from of the birth of Rāmānanda, he went to Purī because it is said that Rāmānanda travelled to that city with Kabīr and Pīpā and Raidās. The Śāṅkarācārya welcomed Rāmnaresācārya and together they went to the three *rath*-s of Bhagvān Jagannāth, Prabhu Balabhadra and Devī Subhadrā to do *pūjā* and *arcana*. Then they performed the *parikramā* together as well. The encounter is reported in the Hindi magazine published by the Śrī Maṭh, *Rāmānanda Prakāś*, and described as an historical event for the two *sampradāya*-s.

the presence of a few journalists who were there to ask the Śaṅkarācārya his point of view about the Ganga movement that was spreading quickly across India at the time.

The next morning, the *tyāgī*-s from the previous night attended the *pravacan*, during which the 108 years-old *mahā-tyāgī* was officially presented to the community of lay people. All the *tyāgī* from the camp came up on the stage.

It is hard to ascertain the level of recognition that the *tyāgī* branch holds for the Jagadgurū, given that the number of *tyāgī*-s and their *āśram*-s is difficult to estimate. Similarly with the *akhārā*-s, although many *nāgā*-s attended the *pravacan*-s of the Jagadgurū, these were mostly from the Digambar *akhārā*. Furthermore, because the Jagadgurū did not visit the *akhārā*-s camp while I was in the *āśram*, I could not evaluate the level of acknowledgment that this branch of the *sampradāya* holds for the Jagadgurū.

During my stay in the Kumbh Melā, I did not have time to visit Rāmbhadrācārya's camp because it was located in Sector 9, which was relatively far from the *Sanḡam* and the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya's place. There were some boards publicizing Narendrācārya, but they were not properly inside the Kumbh area because, as a *tyāgī* from Prayāg told me, the Akhārā Pariṣad did not allow him to set his camp. The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya said he was in the Kumbh for only one week before he had to move for unspecified reasons. I was not able to get any other information about the other Jagadgurū-s, although another Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya was elected in the Kumbh Melā of 2013.⁵⁷⁷

As mentioned in Chapter 4, section 3.5, the Rāmānandī followers of Rāmnareśācārya are *sādhu*-s who respect and honor him as leader of the *sampradāya* for his religious authority and personal charisma, as well as *sādhu*-s who recognize his office because he provides them with economic support.

The position of Rāmnareśācārya as Jagadgurū is only challenged in the *sampradāya* by some individuals belonging to the *akhārā*-s, presumably because of power relations inside the *sampradāya* rather than for ideological reasons. However, confronting the beginning of Rāmnareśācārya Jagadgurū-ship with today's situation, it seemed to me that, year after year, the Jagadgurū is gaining respect and support by ever-increasing sections of the *sampradāya*.⁵⁷⁸ Furthermore, thanks to his friendly demeanor, the Jagadgurū is able to build relationships with representatives of other *sampradāya*-s (as with the Śaṅkarācārya-s, the

⁵⁷⁷ Cf. Chapter 4, sec. 3.3.6.

⁵⁷⁸ I suggest this because, for example, the Jagadgurū initially did not have a proper camp in the Kumbh Melā but now possesses an *āśram*. Secondly, he has renewed friendly relationship with branches of the *sampradāya* that used to oppose him.

Madhvācārya and the Senācārya) based not on political advantage, but on his belief that mutual respect and support among *sampradāya*-s is required to improve the collective dharma.

2.4 From Varanasi to Ayodhya

This section will explore the ways in which the Jagadgurū publicly manifests his status in the *sampradāya*. As we have seen many times, the Jagadgurū's authority is challenged by the presence of other Jagadgurū-s who have received support from the Akhārā Pariṣad and, in general, from those Rāmānandī *akhārā*-s or representatives of the *akhārā*-s who are important in the Pariṣad. During my fieldwork, it seemed to me that the main opponent to Rāmnaresācārya was Gyān Dās, likely for reasons connected to his leadership as president of the Akhārā Pariṣad.

Ayodhya is one of the most important Rāmānandī centers in India, therefore to receive the support of Rāmānandī-s residing there is an important part of establishing one's religious authority. As we have described above, the Jagadgurū has many supporters from the most important and oldest centers of the *sampradāya*, including the Hanumān Gaṛhī and the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā Maṭh.⁵⁷⁹

During his Jagadgurū-ship, Rāmnaresācārya went to Ayodhya only a few times: in the early 1990s, in 2008 and 2014.

The Jagadgurū went to Ayodhya in 2008 for the Śrī Rām Rāmānanda Bhāvābhiṣikta Yātrā, a short *yātrā* (journey)⁵⁸⁰ from March 30 to April 1, 2008 with the purpose of coming up with a unified Rāmānandī plan of action to deal with the Rāmjanmabhūmi issue.⁵⁸¹

On the morning of March 30, the Jagadgurū began the *yātrā* toward the Sarayu river, followed by *mahant*-s and *sant*-s. During the *yātrā*, he visited the most important religious centers and was acclaimed by eminent Rāmānandī-s such as Śrī Nrtya Gopāl Dās (from the Choṭī Chāvnī), Śrī Dharmdās (Hanumān Gaṛhī), *mahant* Śrī Suresh Dās (Digambar *akhārā*), *rasik ācārya* Śrī Janmejaya and Vindugyācārya Śrī Devendrprasādācārya. There is a video of the procession on YouTube that was uploaded in 2014, although it mistakenly labeled the

⁵⁷⁹ However, as already mentioned in Chapter 4, the support of powerful *mahant* heads of important Rāmānandī centers may be not unconditional but nominal and also may not prevent the same *mahant* from also supporting other Jagadgurū.

⁵⁸⁰ Usually the word *yātrā* in a religious context means pilgrimage to a holy place but it is also used in a colloquial way to describe any kind of journey. When the Jagadgurū was not in the Maṭh, *brahmacārī*-s would generally say '*Mahārāj jī yātrā men hain*' to mean he was on tour.

⁵⁸¹ The Śrī Maṭh published a review of this *yātrā* called *Śrī Rām Rāmānanda Bhāvābhiṣikta Yātrā Prakāś* (2008).

date as 2009 instead of 2008.⁵⁸² The video shows the grandeur of the *yātrā*. The Jagadgurū sits in a car transformed in a silver *rath* (chariot), with a canopy decorated with lights and flowers. At the head of the procession, an ascetic demonstrates his swordsmanship; before the *rath*, the road is filled with *pujārī-s*, *gṛhastha-s* and musicians and ascetics holding flags. While the *rath* is marching, people throw streamers from the roofs and ascetics on the side of the chariot hold the *camar* and wave at the Jagadgurū; the cortège is festive with women and men clapping in rhythm to the concert band. The cortège is enriched by lines of *brahmacārin-s* wearing ochre clothes, elephants, horses, and little chariots covered in paintings representing the previous Jagadgurū-s and Rāmānanda.

When the procession reached the Sarayu, the Jagadgurū took his *snān* (bath) along with other ascetics and lay followers. The *yātrā* continued towards the most important Rāmānandī centers in Ayodhya, where the Jagadgurū performed the *mūrti pūjā* and made the *parikramā*. Among the temples visited, special importance was given to the *pūjā* at the Hanumān Gaṛhī in Kanak Bhāvan and at a *rasik* center in Jānkī *ghāṭ*. The following day there was a *sant sammelan*, whose last speaker was Rāmnareśācārya himself. As Uday Pratap Singh writes in a magazine about the *parikramā* called *Prakāś*, the Jagadgurū spoke about Śivarāmācārya and especially about Bhagavadācārya, his desire to establish the Śrī Maṭh in Kāśī and the need to support the Maṭh. Furthermore, according to Singh, the Jagadgurū said: 'For the last twenty years the Śrī Maṭh has not received the cooperation required, but thanks to the mercy of God, today we are united' (2008: 12, my translation).

Given the declared purpose of the *yātrā*, we can deduce from this quote that Rāmnareśācārya was specifically addressing a need for unity among the Rāmānandī *sādhu-s* in facing the Rāmjanmabhūmi issue and ensuring that the temple was finally built after decades of empty speeches by politicians. These words focusing on the need for unity within the *sampradāya* were echoed in the speech of Śrī *mahant* Sureśdās (also reported by Uday Pratap Singh), who also claimed that his guru Rāmcandradās Paramhans was a follower of Rāmnareśācārya and he had never supported other Rāmānandācārya, whom he deemed to be fake. Moreover, he stressed the respect shown for the Jagadgurū by the Digambar *akhārā*.

To better understand this second reference by Sureśdās, we can consult an article by Satish Kumār included in the *Yātrā Prakāś*. Interestingly, he made a connection between this 2008 *yātrā* and a *yātrā* which the Jagadgurū did in 1995 (2008: 15-16). Satish Kumār

⁵⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXU1pm4K61Q> (Accessed: July 2014).

says that since there were political disagreements over the Ayodhya issue,⁵⁸³ the 1995 *yātrā* saw the opposition and ‘conspiracy’ of the Digambar *akhārā*.⁵⁸⁴ For example, the Digambar *akhārā* held their opposition demonstration close to the Tulsī Mānas Bhavan where the Jagadgurū held his main celebration. They intended to stop the Jagadgurū’s *yātrā* and prevent him from reaching his destination. Despite their attempts, however, Kumār says that the Digambar *akhārā* failed and the Jagadgurū was able to give his teachings and perform rituals for the crowd.

The opposition from the Digambar *akhārā* in 1995 also manifested in another way: as we have seen in Chapter 4, section 3.3.1, in August of that same year Rāmbhadrācārya was appointed Jagadgurū by the same Digambar Akhārā.

By contrast, during the 2008 *yātrā* thirteen years later, the Digambar Akhārā did not create any opposition; in fact, its *nāgā*-s participated openly in the *yātrā* and *parikramā*. This explains why the participation of the Digambar Akhārā is purposely stressed in the magazine about the *yātrā*.

It seems likely that, although these *yātrā*-s in Ayodhya could have been related to the Rāmjanmabhūmi issue, they were also used as tools to demonstrate the participants’ support of Rāmānandī centers in Ayodhya. For instance, in 2014 during the Jagadgurū’s *Rajat Jayantī* (25th anniversary of Rāmnaresācārya’s enthronement in the Śrī Maṭh), the Jagadgurū reached Ayodhya on Rām Navamī, the most important religious day in the city. Although I could not go, it has been described to me by those who were in attendance as a majestic event.

The Jagadgurū told me that he is not interested in engaging in competition with anyone, and that he is not concerned about the other Jagadgurū-s as they have never attempted to challenge him. Therefore, the Jagadgurū prefers to show his authority through the organization of events and celebrations.

2.5 Other religious *yātrā*-s

The Jagadgurū usually dwells for a few weeks each year in the Śrī Maṭh and spends the rest of year travelling throughout various cities of north India and a few in the south. As I have already mentioned, I have never followed the Jagadgurū during his travels, but my

⁵⁸³ It is likely that disagreements arose because the Jagadgurū initially did not want to take a specific part in the movement because he considered it to be too political and later he cooperated with the Congress Party in the Ramalaya Trust (Cf. below, Sec. 4.3.6).

⁵⁸⁴ Obviously, as the same Kumar reports, not all the *nāgā*-s of the *akhārā* were against Rāmnaresācārya.

informants have told me that he moves on two occasions: when he organizes highly publicized *yātrā*-s and religious events, and when disciples or *sādhu*-s call him to attend special ceremonies. In this latter situation, he accepts the invitation when all the expenses are covered and if he is sure about the place where he and his entourage will stay.

As Rāmnareśācārya told me, people also sometimes invite him to bless the *mūrti* they have at home or in their local temple or *āśram*. When the Jagadgurū visits a place, he performs *pūjā*-s and gives *āśīrvād* and speeches. These activities also give him the opportunity to find more followers. In addition, he also goes to meet families that are in mourning to explain the meaning of death and to teach them that death should not be a cause for distress. The Jagadgurū may also attend marriages or ceremonies organized by his followers.⁵⁸⁵

The Jagadgurū also organizes religious events in various part of India, such as *yajñā*-s, *parikramā*-s, and *tīrth yātrā*-s, which are economically supported by lay people and other *mahant*-s and hosted in religious centers that belong to both his *sampradāya* and Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva *sampradāya*-s.⁵⁸⁶ The Jagadgurū usually executes *yajñā* in conjunction with lay people. By contrast, Gross states that, when *tyāgī*-s perform the *yajñā*-s, 'householders were not permitted to sit near the sacred fire for fear of defiling the sacrifice.' Instead, these large public performances of *yajñā* are performed by specific *sādhu*-s called *yajñaka*-s (1992: 321).

The Jagadgurū's busy travel schedule has the purpose of not only performing religious ceremonies, but also publicizing new ones and receiving the economic support that he requires. He says that it is necessary to spend time with devotees, to perform *pūjā*, and to teach children how to do *pūjā*, to guide them towards a more devoted and 'dharmic' life style.⁵⁸⁷

The high number of travels in the Jagadgurū's agenda is quite distinctive compared to those *mahant*-s and gurus who have a more local dimension and less resources to travel, as well as compared with those who are heads of well-known centers who do not need to modernize their approach or whose tradition prescribes the presence of the head in the

⁵⁸⁵ Broo affirms that instead in the Gauḍīya *sampradāya* a *saṁnyāsī* guru is not supposed to participate in worldly events (2003).

⁵⁸⁶ For example, a stage of the *yātrā* held in celebration of the seventh centenary of Rāmānanda's birth was hosted by the Śaṅkarācārya of Puri.

⁵⁸⁷ He told me that sometimes during *bhaṅḍārā* he gives two rupees to those children who are able to repeat a *śloka* dedicated to Rām.

center.⁵⁸⁸ However, the Jagadgurū's movements are 'normal' when compared to the traditional image of the wandering ascetics or guru who travels India to spread the dharma through his teachings. Both Śaṅkarācārya and Rāmānanda are said to have done a *digvijaya*, whereby they travelled India in the four directions to transmit their teachings. Furthermore, it is also a normal activity shared by those gurus and *mahant*-s who have a pragmatic or modern attitude.

It is through this constant movement that the Jagadgurū remains in touch with his wide range of lay disciples and followers that are the core of his support and the source of his economic power.

3. The Jagadgurū and the lay people

3.1 Different paths that lead toward the Jagadgurū

As mentioned in the Introduction of this dissertation, Sudhir Kakar claims that, in addition to his other duties, a guru carries out a psychotherapeutic function because he or she may be chosen to fill some emotional vacuum for his followers. Kakar reports the words of Swāmī Satyānand Sarasvatī, which are meaningful to understand this function:

Now in relation with guru, the disciple chooses one *bhava* (emotional state) for himself, according to his personality and needs, and develops that to its fullest potential. If he feels the need for a friend, he should regard the guru as his friend. Or, if he has been lacking parental love, the guru can be his father and mother. [...] It all depends on your basic needs and which area of your personality is the most powerful. Sometimes in adopting a certain *bhava* toward the guru, the disciple tends to transfer his complexes and neurosis too. If he has become insecure due to the suffering meted out to him by harsh parents, then in relationship with guru too, he feels insecure' (1991: 53).

During my fieldwork I heard several stories of how my informants came close to the Jagadgurū and decided to choose him as their guru.

The main distinction that I noticed exists between those whose choice of the Jagadgurū was influenced by their family members or acquaintances, and those whose choice was made on a completely individual basis. In the first case, an individual would choose to become a disciple of the Jagadgurū in order to join a religious group to which members of his or her family, community or neighborhood already belonged. The

⁵⁸⁸ For example, van der Veer claims that the *mahant* of the Hanumān Gaṛhī, who is appointed for life, 'is not allowed to leave the temple on his own accord but only with the written permission of the assembly (panchayat)' (1988: 154).

Jagadgurū still fulfills the role of dispenser of advice to solve inner religious or emotional quests, but the individual is primarily bound to the Jagadgurū through communal bonds.

By contrast, when the choice is completely individual, the person meets the Jagadgurū by chance and decides to follow him for spiritual guidance. This choice discloses a personal need that can be exclusively religious, or can represent a need to fill the vacuum of a familiar role, or can be a means to assert one's personality. In the first situation, the Jagadgurū often later becomes the guru of the family, while in the second and third scenarios the individual often strives to keep his or her religious life separate from his or her family life.

I noticed that this latter situation is more typical among women.⁵⁸⁹ Those women who have a difficult relationship with their husband or family in-law, are unmarried, or who have been abandoned by their husbands, find in the Jagadgurū and in their devotion towards him a male-relief valve which is socially justifiable.

For those whose devotion to the Jagadgurū is more of a private decision, *bhakti* may become the meaning of their lives and the main reason for their daily routine. Some devotees talk about their first meeting with the Jagadgurū as a kind of miracle that changed their life forever. The stories of their relationships with him are highlighted by little events that they think of as miracles performed by the Jagadgurū. The Jagadgurū thus becomes not just a source of comfort but also a source of explanations for live events.

3.2 The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, guru for lay people

The community of followers of the Jagadgurū includes people coming mostly from the northern Indian states of Bihar, Punjab and Rajasthan, but also from Madhya Pradesh and, in the recent years, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Unlike the lay followers of modern gurus, who can be described as belonging to specific sectors of Indian society,⁵⁹⁰ the Jagadgurū's followers are difficult to classify in terms of social grouping, because they are a very heterogeneous group.

The main kind of classification that seems plausible among his followers falls along lines of geographic origin: those who are from cities and those who are from rural areas.⁵⁹¹ Within

⁵⁸⁹ However, it is also possible that, as I spent more time with women my observation is biased by this factor.

⁵⁹⁰ Cf. Chapter 4, sec. 1.

⁵⁹¹ Although it is undeniable that middle class people have more opportunity to travel, I noticed that even peasants travel a lot, although they tend to do either in groups or as individuals when they are quite old and perhaps their presence may not be so necessary in the fields. This does not mean that they become

these two main groups, the social status and form of employment can vary considerably. While many people from villagers are peasants, the urban followers⁵⁹² range from so-called white-collar employees (government officers, journalists, managers, teachers, doctors, computer software personnel, engineers) to working-class people like shopkeepers, drivers, house sellers, and jewelers.

The Jagadgurū obviously also has many wealthy followers, mostly from the business class, who financially back his events and construction projects. The level of economic inequality among his followers was manifested during the Kumbh Melā of 2013 when people from both villages and urban centers resided in the Jagadgurū's *āśram*. There was a kind of hierarchy represented by the rooms, which were assigned to people according to their social status. Wealthier people often stayed in rooms furnished with beds and indoor toilets, usually because they had contributed to their construction. People from the villages stayed in *jhoprī*-s, very basic straw huts with shared lavatories. Some village people were given rooms that were even more basic, lacking both a bed and a bathroom.

Through my conversations with his followers, I ascertained that lay people were attracted by Rāmnareśācārya's charisma as a spiritual leader and teacher rather than by his membership within the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. For example, one disciple told me that she was not linked to the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, and was not even a worshipper of Rām, but that she had become a Rām *bhakta* because she was so impressed by the Jagadgurū that she wanted to be his disciple.⁵⁹³ Similarly, there were others that were already Vaiṣṇava and Rām worshippers but had no connection to the *sampradāya*. They, too, had decided to follow the Jagadgurū simply because they found him to be a compelling spiritual leader. Such followers show us that Rāmnareśācārya has a charisma that allows him to capture the attention of people who are not directly affiliated with the Rām *bhakti*. However, I consider his charisma to be not only personal but also routinized.⁵⁹⁴ In fact, the individual charisma of Bhagavadācārya was associated with the traditional image of Rāmānanda and institutionalized through the creation of the title of Jagadgurū

renouncers, but they do complete religious pilgrimages, sometimes under very uncomfortable conditions, to satisfy their religious quest.

⁵⁹² There are very few disciples from metropolises like Delhi and Mumbai. Those whom I met were upper class people with a very orthodox Brahmanic background. For instance, when the Jagadgurū travels to Delhi, he is hosted by a disciple who possesses a number of apartments in the embassy district.

⁵⁹³ However, she also follows other guru-s who teach different *sādhana*-s, as she wants to have a wider religious approach. (Interview, August 2, 2012).

⁵⁹⁴ I follow the definition of routinization of charisma suggested by Weber. The scholar argues that when a charismatic authority is incorporated into society, it is succeeded by a bureaucracy that is controlled by an established authority or by a combination of traditional and bureaucratic authority (1964: 363-372).

Rāmānandācārya, a standardized narration of Rāmānanda's life story and the reconstruction of the Śrī Maṭh.

The Jagadgurū is very friendly with his devotees, especially those who have followed him for a long time. He appears in daily public meetings, called *darśan*, organized in every city he visits, to allow his followers and other Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s to meet him and talk to him.

3.3 The *darśan* of the Jagadgurū

When the Jagadgurū appears in front of his disciples, everybody stands and tries to touch his feet. Those who arrive later bow at his feet, some lying completely flat on the floor to demonstrate respect. When the Jagadgurū sits, after a gesture of his hand everyone else to sit. The *darśan* can begin.

Darśan literally means 'to see.' The use of this word highlights the value placed on the action of seeing in the Hindu tradition. As explained by Eck, the act of seeing is central to the Hindu religious approach: when Hindus go to the temple, they go to see the image of the deity (2007: 3). As the scholar says:

Darśan is sometimes translated as the "auspicious sight" of the divine, and its importance in the Hindu ritual complex reminds us that for Hindus "worship" is not only a matter of prayers and offerings and the devotional disposition of the heart. Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine. (*ibid*)

For this reason, when people meet their guru or a person famous for his religious achievements, they go not only to hear his teachings but also to see him or her. On the other side, as stressed by Eck, the guru also 'gives himself to be seen by the villagers' (2007: 6). The reciprocity of sight has a special value. In fact, some followers of the Jagadgurū told me that he can understand the *mān* (soul) of an individual simply by looking at him or her.

This brief introduction explains why these meetings are called *darśan*-s: they allow followers to have sight of the Jagadgurū, who is actually thought to possess divine qualities. The Jagadgurū gives two *darśan*-s every day wherever he is, one in the morning and one in the evening. However, during religious celebrations when pilgrims continue arriving, he gives very long *darśan*-s and often appears several times just to meet the newcomers and

give them *āśīrvād* (blessings). One time I witnessed a group of about fifty people come to the Śrī Maṭh from a village near Jodhpur. They told me that the Jagadgurū had first come to their village in 1992 and that they had supported him since then. For this reason they wanted to come and have his *darśan*.⁵⁹⁵ Before leaving, a representative gave the Jagadgurū nine thousands rupees⁵⁹⁶ and five kilograms of typical Rajasthani sweets.

During the *darśan*, lay people and ascetics sit in different places: ascetics are always closer to the Jagadgurū and gathered together (both male and female). However, normally, not many *sādhu*-s participate in his daily *darśan*, and those who do come often remain for only a few minutes. Hence the usual visual distinction among the participants is between men and women.

Lay men and women are the main audience of the Jagadgurū and usually sit on the floor in two separate groups. Before the beginning of the *darśan*, people sit wherever they want. However, as soon as the number of participants increases, a social hierarchy manifests. Those people who are either wealthier or have a closer relationship with the Jagadgurū sit closer to him. All the other devotees sit behind them. By consequence, even high caste people who are poor and come from villages sit behind wealthier people. This inner hierarchy is not designed by the Jagadgurū, but rather is reproduced automatically among lay devotees, from both the two sides. On the one hand, rural and 'common' people are more reserved and they leave the 'better' places for those who 'count' and those whom they know are held in high esteem by the Jagadgurū (for example, any time I reached the *darśan* area, people who knew me always invited me to sit in front). On the other side, wealthy people and habitués are self-assertive and they usually take the spot they think they deserve. The Jagadgurū will tell them where to sit only if there are many people who have to take seat – although usually when he arrives, people have often already sat down. Those who arrive later find a place according to the availability, but if an important person arrives, the Jagadgurū will ask those in the front to make space for the newcomers. However, the Jagadgurū may choose a specific devotee to sit closer to him, to publically reward that person's religious efforts.

The composition of the devotees attending the *darśan* varies. If there are no specific celebrations being held, there may be just a few people from Varanasi in attendance. It is

⁵⁹⁵ Their *darśan* was very quick as they were about to leave for Allahabad. Therefore after receiving the *āśīrvād* of the Jagadgurū they left.

⁵⁹⁶ I counted the money as I was asked by the Jagadgurū. I interpreted this request by the Jagadgurū as his way of demonstrating to me his trust and the recognition of my role and place in the Śrī Maṭh community.

difficult to say, however, which social group represents the core of Rāmnareśācārya's followers, because his ability to address people from all social strata has created an heterogeneous group of supporters, causing the social composition of a *darśan* to vary from day to day and from place to place.

When people come to meet the Jagadgurū, they will give him *mālā*-s and other offerings such as fruits, sweets or money. While *mālā*-s are usually put on the neck, wrists and feet of the Jagadgurū, money and other objects are placed close to his feet. Similar to offers given in a temple to a *mūrti*, the edible *dān* is transformed in *prasād* through the touch of the Jagadgurū and then distributed to the attendees after the *darśan*. If nobody donates food, the Jagadgurū will usually ask one of his *sevak*-s to take sweets kept in the fridge to give to those present. Money will stay on the floor until the Jagadgurū asks someone to pick it up and put it in the donation box.

Before starting any conversation, the Jagadgurū exchanges the usual courtesies, asking personal questions of those in attendance. This creates a familiar and comfortable atmosphere because the Jagadgurū remembers peoples' names and life stories. As he is very accommodating, it is not unusual for devotees or followers to call their friends and relatives from his *darśan* so that they can receive an *āśīrvād* from the Jagadgurū over the phone.

When the Jagadgurū meets his disciples privately in his room, the nature of the meeting is mainly personal. Such a meeting can happen because of a request the disciple has made of the Jagadgurū or because the Jagadgurū has signaled that he wants to talk with that disciple. In this latter case, it is then possible that the disciple is also an economic supporter of the Jagadgurū and they have to discuss financial and managerial issues.

I was only able to attend one private meeting, which occurred when I was at the Mahā Kumbh Melā. The disciple had asked to speak with the Jagadgurū, and, as I had to ask him some questions as well, we went inside together. The approach of the Jagadgurū was more open compared to his manner during the *darśan*, likely because we had conversed many times before, and the disciple was a long-time follower. The Jagadgurū behaved with her in a friendly way. What I gathered from this private meeting and the follow-up conversations I had with multiple disciples is that the Jagadgurū's advice has a great influence on his disciples. The words of the Jagadgurū become decisive for his followers when they are struggling to decide among various options, when they are trying to embark on a new path in life, or if there is something that is troubling the disciples' mind. The Jagadgurū's words have an impact even when the disciple does not completely agree with

his advice.⁵⁹⁷

3.4 The Jagadgurū giving *dīkṣā*

According to the Jagadgurū,⁵⁹⁸ the link between man and God is realized by a guru through the *dīkṣā*.⁵⁹⁹ He told me that *dīkṣā* is a *saṃskāra* and it creates relationships as strong as a marriage. For this reason he does not give *dīkṣā* to everybody. Lay people can ask him for it, but before accepting someone as a disciple, the Jagadgurū takes his time to observe him or her to be sure about whether they would make a good disciple.

The day of the *dīkṣā*, the future disciple cannot eat any food until the *dīkṣā* is complete because he or she has to remain in a holy status. Then, the individual has to perform *pūjā* to God and to the Jagadgurū, to signify that they have a similar role. In fact, in the Rāmānandī *saṃpradāya*, Rām is the first *ācārya*, meaning he has to be considered as both a guru and a *devatā*. After doing the *pūjā* to God, before the ceremony starts, the future disciple has to do the *dīkṣā ārtī* to the Jagadgurū. Then, the Jagadgurū gives the individual the five *saṃskāra*-s, which are the core of the *dīkṣā* ceremony.

The first *saṃskāra*-s is *tilak saṃskāra*, the application on the forehead two streaks of white color, which is meant to represent the footprint of the God Viṣṇu, and a red streak in-between them to represent Sītā. Then the Jagadgurū applies the *mudra saṃskāra*, signs drawn on the arm that represent Rām's bows and arrows. During the *mālā saṃskāra*, the Jagadgurū donates a *tulsī mālā*, because Tulsī is the bride of Viṣṇu and therefore all the Vaiṣṇava-s wear a *tulsī mālā*. The individual shows respect to Viṣṇu, Rām, Kṛṣṇa, Lakṣmī – all the forms that God may take – by placing a bead of tulsī around the neck. The *mālā* is *saṃskārik*, but to wear bracelets with *tulsī* is not – hence someone can wear *tulsī* bracelets

⁵⁹⁷ For example, one informant told me that she asked the Jagadgurū if she should marry a man that she really did not love whose family was very traditional and therefore very strict with women. The Jagadgurū suggested to her that she get married and use the situation to improve her character by becoming less aggressive and more humble and patient. She followed his advices and says that she thinks she has improved her character and become closer to God, although she also says her life has not been easy or joyful.

⁵⁹⁸ I did not attend a *dīkṣā* ceremony during my fieldwork. For this reason, I directly asked the Jagadgurū to describe to me what happens during the ceremony and what it signifies. The information I report here is from our conversation held on November 15, 2013.

⁵⁹⁹ As a comprehensive explanation about *dīkṣā* will lead us far from our main issue, I report here the concise summary given by Heinrich von Stietencron: '*dīkṣā* was a Vedic rite of purification and initiation which was a prerequisite for the *yajamāna* or patron of all major rituals. Its effect was supposed to last only as long as the period of ritual engagement [...] In the early medieval concept of *dīkṣā* there are two forms: (a) initiation of the novice into the religious community by the *ācārya* or *dīkṣāguru*; and (b) the transfer of divine power to a religious specialist who thereby becomes an *ācārya* or *dīkṣāguru* himself. For these two there is no time limit, since the first is meant to last for the whole life [...] and the second is expected to yield liberation while still living (*jīvanmuktī*), either with the initiation or during his lifetime or at the moment of death at the very latest.'(2001: 35).

even without *dīkṣā*.

The next step is the *nām saṁskāra*, the bestowing of a religious name that will contain the suffix *-dās* (slave), *-śaraṇa* (shelter) or *-prāpaṇa* (attainment). However, the *dīkṣā* name not necessarily will replace the secular name.

The last *saṁskāra* is the mantra *saṁskāra*. There are several *dīkṣā* mantras, but the Jagadgurū gives only two. The first, the Rāj mantra, has to be repeated under specific condition: after taking bath, on an empty stomach, sitting in a comfortable position and counting the times of repetition with the *tulsī mālā*. This mantra, *Rām Rāmāyaṇa Namaḥ*, has to be repeated one hundred times per day. The second mantra, *Śrī Rāmaḥ Śaraṇam Namaḥ*, can be repeated without taking a bath and even before eating, which is rare for a mantra.

After giving the *saṁskāra*-s, the Jagadgurū explains the *sāadhanā* to the new disciple. The *sāadhanā* is based on *prapatti* and *bhakti*. Only through *bhakti* to God and total surrender to him (*prapatti*) can a human being obtain *mokṣa*, which is the purpose of all devotions and religious paths. Then he tells the disciple the rules for being a proper lay follower of the Rāmānandī path and *Vaiṣṇava sampradāya*. He mainly stresses the importance of being a vegetarian and lists foods not to be eaten: garlic, onions or food which have a strong smell, food that is burnt and food that is too dry. Disciples especially cannot eat *jūṭhā* food, food that is left uneaten.⁶⁰⁰

According to the Śrī Maṭh trust, the Jagadgurū cannot give *virakta dīkṣā* (initiation into *sannyāsa*)⁶⁰¹ to members of his family. Similarly, they cannot do *sevā* for him.

3.5 The involvement of the Jagadgurū in his devotees' *saṁskāra*-s⁶⁰²

I attended only one *saṁskāra* in the Śrī Maṭh: the celebration of the *nām saṁskāra* of the children of two couples who are disciples of the Jagadgurū. Usually, the *pujārī* celebrates

⁶⁰⁰ The role of food in the Hindu society and religions has been the topic of several academic studies. Among these, Charles Malamoud has given an important contribution. He argues that food has a strong social and religious symbolism. Food can transmit impurities and mealtime represents the most vulnerable time for disciples because that is when they can be contaminated by impure meals. The remains of a meal, then, represent the most impure form of food, because they are not only the leftovers of something (the ingredients) but also the leftover of *someone*. Therefore, the more impure someone is the worse his/their leftovers are – although, in general, all *jūṭhā* food is *per se* infected. Additionally, it is not just impure to eat the leaf-over food, but also to touch it (1994: 19-21).

⁶⁰¹ However, as we have already seen, the Jagadgurū does not give *virakta dīkṣā* to anyone.

⁶⁰² As explained by Rajbali Pandey (1969: 16), the word *saṁskāra*-s is of difficult translation. He stresses that the word has got specific associations through its long history; its meaning might be summarized as 'religious purificatory rites, and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual, so that he may become a full-fledged member of the community'.

the *saṃskāra* and suggests the name to give to the baby; in the Śrī Maṭh, the *pūjā* was performed by the *brahmacārī-s*, but the Jagadgurū decided the names. He said that it is better that the guru name the child because people do not know how to give names, as it is necessary that the baby name contains the word of God, or one of the names of God, in order to be a proper name.

During the ceremony, the Jagadgurū asked the parents the names that were already used in the family. He then left to think. In this time, *brahmacārī-s* celebrated *pūjā* for the kids. At the end, the Jagadgurū reappeared with the names written on a paper. The Jagadgurū asked for a golden ring or jewel for each baby, and he pretended to write the name of the baby with it on a plate of rice. Later on, he gave the fathers a certificate with the name and told them to whisper it in their babies' ears. In the end, both the fathers washed the feet of the Jagadgurū, put saffron powder on the feet nails and offered him *mālā*. The Jagadgurū gave them *prasād* and the ceremony finished.

The Jagadgurū told me that he plays a role in many of the *saṃskāra-s* that mark the life of a Hindu. Marriage is the *saṃskāra* in which the Jagadgurū's advice is more requested. It is not rare for the Jagadgurū to give advice about the partner that one should choose, or to find the right partner for a disciple and later, to suggest how and when the couple should marry.

Once the couple is formed, the Jagadgurū may also organize the celebration of the *garbhādāna*, the *saṃskāra* that is performed before the conception. When a woman is pregnant he organizes other *saṃskāra-s*, especially those given after childbirth, such as *chudakarana saṃskāra*, the first cut of the baby's hair, and the *annaprāsana saṃskāra*, when a baby starts to eat his or her first food after the mother's milk.⁶⁰³

The Jagadgurū often does not attend the actual *saṃskāra*, but he organizes the ceremony, deciding the right time and telling everyone what to do, what to perform and who should perform the *pūjā*. When he is present at a ceremony, his role is mostly that of giving blessings. According to him, it is very important that he is the one to organize *saṃskāra-s* because, in his words, '*jab tak saṃskāra sāhī nahī hongē tab tak samāj sāhī nahī hogā*' (until *saṃskāra-s* will not be performed properly, the society will not be right).

⁶⁰³ He told me that this *saṃskāra* is very important because the *pūjārī* has to write the name of God on the baby's tongue with honey, so that the name of God is the first word the baby says. After this, the baby's father says the name of God in the baby's ear.

3.6 The paternal figure of the Jagadgurū and the ways he supports his followers in practical matters

Given the role that the Jagadgurū has in the lives of his devotees, they see him not only as a guru but as a fatherly figure who is ready to support and advise them in practical matters in addition to spiritual ones. However, this fatherly identification depends on the age and the gender of the follower. For younger followers, this is an easy identification and often they call him *Bābā jī* (respected father). Furthermore, they often ask and tell him things that are usually discussed with a father: they might ask him for moral support for an exam and then inform him about the result; they also might ask him for help in looking for a job or a future spouse.

Those who are of the same age as the Jagadgurū see him as father of the religious community they belong to,⁶⁰⁴ but for them the Jagadgurū is Mahārāj jī (great king) or Swāmī jī (master). However, followers of all ages⁶⁰⁵ see in the Jagadgurū a supporter who can help them with practical issues.

The requests from adults are frequently economic in nature, and especially concern medical needs. For example, during the first *darśan* I attended, a follower came to thank the Jagadgurū for paying for the medical treatment for his daughter who was about to die. In the same day, another man asked the Jagadgurū for money for his father's treatment.⁶⁰⁶

Another economic help often requested is for the organization of marriages. Devotees who live in Varanasi sometimes ask for a place where they can celebrate the wedding. In that case, the Śrī Vihāram is made available, but for all other situations, and especially in the case of very poor people, the Maṭh may afford every expense, even for the clothes.

Another request from followers may be economic support for studying. During a *darśan* that I attended, the Jagadgurū gave a check to a man who needed money to allow his sons to study. As the number of *brahmacārī*-s in the Maṭh demonstrates, the Jagadgurū is very sensitive to the cause of education, as he regards studying an important step in the life

⁶⁰⁴ It is common for someone belonging to a religious community to be recognized as a family member: the men consider the women to be their sisters, and the women see the men as their brothers. However, even in this case, age matters: hence young followers will recognize the older followers as uncles and aunties, and the latter will address the younger as sons or daughters.

⁶⁰⁵ Although a devotee or a follower is not a disciple because he or she has not taken *dikṣā*, his or her external behaviors with the Jagadgurū are still similar of disciples. In the same ways in public the Jagadgurū behaves with all of his followers and disciples in the same way.

⁶⁰⁶ However, it has to be added that people believe that the treatment will surely be effective because they received the money from the Jagadgurū, together with his *āśīrvād*.

of an individual. For this reason, he is always suggesting his followers to make their sons and daughters study, and when the children of his devotees do well in school he praises them publicly and holds them up as examples for other people.

The Jagadgurū also economically supports families without income. For example, once in the Maṭh I met a woman who had been abandoned by her husband. The Jagadgurū is taking care of her and her two sons, and he helped her daughter to marry as well. That day, the woman and her daughter came from Allahabad to thank the Jagadgurū and obtain his blessing for the future marriage. The Jagadgurū described the girl as 'a daughter of the Maṭh', and performed a little *pūjā* for her, applying *candan* on her forehead. Padmānabham⁶⁰⁷ was there reciting mantra-s and before she left, he gave her five hundred rupees.

Given the frequency with which the Jagadgurū supports his disciples, it is likely that he funds his devotees in several other ways that I did not personally observe.

The examples that I have listed represent the most frequent forms of practical care that he provides to lay members.⁶⁰⁸

Because he is the father of a religious community, his role encompasses both that of protector and disciplinarian of his followers. To give a little example, once we were going to the Bindu Mādhav temple and the Jagadgurū happened to come across a Brahman who had been bothering a young girl devotee of the Śrī Maṭh who had brought the matter to the Jagadgurū's attention. As soon as the Jagadgurū saw him he snatched his arm and began scolding him loudly. He was visibly angry with the man and had him sent to the Vidhān Bābā for, I assume, receiving heavy disciplinary action.⁶⁰⁹

The way followers demonstrate their respect and devotion towards the Jagadgurū is through economic support and *sevā*. The next section will explore this theme more closely.

⁶⁰⁷ See Chapter 5, sec. 4.1., p. 283.

⁶⁰⁸ Gross gives a comprehensive description of the relationship between *sādhu*-s and householders. He identifies the householders as clients of the *sādhu*-s, who help them resolve a wide range of personal problems that Gross schematizes in eight cases: '1) religious teachings and the transmission of traditional cultural values and religious ideology; 2) medical and psychological advice; 3) healing and exorcism; 4) mediation in interpersonal conflicts and the arrangements of marriages; 5) help in business ventures and aid in finding employment; 6) advice and intervention in legal and criminal proceedings; 7) counsel and involvement in village level, state, and national politics; and 8) entertainment and the spread of local news and gossip (1992: 167-168)'. With the exception of proper medical advices, healings and exorcisms, and the spread of gossip, there are many similarities between the role of the Jagadgurū and that of a more common *sādhu* with society. The range of situations in which the help of a *sādhu* can be useful for a householder demonstrates why religious figures have an important hold over the Indian population, and how their role fits within society.

⁶⁰⁹ It seems that this kind of corporal punishment is a prerogative of the Vidhān Bābā, who sometimes uses slaps to teach the *brahmacārī*-s to respect the rules.

3.7 Economic support and *sevā*

While the Jagadgurū is a dispenser of various types of support, he is also economically supported by the religious and lay communities. In fact, although sometimes other Rāmānandī centers provide the Jagadgurū with monetary gifts, the real sponsors of his religious activities are lay followers, some of whom can afford to give consistent donations. These donations are part of the *sevā* of devotees and disciples. In fact, it is the duty of a disciple to support his or her guru with body (*tan*), mind (*mān*) and money (*dān*).

Devotees who can supply a consistent *dān* (donation) are highly appreciated, and are often exalted by the Jagadgurū for their generosity and devotion. Furthermore, the name of the donors who have contributed to the realization of an event or the construction of a structure are always listed in the pertinent brochures in a specific paragraph called *samarthak* (supporter).

As we have seen before, material concerns do play some role within the Jagadgurū's Śrī Maṭh community. Even the kind of the *sevā* that devotees are assigned to carry out during their stay in the Jagadgurū's *āśram* seems to vary according to the level of economic support they provide the institution. People who economically support the Maṭh will not be requested to do labor-intensive work (such as peeling potatoes). Instead, they may, if they wish, serve other people during the *bhaṇḍārā*.

During *bhaṇḍārā*, lay devotees display a wide range of attitudes toward commensality rules. This arises from the fact that many people follow Rāmānandī as their guru, rather than having any commitment to the values of the *sampradāya* as a whole. Such followers thus prefer to maintain their personal eating habits. For many, it is important that food is prepared by Brahmans, whereas other devotees are not even vegetarian. In circumstances where many lay devotees eat or sit together, it seemed to me that tension was based not on difference of caste, but rather on distinctions of social background. Wealthy people did mind mixing with village people, even if the latter were Brahmans. In fact, as already said, social status appears to be the most important hierarchy among the devotees of the Jagadgurū. Those who are wealthier also have more chances to be chosen by the Jagadgurū to accompany him during his visits to other religious places. Being chosen represent a great honor and many devotees crave for it.⁶¹⁰

The *sevā* of disciples often takes the form of providing temporary help in the Śrī

⁶¹⁰ Sometimes, the Jagadgurū takes his supporters along to other Rāmānandī centers, so that if required, they can also financially assist these other places.

Maṭh: along with with Gopāl Singh, who lives in the Śrī Vihāram, there are other disciples from Varanasi who perform small services according to the Jagadgurū's requests.⁶¹¹ Everything the Jagadgurū asks is realized. If he drinks water, he will ask his *sevak*-s to bring a tray and some water to wash his hands before and after drinking. Similarly, if he complains of a physical ache, devotees, *brahmacārī*-s or other *sādhu*-s will massage him. Everything done in the Maṭh by devotees is regarded as *sevā*: from the accomplishment of a simple request, to sweeping the floor, to placing decorative garlands around the building.

Everywhere the Jagadgurū travels, there are people completely at his disposal. Most of these people are middle-aged men in retirement or middle-aged married women.⁶¹² Sometimes devotees of the Śrī Maṭh form committees in their city to organize events or to donate something to the Jagadgurū.⁶¹³ One time, a man from the city of Surat in Gujarat showed me his identity card as devotee of the Śrī Maṭh. He explained to me that the card officially recognized him as a member of the Śrī Maṭh *parivār* (the family of the Maṭh) who could perform *sevā* for it. He wore this identity card as a necklace. Like this man, I have seen people from other cities with cards that displayed their religious belonging. For example, the Jagadgurū said that he has the financial support of an industrialist named Mr. Agrawal in the city of Jaipur who finances all of the ceremonies for him when he travels to that city. The Jagadgurū and his entourage stay in this man's home, and the man handles all of the logistics of the ceremony, including the flux of devotees coming to his place to meet the Jagadgurū.⁶¹⁴

In addition to the organization of religious celebration, his devotees are very concerned about the organization of Rāmnareśācārya's *jayantī* (birthday) celebrations. For his sixtieth birthday, his followers published a collection of *bhajan* for him titled *Śrī Maṭh Dhām kī Prastuti, Gurū Pyār ke Sāgar Hai*, and a young female disciple made a video called *Rāmhi Keval Prem Piyārā*. The birthday of the Jagadgurū that was celebrated during the

⁶¹¹ For example, another disciple of the Jagadgurū, who is often present is mister Mishra, who once helped locate all of the books shop in Old Varanasi at the Jagadgurū's request.

⁶¹² Actually, it seems that the number of female followers of the Jagadgurū is higher than that of male followers. This may occur because most women do not work outside the home and thus have more time to devote to the Jagadgurū.

⁶¹³ For example the group that organizes and supports the cultural events in and near the Śrī Maṭh (like the Śarad Pūrṇimā Mahostav) is composed of a somewhat restricted group of ten people. Others are sometimes allowed to join the group. The organizers will recommend some artists for a given event to the Jagadgurū, who has the last decision. The cost of the event is then equally shared between the group and the Jagadgurū. However, they can also help other organizers in other cities if necessary.

⁶¹⁴ As we have seen in Chapter 4, businesspeople, and of the merchant castes in particular, play a critically important role in financially supporting gurus in contemporary India, which in turn gives them a particular level of religious influence and social status.

Mahā Kumbh Melā 2013 included a full daily program characterized by a morning celebration which was broadcast on television, a proper religious *pūjā* performed by *brahmacārī-s* and *pūjārī-s*, and a further evening program completely coordinated by lay people.

4. Rāmnareśācārya's teachings, thoughts and behaviors

As we have seen in Chapter 4, at the beginning of his career Rāmnareśācārya was a teacher who planned to continue that role for the rest of his life. Therefore, he has a strong positive attitude toward teaching and often gives religious speeches (*pravacan*) and lessons based on his scholarly readings of religious texts. He is also very communicative and has a predisposition for talking with his devotees about a wide range of topics. In this paragraph I present the main issues he explores during his *darśan* and *pravacan*, and I will also explain how his teachings are actualized through his behaviors and activities.

4.1 Teachings during *darśan* and *pravacan*

As I have already presented a description of the *darśan*, here I will illustrate the *pravacan*. As Gross has pointed out, *pravacan* is a 'popular ascetic ritual performance and a more effective medium for the mass dissemination of religious ideology and exoteric spiritual teaching. It is by far the most important type of ascetic public performance and is one of the main means of formal contact between sādhus and laity' (1992: 322). As a ritual structure, the *pravacan* has a proper setting and organization. I use here the description given by Gross because it summarizes in a comprehensive way the elements that constitute all the *pravacan-s* I attended:

- (1) a period of devotional music often precedes the lecture providing a mood of piety; (2) the ascetic preacher on taking his seat on a raised platform is garlanded with flowers and incense is lighted before him in the manner of worshipping a deity; (3) he then utters a long series of mantric prayers to the gods asking for their blessings and protection and invoking their presence in the assembly; (4) the talk itself invariably centers on the teachings contained in a sacred scripture; (5) the ascetic giving the discourse is venerated as a saint spiritually imbued with the power to reveal the word of God; and (6) at the conclusion of the *pravacan* more invocations and prayers are chanted with the audience responding and blessing are bestowed on all who have gathered for the discourse. At that time many people come up to touch the feet of the teacher and receive

personal blessing from him while deposing offerings into a special collection box on the podium. (1992: 323)

Therefore, the main difference between a *darśan* and a *pravacan* lies in the general informality of the first and the formality of the second. *Darśan*-s have a more colloquial atmosphere, and during it the Jagadgurū can talk about any topic that might interest the people present, while *pravacan*-s, as events organized with a specific purpose, are more focused on religious teaching. Quite often, the contents of the Jagadgurū's *pravacan*-s are summarized in *bhāga*-s (chapters) on Internet blog pages.⁶¹⁵

Rāmnareśācārya is an exceptional speaker. During *darśan*-s he is able to entertain the audience with talks full of examples from everyday life. He does not impose his figure as authoritarian but rather supports dialogue, listens to other peoples' opinions or knowledge about topics outside of his religious field. This approach makes him seem more 'human' and approachable even though he is considered by some of his devotees to be a kind of God on earth.

As explained to me by professor Udai Pratap Singh, his dialogical approach is especially possible when the interlocutor is not a disciple. Pratap Singh said that although he has followed the Jagadgurū for years, he has not yet taken *dīkṣā* because of his research on the *sampradāya*. He has to remain a follower without *dīkṣā* because his scholarly approach would be compromised if the Jagadgurū were his guru.⁶¹⁶

Although the tone between *pravacan* and *darśan* is slightly different, the content is quite similar and can be divided between religious issues on the one hand and social and political issues on the other. In the next section I will summarize the Jagadgurū's main teachings and, in order to better explain his position I will add information he provided me during our conversations, and the description of those activities through which he enacts his own teachings.

4.2 Religious issues

One of the main religious topics that the Jagadgurū likes to discuss is the Rāmānandī

⁶¹⁵ Cf. below, Sec. 4.3.7.

⁶¹⁶ Gross stresses the consequence and limitation of taking *dīkṣā*. After he took *dīkṣā* to be more involved in *sādhu* life, he realized that the subordinate position he initially held as a researcher became more established. Gross reports: 'When I was with the guru or any other older sadhu for the matter, I had to act deferentially toward him, follow his instructions, and serve him [...] I had to conform to certain regulations and abide by the institutionalized routine of discipline [...] I was under a greater obligation than before my initiation' (1992: 96).

sampradāya. In fact, not all the Jagadgurū's followers have a clear idea about who Rāmānanda was or about the history of the *sampradāya* in general. The fact that there are several branches is understood as a normality of Indian asceticism, so they do not delve further into the matter. Lay people are not able to distinguish among different branches – the most that they understand is the fact that other branches exist and that the Jagadgurū is in contact with all the various groups. To improve this lack of information, the Jagadgurū publishes book about the founder of the *sampradāya* and its history, and often uses Rāmānanda's life story and the example of Rāmānandī ascetics to explain the meaning and the purpose of Rām *bhakti*. For this reason, he always gives a space to Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s during *sammelan*-s and *pravacan*-s to demonstrate their religious insights on the topic of the Rām *bhakti*.

Obviously, *bhakti* is an ever-present topic, not only because it is the core of the teaching of the *sampradāya*, but also because it is recognized as the only means to reach God in the present historical period. Rāmnaresācārya usually does not discriminate between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa bhakti*, arguing they are two parallel paths that lead to the same aim, although using different tools. According to him, this is a necessary difference that takes into consideration the different natures of individuals, their different skills, interests and attitudes. *Bhakti* is based on *prem* (love) towards God, which leads to service, or *sevā*. Through the *sevā* to both God and people, the purpose of life is achieved. The Jagadgurū supports the ideas in his speeches by referencing religious texts such as *Śāstra*-s,⁶¹⁷ *Veda*-s and the *Bhāgavata Gītā*, as well as work by pious individuals like Tulsīdās and other *Sant*-s. During more colloquial talks, he gives examples from every day life and keeps the content of his speeches simple and easy-to-understand. He aims to address the common man and to be clearly understandable by everyone.

When the Jagadgurū organizes longer events, like his *cāturmās* or the Kumbh Melā, he integrates the public reading and explanation of holy texts into the daily schedule.⁶¹⁸ In this occasion, his passion for teaching is clearly visible. He explains the same sentence several times to ensure his audience's comprehension of its meaning. The books he chooses to read depend on the context. During the Kumbh Melā, he focused on a texts on *bhakti*, whereas in Rām Navamī he read the *Adhyātmya Rāmāyaṇa*. He always enriches the

⁶¹⁷ According to him, society can become more dharmic and positive, if more people followed the *Śāstra*-s under the guidance of a guru.

⁶¹⁸ The Jagadgurū also gives private teachings to *brahmacārī*-s who are studying *Śāstra*-s. When the Jagadgurū instructs *brahmacārī*-s, he does it in his role of *ācārya* and *guru-ācārya*.

explanation with references to other texts for the purposes of both comparison and clarification. In this context, the Jagadgurū goes deep in philosophical and theoretical explanations that not are always followed by those present, as the themes are sometimes difficult to understand for those who are not educated. In fact, during these lessons one is more likely to find *brahmacārī*-s, who usually do not attend *darśan*-s and rarely stay for entire *pravacan*-s, as well as *sādhu*-s, who will concentrate on taking notes on the speech. During his lessons, the Jagadgurū encourages questions. It is also not unusual for him to ask *paṇḍit*-s or knowledgeable scholars in attendance for confirmation or further explanation about some topic.

As we have already mentioned, one of the aims of the Jagadgurū is to create a clear identity for Rāmānanda and for the *sampradāya* to present to lay people. Because he wants to make the name of Rāmānanda ‘as famous as that of Gandhi,’ he publicizes the *sampradāya* and Rāmānanda through an intense publishing activity that I will briefly describe in the next section.

4.2.1 Publishing activity

The Jagadguru publishes four types of works: books, collections of articles selected by the Jagadgurū, monographs by authors who submit their work to the Jagadgurū, and magazines about the activities of the Śrī Maṭh.

The works are printed in various locations – including Jaipur, Varanasi, and Bhopal – depending on the supply of his devotees who have printing houses or who know someone in the field. The publishing activity began as soon as the Jagadgurū obtained his title. Since 1988, almost 23 books have been published,⁶¹⁹ some in multiple editions. Over the years, the number of works published has increased to such an extent that from January to June

⁶¹⁹ I write here the list of all the works published that I found in the journal for the Rajat Jayantī, plus those titles I could find in the library of the Maṭh. For this reason, those titles copied from the journal are missing the publishing date, as it was not provided: *Kincjāpyam* by ācārya Rāmmūrti Tripāṭhī; *Rāmtāpnīyopaniṣad* ācārya Murlīdhar Pānday; *Jagadgurū Śātkam*, Śivjī Upādhyāy; *Etiḥāsik Ālok men Kāśī aur Svāmī Rāmānandācārya*, Avadh Bihārī Khare; *Svāmī Rāmānand ke śiṣya our Uplabdhiuān*, Doc. Sudhākar Panday; *Rāmsahastranām*, Jagannāth Śāstrī Telang; Śrī Maṭh Stutikusumānjli, Śrī Jagannāth Śāstrī Telang; *Śrī Maṭh Smārikā*, February 1989; *Amṛt Kalāś*, May 1992; *Śrī Rām Rakṣā Stotram*, July 2000; *Śrī Maṭh Prakāś*, February 2001; *Rāmānand Rāmras Māte*, January 2001; *Rāmānand Vijay (Mahākāvya)*, 2001; *Tīrthraj Prayāg aur Kumbh Mahāpurv*, 2007; *Swāmī Rāmānand the Pioneer of Rām Bhakti*, 2009; *Gurū Milyā Rāmānand*, February 2010; *Haridvār Samagr*, 2010; *Śrī Sampradāy (Rāmāvat): Vividh Aayām*, *Śrī Maṭh Samagr (Pratham Khaṇḍa)* 2011; *Paricay, Pravacan our Śrī Maṭh: Duhkh, Kyom Hotā Hai?*, August 2012; *Śrī Rāmānand Caritr Sāgar*, October 2012; *Śrī Rāmānand Satsaī*, February 2013; *Śrī Rāmcaritmānas*, Prof. Prabhunāth Dvivedii; *Śrī Vaiṣṇava Matābjbhāskar Vyākya Sahit*, ācārya Jayakānt Sarm; *Santon ke Sant Kavi Rāmānanda*, Doc. Uday Pratap Singh; *Haridvār Samagr*, Doc. Uday Pratap Singh. Some of these works have a synthetic description in the Rajat Jayantī journal (2014: 27-32).

2014, the Śrī Maṭh had already published quite a few titles.

This development is clear evidence of the increase in the number of supporters of the Jagadgurū and, as consequence, of the fund that he is able to obtain. In addition to books, a few magazines have been printed sporadically as well. Usually they are published in conjunction with a special event organized by the Jagadgurū, such as the *Rāmānanda Prakāś* for the seven hundredth anniversary of Rāmānanda's birth in 2000, the *Śrī Rām-Rāmānanda Bhāvābhiṣikta Yātrā Prakāś* for the Jagadgurū's journey to Ayodhya in 2008, or the *Rajat Jayantī Mahotsav* for the 25th anniversary of Rāmnareśācārya's Jagadgurū-ship.

The common topics of all these works are Rām *bhakti* and especially Rāmānanda, his teachings and his literary production. There are no texts linked to a more modern and 'commercial' form of religious publishing. The traditional texts that are printed by the Maṭh are part of the Rām *bhakti* background (as the *Rāmcaritmānas*). There is no effort to amplify the scope of the publishing to catch more lay devotees, as Rāmnareśācārya is focused on the core of what is supposed to be the original teaching of and for the *sampradāya*.

4.3 Social and political issues

As Rāmnareśācārya is attentive to the news circulating in India, he frequently speaks about social and political issues during his *darśan*-s, sometimes reflecting about the news and sometimes replying to questions from the audience about an issue.

Because it is impossible to write down all the topics that Rāmnareśācārya speaks about, here I will report his considerations about some themes that are particularly sensitive in India, through which we can delineate Rāmnareśācārya's stance on social and political issues.

4.3.1 Women's Issues

As dealing with women's issues in India opens a range of topics for discussion, I will focus here on those issues that are most prominently debated in public circles, and that the Jagadgurū speaks about most frequently in his *pravacan*. Furthermore, I will describe his general attitude and behaviors about female devotees.

Female abortion. During the Kumbh Melā, when his *pravacan*-s were broadcast on television, the Jagadgurū demonstrated his concern about the problem of the abortion of female fetuses, declaring that he would not accept followers who commit female

infanticide. He described the practice as a shame for India and found the source of problem to lie in the wedding culture, as people could not afford to marry off a daughter. According to him then, the government should give funds for the wedding of girls. He declared the practice of sex-selective abortion a kind of domestic terrorism against women.

Rape. With regards to the topic of rape, Rāmnareśācārya focused on the values of modern culture spreading on television, which he viewed as immoral and the motivating factor behind rape. Using rhetoric that is popular in India, he complained about modern female clothing. He claimed that women should give more attention to their integrity, stressing that the family is responsible for their daughter's behavior as well. He also stressed that parents should pay more attention to the education of their daughters. His point of view is in line with that of many religious leaders that have publicly discussed the issue. He views the problem of rape, then, as something that women should bring upon themselves.

Female empowerment. Rāmnareśācārya's attitude toward the issue of rape notwithstanding, he is vocal about his support for women, and he values women who are independent. However, he does not appreciate women wearing western clothes (although he does not complain if his male devotees wear them) and he does not teach an emancipatory path to those female disciples who live in conventional families and who are therefore not supposed to be independent. He believes that they should make their families a priority and therefore listen what is suggested to them by their family (in their role as daughters) and family-in-law (in their roles as wives⁶²⁰ and mothers). This stems from the great importance Rāmnareśācārya gives to the idea of family and respect towards family members.

Female asceticism. In the religious field, as he belongs to a tradition which has opened the ascetic path to women, he sustains the possibility for women to become ascetics. In fact he always emphasizes the devotional skills of women and their ability to follow a devotional path better than men. However, according to the Jagadgurū, the ascetic path should be undertaken under specific circumstances because, as stated in the *Dharma Śāstra*, the female nature is different from the male one, and women are more inclined to family life and love rather than a life of renunciation. Nevertheless, a life as a renouncer is the best path to follow for women who cannot get married and widows, meaning women who do not have any male supporters and therefor can suffer from social stigma.

⁶²⁰ He supports the idea of woman as *pativrata*, meaning someone who is dedicated to her husband as her master.

The Jagadgurū encourages education for girls and their taking an active part in social life (especially if dedicated to religious activities), but only with the support of their family. For this reason, the Jagadgurū can be helpful in situations such as convincing a family to allow a girl to go to another city to study.

In the context of the Indian religious environment, the Jagadgurū's attitude towards women's position in the society is similar to that of the majority of the religious leaders and especially female gurus, although less conservative than Hindu nationalist organization like the Durga Vahini.⁶²¹ As argued by Clémentin-Ojha (1998: 35), as a consequence of their non-conventional status,⁶²² female gurus do not use asceticism as a platform to criticize aspects of Hindu society.⁶²³ Instead, they often encourage people to respect their *svadharma*, defending the caste system and the orthodox values of Hinduism. Several centers supported by female gurus have the purpose of improving girls' education for the purpose of giving them traditional religious training that can provide them with the opportunity for a good marriage or the chance to continue an ascetic way of life. In fact, their religious/spiritual imprint has specifically ascetic characteristics, based on the instructions given by the female gurus who established the *pith*-s and lead them.

The purpose of a religious-social organization such as the Durga Vahini is to encourage women to participate in prayer meetings and in cultural activities, while dedicating themselves to physical, mental and intellectual development. However, as T.B. Hansen claims, this development is a controlled emancipation. Hansen identifies two strategies taken by Hindu nationalists regarding women: 'one asserts the primacy of motherhood with respect to women's position in society, the other attempts to suture gender conflicts through the controlled emancipation of women under the protective canopy of Hindu nationalist organization' (1994: 82). In fact, Amrita Basu also underlines that 'Hindu women's activism has not necessarily challenged patterns of sexual inequality within the

⁶²¹ The Durgā Vahini is the women's wing of the VHP organized in the 1990s by Sādhvī Ritambhara.

⁶²² According to Brahmanic sources, women are not supposed to engage in the ascetic life of the renouncer. As the issue is a complex one, for more comprehensive explanations see Clémentin-Ojha (1990; 1998); Pechilis (2004); Denton (2004); Charpentier (2010).

⁶²³ Charpentier presents the example of one woman named Anandamurti Guruma who is the exception to this rule in her study on seventy female gurus. Charpentier says that Guruma: 'advises parents to make their daughters strong and powerful in order to make them self supportive. She states that this can be done in two ways: first, through education, and second, through professional training eventually leading to financial independence. [...] She also advises parents to let their daughters train martial arts in order to acquire inner strength and be able to defend themselves against, street Romeos [...] She refuses to reproduce cultural values, thus openly challenging conventional Indian standards. She consciously uses her socially sanctioned position as spiritual master in subversive ways, thus challenging all forms of oppression that support patriarchy.' (2010: 256)

home and the world' (1998: 179). The mentality that lies at the core of such movements is meaningfully synthesized by the words of Mridula Sinha (President of the Women's Wing of the BJP) mentioned by Amrita Basu: 'For Indian women, liberation means liberation from atrocities. It doesn't mean that women should be relieved of their duties as wives and mothers. Women should stop demanding their rights all the time and think instead in terms of their responsibilities to the family' (1998: 178).

The Jagadgurū's rhetoric about women could be defined as a kind of controlled emancipation as well, because he is for the empowerment of women within the confines of a path that respects the wishes of the woman's family and that follows Brahmanic customs. Nevertheless, because he also accepts a more individualistic lifestyle for women (according to the freedom conceded by their families to them) and he does not criticize, but rather supports, the presence of women in higher religious positions, his stance is still more progressive than that of nationalist Hindu movements and some female gurus.

4.3.2 Considerations about the 'Western World'

Rāmnareśācārya is always informed about current events in India and the world, which he tries to connect in tangible ways to his teachings based on Rām *bhakti*.

The Jagadgurū's stance towards 'Western culture' is typical of conservative Hindus, whose idea of the West is based mostly on Hollywood gossip magazines and American and European political scandals. He is quite critical of the United States, and uses Americans in particular as examples that Indians should not follow. For example, once the Jagadgurū was talking about the need of truth, saying that everyone, no matter how much power they have, should tell the truth. He gave the example of former President Richard Nixon and his involvement in the Watergate scandal that led him to resign as a way of illustrating the consequences of lying. Then, to give an example of misuse of personal power, he talked about Bill Clinton and his illicit affair with Monica Lewinsky. He used Clinton's case as an example of disrespect towards a wife. In general, if Rāmnareśācārya criticizes foreigner politicians, he specifically uses American presidents as an example.

This disapproving approach is also directed towards Christianity, which, according to the Jagadgurū, is not a religion based on equality. To explain this position, he says that although Christian centers give food to poor people, they generally will not host rich people in the same space, whereas the kitchen of the Śrī Maṭh is open to anyone, without distinction. Furthermore, he said that in the past black people could not become Christian

priests, and for this reason, a black President (meaning Barack Obama) could only be elected in the 21st century. The Jagadgurū uses these considerations, which demonstrate a simplistic knowledge of Christian religion or Western society, to introduce comparisons with Rāmānanda that glorify his teachings and the positive examples they represent. The Jagadgurū sees the West as more barbarian because people are less attentive to rules of purity, mostly non-vegetarian and, he concludes, therefore more aggressive and immoral.

Many questions the Jagadgurū and other *brahmacārī*-s asked me were about whether people in Western countries really do marry and divorce so easily, whether couples can live together without marriage and whether they do not take their families into consideration when making decisions. Any time I tried to explain to them that the reality was much more complex, they looked at me with a surprised but skeptical look.

Hence, the idea of the West presented by the Jagadgurū is based on a superficial analysis of what he comes to know through newspapers, lacking any interest in obtaining a more nuanced understanding. In his view, the West is reigned by materialism, superficiality and dominion over others, and therefore constitutes an example that India should not follow in shaping its society.

4.3.3 Considerations about caste

Following the teaching of Rāmānanda, the Jagadgurū supports the open path of *bhakti* for all, and the admittance of untouchables and women into the *sampradāya*. He told me that all the Rāmānandī *sādhu*-s are on the same level and that, therefore, there are no castes among them.⁶²⁴ In fact, after joining the *sampradāya*, a *sādhu* acquires the caste of God. Consequently, even the *jāti* of an untouchable becomes that of God. For this reason, he said, it is not unlikely for a low caste *sādhu* to become the *mahant* of a Rāmānandī center.

The Jagadgurū also admitted that a Rāmānandī may decide to differently behave with ascetics who follow a *sāadhanā* or lifestyle that he considers less pure than his own discipline, in order to maintain his personal purity.

As we have already mentioned in Chapter 5, in *āśram*-s managed by the Jagadgurū, Rāmānandī-s usually sleep and eat in the same communal space, even sharing with *sādhu*-s from other *sampradāya*-s. I have described this liberal approach as an innovation originates from the modernity of the center and from the focus placed on implementing the

⁶²⁴ The caste issue has been an issue for the *sampradāya* for centuries and remains a source of debate today because not all of the branches of the *sampradāya* believe in equal treatment and access for people of all castes.

teaching of Rāmānanda. Therefore, the Jagadgurū can support behaviors that are as liberal as the supposed teaching of Rāmānanda.

However, to stress this issue again, the Jagadgurū distinguishes clearly between social and religious fields. For the religious field, he supports and encourages an egalitarian approach towards *bhakti* – however, he distinguishes the religious path of an ascetic from that of a lay person, as they cannot intermingle.⁶²⁵ Moreover, on the social field, he does not believe in the equality of people; rather, he supports the social value of the *varṇāśrama dharma*, and the view that different castes have different roles in society. However, at the same time, he encourages the idea of mutual respect between the classes and the improvement of the rights and opportunities for all castes and classes, especially untouchables.

4.3.4 The Jagadgurū on untouchability

When the Jagadgurū accomplished the reconstruction of the Śrī Math, he ordered for a famous verse attributed to Rāmānanda to be engraved on the wall of Pañcagaṅgā Ghāṭ: *Hari ko bhaje so hari ka hoi / jat-pat puche nahi koi* (If you love God, you belong to God. Do not ask about caste.)

This phrase is considered to be the main teaching of Rāmānanda, and is therefore always emphasized by the Jagadgurū, especially among lay people. It is exalted in books published by the Śrī Math for its progressiveness and importance. Rāmānanda is portrayed as a forerunner of Gandhi, a reformist whose main purpose was to bring a new awareness among untouchables.⁶²⁶ As my informants told me, the Jagadgurū has several untouchable devotees and disciples. They can go the Śrī Math for *darśan* and receive initiation there. The personal driver of the Jagadgurū is an untouchable who, on some occasions, has participated in ceremonies by singing *bhajan*. He is called Monnu and lives fourteen kilometers from Varanasi. He has worked for the Jagadgurū for the past three years and received a monthly wage from the Jagadgurū. When I interviewed him, he told me that he has not taken *dīkṣā* yet, but that he wanted to ask the Jagadgurū for it.

⁶²⁵ As reported by Burghart: 'Ascetics separate themselves from householders [...] by the acceptance or denial of food, fire and water from other social units [...] the Bairagi does not take into his body food which has been cooked on householder's heart [...] A Bairagi who does not separate himself in this way from householders becomes vulnerable to desire and will be thought by Bairagis and householders to be unfit for the service of Lord Ram' (1977: 102-104).

⁶²⁶ Cf. Ramchandra Sinha (2001: 57).

Furthermore, every year during his *cāturmās*, the Jagadgurū organizes a *harijan pūjā* with his lay devotees for a few days. During that time, a meeting of intellectuals is organized: someone among the community of untouchables is chosen for intellectual merit and awarded a monetary prize. Then he or she gives a speech about a topic of their choosing. Another important event is the visit of the Jagadgurū to an area where untouchables live. There, he gives a religious speech and untouchables are allowed to perform *guru pūjā* to him, which consists of a celebration of the guru figure that culminates in the washing of the guru's feet. After the *pūjā*, *prasād* is distributed among devotees.

The Jagadgurū encourages these activities as concretization of the universal right to access the *bhakti* path marked by Rāmānanda. Therefore, even during the Kumbh Melā, his *āśram* was open to anyone: *harijan* can find shelter as well as *sādhu*-s from other *sampradāya*-s.

The Jagadgurū uses the word *harijan* because Gandhi used it. The term means child of Hari (Viṣṇu), a meaning that stands in positive contrast to other derogatory labels for untouchables such as *dalit*, *achut*, or *camar*. He recognizes the disadvantaged position of untouchables in Indian society and therefore supports the *dalit āndolan* (untouchable movement) because, according to him, they should have what all other people have. For this reason, he constantly helps untouchables wherever he has *āśram*-s⁶²⁷ by providing them with opportunities for paid work as well as charity in the form of clothes, food and medical treatment if necessary. The Jagadgurū treats the *dalit*-s who work for him with a high degree of respect. In this way he hopes to show other people that *dalit*-s have to be respected and treated like anyone else. According to him, it is necessary to break the common attitude of people towards untouchables because this will help the *dharma* of the country to improve.

Rāmnareśācārya told me that he tries his best to improve the attitudes of those around him toward the untouchables. Once, one of his devotees was in love with a *harijan* girl but his family was against the courtship because of her caste. The Jagadgurū went to the family to scold them, saying that all their *bhakti* and donation towards Rām were meaningless if they were not able to see God in a *harijan*.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁷ For example, during the restoration of the Śrī Vihāram, all of the workers, who were *dalit*, used to eat with the other lay people during lunch. The Jagadgurū also paid for the medical treatment of a worker who was injured while working there. Rāmnareśācārya explained that he did this to demonstrate to the man that he valued his well-being and to show to his devotees that wealthier people should help the less fortunate.

⁶²⁸ Finally, the man married another woman who was chosen by the Jagadgurū. In fact, as stressed several times, the Jagadgurū supports the conventional (Brahmanic) social rules.

The Jagadgurū always allows *harijan-s* to go and do his *pranam*. He does specify that they should perform it from a distance ('*dur se*'), but he also says that anyone, regardless of class, should adhere to this rule because 'because nobody can be sure about how people use their hands before the *pranam*'.⁶²⁹

Hence, although somewhat contradictory, the Jagadgurū's attitude towards *harijan-s* is mostly supportive. He recognizes that their condition has to be improved and that they have to be respected. However, it is also clear that he recognizes them as a specific group in the social system, with its own functions that should be maintained. In fact, the Jagadgurū has never spoken about the eradication of untouchability. This, once again, proves his support of the *varṇāśrama dharma* for a social point of view, whereas from a religious point of view he proposes a unified Vaiṣṇava-Rāmānandī community where all the devotees are judged for their religious attitudes, and even an untouchable can receive high honor.

4.3.5 On Politics and Secularism

As it has arisen in several speeches, and during his *darśan-s*, the Jagadgurū does not officially support a political party, but he has a certain disposition towards the Congress. In fact, there are several photos in the Śrī Math with Rāmnareśācārya and representatives of the Congress Party: in one photo Rāmnareśācārya is with Rajiv Gandhi; in another one he gives *āśīrvād* to Zail Singh (politician of the Congress Party who was the Indian President from 1982 to 1987), in another he is with Digvijaya Singh (General Secretary of the Congress Party) and in a fourth he is with Sushilkumar Shinde (Congress Party). There is also a photo of him with Chandra Shekhar,⁶³⁰ and in another photo Sonia Gandhi is captured paying homage to Rāmnareśācārya during the closure ceremony of the seven-hundredth birth anniversary of Rāmānanda on January 26, 2000. The Jagadgurū holds Sonia Gandhi in great esteem. He told me: 'You know, Sonia Gandhi came to visit me and she gave me lot of respect. She is a great lady. She came here from another country and now she is the head of the bigger party in India. She is very strong, though she is far from his home (*sic*). We have a very good relationship, if I asked her for something she would not denied it'.⁶³¹

⁶²⁹ However, other people are allowed to touch his feet.

⁶³⁰ He was with the Congress Party till 1975, when he was arrested by Indira Gandhi, after which he joined the Janta Party and, later on, the Janta Dal.

⁶³¹ *Darśan*, March 24, 2012; my translation.

Rāmnareśācārya has always stressed that he has never tried to take advantage of his connections to politicians, as, according to him, politicians and *sādhu-s'* worlds must be separated. He considers himself neutral and more attentive to the activities of a politician than to the party to which he or she belongs. Because of this position on political matters, Rāmnareśācārya also has supporters from the BJP and other political parties.

Although the Jagadgurū finds in Rāmānanda's teaching the answer for many contemporary problems, and although he thinks that the religious field may influence the political one, he believes that the worlds of religion and politics should not mix. In contrast to the criticisms that other religious organizations like the RSS and the VHP have launched toward the Congress party, he does not use the teaching of Rāmānanda to challenge the pseudo-secularism of political parties. On the contrary, Rāmnareśācārya is a great supporter of Indian political secularism. According to him, in a country where there are many religions and communities, one cannot have the supremacy, because that would limit the wellbeing of other groups. Although the majority of the people in India are Hindu and a Hindu Raśtra (Hindu Nation) would satisfy the majority of the population, he wonders about whether there is a real need to create a Hindu Raśtra. In fact, according to him, Hindus receive lots of support from the government and therefore nothing would actually change for them under a Hindu Raśtra. Temples would be built and *pūjā-s* performed with the support of the State as it already happens in the present day. The government spends a lot of money for the Hindu dharma to help organize religious ceremonies like the Mahā Kumbh Melā or manage temples like the Kāśī Viśvanāth temple. It does not do the same for Muslims or Christians. For this reason, the Jagadgurū does not believe that a Hindu Raśtra would have any noticeable effect on the *dharma* of the country. Hence, he considers secularism as the best political arrangement for India.

The Jagadgurū says that his approach simply mirrors the teaching of Rāmānanda, who was open to everyone. Rāmnareśācārya exclaimed: 'If you are from a religion different from mine, what is the problem? Anyone should think about how to improve his own dharma, without caring about the dharma of other people'.

His stance on the need for secularism had led him several times to critique Muslims, because, according to him, the interference in others' religions is typical of Islam. His criticisms of Islam come despite the fact that he actually has some Muslim devotees and he

condemns communalism.⁶³² He is a man with a conservative background, who has grown up with the idea of an Indian society based on two reified communities, Hindu and Muslim, that the supporters of communalism have used and spread with success, unlike the explanations made by secular scholars to describe the nature of Hindu-Muslim relationships over the centuries.

Therefore, the portrait of Muslims furnished by right-wing organizations has become more common among Hindus, to such an extent that it is also supported by people that are not involved in any Hindutva activity, such as the Jagadgurū.

The success of the spread of this idea is due to the fact that these organizations use symbols, topics and a vocabulary already known and used by Hindus, although with different purposes and nuances of meaning. Daniela Berti, in her study about the Akhil Bhartiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna (The Plan for Collecting History of the Whole India), a project supported by the RSS to collect and write the local histories of India, has demonstrated that those who participate in the project have not always shared the same ideological position of the RSS. She argues that her case study 'shows how an organization which is completely committed to the mainstream Hindutva ideology at the level of its main leaders, owes its efficacy to the participation of people who, in different ways, get involved in its local project for reasons which may have nothing to do with political ideology'.⁶³³ Therefore, people 'may be involved in the ABISY's local project just out of their liking for regional culture and for being personally concerned by the rewriting of local traditions' (2007: 7). For this reason, Berti stresses that another aim of her study was to 'show the difficulty in differentiating what has been directly influenced by Hindutva from what is due to different and sometimes longstanding processes of reattaching local lore to a wider textual-based tradition' (2007: 9).

To summarize, the Jagadgurū may have been influenced by some of the ideas of the RSS and VHP but he is not a supporter of those groups, because, as we have already seen in Chapter 4, he does not think that the people involved in these organizations can really speak knowledgably about religious matters. Similarly, he does not believe that politics and

⁶³²In fact, the Jagadgurū supports the peaceful cohabitation of communities. For this reason, he does not support any action against Muslims nor is he involved in any re-conversion of Muslims to Hinduism, although in some of Rāmānanda's biographies this activity is attributed to him.

⁶³³As Fuller has demonstrated, there has recently been a normalization of Hindutva, fueled by the participation and support of individuals who are more focused on 'emphasis on religious and cultural programs, and less on street-level confrontation' (2001: 1615). Therefore, through activities like the ABISY and new religious festivals, right-leaning Hindu organizations are moderating their extremism becoming part of the mainstream political discourse, influencing thoughts and obtaining the support of even those who are not ideologically close to their original principles.

religion should mix except when it is extremely necessary for religious people to take a position. His stance is quite different from that of other Jagadgurū-s (especially Śaṅkarācārya) and from that of *mahant*-s who are heads of important centers, such as the *mahant* of Revāsā Pīṭh, as well as Narendrācārya and Rāmbhadrācārya, who are supporters of the VHP.

It is likely that his stance on this matter depends on the fact that he was chosen for the role of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya because he does not see the title as a tool to conquer power or fame. Therefore, he is driven primarily in his actions by his faith, and by his religious task, namely to spread the teachings of Rāmānanda and the Rām *bhakti*.

4.3.6 Participation to the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement

As we have said in Chapter 4, Rāmnareśācārya had a role in the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement from the side of the Congress. Nevertheless, I found references to him in very few texts, despite his central role in the Ramalaya Trust.

Given this lack of printed information, I asked professor Dipak Malik, who is politically and socially active in Varanasi, to tell me about that period and the role the Jagadgurū had in it.⁶³⁴ Malik told me that during the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement the social situation in Varanasi had deteriorated as well,⁶³⁵ with clashes between the Hindu and Muslim communities leading to a police-ordered curfew. Therefore, a group of intellectuals decided to gather representatives of *bhakti* groups who could effectively reach the grassroots of society and help rejuvenate the spirit of unity that had characterized medieval *bhakti* movements. The purpose of the group was to create a secular movement in which religious leaders from a variety of traditions could help resurrect the original meaning of the *bhakti* as an antidote to divisiveness between religious communities. The group wanted to spread the message of a need for peaceful coexistence between the groups, in the tradition of many *Sant*-s of the past.

According to Malik, the main problem that India faces is the lack of communication between the intellectual elite and the country's religious leaders, who are the main links to reach society. For this reason, he was quite amazed when the movement they began in

⁶³⁴ Interview, January 31, 2012; my translation.

⁶³⁵ This happened because Varanasi has several mosques that were built after the destruction of Hindu temples. Both the Bindu Mādhav temple and the Kāśī Viśvanāth temple were destroyed by Aurangzeb and substituted by the Alamgir mosque and the Gyān Vapi mosque. As a new Kāśī Viśvanāth temple has been built close to this latter mosque and is the most important temple in the city, the spot became a sensitive one in the wake of growing religious communal movements.

Varanasi obtained the participation of the Kabīr *panth*, the Jagadgurū, the Śaṅkarācārya of Dvārka and the Ramakrishna Mission (to mention the most important centers). According to Malik, many *math*-s did not answer their call, but they did not oppose their efforts either, which was understood as a positive sign of sorts. The Kabīr *panth* and the Jagadgurū provided the main support to the initiative.

Malik told me that the Jagadgurū was really annoyed by the situation in Ayodhya, especially because many centers of the *sampradāya* were supporting the Sangh Parivar.

According to Rāmnareśācārya, many small Rāmānandī centers were in the hands of people who could not be called *sādhu*-s or *sant*-s, as they decided to join the movement only for economic motivations. The VHP was able to take root in Ayodhya because of these kinds of *sādhu*-s. Malik stressed the importance that these Rāmānandī centers have on a local scale: because they are spread all over northern India, they have quite an impact on the population as a whole, especially in rural areas.

I had my first conversation with the Jagadgurū about the topic of the Rāmjanmabhūmi in March 2012. I asked him what his position on the movement had been. He answered:

During the movement, the Rāmjanmabhūmi Nyas⁶³⁶ was established with Śivarāmācārya as its head. The Trust specified that the leader of the *sampradāya* should be the president of the Trust as well. However, when Śivarāmācārya died, instead of giving the title to me, the Trust decided to appoint another *mahant* of the *sampradāya* named Rāmcāndra Prabanda as President. As I was not the president of the Trust, I was not supposed to make any special effort on behalf of the movement. Later on, when the movement was spreading, I recognized that its nature was more political than religious so I decided to take a different stance from those who supported it. [...] I do not trust *sādhu*-s who attach their activities to those of politicians. [...] For this reason I decided not to work for the movement. However, several other organizations arose that the government later suspended. When the court was considering the case of the Rāmjanmabhūmi, Narasimha Rao organized a Trust called the Ramalaya Trust.⁶³⁷ In this Trust there were the Śaṅkarācārya of Dvārka, Jyotish Pīṭh, the Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi, a *mahant* from Gujarat,

⁶³⁶The Trust was established by the VHP on February 3rd 1986. Pradhan (who made an inquiry about the various political-religious tendencies among *sādhu*-s in the 1990s and later in 2008) claims that those *sādhu*-s who were part of the Trust were 'drawn from the bigger pool who had associated themselves informally with the VHP's Dharma Samsad, an informal platform of religious ascetics established in 1984' (2014: 13).

⁶³⁷The Ramalaya Trust was established by the Congress mainly to oppose the VHP on the issue of who should take the leadership role in the construction of the temple. The prominent participants of the Trust, together with Rāmnareśācārya were the Śaṅkarācārya Svaropānanda Sarasvatī, the Śaṅkarācārya of Purī Niśālananda Sarasvatī and *mahant* Gyān Dās.

Gopala Ānand jī Bāpū (from the side of the *ākhāra-s*), and an expert from the Lakṣman Kilā of Ayodhya. I joined this Trust as well.⁶³⁸

Rāmnareśācārya set some conditions: he stressed that only honest religious teachers should be involved. He did not want VHP-aligned *sādhu-s* to join the group, nor did he want Chandraswami, who was close to Rao, as he did not consider him to be a religious person. He described for me his function in the Ramalaya Trust:

In this Trust, I had an important role. People from the VHP and BJP did not want a new Trust to be established. After the establishment of the Trust, I worked hard to increase its influence and importance. For this reason, I received lot of national publicity in the newspapers. You know, in 1994 we had to pay, here in the Śrī Math, a telephone bill for more than forty thousand rupees. Someone told me to ask the Pradhan Mantri to pay the bill, but I refused because the money we have is supposed to be for dharma, and if they have to be spent on dharmic issue then it is fine, and the Ram temple is a dharm only. [...] Because of my position, people from the BJP and VHP thought that I was against the movement, but this is not a question of being against someone, but to be with those people who follow the dharma. This is the same reason why I do not follow the present movement for the Ganga.⁶³⁹ [...] When a final decision is made, the Hindu part⁶⁴⁰ that will obtain the place will be the Nirmohi *ākhāra*, which is part of my *sampradāy*. One of the main mahant of the *ākhāra* is a *bhakta* of mine. What I say to people is that we do not need politicians for the construction of the Rām temple - we will build it on our own. People have used various means to collect money for the construction. What I did to help was to participate in the Ramalaya Trust. The Trust was inaugurated in Delhi, but the first meeting was held here. Many people came such as the Sringeri Śaṅkarācārya, that of Dvark and Jyotir, Swarupananda... obviously I was there... a representative of Niranjani Sarasvatī, policemen... many people were there. I participate for good reasons.⁶⁴¹

The Jagadgurū, as well as most of the *sādhu-s* living in the Maṭh, are in full opposition to the VHP and the BJP. In reference to the VHP, he said:

In 2007, I met Ashok Singhal in Allahabad from the VHP. [...] These kinds of people [from the VHP] cannot do our job. In thirteen years I met him twice. He came to talk to me one

⁶³⁸ Interview, March 7, 2012, my translation.

⁶³⁹ In 2011, a movement for the protection of the Ganga started in Varanasi, supported by several important religious centers in the city. However, according to Rāmnareśācārya this movement was only a political façade, because the issue had been going on in Varanasi for a long time and a lot of money had been donated from various Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) without any real result.

⁶⁴⁰ There are two Hindu competitors: the VHP and the Nirmohī *akhārā*.

⁶⁴¹ Interview, March 7, 2012, my translation.

of those times. When he was here I asked him two questions. The first question was, “Where will you build the temple? In Ayodhya or in Delhi?” And he replied “Delhi”. Hence, it is clear that they wanted the movement just for political gain [because Delhi is the center of national political power]. The second question I asked was, “As the VHP says it can speak for all the Hindus, and you are the president of the VHP, what is your knowledge of the Hindu dharma?” He replied that he is only a *senik* (soldier) and that we gurus are the one who have to have such knowledge! [...] If you have no knowledge of the Hindu dharma how can you be the president of such an organization! I scolded him a lot in that meeting [...] ⁶⁴²

Also in his conversation with Pradhan, the Jagadgurū expressed similar opinions about the BJP and the RSS:

Several religious people who looked forward to the building of the Ram temple were harassed, a mahant was murdered by the VHP. Congress never did such things. We never cared about caste or political affiliation of a sadhu or a person who supported our Ramjanmabhoomi cuse or who participated the campaign. But, the BJP leaders who are the descendent of the Jan Sangh Party do not like to get involved with sadhus who are visited by Congress politicians. The BJP, having come to power in the temple issue, should have worked with sadhus of all persuasions to get the temple built, but they became unsure of what might actually happen politically if they did so. (2014: 222)

The birth anniversary of Dr. Hedgewar was being celebrated once. After their speeches were over, they asked me to give my blessings. I told them, I am not that kind of sadhu who just give blessings. I told them, it was wrong that sanatan dharma will be safe only because of RSS and VHP and its campaigns. I told them, your work is like that of the missionaries. Who has done more for the sanatan dharma, Ram and Krishna or RSS's Hedgewar? (*ibid*: 239)

As reported by the *Times of India* (March 12, 2002) Rāmnareśācārya questioned the authority of the Śāṅkarācārya of Kanchi, Jayendra Sarasvatī, in mediating the temple issue, accusing him to have the same position as Ashok Singhal. The Jagadgurū complained several times about the interference of the Śāṅkarācārya-s. According to him, only Rāmānandī-s have a legal right to build the temple or to claim the land, especially because the case has been going on for such a long time and it should only concern the two groups involved (Muslims and Nirmohī *akhārā*). Hence it has to be stressed that Rāmnareśācārya is in favor of a solution that would favor the Rāmānandī-s as they are supportive of the

⁶⁴² Interview, March 7, 2012, my translation.

Rām *bhakti*. He is completely against any VHP/Hindutva interference, as he considers it to be motivated only by political considerations, rather than by any true religious conviction. Moreover, like several other Rāmānandī-s I met in Ayodhya,⁶⁴³ Rāmnaresācārya does not think it is necessary to build the Ram temple on the same spot as the Babri Masjid. As he said to Pradhan:

Like we want the Ramjamabhoomu temple to be built [...] everyone should feel like that, even Muslims because they are citizens of this country. Everyone will benefit if the temple is made. There won't be any strife and violence every day. And now, this useless demand from most sadhus that it should be built in the *garbhgriha*. Is Vishwanath temple in the *garbhriha*? The whole world is available to build a temple. You make shops wherever you can. You have dips in the holy rivers wherever you can. You do not insist that you will only bathe in the Ganga river or in Haridwar because only then you can collect spiritual merit. What they should have done was to build a grand temple, for the entire city of Ayodhya is Ram's. How many times has the Vishwanath temple been destroyed and rebuilt? There is a mosque there right now. If they had insisted to build on the very same spot, the Vishwanath temple would not have been built. (2014: 240)

To summarize, the Jagadgurū has never supported the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement as a political instrument for two main reasons: 1) because he believes politics and religion should not intermingle and 2) because he thinks the construction of a Rām temple cannot justify the use of violence and should not be misused for political gain. In keeping with this latter position, the Jagadgurū has joined the Ramalaya Trust to be part of an exclusively religious group that could handle the issue without any political interest. At the same time, he has started the construction of what it is supposed to become the biggest Rām temple in Northern India in Haridwar to demonstrate that Rām's temple can be built everywhere. However, the Jagadgurū is in favor of a solution that favors the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in the Ayodhya dispute, as there was a dispute even before the rising of the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. He also supports the construction of a temple on the contested side, although he specifies it should be built by the ascetics of the city (the Rāmānandī-s).

⁶⁴³ During my interview with Rām Gopāl Phalāhārī Bābā, he expressed his great dissatisfaction regarding the Ayodhya issue. In fact, according to him, a temple is a spiritually empty place if it is not built on real devotion - especially if it is a temple built in the wake of the destruction of another holy place. Furthermore, he said that the Ayodhya issue is meaningless because for many Rām *bhakta*-s, the story of Rām's birth in Ayodhya is secondary. The more important thing for them is the recognition of Rām as a God. Phalāhārī Bābā opposes the construction because according to him, they will make the temple into a kind of shopping mall to sell *darśan* rather than a proper place of worship. (Interview, November 20, 2012)

4.3.6.1 Construction of the Advitīya Śrī Rām temple in Haridwar

The Jagadgurū justifies the decision to build a Rām temple in Haridwar from both a religious and political point of view: because Haridwar is a holy place for Hindus and the seat of several *sampradāya*-s, it is necessary that a majestic Rām temple, embodying the religious and historical importance of the Rām worship in India, is placed there. However, the construction of the temple is also the Jagadgurū's answer to the Rāmjanmabhūmi temple: because that temple is not going to be built soon,⁶⁴⁴ the Jagadgurū decided to choose another location, as he believes that Rām is everywhere and paying devotion to Him is more important than a specific spot.

The Advitīya Śrī Rām temple is on Saptarishi Path, the road that leads to the Haridwar railway station, and therefore will be highly visible. The area is called Bhūpatvālā and it is filled with many modern Hindu temples. They are quite kitsch in their appearance: many have colorful movable statues, and some seem more like Disneyland attractions than Hindu temples. Compared to them, the building of the Advitīya Śrī Rām temple recalls a past ideal of a temple as simple and sober with a composite structure. This aesthetic ideal respects what the Jagadgurū wants for it: as it is explained in a brief brochure to publicize the project, the temple will not be a place for amusement, but rather a center to promulgate the Rām *bhāva* (the essence of Rām) and the worship of him. Therefore, no mundane activity will be allowed in its proximity.

To give to the temple a classic aspect, its structure follows the traditional composition of a Hindu temple with a symmetrical structure (Fig. 65).⁶⁴⁵ The temple will be 193 feet long, 175 feet high, and 102 feet wide. It will have five main *śikhar*-s and 85 minor ones, and 104 pillars. In the back there will also be a tank, while at the four sides there will be four little *maṇḍap*-s: one with the purpose of a storage room, another for resting, another for bathing and the forth for meetings (Fig. 66). The material used is sandstone from Jodhpur and the artisans working there are from Rajasthan. They are responsible for shaping the stones and carving them into elegant and precise motives.

⁶⁴⁴ The Rāmjanmabhūmi temple in Ayodhya is almost complete: its separate parts are collected at the Nyās Kāryaśālā in Ayodhya. In this place there is a scale model of the future Rām temple that is supposed to become the biggest temple in Ayodhya, perhaps in all of India. People can go and have a look at the pieces and give donations to support the project. It is said that the temple will be assembled when the court will make its final decision on its construction and they have the spot necessary for its construction. It is said that because everything is ready for construction, it will take only one day to build.

⁶⁴⁵ As this is not the place for a comprehensive explanation about the Hindu temple, its structure and symbolism, I invite the reader to refer at Michell (1988).

The temple's area was bought by the Jagadgurū⁶⁴⁶ but the construction is funded by donations, because 'in the establishment of Rām Rāj the purity of donations and manners are of fundamental importance'.

Usually on the spot there are workers and *brahmacārī*-s who take care of the *gośālā* and the temporary temple. The place is more like a 'temple-room.' This is where the Jagadgurū stays when he comes to check the work. He has his throne there, close to a table-altar with a three portraits: Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ, Hanumān, Lakṣmī (Fig. 67). The walls of this room are studded with photos of the Jagadgurū and of the various phases of the construction. One depicts the *śilānyās* of the temple – the ceremony during which the first brick of the building is placed – which was performed by the Jagadgurū Mādhvācārya Swāmī Śrī Viśveśatīrth on November 18, 2005.

When I went to Haridwar to visit the temple site⁶⁴⁷ the *brahmacārī*-s told me that it will take ten to fifteen years to finish the temple because the works are supported by donations and depend on the flow of money.⁶⁴⁸ Outside the wall of the office, some boards list the names of the lay members of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Smārak Sevā Mahā Samiti, and another one lists those of other *sant*-s involved.⁶⁴⁹ It is supposed to become one of the biggest Rām temples in India.

4.3.7 About the use of Internet and other media

During my fieldwork, I observed the spread of Internet use in the Śrī Maṭh. The use of the Internet by religious groups has been the subject of several new academic studies. These scholars have noted the importance that new means of communication are having in publicizing and spreading religious teachings and creating virtual religious communities. As the sociologist Isabelle Jonveaux reports, referring to Rosalind I.J. Hackett,⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁶ He said that they paid two and half *karor* of rupees (25 millions) for 75000 square meters. The project also aims to buy the adjacent area so that there will be a place for the *āśram*, and the temple. Before the area was very cheap, which is why they bought it there, but today it has become quite expensive. It is likely that the increased number of temples there and the higher flux of people made the area more expensive.

⁶⁴⁷ October 24, 2012.

⁶⁴⁸ According to the Jagadgurū, in a couple of years the temple will be ready. However, considering the project and the fact that they have to buy other plots surrounding it, his affirmation seems a bit too optimistic.

⁶⁴⁹ These eight *sant*-s are: Dharm Gaurav Śrī *mahant* Umā and Amrābāpū from Pāliyād Dhām in Gujarat; Śrī *mahant* Jagannāth Dās from Hanumān temple in Sūrat; Śrī Senācārya Swāmī Acālānanda from Jodhpur; Śrī *mahant* Gopāl Dās Mahā tyāgī; Śrī *mahant* Sant Śaraṇ Goswāmī from Sagunā, Patna; Śrī *mahant* Vallabhā Śaraṇ from Citrakūṭ; Śrī Brahmacārī Rāmānanda from the Agni Akhārā, Kāśī; Śrī *mahant* Dayārām Dās from Raghuvīr Bhavan, Haridwar.

⁶⁵⁰ Cf. Hackett (2005).

'l'avènement de l'Internet a été aussi révolutionnaire pour le développement des religions et pour leur diffusion que l'invention de l'imprimerie' (2013: 9).

In the context of Hindu religious organizations, the variety and complexity of web sites, blogs, Facebook pages created by gurus, *sampradāya*-s and modern religious organizations is astonishing. An analysis of this issue would demand a proper study in itself. For this reason, here I will focus on the specific approach of the Jagadgurū and that of his followers with regards to Internet use. I will show that the followers themselves mainly support the progression towards modernity, which does not directly affect the life of the inhabitants of the Śrī Maṭh, especially the Jagadgurū.

When I asked the Jagadgurū if he thought it was necessary for *sampradāya*-s to use the Internet, he replied that the Internet was a good way to spread ideas and to maintain links with supporters and followers. He gave to me the example of some of his *bhakta*-s who frequently have to travel to the United States for work. Thanks to the Internet, they can stay updated about his activities in India while they are gone. He said:

We *sādhu*-s are people connected to past traditions and we respect and transmit tradition. We should not use new technologies too much. However, it has been recognized that the Internet can be useful.⁶⁵¹ *Sādhu*-s can put their speeches on line. The Śrī Maṭh is also going to have a web site where devotees and followers can find out where I am, what I am doing. A speech can spread farther and have a much greater influence with these new technologies.⁶⁵²

The Jagadgurū acknowledged that there are advantages in using new technologies, but admitted that the Śrī Maṭh is not at the forefront of this issue⁶⁵³ because he will always prefer to meet people in person. He argued that only a direct encounter between people can change an individual's way of thinking. As we have already seen, the Jagadgurū has a very busy agenda that prioritizes personal contacts with his devotees, so that he can support them and talk to them in a way that he feels is much more powerful than online communication.

⁶⁵¹ A similar consideration has been made by Isabelle Jonveaux as a result of her study on Christian monasteries in Europe: 'L'Internet n'est pas à comprendre en premier lieu comme un facteur d'ouverture des monastères sur le monde, mais comme un outil supplémentaire qui vient assister les communautés qui ont déjà des activités pour le monde dans leur visibilité' (2013: 68). When a new follower comes to the Śrī Maṭh he or she is invited to write down his or her address and mobile number in a contact book to receive information about the events organized by the Maṭh.

⁶⁵² Interview, October 5, 2012

⁶⁵³ In fact, the Śrī Maṭh does not have any Internet connection. Instead, *brahmacārī*-s will sometimes use a mobile sim-card to connect to the Internet via an old computer that was donated to the center.

At present, the Śrī Maṭh has its own website,⁶⁵⁴ two blogs,⁶⁵⁵ and a Facebook page⁶⁵⁶ – however, these online forms of communication are controlled by *brahmacārī-s* and followers, rather than by the Jagadgurū. Young people linked to the Jagadgurū since their childhood through their parents are the promoters of this technological *sevā* for the Śrī Maṭh. They promote the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū’s activities through these new methods of communication. For examples, they have developed applications (or apps) for smartphones so that devotees of the Jagadgurū can easily follow updates from him. The Facebook page, website, blogs and other social media accounts attributed to the Jagadgurū are not actually controlled by him, although he does check them periodically with the help of followers.

By consequence, these social media accounts also represent a space for devotees to share their devotion for him. This is particularly evident in the WhatsApp group, started by Padmanabham. The number of people in the group is limited to those for whom Padmanabham had a phone number and, with the exception of a few question-and-answer threads, messages are mainly invocations of the name of the Jagadgurū, or God. I observed through monitoring the online groups that, rather than limiting their devotion to Rām and Viṣṇu, they express their devotion to all the forms of God, including Śiv, Guru Nanak, Satya Sai Baba and so on. Furthermore, they post photos of the *mūrti* of temples and of the Jagadgurū. These can be evocative photos, or photos of his activities so that devotees can know what their guru is doing on a given day, allowing them to receive a *darśan* from a distance.

The regular communication between fellow devotees, *sevak-s* and *brahmacārī-s* also creates a virtual community through which members can support each other in their faith. Furthermore, the fact that devotees can stay connected to the Jagadgurū during his frequent travels maintains a sense of unity within the community of followers. Online communication and new means of transport help to create a wide community of people that, despite physical distance, can remain in contact, share opinions and organize meetings, giving the community an idea of compactness and cohesion that perhaps before could be realized only during pilgrimages.

The Jagadgurū also uses a mobile phone, through which devotees can reach him. He usually does not make outgoing calls (other people do it for him), but he does receive calls

⁶⁵⁴ <http://www.shreemathkashi.com/>

⁶⁵⁵ <http://www.ramanandacharya.blogspot.it/> and <http://swamiramnareshacharya.blogspot.it/>

⁶⁵⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/221920584485937/>

continuously. For devotees, the mobile phone is the quickest way to reach the Jagadgurū: they may call him to inquire about his health, to ask for advice or permission to visit him, or simply to receive an *āśīrvād* by telephone. One time the Jagadgurū told me that there is a devotee that leaves him a missed call every evening just to mean a *praṇām* (a highly respectful form of greetings).

Traditional media like television and newspapers put the Jagadgurū in the limelight on a frequent basis. When there are programs going on in the Maṭh, local journalists may come to report the news. Other times, proper interviews are arranged by devotees with journalists from newspapers in other cities. When the Jagadgurū organizes particularly important ceremonies, local television stations may record it as well. The Jagadgurū received his biggest media exposure during the Mahā Kumbh Melā. The television channel Zee Jagaran⁶⁵⁷ recorded the Jagadgurū's speeches entitled, *Rām Kathā: Saḡuṇa tathā nirguṇa Rām bhakti paramparā evam Śrī sampradāya (Rāmāvat) kā ekbhāva* (Rām talks: *saḡuṇa* and *nirguṇa* a unique expression of the Śrī *sampradāya* and Rām *bhakti paramparā*). Every day from February 11 to 17, the Jagadgurū used the channel for three hours to talk about religious issues and social problems, taking into account traditional texts (as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Śāstra-s* and *Rāmcaritmānas*). He emphasized the life story of Rām and exalted the Rām *bhakti* and the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* in the context of the Hindu religious landscape.

To summarize, the Jagadgurū encourages his devotees to use new technological tools to spread his teachings, especially the teachings of Rāmānanda and the activities supported by the Śrī Maṭh. However, he is not a modernized guru – He is not interested in technology for himself and he still believes that the best way to communicate with his devotees is direct contact and the face-to-face dialogue. The only innovation he has assimilated into his daily life is the mobile phone, which he only uses to answer the calls of followers who take the initiative to reach out to him.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya in his roles as leader of the *sampradāya* and guru of his lay followers.

Rāmnaresācārya was elected following specific rules decided by the Śrī Maṭh Samiti

⁶⁵⁷ This channel is part of the Zee Entertainment Enterprise Ltd, the Mumbai-based Indian media and entertainment company that is the second largest in the country. The channel broadcasts religious teachers and gurus twenty-four hours a day. It is one of the most-followed religious channels on a national level.

Trust. His election made him part of the Rāmānanda's *paramparā*, relating him directly to Rām. Because of this lineage and the expectations that the title of Jagadgurū arises, Rāmnareśācārya feels he has to accomplish specific aims: to make Rāmānanda as famous as Mahātma Gandhi because of the high value of his teachings; to practice *sevā* for the society by means of these teachings; to improve the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

In order to spread the name and the teachings of Rāmānanda, the Jagadgurū supports an intense publishing activity and follows a thick traveling schedule. These activities, along with the religious ceremonies described in the previous chapters, have allowed him to gather around himself a quite wide lay community. This community is more attracted by the personal charisma of Rāmnareśācārya as a Jagadgurū than by his being a Rāmānandī. In his role as a guru, Rāmnareśācārya provides for support that is not only religious but generally sympathetic with the emotional, and in many cases economic, needs of his followers.

An intimate relationship often arises between the Jagadgurū and his disciples, while his presence and consent is central in many important steps in the lives of his disciples and followers. This personal yet hierarchical connection creates a feeling of security and reassurance as the disciple-follower knows that he or she can count on the Jagadgurū for every little problem in his or her life. Being a follower of the Jagadgurū means, moreover, to be part of the Śrī Maṭh Parivar, the community led by the Jagadgurū that is, year after year, improving and increasing its religious activities. The wide outreach of the Jagadgurū's engagement is made possible by his personal dynamism as well as by the economic support that his followers provide.

In his role as a teacher, the Jagadgurū focuses mainly on religious and social issues because he firmly believes in the separation between religion and politics. Furthermore, his purpose is to improve the dharma in the society, not to gain secular power. His speeches reveal his Rām *bhakti* faith, his belief in Rāmānanda's message and his deep Brahmanic background, influenced not only by classic texts but also by a pro-Hindu rhetoric generally widespread in orthodox contexts.

In his role as Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya, Rāmnareśācārya distinguishes himself from other Rāmānandī-s for his external appearance that takes inspiration from that of the Śaṅkarācārya-s. His aesthetic aspect also shows another important characteristic: although he is a *virakta*, whose purpose is *bhakti*, he follows *saṃskāra*-s, as the presence of the *śikā* testifies. His *sādhanā* is *saguna* but he continuously interacts with Rāmānandī-s belonging to other branches, especially *tyāgī*-s and *nāgā*-s. This is part of Rāmnareśācārya's

aspiration to improve the *sampradāya*. To him, this improvement means first and foremost to unify the *sampradāya* under a single leader. The purpose of the Jagadgurū is not to nullify the internal differences of the *sampradāya*, but to create bridges and friendly relations among centers in order to increase the reputation of the *sampradāya* on a national level. Possibly, the establishment of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya was meant to provide the *sampradāya* with a national representative to make it recognizable among the hundreds of other religious groups that stud the Indian religious sky. However, unlike many other nationally known modern or *sampradāyik* gurus, the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya has decided to distinguish himself following a policy of not interfering in activities and events that do not concern religious figures. He is known on a national level for his religious charisma and intellectual standing, on account of the title of Jagadgurū he carries.

His position is known and acclaimed also by other religious leaders because, as we have seen, the Jagadgurū prefers building up relations with other *mahant*-s and Jagadgurū-s through mutual respect and with the confidence that collaboration among religious leaders will result in a better and more dharmic society.

However, the project of unifying the *sampradāya* under his leadership has been partly delayed by the creation of other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s supported by sections of the *sampradāya* – namely some *akhārā*-s – for reasons that appear to be economic rather than ideological.

Rāmānandī-s who recognize the role of Rāmnaresācārya treat him with the highest respect as they see him as a representative of God on earth and the *avatār* of Rāmānanda that will provide for the future of the *sampradāya*.

Many ascetics began supporting Rāmnaresācārya after meeting him personally. That is why the Jagadgurū always prefers a face-to-face contact: he believes that through his words and truthful religious nature he can demonstrate his good intentions. In so doing he has established a friendly relation with *mahant*-s of important centers, for example those of Piṇḍorī Dham, Lakṣmaṇ Kilā and Vrindavan, to mention only a few examples.

However, it is also likely that many ascetics now support Rāmnaresācārya because of more pragmatic considerations, after seeing his increasing appeal among lay people as well as his flourishing activities and projects. These are signs that Rāmnaresācārya's power and richness are improving and therefore it might be more convenient to be on friendly terms with him than antagonizing him. In fact, as we have seen, the Jagadgurū is always inclined to help centers and *mahant*-s in situations of financial crisis.

While the Śrī Maṭh Trust Registration Act endows the Jagadgurū with certain decision-powers, it appears that actually he does not have the power of interfering in the organization and rules of a *sampradāya* center. In fact, as claimed by the *mahant* of the Revāsā Pīṭh, each center has an internal *paramparā* (tradition) which has to be respected and maintained.

Therefore, we can suggest that the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya mainly performs two roles: 1) linking up different branches of the *sampradāya* to each other, and the *sampradāya* as a whole to other *sampradāya*-s; 2) representing the *sampradāya* at a national level and especially among lay people.

Hence the profile of the Jagadgurū is that of a leader who is needed when a national issue arises (e.g., the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement), who can spread the teachings of Rāmānanda and the Rām *bhakti* in general, and who attracts with his religious, personal and routinized charisma lay followers that will support the *sampradāya*, enabling it to survive and further pass on its tradition.

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to describe how a religious order undergoes processes of evolution and transformation that enable to interpret and satisfy the religious needs of society. The assumption at the base of this work is that religious orders and gurus are central elements that characterize and influence Indian society in the past and in the present.

I focused my attention on the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* because two important changes occurred in the *sampradāya* during the 1970s: the bestowing of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and the establishment of the Śrī Maṭh.

These changes were consequences of the independence that the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* had gained from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya* at the beginning of the 20th century. The quest for independence was built on the figure of Rāmānanda as founder and leader of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. The split occurred at a time when *sampradāya*-s were affirming their identities as new religious approaches and a new national independent spirit were spreading across the country.

In the 1970s, the *sampradāya* decided to elect a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya as the representative of the *sampradāya*, and to direct the construction of the Śrī Maṭh as the *mul pīṭh*, or main center for the *sampradāya*. The attempt to rebuild a traditional religious center and to establish a leader in an order that had been characterized by many internal divisions and diffuse centers of powers represented innovative and significant changes.

I considered these changes as important milestones through which we can retrace and understand the history of the *sampradāya*. The impact of such an approach is amplified by the fact that these elements have not been analyzed in previous studies.

My attempts to retrace the evolution of the *sampradāya* aimed to understand the reasons that led the order to establish the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and of the Śrī Maṭh in Varanasi. This procedure was based on the consideration that the present carries the signs of a past. The importance of historical considerations is especially elevated in the Indian socio-religious context, in which religious authority is still legitimated through tradition and, as we have seen in the Introduction, through the interpretation of the past in the light of the present context.

Traditional religious orders also provide examples to understand this continuous exchange between the past and the present. That a past religious tradition is passed on and interpreted through adaptations and change shows the capacity of religious orders to evolve and survive over time. The study of these changes enables us to bring to light those characteristics and values that are constant – but not static – and functional to the present in which they are reenacted.

When the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya was conferred in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, two specific traditions were referred: 1) the tradition of a universal religious authority, in the wake of past gurus glorified by the title of Jagadgurū; 2) the tradition of Rāmānanda's teaching, a medieval guru well-known for having opened the *bhakti* path to all individuals regardless of caste or gender. This tradition was stressed by the title of Rāmānandācārya.

In this dissertation I demonstrated that to understand the background to the two aforementioned changes, it was useful to use a diachronic and synchronic analysis realized by virtue of an historical and an anthropological methodology. The use of these two disciplines was justified based on the observations of Bernard Cohn on the results that a mutual collaboration between these disciplines can produce, and on his general definition of ethnohistory. Ethnohistory combines 'historical sources with ethnographic fieldwork among the present-day members of the societies' to reconstruct their past through 'rounded' history (Cohn, 1968: 440), and, I add, to explain present events and changes.

The anthropological approach did not manifest only in my method of participant observation in the fieldwork but also in the use of an interpretative approach for past situations in which historical evidence was lacking. Therefore, sources such as hagiographies, commentaries on supposed works of Rāmānanda, and travellers' diaries have been interpreted in the light of my fieldwork to create a portrait of Rāmānanda as both a man and guru and to describe the historical period in which he lived.

This approach has also been used to describe other gurus. This emphasis on individuality derives from an important point: that the evolution of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, its spread and its survival in multifarious shapes, both in the past and in the present, has been carried on by charismatic religious leaders. An attention to individuality led to an attention to subjective features (such as personal charisma, personal approaches and faith) as agents of changes. These features are considered to be as important as economic and political variables in driving changes in a religious order.

Moreover, I have used a synchronic approach to produce pictures of religious centers, politics and religious disciplines circumscribed in time and place, both in the present and in the past. Placing these synchronic pictures in the diachronic tableau of the *longue durée* has allowed us to see the evolution of their features over the centuries.

Such an approach has given us a comprehensive image of changes in the *sampradāya*, verifying that changes analyzed synchronically never take place uniformly but that some changes had consequences that have lasted and continued to evolve through the centuries, or diachronically.

Through this method I have demonstrated that: internal differentiations of *sādhana* and lifestyle are functional historical characteristics of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*; the presence of the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya has to be interpreted as part of the evolution of the figure of Rāmānanda toward a more Brahmanic-Sankritic image, although still connected to a liberal approach; the election of a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya results from a contemporary religious Indian landscape characterized by an increasing number of gurus and religious institutions, and the need of the *sampradāya* to be represented nationally by a valuable charismatic *ācārya* able to unify the order and attract lay people; the construction of the Śrī Maṭh has created in the *sampradāya* a center that is universally recognized as the *mul pīṭh*; the election of more Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s is the result of various power-groups present in the *sampradāya*.

To reach these conclusions I have centered my arguments on three main issues that I will describe below: the image of Rāmānanda, the double teaching of Rāmānanda, and the evolution of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. I sought to answer the question, 'why was the title of Jagadgurū bestowed?' Following the summary of my arguments, I will present some issues mentioned in this dissertation that deserve to be deepened in further studies.

1. Main arguments

1.1 The image of Rāmānanda

In this dissertation, I demonstrated that the representation of Rāmānanda changed over time according to the needs of the period and the location of the religious community.

In Chapter 1, I showed that, beginning with the early hagiographies, Rāmānanda is described as an *avatār* of Rām and a bridge between Rām and the world. He was a *sat* guru who could direct his disciples toward the religious path that was most suitable to them and

the man who opened the *bhakti* to the four *varṇa* and to women. He was a Rām *bhakta* and a *tyāgī* at the same time and he was also linked to Rāmānūja and had twelve disciples.

This guru-image of Rāmānanda remained consistent over the centuries leading up to the present day, and it is likely that he was such an important guru of his time (the 15th century) that other *sampradāya*-s and *panth*-s claimed to have a connection to him, although we have little written evidence to support such claims and it is difficult to determine the truthfulness of oral traditions about Rāmānanda.

I then showed that the attention on the narration of Rāmānanda's life particularly increased during the 18th century continuing up to the present day, and that this attention derived from the need to stress the group's identity in response to the newly competitive religious environment created under the English Raj. This context led to the crystallization of two specific images of Rāmānanda: a Sanskrit one and a Hindi one. I argued that the need to represent a more Sanskritic Rāmānanda was most acutely felt within the *rasik* branch of the *sampradāya*, in which there was a higher population of educated ascetics, mostly Brahmans. These ascetics were the authors of hagiographies and probably the ones who most frequently had to face Christian missionaries. They therefore had a stronger need to frame their founder as a traditional Sanskritic *ācārya*, whereas *tyāgī*-s continued focusing on Rāmānanda as a Hindi guru.

In the 20th century, under the leadership of Bhagavadācārya, further attention was given to the figure of Rāmānanda as the founder of the *sampradāya* to encourage growing aspirations of autonomy from the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*. To support such ambitions of independence, a radical group presented a portrait of Rāmānanda that further stressed his role as an *ācārya* through the 'discovery' of more revolutionary commentaries attributed to him. These 'new' commentaries nevertheless still maintained the social liberal tone for which Rāmānanda was renowned.

The codification of the life of Rāmānanda according to this Brahmanic-*ācārya* perspective reached its peak in the establishment of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya in the 20th century. As Rāmānanda's image was 'Sanskritized,' it was also modernized. In fact, Rāmānandī-s not only stressed Rāmānanda's Brahmanic background (including the fact that he wrote books in Sanskrit and studied in Varanasi), but they also highlighted those of his teachings that can be interpreted as liberal (such as the fact he opened the *bhakti* path to women and to all castes) as examples of his topicality and relevance in contemporary India.

The title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya was initially bestowed to Bhagavadācārya. I

argued in Chapter 4 that the title gives special status not only to Rāmānanda, but also to those Rāmānandī ascetics who are appointed as Jagadgurū. In fact, the Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya is considered not only to be the successor and *avatār* of Rāmānanda, but also an *avatār* of God Rām himself. In this way, he obtains the status of demi-god, or a representative of God on earth. Therefore, the more the narration of the life of Rāmānanda is enriched and his status heightened, the more the value of the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya increases, and by consequence the status of those who carry the title.

I have shown that the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya aims to make Rāmānanda as famous as Gandhi, and that in order to accomplish this goal, he supports the celebration of Rāmānanda's *jayantī* and the publications of books about him almost every year. However, these activities are not simply the result of a calculation: they also arise from a belief in Rāmānanda and the value of his teachings that Rāmnareśācārya tries to actualize with his own actions, as I will argue in the next section.

The exaltation of Rāmānanda's image and charisma has also been realized through the reconstruction of the Śrī Maṭh. Theoretically, the official Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya is the one who lives in the Maṭh, as this is the monastery that contained Rāmānanda's *caraṇa pādukā* and is located where Rāmānanda began his teaching. I have shown in Chapter 5 that the place has a particular significance for Rāmānanda's followers and that, notwithstanding its modernity, it is universally accepted by all the branches of the *sampradāya* as one of the most important Rāmānandī centers today. The status of the place is even recognized by those Rāmānandī-s who do not specifically support Rāmnareśācārya.

I have also illustrated that the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya, because of his title, was gifted with another place (the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir), which is said to be the birth place of Rāmānanda in Prayāg. The ownership of this second property confers to him even more religious authority and so-called authenticity compared to other Jagadgurū-s. From the activities, behaviors and thoughts of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya that I have described in Chapter 6 – his openness to other religious traditions, his relatively modern positions while also maintaining an attention to Brahmanic tradition – it seems that he is trying to reenact the role that Rāmānanda used to play, especially in his role of 'bridge' between the ascetic and the lay communities.

1.2 The double teaching of Rāmānanda

Scholars have mostly focused on the dual nature of Rāmānanda's teachings, which have aspects of both a *nirguṇa* and a *saguṇa sādhanā*. However, I have demonstrated in Chapter 1 that Rāmānanda likely recommended two types of teachings according to his disciples' nature: one set of teachings that stressed ascetic practices for those disciples who had undertaken the renouncer path and one set that focused exclusively on devotion for those disciples who were still householders. Furthermore, I have also suggested that many of Rāmānanda's disciples likely practiced a mixed *sādhanā* in which yoga and *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* worship all intermingled.

The use of more approaches was not (and is still not) unusual or uncommon. I have suggested that Rāmānanda was not a *sui generis* guru, but rather was likely one of those gurus attentive to the various religious currents of the period, which he reinterpreted according to his perspective and personal beliefs. This possibility is supported by early hagiographies, the reconstruction of the religious background that existed in northern India and in Varanasi in the 14th and 15th centuries and examples of the religious disciplines attributed to early Rāmānandī-s.

As we have seen in Chapter 3, it was thanks to this double approach and the group's liberal attitude in the recruitment of disciples that Rāmānandī-s were able to further develop their guru's original teachings. Following religious trends that were spreading in various geographic areas, some Rāmānandī-s emphasized forms of asceticism that focused on *tapasic sādhanā*, while others focused on forms of devotion that stressed a more intimate relationship with God. As I have shown in Chapter 3, this progression slowly led to the development of three Rāmānandī branches: *tyāgī*, *rasik* and *nāgā*. Nevertheless, I have also shown that these terms do not only indicate three sub-groups but also refer to *sādhanā*-s that, as such, are followed by ascetics of one of the sub-groups. In fact, being a *tyāgī* means to be part of the *tyāgī* branch but also to follow specific practices for becoming detached from the physical world; therefore, a renouncer can be called a *tyāgī* in a more general sense, without necessarily having a specific connection to a *tyāgī* center. On the contrary, I have explained that the term *rasik* is employed by scholars to address all the branches with a *saguṇa* approach.

However, I have also explained that I use the word *rasik* with the awareness that this term in the *sampradāya* has two meanings: it is accepted as a term to unify all of those Rāmānandī-s who are neither *tyāgī* nor *nāgā*, but it is more commonly used for identifying

those Rāmānandī-s who live their relationship with God as if they were his female companion. Along with this emic understanding of the word *rasik*, I have stressed the importance of the *dās* component in the *sampradāya*, which is often simply mentioned as a sub-branch of the *rasik* group. Instead, in my opinion, the *dās* component was the original *bhāva* on which Rāmānanda based his teaching. This is testified by the presence of *dās* in all the branches and in the works of Tulsīdās, who, I suggested, probably was influenced by Rāmānandī-s living in the area of Varanasi and Ayodhya.

As I have shown in Chapter 3, the teachings of Rāmānanda evolved because of personal attitudes of his disciples and their own disciples, but also because of external pressures that sometimes drove them to compromise even on religious matters. One especially poignant example is the decision to abandon the requirement of celibacy for the *mahant* of Galtā under Jai Singh II. However, I have also demonstrated that, notwithstanding obstacles for some places, other centers continued to follow their own discipline, such as the Bālānanda Maṭh in Jaipur. This proved that the individual history and evolution of a place, and even the history of an area cannot be used in a general way to describe the *sampradāya* in its entirety. In fact, sources tell us is that the liberal approach towards *bhakti* as testified by Nābhādās, which permitted low cast individuals and women to be admitted in the *sampradāya*, was maintained over the centuries through the spread of the *tyāgī* and *nāgā* branches, continues to be strengthened today as well.

In fact, as described in Chapter 6, even the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya has adopted an open approach to addressing the various needs of his followers and remains open to accepting disciples from all castes and creeds and without gender discrimination. The Jagadgurū draws his inspiration from the example of Rāmānanda's open *bhakti*, which he tries to put into practice in several ways. For example, he accepts so-called untouchables as followers and performs *harijan pūjā* for them during special occasions. However, Rāmnareśācārya is not a social reformer: he preaches respect and equal rights for all individuals, but he still supports the value of the *varṇāśrama* dharma. He stresses *prapatti* and the idea of *sevā* and *dāśya bhāva* as a social tool to improve society and make people more compassionate, because the *sevā* should be performed not only for God and holy men but also for society at large. He shows respect for all the various religious paths – not only the Vaiṣṇava tradition, but also the Śaiva path. In fact, as shown in Chapter 5, the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya performs celebrations belonging to the Vaiṣṇava tradition – specifically from the Rām *bhakti* – but he also performs *pūjā* at Śaiva *liṅga*-s and homage at Śaiva temples. However, it is also likely that his interpretation of Rāmānanda's teaching is not

only personal, but also an expression of the syncretic attitude of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* which, as I argued in Chapter 3, has since its beginning adopted religious concepts and practices from other groups. Nevertheless, I have also shown that all the *sādhana*-s are unified under a common *bhakti* towards Rām that in many branches represents not only the path towards God but also the aim of asceticism. I have, in fact, described in Chapter 6 that because *bhakti*, rather than *mokṣa*, is often the purpose of a Rāmānandī, he can still be involved in Brahmanic rituals.

Unlike the Rāmānanda depicted in the earlier sources, but closer to the Rāmānanda portrayed in the *rasik* branch, the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya exclusively follows the *saguṇa bhakti* because he is a *dās*, and within that tradition he sticks to Brahmanic rituals because he is an *ācārya*. I have shown that, through a mix of celebrations (like the Rāmānanda's *jayantī*), activities (like publishing materials about Rāmānanda and the Śrī Maṭh) and the reconstruction and preservation of places linked with Rāmānanda's life history (like the the Śrī Maṭh and the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir), Rāmnareśācārya was able to claim an authenticity in contrast to other Jagadgurū-s who cannot prove any 'traditional' link with Rāmānanda.

1.3 The evolution of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*

In Chapter 3 I have argued that it is likely that Rāmānanda did not establish an entire new *sampradāya* but rather simply a branch of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*, and that his disciples continued on this path without formal institutions or feeling the need to define their positions on orthodox matters because there was no main Rāmānandī center. Their *sampradāya* consisted simple of the teachings of Rāmānanda, rather than a structured institution or a strict set of rules.

Only later, with the construction of proper centers and thanks to the support of royals and locals alike, did the *sampradāya* became more organized. Many features of the *sampradāya* evolved: the image of its founder and his disciples, the presence of centers in northern India, the *sādhana* practiced there, the relationship with other *sampradāya*-s and with political powers, the relationship between gurus and lay people, the codification of internal rules, the administration of political and decisional power and the bestowing of titles.

In fact, considering early hagiographies and historical evidence from the 18th century, we can create a sketch of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* from its earliest days up to the present. Therefore, the idea of a Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as part of a wide Vaiṣṇava community in

which differences between Rāmānūjī-s and Rāmānandī-s were not emphasized (like in Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*), gave way to the image of the *sampradāya* as having more specific characteristic while still falling under the umbrella of the Śrī Sampradāya in the 18th century, to be then replaced in the 19th and 20th centuries by the idea of an independent *sampradāya*, defined through its founder and his specific teachings.

By following the succession of Rāmānanda's disciples, I hypothesized the spread of the *sampradāya*. I introduced both the earliest Rāmānandī *gaddī*-s and those that developed later. I demonstrated that the history of the *sampradāya* cannot be deduced by only focusing on specific centers or time periods because the *sampradāya* and the events that concern it are so complex that they have to be analyzed across a long period of time (diachronically) and by considering the situations of different places within the same period (synchronically) to be properly understood. Through the history of these places I showed how the *sampradāya* spread across northern India and how singular places, such as Galtā, Revāsā, Piṇḍorī and Kullu, had evolved over the centuries.

I argued that over the centuries the *sampradāya* relied on remarkable individuals (such as Kṛṣṇadās, Agradās and Kīlh) who were able to support the group and help it to evolve according to the needs of the time. In such circumstances, *mahant*-s that compromised wisely were able to ensure the *sampradāya*'s survival, while those centers in which *mahant*-s were not charismatic and unable to maintain popular support for their places led those communities towards decline. I show in the Appendix of this dissertation that similar situations also occur today, as Rāmānandī centers that were important in Varanasi just a few decades ago have since fallen into ruin because of poor management.

I also explained that some changes that happened in the *sampradāya* were the result of political conditions that only affected individual centers. In those cases, change represented the evolution of the *sampradāya* in a specific area and historical context in order to protect itself and to maintain its creed. However, changes could also depend on the personal religious attitude of a given *mahant* or the spread of new religious currents. Therefore Rāmānandī centers were always characterized by various internal positions on spiritual matter. This internal variety among religious centers has existed for centuries and continues into the present.

For example, I illustrated that in the past, under the reign of Jai Singh II of Jaipur, those centers and *sāadhanā*-s that were functional for the religious apparatus of the state were pushed towards radicalization and orthodoxy, whereas those that did not have any kind involvement with the court (such as the Bālānanda Maṭh) were able to remain independent

in terms of their beliefs and internal culture. In the 18th century, while some branches and religious centers of the *sampradāya* underwent a process of orthodoxization, its grassroots was still composed of wandering ascetics (*tyāgī*, or *vairāgī*) who had an open recruitment policy and were likely the highest contributors to the spread of Rām *bhakti* and of the *sampradāya* on a hyper-local level.

Similarly, pragmatism and a variety of approaches appear in the 20th century: although Bhagavadācārya fought for the independence of the *sampradāya*, his victory did not affect all the Rāmānandī centers or institute new rules that had to be followed by the entire *sampradāya*. He did not even regularize the method through which new ascetics were recruited or the behaviors towards castes that could be employed in Rāmānandī *āśram*-s or *maṭh*-s. Furthermore, not all the centers approved the new *paramparā* that he codified that did not include Rāmānūja, nor did they all support the fact that Rāmānanda had written commentaries like the *Ānanda Bhāṣya*.

This plurality of approaches also manifests in the attitude that different Rāmānandī-s have regarding the number of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s. In fact, I showed in Chapter 4 that when asked for their opinion on the role of the Jagadgurū and how many Jagadgurū-s should be in the *sampradāya*, there were three main positions that arose: some *sādhu*-s did not care about the number of Jagadgurū-s because they have their own center and therefore are not interested in this issue; some support only the Jagadgurū Rāmānareśācārya; and some *sādhu*-s do not support Rāmānareśācārya but do support other Jagadgurū-s. New Jagadgurū-s can be accepted by Rāmānandī-s because historically the group has never had a leader to organize the *sampradāya* into one homogeneous unit. Today, these Jagadgurū-s do not have defined roles, and they seem more like the attempt of some groups within the *sampradāya* to limit the authority of the Jagadgurū Rāmānareśācārya or simply to gain economically from the title of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya.

We can find various approaches that seek to analyze the relations between Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s and the political sphere. Rāmānareśācārya does not have to compromise with political figures to obtain support because he is considered to be directly linked to Rāmānanda and because he dwells in the Śrī Maṭh, which is a Trust owned by a committee belonging to the *sampradāya*. He therefore has all the markers of the legitimacy based on his connection to 'tradition,' even though his position was actually created fairly recently. He can thus focus his attention on enlarging his support within the *sampradāya*

and in lay society according to his own personal beliefs and wishes rather than according to political calculations.

On the other hand, those Jagadgurū-s who obtained the title because of their involvement in political affairs, sometimes need the support of national religious organizations (like the VHP), big industrial tycoons and politicians. Therefore, they may utilize approaches that derive partially from their beliefs and partially from their calculations about how to best maintain or gain supporters. In Chapter 4, I gave various examples of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s who exploit the political sphere to their gain. However, the reactions among Rāmānandī-s that I observed during my fieldwork also demonstrate that although the support of politicians and politicized organizations might be necessary, politics and money alone are not yet able to substitute the legitimation and authority provided by tradition.

In Chapter 5, I paid particular attention to the issue of succession in the Śrī Maṭh. In fact, the Śrī Maṭh has a unique status compared to that of other Rāmānandī Jagadgurū-s' centers, because it is the *mul pīṭh* of the *sampradāya* and the place in which the Jagadgurū dwells. I showed that the succession is regulated by a Samiti in which Rāmānandī-s from various branches participate, and that the Jagadgurū does not have any ascetic disciples in order to avoid competing claims to succession. To explain this situation, I suggested that the Jagadgurū in the Śrī Maṭh is appointed on the basis of a different conceptualization of *paramparā*. In fact, since it was impossible to reconstruct any *paramparā* for the original Śrī Maṭh, a committee of *sādhu*-s was gathered to elect the worthiest leader from among the Brahman Rāmānandī-s. This election gave the successor an air of legitimacy, as he had been vouched for by the top members of the *sampradāya*.

However, following the historic splitting of the tradition into many different branches and sub-branches, the present-day internal differentiation of within the *sampradāya* has led to various interpretations and adaptations of the role and office of the Jagadgurū.

2. Why has the title of Jagadgurū been bestowed?

The answer to the question at the base of this dissertation appears to be complex because the election of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya has gone through recent changes.

As I have argued in Chapter 4, it is likely that the initial reason for the election of a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya was to reward Bhagavadācārya for his efforts that contributed to the independence of the *sampradāya*. I have also noted that bestowing him with this title

was also a reaction to the use of the title by a disciple of Raghubarācārya, and I suggested that the officialization of the title to Bhagavadācārya in 1977 may represent the adoption of a specific policy within the *sampradāya* regarding matters of succession and the embrace of a specific image for Rāmānanda as a Jagadgurū.

The Rāmānanda's *paramparā* continued by Bhagavadācārya also found support in the establishment of the Śrī Maṭh, the construction of which strengthened the *ācārya* image of Rāmānanda who was recognized to have been a Jagadgurū and the founder of the *sampradāya*, and whose importance was emphasized through the cult of his *pādukā*.

The successors of Bhagavadācārya followed his main purpose: to spread the fame of Rāmānanda and improve the *sampradāya* by attempting to create unity among the various branches. I have demonstrated that the feeling of a gap between the internal groups is quite spread among the ascetics of the *sampradāya*, and that the presence of a leader who could charismatically represent the *sampradāya* on a national level is seen as necessary in order to make the *sampradāya* recognizable among the hundreds of other Hindu groups. The authority of this leader is emphasized through the strategic use of a traditional title and an illustrious *paramparā*.

However, recent decades have seen a significant change in the process by which the title of Jagadgurū is bestowed. A new social environment in Ayodhya favored the creation of other Jagadgurū-s to face the challenges posed to the *sampradāya* by the Rāmjanmabhūmi movement. As described in Chapter 4 and 5, the election of Rāmnareśācārya and his position in the movement were not accepted by some branches of the *sampradāya*, which led to the formation of other Jagadgurū-s. I have shown that political disagreement may have spurred the elections of Rāmbhadrācārya and Haryācārya. The title of Jagadgurū and the respect that it evoked led to another change: it became a title, that, due to the example of the Śāṅkarācārya, began to confer an aura of authority that aided in the recruitment of devotees.

This created a kind of marketplace for religious titles: on one side, ascetics and gurus ready to buy the title, and on the other side, 'sellers' (the *akhārā*-s) ready to confer it for personal gain. To justify this new practice, some representatives of the *Akhārā*-s and some Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s said that the number of Rāmānandācārya-s had to be modeled on the number of Śāṅkarācārya-s.

The ease with which the title is now given is possible because it is not based in any ancient tradition, although it seems it did become one of the main charges among the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s – effectively, the Vaiṣṇava counterpart of the Śāṅkarācārya-s.

However it is also likely that this ease of titleship is also the result of the contemporary period in which, although many gurus without an orthodox pedigree are able to capture the attention of devotees through their personal charisma, many still prefer to connect to a traditional *sampradāya* to increase their credibility and stand out amidst the crowded panorama of Indian gurus vying for international reach.

Leaving aside those Jagadgurū-s who received the title for personal interests, the main purpose of a Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya is the same as it is for Rāmnareśācārya and for those who support the existence of more than one Jagadgurū: to have one or more leaders to manage the wide community of the *sampradāya*, creating a bridge among the *sādhu*-s of the *sampradāya* and between *sādhu*-s and lay society.

I have described this purpose as part of Rāmnareśācārya's project to improve the *sampradāya*. Rāmnareśācārya organizes ceremonies and events that gather lay people and ascetics around him and thus increase his influence. He helps build connections between his devotees and Rāmānandī-s from various branches, thus exposing them to a conceptualization of a Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* in which he is the vertex. The description in Chapter 6 of the relationships between the Jagadgurū and his disciples has highlighted that he is a source of support beyond the religious guidance he provides and his activities are considered to be a form of social *sevā*. Thus Chapter 6 has demonstrated the multifaceted role of the guru in contemporary India.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I have also shown that the Jagadgurū attempts to create friendly relationships with various branches of the *sampradāya*-s and various important religious centers, and that over the decades he has been able to soothe disagreements with the Digambar Akhārā. For instance, I described the respect that *mahant*-s of important centers, such as the Piṇḍorī Dhām and the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā in Ayodhya, showed towards the Jagadgurū during the Kumbh Melā. I also described how the Jagadgurū creates links with various groups by visiting them often and organizing events in which representatives of the various branches and *sampradāya*-s participate. He manifests this friendly approach towards both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva *sampradāya*-s. His openness toward the intermingling of the sects is based on not only the idea that the Rām *bhakti* teaches the respect for all the creeds but also the belief that only through unity can a real improvement of Dharma be realized for all of society.

3. How to further develop this research

As already mentioned, in this research I outlined the history of the *sampradāya* to explore the creation of the office of Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya and the role of the Śrī Maṭh in the historical evolution of the *sampradāya*, all changes that helped create a new religious Indian landscape. Despite my comprehensive approach, I am aware that the scale of the debate is extensive and multifaceted, and therefore even my work only contributes a partial portrait of the *sampradāya*. To generate a proper picture of the *sampradāya* in contemporary India, there is need for more case studies at the local level to allow further assessment of local dimensions of the subject.

Therefore, I think further comparative studies and surveys on the organization of the *sampradāya* and its centers in northern India, the *gaddī*-s and centers about which we have only limited information and which have never received the attention of scholars, and the various subgroups present in each branch, could be useful to understand the true geographic and cultural range of the *sampradāya*, its organization and its practices.

Other interesting aspects to properly develop include the connection between the *sampradāya*'s branches and national organizations, such as the VHP or the Akhārā Pariṣad.

During my fieldwork I realized that some of the circumstances I dealt with may be helpful in explaining some general trends that exist in the contemporary Indian religious field. For example, the fact that some of the other Jagadgurū Rāmānandācārya-s have paid for that title describes a reality that exists in other *sampradāya*-s as well. Consequently, comparative research among *sampradāya*-s could be useful in understanding this development, its causes and consequences.

Moreover, further information should be collected on the works of Bhagavadācārya as an example of a liberal *sādhu* in comparison to orthodox *sādhu*-s contemporary to him, such as Swāmī Karpātrī.

My expectation is that the development of studies about *sampradāya*-s and gurus, both traditional and modern, could help illuminate contemporary religious events in India, especially those that affect society on a large scale. Furthermore, I think that the ethnographic-historical method or, more general, the multidisciplinary approach, may be the most effective way to make these topics comprehensive to a larger audience. In fact, I retain that humanistic disciplines should also have 'practical' goals, that is, the circulation of a constant actualized knowledge that may help in understanding contemporary issues, not only among scholars but also among the grassroots of a population.

4. Concluding remarks

In this dissertation, collecting the results of previous studies on the *sampradāya* and integrating them with data from my fieldwork and their interpretation, I demonstrated that a multidisciplinary approach to understand the dynamics of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* both in the past and in the present produces interesting results. First, I have shown that in the Rāmānandī tradition, nothing remains static: aspects of the tradition such as the life story of its founder, his religious teachings, and its historical centers evolve according to social, religious and political contexts.

In fact, I demonstrated that some events that are normally interpreted as the invention of tradition, could be better interpreted as the evolution of tradition, as the word 'evolution' appears to be more suitable for the interpretation of changes and innovations that are in a condition of continuity with the past, are understandable in the historical context in which they are formulated, and are considered as such by the conveyors of a tradition. In fact, while the contents of tradition may change, the notion that a tradition is necessary in order to acquire legitimation persists.

Through my data, I showed the role that charismatic individuals have in maintaining and transmitting a tradition, and that by interpreting events according to emic perspectives wherever possible, we reach conclusions that are different from those of previous scholars, especially in evaluating the past of the *sampradāya*. What has arisen in this dissertation is that variables such as faith, belief and personal charisma are very important components that determine the success or failure of a guru and his ability to gather disciples. These variables, therefore, should be taken into consideration in order to understand the evolution of a *sampradāya*. From the history of the *sampradāya* also arose the fact that its success relied on its *sādhu*-s, who were close to the grassroots of the population due to their wandering lifestyle, and the charismatic and pragmatic leaders who stood by their faith even during difficult times.

The historical study of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*-s and the portrait of the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya enabled me to give an example of the evolution of a *sampradāya* and of an image of guru that can be representative of Modern Hindu traditionalism. In fact, as suggested in the Introduction, this category, which addresses traditions that resisted contact with both Neo-Hindu thought and outmoded views of 'classical' Hinduism, needs to be described in-depth through case studies to reach a proper comprehension, as it is very vague and can refer to a high number of traditions. I showed

that Rāmnareśācārya's role and office is the result of not only the tradition to which he belongs (the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*), but also his own personal positions on religious and spiritual matters. Rāmnareśācārya's approach to his disciples offered an example of the relationship that a *sampradāyik* guru has with his highly variegated social base of followers.

I demonstrated that a form of modernization manifests in the way that Rāmnareśācārya spreads his teachings – including his embrace of 21st century technologies – and in the way he stresses those teachings that are more appropriate for present-day society. As we have seen in the Introduction, his approaches embody what we have described as the defining characteristic of a *sampradāya*: a present-day interpretation and adaptation of teachings originating in the far past.

Appendix

Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi

1. The Rāmānandī presence in Varanasi: a census perspective

In Chapter 5 I introduced the Vaiṣṇava landscape of Varanasi, and especially of Pañcagaṅgā *ghāṭ*. I also have demonstrated that there is no particular evidence to confirm the existence of an *āśram* established by Rāmānanda on that spot.

It is hard to detail the development of Rāmānandī centers in the city of Varanasi: on the one hand we have a shortage of information about the *sampradāya* before the 17th century; and on the other hand, Varanasi has an history of destruction and reconstruction which creates great uncertainty about places and their antiquity. As Lutgendorf suggests, however, in the latter part of the 18th century the rulers of Varanasi paid particular attention to the Rām tradition. He suggests that the reason for this interest reflects ‘among other things their need to cultivate an explicitly Hindu symbol of royal legitimacy’ whose purpose was ‘to achieve ideological as well as political independence from the Nawabs’ (1989: 41).⁶⁵⁸ However, Lutgendorf advances also another reason for this patronage:

A further motive for the Banaras kings' patronage of the Ram tradition may have been their desire to maintain amicable relations with the economically and militarily powerful Rāmānandī-order. A mobile population that was difficult to monitor, these mendicants or sadhus often traveled in armed bands, served as mercenaries in royal armies, and controlled the trade in certain commodities; given the unstable conditions of the period, aspiring kings may well have been concerned to remain on favorable terms with them. The Banaras kingdom was in relatively close proximity to three important Ramanandi centers: Chitrakut in the southwest, Janakpur in the northeast, and Ayodhya in the northwest. It was in part through conspicuous patronage of the Ramanandis—especially at the time of the Ramlila festival, when thousands of sadhus were invited to set up camp in the royal city and were fed at the Raja's expense—that the Banaras rulers succeeded

⁶⁵⁸ The myth of Rām had a strong martial and sociopolitical dimension in the vision of Rām Rāj, the golden age of Ram rule which, with its emphasis on social and political hierarchy and on deferential behavior of subjects and subordinates, ‘could serve as chastening examples to the Rajas' rebellious underlings’. These ideals found expression in the *Rāmcaritmānas* which become a further tool and model to validate a religious-political authority. Therefore, many royal courts of the period began to support *Rāmcaritmānas* performance and scholarship (Lutgendorf, 1989: 41).

in turning their upstart capital, on the "impure" eastern bank of the Ganges, into a major center of pilgrimage, a move that must have conferred positive economic benefits even while it served to advertise their prestige and piety. (*ibid*: 41-42)

I, however, do not believe that the Raja of Varanasi used the Rām tradition to please the Rāmānandī-s; rather I think that the attendance of Rāmānandī-s at the *Rām Līlā* in Ramnagar was more likely a consequence of the existence of the *Rām Līlā* than a reason for its existence. In fact, since Rāmānandī-s were not the only military powerful ascetic group present in the city, we should wonder why the Raja would have decided to pander to them in such an elaborate way, and do nothing similar for the Śaiva Gosain.

That there was a mixed but high percentage of militant ascetics is well attested by W.W. Bird (senior judge of the Court of Circuit for the Division of Benares) in his Board's Collection,⁶⁵⁹ mentioned by Pinch. Bird estimated that warrior ascetics (who he generally calls Gosain) represented one fourth of the male population of Varanasi, making a total number of warriors that Pinch calculates to be about 22,000-25,000 individuals. He then compares this data with that based on a house census of 1799 according to which there were approximately 10,000 Gosain-s and Vairāgī-s – who, as we have seen, were mostly Rāmānandī ascetics – permanently resident in Varanasi. Pinch assumes that half of this 10,000 were Vairāgī-s as, according to him, there was a massive increase of Gosain-s and Vairāgī-s in Varanasi at the beginning of the 19th century (2012: 80-81).

Another account of Rāmānandī-s in the city is found in the census of 1827-28 taken by James Prinsep (1833). He uses the category of 'Hindu Fakirs', within which the number of Rāmānandī-s equalled the number of Saṃnyāsī-s (2500), but he does not offer any description of them. Instead, Prinsep calls Saṃnyāsī-s those who are 'mostly gosain, merchants', counting separately the number of *daṇḍī* (700), and the 'Dravir Sanyasi' (50). The total number of ascetics according to him was 7.171 (1833: 119).

According to Cohn (1987: 234), the population of Varanasi was overestimated in the first half of the 19th century because of the methods used to count it, which were not always able to provide accurate information. Therefore also the presence of 2500 Rāmānandī-s should be considered as an approximation. Since the beginning of the 20th century, as well, there has been confusion about how to take a census of ascetics, to the point where more recent censuses have abandoned the statistical enumeration of ascetics altogether. Gross explains:

⁶⁵⁹ This consists of extracted letters from the Bengal Political and Bengal Judicial proceedings.

In the early censuses, ascetics were tabulated in terms of their numbers in a particular sect, and the ascetics sects were treated as if they were caste groups. The *sādhus* (i.e., “Religious Mendicants and Inmates of Monastic Institutions”) were also listed under the separate occupational category of professional religious specialist along with priests and temple service castes... in the 1951, 1961, and 1971 Censuses of India, the *sādhus* are considered to be “non-productive” workers and have simply been lumped together with beggars and vagrants. Furthermore, the *sādhus* who are residents of religious institutions (i.e., *maths* and *ashrams*) are now included with inmates of mental asylums and jails” (1992: 122).

The data collected by Sinha and Saraswati differ considerably from those of previous centuries and decades. The two scholars made an anthropological inquiry about the ascetics of Kāśī at the end of the 1960s. According to them, the total ascetic population was around 1284, among which 258 were Rāmānandī ascetics, constituting one-fifth of the total ascetic population of the city (1978: 115).

Sinha and Saraswati not only made an inquiry about the ascetics in Varanasi, but also listed their centers. They found that the Rāmānandī-s had around forty *maṭh*-s in seventeen wards of the city and that about 95 per cent of these had come up between 1700 and 1968; as well, two places were said to have been established by Śrī Rāmānanda in the 15th century (but the anthropologists do not mention their names). They also found that 56.6 per cent of the Rāmānandī *maṭh*-s came into existence after 1900 (1978: 115). At the time of Sinha and Saraswati the presence of Rāmānandī-s followed this ratio: ‘in 42.5 per cent *mathas* of the Ramanandis 2 to 5 ascetics live permanently, 32.5 per cent *mathas* accommodate 6 to 20 ascetics, and in 22.5 per cent *mathas* only one ascetic lives permanently. In one of the Ramanandi *mathas* the number of ascetics living permanently ranged between 41 and 50’ (1978: 115). According to them:

All the Ramanandi *mathas* in Kashi are grouped under four Tadas which may be compared to Municipal wards of a city. Each Tada has a Sri Mahanta. The post of the Sri Mahanta is transferred from *guru* to *shishya* and hence it is the matha which usually takes the name of the Tada. The four Tadas or the *mathas* which act as the headquarters of the Tada organization are Lota Teela *matha* at Ishwargangi, Rama-Janaki Mandir at Rajadarwaja, Rama Mandir at Kashmiriganj and Sheetal Dasjika Akhara at Assi. Under the Tada system, Kashi is divided into four parts, each indicating the jurisdiction of a Tada. [...] functionally the Tada is a commensal boundary, all the members of a Tada are

invited for small scale *bhandaras*. Besides, the dispute of a *matha* belonging to the Tada are generally solved by the Tada Sri Mahant (*ibid*: 116).

Also H.H. Wilson, who has already been mentioned, testified to the presence in an earlier period of many Rāmānandī *math*-s in Varanasi, whose ‘panchayat or Council is the Chief Authority amongst the Ramavats in upper India (1846: 32)’. If this remark was a reference to the Toda organization mentioned by Sinha and Saraswati, it would demonstrate that the meeting had a wider purpose than just the organization of *bhāṇḍāra*-s. Unfortunately, Wilson does not give further information, and the present observable situation among Rāmānandī-s would confirm the absence of some centers of wider authority than others in Varanasi, and the fact that boundaries of commensality exist between centers. This kind of link was confirmed to me by the *mahant* of the Tapovan *āśram*, who described the nature of the meetings of Rāmānandī centers as based on the schedule of *bhāṇḍāra*-s organized by the various centers.⁶⁶⁰ However, he did not mention any place in specific.

2. In search of Rāmānandī centers

I looked for Rāmānandī places in Varanasi towards the end of my fieldwork, and initially the main reason was to ascertain the views of their *mahant*-s about the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū. Only later did I decide to create a map of the Rāmānandī *āśram*-s to see whether the data collected by Sinha and Saraswati were still valid. I soon realized that a proper inquiry would have needed perhaps one year more, given the remarkable number of Rāmānandī centers and the fact that their number has probably increased. It was also quite difficult to find some of them, as they are located in peripheral areas not easy to reach, or the addresses furnished by Sinha and Saraswati were incomplete. Furthermore, when I began this inquiry, the Mahā Kumbh Melā was going on, meaning that many *mahant*-s were not present as they were at the Kumbh.

Since many Rāmānandī-s told me that the actual number of Rāmānandī centers is around sixty-seventy (one said as many as a hundred), my data represent only one third of the possible sites. However, I decided that my inquiry could in any case shed more light on the religious environment of the city and, in particular, provide some information about the types of Rāmānandī centers present and their characteristics and status.

⁶⁶⁰ Peter van der Veer has dedicated an entire paragraph to the importance of *bhāṇḍāra* as ritual activity, especially in the life of *tyāgi*-s. He argues that *bhāṇḍāra*, often sponsored by laymen, is ‘a way in which group solidarity is reinforced among tyagis of a jamāt or a khālsā’ (1988: 124).

I began my survey searching for the centers listed by Sinha and Saraswati. However, as noted above, some of the centers described by them do not exist any more or their status has changed, perhaps because the life of a *maṭh*, temple or *āśram* depends on variables among which are the ability of a *mahant* to collect disciples, to pass on the place and to gain the support of lay people.

Initially I decided to look for those centers that were described as Tada-s by the two anthropologists.

2.1 The four Tada-s

As already indicated, in my inquiries with Rāmānandī-s in Varanasi the concept of Tada never came out. Furthermore, it never even arose that the four centers described below have any particular power in the organization of other centers in Varanasi.

2.1.1 Rām Jānkī Mandir, Rājā Darvaza

I found the Rām Jānkī Mandir, hidden in the narrow streets of old Varanasi, after wandering in the area called Rājā Darvaza, which is on the east side of the little square known as Chowk. The building is actually an *havelī*. Entering from the main gate, a courtyard opens to the mansion, which is colored in a blue-green and red. In the central part of the courtyard, a small and very new temple contains a Śiv *liṅga*. On the right side, a pillared area encloses three cells which contain the holy *mūrti*-s of Rām and Sītā, Rām Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ and Hanumān. The cells have golden doors, in front of which devotees can sit. This creates an intimate ambience because the *mūrti* is not (as is more common) located in the *garbhagrha* of a temple structure, and devotees can easily sit in front of it and participate in the *pūjā* performed by the *pūjārī*. When the temple has to be closed, the door of the room-temple is simply locked. At the side of the cells, two stairways lead to the first floor, where *brahmacārī*-s and ascetics dwell.

When I arrived, there were several women waiting for the *pūjārī*. The place was quite lively with about ten *brahmacārī*-s and a similar number of ascetics. Fortunately, the *mahant* was present and helpful. He told me that the place was about 250 years old, while the Śiv *liṅga* collocated at the center of the courtyard had been there for a couple of years. The *mahant* said that they were part of the *dās* branch of the *sampradāya*, but he reminded me that the suffix *-dās* could be found also among *nāgā*-s and *tyāgī*-s. When I asked for his name, the *mahant* replied that knowing his name was not necessary, and I did not insist. I

did not ask directly for the *paramparā*, but looking to the left of the main temple I noticed that over the *gaddī* (throne), there were seven portraits of previous *mahant*-s. Hence, if we calculate about 30 years for each *mahant*, I suppose that an estimate that the place is 200 years old would be reasonable.

2.1.2 Shītal Dās Baṛā Akhārā, Assi Ghāṭ

The Shītal Dās Baṛā Akhārā is collocated on the road that from Assi leads towards Lanka area. Just after other religious centers and a few shops, a little streets on the left opens, close to a tank. In front of this tank stand the Rāmānandī center, accessible from a little door over which is written the complete name of the place: Śrī Swāmī Shītal Dās Baṛā Akhārā Sevā Trust, *mahant* Śrī Nirānjan Dās (the current *mahant*).

Although the *mahant* was absent, I was welcomed by a Śaiva Bābā living there. There were several young *brahmacārin*-s present, as there is a school and an *āśram* inside the compound. When I met the Choṭā Mahārāj (just as in the Śrī Maṭh, he is the *sādhu* who has charge of the place when the *mahant* is absent), he said that the place was built about 250 years ago, and it rises on the spot where Rām would have installed a *liṅga* before proceeding towards Lanka. He said that Tulsīdās would have worshiped this *liṅga* as well, but he did not offer to show it to me.

The Rām temple is on the right side of the entrance; the *mūrti* is contained in a cell that is in the middle of a wide area, covered but not enclosed, so that devotees can sit in front and all around the cell. According to the Choṭā Mahārāj, the paintings in the hall of the temple are original and represent the stories of the Hindu gods. Among the treasures of the place there is also a bell said to be 350 years old, which was given by a general from Nepal. (The precise date is uncertain.) In the *āśram* there are several shrines dedicated to Rām and Sītā, but also shrines to Jagannath, Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and Hanumān. According to the Choṭā Mahārāj, the name of the place is not connected to any contemporary *akhārā*, but it was the name of the founder 250 years ago. However, from his words, it was not clear whether Sital Dās established the place or whether he renovated an *akhārā* already in existence. Nowadays there is no longer an *akhārā* but the name has remained, while the ascetics staying there are *dās*.

2.1.3 Śrī Anant Śrī Sītā Rām Jānkī Mandir, Kashmiri Ganj

Kashmiri Ganj is an area on the southeast of Varanasi. There, in a wide and less populated road stands the beautiful and majestic Śrī Anant Śrī Sītā Rām Jānkī Mandir, whose *mahant* is Śrī Doc. Rāmkamal Dās Vedāntī. When I visited he was in Bhopal, but I was able to speak with some ascetics dwelling there. They said that the place is 650 years old and that it was established by Anantānanda himself. Externally, however, the structure does not seem particularly old, especially the marble *śikhar* that is without decoration. The building is a one-floor structure, with an entrance that is marked on top by the Vaiṣṇava *tilak*, the conch, the disk, and the bow and arrow. Over the entrance a statue of Lakṣmī is sprinkled by two elephants. Inside, towered over by the *śikhar*, the core of the temple consists of *mūrti*-s of Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ. The temple is very much decorated, with colorful statues and a marble floor. On its right, there is the office where I was able only to speak with those aforementioned ascetics. They told me that they follow *bhakti sādhanā*, and that the center is from the *dās* branch, and therefore *rasik* from a more general perspective.

Although I tried months later to meet the *mahant*, I never had a chance as he often travels, not only in India but especially in US and New Zealand. He has devotees in various part of the world and he gives *virakta dīkṣā* also to foreigners.⁶⁶¹ The temple publishes a magazine named *Vedānt Pravāh*, which is apparently written entirely by Śrī Rāmkamal Dās. A copy they gave me provided a hint about the approach of this guru, which is very close to that described for a 'modern guru'. In fact, in less than 25 pages, the *mahant* wrote about: *karma-yoga*; *bhakti*; Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa; the importance of yoga; the role of the *Veda*-s; the importance of worship of the mother; the use of *Gītā*; and the role of the seven Śakti and Tantrism. One paragraph was called 'Jay Hind', while another was about the forms of Śiva, and another was about the role of the Caturthī *vrata* and *darśan*. The last paragraph was about spondylitis disease. His wide-ranging approach portrays him as a modern guru, interested in issues which are of interest to middle-class people, rather than as a

⁶⁶¹ In fact, by chance an Italian Rāmānandī who was initiated by an American Rāmānandī in New York wrote to me to have information about the *sampradāya*, and I discovered that his guru was initiated by Śrī Rāmkamal Dās Vedāntī jī. The e-mail exchange with this Italian Rāmānandī was quite interesting because it demonstrated to me how, once again, a tradition can evolve and be able to spread in other contexts. This young man wrote to me that he was initiated in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* as a Brahmin (!) of the Achari branch (started by Bhāvānanda, disciple of Rāmānanda) from Mukti Nāth (Nepal). He said that he studied in New York with his guru (Swāmī Jai Rām Dās Mahārāj) and there he worked for a little while as paṇḍit in a temple. Nowadays, he cooperates with the Italian Hindu Union and he is one of the organizers of the first European Rāmānandī Sangam. His function is to give *dīkṣā* (!) and help devotees from France, UK and Lithuania (his guru is from Lithuania, although he lives in New York), performing the role of priest (e-mail correspondence, April 16/20, 2014).

Rāmānandī. Perhaps the reason for this approach lies in the international audience of the magazine, which is sold particularly in the US.

2.1.4 Loṭa Tīla Maṭh, Isvaragangi Pokra

I localized the Loṭa Tīla Maṭh in an area called Isvaragangi Pokra, close to Lahurabir Road. Today the place has lost completely any role or importance, compared with the information given by Sinha and Saraswati.⁶⁶² I was only able to find it because I was able to read a little board on top of a door on which was carved its name. In fact, the building is mostly collapsed and when I went inside the *mahant* or head of the place was sleeping on an old bed and did not show even the minimum of interest in me. Sitting close to him was an old woman, who did not look like an ascetic and who told me that the *mahant* was sleeping and nobody else was there. Inside the place there was the *mūrti* of Lota Dās, and several little temples: one contained twelve little Śiv *liṅga*, another was dedicated to Hanumān and another to Bolenath. In front of the Hanumān temple the *dhuni*, collected in a structure similar to the *yajña* place, was still burning with few books kept close by. On one wall, there are portraits of three previous *mahant*-s. I guess that the present *mahant* is not able to find lay supporters or disciples and, therefore, the place is falling apart.

2.2 Other Rāmānandī centers

In this paragraph I will list those Rāmānandī centers that I was able to find because of the indication of Sinha and Saraswati, plus some others that I found merely by walking around. I list the places according to their geographic position, starting from south Varanasi, which means Assi Ghāṭ and Nagwa. I will list also those mentioned by Sinha and Saraswati that I was not able to find but that perhaps I at least localized geographically so that other interested researchers could have more chance to discover them. The Map 4 will also assist.

2.2.1 Nagwa

The *Kartaliya Bābā Annapurṇa millki Ṭhākurbari* (number 1 on Sinha and

⁶⁶² They report the spiritual genealogy of Śrī Gurucaraṇa Dās, the *mahant* of the Loṭa Tīla Maṭh. Anantānanda; Kṛṣṇa Dās Payahārī; Bhagvānjī; Lota Das jī (1763-1813 VS); Dvārikā Dās; Surat Dās; Lakṣmaṇ Dās (1813-1843 VS); Narayan Dās (1843-1868 VS); Gadadhar Dās (1868-1916 VS); Kalika Dās (1916-1946 VS); Raghubar Dās (1946-1947 VS); Rām Sumeru Dās (1947-1959 VS); Bhagvān Dās (1959-1980 VS); Narottam Dās (1980-2000 VS); Bharat Dās; Maksudam Dās (2000-2014 VS); Sukharam Dās Jeystha (2012-Asadh 2014); Gurucaraṇ Dās (2014-?).

Saraswati's list, p. 252) is quite close to Samdhya *ghāt*: taking the street which from Assi goes towards Nagwa, it is necessary to reach the first mosque on the left, take a street on its left, then look towards the International Hindu school. Almost at the back of this school there is the Rāmānandī place, recognizable from the marks of the bow and arrow over the door (in fact, on the way there are a few other Vaiṣṇava places, which are recognizable by the different symbols: the disk and the conch). The place looks like other buildings in the neighborhood: a yellow two storied structure, which I guessed to be the *āśram*, while just in front of the entrance, on the opposite side of the courtyard, there is the Sītā Rām temple. Actually the building was closed when I arrived and I could not collect information. According to people working there, the place is inhabited by a few *sādhu*-s.

Raghunath Āśram Mahābir Mandir (number 18 on Sinha and Saraswati's list). It is likely that this place does not exist any more in the area. The only information Sinha and Saraswati give is that it is located in Nagwa.

2.2.2 Assi Ghāt

Charauta āśram B 1/138 (number 3 on Sinha and Saraswati's list). It is likely that this place does not exist any more. Nobody in the area knows it and even its address did not lead to any religious place. At B1/128 there is a Hanumān temple though, but it is not a place for ascetics.

Choṭe Gudardāsī kā Akhārā B1/ 90 (number 4 on Sinha and Saraswati's list). The complete name of the place is: Śrī Rāghav Mandir, Kāśī kutiyā Revāsī Samādhī Jilā- Sītā Moṛhi Bihar, Akhārā Guddar Dās jī, and its *mahant* is Rāmādhīn Dās Śāstrī. Inside, a young Rāmānandī welcomed me, but in a suspicious rather than gentle way. He told me that the *āśram* and the temple are 450 years old and were established by Guddar Dās. As the *mahant* was not present, he said he could not help me with more information, but would have done my *sevā* as much as he could. When I asked him about the *sādhana* followed at the place he replied *bhakti ārādhnā*, without further explanation. However, he said that the temple and the *āśram* were linked with the *Laśkarī* group of the *sampradāy*. In fact, as is typical of Rāmānandī-s belonging to that group, he had a completely white *tilak* with a little spot of red under the *tripuṇḍra* and under the white line in the middle.

As he was not comfortable in giving me more information about the place, I asked as a last question about his perspective on the Śrī Maṭh. He said it is the *ācārya gaddī*, and main *gaddī*, and that he knows and respects the Jagadgurū and goes often to the Maṭh.

The main activities of the place are described on a board outside the gate: *saṅgīt* about chapters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *sankīrtan*, *bhajan*, *akhaṇḍa nām sankīrtan*, *devīgīt jāgaran*, and *pañjābī bhāngrā*. These are practices linked to devotionism, such as playing music, singing and dancing. This place is quite recognizable even from afar because of its *akhaṇḍa bhajan*, the uninterrupted repetition of devotional songs. The list of activities illustrates the devotional nature of Rāmānandī ascetics even in those branches that are connected theoretically with a *tapasic sādhanā*. As we have seen previously, the most important purpose for all Rāmānandī is actually *bhakti*, and this is expressed in various forms.

Śrī Ṭhākur Rām Jānkī Mandir Assi Ghāṭ B 1/155 (Sinha and Saraswati mention a Śrī Ṭhākur Rām Jānkī Mandir as 23rd in their list but I could not find the address that they give, which is Assi *ghāṭ* B1/204). The entrance to this small and decaying place is marked by a red board with white writing, in a street filled with tourist shops. When I went inside, only a Bābā was living there. The temple was at that time closed. The *āśram* and temple are on the ground floor of a building, to the left of its inner courtyard. On part of the building, there are photos of previous *mahant*-s. The old Bābā was almost blind and deaf and we could not talk properly as he could not understand me very well and for me his Hindi was hard to understand. His name was Śrī Śrī Hari Dās. Talking about Pañcagaṅgā he said that he knew the Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadgurū, and sometimes he goes to have his *darśan*. He agreed that the Śrī Maṭh is the place where Rāmānand lived and taught. He said that in his temple about four or five other ascetics were living. He talked about a Rāmānūjī *āśram* behind the building that, if I understood properly, Rāmānūjī-s bought from Rāmānandī-s for thousands of rupees.⁶⁶³ On the other side of the courtyard, lay people were living and some women were doing *sevā* to the Bābā.

Rām Jānkī Maṭh Trust, Lāl Dvārā, Śrī Śrī 1008 Śrī Punjabi Bhagvān Āśram, Mahant Śrī Rāj Kumar Dās jī (not present in Sinha and Saraswati's list). The building is a new structure. On the ground floor there is the temple where ascetics and lay people sing *kīrtan* every day. Everything is in marble and the first floor looks more like a guesthouse, with all doors facing on the corridor. The *mahant* stays on the first floor. When I went, he had just finished the *darśan* and was ready for his meal.

⁶⁶³ Just as the Bābā said, at the back of the Śrī Ṭhākur Rām Jānkī Mandir there is the Śrī Dvārkaḍhīś Mandir. It is a building painted yellow with three floors, an inner courtyard and a *gośālā*. Inside there were perhaps twenty ascetics, many of them young. Their *tilak*, white and smoothed over the nose, with a red line and a dot in the middle, marked their belonging to the Rāmānūjī *sampradāya*.

A regular visitor to the Maṭh told me that the main inhabitants of the place are *vidyārthī*-s (students), while the proper *sādhu*-s were just three or four.

I tried several times to talk with the *mahant* to receive information about the place but he was often absent. When we could talk he told me he did not have much information about the *sampradāya* and for that it would be better to go to Pañcagaṅgā. When I explained to him that I just wanted information about his particular place and the Trust he told me to write my questions and then let him check them before passing them on to someone else for a reply. So the last time I visited I left my questions for the *mahant* but after that heard nothing further.

Tilak dās jī kā Mandir Assi B1/121 (number 8 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). I could not find this temple.

2.2.3 South-East Varanasi

Dvārkaḍhīś Mandir B22/195 Shankhudhāra (number 11 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). This temple is quite famous in Varanasi because it hosts the transposition of the Kṛṣṇa *mūrti* of the Dvārka temple in Gujarat. In fact, Varanasi is one of the *saptapurī* or 'seven holiest city of India', along with Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Ujjain, Dvarka and Kanchi. However, Varanasi has the distinction of being the main *tīrth* among these, to such an extent that it contains places that represent the six other *saptapurī*. Among these, there is the Dvārkaḍhīś Mandir.

The temple is in front of a quiet pond in the center of the Shankhudhāra neighborhood. Entering from a set of steps, the temple appears similar to those already described: a simple building with a rectangular shape, with a facade pillared and with three main doors that protect the *mūrti*-s contained in the cells. In the middle one, together with the transposition of the Dvārka *mūrti*, there are many more little *mūrti*-s of Kṛṣṇa and *śaligram*-s. On the left side of the main cell, there are the *mūrti*-s of Rām and Jānkī and in front of this the temple of Hanumān. At the right side of the main cell is the statue of Rāmānanda. As noted by Eck, the place is not ancient although it contains some statues which themselves are quite old. She mentions a Viṣṇu statue from the Pāla period that must be at least nine hundred years old. It is just in front of the main cells, together with another statue of Śiv. The *mahant* was not present when I visited and I could talk only with a *brahmacārī*, the eldest of a group that dwells there to study Sanskrit and Brahmanic texts. He told me that a few *sādhu*-s live in the place, but as they are Vairāgī-s their number is

always changing. He said that the *mahant* of the place is a *tyāgī*.

On a board in the temple it was written that the rights over the place were taken by *mahant Śrī Śrī 1008 Śrī Avadhbihārjī Dās jī Mahārāj* and then passed on to his disciple *mahant Śrī Śrī 1008 Svāmī Rām Dās Ācārya jī Mahārāj*.

Unfortunately there was no one who could tell me any more about the history of the place and how long it has been in the hands of Rāmānandī-s. It is quite surprising (although not impossible given the respect Rāmānandī-s show towards all the forms of Viṣṇu and other gods) to find a Rāmānandī place and temple that houses a Kṛṣṇa *mūrti*. It is likely that Rāmānandī-s were given the place after it had been occupied by another group.

Rādhā Kṛṣṇa temple B 26/6 Nawabganj, close to Gurudhām colony (number 21 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). Although I identified the place, I was not actually able to find it.

Following the few indications of the Choṭā Mahārāj of the Sital Dās Akhārā, and asking around for a Rām temple, I reached the little Sītā Rām temple in Belapur, whose first floor functions as an *āśram*. Although the *mūrti* there are Sītā Rām and Lakṣmaṇ, the present *mahant* told me that the place is now a Rāmānūjī center. He said that it has belonged to the Śrī *sampradāya* for the last twenty-five years. It would have been interesting to know the reasons for this change in ownership, but the *mahant* was not comfortable dealing with this issue. Perhaps he did not even know. Nowadays there are mainly students living there and few *sādhu*-s who come and go. The *mahant* was very kind and explained to me the position of Rāmānūjī-s with respect to Rāmānandī-s.

When I asked him if Rāmānūjī-s take into consideration Rāmānanda, he smiled and said that there are various positions, but he pointed out that considering the *siddhānta*-s of both the traditions, it is possible to recognize the influence of Rāmānūja on Rāmānanda. He said that many Rāmānūjī-s accept the presence of Rāmānanda. I asked him whether Rāmānūjī *mahant*-s necessarily have to be married. He said that there are actually two *paramparā* of Rāmānūjī, but he did not refer to Vadakalai and Tenkalai schools, rather to those who live in the South and those in the North. In South India, he explained there are *mahant* who manage *gaddī*-s and they are married, while in the North there is a bigger influence of *virakta* (renunciation) and therefore there are many Rāmānūjī *sādhu*-s and *mahant* who are still *brahmacārin*-s.

2.2.4 Close to Godowlia

Bhagvān Dās jī Akhārā D 17/125 Daśāśvamedh *ghāṭ* (number 16 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). Coming from Daśāśvamedh road, close to the river, the road divides in two. Taking the street on the left, one reaches this Rām Temple, just at the beginning of the steps of the *ghāṭ*. It was built about forty years ago, by Bhagvān Dās who was a Rāmānandī *nāgā* from the Nirvānī *akhārā*. Nowadays the place, which in the past was mostly one floor, is under huge construction: three floors more have been added and the interior part has been covered with marble. Inside there are about ten ascetics, among whom a *sādhvī*, Kṛṣṇa Dās, is a Rāmānandī, *nāgā*.⁶⁶⁴ She showed me around the place, which has three groups of *mūrti*: one with Rām, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇ, and close by a group with Gaṇeś and several Śiva *liṅga*; another again with Rām Sītā Lakṣmaṇ and Rām Lalla; and a third one with Pañcmukhī Hanumān. There is a place dedicated to Rāmānand and a statue of Bhagvān Dās.

Rām Sinh āsan temple D 17/111 Prayāg-Daśāśvamedh *ghāṭ* (number 32 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). Taking the right side of Daśāśvamedh Road, one reaches another Rām temple that is actually in Daśāśvamedh *ghāṭ* rather than Prayāg *ghāṭ*. A board tells the full name of the place: Mahāmaṇḍaleśvar Śrī Brahmṛsī Bankhandī Jī Mahārāj Śrī Rām Sinhāsan Mandir. It stands on the left of the steps and looks quite neglected. The floor which hosts the *mūrti* is colored in bright green and red; a gate, which unfortunately was locked, marks the entrance to the temple and the entrance to the other floors. On the right side of this gate, there is another *mūrti* with Pañcmukhī Hanumān.

Hanumān temple D53/34 Laksa road (number 41 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). Taking Laksa Road from the Godowlia crossing, I found the temple not on the main road, but by taking the fourth street on the left, and then the second street on the left again. The temple is on the ground floor of a white building that looks quite modern and although it is not a big center it is quite well-known in the local area. It is a room enclosed by a yellow grating through which people can easily see inside. The place survives, perhaps, thanks to donations to the old Hanumān *mūrti* that it houses rather than due to the activities of the few *sādhu*-s who live there.

⁶⁶⁴ She was wearing a simple yellow sari and had no *jaṭā* but long hair tied in a ponytail. When I asked about her *sādhanā* she explained to me that she does not follow, and has never followed, any '*nāgā* training': her religious discipline is mainly focused on the *nām jāp* and reading of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and other books linked to Rām *bhakti*. This was in fact the path shown to her by her guru who belonged to the Nirvānī *akhārā*. This confirmed to me that belonging to one branch rather than another is not always connected to the future ascetic's initial personal choice, but rather can be related to the guru he or she follows and the branch to which the guru belongs.

The story of this huge Hanumān *mūrti* was told to me by a man I met by chance in the temple, who said he was the descendant of the owner of the place who had donated it to a Rāmānandī *sādhu* decades before. He told me that around two hundred years ago, the Raja of that time had a dream that a *mūrti* of Hanumān was hidden in the soil in the jungle area that today is Laksa. He sent some men to dig the place and they found the Hanumān *mūrti*. They put it up and built a temple around it. Later the Raja decided that was better to install the *mūrti* in his palace, but when people went there to pick it up, nobody was able to move it. The Raja then understood that the God wanted to remain in the jungle, and the *mūrti* was left on the spot. As mentioned, the area was later owned by a Varanasi family, which subsequently gifted it to the *dāda* guru (grandfather guru) of the present *mahant*. Photos of previous *mahant*-s are on the walls, which are decorated with colorful tiles, as are the pillars. The *mahant* was a old man with a long white beard, white clothes (actually a *luṅgī* and a *kurta*), and a yellow *tilak* occupying most of his forehead with a precise red line in the center and a dot. He told me that his *sādhana* was *rasik*, from the *sākhī* branch, and from that section that considers Sītā to be a sister. Apart from the actual temple, the rest of the building is the space for residents, which actually means just the old *mahant*, another *sādhu*, and few brahmacārin-s who study there. The *mahant* does not seem to have many disciples, either lay people or ascetics. A man I spoke with outside the temple, who had just had *darśan* of the *mahant*, and is local to the area, did not even know that there were ascetics living there. In this case, the place will probably continue to live as long as people are attracted by the *mūrti* and his story, rather than by the charisma of the *mahant*.

2.2.5 Towards the northern *ghāṭ*-s

Rām Jānkī temple Ck 12/140 Brahmanala, close to Maṇikarṇikā (number 26 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). I could not find this temple in the area of Maṇikarṇikā, but I found another more recent one (which perhaps has substituted for that reported by Sinha and Saraswati?), also named Rām Jānkī Mandir, on a *galī* that leads to Maṇikarṇikā *ghāṭ*. The temple is easily recognizable as its external walls are covered by tiles representing Hindu deities and because the *akhaṇḍa kīrtan* echoes for several hours during the day.

Established by Śrī 108 Śrī Rāmcarāṇa Dās Tyāgī, the temple is these days run by a female ascetic, Rām Pyar Dās, whose images while doing yoga *āsan*-s, are collected in several drawings. She told me that the place was established about twenty years earlier by her guru. It is supported particularly by devotees from Gujarat, as Śrī Rāmcarāṇa Dās Tyāgī

and Rām Pyār Dās are from that state. The place is a three storied building, with an Hanumān temple on the ground floor and a first floor with a kitchen, the room of Rām Pyār Dās and a little temple containing *mūrti*-s of Sītā and Rām and various *śaligram*-s. The second floor is used as an *āśram* to host ascetics, even some Śaiva ones. Even the inner part of the building is covered with tiles, some decorated with deities, other to remember the names of those who have contributed to the construction and maintenance of the place. In the temple, *bhajan*-s (devotional songs) are chanted from early morning until late evening, with a pause only at 12 noon when, after the meal for the god, the temple is closed until 4 P.M. Before closing the temple, Rām Pyār Dās dedicates her time every day to preparing *prasād* (blessed food) for devotees and ascetics, sometimes with the help of devotees.

From Maṅikarṇikā *ghāṭ*, moving towards the North, one finds *Hanumān Gaṛhī ghāṭ*. Climbing the steps, there is a little Rāmeśvara temple. On its left there is an Hanumān temple where the original *dhunī* is kept, together with photographs of some ascetics. The main building is an *akhārā* facing the river. There I met a middle-aged man who lives close by, who said that the place was built by a Mahā-tyāgī from the Hanumān Gaṛhī of Ayodhya and named after him. He was Śrī 108 Śrī Bābā Śyam Dās Mahā-tyāgī. It seemed to me, however, that there were no Rāmānandī-s living there (at least at the time of my visit), and the man had no precise information about the sampradāya except to say that the Śrī Maṭh in Pañcagaṅgā is considered to be the *ācārya* Pith.

Hanumān jī Sthān (Śrī Saptr̥ṣi *āśram*) under the Raj *ghāṭ* bridge (number 39 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). On arrival at Rāj *ghāṭ*, I realized that the area is mainly Vaiṣṇava, not only because of the presence of a huge and well-settled temple dedicated to Raidās, but also because of the presence of a large number of little Rām temples and, as I verified later, several Rāmānandī places.

The first place I went to was close to the bridge, and it is a tyāgī *āśram*. The building is simple, colored blue externally, and contains a *mūrti* of Hanumān in a little chamber which constitutes the temple of the *āśram*. Outside the building there were several ascetics who described themselves as Mahā-tyāgī, although not all of them had *jaṭā*. I could not meet the *mahant* because he had apparently arrived only a few hours earlier from Allahabad and had gone to rest. Nevertheless, I had the opportunity to talk with another *tyāgī* who was introduced by the others as the *vidvān* of the group. According to this *tyāgī*, the *āśram* was built the same year of the bridge (1933), during the British Raj, and English

people had actually donated the land to the first *mahant*, Śrī Rāmjīvan Dās jī. At the time, there were only mango trees and the *mūrti* of Hanumān. After the first *mahant*, there have been three more before the current incumbent. According to this *tyāgī*, there are now almost forty *tyāgī*-s living there but they do not dwell in the place continuously. Talking about the seat of Rāmānandācārya, he said that previously the Jagadgurū had lived close to there, but he did not give further information. Perhaps he was referring to a certain Haryācārya who is also mentioned by Pinch,⁶⁶⁵ or perhaps to Śivarāmācārya, since the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya said that Śivarāmācārya initially did not stay in the Maṭh as it was still under construction. These *tyāgī*-s recognized the Śrī Maṭh as the main *gaddī*, and the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya as the first elected after Śivarāmācārya. According to them, in Varanasi there are about 250 Rāmānandī centers, many of them very small.

Jānkī Bāg Raj Ghāṭ A 13/167 (number 6 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). This center is not directly on the *ghāṭ*, but on the street which leads toward the inner part of the area. The place, Śrī Mate Rāmānand Jānkī Bāg Mandir, is a white building and, as written on an external board, is managed by three *mahant*-s: Śrī Swāmī Maṇīrām Dās jī (Chāvnī from Ayodhyā); Śrī Swāmī Śrī Rām Manohar Dās jī Mahārāj, Śrī Mahant Raghuvans Thūsan Dās jī Mahārāj. Over the orange door, from a first floor balcony, a statue of a flying Hanumān oversees the area.

The place is well organized and it occupies several floors: entering from the main door one realizes that in reality this is already the third floor, and to reach the temple it is necessary to go downstairs. I met only a *brahmacārī* and a *pujārī* who told me that the *mahant*-s were at the Kumbh Melā. According to the *brahmacārī*, the place was built about seventy years ago, through the support of centers from Ayodhya, and it is not linked to a specific *sādhanā*; rather, all types of *sādhu*-s can find shelter there. The ascetics who actually live in the *āśram* number about twenty. The *brahmacārī* added that the temple facilitated the establishment of three or four other Rāmānandī center, and he also said that this is a situation typical of Varanasi: from one bigger center other smaller branches are established.

Even this *brahmacārī* said, however, that the center supports and recognizes the role of the Śrī maṭh and of the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya.

I could not find in Rāj *ghāṭ* Dūdhadhari jī kā Mandir A 13/27, and Hanumān jī Mandir A 36/52 (number 10 and 38 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati).

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. Chapter 4, sec. 3.3.2.

Continuing towards the north, on the left of Rāj ghāṭ there is an area called Qazakpur in which Sinha and Saraswati list a Rādhā Kṛṣṇa Mandir (at A 38/53) and at the same address also an Hanumān jī Mandir. However, as Qazakpur is the name of the entire area I was not able to find the places.

2.2.6 North Varanasi

I could not find Rasik Hanumān Bagh Chetganj close to Kabīr Chowra and Rām Jānkī Mandir K 62/84 Bulanala, close to Kabir Road (number 19 and number 27 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati)

Śrī Bābā (and not Śrī Rām as reported by Sinha and Saraswati) *Jivandās jī kā akhārā*, K 46/258 Visheshwarganj (number 30, in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). This *akhārā*, although rather neglected, still functions as a wrestling training center, open from 6 to 10 A.M. and from 5 to 9 P.M. On the ground floor in front of the training area there is an Hanumān temple. At the time of my visit there were no *sādhu*-s inside, only people resting. The *mahant*, I was told, had gone to his village, and usually, two or three young boys stay and study. The place really looked almost abandoned; even the room of the *mahant*. Only the training room had some furniture, and that was the equipment for physical exercises. From pictures hanging on the wall I could see that efforts had been made to create a little *paramparā*: there was a painting of Rāmānanda, and photos of *mahant*-s: Śrī Bābā Rām Nārāyaṇa Dās, Swāmī Bābā Jagdīsh Dās Miśrā, and the present Śrī Gouriśankar Dās.

Kāśī Vidya Mandir D 48/202 in Mishra Pokhara (number 2 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). At this address (which is known as Misir Pokhara) there is today actually a school.

Patalapuri Math K 66/3 Naraharpura (number 12 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). The address of this place was insufficient, because the area actually consists of several distinct quarters.

A similar situation exists in the case of the Badarik āśram described as being at CK 60/47 Karnaghanta, an area which is around the Chowk and Kotwali.

Similarly again, for the Phalahari baba temple Sinha and Saraswati give only the name of the area, Shivpur. Therefore, I could not even start to search for it.

2.2.7 On the banks of the Varuna river

Tapovan āśram Nakki Ghāṭ (number 7 of the list of Sinha and Saraswati). It was hard to find this huge *āśram* which is quite close to the Varuna river, but accessible through a street that is in a very bad condition. When I arrived, the *mahant* was sitting on his *gaddī*, with few lay people around him. He was very kind and curious and asked one of those present to show me around. The *āśram* is a two floored building: the ground floor, with a marble floor, is a pillared open area with the Rām Jānkī temple in the center. There are three other chambers. One contains *mūrti*-s of the past *mahant*-s, another is a little temple with a Śiv *liṅga*, and another the *dhunī* of the temple.

The place can host a large number of *sādhu*-s: there are many rooms and dormitories, and the first floor has only rooms. The *mahant* said that usually there are between 20 and 50 *sādhu*-s but their number is always changing as they come and go and anyone can stay as long as he wants. During big events (such as *Rām Navamī* but also the *Rāmānanda Jayantī*) there are *sādhu*-s from all over Varanasi coming and Rāmānandī-s from all over India. It has hosted up to 5000 ascetics. The huge kitchen is at the back of the main building, close to the *bhagīcā* and the *vatikā* (plant garden). The place was established around two hundred years ago by Śrī Śrī Anant Śrī Swāmī Bābā Vasudev Dās jī Mahārājī who was a *tyāgī*. The *paramparā* has continued with Śrī Śrī 108 Swāmī Śrī Bhagvad Dās jī Mahārāj, Śrī Śrī 108 Śrī Swāmī Kāśī Dās Adhikārī jī and the present *mahant* Śrī Śrī 108 Śrī Dīnvandu Dās jī Mahārāj.⁶⁶⁶ As its name suggests, it is a place based on *tapasya* (*taposva*) whose main *sādhana* is the *sevā* of *sant* people. The place in fact has been established to host as many *sādhu*-s as possible. Hence the main activities are performing *pūjā-pat*, preparing *bhaṇḍārā* and singing *bhajan*-s.

Rām Jānkī Mandir, Nakki Ghāṭ (number 29 in the list of Sinha and Saraswati). I am not sure whether I found this place. On the left side of the bridge that marks the beginning of Nakki Ghāṭ there is a Rām Jānkī temple (which is accessible through little steps that lead from a terrace to the ground floor). However, locals told me that there is only a temple, without an *āśram* to host *sādhus* and where only a *pujārī* goes daily for the *pūjā*.

On the left side of Nakki Ghāṭ there is an area called Nai Basti Pandeypur, where Sinha and Saraswati mention a Rām Jānkī Mandir in J 11/13. I could not localize the address, as Nai Basti is the name of an entire area.

⁶⁶⁶ Actually a *paramparā* of only four *mahant*, included the present one, for a period of about two hundred years seems quite unrealistic.

2.2.8 Places not located

Some of the Rāmānandī centers listed by Sihna and Saraswati (pp. 252-253) were impossible to find because of incomplete or vague information in the addresses given. They therefore do not find a place in the Map 4. Here I merely list those places so that a luckier future researcher might have a beginning point. The spelling of the name is the one mentioned by the two scholars.

Durbasa āśram, J 12/95 Nrisingh Teela,;

Phalahari Bābā temple Vaitarni, Koniya;

Mahārāj kī Thakurbari Batuka Bhairava, unknown area;

Rām Jānkī Jagadish Mandir, J12/119 in Chittrakut area;

Rām Jānkī Mandir, A 38/23 Koniyan satti, similar to Koniya;

Bihari jī kā Baṛā Mandir, number 34 S23/91 Dhelawariya;

Hanumān Mandir, number 40 J 12/57 Dhoopachandi.

3. Remarks on the above evidence

Based on the assertions of those *sādhu*-s I talked with, and the words of the Jagadgurū about the number of Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi, the places here described probably represent only one third of a total of about 60. If, instead, one considers just the 42 centers listed by Sinha and Saraswati, my data describe half of that number.

The majority of these centers do not have long *paramparā* and only two declare themselves to be older than three centuries, while another two claim to be around 200 years old. The other constructions seem to be mostly from the 20th century. Two centers are branches of other *math*-s in other cities. Four have almost fallen into disuse.

Among all the places I visited, only the Rām Jānkī temple in Kashmiri Ganj presented a very modern approach, with a web site, publications and a *mahant* with international links and disciples. The majority of the other centers were very traditional in their activities: Sanskrit schools for *brahmacārī*-s (present also in *tyāgī* centers), *pūjā*, *bhajan* and *kīrtana* for devotees and *sādhu*-s and *bhaṇḍārā* (*sevā* for *sādhu*). It is notable that there are almost no differences in the devotional practices of *rasik*, *tyāgī* and *nāgā* centers. This situation can be explained in two ways: the external expression of devotion is mostly for devotees and lay people, and therefore these activities are common to all the centers, while ascetics follows a more specific *sāadhanā* in their private practices.

Therefore, we can imagine that the differences between branches is diminishing

because *sādhu*-s have abandoned some of their former roles, such as those of warriors or merchants, and this sedentarization could lead to a homogenization of activities. On the other hand, it is also possible that these practices were always shared by Rāmānandī-s, as an expression of their *prapatti* and *bhakti*. In this case, collective practices would be common to all branches even though each addresses worship to one or other Ramaite *devatā*, thus enriching the practice of an individual *sāadhanā*.

From the stories collected, it seems that those places which are frequented by *sādhu*-s and devotees primarily because of the renown of the place itself and its temple (like the Dvārkaḍhīś Mandir) survive regardless of the religious order attached to it, which can also change. Other places, though, rely heavily on the charisma or initiative of the *mahant*, and the support that lay people give to the place.

It seems to me that, compared with other Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*-s, the Rāmānandī presence is still very well-established in the city, just as was reported by scholars of the 19th and 20th century.

We can imagine that given the use of Rām by nationalists and *sādhu*-s belonging to other *sampradāya* (see the already mentioned Rāmjanmabhūmi movement), it is likely that the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is already receiving increased support from lay people, both in Ayodhya and in other cities. It is also possible that part of the funds converging on Ayodhya has been used to finance other centers as well. However, only an appropriately in-depth study could ascertain whether the increasing use of Rām in politics has led to an increase of support for the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and its ascetics.

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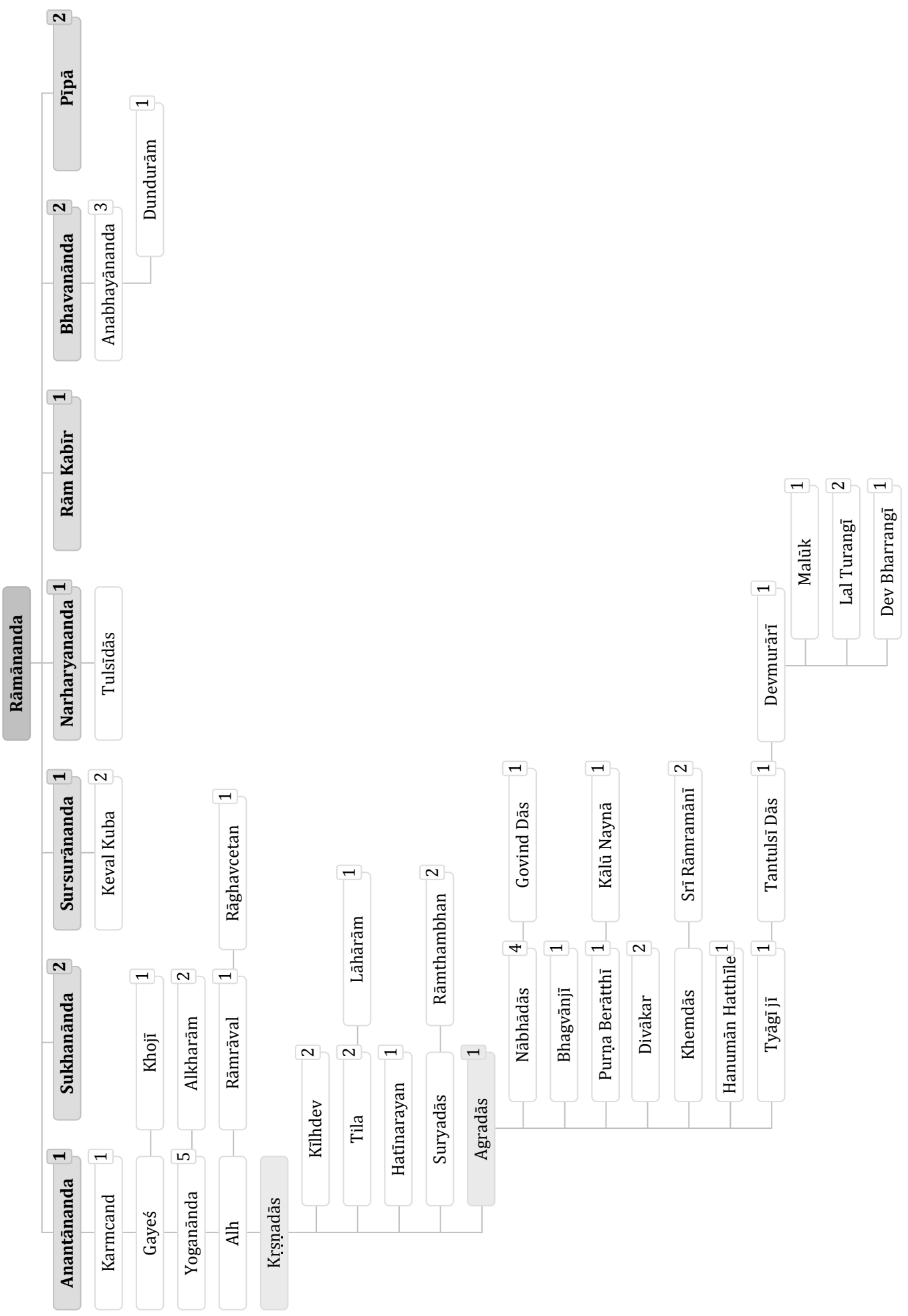
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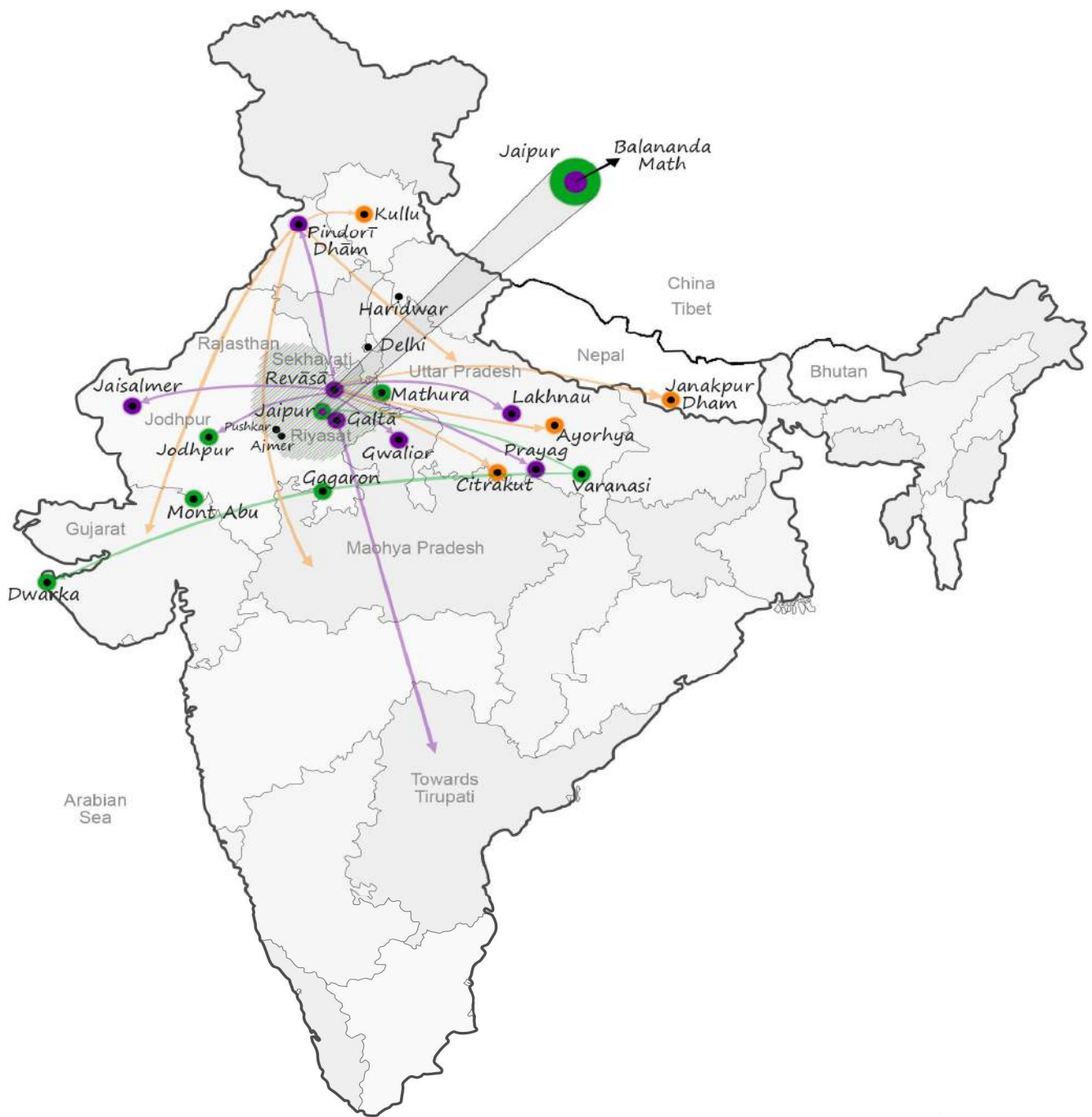
Tab. 1 - Rāmānanda's paramparā : his closer descendants and the supposed number of their gaddī-s










Tab. 2 - Annual celebrations in the Śrī Math

<p>Chaitra (March-April)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>1st - 9th days Rām Navamī</p>	<p>Vaiśākha (April-May)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>Narmadā Parikramā</p>	<p>Jyeṣṭha (May-June)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>10th day (<i>dāsamī</i>) Gaṅgā Daṣerā</p>	<p>Āṣāḍha (June-July)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>11th day (<i>śayanā ekādāśī</i>) Cāturmās Begins 15th day (<i>pūrṇimā</i>) Guru Pūrṇimā</p>
<p>Srāvaṇa (July-August)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>5th day Nāg Pañcamī 7th day (<i>saptamī</i>) Tulsīdās Jayantī 11th day (<i>ekādāśī - pratipadā</i>) Jhulā Mahotsav 15th day (<i>pūrṇimā</i>) Raksā Bandhan</p>	<p>Bhādrapada (August-September)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>8th day (<i>aṣṭamī</i>) Kṛṣṇa Jayantī</p> <p>4th day (<i>ānanda caturdāśī</i>) Gaṇeś Caturthī 15th day (<i>pūrṇimā</i>) beginning of Pitru Pakṣa</p>	<p>Āśvina (September-October)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>Pitru Pakṣa till <i>amāvasyā</i></p> <p>1st - 9th days Navarātrī, Daṣerā 15th day (<i>pūrṇimā</i>) Śarad Pūrṇimā</p>	<p>Kārtik (October-November)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>15th day (<i>amāvasyā</i>) Divālī</p> <p>1st day Annakūt Pūjā 9th day (<i>akṣaya navamī</i>) Amlā Pūjā 11th day (<i>prabodhini ekādāśī</i>) Tulsī Vivāh Arpan Bindu Mādhav 15th day (<i>pūrṇimā</i>) Devdīpavali</p>
<p>Mārgaśīrṣa (November-December)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>11th day (<i>vaikunta ekādāśī</i>) Gītā Jayantī</p>	<p>Pauṣa (December-January)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p>	<p>Māgha (January-February)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>7th day Rāmānanda Jayantī</p> <p>5th day (<i>vasant pañcamī</i>) Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya Jayantī</p>	<p>Phālguna (February-March)</p> <p>kr̥ṣṇa pakṣa śukla pakṣa</p> <p>15th day (<i>pūrṇimā</i>) Holī</p>

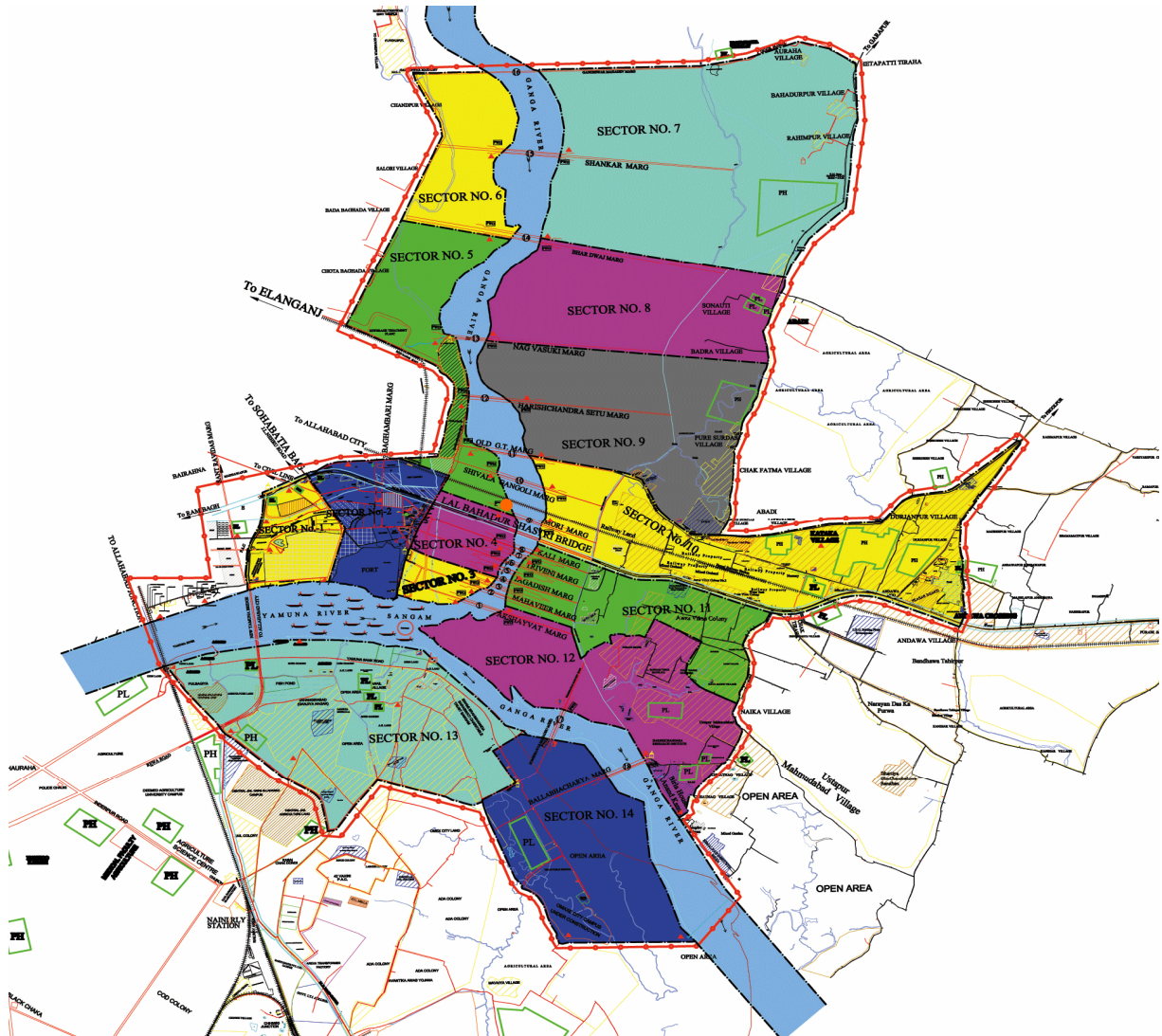
Map 1 - Hypothetical spread of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*



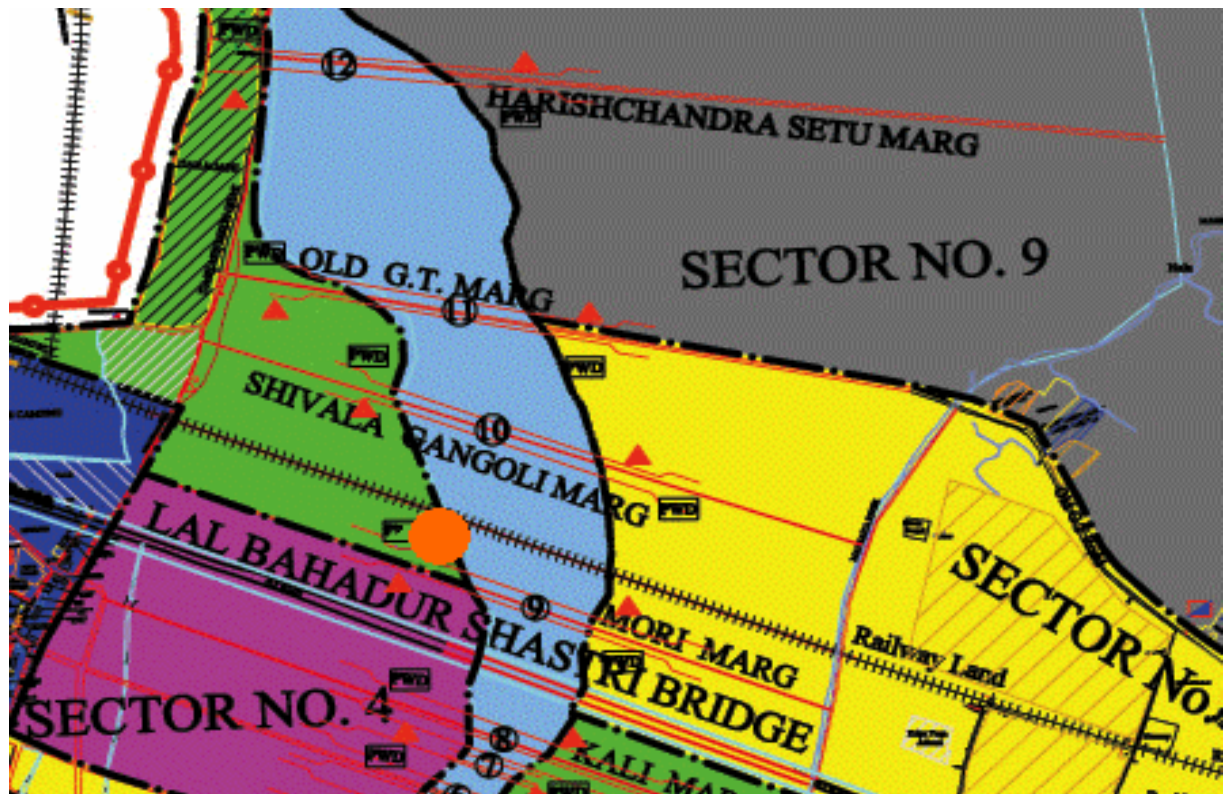
KEY LEGEND

-  Earlier Hypotetical spread of Rāmānanda and his disciples, 15th century
-  Area of Rāmānandī influence and earlier Rāmānandī centers
-  Spread of 2nd - 3rd generation of Rāmānandīs
-  Rāmānandī centers in 16th 17th centuries
-  Hypotetical area of Rāmānandī influence between 15th and 17th centuries
-  Spreading of Rāmānandīs in the Late 17th century and 18th century
-  Rāmānandī centers in 18th century

Map of the Kumbh Melā

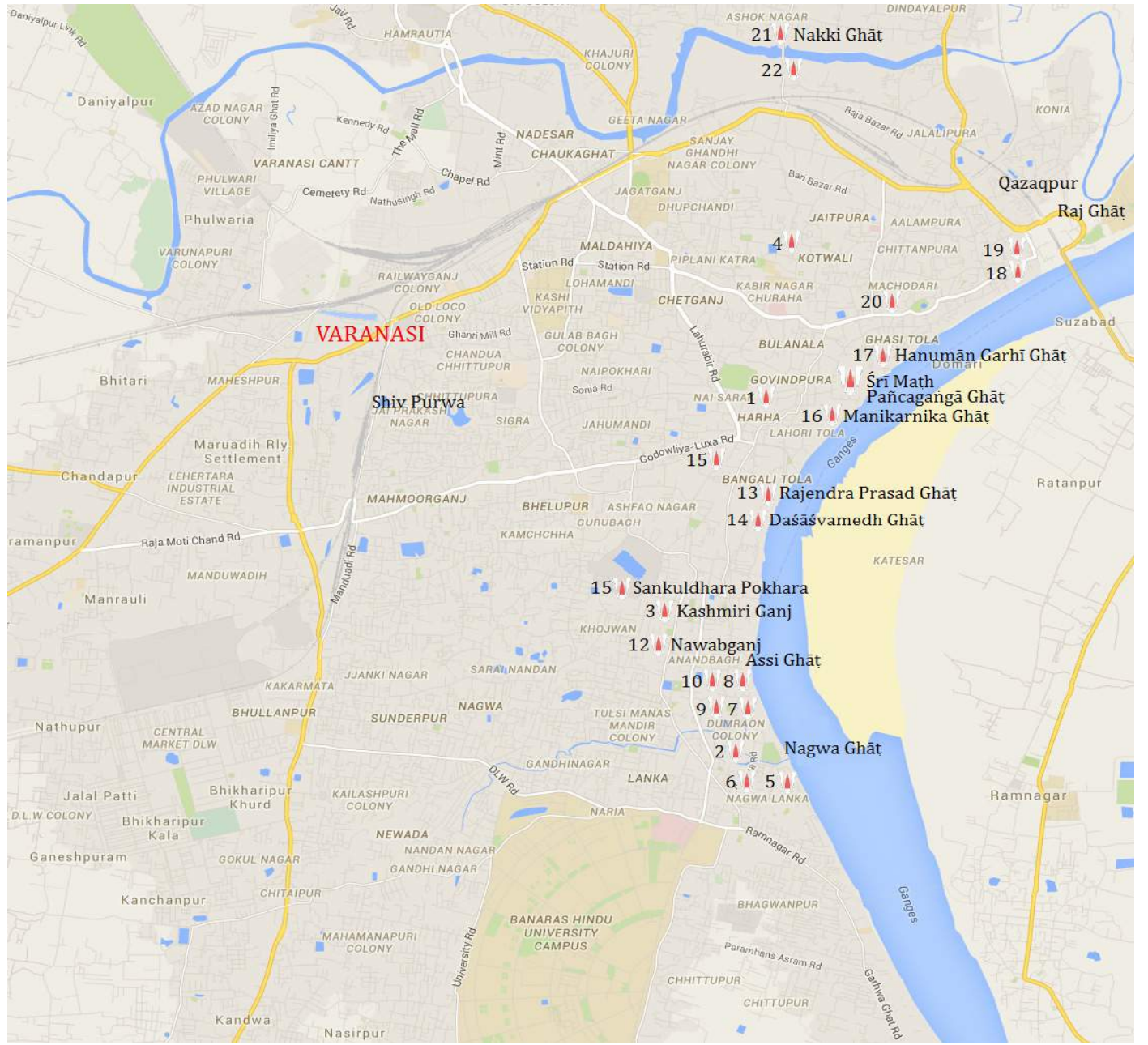


Map 2 - Kumbh Melā



Map 3 - The place of Thākur Harit Mādhav Mandir 1, marked by the orange square

Map 4 - Rāmānandī centers in Varanasi



KEY LEGEND

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 🏛️ Rām Jānkī Mandir. Rājā Darvaza | 12 🏛️ Rādhā Kṛṣṇa Temple. Nawabganj Gurudhām Colony B26/6 |
| 2 🏛️ Śītal Dās Barā Akhārā. Assi Ghāt | 13 🏛️ Bhagvān Dās jī Akhārā. Daśāśvamedh Ghāt, D17/125 |
| 3 🏛️ Śrī Anant Śrī Rām Jānkī Mandir. Kashmiri Ganj | 14 🏛️ Rām Sinhāsan Temple. Prayāg-Daśāśvamedh Ghāt, D17/111 |
| 4 🏛️ Loṭa Tīla Maṭh. Isvarangani Pokra | 15 🏛️ Hanumān Temple. Laksa Road, D53/34. |
| 5 🏛️ Kartaliya Bābā Annapurṇa Millki Ṭhākurbāri. Nagwa | 16 🏛️ Rām Jānkī Temple. Brahmanla, Ck12/140 |
| 6 🏛️ Raghunath Āśram Mahābir Mandir. Nagwa | 17 🏛️ Hanumān Garhī Ghāt. |
| 7 🏛️ Charauta āśram. Assi Ghāt B1/138 | 18 🏛️ Hanumān jī Sthān (Śrī Sapṭṛṣi āśram). Under the Raj Ghāt bridge |
| 8 🏛️ Choṭe Guardadāsī kā Akhārā. Assi Ghāt B1/90 | 19 🏛️ Jānkī Bāg. Raj Ghāt A13/167 |
| 9 🏛️ Śrī Ṭhākur Rām Jānkī Mandir. Assi Ghāt B1/155 | 20 🏛️ Śrī Bābā Javandās jī kā Akhārā. Viśeshwarganj, K46/258 |
| 10 🏛️ Rām Jānkī Maṭh Trust, Lāl Dvārā, Śrī Śrī 1008 Śrī Punjabi Bhagvān Āśram. Assi Ghāt | 21 🏛️ Tapovan āśram. Nakki Ghāt |
| 11 🏛️ Dvārkādhīś Mandir. Shankhudhāra B22/195 | 22 🏛️ Rām Jānkī Mandir. Nakki Ghāt |

Historical Gaddī-s



Fig. 1 Galtā, Jaipur



Fig. 2 Bālānanda Math, Jaipur



Fig. 3 Revāsā Pīṭh



Fig. 4 Dhunī of Agradās, Revāsā Pīṭh

Images of Pañcagaṅgā

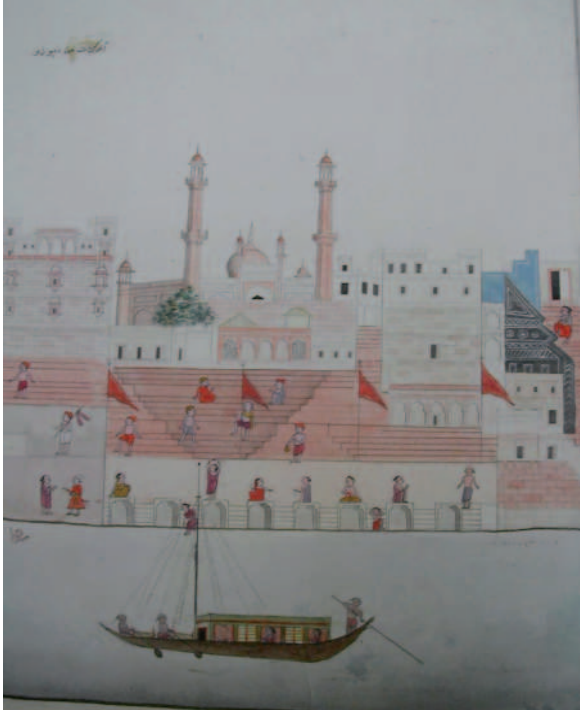


Fig. 5 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt in a map of Varanasi from the 1770. British Museum



Fig. 6 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt. Thomas Daniell 1802



Fig. 7 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt. Robert Smith 1824-26



Fig. 8 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt. Robert Elliot 1833



Fig.9 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt, James Prinsep 1833



Fig. 10 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt, 1896. Photo by Brajo Gopal Bromochary



Fig. 11 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt, 1905. Photo by Madhao Prasad, Khartoum Collection.



Fig. 12 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt, today



Fig. 13 Kṛṣṇa temple in front of the Śrī Maṭh



Fig. 14 Kitchen's entrance



Fig. 15 The Śrī Maṭh



Fig. 16 Inner temple of the Maṭh. Rāmānanda, his caraṇa pādukā and his main disciples: from the left, Pīpā, Anantānanda, Kabīr and Raidās



Fig. 17 The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya during the çarana pādukā pūjā



Fig. 18 Rāmnareśācārya during his darśan. To notice his new silver gaddī on the left, and his gaddī swing

Religious ceremonies

Rām Navamī



Fig. 19 Pūjā to the śaligram



Fig. 20 Havan celebrated in the Sitā kī rasoī



Fig. 21 Reading the Adhyātmya Rāmāyaṇa

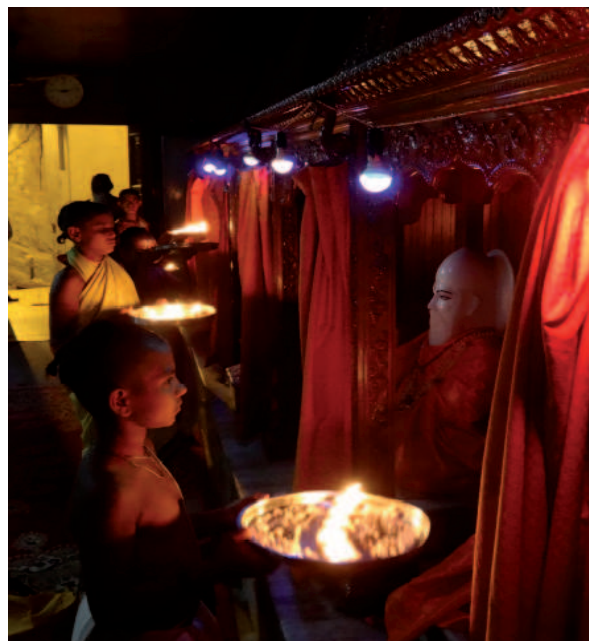


Fig. 22 Performance of the ārtī to the mūrti-s in the Śrī Maṭh

Ceremonies during cāturmās



Fig. 23 Rūdrā Abhiṣek daily performed during cāturmās

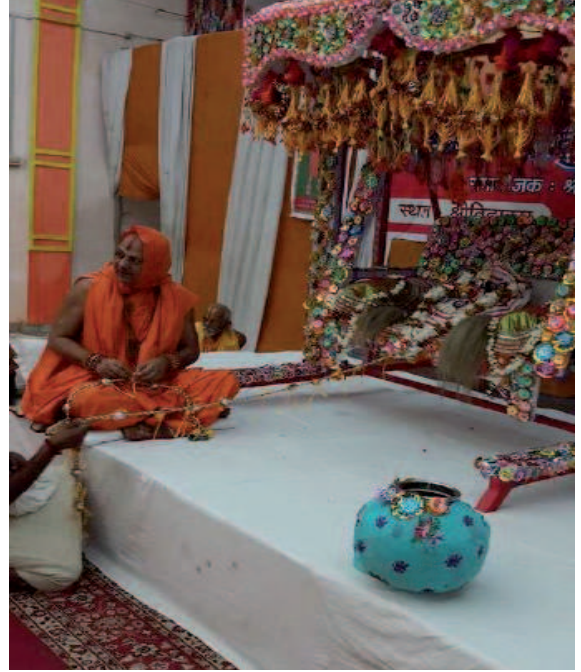


Fig.24 Jhūlā Mahotsav

Kārtik



Fig .25 Śarad Pūrṇimā Mahotsav



Fig.26 Distribution of khir after the performances



Fig. 27 Kārtik lamps hanging in Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt



Fig. 28 Annakūṭ Pūjā



Fig. 29 The Rām temple in the Śrī Maṭh with the fifty-six offering of the Annakūṭ pūjā

Amvālā Pūjā



Fig.30 Amvālā garden



Fig. 31 Groups of devotees gathered around the Amvālā tree



Fig 32,33,34 The Jagadgurū and his followers performing the Amvālā Pūjā

Tulsī Vivāh



Fig. 35 The Tulsī plant as a bride



Fig. 36 The bride's cortège



Fig 37,38 divine couple during the ceremony, Tulsī initially on the right side of Visnu and later on the left side

Arcanā of Bindu Mādhav



Fig. 39 Devotees collecting tulsī leaves



Fig. 40 The mūrti of Bindu Mādhav covered by tulsī leaves

Devdipāvālī



Fig. 41 Pañcagaṅgā Ghāṭ decorated for the festival

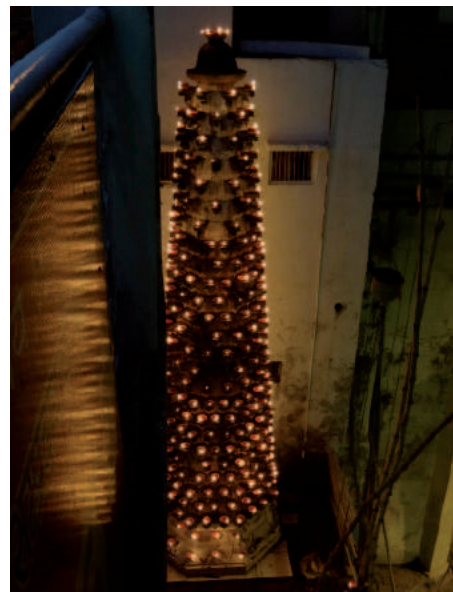


Fig. 42 One thousand lights lamp in the Śrī Maṭh

Rāmānanda Jayantī



Fig. 43 Performance of the caraṇa pādukā pūjā in the Śrī Maṭh



Fig. 44 Performance of the Rāmānanda's pūjā in the temple dedicated to Rāmānanda and his mother in the Thākur Harit Mādhav mandir, Prayag.



Fig. 45 Rāmānanda e Thākur Harit Mādhav Mandir

Rāmnareśācārya Jayanti



Fig. 46 Devotees celebrating Rāmnareśācārya for his Jayanti



Fig. 47 Pūjā for Rāmnareśācārya



Fig. 48 Concert for Rāmnareśācārya's Jayanti



Fig. 49 Devotees performing ārtī to Rāmnareśācārya

Mahā Kumbh Melā



Fig. 50 Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir



Fig. 51 Bhaṇḍārā in the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir



Fig. 52 Rāmnaresācārya celebrated in a Mahā-tyāgī camp



Fig. 53 A tyāgī prepares a food offering for the Jagadgurū



Fig. 54 The mahant of Piṇḍorī Dhām with the Jagadgurū



Fig. 55 Ārti for the Jagadgurū in a Mahā-tyāgī camp



Fig. 56 The Senācārya celebrates the arrival of the Jagadgurū



Fig. 57 Rāmnaresācārya with the Śaṅkarācārya of Puri



Fig. 58 Daily pravacan in the Kumbh Melā



Fig. 59 Daily Guru pūjā



Fig. 60 Procession led by the Jagadgurū Rāmnaresācārya for the mahā snān



Fig.61 Ganga pūjā celebrated by the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya



Fig.62 Ganga ārtī celebrated by the Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya



Fig.63 The Jagadgurū Rāmnareśācārya applies tilak on the forehead of devotees after the pūjā



Fig.64 Rāmnareśācārya distributes prasād

Rām temple



Fig.65 Construction of Rām temple in Haridwar



Fig.66 Project of the Rām temple in Haridwar



Fig.67 Temporary gaddi for the Jagadgurū in Haridwar