

Aesthetics of Renunciation and Social Reformation in Josmani Santa Tradition

Dr. Dipesh Neupane¹

Abstract

Renunciation is an abandonment of pursuit of material comforts, material or mundane consciousness. A person who follows renunciation shuns inner and outer attachments, and leads purely a spiritual life. This article explores the religious history of the renunciation adopted by Josmani Santas who commenced a new tradition different from Hindu and Buddhist religions around 300 years ago in Nepal. Josmani Santa tradition is a spiritual as well as social convention commenced by the first saint named Josmani. Josmani Santas are the saints who detach themselves from the worldly thoughts and desires following the Nirguna-bhakti— a Bhakti dedicated to formless, shapeless and abstract God. They keep aloof from the illusion of Maya and even relinquish lust, greed, anger, pride and infatuation thereby revolting against social evils and aberrations— caste description, corruption, and deceptions, so called Brahmanism. They adopt the life of renunciation to launch their protest in society. In Hinduism, the renounced order of life is sannyāsa. This study conceptualizes the theoretical framework of Sanyasa- the life of renunciation based on the Bhagavat Gita, and the concept proposed by Gyandil Das who adopts renunciation on the one hand and launches social protest on the other. It further analyzes the relation between renunciation and social reformation as complementary phenomena.

Key words: Renunciation, Nirguna, detachment, liberation, illusion, maya, Sanyasa, mundane, spiritual, Reformation etc.

Introduction: Renunciation (Sannyasa) In Hinduism

Sanyasa in Sanskrit means renunciation or abandonment. It is a tripartite compound of ‘sam’ with a ‘collection’ meaning, ni-which means ‘down’ and ‘asa’ from the root as, meaning ‘to throw’ or ‘to put’. A literal translation would be ‘laying everything down’. *Sannyasi* is a person who adopts *sannyasa* or renunciation in life. *Sannyasa* is the life stage of the renouncer within the Hindu scheme of ashrams. It is considered the topmost and final stage of the ashram systems and is traditionally taken by men or women over fifty or by young monks who wish to renounce worldly and materialistic pursuits and dedicates their lives to spiritual pursuits. People in this stage of life develop ‘*Vairagya*’ or a state of dispassion and

¹ Dr. Neupane is the Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Patan Multiple Campus, TU

detachment from material life, renouncing worldly thoughts and desires in order to spend the remainder of their lives in spiritual contemplation. Satya Sai Baba opines:

Udhaseena [detachment marked by renunciation] is a state that is neither complaisance nor in difference. It means detachment from good as well as bad. I will explain this with an illustration. When a thorn gets into your foot, you use another thorn to remove the first one. After this you will have to discard both thorns. You should not keep with you the second thorn though it has helped you in removing the first thorn. This is how you must gradually renounce the good and the bad. We should gradually cut down our relationship with the world. Mostly importantly do not enter into activities that induce unnecessary relationship for that will prove detrimental to one's welfare. ("Divine Discourse")

The *sannyasi* fundamentally lives a celibate life without possessions and practices yoga or bhakti devotional meditation, depending on the specific tradition with prayers to their chosen deity or God. The goal of Hindu *sannyasin* is *moksha* [liberation], the concept of which varies from tradition to tradition. For the devotion oriented traditions, liberations consist of union with the divine, while for yoga oriented traditions; liberation is the experience of the highest Samadhi [enlightenment]. Within the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna describes *Sannyasa*: "काम्यनां कर्मणां न्यासं सन्यासं कवयो विदुः । सर्वकर्मफलत्यागं प्राहुस्त्यागं विचक्षणा : ॥२॥ [The giving up of activities that are based on material desire is what great learned men call the renounced order of life [*sannyasa*]. And giving up the results of all activities is what the wise call renunciation [*Tyaga*]" (18.2)]. Sanskrit and Indic scholar Barbara Stoler Miller translates¹⁸, verse 2 as: "Giving up actions based on desire, the poets know as renunciation, relinquishing all fruit of action, learned men call relinquishment. Disciplined action and relinquishment are spiritually more effective than renunciation." Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's translation of verse 3, chapter 5 of the *Bhagavad Gita* [ज्ञेयः स नित्यसन्यासी यो न द्वेष्टि न काङ्क्षति । निर्द्वन्द्वो हि महाबाहो सुखं बन्धात्प्रमुच्यते ॥ ३ ॥] says: "Know him to be ever a man of renunciation who neither hates or desires; free from the pairs of opposites, he is easily released from bondage, o mighty armed."

Methodology

This study employs the theoretical framework of *Sanyasa*- the life of renunciation based on the Bhagavat Gita, and the concept proposed by Gyandil Das who adopts renunciation on the one hand and launches social protest on the other. It also employs the primary and the secondary resources from the library and the internet to invigorate the study.

Buddha's Renunciation – The path of social Reformation

Gautam Buddha as a prince views himself in the whirlpool of luxuries and comforts in the palace in the beginning. Within narrow confines of the palace, he sees only the rosy side of life, but the dark side, the common lot of mankind, is purposely veiled from him. On a glorious day, he goes out of the palace to the pleasure park to see the world outside. He comes in direct contact with the stark realities of life. Appreciating the value of renunciation in which the wise seek delight, he decides to leave the world in search of Truth and Eternal peace. At midnight he sets out from the palace in search of truth and peace. Thus, he renounces the world. It is not the renunciation of a poor man who has nothing to leave behind. It is the renunciation of a prince in the full bloom of Youth and in the plentitude of wealth and prosperity—a renunciation unparalleled in history (“From Birth to Renunciation”).

The values that emerge from the Buddha's life that are essentially three. They are renunciation, loving –kindness and compassion and wisdom. These three values emerge very clearly through episodes in the Buddha's own life. Renunciation is the antidote for desire, living –kindness and compassion is the antidote for ill- will and wisdom is the antidote for ignorance. Through cultivating these three qualities one is able to eliminate the defilements and attain enlightenment. The very first evidence of the Buddha's renunciation manifests itself while he is very young. Renunciation is basically a recognition that all existence is suffering. When one recognizes the fact that all existence is suffering, one begins to look for something more. This recognition that existence is suffering is the essence of renunciation. If one looks a little bit later in the life of the Buddha, one comes to the famous episode of the four sights which move the prince to renounce the household life and to follow a life of asceticism to seek the truth. The sights of old age, sickness and death make him more contemplative and meditative. This consideration leads him to develop a sense of detachment from pleasure and seek the truth by way of renunciation. Prince considers renunciation as a part of Buddhist teaching:

Buddhism is a teaching of renunciation. It remains to see what is renounced and why. The Buddha said: “What I teach is just ill [or suffering] and its cessation. What is renounced, then, is ill, suffering, discontentment. The Buddha was well aware that much pleasure and happiness is to be found in the world as it is ordinarily experienced but he insisted that these pleasures were transient and therefore relative and limited and that true happiness is only to be found by renouncing what is worldly, transient, relative and limited and seeking instead what is transcendental, unchanging, absolute and unlimited. (“Renunciation” *From birth To Renunciation*)

Buddha averts material consciousness. He transcends worldly path and desires. Renouncing and denouncing the institution of marriage, the family life, the

luxury of life and royal status, Buddha who wanders in the world among the human flux, seeking the reasons behind human suffering and miseries, undergoes vigorous meditation under a tree in Gaya, India and ultimately attains enlightenment, thereby achieving the spiritual illumination and enlightenment. As the light of Asia, Buddha inculcates people with his enlightenment and directs the people to the right path –the path of righteousness, peace and non-violence. The voices of humanity and magnanimity inherent in his principles illuminate not only in Asia but also the whole world (“Buddha’s Renunciation”). The right paths shown by Buddha are concerned with the social reformation, and the improvement of human life for better and peaceful life.

Renunciation and Reformation in Josmani Santa Tradition

Josmani santa tradition is considered to have germinated and flourished in the Nepali soil some 300 years ago. The existence of many religious traditions is on the brink of its collapse, however, *Josmani* tradition is flourishing profusely in Nepal. This tradition has become appropriate, simple and relevant in the context of Nepal for the reformation of social structure. Its effect upon the normal life has been exalting in Nepalese society. Whenever superstitious beliefs and unethical values exist in traditional religious beliefs, they become less useful and beneficial in the public life. Religion embodies pragmatic process to guide the society to the right path. When religion cannot be able to resolve the problems, people try to find other alternatives to stand against existing human problems and social evils.

Josmani tradition comes into being as a way to resolve social ills which religions have not done since long. Religions cannot not go against racial or caste discrimination, superstitious beliefs and so on. A new tradition, therefore, comes into being to rectify various ills and woes of the society. This is called *Josmani* Santa tradition, which is supposed to have been introduced by a saint *Josmani*. Later, other *santas* nourish, flourish and cherish this tradition. They adopt the life of *sanyasa*- the stage of renunciation, renouncing worldly and materialistic pursuits and dedicating their lives to spiritual pursuits. *Sannyasa* is a form of asceticism, is marked by renunciation of material desires and prejudices, represented by a state of disinterest and detachment from material life, and has the purpose of spending one's life in peaceful, love-inspired, simple spiritual life. An individual in *Sanyasa* is known as a *Sannyasi* (male) or *Sannyasini* (female) in Hinduism, which in many ways parallel to the Sadhu and Sadhvi traditions of Jain monasticism, the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* of Buddhism and the monk and nun traditions of Christianity. Jayaram V states:

People who follow the path of *sanyasa* or renunciation are expected to lead very austere and ascetic lives, setting aside all desires and comforts and acknowledging no relationship whatsoever, including the relationship with

God and oneself. One has to forgo all acts of self- preservation and self advancement, and the need to further one's ego and identity. ("The Meaning of *Sanyasa...*")

True renunciation is, therefore, an attitude of indifference, equanimity or sameness. It is a way of life, in which the renunciant sets aside his desires and expectations to let go off all intentional effort and compulsive planning. He lets things happen, identifying himself with his essential nature and true Self. Through austerities, restraints and observances he practices self-transformation to become aware of his inseparable connection with God and his all-pervading nature. Through renunciation, he truly becomes free from the desire to direct his life or the habitual compulsion to exercise his will for his survival or success.

The first *santa* pertaining to this tradition is Harischandra the first. Others are Hari Bhakta, Haris Chandra the second, Santa Dhirjedil Das (Sharma 5). All the *Josmani santas* adopt *nirguna bhakti* tradition, so as to unmask social deformities and anomalies. They wholeheartedly protest caste discrimination, slavery system, and gender discrimination and so on. Among *Josmani Santas*, Sashidhar is an influential figure. He is a great ascetic, a mysterious poet and a social reformer after Kabir, a distinguished *nirguni* saint. He is also against untouchables and religious *Karma-Kanda* [function]. He disseminates *Josmani Santa* tradition to different parts of the country through his disciples *Sesdhar*, *Maya mandal* and *Pemdil*. He is the sixth proponent of *Josmani Santa* tradition. He is *nirguni* in nature like other *Santas*. He says that *nirguna bhakti* should be adopted for the spiritual salvation. One can achieve godhood when one stays on *Yogasan* and contemplates for a long period. Other *Josmani santas* are Dhaukal Das, Swami Nirbananda, Swami Avayananda, Santa Sashidhar, Shyamdil Das, Gyandil Das, Dharmadil Das, Shakti Yogmaya, Achytdil Das, Dharmadil Das etc. (Sharma)

Santa Shasidhar, born in 1804, does not only renounce the worldly desires, but also fights against caste discrimination, useless religious functions, hypocrisy and ill behaviors of the people, and even *Sati* tradition. He sets the path for social and racial harmony and solidarity. All the racial and religious people find their shelter under the *Josmani* tradition as it opens the door for all without any prejudice and discrimination. In the process of social reformation of he tries to eradicate *sati* tradition as social evil:

बहुभेष भाति सब पाखण्डा ॥ [Bahubhesa Bhati Saba Paakhandda]

न तारै वदर षातिर्मुण्डमुण्डा ॥ [Na Taarai Badara Saatirmundamundaa]

केते मुर्दाके नाउँ लि सति होइ पिण्ड तर्पे ॥ (४१ शर्मा) [kete Murdake Nau Li Sati Hoi Pinda Tarpe].

Gyandil Das (1821-1883) was a Nepalese poet and social reformer, later known as a Saint. As a prominent *Josmani santa*, he opposes existing social discrimination such as prevalent caste biases and gender-based violence through his written compositions. Gyandil Das was born to a Brahmin family in a village near Fikkal, in Eastern Nepal. Adopting the sects of renunciation, he involves in social reformation. He repudiates the caste discrimination prevalent in the contemporary society. Belonging to a higher Brahmin caste, he shows empathy towards the lower caste people suppressed by the higher caste:

रुम्जाटारको कोदाको पिठो निर्गुनको दाउन । [Rumjatarko kodako Pitho Nirgunako Daauna]

धर्म कर्म गर्यो गुरुडले छक्क पर्या वाहुन ॥ (साभार,श्रेष्ठ १६३)[Dharma karma Garyo Gurungle Chhakka Paryo Bahuna].

Gyandil writes against social injustices, which incites Jung Bahadur Rana to arrest and imprison him for six months. After being freed from the jail, he joins the prominent *Josmani* religious sect and inducts the *Nirguna* (Attribute-less God) concept in the Nepali devotional poetry. He composed *Udayalahari* in 1877, in Darjeeling, which consists of verses in devotion to the *Nirguna Brahma*. After becoming a *Josmani* follower, he visits many places in Eastern Nepal, Darjeeling, and Sikkim to promote and expand the religious ideology.

अइन वजरियो धनिको फिर्यो जगमहा । [Aina Bajjriyo Dhaniko Firyo Jagmaha]

घुस्याहा विचारी निसाप हेर्छ काहाँ ॥ (८२ शर्मा) [Ghusyaha Bichari Nisapa Herchha Kaha].

According to Janaklal Sharma, Shakti Yogmaya also follows *Josmani santa* tradition (95). Once, Yogmaya happens to pay homage to Swargadwari, Puythan and meet Swami Avayananda. She gets highly influenced by him and becomes the follower of *Josmani Santa* tradition thereafter. Then, she comes back to her birth place (Nepalandanda, Bhojpur) and starts reciting poems and religious hymns pertaining to *Josmani Santa* tradition (95). Like other *Santas*, Yogmaya shows her great concern towards social reformation through her poems, songs and religious hymns. In a verse pertaining to renunciation, she states:

धनका भाग्यले पोल्टै ल्याउँदो हो । [Riches beget pains and sufferings]

ज्ञानका भाग्यमा गुण पाउँदो हो ॥ [Whereas knowledge meritorious]

धनका भाग्यमा सेखी गर्दो हो । [Envious are the people for riches and wealth]

ज्ञानका भाग्यमा मन पाउँदो हो ॥ (योगवानी १७०) [Peace and bliss be gained from knowledge].

Since Neupane relinquishes materialism and gets indulged in spiritual practice being a stern ascetic, she cherishes *nirguna bhakti* through her sacred

verses. She shows no attachments to the worldly or material path. She transcends the *Maya* of the world and gets solely immersed in devotion to the *nirguna* form of God. In a verse, Neupane favors renunciation:

जाहाँ तक् रहन्छु ताहाँ तक् कहन्छु । [Wherever I stay, I utter my voices]

शरीर छाडी दिन्छु म ता शुद्धि हुन्छु ॥ [I relinquish my body for chastity]

जति खाने फल फुल अनाज छाडी दिएँ । [I have fruits much but leave crops]

हेरे नाथ दया होस् एके नाम लिएँ ॥ (योगवानी ५६) [Oh, Lord bless me, I recite your single name].

Adopting the sect of renunciation, Yogmaya, through her lyrical verses and different social movements, launches her crusade against the social evils like caste and gender discrimination, corruption, fraudulent activities, deceptions, misuse of measurements etc. prevalent in the contemporary society. She attacks the political and religious heads, judges and government officials against the corruption and social injustice openly. Disdaining the caste system and the oppression rendered to the common folk Yogmaya recites:

धर्म सम्झी विचार गरी निसाफ गरेन । [Though right was on our side]

पैसा भए बहेरालाई दण्ड परेन ॥ [That bully escapes the law]

कुल ता हाम्रो ब्राम्हण हो छैनौ कुलैमा । [Brahmins, you are so unholy]

जात् ता सत्य छैन हाम्रो राख चुलैमा ॥ (योगवानी १२) [Let's leave our caste in the kitchen].

On the ground of *Josmani* religious sect, Yogmaya like other Santas attempt to reform the society and thereby establishing harmony and social order. It marks the close affinity between renunciation adopted by *Josmani* Santas and their movements for social reformation.

Conclusion

Cohesion between renunciation and social reformation is inevitable. The aesthetics of renunciation lies in social reformation. The saints who renounce the worldly pleasures, basically, get indulged in the protest against social perversions. Since renunciation is rendered for social reformation, they are aesthetically co-related and cohesive. *Josmani* Santas or Saints adopt the renunciation detaching themselves from the material consciousness or worldly desires and resort to the reformation of the social evils related to material gains and social discriminations. Since renunciation is closer to social protest or inner protest, it also embraces the

reformative ideas. Renunciates do not only discard material desires but also protest against the social evils resulted from the avarice for gains. Therefore, renunciation sets the path for social reformation. *Josmani* Santas renouncing the worldly or material desires indulge in the protest against social evils like corruption, caste and gender discriminations, and deceptions and so on. They avert the outer attachments on the one hand and try to ameliorate the social ills on the other. Saints like Gyan Dil Das, Yogmaya, Dharma Dil Das etc. launch their protest against social evils so as to reform the society.

Work Cited

- “Buddha’s Renunciation.” trans. Charles Johnston. Aug.1897. web.20 June 2012.
- Prabhupada, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swim. *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*. Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1986.
- Prince, T. “Renunciation.” *Access to Insight*, 7 June 210. web.15 Nov 2013
- “Renunciation.” *From Birth to Renunciaton* .n.d. web.15 June 2013.
- Sharma, Janaklal. *Josmani Santa Parampara Ra Sahintya: Shaktimayi*. (Josmani Santa Tradition and Literature: Shakti Mata) Sajha Prakasan,2020.
- Shrestha, Taralal. *Shakti,Shrastha and Subaltern*. Oriental Publication, 2011.
- Timsina, Matrika. *Nepali Santa Parampara Ma Yogmaya Ra Sarvartha Yogbani*. Pairabi Prakashan, 2070.
- V, Jayaram. “The Meaning of Sanyasa or Renunciation in Hinduism.” Web. Hindu site.com, 2000-2019.
- Yogmaya, Shakti. *SarbarthaYogbani*. Santa Samaj, 2014. Print.