

Nature of Asceticism in Hinduism and Its Impacts on a Society

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Abstract: Hinduism is a dominant religion in India and in minority in other countries. So there is great difference between the social and cultural values of Hindus of Europe and India. In India, Hindus can sacrifice a widow in Sati practice but in Europe they are unable to do such activity. In India, Hindu can marry a ten year old girl but in Europe or America they can't do this. It is reality that in India, by Hindus, the teachings of Hinduism are not totally practiced. It is also reality that with the passage of time many changes have occurred in Hinduism. This paper is to highlight the Hindu ascetical activities in Indian (Hindu) society. The main objective of this study is to elaborate the impacts of Hindu ascetical activities on their society. Descriptive research method has been used for this study.

Key Words: Asceticism, Practice, Religious, Attitude, Impacts.

Introduction

It is a natural factor that the theoretical aspect of a religion remains same in different societies but its practical activities can be different from society to society. Comparatively, a slightly difference has also been seen between two societies: where a religion is practiced in majority or where it is adopted by people in minority. In a single society where the word 'dominant' is used for a religion, it means that a religion is practiced here by mostly people not it is adopted by whole the society. With the passage of time or with the change of a region, some practical activities of a religion are also changed. This difference has been noted comparatively between the practices of people relating to European society and the practices of people pertaining to other areas even having same religious (theoretical) back ground. On the other hand, many same cultural or regional values are adopted by people having different religious approaches. Also, some social and cultural values of dominant religion are adopted unwillingly by the people who are in minority or practicing the religions those are in minorities in a single society.

Many old policies or practices have been modified according to modern requirements. For this reason, there is a great difference between Hinduism and Hindu society and also old and modern Hinduism. Many practices and beliefs have been modernized and modified according to the new social setup. Asceticism is found in Hinduism (Hindu society) in different forms and shapes in early Hinduism as well as in modern Hinduism. "In India, ascetic practices have been very widely prevalent from the earliest times."¹ Many activities are practiced by Hindus (common people and religious devotees) those are considered under asceticism. These practices are both in natural and un-natural forms because some are harmonious to human nature and some are highly condemnable modern Hindu scholars. These practices are not recommended by their religion or society but they have invented them and are using for their personal causes. To live without clothes, not to eat those things which are not prohibited by his (or her) religion are some kinds of activities which are designed and invented by people to get some special spiritual ends. Somehow some activities are being practiced by Hindus those are recommended by Hinduism

with devotion. Like Yoga which is mentioned in Hindu sacred literature and also it is being practiced in these days. “This which has been taught to thee is wisdom concerning Sankhya. Now listen to wisdom concerning Yoga, endowed with which, O! Arjuna, thou shalt cast off the bonds of action.”² (Bhagavad Gita, Verse No: 39)

In Hindu sacred books the activities like asceticism are found and have been practiced by ancient Hindus for religious causes. As in the reaction of Buddha and Mahavira’s methodology the Brahmans also created some kind of philosophical theories and way of living for a man from his childhood to old age. The modern asceticism was founded by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) as mentioned the nature of old asceticism in his book “The Discovery of India” in this way. “The Mahabharata is a rich storehouse in which we can dis-cover all manner of precious things. It is full of a varied, abundant and bubbling life, something far removed from that other aspect of Indian thought which emphasized asceticism and negation.”³ This idea was further promoted by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and he used practically many ascetical practices in his life. He is said to be the responsible of renaissance of modern asceticism in Hindu society. “Gandhi’s synthesis of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* was not a static political strategy; rather it was an organically evolving and dynamic program based on the ascetic disciplines of *sat*, *ahimsa*, *brahmacarya*, *aparigraha*, *mauna*, and fasting.”⁴ Many other activities are found in Hindu society. Some of them are natural and some are un-natural. Some are advised by religion and some have been invented by people.

Shiva is often represented as a celibate ascetic, renouncers, sadhus, and Sannyasis invoke his symbols, his name, and his austere example in pursuing rigorous ascetic exercises that reach superhuman (divine?) extremes: Lying on a bed of nails is small-time stuff when compared with vows taken, not infrequently, to stand on a single leg for a period of several years or to hold one arm above the head, fist clenched, for years as the fingernails grow through the hand and out the back of it.⁵

But ultimate cause of all these activities is to get spiritual purification or to make up for someone’s sins which have been done by him. Their practical style may be different but their ultimate goals or final destination is same. The objectives of all these ascetical activities are same only physical actions, deeds or practices are different in Hindu society as compared to the teachings of Hinduism.

Nature of Asceticism in Hinduism or Hindu (Indian) Society

Ascetical activities are found in ancient Hinduism (Hindu Society) as well as in modern Hinduism (Hindu society). The nature of these activities is different with the variation of time and region. In modern Hindu society like India, many natural and un-natural activities which have been adopted by Hindu Pundits, Sadhus, Yogis, Swamis, Vairagins and Shaivites in different forms and shapes. Some of them promote nature and some of them have openly clash with human nature and also rejected by common persons. But in Hindu society, to get some spiritual ends and to enhance spirituality they have invented many activities which are not only the current social setup is ignored but also many un-social activities have been adopted by Hindu ascetics. “Hindu ascetics are often known as *renouncers* because they frequently choose a lifestyle of homelessness, depending upon alms and eschewing possessions. Specific ascetical practices can involve fasting, lying on a bed of nails, or holding unnatural positions for long lengths of time. Many ascetic techniques date to Vedic times, and influenced both the development of yoga and Buddhist spiritual practices.”⁶ Some major ascetic activities which are

practiced by different people in different ways even their objectives vary from person to person and their nature can be noted different. But they are being practiced by Hindus in mostly Indian (Hindu) society.

1.1 Hindu Yoga

Hindu yoga is an activity practiced by people as a ritual practice and also non-ritual practice. This activity is also practiced by ascetics in Hinduism (in Indian society). Yoga is one of those practices which are practiced by Hindu and also by non-Hindus. Hindus adopt it to get spiritual, physical and mental satisfaction. But non-Hindus adopt it to get mental relaxation and calmness, stress relief and for body fitness purposes. The main objective of yoga exercises is “moksha” in Hinduism. To control body parts or mental situations is the core objective of Hindu ascetics. The renowned kinds of ascetic yoga are Karma yoga (The yoga of action), Bhakti yoga (The yoga of devotion) and Jana yoga (The yoga of knowledge). “Activities (yoga) are explained to be three, namely: activity of the mind, activity of the speech, activity of the body.”⁷

The wife of Siva named Sati burnt herself when she heard the news of her husband’s death. The Sati practice was started from this incident and to follow this methodology. Widows of Hindu society are sacrificed under of this practice. But male people also use yoga practices to suffer their bodies and to blow on their inner heat. Hindu females also follow the strategy used by Siva’s wife and followers want to keep it alive in the minds of coming generations. “The radiating yogin blows on inner heat much as Sati burnt herself (by means of yoga).”⁸ In modern time, generally, yoga is considered a kind of asceticism. In the perspective of pain gaining and self-suffering activities, yoga is considered to be an ascetical activity. In some conditions yoga is considered an un-natural form of asceticism as practiced by some Hindu yogis. Many sociologists like Max Weber (1864-1920) gave their views that classical yoga is a systematic form of emotional asceticism. Its natural form is used by people for mediation and to get a mental as well as bodily relaxation. They get relief from mental stress on the advice of their physician. “In modern times, through a process of linguistic and scholastic overkill, Classical Yoga is presented by Weber as a “rationally systematized form of methodical emotional asceticism.”⁹ In early Hindu sacred literature, the term yoga has been used for different approaches. Arjuna himself when felt some spiritual weakness and helplessness, he choose the way of surrender before lord to get some mental satisfaction. Their practical performance and dialogues were later compiled in the form of Bhagavad Gita. This book is divided into many chapters and mostly chapters are related to different types of Yoga.

Tapasya

It is another ascetic activity practiced by Hindus. It is also as old as the religion Hinduism is and nowadays in modern age is also practiced by many Hindu clergy men and Sadhus in different ways. This term (*Tapas*) is used in Hindi and also Sanskrit with the basic root of “*Tap*”. It means hot or heat or to burn something. In the perspective of religious goals, people who adopt this activity suffer themselves and bear pains to get spiritual goals. “*Tapas*, however is also pain, suffering, voluntarily endured.”¹⁰ This practice is found in every old religion; Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. In Jainism it is purely concern to asceticism, in Buddhism this practice is used for meditation purposes. In Hinduism this practice is systematically used for ascetical, inner cleansing and self-discipline. In Hindu sacred literature, this word “*Tapas*” is used as terminology in the sense of ascetical activity in which excessive form of meditation and controlled insight observation are experienced. “Ancient orthodox yogis used to sit surrounded by five fires under the noonday Sun in order to absorb the heat and gain spiritual power.”¹¹ A lot

of spiritual goals are attained through this activity by ascetics in a Hindu society. “It is the heat of tapas that leads toward the perfection of the body and the sense organs and onward toward the final goal of yoga.”¹² Hinduism holds many Philosophical approaches. Tapasya is one of those philosophies. From start to till this practice is being adopted by many Hindus. In old literate like Vedic periods, this activity remained complex by nature. This practice was adopted by Hindu pundits, students and public servants also.

Fasting Observed by Hindu Ascetics

Fasting is one of many ascetical practices adopted by people of different religions. Hindu ascetics also practiced fasting for some spiritual or religious causes. Even fasting is not an obligatory factor in Hindu religion but it is observed to achieve some spiritual goals. To maintain body physically and spiritually, fasting is practiced in different days. Also the time period of fasting is different and nature varies from of other religions. But the ultimate objective of Hinduism as well as other religions is to purify the souls with fasting. In Hinduism, and in Hindu society, ascetics observe fasting to attain divine grace. Different beliefs of Hindus motivate them also to observe fasting in different days. Some of them are difficult and some are normal by nature. In some kinds of fasting, some special kinds of food are prohibited in fasting and sometime every type of food is prohibited for a person who is observing fasts. Among those, some practices are invented by people. Some are advised by religion. “During Navaratri (the word literally means “nine nights”), devotees of Durga observe a fast. Brahmins are fed and prayers are offered for the protection of health and property.”¹³ A festival in Hinduism is celebrated on the 7th day of December to January named *Margaseersha*. On this festival, people arrange a Puja and read some holy verses of *Surya Sahasranama* whole the day and practiced some holy deeds and also invite others to do such actions. On this day, people also fast whole the day. Women also fast on this day for some special purposes. A special package is declared for widows on this day if they fast, in next life she would be saved from current situation. On many occasions fasting are observed by Hindus in different forms. Even these are not obligatory in nature but a lot of benefits are declared. In the memory of Lord Dattatreya Jayanthi, people fast whole the day and keep themselves alone whole the day. They forget all their belongings and even body requirements are ignored. Only the time is given for self-recognition.

Fasting (*Upavas*) is a ritual practice in Hindu society. It is practiced by ascetical and also by common people to emancipate the severity of sins or to achieve next level of spirituality. In start, in Hinduism, this practice was adopted to minimize the sexual energy for physical purposes but later it was used for spiritual purposes. In Vedic period, students were taught and motivated to observe fast. Women were advised to practice this activity to save themselves from odd situations. Particularly, widows were advised to keep *Upavas* to save the repetition of this incident. For the long life of husband their women observe fasts whole day. This is called *Karva Chauth* in Hindu societies. They also practiced it to protect their children, families and other relatives. Fasting is actually a kind of sacrifice of body in which some kinds of foods and basic requirements of life are ignored for a period. For both material and nonmaterial ends are gained in Hinduism with the help of fasting.

Renunciation

Renunciation means to leave worldly pleasures and pursuits for the cause of a religion. Hindus are blamed that they have invented renunciation in human history. Buddha and Mahavira were the earlier renouncers in Hindu society. People in Hindu society, in the reaction of Brahmins attitude and their strict or biased religious policies started to make a separate system

and they were called the rebels of Brahman's policies. People at that time renounced the social setup and went to some forest or deserts and started a new way of life. They started to make some new set up of beliefs and values. A distinct way of life as it was being practiced before. Consequently, some new kinds of religions came into existence and some new set of social values were introduced. Buddhism and Jainism came into existence after the separation from Hinduism. When Brahmins observed that their teachings and policies were becoming valueless they introduced some new social values and ritual practices. They introduced four stages of life for a man in Hinduism. According to this new setup, four stages which are known as "*Ashrams*". The fourth stage, according to this philosophy is "*Samnyasa*" or renunciation in the life of a man in which somebody has to leave whole the social setup and has to live a monastic way of life. It is last stage of life for every Hindu man and woman in which many materialistic and pleasurable activities have to reject to get some spiritual ends. "The brahmacharya asrama of the student, the Grihastha asrama of the Dikshitayajamana, the later Vanaprastha and Sannyasa Asramas of the ascetic are each in their own way a heated passage, a tapta-marga."¹⁴ To get spiritual ends, some people go in extreme level of asceticism in Hinduism. They are advised not to earn but to beg for the fulfillment of their basic needs. It is mentioned in Hindu law books. To become a *Sannyasa* or renouncer there is no restriction by Hindu society or Hindu religious teaching even they are encouraged for this purpose.

Psycho-Factor of Hindu Ascetics

Self-Suffering or pain gaining is one of many un-natural activities of Hindu asceticism. People for some religious or spiritual purposes adopt such activities in which they hurt themselves physically or psychologically. In this type of asceticism people take pain or cut them off from worldly pleasure. This is severe form of asceticism. In Hindu societies, many Hindus, for the cause of spirituality adopt such way of style that they ignore basic requirements of a life. Vegetables are preferred to eat. In Hindu society, due to this habit, to eat flesh is not liked and people don't like to kill animals. For this reason they are called vegetarians. Even some ascetics don't use those sandals or other home used things which are made animal leather. They have a belief on non-violence in their social setup. "Because of ahimsa there are certain orthodox Hindu ascetics who will not wear leather shoes or sandals, but will wear only wooden shoes."¹⁵ In Hindu society, self-suffering is adopted to minimize the severity of sins and to make up for previous wrong actions.

Celibacy in Hinduism

Celibacy is another factor of asceticism adopted by people on the name of a religious or spiritual cause. It is practiced in many religions and societies. Usually, every Prophet had their family and used to keep sexual intercourses with their wives. It is natural process and nobody can live without it. If someone is forced to abstain from having sex it causes worst results in a society. In many religions, people to gain some spiritual ends live in such a way of life that they abstain from having sex legally or illegally. Some people totally reject the social and family setup and live a celibacy life and don't touch an opposite gender whole their life to gain spirituality. "In Hinduism, celibacy is called brahmacharya, which is practiced by an ascetic and by a student, which suggests that for a Hindu celibacy is practically synonymous with being a student."¹⁶ In Hinduism, Sadhus adopt such way of life. According to Vedic literature, the last stage of a man when he renounces the social setup and live a celibacy life. It is practiced in "*Brahmcharya*" "*Yama*" and in some Yoga practices. People generally hold an idea that they have fully devoted for their religious missions. This phenomenon has been discussed in

Bhagavad Gita clearly. “Worship of the gods, the twice-born, the teachers and the wise, purity, straightforwardness, celibacy and non-injury—these are called the austerities of the body.”¹⁷ Celibacy was invented in Hindu society in the reaction of Buddha’s and Mahavira’s philosophies. When common people used to start following the path of renunciation and became rebels against Brahmin rule in Hindu society, then Brahmins made some stages of life and in these stages celibacy and renunciation were determined for everyone. So this activity was imparted in Hindu society and it was started to practice as a part of Hindu religion. This activity is mentioned in Hindu literature. “A careful reading of the early Dharma-sutras shows that the authors of the system were Brahmins who were supporters of or sympathetic toward the ideals of celibacy and renunciation.”¹⁸

Impacts of Hindu Asceticism on (Hindu) Society

Religious asceticism influences in different ways and leaves revolutionary impacts on individual as well as on a society. In Hinduism or Hindu society, every kind of ascetical activity has great influence and social impact on social life both in positive and negative ways. The activities which are done by Hindu ascetics also leave different impacts on Hindu society. “In Hinduism asceticism is believed to be both morally and ritually efficacious; it is a value that permeates the ideology, affecting the spiritual status and daily religious activities of all members of society.”¹⁹ By nature, these impacts can be categorized into two forms: positive and negative. Many activities practiced by Hindu ascetics in different areas and also in different ways impact their society in different forms. In positive sense, Hindu yoga, Hindu tapas and Hindu fasting have many physical and spiritual benefits.

Socio Impacts of Hindu Yoga on Hindu Society

Yoga is not just a physical exercise but a lot of yoga activities are performed for meditation purposes. It leaves revolutionary impacts on individual and also on society. To get some particular physical and mental ends people of India practices to minimize mental depression and anxiety and to gain spiritual satisfaction. The main objective of yoga is to decrease the level of depression in society. It helps to decrease the disorder and chaos in a society. Small ratio of mentally upset people means low chances of quarrels in a society. “The perceived value of yoga and meditation and their impact on the human brain and body is, many discussion groups in this country focus on the merits of these activities or other religious rituals, which are seen as leading to better human health or creating a safer environment.”²⁰ Finally, collective attitude of a society becomes positive. It is positive form of yoga in Hindu society. A healthy mind can be found in a healthy body. Yoga helps in these ways to maintain bodily health directly and mental health indirectly. High ratio of healthy people is the one of main sign of progressive society.

Many social conflicts can be resolved by yoga. When people of different approaches gather on one place for yoga exercises a friendly environment is created to share their cultural values as well as personal problems. They interchange their social values and social behaviors with one another. To listen and to solve someone’s problems, it creates opportunities for them. The misunderstandings and wrong mentalities can be minimized. It creates the environment of non-violence and peaceful circumstances in these ways. “Pat Anjali defines yoga as the cessation of the fluctuations of mental activity. This is to be achieved by following specific steps. The first steps teach ethical, personal, and social behavior through practices such as nonviolence (ahimsa), truthfulness, celibacy, cleanliness, asceticism, and study.” (Shattuck, *Hinduism*, 30) Yoga has got new trends in these days not only clergy men but non-religious people (for non-spiritual

Purposes) use to attend yoga classes. To get physical ends they practice the yoga exercises. Sometime they are recommended by their physicians or medical doctors to adopt such types of exercises, to maintain their body shapes and to resolve their health issues. “The middle classes are developing a fast growing interest in techniques of the body such as yoga, or meditation taught by new spiritual teachers claiming descent from a variety of older traditions.”²¹ Yoga exercises not only on social setups but also on different literature have affected in different ways. Many terminologies have been accepted as a part of literature in other language. Particular in English language a part of wordings, terms and phrases have been added due to their practical application and adaptation of European and American people.

The Impact of Tapasya

Tapasya is to bear heat. It burns some calories of human body. Medically it is fruitful to maintain health of a body for all extra and spoiled lipids are burnt by this activity. Consequently one’s body gets pure and saturated from impurities and un-necessary elements. “But ascetically produced within the human being *tapas*, saturates the body, making it a reservoir of hot power.”²² After burning the body in heat, the body becomes cool and normal. Many desires like sexual desire are leveled. It saves from usage of drugs and alcoholic materials. Socially, many un-social activities like rape cases, quarrels, unsafe driving, loudly music and vandalism are prevented. These are some positive and constructive impacts of Tapasya on a society. In negative angles, many social activities have to renounce and has to adopt a specific way of life. While in Tapasya, many un-natural deeds are practiced to get pain after not using proper diet and not caring for one’s body.

Impacts of Hindu Fasting on Hindu Society

Fasting is one of many rituals practices which are authenticated and admired by scientific theories. It is observed by different people in different ways. Their timing and period may be different but the ultimate objectives of all religious observers are same, they want their spiritual purification through fasting. As ascetical activity, it is practiced to minimize the burden of sins and to purify the souls in different religions. The basic purpose of fasting is to control the sinful activities by individual or a society. People during fasts keep their body controlled and disciplined. To prevent the wrong desires they use fasting to make their body prepared. This aspect brings a revolutionary change in a society because controlling the un-social activities during fasting gives positive results. This practice leaves permanent impacts in individual bodies and in a society also. “Ritual impurity is usually caused by contact with what are considered impure substances: generally contact with corpses, with blood (especially menstrual blood) or other bodily fluids, or with ‘untouchables. This impurity is removed through religious practices such as bathing, repeating mantras and fasting according to a well-established canon.”²³ Due to fasting the ratio of un-social activities as well as crimes can be controlled in a society.

Conclusion

Asceticism is there in Hinduism both in natural and un-natural forms. Many activities like yoga, Tapasya, fasting, renunciation, celibacy and meditation are ascetical activities which have been practiced by Hindus in different ways. These practices influence on Hindu society in different ways: social and un-social ways. The natural form of yoga proves helpful and beneficial for everyone and excessive form of yoga breaks the bones of a yogi. Tapasya is also a kind of worship whose moderate form is beneficial for a man but its excessive form is harmful for its practitioners. Hindu renunciation is always anti-social activity which is being practiced by many Hindu Sadhus (male and female). Celibacy is also practiced by many Hindu clergy men for the

sake of a religious cause or to get next level of spirituality. This is totally un-social activity which prevents the progress of next generation. To avoid marrying or having sexual relation with opposite sex means it is prevention of natural process. So asceticism in Hindu society is only acceptable or practicable by others those are harmonious to human nature or those are practiced according to human nature but activities which are against the human nature and social setup are not liked by people of modern Hindu society. Hindu ascetical practices give benefits in moderate form but in excessive, un-natural form are harmful for Hindu society.

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