Original Article (Special Theme)

Free Food May Make Friends: Everyday Commensality and Vernacular Ascetic Society in Haridwar, North India

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Introduction

Generally, philanthropic activities in Hindu India are termed *sevā*, which means service. This service can take diverse forms. While *sevā* originally referred to an obligatory service and devotional worship of the gods and gurus, or spiritual masters, its focal point has shifted from individual religious practice to organized humanitarian service since socio-religious movements during the nineteenth century (Beckerlegge 2015). Nowadays, many prominent gurus and their organizations are engaged in various philanthropic activities such as education, medication, food charity, and care of orphans. Although these activities bring them public endorsement, religiously motivated philanthropy is criticized from the viewpoint of humanitarianism and it is questioned whether it could realize a citizen society beyond
communal and sectarian conflicts.

This article aims to explore how Hindu philanthropic activities, particularly food charity, give impetus to create a vernacular form of ascetic society, focusing on the female “lay ascetics” who receive the food. Section 1 reconsiders the historical transition of the concept and practice of *sevā*, to which previous studies pay attention in attempting to comprehend the recently proliferating guru-led movements both in India and abroad. Section 2 describes the details of field research, and Section 3 outlines the system of food charity. Sections 4, 5, and 6 examine case studies from two separate points of view: (1) the logic of religious giving, and (2) the ethics of commensality. In doing so, this article will elucidate that while the logic of religious giving creates an imagined monastic community, female lay ascetics who are marginalized help each other to eat together and then nurture friendship, which constitutes part of vernacular ascetic society.

Hindu Philanthropy and Religious Gifts

As charismatic guru-led movements have increased in influence worldwide, previous studies have come to focus on their philanthropic social work, which are supported by the followers’ financial and physical service. One contentious issue is the guru’s overwhelming authority, and the apparently hierarchical or asymmetrical relations and unilateral transactions between the guru and their followers. Warrier (2003), studying a female guru-led organization in South India, argues that the ethic of *sevā*, propagated by the guru, encourages the devotees to offer selfless service as significant spiritual practice, in return for rewards such as a good reputation in the organization and the guru’s affection. Copeman (2009), investigating blood donation as a social practice in guru-led
organizations in North India, describes how the devotees who offer blood donation as a service to the guru value the utility of the blood; that is, they gauge whether their blood is used effectively to fulfil their different aims. These activities are criticized from the viewpoint of humanitarianism in that their ultimate goal is not to improve social inequality but rather to obtain individual spiritual merit and salvation. Thus, these activities result in reinforcing asymmetrical relations such as the guru and the devotees or the wealthy and the poor.

This article, however, highlights an aspect of horizontal bonding that Hindu philanthropic work engenders among the participants, focusing on the imaginative and creative power of religious gifts. Dān, or an offering to the gods and religious experts, is considered the so-called pure gift, which does not create any obligatory relationship or even friendship (Laidlaw 2000). Meanwhile, Bornstein (2012), who investigated NGOs’ philanthropic activities in Delhi, argues that the tradition of dān drives people to offer donations without taking care of rewards or accountability. She conceptualizes it as the “impulsive gift” that is motivated from empathy to suffering others leading to an impulse to help them, and describes that, through the giving and taking of gifts, a sense of the “circle of we” is fostered beyond the boundary between the givers and the recipients (Bornstein 2012: 165-170). It is noteworthy to consider empathetic feelings, which inspire or are inspired by gift-exchanges, but what should be explored further is a subtle difference of values between the religious gifts, and how it discriminates suitable recipients from others according to social boundaries such as gender. It is the difference that stimulates the participants to give and receive gifts and strive to do so in a better, more suitable manner. This article will clarify how, because the logic of religious giving brings asymmetrical
relations between the recipients, female lay ascetics struggle to help and care for each other, which does cause a sense of the circle of we.

Female Lay Ascetics: Recipients of Food Charity

Field research was conducted for about two and a half years from August 2011 to March 2014, around Haridwar district in Uttarakhand state, North India, in addition to several supplemental surveys. Haridwar is one of the most famous pilgrimage sites in Hindu India, regarded as a gateway through which one can gain some understanding of higher reality, where many ascetics and spiritual seekers settle. This article focuses on women who, as lay ascetics, are frequently looked down upon by other ascetics and local people. This is due to their apparently householder-like lifestyles. Most female lay ascetics live independently in a small cottage, rental room, or shanty near the Ganges, rather than in an established āśram (hermitage) or monastery, and make a living through begging for alms, including being the recipients of food charity.

Food charity, termed anna-kṣetra or langar, is available daily at many places across the area. One of the largest regular acts of charity that GK Āśram offers in the evening attracts hundreds of people including local ascetics, vagrant beggars, students and children, women with babies, and passing tourists. GK Āśram was founded in 1973 by the late guru, and since his death in 2004 the organization has been run by a committee composed of his disciples and lay devotees. In addition to food charity, they conduct a variety of philanthropic work such as distributing food and clothing to poor households twice a month, offering free consultation and medication, and running a nursing home and school without any charge.
The Logic of Religious Giving

Although food charity is open to everyone, how to offer food differs according to the recipients. It is because ritual offerings to the gods, priests, and saints are interpreted as _dān_, through which the givers expect to purify their sins and gain blessings from the recipients, whereas alms (_bhikṣā_) to destitute people are somehow undervalued. In the case of GK Āśram, they offer food in two ways: first, they feed ascetics inside the premises of the āśram, and after the ascetics finish their meals they begin to distribute food to others outside. So then, how do they decide who are religious “mendicants (_sant_),” or suitable recipients, and who are secular “beggars (_phakka_)?” Speaking concisely, it is those who obey the āśram’s rules and regulations, such as the dress code, and behaving “properly” according to the givers’ expectations who are treated as mendicants. The assembly of ascetics who receive meals inside is worshipped as a symbol of the monastic community (_sant samāj_), though temporarily.

The Ethics of Commensality

However, this logic of religious giving is fundamentally androcentric, marginalizing women because they are not considered to be qualified renouncers. Female lay ascetics, thus, face more difficulties than men when engaging with charity, which prompts them to work together. For instance, they check their attire and behaviour mutually and give advice and warning when they find something wrong. Also, they encourage each other to go to the āśram on time daily even if they do not need to have supper. Through these collaborative efforts, they gradually learn proper techniques of the body, a common sense of time, and their ethical code of practice. What they value the most is the ethics of commensality; they attend the charitable activity not only to obtain food just for themselves, but to meet other fellow
ascetics and eat together with them. In doing so, they nurture a sense of the circle of we, or friendship beyond the different socio-religious backgrounds.

Furthermore, this friendship can surpass boundaries between mendicants and beggars, males and females, or the givers and the recipients. Let me illustrate the emotional connections between the givers and the recipients. Most lay ascetics have not seen the late guru or his disciples directly, and there are no personal interactions between them. Nevertheless, not a few female lay ascetics embrace a feeling of gratitude and adoration to the guru, as some of them say that they will go to the heaven where the late guru now resides, because they eat the āśram’s salt and drink the water. When his female disciple left her body, many female lay ascetics spontaneously gathered at her funeral ritual and mourned together with the devotees, which might be a manifestation of the circle of we, bridging the gap between the otherworldly givers and the recipients in this world.

Conclusion

In closing, the first point is that the logic of religious giving divides the recipients into two categories: religious mendicants or secular beggars. It creates a miscellaneous assembly of ascetics as a symbol of the monastic community to suit the givers’ imagination and expectation. However, it is a male-centred, temporary community, which relegates women to a secondary position. Second, because female lay ascetics develop empathy with fellow ascetics and help each other, they come to nurture friendship on a daily basis. What they value the most is the ethics of commensality; in other words, they attend charitable events to meet fellow ascetics and eat together, not just to get bread for themselves alone. Furthermore, this friendship can be spread over different socio-religious backgrounds and
boundaries between the recipients, or between the givers and the recipients. Third, it is female lay ascetics’ collaborative efforts to join the imagined community and receive the gifts in a better way that makes the community flexible and sustainable. This imagined community and friendship among female lay ascetics, thus, interactively constitutes a vernacular form of ascetic society, which is neither a guru-centred exclusive community nor just individual network.

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