

Call for Papers

Indian Ascetic Traditions: Organisations, Practices, Representations and Social Manifestations

Concept Note for an Edited Volume

Why has Yogi Ramdev garnered such widespread acceptability and popularity in contemporary Indian society? What makes his videos of *prāṇāyāma* special and distinct among the numerous other YouTubers in the country? Seemingly, his status of being an ascetic/ a yogi grants him a unique credibility in the Indian context to the extent that his reality of being an astute businessman never receives as much attention. How does he navigate this blending of being a respected yogi and a successful entrepreneur? The answer to this amorphousness lies in documenting the history of Indian ascetic traditions, focusing on their evolution, development, continuity, coalescence and adaptability over the centuries, in the realms of their respective texts, religious functionalism, visual cultures and social manifestations.

Ascetic traditions have played a significant role throughout the history of the Indian subcontinent, particularly within Indic religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, where practitioners have challenged or supported dominant religious canons and contributed to the development of diverse philosophical, bodily, ritual and devotional practices. Since medieval times, innumerable Islamic ascetics, Sufis, Christian saints and missionaries have also established enduring presences in the region, shaping its religious and cultural landscape.

Classical Sanskrit and vernacular texts produced in both religious and secular milieus are vital for understanding the evolution and development of ascetic traditions. These sources refer to powerful individuals or certain groups of renunciants and mendicants, offer insight into their rituals, ascetic practices (*yoga, tapa, mantra, nāma, japa, zikr, prayer*), describe the rules and regulations governing their lives and material culture, and preserve elements of their esoteric knowledge systems. Another source for chronicling the subject of Indian asceticism is visual culture, which provides valuable evidence for interpreting the diverse forms and representations of ascetic life. Over the centuries, it has played a crucial role in articulating abstract ideas, including deities, yogic *cakra*-s, *yantra*-s, *mandala*-s, and *mudrā*-s, as well as the profound ideals and goals of asceticism, such as renunciation, spiritual pursuits, and enlightenment. Furthermore, artworks provide deep awareness of the cultural and historical contexts that shaped the emergence and evolution of ascetic traditions.

In contemporary context, ethnographic research offers insights by examining living ascetic communities, their practices, internal dynamics, the continuity or break in their traditions, and interactions with political institutions or their immediate society. Ascetics, indeed, affiliate

themselves with particular sects, adhere to different philosophical doctrines, and follow a range of rituals and practices. These sectarian identities and their associated practices shape both how ascetics present themselves and how they are perceived within broader religious and social landscapes. The lifestyle of an ascetic is mostly distinct from that of a householder; however, this is not always the case. While many ascetics pursue forms of seclusion and remain outside society, others adopt peripatetic lifestyles, some administer temples and monasteries maintaining close ties with lay followers, and others still remain integrated within the life of a householder.

Given the remarkable chronological depth and geographical breadth of ascetic traditions in South Asia, the preparation of a dedicated volume that helps understanding the historical trajectories of asceticism and ascetic groups situating their development both diachronically and synchronically, is both timely and necessary. Such work would enable a systematic exploration of key historical, social and cultural questions that can address both the past and the present, including:

- In what ways did asceticism and ascetic orders emerge, consolidate, and organise themselves over time? What kind of overlapping and/or syncretism do we see in this process?
- What forms of solidarities or rivalries developed among ascetic groups?
- How did ascetic practices develop across different historical periods?
- How were ascetics imagined/represented in textual and visual culture throughout history? How are asceticism's ambiguities, practices, abstract ideas and tenets expressed in these mediums? How are these themes and imagery reinterpreted over time?
- Can visual arts serve as a form of ascetic or spiritual practice?
- How have ascetics participated in, interpreted, or shaped religious pilgrimages and festivals, both historically and in contemporary contexts? Could we talk about an ascetic religious landscape?
- What roles have women played within asceticism, and how have these roles changed over time?
- What kind of interactions and exchanges have historically occurred between ascetic communities and lay society? How do ascetic traditions influence social norms and ideals?
- How do ascetics navigate the friction and negotiate between their spiritual pursuits and social responsibilities or expectations?
- How have ascetic groups or individuals engaged with/resisted against political power in different periods, and how do they negotiate such relationships today? In what ways have ascetic ideals influenced leaders and politicians and political movements?
- What relationship exists between ascetics and nature, especially how the natural world influences or informs their spiritual endeavours and practices?

To understand the nature of asceticism in South Asia, this volume (tentatively titled as *Indian Ascetic Traditions: Organisations, Practices, Representations and Social Manifestations*) welcomes critical and theoretical papers from a range of disciplinary approaches, time

periods, and areas (from religious studies, textual analysis, ethnography, visual studies, and the broader Indic studies).

The peer-reviewed manuscript will be issued by a reputable publisher with a global presence and accommodate papers in English and possibly in Hindi.

Abstracts of 250–300 words and a short biography (100 words: affiliation, research field and 2-3 publications) should be submitted to indianasceticvolume@gmail.com by **31st March 2026**.

Selected contributors will be invited to submit their chapter.

- **Deadline for full article:** 31st March 2027
- **Length:** Maximum 7,000 words including endnotes/footnotes and bibliography
- **Style:** Chicago Manual of Style referencing (notes and bibliography)
(https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)
- **Submission:** indianasceticvolume@gmail.com

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