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Sādhu: Tradition vs. Modernity, A Moral Investigation

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Abstract

India has a rich tradition of spirituality, religion and culture. The beauty lies in the diversity of religious beliefs, sects and more. The term 'sādh' depicts spiritual renunciation, liberation. It is the greatest Purusārtha or end in life for Indian soul. Thus, Sadhus are seated in such height that they are viewed as direct communicators with deity. The purest soul in human form. But in today's world this purity is least available. Sādhanā has become a commodity to become popular sensation. This paper aims at highlighting the rich tradition of Sadhu and to reveal its contemporary positions and possible exploitation through critical analysis from a moral point of view. I have mentioned a number of modern 'Sādhaka's to reveal the extent of devaluation of tradition and depth of such position.

Keywords: Sādhu, Sādhaka, Sādhvi, Liberation, Tradition, Modernity, Controversy, Exploitation

India is known for its a rich tradition of spirituality, religion and cultural heritage. Diverse of religious beliefs, cultural vastness, different languages, sects, people of different regions across the country make it a wealthy of diverse colours. Vastly in Hinduism and also in other religions the concept of *Sādhuism* prevails. It's not just a religion but a tradition in this land.

The concept of *Sādhu* has originated from the tradition of spiritual worships. Sādhu is a religious ascetic, a holy person. Sādhu is linked with Sādhanā. Who performs sādhanā is a Sādhu, Sādhvi or Sādhaka. By practicing devotion, worship, yoga-sādhanā, renunciation, one turns into a Sādhu. The journey from a normal life towards becoming a Sādhu is not a path of roses but of horns. One has to follow austerity for life, abstain from all sensual pleasures, humanly desires. They have to take life of ascetic, leave their own house, loved ones and devote their soul towards worship the spiritual energy or God. They promise of celibacy and live life in poverty. *R̥g Vedas*ⁱ has used Sādhu to describe *Sāvitrī* (6.15.16) as one who excels in performing the sacrifice with perfectionⁱⁱ.

In Indian tradition achieving Mokṣa or liberation is the ultimate goal of human life. Life and death are a cycle of sufferings, pain and liberation from this cycle is the goal of every soul. This journey towards liberation has different rules or paths for different groups of people. There were four stages of living. First, *Brahmacharya*, the student life in austerity. Second *Grihastha*, the family life at home. Third, *Vanaprastha*, at the late age leaving every materialistic gain at home the person leaves for forests to spend their rest of life. The last is

Sannyasa, complete renunciation and to meditate in search of liberation. The Sadhus choose the life of renunciation in their early lives or maybe in later times. In search for calm places to manifest with spiritual meditation they stay away from localities, in forests, river sides, leaf-huts with very minimal basic amenities.

The term 'Sādhu'ⁱⁱⁱ means goal. The goal of spiritual renunciation, liberation, the greatest Purusartha or human goal. 'Sādhanāttam'^{iv} is the ability to reach that goal. Sādhu is the person who succeeds to reach that goal. The male ones are known as Sādhu or Sādhuaka while females are referred as Sādhvi or Sādhika. The paths maybe diverse in different religions, sects, may differ in different regions but the goal is always the same. Sādhus' cross hurdles of life, abandon their normal lives, and leave for spiritual enlightenment, reach epitome of virtue. Excel in spirituality and become a great soul. Different religions, sects have distinct names for them as well. *Vairāgi, Shaiva, Vāishnava, Shākta, Aghori, Sannyasi, Kāpālīka*, Jogi and so on. Vairāgya generally refers to ascetic disinterest. It comes from Virāga or disinterest. A person who renounces from materialistic pain and pleasures is a Vairagi, who achieves liberation. Shaiva sadhus are renunciants devoted to lord Shiva. Vaishnava Sādhus are renouncers devoted to lord Vishnu (or his avatars, such as Rama or Krishna). The Vaishnava Sādhus are sometimes referred to as Vairāgis too. There are Shakta Sādhus, who are devoted to Shakti^v or divine goddess. Aghoris usually engage in post-mortem rituals, often dwell in charnel grounds, smear cremation ashes on their bodies, and use bones from human corpses for crafting *kapāla* (skull cups which Shiva and other Hindu deities are often iconically depicted holding or using) and jewellery. They also practice post-mortem cannibalism, eating flesh from foraged human corpses, including those taken from cremation ghats^{vi}. *Kāpālīka* is a predecessor of Aghoris, a Tantric, non-Puranic form of Shaivism which originated in medieval India between the 4th and 8th century CE. The term has been generated from Kapala or scull^{vii}. The Yogi is someone who practices yoga sādhanā. The Sannyasi is the performer of sannyasa, the final stage of Caturāshram Tradition of Vedas. These diverse types of Sādhus wear diverse colours of cloths, mark their bodies with Sringāra.

Sādhu stands for who is in association with Sāt (truth). They have higher levels of Sātvik nature. They are gentle at the outset but demonstrate strong will power, deep concentration that is not disrupted easily. Common people seek their blessings for healing mentally, physically, purifying their souls and seek peace in presence of them.

Mostly a person turns into a devoted Sādhu by a strong will-power or by inspiration from their teachers or gurus or being influenced by some other Sādhu who has already achieved the state of purification. They live secluded but they are seen in religious occasions, in pilgrimages, religious places like Vāranasi. They travel mostly barefoot and usually walk to places. They have very minimal belongings. They are most peaceful souls but also appear to be rebellious and engaging in warfare is not rare. Ananda Bhattacharya depicted in his paper sanyasis were trained in warfare, also engaged in land-ownership cases.

It stands for means for people. What a person desires in life. A normal person seeks pleasure in forms of wealth, sensual fulfilments. The wise aims to be truthful, to obey with the laws of Dharma. By Dharma it refers to paths leading to truth not the generic meaning, religion. Sādhus are great followers of the paths of truth, are bearers of Dharma. Leading whole lives in lone, abstaining from worldly pleasure and pain, in austerity long for Mokṣa the ultimate liberation.

The controversy I would be discussing here is the gap between the great legacy of Sādhu tradition and the modern-day practice of Sādhu culture specifically in Southeast Asia's richest land of culture, India. These modern-day's sadhus are unbelievably famous in social media. They claim to have a cherished devoted young life where in most cases, their parents or grand-parents were Sādhus or devotees to some deities. They have influenced these modern-day sadhus to follow austerity, chastity and become devotees.

Modern Sādhanā and Sādha:

Here I would discuss a few social media influencer Sādhus namely, Sadhguru, Acharya Baba, Baba Bageshwar, Ramdev Baba, Sādhvi Bhagwati Saraswati, and Sādhvi Om Prabha Bharti and their way of practicing and preaching in modern times.

Sadhguru, formerly known as Jagadish Vasudev is an Indian Guru or influencer was born in a Telegu family on 3rd September, 1957. He was the youngest among his five siblings. His father was an ophthalmologist at the Mysuru Railway Hospital and mother a housewife. Got married in 1984 to Vijay kumari, had a daughter named Radhe in 1990s. He after formal education joined University of Mysore to study English literature. After completion he started his first business, a poultry farm, in Mysore. He noted that it was a motivation for him that the time of serenity he had in the non-working hours. His poultry farm needed a very less time of attention in a day. Later being opposed and criticized by his parents he opened a construction business with a civil engineer friend. At the age of 25 he quit all his businesses and started travelling and teaching yoga. In 1983, he taught his first yoga class, in Mysore. He began travelling across Karnataka and Hyderabad on his motorcycle, spreading his style of yoga known as Sahaja Sthiti Yoga^{viii}, he is the founder of Isha foundation based in Coimbatore, India. This foundation was established on 1992. This carries out educational and spiritual activities. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Inner Engineering: A Yogi's Guide to Joy* and *Karma: A Yogi's Guide to Crafting Your Destiny*^{ix}. He speak at international platforms as well^x. He works for protecting the environment against climate change, took leading parts in many initiatives like Project Green Hands (PGH), Rally for Rivers, Cauvery Calling, and the Journey to Save Soil^{xi}. In 2017, he received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award, for his contributions to spirituality and humanitarian services.

But he despite of being a great public figure and devoted practitioner on humanitarian grounds, he I criticised for promoting a number of pseudo-scientific claims. He also consecrated the Adi Yogi Shiva statue, the world's largest bust, in Coimbatore, India. Sadhguru was not influenced to be a guru by any of his ancestors. He had his first spiritual experience at age of 25^{xii}. On 23 September 1982, he drove up Chamundi Hill, and as he sat on a stone, explained that,

"All my life I had thought, this is me...But now the air I was breathing, the rock on which I was sitting, the atmosphere around me – everything had become me."^{xiii}

A few days later he having similar experience at home he decided to leave all his businesses and focus on teaching yoga as well as sharing his experiences by traveling to places. After a few weeks he did so in order to seek insights of his spiritual experiences. In 1993 he was searching for a place to establish the Isha Yoga Centre and later succeeded with it. He bought a land in Coimbatore and flourished his enthusiasm on yoga. The Isha foundation's activities are run mostly by volunteers. Sadhguru in his organisation offers yoga programmes, known

as *Isha Yoga*.^{xiv} His foundation aims to improve the quality of education in rural India through an initiative called Isha Vidhya.^{xv}

Comment: Sadhguru is truly a gentle soul and a deep thinker. He speaks well of his disciple's well beings. But it seems somewhat awkward to me that whether it is preferable for a yogi person to stay always Infront of lens? To be a constant influencer at social media which depicts as a materialistic world?

Anirudh Acharya Ji Maharaj, original name Anirudh Tiwari, born in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh is a 35years old man. He has got a doctorate degree from American University, USA in 2024 also got the award at World Book of Records of London by British Government for having highest number of followers in Bhagavat Gita katha and other spiritual discourses till 6th September 2023. He works as a spiritual orator, social worker. He is married, which is quite unusual for a Sadhaka. He has two sons too. Her wife is called as Guru-Maa. He charges 1lakh rupees for a katha session which is again reveal s a materialistic mentality of his. However, he started an old age ashrama for abandoned elderly people in the name of Gauri Gopal Vrddhāshrama in 2019 and Gau Gopal Sevā Sansthāna for welfare of cows^{xvi}. About his lifestyle, he loves to listen to old Bollywood songs and plays cricket in his leisure times. He is a devotee of Lord Krishna. About his early life he and his poor family used to live in a temple of a village in MP, where he used to beg for living. A few years later when the priest of that temple made them leave the premisses the homeless family got 15000 rupees under Indira Awas Yojana scheme. Now coming back to his professional life, he is popularly a public orator and social worker. In his Katha sessions, he listens to the disciple's problems, queries of their lives and provides them with suggestions from a spiritual, ethical perspective. Though a number of his claims are objectionable, commendable to modern times. He links pseudo-science to real life phenomena. One of his comments I remember is – 'we should not consume biscuits, because in it 'bish' (poison) 'kut kut ke' (loaded with) that is, biscuits are loaded with poison as its name suggests in Hindi language. Some of his sexist comments have kindled the debated of mentality of such Maharaj Ji's in modern society and impact of their negative influence is a curse to society. He in one of his sessions stated that *Sita* from Ramayana and *Draupadi* from Mahābhārata were abducted for their beauty, he didn't mark the culprits in both cases.

Comments: choosing a living in spirituality is more preferable than commendable in India. But the intention one carrying inherently to the mass that follows their footsteps lies a big responsibility. One has to refine their knowledge and be a philosopher to right means that they can preach with good morale in hearts of the helpless society around them. Having no influencer is far safer than having a negative one. Aniruddha Acharya is a below average minded orator who preaches morally incorrect kathas that drive people into deeper darkness. To my understanding he can effortlessly be labelled as a comedian rather than a true sage or Sādhu.

Baba Bageshwar, formal name Dhirendra Krishna Shastri. The Bageshwar Dhām is an ancient place of sages and seers, with its divine significance of sages performing austerities here. They invoked blessings of Lord Hanuman. With time it turned into a sacred court of divinity, spirituality, meditation. In recent times the current Babaji of this temple, Dhirendra Krishna Shastri gained popularity for his claimed ability to identify his disciple's problems without them speaking. He organises a 'chamatkari darbar' miracle courtroom for common people who seek his divine solutions to their life problems. He writes this 'parcha' (note). He

guesses the problems that are to be raised to him with confidence. Then he calls the person before him and holding that note in one hand asks them to state their problems. Instantly he with pride, showcases his note having the exact same questions or problems that the person uttered. He claims this to be his divine power. People believe in his miraculous ability to identify and solutions that is provided for. Countless have reported a successful healing after seeking path from this dhām. Their family disputes, occupational problems, health conditions have significantly improved with Babaji's words. For many this place strengthens their faith, devotion in divine powers, they find inner peace.

Comments: Owning divine power is not easy task. If we agree on the point that the Bageshwar Baba Dharendra Ji has divine powers such that he can mind read so effortlessly it is still agreeable as in Jaina philosophy we have encountered with Manah Paryāya as a perception. In Nyaya we have learned of Yogaja Alaukika Pratyaksa by which the sages are able to foresee the past, and future of others though yoga darshana. However, the parcha or note concept makes the whole atmosphere somewhat shallow. Has the world become so materialistic that to prove spirituality one has to bend to such tricks and tactics that can gain people's trust. though he leaves no room for doubts in his viewers, the whole show might be just a pre-scripted act where the people seeking solutions are planted accordingly. The solutions are fruitful because they are mostly based on general life's philosophy and ethics. For example, in a session he asked a random man to choose any one of the visitors to represent and state their problems to Babaji, be it his known or unknown. Babaji wrote a note before the man identified the other person, a woman and her son. He then asked them to come on stage and state their queries in microphone. The women pleaded for good health and job opportunities for her son, to everyone's surprise Babaji took out the note which he finished writing before they came and set it aside. He also cleared that he is not holding any pen while they were there. The note had same queries written as the woman uttered. He glorified his divinity like any skilful magician. This expression seemed shallow to my understanding of divine powers. He seemed to commodify the divinity for earning popularity, to become public sensation.

Baba Ramdev, Ramkishen Yadav is famously known as Ramdev Baba. He is a yoga guru and a businessman side by side. Born in present Haryana in 1965. He came under limelight with his excellence in yoga. He usually arranged yoga sessions for large masses. His stomach exercises caught extra sensation in public. These sessions are telecasted regularly on Astha channel in TV. Yoga enthusiasts hugely follow his lessons. The problem arose when he started preaching his Patanjali products under his fame. He claimed these wide range of food products like biscuits, chawan-prash, tea, wellness products like aloe vera gel, face wash, soap, shampoo, and more are trusted blindly by many as ayurvedic. But sadly, these have failed to be such in recent findings. In December 2016, his business brand Patanjali was fined by a court in Haridwar, for 11lakh rupees in charge of misbranding and using misleading advertisements together recognition in public eye. in the West Bengal Public Health Laboratory, Kolkata his food product Amla juice and aloe vera juice were found unfit as edible. Another controversial medicine was launched by Ramdev in June 2020, Coronil, an ayurvedic medicine claimed to be an effective cure for corona patients in the covid-19 outbreak. He faked positive clinical trials, for this he received huge criticism. However, the govt. of Uttarakhand, Union Govt and AYUSH Ministry keeping distance from his claims completely banned advertising this medicine with immediate effect. Afterwards, in Jaipur

an FIR against him and four alleged others were lodge for selling fake medicine in name of Ayurveda. It didn't stop here. Controversies rose even greater. In 2021 May, a defamation notice lodged on Baba Ramdev of Rs. 1000 crore against his remarks on allopathic medicine to be ineffective for treatment of Covid-19 disease. This amount is claimed to be drawn from Baba if he fails to post a video condemning his statements on the same or tenders a written apology on this regard. Harsh Vardhan, Union Health Minister called Baba Ramdev's statement as '*extremely unfortunate*^{xvii}' also asked him to withdraw it, in reply to this Ramdev took the pain to take back his words. His religious claims are also not openminded. In a seer meeting in Rajasthan in 2023, he controversially charged Muslims of resorting to terror and abduction of Hindu women while comparing Hinduism with Christianity and Islam. On this regard, Rajasthan High Court issued an order for him to appear at Chohtan Police Station in Barmer on 5th October 2023 for questioning. The said court extended the stay order for his arrest and asked the govt counsel to present the case in court on 16th of October 2023. The SC warned His brand Patanjali of 1crore penalty for each false claim in their advertisements. It was in response to the petition of IMA (Indian Medical Association) on Patanjali's ad titled- '*Misconceptions spread by allopathy: Save yourself and the country from the misconceptions spread by pharma and medical industry*'^{xviii}. It was published in 2022, July. It was charged for accusing and using falsely the evidence-based medicine for their selfish means. The company was ordered to take off all these claims and advertisements. The SC of India again charged the Managing Director Acharya Balkishna for Publication of ads that violated the regulations of Drugs and Magic Remedies Act, 1954. It followed with a show-cause to Babaji for not initiating the contempt. In 24th April, 25 the company issued an appropriate apology in different newspapers.

Comments: Ramdev started off with yoga practices and various effective acupressure techniques that gained him popularity beyond match. But under his Gerua Cloths he hid a smear face of a businessman. He tricked people who trusted him blindly through his yogic sessions. Using the name Patanjali was also tricky. It is the name of the founder of Yoga philosophy Maharshi Patanjali. Naming his company after him sought a different level of popularity and faith. Above that, he labelled his products Divya (divine), which is the last thing these were in reality. He commenced multiple fraudulent, false accusation of Evidence-proven medicines, launching fake medicines claiming fake evidences, fake advertising of his products for selfish means and money. So, I can clearly mark him as a fraud Sādhu. He and the likes of him are the reason people are sceptical to believe the purest souls alive till this date.

Sādhvi Bhagavati Saraswati, on the other hand is a young woman born in Los Angeles. She has completed her graduation from Stanford University, has completed her Ph. D. she came to India as a tourist when she was only of age 25 but she found real home in this land. She says, '*I don't feel I live in Bharat; I feel Bharat lives in me.*'^{xix} She spent 23 years of her life in devotion in this country. She spent these years with humble devotion and tireless serving of people. She spent her Sādhvi life in the Paramarth Niketan located in Rishikesh. She gained popularity as a global spiritual leader. Her Hindi is as good as any non-Hindi netizen of our country with a little anglicised tone. She is a truly living proof of the sacred powers that roots one to Sanātana Dharma and goddess Gangā's divinity. She was deeply inspired into Sanyas by her Guru, Ramdev, Mahamandaleshwar Puri, Swami Rajendra Das, Swami Ravindra Puri, Mahamandaleshwar Swami Harichetanand, Sant Shri Murlidhar, Acharya

Bal Krishna, Dr. Chinmaya Pandya, Shri Ajay Bhai. She is a meaningful devotional bridge between the East and West. She says in a talk show on the occasion of Kumbh Manthan, that one should not aim to go to west in search of money, because money cannot make oneself fulfilled as this land of spirituality can. She insisted on aiming on the realization of essence of Sanātana Dharma. She also mentioned, Sanatana isn't confined into this land but it's essence can be felt from anywhere one might stand. Recently her silver jubilee (25 years) of Sanyas has been celebrated at the Paramarth Niketan. A free multi-specialty medical camp was arranged on this occasion.

Sādhoi Om Prabha Bharti, on Kumbh Manthan ceremonial talk show on news 24 channel, she discussed how transformed her life when she came to India as a tourist in her vacation. She spent her teenage life as a normal teenager girl, she read Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology. She mentioned that a man is incurable, this conclusion led her to the search for deeper knowledge, a true end in life. She heard Shri Asutosh Maharaj Ji, to analyse Geeta from Mahābhārata, that shri Krishna has never gave up on Arjuna, when he was in dilemma. She heard of Sanskrit; she mentioned it as the most glorious language as this land that one must realize its true essence. She insists on that, as Vivekananda says, if someone doesn't know how to use the weapon, they have it is of no use to them, thus being born in India doesn't make one true Indian but one who understands treasures this land is enriched of makes them a real Indian.

Early Tradition of Sādhanā and Sādha:

Sādhanā is a common practise since earliest time in this land. India has a rich cultural treasure, glorified history of Vedas, Puranās, Mahākāvya, Samhitas, Puthis engraved with spirituality and devotion. Traced back to Indian Philosophical schools, divided into Āstika and Nāstika strands reflect different paths towards the ultimate goal 'Sādha', liberation. This is not a pessimistic rather optimistic channel of the Indian tradition. Following true means leads to the four Purusārthas, Dharma-Artha-Kāma-Mokṣa. The Nṛyāya and Vaiśeṣika school refer to gaining knowledge of Padārthas are the true means of liberation. Thus, Sādhanā or gaining the true knowledge of the 16 categories (Nṛyāya) and 7 categories (Vaiśeṣika) is the ultimate goal. Yoga and Samkhya philosophy recognise yoga practice of both soul and body as essential element for achieving Mokṣa. The Astānga philosophy is to involve all of the eight limbs of yoga,

“Yama (moral codes), Niyama (self-discipline), Asana (posture), Pranayama (breath control), Pratyahara (sense withdrawal), as the outer yoga and Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (meditation), and Samadhi (oneness with the self)”^{xx}

as the inner yoga. The Mimamsa Philosophies of Kumarila Bhatta, Prabhakara Mishra and Murari Mishra have acknowledged karma or yajna and devotion in God takes one towards liberation, while Uttara or Later Mimamsa or Vedanta considers Brahma Jnana is the ultimate path for it. The Nastika schools like Bauddha believes following the eight-fold path of the fourth Arya Satya (there is ways to get rid of sorrow) to attain Nirvana or liberation from painful life cycle (bhava chakra).

Sri Rupa Gosvami describes among eight-fold steps through which Bhakti or devotion develops from sādhanā to bhāva, sraddhā or respect is the first-step that leads one towards second-step, Sādhu-sanga (association with a Sādha, a saint). This association brings trust to one's heart. This trust is sraddhā, respect this is how it all begins without any conscious

effort of the devotee. The author describes it as causeless grace as it is out of pure independence or by chance. It is sometimes described as yadricchā or spontaneous. The association with a saint is pure blessing for a conditioned soul. Their heart fills with permanent revolution. Bhagwan Krishna has glorified this association greatly in Bhagavat Purāna. Thus, Sādhu is a teacher or guru^{xxi}. Uddhava asks Bhagavan Krishna about characteristics of saintly persons and liberated souls. In reply Krishna describes, different levels of spirituality, he distinguishes between those who take Krishna to be the sole goal of life and the ones who are devotees of his and consider serving him as the only goal. He associates himself to the devotees of his, especially the Gopī's of Vrindavana. They are so devoted towards Krishna Prema; the Lord feels indebted towards them. He further describes, one can never attain Mokṣa with material renunciations, or following ordinary, religion that is dividend in nature. One must realise the true essence of the Supreme reality. Every bound soul who is chained in worldly sorrows, cruelty, disease, old age and so on must know that if they surrender themselves to the Lord, by Bhakti-yoga one can achieve spiritual perfection^{xxii}.

So, Sādhu/Sādhvi or Sādhaka is the person who worships from all their soul and body to achieve solace in spiritual perfection. Being associated with such pure souls brings true joy and peace on any other being who are entangled in doubt, darkness of any distress. Sādhaka or Sādhvi is a place of trust, they have the power to sooth one's mind and soul with their yogic abilities. But this is very scarce in today's world. With rising population and socialization though virtual platforms, these higher beings with deep spiritual understanding fall naïve to the growing sensations. But some spiritual orators we commonly find in mostly YouTube videos or reels preaching their self-centred sessions that are disguised as orators of spirituality but unfortunately, these are nothing but use of the tradition of Sādhanā as means for popularity. A possible question might arise in response to this analysis, that if I have meant using online platforms as means to be negative sense. In my defence I would say that no, I haven't. it is never wrong to use it as a means to reach to the mass in today's era. But hiding behind a mask of preacher for own selfish means is condemnable. There are a number of true Sādhakas who preach through social medias like Sadhguru as I have mentioned. But there are a lot many who take advantage of the positivity of Sādhanā to hide their own selfish means. And this does a lot harm to the mass across social medias than serving any good.

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