

Ascetic poetry in ancient India

The ideal renouncer and the path to liberation, according to independent verses in early Brahmanic, Buddhist, and Jaina literature

Kristoffer af Edholm

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Abstract

The dissertation identifies the ideal renouncer and the path to liberation on the basis of nearly 3500 “independent verses”, i.e. one-strophe stanzas (*gāthās*, *ślokas*), in early Brahmanic, Buddhist, and Jaina literature, including *Mahābhārata*, *Suttanipāta*, *Dhammapada*, *Samyuttanikāya*, *Uttarajjhayana*, *Sūyagaḍa*, *Isibhāsiyāim*, and other texts. It is argued that this genre of poetry is important for our knowledge about the ascetic milieu in Northern India around the 5th century BCE.

Verses from the three traditions are compared with one another, the verse-material is compared with selected texts belonging to other genres, and the literature is placed in its historical context. Attention is given to vocabulary, formulas, similes, and recurrent themes. Hypotheses about the early history of the renouncer-traditions are tested against the verse-material.

Part 1 discusses aim, theory, method, terminology, previous studies, earliness and authenticity of the verses, origins and characteristics of the genre, and relevant texts. Part 2 treats the debated origins of emancipatory askesis, *brāhmaṇa* and *śramaṇa*, authority and founder-figures, and female ascetics. Part 3 proceeds along an ideal path to liberation: from reasons for giving up mundane pursuits, to going forth into homelessness, practise of austerity, itinerancy, solitude, seclusion, mendicancy, purification, non-harm, restraint, heroic overcoming of obstacles, and meditation, to attainment of gnosis and awakening, and finally liberation from *samsāra*. Part 4 is the conclusion. The Appendices contain the entire verse-material, as well as defining sentences in final *pādas*, shared whole verses, and key-terms.

It is concluded that in the three verse-corpora one can identify a shared outlook, which is world-rejecting, autocentric, and telos-oriented, and a shared renouncer-ideal, which is male, heroic, and austere. The same outlook and ideal are found in narrative accounts about Śākyamuni, Mahāvīra, and others who attain the highest goal. Differences between the three traditions concern mainly the use of certain terms, formulas, and similes, less so doctrine, but the differences are not reducible to a divide between Brahmanic and Buddhist/Jaina.

Generally speaking, each tradition has composed its own verses that promote a renouncer-ideal and a path to liberation, rather than having borrowed verses from another tradition or from a common source. The many similarities between the three traditions are primarily due to their common origin in the ascetic milieu, in which the one-strophe *gāthā* was an established literary medium for making authoritative statements.

It is argued that the shared outlook and ideal were established before the introduction of two-step ordination, nuns' order, fourfold community, devotion to an exalted founder-figure, and the building of monasteries. The verse-content points to a rural environment and a stratified society rooted in late Vedic culture. The renunciant movement of the 5th century BCE can be seen as the culmination of a centuries-old ascetic tradition in ancient India.

Keywords: *Ancient India, 5th century BCE, renunciation, asceticism, ascetic literature, independent verse, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism.*

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Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies



Stockholm University

Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm