

Karma Saṁnyāsa: Sarkar's Reconceptualization of Indian Asceticism

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore P.R. Sarkar's contribution to asceticism, particular his concept of *karma saṁnyāsa*. Sarkar enjoins the yogi with eyes firmly fixed on the supreme to engage in a politics of social liberation. In this transformative practice, he does not ally himself to shaman or brahmin priest; rather, Sarkar imagines and through his social and spiritual movements, intends on creating the *sadvipra* — the person with the balanced mind. It is this critical reading of Tantra — as spiritual and social liberation — that extends him beyond Aurobindo and Gandhi, taking him outside the Vedic orbit as well as outside the nationalistic politics of the BJP.

Ascetic practice and the concept of *saṁnyāsa* occupy significant positions in the civilizational project of the late Indian philosopher, artist and guru Prabhat Rañjan Sarkar. As a guru Sarkar's discourse primarily speaks to the yogi, and his life tells of a commitment to the transformation of individuals and attainment of the absolute self (*paramātman*). However Sarkar, unlike conventional gurus, sought not just to transform the individual but to create the structure of a new society. He offered an alternative theory of social justice, the Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT), an alternative reading of macrohistory (his spiral theory of *varṇa*), an alternative global ethics (neo-humanism), and created a range of spiritual associations (Ānanda Mārga), social movements (his *samāj* movements) and political parties (the Proutist forum) to help realize his vision of the future.

Irrespective of his contribution to social theory, as outlined in *Situating Sarkar and Transcending Boundaries* (Inayatullah 1998; Inayatullah and Fitzgerald 1998), at essence his work was spiritual. He functioned as a guru, focused on helping his disciples realize enlightenment. While he was often at odds with various traditional

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Hindu groups, primarily for his commitment against *jhat* and other conventional hierarchies, he can certainly be seen as a product of India. His work can be read as part of the Indian episteme and not counter or foreign to it. However, perhaps like the Buddha, aspects of his work will be accepted more outside of the subcontinent than within.

This article will not focus on the controversial politics of his social movements, but on his contribution to asceticism, particularly his *karma samnyāsa* — a model by which the yogi eschews monastic seclusion or retreat to the jungle and mountains, remaining engaged in service to society. Sarkar establishes a link between the individual and social, the spiritual and the material, placing human agency within the Indian social discourse. The yogi not only acts through the “non-doing” of meditation, but through cultural invigoration (like Tagore or Vivekananda), concrete social welfare projects (the Christian model) and revolutionary activity (the Marxist and third world models) such as initiating and participating in ecological, workers’ and farmers’ movements and other efforts that challenge statist authority and monopoly capitalism.

Sarkar thus enjoined the yogi to use his ethical base — *yama* and *niyama* — not just to perfect the self, as in classical Indian thought, but following Gandhi, Aurobindo and others, to constructively engage in politics as social liberation (Inayatullah 1998a). However, this politics was neither framed nor quarantined by the nation-state; rather, for Sarkar the struggle is for the creation of a planetary civilization based on ecological pluralism, distributive justice, the maximum utilization of physical, mental and spiritual resources and a shared ethics.

Sarkar and the Indian Episteme

Even as Sarkar attempts to move out of the Indian episteme, inclusion of *samnyāsa* and other central characteristics of Indian thought demonstrate that Sarkar’s civilizational project takes place largely within its boundaries. Thus, while in many respects maintaining the ideological occupations and predominantly hermeneutic intellectual style of India, he has not hesitated to engage in extended critique of particulars. Indeed a large number of his books (oral discourses notated by his disciples) can be viewed as critiques of various schools of Indian thought, at both philosophical and political levels.¹ His critique has not however challenged the ontological orientation of the Indian discourse, maintaining occupation with issues concerning the nature of the *ātman* (self), relation of consciousness and energy, veracity of monism or dualism, and the reality or non-reality of the world. Sarkar’s reconceptualization of *samnyāsa* and the *samnyāsin* is particularly illustrative of his approach; though maintaining continuity with the Indian ascetic ethos and even forming his own ascetic order, Sarkar does so critiquing and reinventing in significant ways.

In understanding Sarkar's location in the Indian episteme, it is important to note that he places himself within the stream of thought and praxis he identifies as Tantra. While in its common usage *Tantra* refers to the practices of *sādhana* (esoteric ritual and yogic meditation) explicated in a body of scriptures classified as Tantra *sāstras*, Sarkar's definition of Tantra and way of identifying Tantra in the Indian episteme invokes both ideology and interpretive narrative. Tantra is seen as the esoteric undercurrent of yogic practices forming the experiential basis of multiple theological systems, primarily Tantrik Buddhism, Jainism, Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. On the personal level Tantra is the effort to overcome all obstacles; on the social level it is the fight against exploitation and the effort to establish *sama samāja tattva* (the principle of social equality). Sarkar, particularly in his *Neo-Humanism — The Liberation of Intellect* (1987) has sought to emphasise this often neglected dimension of Indian social thought — the necessity for distributive justice (the creation of an egalitarian society with income ceilings and floors). A link between his reading of Tantra and his transformation of traditional Indian conceptions of the ascetic should be obvious. The ascetic stands as a critic of society — not merely a postmodern literary critic but one that questions the basis of current society by attempting to transform it. As Ashis Nandy (1987) has argued, the shaman functions as a voice of dissent, as a voice outside of conventional ways of knowing. Sarkar takes this idea of the shaman as dissent and places the yogi back within society, acting as a social revolutionary but having his or her mind outside of society — not tainted by the politics of ego and power. This is in stark contrast to, for example, the Indian political party the BJP, where instead of the critical transformation of Hinduism qua Tantra, Hindu traditions are modernized in the sense of becoming syndicated, increasingly betraying the influence of statecraft.

Sarkar's historical reading of Tantra juxtaposes it against the Aryan Vedic religion, paralleling a struggle between Aryan and indigenous society in ancient India. Tantra thus challenges the dominant ways of knowing and offers an alternative vision of the future. Tantra becomes dissent. Tantra is esoteric transformative praxis forming the basis of Dravidian (indigenous South Asian) society, codified by the guru Śiva and permeating the inner core of later Indian religion. Paralleling probable social dynamics, his historical reading of Vedic religion speaks of conflict with, and later ever increasing assimilation of Tantra; the *Rgveda* is non-Tantrik, while the *Atharvaveda* is thoroughly Tantrik. He further identifies Paurāṇic Hinduism as a distinct entity, largely based upon metamorphosed Tantrik and Vedic elements (Sarkar 1995). His project may be partly read as an effort to deconstruct Paurāṇic Hinduism and embrace Tantra in a state free of exogenous, limiting factors.

The Indian Ascetic Ethos

Discussions of Indian asceticism often center on its origins and sources: Vedic, indigenous (pre-Vedic and / or non-Aryan), Buddhist or Jain. Johannes Bronkhorst (1993) identifies two primary streams of Indian asceticism, Vedic and non-Vedic, which he holds as having progressed through a process of synthesis, eventually becoming indistinguishable in the medieval *saṃnyāsin*. This is significant to note as his two streams of asceticism basically conform to the Veda / Tantra dichotomy so essential to Sarkar's discourse. Like the amalgamation of Tantra and Vedic religion Sarkar identifies in Hinduism, these streams of asceticism are seen as having undergone synthesis.

Classical Indian ascetics — the *saṃnyāsin* (renunciate), *bhikṣu* (beggar), *vanaprastha* (forest hermit), et al — have in the idealized sense remained uninvolved (or at least indirectly involved) in the social and political arena, and have had no productive economic role in the conventional sense. Early Brahmanical asceticism speaks of two primary categories: forest hermits and mendicants, monastic asceticism being a later development. Patrick Olivelle (1995) cites renunciation of social and family ties, sexual relations, domicile, most properties and possessions, economic productivity and customary ritual activities as the defining characteristics of this (particularly mendicant) asceticism. Though not necessarily manifested among all ascetics, these may be considered central elements of ascetic rhetoric and were key in defining ascetics as a distinct social class. These relinquishments are also largely seen as essential (but not necessarily causal) to spiritual attainment, to the realization of the *ātman* — the goal of ascetic life. The actual causal mechanisms for this attainment are predominantly contemplative practices (*yoga*) and penance (*tapas*).

Despite efforts to create independent identities, medieval Indian asceticism was in many respects a singular model. Buddhist, Jain and various Brahmanical ascetics sought distinguish themselves from each other based upon minute differences in material culture, such as variations in begging bowls, water pots, staves, color of robes, retention or non-retention of hairs and caste emblems, and mode of alms-begging. Extensive compendiums of conduct rules were also composed. However underlying the exhaustive rules and regulations associated with asceticism is a preoccupation with self knowledge. For instance the *Yatidharmasamuccaya* of the Vaiṣṇavite *Yādava Prakāśa* cites *sāṃkhya*, *yoga*, devotion to *Viṣṇu*, vigilance, and detachment as the essential occupation of the *saṃnyāsin*; other duties and obligations merely define one as belonging to the *saṃnyāsa* way or order of life (*āśrama*) in Brahmanical society (Olivelle 1995, 75). However, these accessory rules are elucidated to such a great depth in this text itself and others that it would perhaps not be inaccurate to call them the subject of primary concern. In contrast, concentrating upon the 'essential occupations' of the *saṃnyāsin* and adding a social

role, Sarkar removes many external trappings and accessory rules. As in Sarkar's deconstruction of Paurāṇic religion, his reading of asceticism seeks to eliminate elements based in social custom (such as *āśrama* and *jhat*) and myth. Traditional Indian fascination with rules and procedural details, perhaps originating in the Brahmanical ritual tradition, also holds little interest for Sarkar.

Sarkar's Conception of *Samnyasa*

Classical Indian asceticism and the conventional definition of *saṃnyāsa* are primarily concerned with negation or renunciation on different levels, placing worldly engagement (social or material) in exclusive opposition to the spiritual. Classical definitions of *saṃnyāsa* include "putting or throwing down, laying aside, resignation, renunciation of the world, the profession of asceticism, abstinence from food, giving up the body" (Monier-Williams 1899, 1148). Sarkar, whose philological work is gaining recognition in Bengal, prefers a derivation from *nyāsa* (placing), prefixed by *sat* (true, unchangeable; the Supreme Entity or *brahman*), becoming *saṃnyāsa* (abstract) or *saṃnyāsin*: one who is placed at the service of *sat*, one who has achieved total identification of the self with the unchangeable entity — or simply, "devoted to *sat*" (1988). Hence there is no direct connotation of renunciation or resignation in his definition, which speaks more of engagement than negation.

Also underlying this reconceptualization of *saṃnyāsa* is a refutation of the theory held by some Jains and Hindus that by not performing *karman* (action) one may become liberated from the cycles of birth and death. While for Sarkar *karman* produces *saṃskāras* (reactions to actions in potential form) which are the momenta ensuring perpetual transmigration of the soul, his answer for attaining the goal of *mokṣa* (liberation — absorption into the Absolute) is not the cessation of action. Such cessation is impossible to him — even respiration and thought are *karman*. Sarkar's *saṃnyāsa* better reflects the dialectic between *karman* and *mokṣa* apparent in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: the *saṃnyāsin* is one who, placing himself (*nyāsa*) at the service of *sat* (*Kṛṣṇa*) performs *karman*, surrendering all attachment to the results.

Critical to Sarkar's *saṃnyāsa* is the relationship between *bhakti* and *jagat* (the world). To Sarkar *bhakti* is the intimate relation formed with *paramātmān* (Supreme Soul) — *sat* — as the mind becomes detached from worldly objects and channelled inward. Not only does his writing continually iterate the supremacy of *bhakti* over *karman* (action) and *jñāna* (knowledge), but *bhakti* even becomes the rationale for explaining what is a cornerstone of his spiritual philosophy: the necessity of rendering selfless service to the universe. As in other *bhakti* traditions, intimate language and metaphor (paternal, maternal or conjugal) characterize the a-intellectual *bhakti* in Sarkar's Tantra. Sarkar's *bhakti* is unusual though in that it

is often spoken of in relation to impersonal concepts of the divine (*brahman* and *paramātmān*). *Paramātmān* is the ‘loving father’, caring for his children (creation); and as one loves Him, one should “according to natural law” come to love creation with the same spirit of *bhakti* (1988, 33). Love, of society, living beings and even of the inanimate universe is considered integral to *bhakti*. This might be considered an attempt to reconcile Buddhist compassion with Hindu devotion. However, Sarkar’s compassion is not based upon the Buddhistic discourse on suffering and its cessation, and validates both temporal service (material and mental) as well as helping beings attain *nirvāṇa*. Sarkar’s view of creation perhaps better reflects the *Upaniṣads* than Buddhism, seeing all as an expression of *brahman* rather than focusing on the suffering inherent in *samsāra*.

While *bhakti* is directed toward the personal beloved of the devotee (whether understood as *Kṛṣṇa*, *sat*, or *Paramātmān*), for Sarkar the focal point of *saṁnyāsa* is impersonal ideology — that all beings are manifestations of *brahman*, that service to the universe is the highest form of *karman*, that union of the self with the cosmic entity is the goal of human life (1973). The dual acceptance of *bhakti* and *saṁnyāsa*, devotion to the *brahman* and to ideology, is regarded as critical to the human spiritual quest. For Sarkar *karman* has meaning only in the context of *bhakti*. His *saṁnyāsa* aspires for the total identification of the self with *sat*, and he terms the endeavor to perfect this identification *karma saṁnyāsa*.² *Bhakti* is the factor inspiring this endeavor, while ideology (*saṁnyāsa*) reinforces *bhakti*, which may fluctuate.

Karma saṁnyāsa also carries another connotation in Sarkar’s philosophy: the effort to unite unit intellect with the cosmic intelligence, solely for performing *karman* beyond the capacity of ordinary human limitations (1988, 33). Though an idealistic goal, Sarkar nonetheless took this very seriously in guiding his disciples, setting astonishingly difficult (practically speaking, impossible) goals for their service and missionary work. This could be read as an effort to provoke actions beyond human capacity, actions which require assistance from a greater source of agency. A interesting difference is here discernible between Sarkar and Tantrik gurus of the past; rather than, as a test of character and preparation for spiritual initiation, having the disciples build houses out of stone only to destroy them again and again (as with Milarepa and his guru Marpa in Tibetan Tantra), Sarkar’s proverbial stone houses are in fact houses for the poor and disadvantaged and do have value to society and not the self alone. Of course as a spiritual guru, a Tantrik guru, his goal may have been as much to inspire greater *bhakti* and ego-surrender in his disciples as to transform society.

Ascetic Practices

Sarkar's asceticism is not solely for *saṃnyāsins*: his householder disciples also incorporate various levels of asceticism into their lives. The primary ascetic occupation of all Sarkar's disciples is meditation, largely following the *aṣṭāṅga* (eight-fold) yoga outlined by Patañjali and traditional *rājā-* and *rājādhirāja* yogas (meditation techniques). Advanced lay disciples and *saṃnyāsins* also practice other aspects of Tantra, such as *kapalika sādhanā*. Additionally Sarkar's disciples practice yoga postures (*Āsanas*), periodic fasting, dietary restraint, general moderation and traditional yogic ethical principles — *yama* and *niyama*.

Sarkar reinterprets several facets of *yama* and *niyama* having a particular relevance to asceticism: *brahmacarya*, *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and *tapas* (penance). *Brahmacarya* no longer means celibacy but is read, perhaps in a more etymologically accurate way, to view and treat the universe as a manifestation of *brahman* (1965, 20). *Ahiṃsā*, the nucleus of the Jain ascetic discourse, is read as “not inflicting pain or hurt on anybody by thought, word or action” (1969, 5). Sarkar's definition is a departure in that it privileges intent rather than result. We respire, resulting in the death of countless bacteria; we plough the soil and kill worms; we filter water for drinking. Our intention is not to harm — it is merely self-preservation. Similarly, self-defence is also not in violation of *ahiṃsā*. Sarkar dismisses many ancient Jain rules for *saṃnyāsins* as impractical obstacles to human well-being, including an injunction against ploughing or digging the soil, the necessity of wearing of veils so as to prevent insects from dying from human respiration, not walking down paths on which one may step on insects, etc. Human beings must kill other living beings for food in order to survive; this is also not a violation of *ahiṃsā* for Sarkar. However, one should eat those beings which are relatively less mentally developed — those of the plant kingdom, never animals. More radically, departing from Gandhi, Sarkar does not consider the use of force — mental, or in extreme circumstances physical — to end imperial subjugation, or to check the anti-social behavior of individuals as a violation of *ahiṃsā*. As a social theorist he also recognizes the historical role mental or physical revolution has played and may again play in the quest for human social justice, and does not close this as an option in certain circumstances (1969, 262-4). Sarkar's attitude toward *ahiṃsā* follows his reading of Tantra as a perpetual internal struggle, reflected on the social level as a struggle for distributive justice and social equity.

Following Buddhism, Sarkar's asceticism eschews extreme penance (*tapas*) and adopts the middle path (*madhya mārga*). He rejects outright the path of the yogi who adopts extreme penance as the means to know the self. Sarkar's spirituality privileges *sādhanā* and *bhakti*, along with benevolent *karman* and to a lesser degree *jñāna* (knowledge). While rejecting traditional definitions, Sarkar's discourse does however include *tapas*, which is interpreted as “to accept physical hardships for

others' welfare" (1995, 185). This is of course a logical extension of his *karma samnyāsa* and emphasis on social service. To him the *tapas* yogi standing on one leg for countless hours, lying on a bed of nails, standing on his head, sitting on rocks in the sun or fasting weeks on end merely wastes time and impairs the functioning of the brain. Equally, he rejects the idea (perhaps primarily found in the New-Age West) that one need not practice restraint to progress spiritually. One must gradually reduce attachment to physicality through ascetic practices. Sarkar also rejects the (modern Western) reading of Tantra as spiritual sexuality. Sexuality is accepted as natural and not to be forcefully repressed — yet, restraint and moderation are helpful for meditation and abstinence is suitable for *samnyāsins* and others so inclined (1969).

Sarkar's Ascetic Order

Given Sarkar's deconstruction of the traditional context of *samnyāsa*, it might seem surprising that he himself created a new ascetic order. He did not however wish that the order give rise to parasitic *vipras*, Brahmins living off others and using their mental agility to maintain a hegemonic position. Rather, he imagined the renunciate ascetic becoming the *sadvipra* — the leader with a pure and balanced mind: courageous, service minded, entrepreneurial and intellectually / intuitively brilliant. The *samnyāsin* becomes responsible not only for his or her own liberation, and like the *bodhisattva*, that of others, but for the comprehensive progress of human society, interpreted as carrying forward the totality of Sarkar's civilizational project.

Nonetheless, Sarkar's ascetic order is certainly of India, even while a number of characteristics have little internal precedent and appear to be drawn from other frameworks. The fundamental goal of attaining the *ātman* remains, as do a large portion of the characteristic Indian ascetic practices — meditation, fasting and dietary restrictions, celibacy, limits on ownership and possessions, renunciation of family ties and employment; what is changed is the level of social engagement. Service projects — like orphanages, medical clinics, disaster relief, food assistance programs and rural development; educational facilities (mostly primary schools) and literacy training; cultural projects; and of course, missionary activity (primarily the teaching of meditation) — are the occupations of the renunciate yogi. In many respects this is suggestive of the Christian model, especially what might be considered the *bhakti*-motivated social service of Mother Teresa, whose locus, Calcutta, coincided with that of Sarkar. However the uniqueness is also quite notable in that these activities must be seen as part of a larger civilizational project, a project which seeks not only to provide for the poor but to address the underlying causes of poverty and stem the cultural degradation associated with global capitalism. The comprehensiveness of Sarkar's

project is quite unique, stretching from sustainable economic development and the formation of cooperatives to the liberation of the self. Like Aurobindo, it is synthetic; however, unlike earlier attempts to transform Hinduism, such as the Brahma Samāj, it seeks to transcend the cultural boundaries which have given it birth.

While many of Sarkar's ascetics have roles which resemble those of monastic or traditional itinerant missionary ascetics, the lives of others more closely resemble those of peace corps or red cross volunteers. Yet others, according to the circumstances of their work live the lives of school teachers, parents / wardens, doctors, musicians, activists or scholars. And the lives of some, particularly those with global or continental supervisory roles, perhaps better reflect the lifestyle of the corporate sector. Sarkar's laptop-carrying, flying ascetics are not the exactly wooden sandal clad staff-bearers of India's past. However, the ascetic practices are constant regardless of what capacity the *saṃnyāsīn* is acting in. Whether in an office in Calcutta or New York, travelling from village to village in India teaching meditation, conducting disaster relief in Somalia or being a warden to abandoned children in Mongolia, the primacy of *sādhanā* and the ascetic lifestyle is maintained.

The institutional nature of Sarkar's ascetic order places it in proximity to Buddhist, Jain and monastic Hindu orders. This is a rejection of the inherently a-institutional or even anarchistic conception of the early Brahmanical *saṃnyāsīn* as one beyond any social regulations or worldly ties. The *saṃnyāsīn* must accept certain social obligations and responsibilities and work within the (some might say loose) framework of Sarkar's organizational structure. The governance of Sarkar's organizations is neither the democracy of some Buddhist orders nor the rigid autocracy of the Jains; Sarkar's organizations combine horizontal and vertical authority. And unlike most other orders, whether of India or elsewhere, Sarkar's departs by placing the constitutional status of monks and nuns on parity. A high degree of structural independence exists, such that nuns rarely come under the supervision of monks or vice versa. Of course, regardless of his intentions, Sarkar's organizations have grown largely within the Indian social structure and as such are negotiating the boundaries of patriarchy and gender cooperation. As the economic, social and spiritual emancipation of women occupies a significant position in Sarkar's civilizational project, we would expect the internal gender relations of Sarkar's organizations to either reflect this or fall short of their original objectives. Their continuing globalization may facilitate a larger degree of internal gender cooperation.

One immediately notable characteristic of Sarkar's order is that of titles — gone is the Hindu designation *svāmi*, for example. All monks and nuns of Sarkar's order are ordained as spiritual teachers (*ācāryas*); however, renunciation of family life is not regarded as a requisite for becoming an *ācārya*. What distinguishes

them from non-renunciate *ācāryas* in name is simply their rather secular English designation: whole-time workers (WT). Like traditional Indian ascetics, Sarkar's *saṃnyāsins* also take lifelong vows.

A traditional ascetic category which is recognized by Sarkar is the *avadhūta*, though radically reinterpreted. The *avadhūta* is perhaps traditionally the most a-institutional and socially removed category of Indian ascetic, often a naked, ash-besmeared recluse absorbed exclusively in the nature of the all-pervasive self. According to the *Song of the avadhūta* attributed to Dattatreya, "The *avadhūta* lives alone in an empty hut; / With a pure, even mind he is always content. / He moves about, naked and free, / Aware that all this is only the self" (1992, 49). Sarkar retains the spiritual ideal of the *avadhūta* while reinterpreting its social role. Sarkar's *avadhūtas* and *avadhūtikās* (feminine) are challenged to pursue knowledge of self and absorption in the cosmic while attempting to live in and change society.

The training of Sarkar's *saṃnyāsins* is perhaps the least radical element of his ascetic order. The syllabus includes, for example, the Sanskrit and, interestingly, Bengali languages; spiritual philosophy including Sarkar's reinterpreted *sāṃkhya* (cosmology), and sūtras from the *Upaniṣads*, *Vedas*, *Tantras* and Sarkar's *Ānanda Sūtram*; pedagogy of meditation; yoga therapy; conduct rules for *saṃnyāsins*; and practical skills training (cooking, driving, etc.). However the focus is primarily upon meditation and personal development.

The Renunciate and the Householder

At some point the Brahmanical tradition experienced a change of attitude toward renunciation, shifting from the Vedic theology in which the married householder, whose main obligations (*dharma*) revolved around Vedic sacrificial ritual and procreation, was the religious ideal, to the *saṃnyāsīn* as the religious ideal (Olivelle 1995, 21). Medieval and modern Hinduism greatly privilege the (male) *saṃnyāsīn*, viewing severing of worldly ties as a prerequisite for the penultimate spiritual attainment. Both Buddhism and Jainism also privilege the ascetic — the Jain canon in fact in many ways appears largely concerned with defining and illustrating renunciation.

While to Sarkar the rise of asceticism, reflected in Buddhism and Jainism and by Brahmanical reformers, was a progressive reaction against what he referred to as the excesses of "ritualistic ostentations" characterizing the Brahmanical decadence of that period, in medieval times this privileging of the *saṃnyāsīn* became a conscious effort toward the consolidation of social power into the *vipra* class (Sarkar's category for priesthood and intelligentsia in social philosophy) (1995, 263). Indian asceticism must be understood as occurring in the context of a society placing great value on stable domicile and extended family ties. By placing a strong

emphasis on renouncing these, and upon the relation between spiritual elevation and the renunciation of natural human inclinations, particularly sexuality, it became possible to create an inferiority complex in the minds of the population at large which ensured the perpetuation of the privileged position of ascetics (1969, 22).

Sarkar's *karma samnyāsa* must be understood as existing in a context (his reading of Tantra) which does not accept that escape from worldly obligations facilitates spiritual development. Rather, his conception of Tantra as the perpetual struggle against *avidyāmāyā* — the devolutionary cosmic force which binds the mind to the relative — prefers the difficult situations and worldly engagement necessitated by rendering service and attaining *karma samnyāsa*. Staying in normal situations and practicing restraint is regarded as superior to creating abnormal circumstances in which one's obligations are fewer. Sarkar's attitude toward worldly engagement naturally reflects a critical attitude toward elements of the Indian episteme that profess the illusory nature of the world. He accepts neither absolute monism nor duality; to him the universe is real so long as the unit mind perceives itself as separate from *Paramātmān*. The world is a relative truth — true from the perspective of *jīvas* (unit minds) and dreamlike from the standpoint of *Paramātmān*.

Sarkar also takes great pains to deconstruct the notion that for meditation (*sādhana*), extreme seclusion is necessary. He in fact seeks to remove the yogi from the Himalayas and the banks of the Ganges, from the caves and jungles — to place him and her into society and for society in turn to emulate the socially engaged yogi. Given Sarkar's larger goal of creating a society in which the realization of the supreme self is not restricted to a few rare individuals in seclusion, or to the dusty pages of ancient scriptures, this effort is not surprising. Sarkar's vision of a spiritual social order is also not one privileging the socially engaged celibate yogi; the family structure and family yogi have not only an important role but are the foundation of his vision of society. Sarkar's spiritual organization, Ānanda Mārga, elevates the status of the householder from its greatly inferior position in medieval Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. The first spiritual teachers of Ānanda Mārga were married men and women; an order of *samnyāsins* followed a number of years later. For Sarkar, along with the abolition of the caste system and positing the spiritual equality of women, his refutation of the necessity for renunciation as a prerequisite for the highest spiritual attainment is one of the most revolutionary aspects of Ānanda Mārga (1988). Given the emphasis placed on service and responsibility to the world in *karma samnyāsa*, it is not surprising that Sarkar places emphasis on family life. Indeed, the family becomes the dominant metaphor for the social. Rather than Adam Smith's individual or Mao's collective, the family moving together on a spiritual and social journey becomes Sarkar's operating myth.

Sarkar thus categorically rejects the placement of the renunciate over the householder. To him, the most respectable individual is in fact the "ideal" house-

holder — one who attains great spiritual elevation while both fulfilling his or her obligations to the immediate family and rendering service to humanity at large. Indeed, the only justification Sarkar cites for the existence of *saṃnyāsins* is their capacity to become selfless servants of society, responsible for the “universal family” rather than the nuclear. Not bound in time or space by the obligations consuming most individuals, they can devote themselves to the actualization of the socio-spiritual transformation envisioned by Sarkar. To become a *saṃnyāsin* with another motivation for Sarkar retards spiritual progress. In his words, “Only those *saṃnyāsins*’ vow of renunciation becomes successful — only their spiritual life becomes successful — whose minds are deeply pained at the gloomy touch of human sorrow — whose minds sparkle like rubies and emeralds with the tears and joy and laughter of all beings” (1995, 170).

Sarkar’s reading of the householder and the renunciate can be recognized as not at all alien to Tantra, the dominant metaphor being that of *śiva* and *śakti*. The Supreme Entity is Śiva, whose spouse is the Supreme Goddess, the *devī*. Beyond simple mythology, this becomes a metaphor for consciousness and energy, for quiescence and manifestation, applicable to both microcosm and Macrocosm. Marriage becomes a reflection of the cosmological order. In Tantra many gurus have historically been householders, as was Sarkar himself. Hence Sarkar’s reconceptualization of the householder again speaks of his effort to free Tantra from what he sees as exogenous, primarily Vedic, elements.

Conclusion

Sarkar’s asceticism is essentially an effort to create enlightened leadership. Remembering both Gandhi and Aurobindo, leadership becomes defined not in the traditional Greek sense but in a traditional Indian sense: that of the yogi. Through spiritual practices the yogi remains outside the vortex of material power. He or she can fast, can live in poverty and has conquered fear. Neither king nor merchant (or venture capitalist) can seduce him or her. While in the West self-reflection produces the enlightened philosopher king, for the yogi the self is beyond mere intellectual reflection, knowable through direct intuitive experience, through *samādhi*. But Sarkar adds social responsibility to the task of the yogi, recognizing that it is not enough to practice non-violence oneself without challenging structural violence.

Central to challenging structural violence is relocating self and group identity away from nation, religion and group, and toward broader identifications-with human society as a whole. Spiritual practice becomes the vehicle to do so. Engaging in social service and planetary transformation make the spiritual socially relevant and helps produce not the fringe shaman nor the Brahmin priest, but the *sadvipra*.

Whether Sarkar will be philosophically and practically successful in this effort remains to be seen.

NOTES

- 1 Such as Sarkar's critique of the six orthodox schools of Indian thought (1997).
- 2 Sarkar also discusses traditional "untrue" interpretations of *karma samnyāsa*, which he sites as total inactivity (reflecting Monier-Williams' definition), the perfect finishing of work, or unification with Supreme Consciousness through *karman* (1988, 33).

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