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Awkward one-armed babas: *Ūrdhvabāhu* Hindu Ascetics in Western Imagination

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ABSTRACT

This article examines representations of Hindu *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics in Western writings, through close readings of fiction and non-fictional writings from the pre-colonial period to the present times. These *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics keep one or both of their arms held perpetually aloft as part of their austerity. They thereby maim themselves in the process. Most Western writers not only mock this ascetic practice but also represent it as something evil. Yet Western imagination manifests a strange preoccupation with it, since Western writers return to this topic again and again. If this type of Hindu austerity is indeed irrational and iniquitous, why do Western writers frequently return to this topic? Why were *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics stereotyped as evil in pre-colonial and colonial texts? Why is it chosen over other types of equally severe Hindu austerities to represent the Indians' need for Western enlightenment? This article tries to suggest answers to these questions

KEYWORDS

Hindu, *sadhus*, *tapasya*, *ūrdhvabāhu*, spike-lying, negative stereotyping, Western representation.

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I begin with an example from the not-too-distant past. On 18 July 2017, the e-zine *Freak Lore* published a report on the Hindu ascetic or *sadhu* Amar Bharati. This *saiva sadhu*[1] has managed to keep his right hand raised perpetually aloft in a fixed position for a span of 43 years (Larch n.p.).[2] Such an incredible feat naturally attracts attention, and one finds that the Anglo-American media has continued to focus on Amar Bharati for some time now. He was mentioned as early as in 2001, in a report by Luke Harding in *The Guardian*. Harding was the first to use the word "awkward" in connection with his peculiar ascetic practice (Harding n.p.). Since 2001, Western[3] interest in Amar Bharati's peculiar ascetic practice has remained undiminished. Thus one finds that the *Yahoo! News Australia* had published a feature on him on 19 September 2011. It was followed by James Plafke's article on the same topic in the online entertainment news site *Mary Sue* on the very next day. Today, one comes across dozens of reports on this "one-armed baba[4]" and his 'peculiar' austerity on the internet.[5] Interestingly, most of these are Anglo-American in origin.

Nothing seems surprising in Western fascination with such an extraordinary feat of austerity. However, one should not lose sight of two facts. First, Western media reports on Amar Bharati's austerity are generally sardonic in tone - if not outright disparaging.[6] For instance, the journalist Luke Harding likens *sadhu* Amar Bharati to "a schoolboy with a persistent and awkward query" (Harding n.p.). Subsequent Western writers have readily appropriated Harding's cynical simile. Plafke, for one, imagines these "one-armed babas" as schoolboys "forever asking for permission to speak in class" (Plafke n.p.). It may be argued that in comparing "one-armed" *sadhus* with schoolboys, the writers merely intended to be amusing rather than sarcastic. But one needs to remember that Western colonial powers had widely employed the strategy of infantilizing racial *others* in the preceding centuries (see for instance, Greenberger 42). Consequently, such comparisons are bound to reinforce the stereotype of the infantile Hindu Indians in Western minds.[7] As Stuart Hall insightfully observed, "meanings 'float'" but

[1] A *saiva* or *shaiva* is a Hindu devoted to Lord Shiva. A *sadhu* is an ascetic (translated by the author).

[2] *Sadhu* Amar Bharati has maintained in his various interviews that he has kept his right hand raised aloft since 1973 ("Man Raises Arm" n.p.; Larch n.p.).

[3] In this paper, "the West" stands for a discursive construct. It has less to do with geography. Today, the West has come to stand for the 'developed' nations as distinguished from the 'underdeveloped' ones.

[4] Etymologically, the word *baba* is a word of Persian origin. Among other things, it means "a holy man" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 94). The term is used as honorific for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh ascetics in South Asia.

[5] In this article I have mentioned just a few of these reports on *sadhu* Amar Bharati to illustrate my point.

[6] One may contrast such reports with those appearing in Indian news sites. For instance, one may consider the report by Sanchari Bhattacharya and Reuben N V published on 6 April 2010 in Rediff.com.

[7] Incidentally, Indian journalists covering the same topic eschew such comparisons. One may think for instance of the report in Rediff.com by Sanchari Bhattacharya and Reuben N V, published in 6 April 2010. In all likelihood, Indian journalists more readily notice the negative stereotyping implicit in such comparisons. Or, are they simply mindful of their readers' sentiments?

"representational practices" attempt to privilege one over the others (Hall 228).There is another fact that needs to be taken into consideration here. Amar Bharati is certainly not the only Hindu ascetic to practice this form of austerity. Known as *ūrdhvabāhu*,[8] Hindu ascetics in India have practiced it since time immemorial. Nor is Amar Bharati the first one to be known in the West for practicing such severe austerity. This article will show that the West had known about this practice at least from the seventeenth century, if not earlier. It was described in several nineteenth and twentieth century colonial texts. The continued focus on *ūrdhvabāhu* at this later date therefore puzzles us. Why do Western writers keep returning to this particular type of austerity, when they evidently fail to see its significance? More importantly, why do these writers focus on *this* particular type of austerity when Hindu ascetics are known to practice other equally severe ones? In short, why does the West find *ūrdhvabāhu* so appealing or appalling? This article seeks to suggest answers to these questions.

In this article I examine how Western writers have imagined *ūrdhvabāhu* since the seventeenth century.[9] While some scholars like Benita Parry and Rianne Siebenga have previously focused on negative stereotyping of Indian ascetics[10] in general, no specific attention has ever been paid to popular Western representations of Hindu ascetic practices. This is strange, as Hindu austerities, particularly the more severe ones, continue to attract attention abroad. Specifically, as discussed earlier, *ūrdhvabāhu* continues to intrigue Western writers even in our age. Though Hindu ascetics practice other types of austerities, this and 'spike lying' has received the most attention in the West so far. Recognizing that a knowledge gap exists in this field, the article tries to examine and account for the negative stereotyping of *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics in Western writings.

This article traces the roots of contemporary Western writers' obsession with this form of Hindu austerity, usually perceived outside India as shocking and horrific. To do this, it examines Western accounts of *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics from the pre-colonial and the colonial era. In the process it tries to explain why some Western writers remain so engrossed with this type of austerity, when it is only one of the several forms of corporeal mortifications practiced by Hindu holy men and women. It is my contention that representations of *ūrdhvabāhu* as an ascetic practice in Western writings are not free of ideological underpinnings. As I see it, it is reductive to understand the stock Western response to *ūrdhvabāhu* as having its foundation *solely* in religious prejudices. While such prejudices may have sometimes coloured Western perception of

[8] From Sanskrit *urdhva* meaning "upper" and *bahu* meaning "hand/arm" (translated by the author).
[9] To the best of my knowledge, descriptions of *ūrdhvabāhu sadhus* do not appear in Western writings before the seventeenth century. However, as this article goes on to show, Indian ascetics had captivated Western imagination at least from the time of Alexander the Great.
[10] Both Hindu *sadhus* and Muslim *fakirs*.

Hindu ascetic practices, it is also to be kept in mind that Western missionaries and preachers in India have now and again adopted the guise of Hindu ascetics to spread their religion. For instance, one may recall the story of the seventeenth century missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577 – 1656). He lived like a Hindu ascetic and became famous as the "Italian Brahmin" (Pillai 3 - 6). It is no small matter that even Pope Gregory XV sanctioned de Nobili's practice in 1623. But, as Pillai points out, his opponents inside the church felt that "conversion meant conversion into a European frame" and ultimately managed to frustrate his strategy (Pillai 6). Pillai thus shows that what many Western missionaries sought to preach in India was not simply Christianity, but *Western Christianity*. This again reflects that prejudices, stemming from a superiority complex, often became more important than religious considerations. Nobili was not the only Western preacher to pose as a Hindu ascetic. The nineteenth century author G. O. Trevelyan has written about German Lutheran missionaries who lived unostentatiously like ascetics amidst the rural Indians to gain converts (Trevelyan 386). Peter van der Veer informs that Frederick Booth-Tucker, who ushered the Salvation Army in India in 1882, also posed as a Hindu *sadhu* (van der Veer 153 – 54).[11] These are just a few examples. But they do show that religious prejudice could not have been the only determining factor behind negative stereotyping of Hindu ascetic practices in Western writings. It cannot be denied that the Christian missionaries and preachers mentioned above were unsympathetic to Hinduism.[12] However, they clearly did not see the *sadhus*, and their way of life, as evil. Otherwise, they would not have posed as Hindu *sadhus* even for the sake of gaining converts. By posing as *sadhus* they seem to have tacitly acknowledged their devotion; although they could not, as Christian missionaries, have approved of the objects of that devotion. Keeping all these considerations in mind, I read in Western writers' repeated return to *urdhvabhu* a conscious strategy of highlighting otherness. To put it simply, *ūrdhvabāhu*, as many Western writers' treat it, becomes a marker of alterity that serves to distinguish the 'developed' Western countries from the 'underdeveloped' ones.[13] To prove this point, this article will proceed to concentrate on representations of *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics in some nineteenth and early twentieth century fictions by European authors. Literary works are chosen because writers of fiction are usually mindful of their readers' expectations to ensure commercial success of their works. Consequently, they often straightforwardly reflect popular prejudices. The article will go on to consider another stock image of severe Hindu austerity in colonial

[11] Peter van der Veer points out that the Salvation Army "irritated respectable colonial officialdom" and was regarded as "a racial embarrassment in India" by the British colonizers (van der Veer 154-55). Again, it was their 'turning native', and forsaking the Western way of life, that the colonizers resented.

[12] Roberto de Nobili, for instance, condemned the *Vedas* as "ridiculous legends and stories" (Pillai 5).

[13] India, in this particular case.

literature, namely *śaṅkuśī* [14] or lying/sitting on a bed of nails. By showing how these two types of austerities received dissimilar treatments in Western writings, the article will highlight that religious differences were never the main considerations of European writers when they condemned *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics. Otherwise, *śaṅkuśī* would have drawn the same criticism from Western writers as *ūrdhvabāhu*. Finally, the article will try to answer why, even today, Western writers continue to disparage *ūrdhvabāhu* as an ascetic practice even when they are not apparently compelled to defend and justify Western colonialism like their nineteenth and twentieth century predecessors.

A brief insight into Hindu ascetic practices will help us understand this matter more clearly. The Sanskrit word for austerity is *tapas* or *tapasya*. One who practices austerity is a *tapasvin* (Walker 79). The word comes from the root *tap*, which denotes "heat". It refers to the heat generated by austerities (Walker 79; Kaelber 343).[15] Benjamin Walker correctly understands *tapas* as an active effort to acquire merit or spiritual power (Walker 79). He distinguishes it from its passive counterpart *tyāga*, which signifies renunciation (Walker 78-79).[16] *Tapasya* is therefore not to be confused with the idea of penance for sin, though the word is often mistranslated as "penance" in English.[17] To accrue merit or gain spiritual powers, the ascetics or *tapasvins* perform different types of difficult austerities. Sometimes, these involve corporeal mortifications.[18] One particularly difficult *tapasya* is *ūrdhvabāhu* which involves keeping one or both hands perpetually lifted aloft. As might be imagined, this practice is very painful in its initial stages. Moreover, the raised limb gradually loses its functionality through muscle atrophy. In short, this can be seen as a type of self-maiming. Likewise, *śaṅkuśī* is another difficult *tapasya* where the practitioner is required to lie or sit on a bed of spikes. But these are not the only severe austerities practiced by Hindu holy men. Besides *ūrdhvabāhu* and *śaṅkuśī*, one comes across other kinds of severe austerities - like being immersed in water for days or weeks; standing or sitting in one spot for years; standing permanently upright, while leaning on a staff; or keeping the fists permanently closed till the nails grow into the flesh (Walker 79-80).[19] Thus, one may easily see that *tapasya*, as a process of acquiring merit or spiritual powers, finds no parallel in the

[14] *Sānkuśī* means "spike-lying" (Walker 79).

[15] The word *tapas*, however, has a lot of other connotations in Vedic literature. For a detailed discussion, see Kaelber.

[16] Kaelber also stresses on the active, voluntary nature of asceticism denoted by the word *tapas* (Kaelber 344).

[17] For instance, the colonial officer Jonathan Duncan translates it as 'penance' (Duncan *sic passim*).

[18] It is necessary to understand that *tapasya* does not necessarily involve self-mortification or self-mutilation. For instance, *tapasvins* known as *munis* merely take the vow of perpetual silence. Then there are itinerant ascetics whose austerity lies in bathing in as many sacred bathing places as possible (Walker 79).

[19] The eighteenth century ascetic Pran Puri had mentioned eighteen types of *tapasya*, when interviewed by Jonathan Duncan ("The Travels of Pran-Puri" 263-64). Walker's account fairly corresponds with his.

West. It is indeed true that some forms of severe self-mortification like self-flagellation have historically existed, and still exist, among some Christian sects (Courtney 754-55).[20] However, the difference lies in the perceived ends of such exercises. While atonement for sins and "the impetration of divine graces and favours" form the usual motives behind self-flagellation (Courtney 755), for *tapasya* the intentions are generally accruing merit or gaining spiritual/ magical powers (Walker 79).[21]

The unfamiliar nature of Hindu *tapasya* understandably makes it an object of curiosity for the inhabitants of Europe and America. However, what strikes one is the tone of derision in most contemporary Western accounts of Hindu ascetic practices. Of course, it is generally difficult to understand the rationale behind self-mutilation. But one may also reflect that a degree of self-mutilation exists even in modern Western popular culture, if only as 'harmless' body piercing or tattooing. It is germane to note here that Western response to Indian asceticism[22] was not as censorious in ancient times as it is today. Since Alexander's invasion of the North-Western part of the subcontinent, *gymnosophists* or naked philosophers of India become well known in the West (Oman 85). These "philosophers" must have undoubtedly been Indian ascetics or *sadhus*.[23] Alexander himself reportedly honoured and conversed with them (Parmar 144). Certainly, to the Greeks, who had their own self-mortifying philosophers like Diogenes, Indian asceticism did not appear very unseemly. Strabo, the Greek Geographer, approved Indian austerities as a way of practicing endurance (Parmar 151). Even the early Medieval Europe was fascinated by tales of Indian ascetics and their austerities. Bhagban Prakash believes that the word *Rahman*, which implies an austere Christian in Ukranian and Russian, is a corruption of the Sanskrit word *Brahmana*[24] (Prakash 7). This assumption may or may not be correct. But it is certain that

[20] I am aware that the idea of self-conquest is implicit in both Christian and Hindu practices of self-mortification. Thus Christian and Hindu austerities may have more in common than is immediately apparent. Authors like John Campbell Oman detect some similarities between Christian and Hindu ideals of self-mortification (Oman 24). But this is a different area of investigation, and entirely beyond the scope of the present paper.

[21] The *tapasvins* themselves give different reasons for their *tapasya*. Pran Puri observes, ""As to the fruits or consequences, God alone is thoroughly acquainted therewith" ("The Travels of Pran-Puri" 264). Amar Bharati mentioned "world peace" as his goal (Bhattacharya and Reuben n.p.). But Walker, who bases his understanding on the scriptures themselves, is not wrong when he writes that *tapasyas* are often performed to accrue merit or gain spiritual/psychic powers.

[22] I prefer to use the term "Indian asceticism" as opposed to "Hindu asceticism" here. For one thing, Hindu, as a term of self-identification, may not have been in use at that period. David Lorenzen believes that Hindu identity formed between 1200 and 1500 (see, Lorenzen,"Who Invented Hinduism", 631). Secondly, the ascetics whom the Greeks had met may have included Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. So it is improper to use the word 'Hindu' here.

[23] As Oman points out, Greek and Roman accounts reveal that the self-mortifications practiced by the ancient Indian *gymnosophists* were "very similar to, though probably not as severe as, those practiced in India at later periods" (Oman 85).

[24] Frequently anglicised as Brahmin. The Brahmins are a Hindu class who specialize as priests and educators. While a Hindu ascetic need not necessarily be a Brahmin by birth, Brahmins are enjoined by scriptures to practice austerity as spiritual preceptors.

medieval European texts do reflect a certain regard for the simple life of Indian ascetics.

Western views on Hindu asceticism began to change with increasing familiarity. As European visitors and fortune-seekers began to pour in the Indian subcontinent in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the West had the opportunity to study Hindu ascetics and their austerities first hand. Strangely, greater familiarity did not breed unbiased views. While a few old misconceptions were certainly discarded, new prejudices developed in their place. Oman tries to make light of this matter by observing, "Distortion arising from ignorance and prejudices is unavoidably present in all pictures of an alien civilization drawn by visitors coming from countries remote both geographically and intellectually" (Oman 84). However, in case of countries like India, we now know that such 'distortions' were also strategically constructed and articulated. The aim was to construct Western self-identity by distinguishing the 'progressive' Europeans (and later the Americans) from the so called 'backward' Asians. As Ronald Inden points out, "India has played a part in the making of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe (and America)" by serving as a receptacle for all those negative traits which the Euro-Americans wanted to externalize from themselves (Inden 3). Seventeenth century writings of early European expatriates in India provide ample evidences in support of this fact. Such works are usually prejudiced against Hindu *sadhus*, who are represented as evil and licentious. Their ascetic practices are treated as signs of their depravity and otherness. For instance, the seventeenth century gem trader and traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689) portrays the Hindu ascetics as evil libertines.[25] He writes, "For being reverenced as saints, they had abundant opportunities of doing whatsoever evil they wished" (Tavernier, vol. II, 198). The gem trader even suggests that the Hindu ascetics took advantage of the believers' credulity to seduce their wives behind their backs (Tavernier, vol. II, 201-202). This will become a recurring anecdote in subsequent European and American polemics against Hindu *sadhus*. Tavernier does express some wonder at the severity of the *fakirs'* austerities, declaring that these "amount to prodigies" (Tavernier, vol. II, 195).[26] But he also points out that the ascetics perform their "horrible penances" in the hope of obtaining an exalted rebirth (Tavernier, vol. II, 204). Thus, in his view, Hindu ascetics are both evil and irrational. Interestingly, the author describes the ascetics in *ūrdhvabāhu* posture more than those performing other kinds of austerities (Tavernier, vol. II, 200-201). It thus seems to top

[25] Very curiously, Tavernier identifies Hindu ascetics as followers of Ravana (Tavernier, vol. II, 196). Ravana was the demon king of Lanka and the main antagonist in the epic *Ramayana*. One can only guess how Tavernier came to this weird conclusion. But given Ravana's ill-repute in most parts of India, Tavernier's linking the ascetics with him is indeed suggestive.

[26] A *fakir* or *faqir* is a Muslim ascetic (translated by the author). However, the Europeans seldom made a distinction between Hindu *sadhus* and Muslim *fakirs* and instead use the word *fakir* as a generic term for all ascetics in the sub-continent.

Tavernier's list of "horrible penances". This is probably because he sees it as the most difficult type - "one of the greatest torments which the human body can suffer" (Tavernier, vol. II, 201).

Tavernier's polemic against Hindu ascetics appears much mellowed when compared with that of his contemporary and compatriot Francois Bernier's (1620-1688). Bernier was a physician and a traveller who first served the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh and then the court of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. As Zubrzycki recognizes, Bernier's reaction was one of open disgust (Zubrzycki 125). He finds the ascetics, or *fakires*[27] as he calls them, "vegetative rather than rational beings", "destitute of piety", and full of "brutality and ignorance" (Bernier 236). Again, it is the practice of *ūrdhvabāhu* that draws his strongest condemnation. Bernier writes,

> No *Fury* (sic) in the infernal regions can be conceived more horrible than the *Jauguis*[28], with their naked and black skin, long hair, spindle arms, long twisted nails, and fixed in the posture which I have mentioned (Bernier 235).

It might appear that Bernier's animosity towards Hindu ascetics stems solely from his religious prejudices. But we need to keep in mind that Indian ascetics were not the only ones to come under Bernier's criticism. His narratives were dedicated to his patrons, the French king and nobility. Therefore, one of Bernier's concerns was to present India in a poorer light when compared to France. Though visiting India during the height of Mughal prosperity, he tries to dismiss the reports of the emperor's affluence through ingenious arguments (Bernier *sic passim*). His polemics against Hindu ascetics therefore can be seen as an extension of his attacks against the Indians in general. However, the most interesting fact is that both Tavernier and Bernier single out *ūrdhvabāhu* as the severest form of austerity, even when they describe other equally difficult ascetic practices in their works. In fact, Bernier clearly associates *ūrdhvabāhu* with evil, as his comparison of *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics with furies "in the infernal region" shows. This article will go on to demonstrate that subsequent colonial writers of fiction followed him in equating *ūrdhvabāhu* with evil. It will also try to explain why *ūrdhvabāhu* has come to acquire such ill repute in contemporary Western eyes.

It may be argued here that whatever other reasons Tavernier and Bernier might have had for criticizing Hindu beliefs, Western imperialist ideology could not have been one of them. One may recall that these European travellers had visited India at a time when the Mughal power was at its zenith. Seeing the splendour of the court of Aurangzeb, no seventeenth century observer could have guessed that India would bow to European supremacy just a century later. But it is also to be kept in mind that European conquest of foreign territories had already begun two

[27] Evidently a corruption of *fakir*. But Bernier has in mind the Hindu ascetics.
[28] A corruption of *yogi*. A *yogi* is a practitioner of *yoga* (translated by the author). Here, Bernier uses it as s generic term for all Hindu ascetics.

centuries earlier. Both Tavernier and Bernier were convinced of European military superiority. Thus, even when the Mughal power was at its height, Bernier could reflect:

> I could never see these soldiers [in Indian armies], destitute of order, and marching with the irregularity of a herd of animals, without reflecting upon the ease with which five-and-twenty thousand of our veterans from the army in *Flanders*, commanded by *Prince Conde* or *Marshal Turenne*, would overcome these armies, however numerous (Bernier 43).

And Tavernier in his memoir recounts the fantastic story of browbeating the Mughal governor Shaista Khan with threat of a French naval invasion if the governor refused to pay off his debt to him (Tavernier, vol. I, 310). Whether this tale is true or not is a different matter. The point is that both these French authors were conscious of European military strength which allowed them to be chauvinistic even at that early period. Though colonialism was yet to take its root in India, a sense of superiority prevailed among the European expatriates during that time - as the writings of these two authors show.

Tavernier and Bernier were not the only early European writers who have described the *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics in their works. Eighteenth and nineteenth century English writers like James Forbes, William Ward, and Bishop Reginald Heber have also described these ascetics in their writings. As Oman has shown, their attitude towards this type of ascetic practice was always scornful and dismissive (Oman 91-95). However, as Zubrzycki correctly points out, it was Jonathan Duncan's accounts of the ascetics Prakashnand and Pran Puri which shaped "Western perceptions of India's ascetics for decades to come" (Zubrzycki 119-120).[29] While Prakashnand practiced lying on a bed of nails, Pran Puri kept both his arms raised up perpetually over his head. Jonathan Duncan was the British Resident at Benares when he met these two ascetics in 1792. He noted down their stories, which he later published in *Asiatic Researches* in 1799. A more elaborate account of Pran Puri's story was published anonymously by Duncan in *The European Magazine* in two instalments in April-May 1810.[30] These accounts are important because these allow two Hindu ascetics to narrate their own stories for the first time. However, one must also recognize that Duncan's translations filter these testimonies before they reach us. Of these two, the account in *Asiatic Researches* is remarkable in being free of value judgement. Duncan does ask Prakashnand if his 'penance' was for the atonement of any crime (Duncan 51), thereby showing that he failed to understand the idea of *tapasya*. But he criticizes neither Pran Puri nor Prakashnand in this account. On the contrary, he seems to express some wonderment at

[29] Duncan renders the names as "Praun Poory" and "Perkasanund" (Duncan *sic passim*). In this work, I have used contemporary spellings for the sake of clarity.
[30] I am indebted to Zubrzycki for the data (Zubrzycki 119-122).

Prakashnand's endurance and fortitude. He observes that despite practicing such a difficult austerity, the ascetic seems contended and enjoys "good health and spirits" (Duncan 49). However, Duncan's attitude to Pran Puri and his ascetic practice is more ambivalent. In *Asiatic Researches* he describes Pran Puri approvingly as being the more intelligent and well informed of the two (Duncan 46). On the other hand, the account of Pran Puri in *The European Magazine* contains a long interesting footnote which implicitly condemns Hindu asceticism. The whole passage may be cited:

> That men can voluntarily devote themselves to such penances is very extraordinary, and shews into what extravagance human nature, stimulated by enthusiasm, will diverge.
>
> The Indian casts (sic) fought for the truth
> Of th' Liliput and Monkey's tooth.
>
> But still these inane controversies were not, philosophically speaking, so absurd as the personal inflictions of which the wide extended regions of Hindostan afford, alas! too many instances. Among the most prominent is the one that we are contemplating, in which the *sufferer* (sic), who should be termed *the patient* (sic), thinks that the most meritorious service he can, in the eyes of the divine Providence, perform is to keep his arms over his head in the position which the cut will explain ("The Travels of Pran-Puri" 262-63).

Here the *ūrdhvabāhu* Indian ascetic is clearly scoffed at. His austerity is seen as a kind of disease, as the word "patient" indicates. Significantly, the footnote ends with a curious appeal to the British East India Company. The writer states:

> We know how difficult it is to combat religious prejudices; but surely where the relief of our fellow creatures is at stake, the attempt would be worthy of the enlightened policy and pure benevolence of the East India Company ("The Travels of Pran-Puri" 263).

This is characteristically taking on 'the colonial burden', which involves 'saving' the colonized people from themselves against their will. Here we witness how Western colonizers invoked the ascetic practices of Hindu holy men to justify the colonial mission of 'civilizing' the natives. Incidentally, it was again *ūrdhvabāhu* which was chosen over all other types of austerities to highlight the colonized people's 'benighted state' and their need for (Western) enlightenment.

Animosity towards Indian ascetics in general began to increase as British rule expanded in the Indian subcontinent. There are several reasons behind this. The British authorities feared that the itinerant Hindu and Muslim ascetics could work as political spies and spread disaffection

against British rule (Zubrzycki 161-62). As peripatetic groups, Indian ascetics were difficult to govern or control. Also, groups of Hindu and Muslim ascetics sometimes worked as mercenary soldiers. David Lorenzen shows that these "warrior ascetics" became "a significant presence" in North India by the fifteenth century. The British colonizers feared them, as they could be, and indeed were, used by the Indian rulers to fight against the British (Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics", 61-71). Hindu and Muslim ascetics had actually challenged British rule in Bengal during the so called Fakir and Sannyasi Rebellion (1763-1800). The colonizers had to crush the joint resistance of these ascetics after heavy fighting. Hence, throughout the colonial rule, Indian ascetics were seen as threats to law and order. It was believed that they were in league with all classes of criminals. But above all, the Hindu ascetics were seen as impediments to the Anglicization of the (Hindu) Indians. In *The Competition Wallah* (1864) the author G. O. Trevelyan laments, "What can you do with people who see virtue and merit in the performances of a fakeer?" (Trevelyan 383). Interestingly, Trevelyan did not simply desire the conversion of the Hindu Indians to Christianity. Instead, he longed for their conversion to *Anglican Christianity*. The success of the Roman Catholic Church in India irked Trevelyan, who saw it as being similar to the indigenous non-Christian religions in some of its practices (Trevelyan 380-81). His chauvinism manifests itself in the surprising observation, "[T]here is, perhaps, no country in the world where the devout Roman Catholics are superior in intelligence to the devout Protestants" (Trevelyan 379). It thus becomes evident that, to at least a section of British colonizers, proselytization was not the only goal to achieve. Instead, what they sought was the complete acculturation of the Indian populace. Naturally, these colonizers were inimical to Hindu priests and ascetics whom they saw as obstructions in their way.

British animosity towards Hindu ascetics ensured their negative stereotyping in colonial literature. While scholars like Benita Parry have noted this in passing (Parry 70-76), very few full length studies have been conducted on this topic till now. Interestingly, it is the *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics who have always served as scapegoats in colonial literature. Parry herself draws our attention to F. E. Penny's novel *The Swami's Curse* where an *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic is presented as the villain (Parry 71-72). There are likewise several other colonial works which villainize the *ūrdhvabāhu sadhus*.

To demonstrate how colonial imagination demonized *ūrdhvabāhu* Hindu ascetics, this article focuses on their representations in three literary works. The texts are chosen as random samples from three different periods. The aim is to show that the negative stereotyping of *ūrdhvabāhu sadhus* in colonial literature did not change with time. Fictional works, as opposed to scholarly writings, are chosen because they readily serve as guides to popular prejudices. Allen Greenberger points out that since these authors were "only vocal members of the public

rather than full-fledged intellectuals, they give a broad picture of how people in general were thinking at a given time" (Greenberger 2). Moreover, one needs to remember that these works were primarily written to make money. Consequently, these had to cater to public expectations to ensure commercial success. As Greenberger observes, "the Indian reality" never influenced the presentation of India and the Indians in these works (Greenberger 6). It is not surprising that such works always present *ūrdhvabāhu* austerity as something sinister, and often associate it with evil, vice or criminality.

William Browne Hockley's (1792 - 1860) *Pandurang Hari, or the Memoirs of a Hindoo* is doubtlessly the first novel to depict an *ūrdhvabāhu* Hindu ascetic. Published in 1826, it is one of the earliest novels written by an expatriate British author in India. Hockley nurtured a rabid hatred against the Indians in general and the Hindus in particular. He never tried to cloak this feeling. In the "Introduction" to the first edition of the novel, he declares, "From the rajah[31] to the ryot[32], with the intermediate grades, they are ungrateful, insidious, cowardly, unfaithful, and revengeful" (Hockley 22). From Hockley's words it becomes clear that one cannot expect to find any sympathetic treatment of Indian characters in this novel. Particularly, Hindu ascetics become the main targets of his virulent criticism here. The main antagonist in this novel is Gabbage Gousla, alias Gunput Rao. He poses as an ascetic to spin his webs of intrigue against the eponymous hero and his beloved Sagoonah. However, the author's malice towards Indian ascetics finds its most bitter expression in his description of the *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic. The very description is calculated to evoke a feeling of repugnance:

> He seemed a living skeleton, without teeth, and bent double from age and hardship; his hair was long, matted together, and stained purposely of a dirty-brown colour; his nails were as the talons of a bird of prey, and his toes were bowed inwards, while their nails furrowed the earth deeply at every step he took. One hand and arm remained erect over his head … Pointed upwards from the shoulder to which it belonged, with its shrivelled look, it had the effect of giving its owner a character not belonging to the race of men – strange and supernatural (Hockley 190).

As if this description of his "cadaverous hideousness" was not enough (Hockley 193), the author attempts to further heighten his readers' aversion by highlighting the mental depravity of this *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic. The *sannyasi*[33] makes Gabbage and his son Mahadeo undergo a revolting magic ritual which involves taking mouthfuls of blood and spitting it on the image of Lord Shiva. They were then made to wear sacred threads consecrated with blood (Hockley 190-

[31] *Rajah* or *Raja* means a king (translated by the author).
[32] A *ryot* is a peasant (translated by the author).
[33] *Sannyasi* is another term for a Hindu ascetic (translated by the author).

94). One may easily see that this ritual has its existence only in the febrile imagination of Hockley. No Hindu ascetic will dare to desecrate the image of his/her God in this manner. Through the description of this bogus ritual, Hockley tries to inspire in his (British) readers a feeling of revulsion towards Hinduism. The thing to note is that, it is an *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic who is used by Hockley to achieve this end. One finds that subsequent writers follow him in negatively stereotyping these ascetics.

It is not the case that *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics are depicted only in British colonial literature. One may find them even in European fictions, like Emilio Salgari's (1862 – 1911) Italian novel *I misteri della jungla nera* (1895). This works has been translated into English as *The Mystery of the Black Jungle*. Set in colonial India, the novel describes the adventures of the Bengali hunter Tremal-Naik and his Maratha servant Kammamuri who fight the Thugs led by Suyodhana to rescue Tremal's lady love Ada Corishant from their clutches. Salgari is often hailed for his liberal anti-colonial stance, particularly because he depicts interracial romances in his works. However, Francesca Orsini draws our attention to the presence of abundant orientalist clichés in his novels. In her opinion, Salgari "was not, could not be, outside the episteme of his times, which viewed Europe as more advanced than Asia" (Orsini 16). The truth in Orsini's assertion becomes apparent to us once we consider his treatment of the *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic Nimpor in *The Mystery of the Black Jungle*. The gruesome appearance of Nimpor even shocks the dauntless hunter Tremal-Naik. Salgari writes:

> … it was the man's left arm that had made him [Tremal-Naik] shudder. The fakir had held it erect so long the skin and flesh had withered to little more than coloured bone. His hand had been bound shut with leather straps and the hollow filled with dirt to serve as a pot for a small sacred myrtle seedling. Left unattended, his fingernails had pierced through his palm and grew out the back of his hand like dark twisted talons (Salgari 197).

Here Salgari makes use of one of the favourite devices of colonial writers, namely ventriloquism. Instead of censuring the Hindu ascetic himself, he shows the readers the Bengali Tremal-Naik's reaction. He thereby has the ascetic implicitly criticized by his own countryman. But it is not only Nimpor's appearance which Salgari deplores. It transpires that this ascetic is in league with the dreaded Thugs of India[34] and acts as their informer and henchman. Following his predecessors, Salgari thus makes an association between *ūrdhvabāhu* and evil. Also, in keeping

[34] The Thugs, as the British colonizers imagined them, were a cross between highway bandits and murderous cultists whose practitioners supposedly worshipped Goddess Kali and strangled and robbed travellers to please her. However, contemporary researchers question British construction of Thuggee. For an overview of Thuggee and Salgari's treatment of the Thugs in his novels, one may see " 'Providential' Campaigns" by Ayusman Chakraborty.

[35] Sleeman writes, "Three-fourths of these religious mendicants, whether Hindoos or Mahommudans, rob and steal,

with British colonial officers like Sir William Henry Sleeman[35], Salgari criminalizes Hindu ascetics en masse on little evidence. His novel shows that Hindu ascetics were often negatively stereotyped in late nineteenth century, even outside the limits of the British Empire.

Finally, one may consider the treatment of *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics in Alice Perrin's (1867-1934) short story "The Fakirs' Island". The story appears in her collection of short stories entitled *East of Suez* (1901). In this story, the obstinate English beauty Mona Selwyn visits 'the fakirs' island' during the "Khoom Mela"[36]. She is cursed by an *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic for expressing her contempt at the religious mendicants. The ascetic curses her, "before ten suns have set thy beauty will be gone" (Perrin 137). She is stricken with small pox soon after, possibly infected though her contact with the mendicants on the island. Mona loses her beauty as a result, just as the ascetic had cursed her. As Benita Parry explains, "Physically she had not been touched [by the ascetic] but the very demeanour of the priest was an assault and the malediction of the fakir a violation on this pure young Englishwoman" (Parry 75). Parry further suggests that covert threats of sexual violation surfaces in works where Englishwomen are threatened by nude or semi-nude Hindu ascetics (Parry 76). While her deduction is based on good reasoning, it is to be kept in mind that it is again an *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic who is associated with evil in this tale. The story also describes other ascetics in the island, practicing their own varieties of severe austerities. For instance, Perrin describes ascetics sitting on bed of nails, ascetics swinging on ropes with their faces downwards, and ascetics burying themselves to the chin. And yet, it is the ascetic "with one arm held high in the air, withered to a stick" who curses Mona Selwyn (Perrin 136). Is this merely a coincidence? Or was Perrin following the established Western practice of demonizing *ūrdhvabāhu* Hindu ascetics? In light of the information provided earlier, the latter seems more probable.

Survey of Western literary and non-literary works thus demonstrates that *ūrdhvabāhu*, as an sscetic practice, has been condemned as evil in the West at least from the seventeenth century. It remains to be explained why it was singled out of all Hindu ascetic practices for such negative stereotyping. To my mind, the best way to answer this is by comparing the treatment of *śaṅkuśī* in Western writings with that of *ūrdhvabāhu*. It becomes apparent that while 'spike lying' is sometimes satirized in Western literature, it is rarely seen as positive evil. One may think of one Mr Cambridge's satirical verse cited in the American missionary William Butler's *The Land of the Veda* (1895). It describes the plight of a 'spike lying' *tapasvin* who is persuaded by a "kind-

and a very great portion of them murder their victims before they rob them" (Sleeman 11). It cannot be denied that criminals often don the garb of holy men. But to criminalize three fourth of Indian ascetics on little evidence seems unfair. One might also wonder why a criminal should maim himself to his own disadvantage.

[36] Without doubt the reference is to Kumbh Mela, a major festive gathering of the Hindus which involves ritual bath in sacred rivers.

hearted" Indian to give up his "madness". However, the ascetic soon begins to miss the attention he had earlier enjoyed for his difficult austerity:

> To live *undistinguished* to him was the pain,
> An existence unnoticed he could not sustain
> In retirement he sighed for the fame-giving chair,
> For the crowd to admire him, to reverence and stare
> No endearments of pleasure and ease could prevail,
> He the saintship resumed, and new-larded his tail (cited in Butler 197).

The poet's message is clear. He insinuates that Hindu ascetics suffer self-inflicted tortures merely to gain fame. However, despite the poet's prejudiced outlook, he does not present this Indian ascetic as an evil person. He merely ridicules him for his vanity. Likewise, in Perrin's "The Fakirs' Island" the only ascetic who raises the wonder of Mona Selwyn and her companion Kerr is the man on the 'nail bed'. Though Kerr almost dehumanizes him by comparing the thickness of his "hide" to that of a rhinoceros, this comparison also indirectly acknowledges the superhuman endurance of the ascetic (Perrin 136). There is obviously something prodigious and fantastic in tolerating a bed or seat of nails. Rianne Siebenga points out that "[T]he fakir on a bed of spikes possibly topped the list of interesting fakir sights" (Siebenga 445). While she ably demonstrates that the apologists of colonial rule strategically used photographs of self-mortifying Hindu ascetics in postcards and magic-lantern-shows to stress on the need of perpetuating British rule in India, she fails to recognize the dissimilar treatments accorded to different groups of ascetics. As my reading shows, Western imagination has always treated *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics as positively evil. On the other hand, 'spike lying' ascetics are seen as suffering from delusion at worst.

If *ūrdhvabāhu* and *śaṅkuśī* are both different forms of self-mortifications held totally incommensurate with Christian worldview, why does Western imagination treat them differently? It follows that religious bigotry cannot be seen as the sole reason for villainizing *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetics. Otherwise, 'spike lying' ascetics would have been villainized too. Nor can we think of this as the function of anapirophobia or a fear of cripples. As I see it, it is the *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic's voluntary disfiguration of his body that the contemporary West finds most disturbing. One may understand that while 'spike lying' or *śaṅkuśī* does not involve *visible* physical disfiguration, it always attends *ūrdhvabāhu*. Even if *śaṅkuśī* ultimately deforms the practitioner's back and hips, these covered areas of a man's body cannot be very prominently

visible.[37] Moreover, tolerating a bed of nails bespeaks of an almost superhuman fortitude. One may ridicule the act as excessive. But one is also forced to wonder at the practitioner's power of endurance. On the other hand, the withered and deformed arm of an *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic is obviously the first thing that draws one's attention. Unlike *śaṅkuśī*, it is very akin to self-maiming – the voluntary sacrifice of one's limbs. Such an act of self-maiming is sure to appear intriguing and unproductive to post-Enlightenment Western worldview which usually emphasizes utility, productivity and rationality as guiding principles of life.[38] As Henry Louis Gates Junior has observed in a different context, the Enlightenment "used the absence and presence of 'reason' to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color" (Gates 54). The *ūrdhvabāhu sadhu's* self-maiming no doubt appears irrational, and therefore inhuman, to Western eyes. Failing to make sense of it, the post-Enlightenment West perceives it as evil. It is for this reason that it became one of the markers of the Indians' absolute otherness in Western imagination.

Returning to the present, one may now perhaps understand why the *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic's "question" appears so "awkward" to Western minds. It is clear that *ūrdhvabāhu* Hindu *sadhus* neither ask questions nor seek permissions to have their voices heard (in the West). Whatever the goals of their *tapasya* might be, these ascetics have already chosen their path. It is the West that has the unanswered question – why the *tapasvin* does what he does (that is, maims himself)? Western writers generally find it difficult to answer this question, since it involves recognizing a different type of rationality and a different worldview. Such recognition remains particularly problematic for the West, since it has sought to impose its own worldview upon others since the Renaissance. *Ūrdhvabāhu*, as a practice, therefore remains an enigma which is difficult to solve for the West. It remains enticing to Western writers for that very reason. Probably that is why they continue to return to this topic even in our own postcolonial[39] times, finding it both appealing as well as appalling.

[37] I do not know of any medical study that examines the long term effects of *śaṅkuśī* on a person's body. So it is difficult to say whether it at all leads to eventual deformity or not.

[38] By giving up the use of one or both arms, the ascetic becomes dependent on others. This might also appear intriguing to contemporary Western minds which value individualism. For an analysis of 'rugged Western individualism' - the product of "a mercilessly competitive economic system" where one tries to remain as little dependent on others as possible - one can see Samuel Mencher (Mencher *sic passim*).

[39] To be understood both in the sense of "after colonial" and "beyond colonial".

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