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THE FOUNDING OF THE RAMANANDI SECT

by

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ABSTRACT

Scholars disagree on the role of the Hindu saint Ramanand in the founding of the Ramanandi sect. In this essay I present four different spiritual genealogies of the *guru*-disciple succession of Ramanand which were compiled at different periods of time in the development of the sect and I analyze these genealogies as records of strategies in which the sect reinterpreted its past in order to perpetuate itself in the present. In conclusion I propose that the so-called founding of the Ramanandi sect was not an act initiated by Ramanand but instead an act of the imagination initiated by Ramanand's followers.

The Ramanandi sect, which is said to have been founded by Swami Ramanand in the 14th century, performed a particularly significant role in the development of both Hindu religion and Hindi literature. The ascetics of the Ramanandi sect led a minor social revolution in the Ganges basin by recruiting women and members of servant and untouchable castes into their sect. Moreover, the followers of *Swami* Ramanand wrote much of their sectarian literature in the vernacular languages of upper India rather than in Sanskrit. The study of modern Hindi literature, as it is taught in the schools and colleges of India today, usually begins with the devotional stories and poems written by such great saints as Tulsi Das, Mira Bai, and Kabir whom the Vaisnavite bards claim were spiritual descendants of *Swami* Ramanand. Given the historical importance of the Ramanandi sect, it is surprising to find so little information in the sectarian literature on the events which led to the formation of the sect. Drawing upon these sectarian sources, scholars have sought to reconstruct the early history of the Ramanandi sect. The facts, however, are meager and the inferences which scholars have used to interpret

these facts are various so that there is some disagreement over the circumstances which actually led Rāmanand to found the Ramanandi sect. In this essay I shall apply an anthropological analysis to the information from sectarian sources and propose instead that the reason why the founding of the Ramanandi sect has remained such an enigma to scholars is because *Swami* Ramanand never did actually found the Ramanandi sect.

I

According to the classical codes of religious law Hindus who were Twice Born, that is to say those who were born from their mother's womb and reborn through sacrifice in the body of a Brahman, a warrior (*ksatriya*), or a herder or tiller (*vaiśya*), could renounce the family which assisted at both of their births and follow a discipline which, through the control of their body, speech, and mind, would result in their union with Brahma. Only Twice Born Hindus were thought to be endowed with sufficient spiritual energy to discipline themselves in such a way; only Twice Born Hindus were thought to possess a body of sufficient purity to make themselves a suitable subject of discipline. Thus, according to the classical codes, servants (*śudra*), untouchables, and women did not possess the right to renounce their family and to become an ascetic.

During the 16th century, however, some Hindu ascetics who had been attracted by the new devotional discipline which had come from the Dravidian south, carried the following message across the Ganges basin, "Do not inquire from anyone his caste or sect; whoever worships the Lord, belongs to the Lord." For those ascetics their Lord and Saviour was Ram Candra who had been born many years ago in the House of Dasrath in Ayodhya and who had defeated in battle Ravana, the demon King of Lanka. Ram Candra was the seventh incarnation of the god Visnu Narayan, and it was Visnu Narayan who at the dawn of time spawned this mind-born cosmos. Floating on the Sea of Milk, Visnu Narayan was stirred by the residual energy of previous creations and his Supreme Soul fragmented. Each fragment of his Soul became embodied in a creature inhabiting this world. To be sure, all creatures are classified into species (*jāti*) and species differ from one another according to their relative spiritual energy and purity of body; nevertheless all creatures are animated by a fraction of the same Supreme Soul. It is desire for this created world which hinders the reunion of the embodied soul and the Supreme Soul and which condemns the embodied soul to be born from diverse wombs over many lifetimes perpetually suffering the pains of birth and death. Devotion to Ram and the repetition of His name, however, secure the release of the embodied soul from the perpetual cycle of rebirths. Since

Ram, as Visnu Narayan, dwells in all living creatures, then why should not all mankind regardless of caste, sex, or sect have the right to renounce their families and pass the remainder of their lives in the service of Ram? The ascetics who propagated this new message claimed that they heard the teaching from their preceptors. The preceptors were living evidence of the new teaching, for they included not only several Brahmans and a Rajput King, but also a barber, a farmer, a cobbler, a woman, and even a Muslim weaver. The preceptors called themselves Ramanandis, for they, in turn, claimed that they had heard the message from a saint by the name of Ramanand who used to live on the banks of the Ganges in the holy city of Benaras.

Very little is known about *Swami* Ramanand and the early development of the Ramanandi sect apart from information which is derived from sectarian sources, the purposes of which are not always historical. Most scholars who have written about *Swami* Ramanand have assumed that Ramanand, sometime after having been initiated into the Sri sect of Ramanuja, founded his own sect known as the Ramanandi or Ramavat sect. Scholars have either considered the sectarian sources to be accurate or they have second-guessed the literature in order to reconstruct the events which led to the founding of the Ramanandi sect. For Farquhar (1967:324-325) Ramanand was a Ramaite ascetic living among the Sri Vaisnavas in Tamil Nadu who went north to Benaras around 1430 A.D. preaching the *Adhyatma Ramayana* and Ramanuja's *Sri Bhasya*. According to Ghurye (1964:165) Ramanand was born in northern India at Prayag in 1300 A.D. He was initiated as a *Tridandi sannyasi* by *Swami* Raghavanand who was the abbot of the Sri monastery in Benaras. Wilson (1846:31-32) claimed that Ramanand was born sometime after 1400 and that he was initiated into the Sri sect founded by Ramanuja. Ramanand went on a pilgrimage and when he returned to the Sri monastery, he was denied commensality with his co-disciples because they assumed that during his pilgrimage Ramanand could not have observed the caste and sect rules of commensality. The accusation incensed Ramanand who thereupon quit the Sri monastery and established his own sect. Sinha (1957:61-64) recounts a similar incident but claims that it was not Ramanand but instead his *guru* Raghavanand who was denied commensality. This incident, however, did not provoke the establishment of any new sect. Instead, it was in the course of his travels that Ramanand fell under the doctrinal influence of tantrism. This set him apart from his co-disciples in the Sri sect who followed exclusively the devotional doctrine of Ramanuja. Ramanand left the Dravidian south and travelled north not in order to spread the devotional doctrine of Ramanuja but in order to receive the tantric doctrine of the *nirguna* ascetics who lived in the Ganges

basin. Barthwal (1936:13; 1955:30), however, found a different reason for the establishment of the Ramanandi sect. According to the *Bhavisya Purana* (4.21.52-53) Ramanand went to Ayodhya where he converted to Hinduism those Hindus who had been previously converted by force to Islam. Barthwal then assumes that Ramanand had been initiated into the Sri sect of Ramanuja and then infers that the acceptance of reconverted Muslims within the Sri sect antagonized the more orthodox elements within the Sri sect and caused a schism which led to the founding of the Ramanandi sect.

These diverse and somewhat contradictory opinions oblige us to acknowledge at the outset that we do not know with any degree of certainty the most basic facts about *Swami* Ramanand. We do not even know, for example, where he was born, when he was born, and when he died. Nor is the question of his spiritual genealogy beyond dispute. Of the few books and poems written by him some of them may have, in fact, been written by his followers and then attributed to Ramanand in order to give legitimacy to some doctrinal tendency within the sect. Sectarian sources disagree over the names of several of his disciples, and the saying for which Ramanand is most remembered, "Do not inquire from anyone his caste or sect; whoever worships the Lord, belongs to the Lord," cannot even be found in any of the writings attributed to Ramanand.¹ The lack of accurate information about *Swami* Ramanand and his role in the early development of the sect suggests the possibility that he was not an historically important or doctrinally unique enough saint in his own lifetime to have caused others to note his biography. When compared with Sankaracarya, Gorakhnath, and Caitanya who, it is said, also founded important ascetic sects, we know relatively little either about the historical or the legendary Ramanand. Moreover, we know more about Sankaracarya, Gorakhnath, and Caitanya from their sectarian literature than about their direct disciples, but in Priya Das' commentary on Nabha Ji's *Sri Bhakta Mala* the account of the life of Ramanand is dwarfed by the accounts of the lives of his disciples.

While scholars have sifted through this poverty of information in order to reconstruct the life of Ramanand and the early history of the sect, they have overlooked one of the most important facts of all, and that is the poverty of information. The one thing which we do know is that we know very little indeed about *Swami* Ramanand; moreover, for a very long time our ignorance has been shared by the Ramanandi ascetics themselves. This fact is important, for one feature of the Ramanandi sect which appears unique in comparison with other ascetic sects is its diversity. During the 16th and 17th centuries both devotional and tantric disciplines were attributed to Ramanand; both Twice Born Hindus as well as members of the servant and untouchable castes, women, and perhaps even Muslims were recruited into the sect. A number of poems written in the vernacular were attributed to

Ramanand; but other important texts attributed to Ramanand were written in Sanskrit and hence were accessible only to disciples of Brahman birth. Some of Ramanand's descendants continued to observe caste rules of commensality within the sect while other descendants abandoned such rules. This diversity during the early period of the sect is not limited to belief and practice; there was also a diversity of Ramanands. For some Ramanand was a spiritual descendant of Ramanuja. For others Ramanand was only a follower of the doctrine of Ramanuja. Some of Ramanand's followers obviated the historical question of Ramanand's spiritual ancestry by making him an incarnation of Lord Ram. For the *nirguna* ascetics, who worshipped the attributeless Supreme Being, Ramanand was the eternal "truth-guru" (*satguru*). The plethora of Ramanands suggests at least that if more had been known about the historical Ramanand then it would not have been possible to attribute so many diverse doctrines and practices to him. But these diverse images of Ramanand, which serve a devotional purpose for the Hindu ascetic, tell us very little about the life of Ramanand. Why in the early sectarian literature is there such a poverty of biographical information on a saint who was supposed to have caused a social revolution in Hindu asceticism?² Could the reason why scholars have found the real Ramanand so elusive be that *Swami* Ramanand never did personally found a sect of sadhus known as the Ramanandi or Ramavat *sampradaya*?

II

The scholars who have written about *Swami* Ramanand have assumed that Ramanand founded the Ramanandi sect and then they have searched for information concerning the events which led to the founding of the sect. Rather than make such an assumption, let us use the same information and see what we can deduce about the early history of the sect from a knowledge of its social structure. To become a member of any of the Vaisnavite sects the candidate approaches a member of the sect and asks to receive the ritual formula, called the *mantra*, of the sect's tutelary deity. The member of the sect who bestows the initiatory *mantra* upon the candidate becomes the candidate's *guru*. The *guru*, in turn, received the *mantra* from his *guru* who received it from his *guru* and so on back to the founder of the sect who heard the *mantra* from his *guru* and so on back through time until one ultimately comes to the dawn of time when the tutelary deity divulged His personal *mantra*. This initiatory and redeeming *mantra* of the tutelary deity is a secret which is jealously guarded by the sect. Only by initiation can one come to know it. It is the basis of the sect's unique historical origin and of its spiritual independence from other sects.

The *mantra* is the link between the *guru* and the disciple which down through the generations forms the segmentary structure of the sect. With their segmentary structure the Ramanandi sect together with the other Hindu ascetic sects appear to us as so many tribes composed of segmentary lineages which perpetuate themselves by spiritual initiation rather than sexual reproduction and which exploit a territory for its alms rather than for its natural wealth. In order to maintain themselves over time the ascetics of the various Hindu sects acquired access to three important resources: devotees and disciples, pilgrimage routes and pilgrimage centers, and political patronage. The availability of these resources was limited. Although some ascetic sects were founded in the outerlying regions of the sub-continent, nearly all of them, like the Ramanandi sect, eventually spread to the Ganges basin where, given the number of sects operating on that territory, the competition for these three limited resources was very intense. In the competition for devotees and disciples Ramanand and/or his followers gained a significant advantage over their rival sects. The servant castes, untouchables, women, and former Hindus who had converted by choice or by threat of force to Islam comprised more than three-fourths of the population of the Ganges basin and constituted an immense hitherto unexploited source of devotees and disciples for an ascetic sect. The competition for control over pilgrimage routes and pilgrimage centers led to outright battles between the Ramanandi sect and the Dasnami sect of Sannyasis in which the Ramanandi sect did not fare so well. In the early 18th century the Sannyasis encircled and captured Ayodhya on the very birthday of Lord Ram thereby routing the Ramanandi ascetics from the birthplace of their tutelary deity (Prasad 1930:42). According to the sectarian bards the loss of Ayodhya provoked the leaders of the Vaisnavite sects to call the conference at Galata near Jaipur in the course of which the Vaisnavite ascetics organized themselves into militant orders (*akhārā*). By the close of the 18th century the militant orders of the Dasnami sect and the Ramanandi sect were engaged in armed combat for the control of pilgrimage centers.³ In 1760 the Dasnami ascetics captured Hardwar and it was not until the British administered the district that the Ramanandi ascetics were able to return to this pilgrimage center (Farquhar 1925:17). In 1789 a battle erupted over the bathing rights at the Kasi Sangam on the Godavri River in which reportedly 12,000 ascetics lost their lives.⁴ Political patronage was an important factor in the development of the ascetic sects. As the "Abode of Compassion" (*karuṇā nidhān*) the King was the supreme court of appeal in the kingdom. Disputes between sects, such as the one over the bathing rights at the Kasi Sangam on the Godavri River, were settled by the king or by his courts. As the "Lord of the Land" (*bhūpati*) the King was the most significant donor of land in alms within the kingdom. The various ascetic sects fought both military and yogic battles against one

another in order to obtain royal patronage. For example, according to legends in the 16th century Taranath, an ascetic of the Gorakhnathi sect, roamed the region north and west of Delhi where he enjoyed the patronage of the local kings. When Taranath was defeated in a yogic battle at Galata by Krisna Das Payahari (Saran 1969:305) and at Pindori by Bhagawan Ji (Goswamy and Grewal 1969:5-6) the local rulers saw that the spiritual power of these Ramanandi ascetics was greater than that of the Gorakhnathi ascetic and they shifted their patronage from the Gorakhnathi to the Ramanandi sect. Krisna Das Payahari built his monastery at Galata and Bhagawan Ji built his monastery at Pindori near Simla. In the course of time both of these monasteries prospered from the munificent royal gifts of land.

The *guru* disciple succession provides the segmentary structure of the ascetic sect; spiritual genealogies record the names and delineate the relationships of that structure. The *guru* disciple relationship is personal and irrevocable and, in theory, the spiritual genealogies are as unalterable as the events which they record. A perusal of spiritual genealogies of the Ramanandi sect reveals, however, significant differences in the records of the transmission of the *mantra* from *guru* to disciple. Insofar as the purpose of spiritual genealogies is historical then spiritual genealogies are records of facts and the discrepancies which occur among different spiritual genealogies may be judged according to their truth or falsehood. Insofar as the purpose of spiritual genealogies is political, every falsehood becomes a truth of another kind. That is to say, every genealogy is a record of a strategy in which the sect has reinterpreted its past in order to compete more effectively for the three limited resources which are necessary for its survival in the present. Let us consider four spiritual genealogies of the Ramanandi sect taken from the early 15th century, late 16th century, early 18th, and early 20th century and analyze them against a backdrop of 600 years of competition among ascetic sects for devotees and disciples, pilgrimage routes and pilgrimage centers, and political patronage.

In *Ramarcanapaddhiti*, a Sanskrit text attributed to Ramanand, the author traces the following spiritual ancestry of *Swami* Ramanand⁵ (Figure 1). The *Ramarcanapaddhiti* genealogy is interesting because it includes in the tenth generation the Vaisnavite saint Ramanuja who founded the Sri sect in the Tamil speaking region of south India during the 12th century. Let us briefly compare the above spiritual genealogy of the Ramanandi sect with the genealogy of the Sri sect founded by Ramanuja⁶ (Figure 2). The two genealogies are similar in three respects. First, the *Ramarcanapaddhiti* genealogy is written in Sanskrit, the medium by which Ramanuja and the ascetics of the Sri sect transmitted their doctrine. Second, the Sri genealogy begins with a celestial couple, Visnu Narayan who gave the *mantra*. to Laksmi; the *Ramarcanapaddhiti* genealogy also begins with a celestial couple,

Ram Candra who gave the *mantra* to Sita. Ram Candra was an incarnation of Visnu Narayan and Sita was an incarnation of Laksmi. Third, the names in the two genealogies are identical from the third to the tenth generation. The sole difference between the two genealogies is that in the *Ramarcanapaddhiti* genealogy Ram bestows the six syllable Ram *mantra* upon Sita and in the Sri genealogy Narayan bestows the eight syllable Narayan *mantra* upon Laksmi. Inevitably the Ramanandi ascetics, who worship Ram, had to obtain their *mantra* from Lord Ram. If Lord Ram had not been the source of the *mantra* then the *mantra* would have been ineffective in transporting the devotees to

1. Ram Candra
2. Sita
3. Visvaksen
4. Sathkop
5. Nathmuni
6. Pundrikaksa
7. Ram Misra
8. Yamunacarya
9. Mahapurnacarya
10. Ramanuja
11. Kuresa
12. Madhvacarya
13. Vopadevacarya
14. Devacarya
15. Purusottam
16. Gangadhar
17. Rameswar
18. Dvaranand
19. Devanand
20. Sriyanand
21. Hariyanand
22. Raghavanand
23. Ramanand

Fig. 1 The spiritual genealogy of the Ramanandi sect as recorded in the early 15th century.

1. Narayan
2. Laksmi
3. Visvaksen
4. Sathkop
5. Nathmuni
6. Pundrikaksa
7. Ram Misra
8. Yamunacarya
9. Mahapurnacarya
10. Ramunuja

Fig. 2 The spiritual genealogy of the Sri sect.

the celestial refuge of Lord Ram. The most interesting feature of this early Ramanandi spiritual genealogy, therefore, is its ambiguity. Ramanand is a spiritual descendant of Ramanuja thereby making Ramanand a member of the Sri sect, but Ramanuja received the *mantra* from Ran and Sita, not Narayan and Laksmi, thereby making Ramanuja a Ramanandi or Ramavat ascetic. The genealogy does not prove that Ramanand was, in fact, a member of the Sri sect, but it does indicate that at the time of its compilation the author of the genealogy, either Ramanand or one of his followers, found it advantageous for Ramanand to be included as a spiritual descendant of Ramanuja.

Nabha Ji, who was in the fourth generation of Ramanand's descendants, compiled the *Sri Bhakta Mala* in the late 16th century. In *chappaya* 29 of this text Nabha Ji names Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Visnuswami, and Madhvacharya as the founders of the four main Vaisnavite sects (*catuh sampradāya*). In Ramanuja's spiritual genealogy (*chappaya* 30) Narayan and Laksmi are given their rightful place at the top of the list. Nabha Ji, however, neglects to mention the names of Ramanuja's disciples. In *chappaya* 35, however, we learn that Raghavanand lived in Varanasi and saw all Hindus, regardless of their caste, as devotees of the Lord. Raghavanand's disciple was Ramanand who appeared on the terrestrial world and was bold in the doctrines of Ramanuja. Ramanuja is included in Ramanand's spiritual ancestry and in the following *chappaya* Nabha Ji names Ramanand's twelve disciples. The information in the *Sri Bhakta Mala* yields, therefore, the following spiritual genealogy of the Ramandi sect (Figure 3). The *Sri Bhakta Mala* genealogy was compiled during the period of greatest diversity within the Ramanandi sect. The list of disciples includes a weaver (Kabir, it is not

1. Narayan
2. Laksmi
3. Visvakxen
4. Sathkop
5. Nathmuni
6. Pundrikaksa
7. Ram Misra
8. Yamunacarya
9. Mahapurnacarya
10. Ramanuja
11. Devanand
12. Hariyanand
13. Raghavanand
14. Ramanand

Anant- Sursur- Sukh- Bhav- Narhar- Kabir Dhanna Sena Rai Pipa Sur- Padma-
 anand anand anand anand Das suri vati

Fig. 3 The spiritual genealogy of the Ramanandi sect as recorded in the late 16th century.

specifically mentioned that Kabir is a Muslim), a cobbler (Rai Das), a farmer (Dhana), a barber (Sena), a woman (Padmavati), and a married couple (Sursuranand and Sursuri). Pipa was a Ksatriya who, prior to his discipleship, was the King of Gagraun. The remaining disciples, Anantanand, Sukhanand, Narharyanand, Bhavanand, plus Sursuranand and his wife, were Brahmans. No doubt Ramanand had more than twelve disciples, but twelve was a sacred number and we find that other famous ascetics who founded sects, such as Gorakhnath, were also known to have had twelve disciples. According to Caturvedi (1964:218-252) there is no evidence in the writings of Pipa, Sena, Dhanna, Rai Das, and Kabir which proves that they were, in fact, the disciples of Ramanand. It is possible that Pipa, Sena, Dhanna, Rai Das, and Kabir had attracted followers in their own name who found it advantageous to claim Ramanand as their ancestor. This may explain the unusually long life span of either 111 or 148 years which has been attributed to Ramanand by various sectarian sources. To make Ramanand the preceptor of Anantanand, Sukhanand, Pipa, Kabir, Rai Das, and the other disciples the bards of the sect may have been required to keep the legendary Ramanand alive longer than the historical one. In sum, the position of Ramanand in Nabha Ji's *Sri Bhakta Mala* is still ambiguous. Ramanand is included within the Sri sect, but he is attributed twelve disciples as if he had founded his own sect. Moreover, these twelve disciples include Twice Born Hindus, servants, untouchables, and women in contravention of the social practices of the Sri sect who are said to have recruited only Twice Born male Hindus into their sect in upper India.

At the turn of the 18th century about ten generations of Hindu ascetics had claimed spiritual descent from Ramanand. At that time, according to the sectarian bards, an important conference of Vaisnavite ascetics was held at Galata in the Kingdom of Jaipur in order to organize the defense of the Vaisnavite ascetics and their pilgrimage centers against the Sannyasis of the Dasnami sect. The militant orders (*akhārā*) and armies (*anī*) of the Vaisnavite sects date from this time. It seems, however, that there was a second purpose for which the conference was convoked and which has remained untold by the sectarian bards. Prior to the conference the four main Vaisnavite sects comprised the sects founded by Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhvacharya, and Visnuswami. Collectively these four sects were known as the *catuh sampradaya*. The followers of Ramanand were affiliated to the *catuh sampradaya* by virtue of their descent from the Sri sect founded by Ramanuja. At the Galata conference the Ramanandis displaced the Sri sect and were recognized as the original members of the *catuh sampradaya* together with the sects founded by Nimbarka, Madhvacharya, and Visnuswami. This new arrangement was sealed by the subdivision of the four sects into fifty-two "doors" (*dvārā*). Each door, or what we might call a spiritual clan, was said to have been established by a prominent Vaisnavite ascetic who was

a spiritual descendant of Ramanand, Nimbarka, Madhvacharya, or Visnuswami. All members of the four main Vaisnavite sects traced their spiritual descent back to a founder of a spiritual clan. Anyone who could not trace his descent back to the founder of a spiritual clan was not a member of any of the four sects of the *catuh sampradaya*. Of the fifty-two spiritual clans thirty-six were founded by Ramanandi ascetics and twelve were founded by Nimbarki ascetics. The remaining four spiritual clans were founded by ascetics of the Madhvacharya and Visnuswami sects. The thirty-six founders of the Ramanandi spiritual clans fall within the first and sixth generations of Ramanand's descendants. Following Nabha Ji's list of twelve disciples, twenty-seven spiritual clans were founded by Anantanand and his descendants; four spiritual clans were founded by Sursuranand and his descendants. Narharyanand, Sukhanand, Bhavanand, and Pipa each founded a spiritual clan.⁷ Finally there was an ascetic by the name of Ram Kabir who founded a spiritual clan. Most genealogists of the sect claim that Ram Kabir is unrelated to Kabir, the weaver, and hence is not one of Ramanand's direct disciples.⁸ Of Ramanand's twelve disciples Anantanand, Sursuranand, Sukhanand, Narharyanand, Bhavanand, and Pipa were Twice Born Hindus. Evidence abounds that in the course of their travels Kabir, Rai Das, Dhanna, and Sena made many disciples and that there were even sects which were founded in their names (Caturvedi 1964:218-252). They were not assigned, however, the honor of being the founder of a spiritual clan. The servant, untouchable, and female disciples of Ramanand were still recognized as having been Ramanandi ascetics, but by virtue of their not being recognized as the founder of a spiritual clan they lost their role as a transmitter or preceptor of the tradition. From the early 18th century until the present day no Ramanandi ascetic claims his spiritual descent from the servant, untouchable, or female disciples of Ramanand. At the conference at Galata, therefore, the Ramanandi sect was delimited by the following genealogy (Figure 4). Other genealogies indicate that male and female Hindus of servant and untouchable birth were still being admitted into the Ramanandi sect, but from the early 18th century all Ramanandi ascetics, regardless of their caste or sex, who traced their spiritual descent from the servant, untouchable, and female disciples of Ramanand now found themselves outside the Ramanandi sect.⁹

At the Kumbh festival of 1921 held at Ujjain the Ramanandi ascetics met in assembly and formally approved the following spiritual genealogy of *Swami Ramanand*¹⁰ (Figure 5). The proponents of this new genealogy argued that, in fact, the genealogy was not new. Rather it had been found among the writings of Agra Ji who had established the Ramanandi monastery at Raivasa in the Kingdom of Jaipur during the 16th century and who was the preceptor of the "Branch of sentiment" (*rasik sampradāya*) within the Ramanandi sect. Although this genealogy may be found as early as the 19th century in the

literature of the “branch of sentiment,” it is doubtful if the genealogy dates from the time of Agra Ji. In comparing the 1921 spiritual genealogy with the genealogy of the *Ramarcnapadditi* in Figure 1 one may note two important changes. First, from the third to the fourteenth generations of the *Ramarcnapaddhiti* genealogy Ramanuja’s Dravidian spiritual preceptors and descendants have been replaced by six generations of gods and rishis. Second, from the fifteenth to the twentieth generations of the *Ramarcnapaddhiti* genealogy the names of five new preceptors have been added thereby

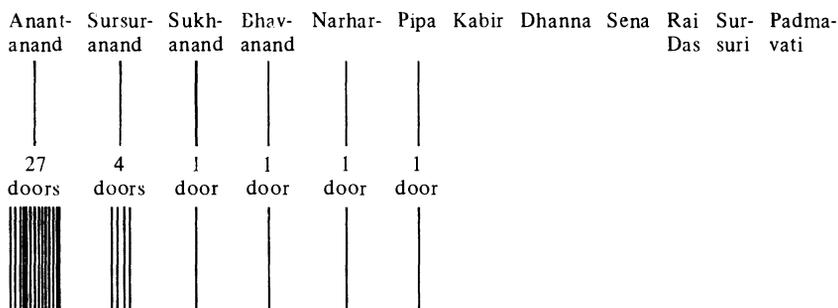


Fig. 4 The spiritual genealogy of the Ramandi sect as recorded in the early 18th century.

1. Ram Candra
2. Sita
3. Hanuman
4. Brahma
5. Vasistha
6. Prasara
7. Vyasdeva
8. Sukadeva
9. Purusottamacarya
10. Gangadharacarya
11. Sadacarya
12. Rameswaracarya
13. Dvaranand
14. Devanand
15. Syamanand
16. Srutanand
17. Cidanand
18. Purnanand
19. Sriyanand
20. Hariyanand
21. Raghavanand
22. Ramanand

Fig. 5 The spiritual genealogy of the Ramanandi sect as recorded in the early 20th century.

extending the generational depth of the 1921 genealogy. In the early 20th century, therefore, the ascetics and bards of the Ramanandi sect finally affirmed their sectarian independence by claiming the unique historical origin of the sect. The *mantra* was divulged by Ram Candra and was transmitted down through twenty-two generations to Ramanand without passing through any of the Dravidian preceptors of the Sri sect. In sum, approximately 500 years after the time of *Swami* Ramanand his followers finally solved the problem of their history. The 1921 genealogy is completely unambiguous with regard to the origin and development of the sect. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that it was also during the early 20th century with the publication of *Sri Ramanand Natak* and *Srimad Ramanand Digvijaya* that the sectarian literature for the first time treats us to detailed biographical information about the life of *Swami* Ramanand.

Let us now review the information which I have presented above. Each spiritual genealogy reveals the names of ascetics who were included or excluded from the spiritual ancestry and descent of Ramanand and in this way illuminates the phases in the development of the sect. In the early 15th century, according to the *Ramarcanapaddhiti* genealogy, Ramanand was a spiritual descendant of Ramanuja. Ramanuja, however, was a devotee of Ram and Sita rather than of Narayan and Laksmi. This ambiguity suggests that Ramanand and/or his followers were reluctant to detach themselves from the Sri sect and from the preceptorship of Ramanuja. One reason for this reluctance may have been that it was more advantageous for the Ramanandis to profit from the established reputation of the Sri sect and the Sri monastic facilities at the pilgrimage centers than to abrogate this link and to fend for themselves in the competition with other ascetic sects. By the late 16th century, according to the *Sri Bhakta Mala* genealogy, devotees and disciples regardless of their caste, sex, or sectarian affiliation were initiated into a Vaisnavite sect by Ramanand. The genealogy reveals the broadening of the criteria for recruitment into a Vaisnavite sect thereby enabling the sect to compete more effectively for devotees and disciples. The spiritual genealogy established by respected Vaisnavite ascetics at Galata at the turn of the 18th century reveals that a Vaisnavite sect which was known formally as the *ramanandi sampradaya* had displaced the Sri sect from the *catuh sampradaya* thereby establishing its separate identity. Moreover, the Ramanandi sect purged itself of the secondary sects which had been founded in the name of Ramanand's disciples of servant caste and untouchable birth.¹¹ The ascetics of these secondary sects were not known to observe caste rules of commensality and hence they would have been considered untouchable by Hindu householders. The purge of such ascetics from the Ramanandi sect, therefore, enabled the Ramanandi ascetics to compete more effectively for the patronage of householders and, in particular, for the patronage of the Hindu

king. According to the spiritual genealogy of the Ramanandi sect which was approved at the Kumbh festival held at Ujjain in 1921 Lord Ram divulged his *mantra* which was transmitted down through twenty-one generations of gods, *rishis*, and saints to Ramanand. The Sri tradition and the Dravidian preceptors were purged from the history of the Ramanandi sect thereby affirming the sectarian independence of the Ramanandi ascetics. Thus we find that the followers of Ramanand passed through four stages in the formation of the sect. In the first stage Ramanand and/or his early followers included themselves within a larger, more established sect. In the second stage ascetics from diverse castes, either sex, and different sectarian affiliations included themselves within the Ramanandi sect. In the third stage the more influential faction within the sect excluded from its midst the “impure” spiritual descendants of Ramanand, and in the fourth stage the more influential faction excluded “alien” spiritual antecedents of Ramanand from the sect. The four spiritual genealogies, when analyzed chronologically, reveal, therefore, that the Ramanandi sect was not established as a separate and independent ascetic sect, but that it became this way after passing through phases of inclusion and exclusion.

This reconstruction of the development of the Ramanandi sect and the proposal that *Swami* Ramanand did not personally establish the sect is further supported by what we might deduce about the early history of the sect from a knowledge of its social structure. The transmission of the *mantra* from *guru* to disciple perpetuates the sect over time. The fission of the sect into segmentary spiritual lineages is an inherent process of its generational growth. Insofar as succession and fission are continual processes of growth in any segmentary lineage system then each stage of the process is no more a beginning of the succeeding stages than it is an end of the preceding stages. How then could a Hindu ascetic transform his role from a mere transmitter of the *mantra* to the founder of a sect? At the time in which Ramanand lived the founders of the ascetic sects whose followers resided or travelled in the Ganges basin were usually known as “preceptors” (*ācārya*). An ascetic became a preceptor by writing a commentary (*bhāṣya*) on a sacred text, such as the *Brahma Sutra* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, and then by propagating a “teaching” (*updeśa*) and “spiritual discipline” (*sādhana*) based upon that commentary. There is neither tradition or evidence, however, that Ramanand ever wrote a commentary on a sacred text; indeed he was known to have used the *Sri Bhāṣya* written by Ramanuja. We may deduce from this that if Ramanand withdrew from the Sri sect and established the Ramanandi sect, he certainly did not do so in the manner customary to his time, that is to say, in the manner which would have been understood by his contemporaries. Later at the turn of the 17th century, when Ramanand was becoming known as the founder of a sect, the sectarian bards avoided the problem caused by the fact

that *Swami Ramanand* had never fulfilled the requirements of a preceptor. In the devotional literature, such as Nabha Ji's *Sri Bhakta Mala*, Ramanand was likened to an incarnation of Ram and in the *nirguna* literature, such as the *Siddhant Patal*, Ramanand was known as a "truth-guru" (*satguru*) or a "primal guru" (*ādiguru*) who has existed since the dawn of time. Both as an incarnation of Ram and as a truth-guru the historical Ramanand was transformed into an eternal Ramanand and removed from the context of the segmentary spiritual lineages created by the transmission of the *mantra*. For the sectarian bards this must have been a convenient way of avoiding the problem of Ramanand's ancestry and transforming Ramanand into the role of the founder of a sect.

There is, however, another possibility which must be considered. Perhaps Ramanand was ostracized from the Sri sect and then by force of circumstance he gathered his followers together and established his own sect. From our knowledge of the social structure of the sect we may doubt that the founding of the sect ever occurred in such a way. No Vaisnavite ascetic, not even one's *guru*, can "defrock" another Vaisnavite ascetic. If Ramanand had been ostracized by the Sri ascetics, this ostracism could have been effected in only two possible ways. First, Ramanand could have been banished territorially from a rent-receiving Sri monastery by the abbot of that monastery. It is possible, but very improbable, that the influential abbots of the Sri monasteries could have appealed to their king to banish Ramanand from the kingdom. Such banishment was, perforce, local. Ramanand would only have had to travel to another locality where his reputation had not caught up with him in order to begin life anew as a Sri ascetic of good standing. Second, Ramanand could have been ostracized commensally by the ascetics of the Sri sect. Such ostracism would have meant only that Ramanand had become less pure than the Sri ascetics; in other words, the Sri ascetics would no longer have accepted cooked food from Ramanand. Ramanand might still, however, have been able to accept cooked food from the Sri ascetics and hence to benefit from their hospitality. And even if the Sri ascetics in a region denied Ramanand food, fire, and water in the customary manner of excommunication, Ramanand could still have travelled to another region where his status as a member of the Sri sect would have been unquestioned. In sum, the hypothetical ostracism of Ramanand from the Sri sect could not have been very effective. The only effective means of isolating Ramanand from the sect would have been to purge him from the sect historically. A council of respected Sri ascetics could have revised Ramanand's genealogy not in order to show that Ramanand had been excluded from the sect, but rather to show that Ramanand had never been included in the sect.¹² If such a council of respected Sri saints ever met in the lifetime of Ramanand then their revision of Ramanand's ancestry was

ineffective because four generations later at the time of Nabhi Ji the followers of Ramanand still traced their descent from Ramanuja.

III

Monasteries of the Ramanandi sect are found today throughout the states of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh as well as in the Nepal Valley and the Nepalese Tarai. Current census figures are not available, but judging from head counts of ascetics in the processions at the Kumbh festival, the Ramanandi sect vies with the Dasnami sect for the honor of being the largest Hindu ascetic sect (Farquhar 1967:327-328). The geographical distribution and numerical strength of the Ramanandi sect today is the measure of its success in the competition with the sects founded by Sankar, Gorakhnath, Bamanuja, Nimbarka, Madhvacharya, Visnuswami, Caitanya, Vallabha, Siva Narayan, Dadu, *Swami* Narayan, and other Hindu saints over the three limited resources: devotees and disciples, pilgrimage routes and pilgrimage centers, and political patronage. The history of the Ramanandi sect, as it is recounted by the Ramanandi ascetics and the sectarian bards, is as much a product of the success of the sect as it is an account of that success. Until recently, however, the sectarian sources from which one might reconstruct the events surrounding the formation of the Ramanandi sect were meager and contradictory. Anthropological methods cannot uncover additional facts about those past events, but our knowledge of the sect's segmentary lineage structure and our analysis of the spiritual genealogies as records of strategy rather than records of fact does call into question the assumption underlying previous reconstructions of those events, namely that Ramanand actually founded the Ramanandi sect. The chronological analysis of the four spiritual genealogies suggests that the founding of the Ramanandi sect was not an act initiated by Ramanand himself, but instead an act of the imagination initiated by Ramanand's followers. *Swami* Ramanand was an important Vaisnavite saint whose teachings acquired renown in the Ganges basin during the 15th century. The earliest ambiguous indication that Ramanand founded a sect, however, did not occur until the late 16th century when Nabha Ji attributed twelve disciples to Ramanand. The followers of Ramanand grew in number and influence, but it was not until the turn of the 18th century when certain impure spiritual descendants were excluded from the sect and the Sri ascetics were displaced from the *catuh sampradaya* that Ramanand became retrospectively and retroactively the founder of the Ramanandi sect.

NOTES

1. Nabha Ji's list in the fifteenth *chappaya* of the *Sri Bhakta Mala* contains the following names: Anantanand, Sursuranand, Bhavanand, Narharyanand, Sukhanand, Pipa, Kabir, Sena, Dhanna, Rai Das, Padmavati, and Sursuri. The list of the "twelve and one half disciples" in the sixteenth to the nineteenth *sloka* of the *Agasthya Samhita* contains the following names: Anantanand, Sursuranand, Narharyanand, Yoganand, Sukhanand, Bhavanand, Galanand, Kabir, Ram Das, Sena, Pipa, Dhanna, and Padmavati. The famous saying which has been attributed to Ramanand cannot be found in the collection of Ramanand's poetry in the vernacular which has been edited by Pitambar Datt Barthwal under the title *Ramanand ki Hindi Racnaen*. The saying is in Hindi and hence would not be found in the two Sanskrit texts, *Vaisnabamatabjabhaskar* and *Ramarcnapaddhiti*, which have also been attributed to Ramanand.
2. The recruitment of women and the members of servant and untouchable castes into an ascetic sect was an innovation in Hindu asceticism, but it was not an innovation in south Asian asceticism. The so-called heretical sects, such as the sects founded in the name of Sakyamuni Buddha, were open to all Hindus regardless of their caste or sex status long before the appearance of *Swami* Ramanand in upper India.
3. During the latter part of the 18th century the Mughal Emperor's control over his civil administration slackened and a number of local and regional revenue collectors profited from the situation and established their own petty kingdoms. During this turbulent period in the administration of upper India the Dasnami Sannyasis secured a significant share of the trade in light weight luxury items, such as gold, coral, gems, and musk. The pilgrimage routes doubled as commercial routes and some of the Dasnami monasteries also served as banking institutions. The abbots of these monasteries loaned both troops and money to the petty kings. The battles between the Sannyasi and Ramanandi ascetics usually occurred at pilgrimage centers and were provoked by the competition for precedence in religious processions. The commercial and financial activities of the ascetic sects during this period are not well known, but it is possible that the battles between the ascetic sects were caused by both economic and religious competition. See Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of the Dasnami Naga Sanyasis* and Bernard S. Cohn. *The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India*.
4. The Peshwa court settled the dispute in 1813 by assigning separate bathing places to the two sects. The battle in 1789 is mentioned in the 1813 settlement inscribed on a copper plate, a facsimile of which has been published in *Jagriti*, 10, 4, 1945, pp. 896-897.
5. I have taken this spiritual genealogy from Sinha, *Ram Bhakti men Rasik Sampradaya*, p. 323. Sinha claims that the genealogy is authentic (*pramānik*), but he does not provide any detailed information concerning the date and location of the particular manuscript of *Ramarcnapaddhiti* to which he had recourse.
6. This genealogy appears to be the standard north Indian genealogy of this south Indian sect. This particular genealogy was taken from *chappaya* 30 of the *Sri Bhakta Mala* which Nabha Ji wrote during the latter part of the 16th century.
7. I have followed Ramanandi sectarian sources here. According to the *Ram Patal*, pp. 111-113, the spiritual clans founded by Anantanand and his spiritual descendants are: 1) Anantanand, 2) Ram Raval, 3) Yoganand, 4) Khoji, 5) Karmacand, 6) Alakh Ram, 7) Raghocetan, 8) Agra Ji, 9) Hathi Narayan Das, 10) Khil Das, 11) Ram Thabhan Das, 12) Nabha Ji, 13) Tila Ji, 14) Ram Ramani, 15) Hanuman Hathila, 16) Jangi Ji, 17) Bhagawan Narayan Das, 18) Tan Tulsi Das, 19) Divrakar, 20) Purna Bairathi, 21) Govind Das, 22) Laharam, 23) Lal Tarangi, 24) Deva Murari, 25) Kalunayana, 26) Maluk Das, and 27) Deva Bharangi. The four spiritual clans founded by Sursuranand and his spiritual descendants include: 1) Sursuranand, 2) Anabhyand, 3) Kuva, 4) Damodar Das.

8. The opinion of the genealogists of the sect is also held by Sinha, *Ram Bhakti men Rasik Sampradaya*, p. 329.
9. Ghurye (1964:182) has written that "the Dwārā [spiritual clan] affiliation was significant in the past in so far as the Nāgā ascetic [member of a militant order] could establish his identity to the Vaisnavite bairagis through an esoteric formula in which his Dwārā figured." The genealogists of the Ramanandi sect who operate in Bihar and the Nepalese Tarai, were unable to confirm Ghurye's opinion for me, nor could they recall the existence of any esoteric formula. Contrary to Ghurye I suspect that the spiritual clans never had a function. They were merely a genealogical arrangement to purge the sect of impure elements and to attract the patronage of householders. Having served their purpose, they became at once vestigial organs. At present membership in a spiritual clan confers no rights and duties upon the Ramanandi ascetic.
10. After the Kumbh festival of 1921 the genealogy was published in Ayodhya as a broadsheet by the Sri Ramanandiya Vaisnav Mandal. The broadsheet has been reprinted in Sinha, *Ram Bhakti men Rasik Sampradaya*, pp. 320-322.
11. The Sri sect of south India was also divided on the issue of the participation of the members of the servant castes in the organization of the sect. Stein (1968:78-94) describes the events leading to the division of the Dravidian Sri sect into a Southern School and a Northern School and notes the different positions of these two schools on the issue of servant caste participation in the rituals and organization of the sect. Stein goes on to note that during the 16th century the influence of the members of the servant castes waned and the Sri ascetics of Brahman birth performed the more significant roles in the organization of the sect. I have not found any information, however, which links these events in the Dravidian south with the later displacement of the Sri sect from the *catuh sampradaya* by the Ramanandi sect and with the purge of the secondary sects founded in the name of Ramanand's disciples of servant caste, untouchable, or female birth.
12. The Sri ascetics of northern India did eventually take this course of action but at what appears to be a much later date than the lifetime of *Swami* Ramanand. In a spiritual genealogy published in 1923 the Sri ascetics adapted the subdivision of the *catuh sampradaya* into fifty-two spiritual clans to their own purposes. One finds the names of Ramanand's spiritual descendants (Anantanand, Sukhanand, Pipa, Agra Ji, Khoja Ji, etc.) as the heads of Sri spiritual clans. Ramanujacarya, Sudarsanacarya (Nimbarka), Sri Vallabhacarya, and Madhvacharya are listed as being the preceptors of the four sects of the *catuh sampradaya*. There is no indication in the genealogy that a saint by the name of Ramanand ever existed. The genealogy may be found in Pandit Tikam Das, *Sri Vairagya Kula Karma Sara Sangrah*, bound between pp. 40-41.

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