

# AYODHYA - THE DARK NIGHT

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## Appendix I

THE RAMANANDI SECT IS one of many Vaishnava sampradayas, each of which advocates the worship of a different manifestation of Lord Vishnu. While in other Vaishnava sects, becoming a naga is at best a marginal phenomenon, it is a major one among the Ramanandis. There is no unanimity among historians with regard to the time when Ramananda, the founder of this sect, walked the earth, and the disputed dates vary from the end of the thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century. The most probable date is the one provided by G.S. Ghurye, according to whom Ramananda was born in Prayag (Allahabad) in northern India in 1300 AD and spent much of his career as a Vaishnava sadhu in Varanasi.<sup>1</sup> The credit of establishing Lord Rama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, as the tutelary deity for his followers goes to Ramananda. And to the sub-sect inspired by him goes the honour of having the largest ascetic membership and the biggest contingent of nagas.

In this respect, the Ramanandi vairagis greatly resemble Shaivite sanyasis or ascetics whose military organization they seem to have copied. In naga parlance, sanyasi and vairagi designate different sectarian affiliations. While Shaiva nagas are called sanyasis, renunciants, Vaishnava nagas are referred to as vairagis, literally meaning 'detached' or 'dispassionate'. As very few historical sources are available on the origin and evolution of the Ramanandi military organization, it is extremely hard to decide upon its chronology. What is certain, however, is that the organization of akharas came very late in the life of the Ramanandi sect, much later than among the naga sanyasis of the Shaiva sect. For none of the seven major Shaiva akharas – collectively called Dashnami Sampradaya – was born later than 1600 AD and most came into existence around the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the organization of Ramanandi akharas is known to have taken place between 1650 and 1700 AD.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the nagas of Dashnami akharas worship Lord Shiva and

recognize Adi Shankaracharya as the originator of their sampradaya, the nagas of the Ramanandi sect worship Lord Rama and recognize Ramananda as their Adi Guru, deriving their main theological orientation from Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*.

Externally, Ramanandi vairagis are distinguished from Shaivite sanyasis by their dress and sect marks. The vairagis are marked off from the sanyasis by their white garments as against the latter's saffron clothes. The tilak mark on the forehead of the vairagis is another feature that distinguishes them from sanyasis. The material that is used for making it is never the sacred ash, which is favoured by sanyasis. Its shape and design, too, are different and exclusively used by them. Its basic pattern is formed by three vertical lines as contrasted with the horizontal lines of the tilak mark of sanyasis. Among themselves, however, the various sub-sects of vairagis differ both as regards the material used for the tilak mark as well as the details of the pattern.

Contrary to the belief promoted largely by the All India Hindu Mahasabha as well as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliates, including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, that the militant akharas were organized to protect Hindu places of worship in the wake of the onslaught of Muslim rulers, history speaks otherwise. While the main driving force behind the organization of Dashnami akharas was to forcibly take over Buddhist, Jain and Vaishnava religious institutions, Ramanandi akharas came into existence primarily to protect vairagis from the violent attacks of Shaiva sanyasis and to free Vaishnava religious places from the occupation of Dashnamis.

There is evidence of how, for centuries, Shaiva and Vaishnava ascetics had been at loggerheads and had not only despised but even killed one another in fairly large numbers. Ghurye lists some such instances. It is said that one Bhairava Giri Gosavi, a Dashnami naga, had vowed not to partake of his daily meals without killing at least one Vaishnava vairagi. Among the Vaishnavas, Bhairava Giri had a counterpart in one Ram Das who refused to eat if he hadn't killed at least one sanyasi. With such deep-rooted animosity, it is not surprising why there were frequent bloody fights between them, especially at the time of the Kumbha Mela. Some of them are well recorded, including a violent fight in Hardwar in 1760, and a great massacre of vairagis by Shaiva sanyasis in Nasik during the Simhastha Fair in 1690.<sup>4</sup>

It is believed that against this backdrop, sometime in the late seventeenth century, a conference of Vaishnava ascetics was held at the Galta Valley, located towards the east of Jaipur in Rajasthan, in which one Balananda of the Ramanandi sect was entrusted with the task of organizing the naga section of vairagis to protect their holy places from Shaiva sanyasis, who were already well organized. Balananda is said to have formed three anis, an ani being the short form of the Sanskrit word anika, meaning 'army'.<sup>5</sup> These three anis – Nirvani, Nirmohi and Digambari – were subdivided into akharas, places where the militant ascetic members, the astradhari, of a traditional sect reside. The akharas affiliated with a particular sect have their own separate administrative system and are quite distinct from the mathas, the religious establishments where shastradhari or the scholastic monks of the same sect live. Each akhara operates as an individual corporate unit, but all the akharas in a sect are linked through a superior governing body.

While the Nirvani Ani consists of the Nirvani, Khaki and Niralambhi akharas, the Nirmohi Ani includes the Nirmohi, Mahanirvani and Santoshi akharas. The Digambari Ani has under it the Ram Digambari and Shyam Digambari akharas. Of all these, the Nirvani, Nirmohi and Digambari akharas are the main Ramanandi military camps, each having its principal centre in Ayodhya.