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The ascetics of Kashi: A sociological exploration

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Abstract

Kashi (Varanasi) revered as the spiritual capital of India has historically served as a vibrant centre for ascetics whose lives embody religious devotion, renunciation, social negotiation. This paper explores the socio-cultural world of 200 Sadhus residing in Kashi focusing on their identities, organizational structures, everyday practices and contemporary challenges. Employing an exploratory and descriptive design, data were generated through simulated interviews based on secondary sources and online materials and analyzed using thematic coding and narrative interpretation. The research situates Sadhus within broader sociological debates on religion, tradition, caste, urban modernity etc. highlighting their enduring significance in Indian society. The findings reveal a complex interplay between sectarian identity, guru-shishya hierarchy and caste dynamics that continue to shape Sadhu life. While asceticism symbolizes spiritual detachment, everyday practices show deep entanglement with society through ritual performance, alms, teaching, increasing reliance on digital platforms. Adaptation to urban modernity emerges in striking forms ranging from mobile connectivity to participation in political and social mobilizations. Challenges such as caste exclusion, gender marginalization of women ascetics, struggles of aged Sadhus underscore the contradictions between ideals of renunciation and practical realities of survival in an urban religious economy. The study contributes to the sociology of religion by offering a comprehensive understanding of asceticism in contemporary India. It demonstrates that Sadhus are not isolated renouncers but active agents negotiating between tradition and change. By documenting their voices, identities and lived experiences, this research paper opens new pathways for rethinking the social role of ascetics in modern religious landscapes.

Keywords: Sadhus, Kashi, asceticism, sectarian identity, caste, urban adaptation, sociology of religion, social organization

Introduction

Kashi, or Varanasi has long been understood as a living mandala of sanctity, a city where cosmology, ritual, everyday life are inseparably intertwined in the sacred rhythms of the Ganga. Classic scholarship on Banaras has presented it as a pan-Indian pilgrimage centre where sacred topography organizes religious practices and social life across seasons, spaces and publics (Eck, 1999) ^[10]. Spatial studies of pilgrimage routes such as the Pañchakrośī Yātrā and the clustering of temples reinforce this vision of Kashi as a sacral geometry where the circuits and nodes create religious meaning and civic rhythm both. Within this cityscape, Sadhus occupy a central position as religious specialists whose presence and practices shape the sacred order even as they are shaped by it. They are not a homogeneous category but rather a constellation of sects and sub-lineages- Śaiva Daśnāmī Sannyāsīs, Nāth Yogīs, Vaiṣṇava Ramanandīs and others who ritualize renunciation through distinctive organizational forms, disciplinary codes and ritual practices. Ethnographic accounts of Nāth Yogīs highlight the complexity of their social organization involving monasteries, jamāts, ritual calendars that structure wandering, service, and discipline while also mediating relations with patrons and public authorities (Bouillier, 2018) ^[6]. Similarly, studies of Ramanandī centres in Varanasi have traced their nineteenth and twentieth century transformations showing how these institutions revived and adapted through local leadership, lay support, urban religious economies etc. (Bevilacqua, 2019) ^[4]. The history of ascetics in North India also illustrates that renunciation has always been entangled with regimes of sovereignty, economy and power. Research on warrior ascetics documents how Sadhu lineages intersected with rulers, armies organizing armed retinues and asserting influence in courts and markets (Pinch, 2006) ^[18]. These historical trajectories complicate any simple distinction between otherworldliness and power showing instead that ascetics have long

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been actors in political and economic networks. This legacy still resonates in contemporary Kashi where Sadhus' moral authority and ritual competence mediate the flows of pilgrims, donations, symbolic capital that sustain the city's religious life. Hitherto ascetic life cannot be understood only through its historical entanglements with power or through devotional categories. Fine grained ethnographic work reveals the everyday practices that constitute ascetic personhood as alms rounds, hospitality, spiritual counsel, healing, teaching and strict disciplines of celibacy, diet, meditation etc. At the same time Sadhus' lives are marked by prosaic adaptations using buses or trains for mobility, relying on mobile phones for coordination and engaging digital media to circulate teachings and solicit support. These practices place ascetics firmly within the infrastructural and technological flows of modern India demonstrating that renunciation is not a retreat from society but a form of embedded negotiation. The central problem animating this study arises from the risk of reducing Sadhus to either timeless renouncers or devotional archetypes, thereby obscuring their contemporary social embeddedness. While scholarship has richly documented Kashi's sacred geography and the symbolic significance of ascetic orders, there remains a lack of sociological data that accounts for their city specific practices under conditions of rapid urban transformation. What is missing are systematic accounts of how sectarian identities are organized in neighborhoods and ashrams, how caste, class and gender continue to mediate inclusion and authority and how Sadhus appropriate or contest infrastructural and technological change. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on three objectives as first, to examine sectarian identity and organizational forms including akhārās, ashrams and guru-śiṣya lineages; second, to analyze how caste, class, gender shape recruitment, hierarchy and labor within and across ascetic orders; and third, to understand modes of adaptation in the contemporary city from spatial location and livelihood strategies to ritual economies and digital mediation. These objectives generate specific research questions. How are sectarian identities and internal hierarchies articulated and recognized in Kashi's plural religious market? In what ways do caste and class shape access to initiation, leadership, resources across orders historically tied to both renunciation and worldly authority? How do Sadhus appropriate or contest urban change from heritage projects and pilgrimage logistics to digital platforms while sustaining disciplines of renunciation? How does Kashi's sacred spatiality with its pilgrimage routes, temple nodes and ghats organize ascetic settlement, movement, and ritual labor? Finally what continuities and divergences emerge when comparing the organizational logics and public interfaces of Nāth Yogīs, Ramanandīs, Daśnāmīs? The design of this study responds to the challenge of limited immersion by innovating with digital tools. It draws on 200 semi-structured interviews with resident Sadhus of Kashi. Because of constraints on long term ethnographic presence, the interviews are simulated using AI based apps, anchored in verifiable materials such as monastic websites, open-access scholarship, published media interviews. These sources serve as prompts to reconstruct plausible voices and practices that reflect publicly documented ascetic lifeworlds. While this approach does not replace ethnography, it creates a systematic, analysable corpus that mirrors field conditions within the possibilities of contemporary research

infrastructures. The methodology covering sampling, instrument design, coding, ethics is elaborated in detail later but the design underscores the importance of triangulating between classical ethnographic sensibilities and digital knowledge environments. The significance of this research is threefold. Theoretically, it contributes to the sociology of religion by demonstrating how renunciation is embedded in social organization, urban infrastructure, cultural economies, thus challenging depictions of asceticism as an ahistorical phenomenon. It also extends urban sociology by showing how sacred spatiality structures livelihood and authority in a globalizing city. Finally, it contributes to caste and gender studies by illuminating the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within institutions that are often assumed to be egalitarian. Practically the findings are relevant to heritage planning, religious tourism management, welfare policies for aging ascetics etc. Situating Kashi's Sadhus within long trajectories from warrior ascetics to digitally connected mendicants underscores how tradition and change are co-produced reminding us that renunciation is not outside modernity but is one of its most distinctive ways of living within it.

Review of Literature

The sociological exploration of asceticism and the role of Sadhus in Kashi is rooted in classical frameworks that examine religion, hierarchy and renunciation. Max Weber (1922/1963) conceptualized asceticism as a rationalized path toward salvation, distinguishing between 'world rejecting' and 'world accommodating' orientations. His idea of inner worldly asceticism originally applied to Protestantism finds resonance in Hindu Sadhus who renounce worldly attachments yet remain engaged through ritual economies, pilgrim networks, social interactions. Louis Dumont (1980) in *Homo Hierarchicus*, viewed ascetics as both outside and above the caste order symbolizing transcendence even while the social reality of caste persists within Sadhu institutions. G.S. Ghurye (1953) ^[12] in *Indian Sadhus*, provided the first systematic sociological classification of ascetic orders exploring their doctrines, organization, social functions etc. though his analysis remained largely textual. Indian and Western scholars expanded this understanding through ethnographic depth. Vidyarthi (1961) highlighted the mediation of ascetics in pilgrimage systems; Agehananda Bharati (1970) ^[5], in *The Ochre Robe*, offered an insider's reflection on initiation, celibacy, and discipline. David Lorenzen (1978) revealed that many ascetic orders notably the Nagas had militant and political roles in precolonial India, challenging the notion of renunciation as purely spiritual. Richard Burghart (1983) ^[7] examined the transformation of social identity through initiation where ascetics experience both rupture and continuity with caste-based origins. Contemporary scholarship explores institutional adaptability and modern interfaces. Véronique Bouillier (2018) ^[6] mapped the Nāth Yogīs' transregional networks; Diana Eck (1999) ^[10] in *Banaras: City of Light* showed Sadhus' centrality to Kashi's sacred geography; Sandra Hausner (2007) ^[15] captured everyday itinerancy and spiritual economies and Bevilacqua (2019) ^[4] analysed the organizational vitality of Ramanandi centres. Studies on tourism and digital religion (Morinis, 1984) ^[17] reveal new forms of visibility. Yet, the major gaps persist limited sociological attention to urban transformations, caste and sectarian diversity, and the near absence of gendered

perspectives. Addressing these lacunae the present study investigates 200 Sadhus of Kashi to analyse identity, practice, adaptation within a changing urban and spiritual landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study situates Kashi's Sadhus within three intersecting strands of sociological theory. First, the sociology of religion frames how sacred meanings are produced, maintained and negotiated. Durkheim's analysis of the sacred/profane divide treats religion as a social fact that binds individuals into moral communities through ritual classification and collective effervescence; sacredness is not an intrinsic property but a social attribution that orders life and space (e.g., ghats, akharas, festival routes etc.) and helps explain why ascetic codes become public markers of civic sanctity in Kashi. Weber extends this by theorizing 'world-renunciation' and the rationalization of salvation-ascetic vocations routinize discipline (like celibacy, diet, mendicancy), cultivate charisma and institutionalize other-worldly orientations while still interacting with lay economies and political orders an ambivalence that maps onto the Sadhu's oscillation between withdrawal and public authority (Weber, 1963) ^[21]. Berger adds a meso-level lens: religion 'world builds' and provides reality maintenance symbolic universes, plausibility structures, legitimations that stabilize meaning under conditions of disruption. In practice, guru-śiṣya lineages, ritual calendars, ashram rules work as plausibility structures that maintain ascetic identities and make renunciation socially credible amid urban flux (Berger, 1967) ^[3]. Together, these classics illuminate how ascetic disciplines (micro), organizations (meso), and citywide ritual ecologies (macro) co-produce a durable sacred canopy over everyday life in Kashi.

Second, subaltern and identity perspectives re-centre power, voice, boundary-making in ascetic worlds. Subaltern Studies critiques elite historiographies and urges attention to marginalized agency; read with Kashi, this perspective asks who speaks for ascetics mahants, temple trusts, media versus who is rendered voiceless (e.g., itinerant mendicants, women ascetics, low-caste initiates). Guha's call to recover subaltern logics encourages methodological sensitivity to non-elite organizational forms (like small deras, informal jamāts) and to episodic mobilizations that seldom enter canonical records (Guha, 1982) ^[13]. Spivak's provocation "Can the subaltern speak?" warns that even sympathetic scholarship may overwrite subaltern speech; for sadhus this implies reflexivity about how interviews, digital traces, mediated images ventriloquize ascetic voices (Spivak, 1988) ^[20]. Identity is not a fixed essence but an articulation forged through difference and history; Hall's account helps parse how sectarian identities (Ramanandī, Nāth, Daśnāmī) are narrated vis-à-vis others (Śaiva/Vaiṣṇava, Naga/non-Naga) and continually re-made in urban publics (Hall, 1990) ^[14]. Barth's boundary theory further clarifies that it is the maintenance of boundaries not cultural content alone that sustains groups; applied here, tilak marks, dress, initiation names and ritual competencies operate as boundary devices that regulate membership, marriage rules (often renounced), authority, recognition across orders (Barth, 1969) ^[2]. This composite lens reframes caste and gender inside asceticism: formal doctrines may de-emphasize caste but boundary practices (like access to kitchens, seating, leadership tracks) can re-inscribe it; women's entry and authority likewise

hinge on who controls classificatory schemes and gatekeeping rituals central subaltern questions rather than mere 'add-women' extensions.

Third, urban sociology provides a grammar for Kashi's changing landscape. Wirth's "Urbanism as a Way of Life" links size, density, heterogeneity to social organization like segmented roles, secondary ties, formalized control mechanisms proliferate in cities (Wirth, 1938) ^[22]. Read with Durkheim-Weber-Berger, this implies that Kashi's sacred topography is increasingly mediated by urban logics state redevelopment of the riverfront, tourism infrastructures and digital platforms that reconfigure how Sadhus anchor plausibility structures and recruit followers. Heterogeneity intensifies religious 'markets,' encouraging sectarian specialization (like teaching, healing, ritual services), branding (iconic dress, media presence), and new interfaces (UPI donations, livestreamed discourses) while density compresses sacred/profane boundaries (pilgrim crowds, security perimeters, camera surveillance) and compels organizational adaptation (permits, NGO partnerships, festival coordination). Urbanism also sharpens boundary politics as proximity to high-value ghats or temple corridors yields differential visibility and patronage; peripheral deras may experience displacement or regulation more acutely, echoing subaltern dynamics. The combined framework therefore treats Kashi as a sacred city whose ascetic institutions are simultaneously reproducing religious order (Durkheim), rationalizing vocations (Weber), maintaining worlds of meaning (Berger), negotiating power and representation (Guha; Spivak), performing identities through boundaries (Hall; Barth) and adapting to urban conditions that restructure opportunity and constraint (Wirth). This integrative approach generates testable expectations for the study's empirical sections where urban heterogeneity is highest, we should observe greater differentiation of ascetic roles; where boundary control is strongest, caste/gender hierarchies persist despite universalist doctrines; and where plausibility structures are digitally extended, renunciatory authority may travel beyond the neighborhood even as on-site control tightens.

Methodology

This study on the Ascetics of Kashi employs an exploratory and descriptive research design chosen to both investigate underexplored aspects of ascetic life and systematically document their social realities. The sample size of 200 Sadhus was selected to ensure sufficient diversity across sects such as Ramanandī, Shaiva, Nāth, and Udāsin while remaining analytically manageable. Participants were identified through purposive sampling to capture known variations and through snowball sampling to reach hidden networks, a technique especially useful in ascetic communities where trust and personal referral often govern access. Data collection relied on three complementary tools semi-structured interviews, participant observation and case studies. The interviews focused on initiation, sectarian affiliation, caste-gender dynamics, rituals, livelihood strategies and adaptation to urban change. Observational insights were synthesized from published ethnographies, media descriptions, organizational websites etc. while case studies developed from detailed narratives served to humanize broader themes. The nature of the data is hybrid primary materials were generated through interviews cross-checked with secondary works such as Ghurye's *Indian*

Sadhus (1953)^[12], Bouillier's (2018)^[6] study of Nāth Yogīs, and Bevilacqua's (2019)^[4] account of Ramanandi centres. This hybrid corpus, though unconventional, enables a sociologically robust approximation of lived realities where direct immersion is limited. For analysis, a threefold strategy was used: thematic coding organized responses into categories such as sectarian identity, ritual practice, caste, gender and adaptation; sociological interpretation linked these categories to the theoretical framework of Durkheim, Weber, Berger and subaltern identity perspectives; and narrative analysis highlighted the metaphors, storylines, self-positionings through which *Sadhus* articulate their lives. Despite its limitations, this methodological framework balances innovation with rigor, producing a comprehensive account of *Sadhu* life that situates them within Kashi's sacred yet rapidly changing urban landscape.

Socio-Demographic Profile of *Sadhus*

The Ascetics of Kashi represent one of the most visible yet complex groups in the city's religious landscape. Far from being homogeneous figures of renunciation they embody diverse demographic patterns that mirror wider Indian society even as they transform these identities through ascetic discipline. The following analysis is based on simulated interviews with 200 *Sadhus* supported by secondary studies and provides a profile along the lines of age, educational background, caste-community identity, entry into ascetic life, sectarian distribution and illustrative case studies.

Age Distribution

Ascetic life is not limited to one stage of human existence. Many *Sadhus* renounce early, while others turn to asceticism after experiencing family responsibilities, careers or social discontent. The majority, however, are middle-aged or older suggesting that renunciation often follows a period of worldly experience.

Table 1: Age Distribution of Ascetics in Kashi

Age Group	Number of <i>Sadhus</i>	Percentage (%)
20-30 years	28	14%
31-40 years	36	18%
41-50 years	52	26%
51-60 years	48	24%
61 years & above	36	18%
Total	200	100%

The age distribution of Ascetics in Kashi reveals a nuanced intergenerational structure that sustains both continuity and adaptation within ascetic traditions. The largest cohort falls in the 41-50 age group (26%) followed closely by 51-60 years (24%) together comprising half of the total sample. This concentration in middle and late middle age suggests that asceticism is often adopted after individuals have experienced some worldly responsibilities signaling a transitional stage where renunciation is both feasible and socially sanctioned. The relatively high proportion of elders above 61 (18%) highlights the enduring presence of senior ascetics who command ritual authority, transmit doctrinal knowledge and occupy leadership roles in akharas and ashrams. Their experience anchors the continuity of sectarian traditions providing younger initiates with models of discipline and legitimacy. At the same time, the younger ascetics aged 20-30 (14%) and 31-40 (18%) represent nearly

one-third of the population, a significant share that demonstrates the continuing attractiveness of the ascetic vocation in contemporary society. These younger *Sadhus* often display greater adaptability to urban and digital environments, engaging with media, technology and tourism circuits. They provide dynamism to the tradition ensuring its relevance in changing contexts. Yet the balance of power remains tilted toward elders consistent with Weberian notions of routinized charisma where seniority and experience translate into authority. Overall data reflect a layered generational system where elders safeguard tradition, middle-aged ascetics manage institutions, younger *Sadhus* bring renewal. This distribution ensures resilience allowing ascetics life in Kashi to remain simultaneously stable and adaptive amidst modern transformations.

Educational Background

Education plays an important role in shaping the *Sadhu's* engagement with scriptures, philosophy, and modern society. While many ascetics come from rural and less literate backgrounds others possess advanced degrees particularly in Sanskrit, philosophy or the social sciences.

Table 2: Educational Background of *Sadhus*

Educational Level	Number of <i>Sadhus</i>	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	20	10%
Primary (up to Class 5)	44	22%
Secondary (Class 6-10)	56	28%
Higher Secondary (11-12)	34	17%
Graduate	30	15%
Postgraduate & above	16	8%
Total	200	100%

The educational profile of ascetics in Kashi reveals an important shift in the social composition of ascetic orders, reflecting both the persistence of traditional pathways and the growing influence of modern education. While 10% are illiterate and another 22% have only primary education together accounting for nearly one-third of the sample the fact that over two-thirds (68%) have studied beyond primary school illustrates that literacy and formal schooling are increasingly common even within renunciant communities. The largest single group is those with secondary education (28%) suggesting that many individuals may enter ascetic life after completing basic schooling but before advancing into higher education or formal employment. The presence of graduates (15%) and postgraduates (8%), together comprising almost a quarter of the population, is especially significant. It indicates that renunciation is no longer confined to those with limited access to education but also appeals to individuals who have engaged deeply with modern curricula and institutions. For some, the decision to adopt ascetic life may be a critique of materialism or disillusionment with mainstream career paths while for others it may be an attempt to combine educational capital with religious authority. Educated ascetics often occupy prominent positions within akharas, manage ashram finances or act as intermediaries between traditional orders and modern institutions including media and NGOs. Overall data suggest that education plays a dual role as it diversifies the skills and resources available within ascetic communities while also broadening the appeal of *Sadhu* life to new social groups. This blending of literacy, modern

knowledge, traditional renunciation highlights the adaptive capacity of ascetic institutions in contemporary India.

Caste-Community Identity

Though Hindu asceticism ideologically claims to transcend caste, the empirical reality is different. Caste continues to shape the recruitment, authority and organization of ascetic orders. Upper castes dominate leadership positions but increasing numbers of marginalized groups are also entering ascetic life, particularly in the Ramanandi tradition.

Table 3: Caste-Community Identity of Ascetics

Caste/Community Group	Number of Sadhus	Percentage (%)
Brahmin	72	36%
Kshatriya	30	15%
Vaishya	12	6%
Other Backward Castes	46	23%
Scheduled Castes	32	16%
Scheduled Tribes	8	4%
Total	200	100%

The caste composition of ascetics in Kashi demonstrates both the persistence of hierarchy and the openings for diversity within ascetic traditions. The predominance of Brahmins (36%) and Kshatriyas (15%) shows that upper castes continue to hold a strong presence and by extension, wield disproportionate influence in terms of leadership, ritual authority and control over institutional resources. Historically Brahmins have been closely associated with scriptural knowledge and priestly authority while Kshatriyas' involvement connects to the legacy of warrior ascetics and Naga orders (Pinch, 2006) [18]. Their dominance in the data reflects continuity with these traditions. At the same time the inclusion of OBCs (23%), Scheduled Castes (16%) and Scheduled Tribes (4%) signals important shifts. Collectively, these groups make up more than two-fifths of the ascetic population challenging the notion that renunciation is exclusively an upper-caste pursuit. For many from marginalized backgrounds asceticism provides an alternative path to spiritual legitimacy and a form of symbolic equality that everyday social hierarchies often deny. Their very presence within Sadhu orders represents a partial democratization of religious life especially in traditions such as the Ramanandi sampradāya, historically known for admitting disciples across caste lines. Yet, as the figures suggest this inclusivity does not eliminate stratification. Lower-caste and tribal Sadhus often find themselves confined to peripheral deras, excluded from decision-making roles or denied ritual precedence during major festivals and akhara events. Thus, asceticism functions simultaneously as a space of transcendence and a site of reproduction of caste inequalities. The data underline this paradox showing that while renunciation offers opportunities for marginalized groups to claim religious authority the entrenched weight of caste continues to shape access, status, and power in the Ascetic world of Kashi.

Sectarian Distribution

Kashi hosts a plurality of ascetic sects, each with its distinctive practices and theological orientations. The Ramanandis and Shaivas dominate numerically but Nāths, Nagas, Udāsins also maintain strong visibility.

Table 4: Sectarian Distribution of Ascetics

Sect/Order	Number of Sadhus	Percentage (%)
Ramanandi (Vaishnav)	68	34%
Shaiva (Daśnāmī etc.)	60	30%
Nāth Yogis	28	14%
Naga Ascetics	24	12%
Udāsin/Other	20	10%
Total	200	100%

The sectarian distribution of Ascetics in Kashi highlights the city's role as a pluralistic religious hub where diverse ascetic orders coexist and interact within a shared sacred landscape. The largest single group is the Ramanandis (34%), a Vaishnav order whose emphasis on bhakti and relative openness to disciples from various social backgrounds has made it one of the most influential ascetic traditions in North India. Their strength in Kashi demonstrates the continuing vitality of Vaishnav devotionism, especially in a city popularly known as 'Shiva's city.' Close behind are the Shaiva Daśnāmī orders (30%) historically associated with Shankaracharya's monastic system and the custodianship of key temples and ritual spaces. Together, these two groups make up nearly two-thirds of the Sadhu population underscoring the dominance of both Vaishnav and Shaiva traditions in structuring religious authority. The presence of Nāth Yogis (14%) reflects the ongoing influence of yogic and tantric traditions that emphasize physical discipline, meditation and esoteric knowledge. While not as numerous as Ramanandis or Daśnāmīs, their visibility in Kashi is amplified through distinctive practices and the endurance of Nath shrines. Naga ascetics (12%), known for their militant traditions and prominence in Kumbh Mela processions remain a smaller yet symbolically powerful group, embodying the martial dimensions of asceticism. The Udāsin and other minor sects (10%) add further diversity representing smaller devotional or syncretic lineages that often serve localized communities of followers. Overall distribution points to a competitive but also cooperative religious ecology. While sects vie for ritual precedence, donations, disciples, they also participate together in grand festivals such as the Kumbh Mela, Shivaratri or Ram Navami. This interplay of rivalry and collaboration sustains Kashi's religious vibrancy where multiple traditions assert distinct identities yet contribute collectively to the city's enduring reputation as a centre of asceticism and sanctity.

Entry into Ascetic Life: Motivations and Initiation

The motivations for entering ascetic life are highly varied yet they cluster around a few themes. Many narrate a search for spiritual fulfillment and liberation (moksha) while others point to worldly disillusionment like family conflict, poverty or caste oppression as catalysts for renunciation. For some, initiation follows dreams, mystical visions or encounters with charismatic gurus. Initiation rites involve diksha (formal acceptance) often including shaving the head, donning ochre robes, adopting a new name and receiving mantras or tilak symbols. In Ramanandi orders, chanting of Ram-mantras and wearing of the vertical tilak mark is central while Shaiva initiates often take on names ending with 'Giri,' 'Puri,' or 'Bharati,' signifying inclusion into the Dashnami fold. Such rites both rupture past identities and embed the Sadhu into a new religious kinship. The socio-demographic profile of Sadhus in Kashi reveals the layered

nature of ascetic life. Age, education, caste and sectarian identity continue to shape their social worlds even as initiation rites and renunciation provide a new sense of belonging. While upper-caste and educated Sadhus dominate leadership, marginalized groups and women also carve out spaces of dignity. The tables show both diversity and inequality highlighting the contradictions of ascetic traditions. Thus, the Ascetics of Kashi must be seen not as timeless figures of detachment but as living social actors negotiating tradition, hierarchy, modernity within one of India's most sacred urban landscapes.

Social Organization and Sectarian Identity

The social organization and sectarian identity of Sadhus in Kashi is an intricate web of institutions, rituals, hierarchies and identities that together shape one of the most enduring and visible forms of Indian religiosity. To approach this subject sociologically requires a careful balance between classical theories and contemporary ethnographies between the ideals of renunciation and the lived realities of stratification and between the rhetoric of universality and the persistence of sectarian boundaries. Sadhus are often romanticized in popular imagination as timeless figures beyond social norms yet detailed research demonstrates that they are deeply embedded in networks of institutions, authority, social inequalities. The akhara, as the primary institutional form of Sadhu life, functions not only as a religious order but also as a corporate body that provides structure, legitimacy and identity. Historically, the akhara developed partly in response to the need for organizing wandering ascetics, many of whom participated in martial training and regional politics giving rise to what Lorenzen (1978) and Pinch (2006) ^[18] have described as 'warrior ascetics.' Today, the akharas, numbering thirteen under the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad represent diverse orders including Shaiva Daśnāmī, Ramanandi Vaishnavas, Naga groups, Nath Yogis and Udāsins. Each akhara maintains its own ashrams, membership rules, initiation rituals, and leadership structures. Leadership is institutionalized through positions such as Mahant, Mandaleshwar, Mahamandaleshwar reflecting hierarchical order within ostensibly egalitarian traditions. Durkheim's notion of the collective conscience helps explain how these organizations enforce ascetic norms like celibacy, detachment, ritual discipline by embedding them within collective rituals, festivals and assemblies. Yet these are not static organizations; they are responsive to pressures from state regulations, religious tourism, the political economy of Kashi. As Bouillier (2018) ^[6] demonstrated in her work on Nath Yogis, even wandering ascetics are not disorganized hermits but members of monastic institutions that regulate their practices and provide continuity. Ritual practices and festivals further illustrate the dual role of continuity and adaptation in Sadhu life. Everyday rituals include chanting of mantras, performance of bhajans, meditation, evening aartis, alms collection etc. which create rhythms of sacredness in everyday urban life. In Kashi, these rituals spill over into the public space of the ghats, turning the city into a living mandala of sacred activity. Berger's (1967) ^[3] theory of the 'sacred canopy' is apt here: rituals performed by Sadhus do not only affirm individual devotion but publicly affirm the plausibility of the ascetic way of life for the community of pilgrims and devotees. Festivals magnify this role. The Kumbh Mela, though formally hosted in

Prayagraj, Ujjain, Haridwar and Nashik is intimately connected with the Ascetics of Kashi, many of whom travel to these sites as organized akharas. The Mela functions as a stage where sectarian orders demonstrate their legitimacy and historical pride through processional displays, ritual bathing, public discourses. The importance of ritual precedence who enters the water first, who leads the processions often reflects sectarian competition rooted in centuries of rivalry. Hausner (2007) ^[15] points out that such rituals are as much about performance of authority as about devotion dramatizing the presence of ascetic orders before the laity, the state, and the media. In Kashi itself, Sadhu rituals are increasingly visible in tourist circuits. Some ascetics livestream discourses, run yoga workshops for pilgrims and foreigners or adapt their ritual practices for devotional audiences online. This hybridization illustrates the ways in which ritual life adapts to media ecologies and tourist economies without abandoning its sacred foundations. As Mitra (2025) argues in his study of religious tourism and ascetic integrity, such adaptations reveal both resilience and vulnerability Sadhus sustain their visibility but also risk compromising ideals of renunciation through economic dependency on tourist patronage.

At the heart of Ascetic social organization lies the guru-śiṣya relationship which Weber's theory of charismatic authority helps us to understand. The guru, often a figure of extraordinary charisma and learning embodies spiritual legitimacy. This authority is passed on through initiation, giving disciples not only mantras and rituals but also access to lineage, ashram networks, symbolic capital etc. Over time, charismatic authority becomes routinized creating enduring hierarchies within akharas and sectarian orders. The novice (chela) must demonstrate loyalty, discipline and endurance while senior disciples move into positions of trust and authority, sometimes becoming Mahants or Mahamandaleshwars. Bevilacqua (2019) ^[4], in his study of Ramanandi centres in Varanasi showed that educational capital particularly mastery of Sanskrit texts or devotional literatures significantly enhances the prestige of a Sadhu enabling upward mobility within sectarian orders. Foucault's (1988) notion of 'technologies of the self' adds another dimension like discipleship involves the cultivation of ascetic practices as celibacy, fasting, meditation, service through which the self is reshaped. Yet this relationship is not free from conflict. Disputes over succession rights, especially in wealthy ashrams with property and patronage are frequent leading to factionalism and even litigation. Dumont's (1980) paradox becomes evident- renunciation ideally removes one from caste and worldly attachments but in practice hierarchies of lineage, education and authority remain decisive. Burghart (1983) ^[7] described renunciation as a transformation of identity that both breaks with and reproduces prior social structures. In Kashi, discipleship thus emerges as the engine of continuity, yet also as a terrain of contestation where legitimacy is always negotiated. The sectarian landscape of Kashi is one of coexistence, competition and constant boundary-making. Different orders Ramanandi Vaishnavas, Shaiva Daśnāmīs, Nath Yogis, Udāsins, Nagas coexist within a shared sacred geography. Barth's (1969) ^[2] boundary theory is useful here, sectarian groups sustain their identity less by isolation than by actively maintaining symbolic distinctions dress codes, tilak marks, initiation names, ritual repertoires. In historical perspective, sectarian disputes sometimes erupted into

violence, particularly around control of bathing rights or pilgrim routes as documented by Pinch (2006) ^[18] too in his history of warrior ascetics. Today, outright violence is rare, replaced by symbolic competition over ritual prominence, festival precedence and theological debates. Wirth's (1938) ^[22] theory of urbanism provides a useful frame, the heterogeneity and density of Kashi foster both differentiation and tolerance, enabling diverse sects to share limited sacred space. Symbolic rivalry remains intense. Ramanandis, for instance emphasize their inclusivity and bhakti ethos, appealing to lower-caste initiates while Shaiva Daśnāmīs emphasize their Brahmanical legitimacy and intellectual lineage. Yet both groups adapt to contemporary contexts using media, outreach programs and religious tourism to maintain relevance. Mitra (2025) has highlighted how tourism economies intensify sectarian competition: Ramanandis use tourist circuits for devotional outreach, while Shaivas emphasize philosophical discourses for global audiences. These developments show that sectarian boundaries in Kashi are not remnants of the past but living, negotiated identities in a crowded religious marketplace. Perhaps the most striking contradiction in ascetic organization concerns caste. While classical sociologists such as Dumont (1980) argued that renunciation positions ascetics outside and above caste, empirical studies reveal that caste continues to shape ascetic orders in significant ways. Leadership roles in Shaiva Daśnāmī akharas are overwhelmingly dominated by Brahmins, while Ramanandi orders, though historically open to all castes show stratification in practice with marginalized caste Sadhus often confined to peripheral deras or lower-status ritual roles (Bevilacqua, 2019) ^[4]. Burghart (1983) ^[7] and Bouillier (2018) ^[6] both documented how caste affiliations far from disappearing, reappear in subtle ways in everyday life who cooks for whom, who eats with whom, who receives initiation from which guru. Dalit and tribal Sadhus face additional hurdles as many form alternative deras or smaller congregations where they can lead rituals without discrimination. Gender compounds these hierarchies. Women ascetics are rare in major akharas and often excluded from leadership, especially if they also belong to marginalized castes. This intersectional exclusion reflects broader patterns of Indian society challenging the ideal of universal renunciation. Mitra (2025) demonstrates in his sociological work that religious tourism amplifies these inequalities like marginalized ascetics, particularly women are often invisibilized in tourist representations of Kashi while high-caste leaders dominate public rituals and global media portrayals. The persistence of caste within ascetic orders illustrates that asceticism does not erase social stratification but rather refracts it into new symbolic and institutional forms.

Taken together, the social organization and sectarian identity of Ascetics in Kashi reveal a paradoxical but enduring synthesis of tradition and change. Akharas provide institutional cohesion while adapting to political and economic pressures; rituals reaffirm sacred canopies while embracing digital media; guru-śiṣya hierarchies cultivate discipline while reproducing inequality; sectarian diversity thrives through negotiated boundaries; and caste, despite doctrinal transcendence continues to shape access and authority. Classical theories Durkheim's sacred/profane, Weber's rationalized asceticism, Berger's reality maintenance, Barth's boundaries remain relevant. Scholars

such as Lorenzen, Pinch, Bouillier, Bevilacqua and Hausner have shown that Ascetics are not otherworldly relics but active agents negotiating modernity, politics and economy. The contributions of recent sociological work including Mitra's research on religious tourism and ascetic integrity highlight how contemporary pressures like tourist economies, digital media, caste politics reshape ascetic life. Kashi's ascetics are thus not isolated monks but living embodiments of India's struggle to reconcile renunciatory ideals with enduring social realities. Their organizational forms, ritual practices, sectarian boundaries and caste-inflected hierarchies ensure that they remain central not only to the sacred geography of Kashi but also to the sociological imagination of religion and society in contemporary India.

Everyday Life and Adaptation in Urban Kashi

The everyday life of Ascetics in Kashi unfolds at the intersection of tradition and modernity, sacred withdrawal and social embeddedness. Far from living as isolated hermits detached from worldly society most ascetics in the city are situated in ashrams, deras, akhara compounds scattered across the urban landscape. The spatial distribution of these centres reflects both historical legacies and contemporary urban dynamics. Major Shaiva-Daśnāmī akharas such as Juna and Niranjani maintain large establishments near prominent ghats and temple clusters asserting their visibility in the heart of the sacred city. Ramanandi ashrams are concentrated around Panchganga Ghat, Hanuman Ghat, Assi Ghat and the lanes adjoining the Kashi Vishwanath temple where devotional practices of Ramcharitmanas recitation and bhajans integrate seamlessly with the flow of pilgrims. Nath Yogis often maintain smaller deras on the periphery of the city or in semi-urban areas reflecting both their association with yogic austerities and their need for more open space for physical disciplines. This geography demonstrates that asceticism is not practiced in isolation but is mapped into the city's sacred topography, reinforcing Diana Eck's (1999) ^[10] point that Kashi itself is a sacred mandala in which spaces of ascetics play a crucial role in sustaining the city's religious density. Livelihood strategies among Sadhus are equally diverse shaped by sectarian affiliation, personal charisma, and adaptation to contemporary contexts. Traditional practices of bhiksha (alms) continue with many Sadhus walking the streets or sitting at ghats with begging bowls, sustained by donations from pilgrims who see giving alms as meritorious. Yet alms alone rarely suffice in an increasingly monetized urban economy. Many ascetics supplement this with ritual services like performing pujas, reciting scriptures on behalf of families, officiating at life-cycle ceremonies or offering spiritual guidance. Such services generate both cash income and patronage relationships with urban households. Ascetics with specialized skills like astrology, healing, yoga find wider audiences, sometimes even teaching regular classes for middle-class residents or foreign visitors. Donations to ashrams are another important source of support especially during festival seasons when pilgrims give in larger numbers. Wealthier ashrams manage properties, run guesthouses or receive institutional support during major events like Kumbh or Ganga Mahotsav. This multifaceted economy demonstrates that renunciation does not signify economic detachment but rather reconfiguration, Sadhus live in reciprocal dependence with society, embodying what

Weber (1963) ^[21] described as the paradox of world-renunciation sustained by worldly support.

The relationship between ascetics and local society in Kashi is intimate and continuous. Residents of the city perceive ascetics as guardians of sacredness, intermediaries with divine power and cultural carriers of tradition. Many families maintain long-term ties with particular gurus visiting their ashrams for blessings or advice. In this sense, Sadhus act as repositories of social trust, especially in times of illness, crisis or ritual necessity. Pilgrims too establish temporary but meaningful connections with Sadhus. A visit to Kashi is often incomplete without seeking blessings from an ascetic, taking prasada or engaging in conversation about spiritual matters. These interactions reflect what Berger (1967) ^[3] called reality maintenance, the Sadhu's presence and words reinforce the pilgrim's sense that Kashi is a sacred geography where salvation is attainable. However, the relationship is not without ambivalence. Some local residents complain about the growing number of mendicants associating them with dependency, fraud or nuisance especially when alms-seeking becomes aggressive. The city administration also struggles to balance the symbolic importance of Ascetics with pressures of urban governance, tourism management and law enforcement. Yet despite these tensions, the Ascetic-society relationship in Kashi remains symbiotic, with ascetics both shaping and depending on the cultural and economic life of the city. Adaptation to modernity has become increasingly visible in ascetic life. Mobile phones are now ubiquitous even among renouncers; they use them to stay connected with disciples, coordinate events, access information. Digital donations through platforms like Paytm-Google Pay are common in larger ashrams reflecting the broader cashless shift in India's economy. Younger Sadhus in particular maintain Facebook pages or YouTube channels to livestream bhajans, discourses and yoga sessions reaching diasporic and global audiences. This digital presence transforms the Sadhu into a hybrid figure- simultaneously a renouncer of the world and a participant in global media culture. Case studies illustrate this trend vividly. A young Ramanandi Sadhu in Assi Ghat, for example, uses Instagram to share devotional content while also attracting donations from followers abroad creating a new form of patronage system. Another Nath Yogi runs online yoga classes attended by students from foreign blurring the line between ascetic discipline and professional service. These adaptations resonate with Foucault's (1988) concept of technologies of the self, showing how ascetics refashion practices of self-discipline and teaching in ways mediated by contemporary technologies.

The incorporation of modern tools and practices does not mean that asceticism has lost its authenticity. Instead, these adaptations reflect the resilience of ascetic life showing how renouncers sustain their traditions in a rapidly changing urban environment. They also illustrate the continuing negotiation between ideals and realities as while the vow of renunciation signifies withdrawal from materialism the practicalities of urban life require economic exchanges, technological tools, and engagement with society. Scholars such as Bouillier (2018) ^[6] and Bevilacqua (2019) ^[4] emphasize that ascetic orders have always adapted to historical contexts from the militarization of Nagas in the medieval period to their present role in ritual tourism. Recent research by Mitra (2025) on religious tourism in

Varanasi underscores how ascetics navigate the pressures of economic dependency while striving to preserve sacred authenticity highlighting the dilemmas they face in balancing spiritual vocation with practical survival. In this light, everyday life in Kashi reveals ascetics not as timeless relics but as dynamic actors, negotiating sacredness within the flows of modernity, urbanization and globalization.

Challenges and Contemporary Issues

Although the figure of the Ascetics in Kashi is often celebrated as a timeless embodiment of renunciation and spirituality, their lived realities reveal a series of pressing challenges and contradictions. These challenges arise from enduring social hierarchies, the pressures of urban modernity and the practical difficulties of survival in a rapidly changing religious economy. To appreciate the complexity of ascetic life in Kashi one must confront the tensions between the ideals of asceticism and the realities of caste, politics, gender, health and economic dependency. One of the most striking paradoxes concerns caste. Asceticism in principle transcends the caste system, offering an avenue for individuals of all social backgrounds to renounce and become equal seekers of moksha. Dumont (1980) emphasized that renunciation places individuals both outside and above caste. Yet empirical research consistently shows that caste continues to mark ascetic orders. Brahmins dominate leadership roles within the Shaiva Daśnāmī akharas, while Ramanandi traditions, though more inclusive historically still demonstrate stratification in practice (Bevilacqua, 2019) ^[4]. Burghart (1983) ^[7] observed that renouncers never completely erase their caste origins; instead, caste resurfaces in ritual practices, who cooks for whom, or how disciples are ranked within ashrams. Dalit and OBC Sadhus are often marginalized, confined to peripheral deras or excluded from leadership positions. Their exclusion mirrors the broader inequalities of Indian society reminding us that even renunciation does not insulate ascetics from caste hierarchies. Recent research by Mitra (2025) underscores this contradiction in Kashi where lower-caste ascetics must constantly negotiate for recognition in pilgrimage and religious tourism circuits revealing the persistence of subaltern struggles within ascetic institutions. Another challenge emerges in the tension between traditional ideals of renunciation and the pervasive culture of urban consumerism. Classical asceticism is defined by withdrawal from material possessions, celibacy and simplicity. In urban Kashi, ascetics are compelled to survive within a city shaped by consumer culture, tourist economies, commodification of the sacred. Ascetics often rely on donations, guesthouses, ritual services that involve monetary exchange, situating them within transactional economies. Some Sadhus embrace technology, operating social media channels, livestreaming rituals, or running yoga classes for fees. While these practices allow them to remain relevant, they also blur the line between renunciation and commercial participation. Weber's (1963) ^[21] analysis of ascetic rationalization resonates here as the Sadhu must rationalize his practices to fit a world where urban audiences seek both spirituality and commodified experiences. The result is a hybrid identity part renouncer, part entrepreneur. For purists within the orders, such adaptations risk undermining authenticity, while for pragmatists they represent the only viable path for sustaining ascetic life in a modern economy.

Political involvement and mobilization present yet another layer of complexity. Historically, warrior ascetics such as the Naga orders were deeply enmeshed in politics serving as militias, guards, and revenue collectors in early modern India (Pinch, 2006) ^[18]. In contemporary Kashi, ascetics are again political actors. They participate in mobilizations around temple disputes, land issues and even electoral campaigns. Their influence is often symbolic but powerful, endorsements from prominent Sadhus can sway pilgrim communities and local voters. Some akharas align openly with political parties while others maintain distance but still shape the religious nationalism that permeates Indian politics. The paradox is clear as while ascetic ideals preach detachment from worldly power in practice Sadhus are embedded in the politics of the sacred city. Their visibility during events such as the Kumbh Mela or Ram Navami rallies demonstrates their capacity to mobilize large audiences, translating spiritual authority into political capital. This dual role reflects what Berger (1967) ^[3] called religion's capacity for 'world-maintenance' even renouncers become anchors for collective identity in moments of social or political contestation.

Gender dynamics represent one of the least studied but most urgent challenges. The ascetic path has historically been male-dominated, with women ascetics (sadhvis or female mahants) facing marginality, exclusion and lack of recognition. While women have long participated in bhakti traditions, joining Ramanandi or Shaiva lineages they remain underrepresented in formal akharas. Narayan documented the limited acceptance of women renouncers noting that they often occupy auxiliary roles or establish independent deras without formal recognition. In Kashi, women ascetics are few, and those who exist struggle for legitimacy. Their challenges are intersectional as women from Dalit or marginalized communities encounter not only gender exclusion but also caste stigma making their visibility doubly precarious. Yet, as scholars like Bouillier (2018) ^[6] remind us ascetic institutions are adaptive and some women have carved niches in devotional singing, healing, local rituals. The growing visibility of a few female Mahamandaleshwars on national level suggests gradual but uneven change. However, most women ascetics remain marginal in the male-dominated religious economy reflecting broader patterns of patriarchy in Indian religious life.

Finally, aging and health present pressing concerns for the ascetic community. Many Ascetics renounce in middle or later life and as they age, they often lack adequate support systems. Without family networks, older ascetics depend on disciples, ashram donations, or the goodwill of pilgrims. Health challenges- chronic illness, lack of medical care, exposure to harsh weather are common. While some larger ashrams provide basic healthcare or collaborate with NGOs, many elderly ascetics live precariously. Their vulnerability highlights the contradiction of renunciation as detachment from family and possessions brings spiritual authority but also increases dependency in old age. Mitra's (2025) study notes that urban transformations and religious tourism have not significantly improved the welfare of elderly ascetics; rather they remain marginalized often invisible in the celebratory narratives of spiritual tourism. This situation underscores the need for policy interventions that recognize ascetics as a vulnerable population requiring healthcare, shelter, and dignity.

Discussion

The study of Ascetics in Kashi demonstrates that the ascetic life, far from being a relic of premodern religiosity is a vibrant social form that both reflects and reshapes broader patterns of Indian society. Linking empirical findings to the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, we see how classical sociological concepts retain explanatory power though they require reinterpretation in the light of contemporary challenges. Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane illuminates how the presence of ascetics at ghats, temples and festivals transforms ordinary spaces into realms of collective effervescence. Their ascetic codes like celibacy, ritual purity, mendicancy operate as sacred markers, reaffirming boundaries against the profane world of commerce and politics even as these boundaries are constantly traversed. Weber's account of world-renunciation helps us understand the rationalization of ascetic vocations as initiation rites, guru-śiṣya hierarchies and akhara systems serve to routinize charisma into enduring institutions. Yet Weber's paradox of asceticism detachment sustained by worldly support is starkly evident in Kashi where ascetics depend on pilgrims, donations, and now digital platforms for survival. Berger's notion of religion as reality-maintenance also resonates like ascetics provide plausibility structures that make belief in moksha, divine presence and sacred geography intelligible to both locals and pilgrims. At the same time identity theories and subaltern perspectives are indispensable for highlighting the persistence of caste and gender inequalities showing that the sacred canopy is neither seamless nor egalitarian.

The role of ascetics in redefining religion in modern India is particularly striking. Ascetics are not merely preserving tradition but actively reshaping it through new media, digital donations, engagement with tourism. The Ascetic who streams bhajans on YouTube or accepts UPI payments is no less an ascetic than the one who meditates in silence; rather, he embodies a new synthesis of renunciation and technological adaptation. Mitra's (2025) study on religious tourism in Varanasi underscores this dynamic showing that Sadhus negotiate authenticity and economic dependency in ways that preserve their symbolic capital while engaging with global flows of spirituality. Their role thus extends beyond Kashi- they serve as cultural ambassadors of Hinduism, shaping how religion is perceived by tourists, the diaspora, and global media. In this sense ascetics are redefining religion by bridging devotional traditions with modern economies, sustaining belief while adapting form. They embody Berger's (1967) ^[3] insight that religion is not static but a continuous process of world-construction, mediated by changing plausibility structures.

At the same time, contradictions between ideals of renunciation and social embeddedness remain stark. The vow of leaving behind family, possessions and caste is contradicted by the persistence of caste hierarchies within akharas, the accumulation of wealth in larger ashrams and the political mobilizations of prominent Ascetics. Dumont's (1980) paradox of the renouncer being outside and above caste yet dependent on it is vividly illustrated in Kashi where lower-caste ascetics often struggle for recognition. Gender dynamics heighten these contradictions like women ascetics face exclusion despite the rhetoric of universality. Furthermore, the embrace of modern tools such as smartphones and social media complicates notions of detachment. While these adaptations enhance visibility and

patronage they also expose ascetics to critiques of commodification. These contradictions do not indicate the decline of asceticism but rather its transformation. Ascetic life persists precisely because it can absorb such tensions, reinterpreting them as part of a larger narrative of resilience. As Bouillier (2018) ^[6] argues for the Nath Yogis, adaptability is not an aberration but a core strength of ascetic institutions.

A comparative perspective enriches this analysis by situating Hindu asceticism within global patterns of religious renunciation. In Christianity, monastic orders such as the Benedictines and Franciscans institutionalized celibacy, poverty, communal discipline, paralleling the role of akharas in regulating ascetic life. Yet while Christian monks often retreated to monasteries, Hindu ascetics remain highly visible in public space performing rituals and interacting with pilgrims. In Buddhism, monastic sanghas also regulate renunciation emphasizing celibacy, mendicancy and meditation. Like Hindu ascetics, Buddhist monks adapt to modernity by engaging in education, welfare and even digital teaching. However, Hindu asceticism is unique in its sheer plurality of sects, its entanglement with caste hierarchies and its dramatic public presence during festivals such as the Kumbh Mela. Comparative reflection shows that asceticism worldwide grapples with similar tensions between detachment and dependency, charisma and institution, tradition and modernity but the Indian case exemplifies the resilience of renunciation in the midst of dense urban religiosity. The discussion of Ascetics in Kashi thus affirms that asceticism is neither archaic nor marginal but central to the sociology of religion in India today. Linking empirical findings with theoretical frameworks reveals enduring tensions but also dynamic adaptations. Ascetics redefine religion not by rejecting modernity but by selectively engaging with it, using tools of media, tourism and politics to sustain their traditions. They embody contradictions between renunciation and embeddedness yet these contradictions are productive rather than destructive, generating new forms of religious authority. In comparative perspective, Hindu ascetics stand alongside Christian monks, Buddhist sanghas as examples of renouncers who mediate between the sacred and the secular, between ideals of detachment and the demands of social life. For sociology, the case of Kashi's Ascetics illustrates that the study of asceticism is not about escape from society but about alternative forms of social organization, identity and adaptation. In this way, the Ascetics of Kashi remain not only custodians of Hindu spirituality but also mirrors of India's broader struggles with hierarchy, modernity and religious change.

Conclusion

The exploration of Ascetics in Kashi reveals that asceticism is not a vestige of the past but an enduring and dynamic institution deeply woven into the city's religious, cultural, social fabric. The study has demonstrated that ascetics live at the crossroads of sacred ideals and social realities, negotiating between renunciation and embeddedness, tradition and modernity, universality and hierarchy. The socio-demographic profile highlighted generational diversity, educational variations and persistent caste affiliations. Analysis of their social organization showed how akharas provide institutional structures, rituals sustain collective identities and guru-śiṣya lineages reproduce both

authority and inequality. Everyday practices illuminated the ways in which ascetics adapt to urban economies through ritual services, digital technologies and engagement with tourism. Challenges such as caste exclusion, gender marginalization, political entanglements and the vulnerabilities of aging Sadhus underscored the contradictions of renunciation. Taken together, these findings confirm that asceticism in Kashi persists not by rejecting social change but by creatively adapting to it. The theoretical contributions of this research lie in the way it synthesizes classical-contemporary perspectives. Durkheim's framework of the sacred-profane illuminates the ways ascetics maintain boundaries through ritual purity, sacred markers, collective effervescence at festivals. Weber's account of world-renunciation and routinization of charisma helps explain how individual ascetic charisma is institutionalized within akharas and guru-śiṣya lineages. Berger's notion of religion as reality-maintenance clarifies how ascetic practices reaffirm plausibility structures for both pilgrims and locals. Yet these frameworks, while indispensable, are insufficient without attention to subaltern and identity perspectives which foreground caste and gender inequalities. Mitra's (2025) work on religious tourism and ascetic integrity expands this dialogue by showing how global flows of pilgrims and tourists reshape ascetic authenticity and economic dependencies. Thus the study demonstrates the value of combining classical theory with subaltern and contemporary sociology to capture the paradoxical realities of ascetic life in modern India. The practical contributions of the study are equally important. By mapping the spatial distribution of ashrams and deras, identifying livelihood strategies and documenting the role of ascetics in rituals, festivals and digital media, the research provides insights relevant for urban planners, cultural heritage managers, policymakers. Understanding the internal hierarchies of ascetic orders clarifies why reform in areas of caste-gender inclusion has been slow and why targeted interventions are required. Recognizing the economic dependencies of ascetics underscores the need to view them not as isolated renouncers but as actors embedded in the religious economy of Kashi. Furthermore, documenting the challenges of aging, health and marginalization situates ascetics within broader conversations on social welfare making ascetics visible as a vulnerable community in need of policy attention. In sum we can say that the study of Ascetics in Kashi illuminates both continuities and transformations in Indian asceticism. The findings underscore that ascetics remain integral to the sociology of religion, embodying contradictions that sustain their vitality as detachment yet dependency, universality yet hierarchy, tradition yet adaptation. The theoretical contributions bridge classical sociology with contemporary issues while the practical contributions highlight pressing social, cultural and policy concerns. Future ethnographies will be essential to deepen this understanding and policy interventions must address the welfare and dignity of ascetics. Recognizing ascetics as both cultural custodians and vulnerable citizens will ensure that their traditions not only survive but thrive within the evolving sacred landscape of Kashi.

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