

The Indian phenomenon of Renunciation and its Paradox in the light of Girardian Thinking

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India is famous for its age-long traditions of ascetic religiosity. There are thousands of sages and ascetics who live either in different *Ashrams* and *Madhams* (convents) or in caves in remote forests in India. Most of them renounce the worldly affairs and live a life of detachment and self-denial. Renunciation is widespread in all diverse religious traditions in India, especially in Hinduism and in Buddhism and is believed to be a path towards liberation (Moksha) There are also political figures like Mahatma Gandhi who live a life of poverty, asceticism and renunciation and become models of Indian religiosity. By detaching from worldly power and living a humble life, such religious personalities influence the hearts of many people. Most of them do not directly involve in the everyday affairs of society but still have authority over the external world. This is a paradox of Indian phenomenon of renunciation: Being not in the world but controlling the world. In this background we want to see here the cultural backdrop of this paradoxical phenomenon of renunciation in India in the light of Girardian thinking. The study of an indologist, J.C. Heesterman helps us to understand the development of the institution of renunciation in India. Although Heesterman is not pointing out clearly the mimetic mechanism behind the social institutions in Indian society, together with Girardian thinking, we can find out the reasons of the paradox of the phenomenon of Indian renunciation. We look at the development of the phenomenon of renunciation in its connection

The Brahmenical Supremacy, Single Sacrificer and Renouncer

The Indian institution of renunciation originated in the Vedic times and developed through different stages with its different nuances. In his book, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, Heesterman finds that renunciation is related to brahmenical supremacy. In the caste-based Indian society, brahmins enjoy the highest rank. Many of the sages and ascetics are from the brahmin caste. There are different arguments with regard to the supremacy of brahmins. Heesterman says that one of the reasons for this supremacy is brahmin's priestly capacity. The brahmins had the monopoly of the Vedic ritual sacrifices. However, for Heesterman, the ritual monopoly is not the only reason for their

supremacy but it is also because of its connection with the institution of renunciation.ⁱ He explains the writing of *Manu* which say that the ideal brahmin is a renouncer. Other literature like *Uttarajjhaya* of the Jaina canon also exhorts that the brahmins perform the true sacrifices through the renunciatory way of life as that of a monk and declares that a true brahmin is a monk. The Buddhist *Kutadanta Sutta* also says that the highest sacrifice is the way of life of a monk.

According to Heesterman, to understand the relation between brahminical supremacy and the phenomenon of renunciation we must look at the development of the concept of single sacrificer in Vedic literature. Heesterman explains the notion of single sacrificer in his book, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, in connection with patron-brahmin pair. He says that single sacrificer as the pivot or the patron of the ritual is called *yajamana* in the classical system of rituals. “He [*yajamana*] is supposed symbolically to incorporate the universe – he is identified with the cosmic man, Prajapati. The ritual culminates in his ritual rebirth, which signifies the regeneration of the cosmos.”ⁱⁱ Although sacrifices are regenerations of the cosmos, they are not communal but strictly private affairs of *Yajamana*. *Yajamana* is the only beneficiary of sacrifices. Besides, *Yajamana* has to undergo a purificatory ceremony called *diksa*. He must undergo twelve days of gradual purification because his being is tainted by death. During these purificatory days, by means of various offerings and gifts, which represent the parts of his body, *Yajamana* disposes of his impure self. He is reborn. He is regenerated from his impure self into a new self. And in the sacrificial rituals he is doing the roles of the patron and of the officiant. By eating from the offerings and by accepting the gifts as an officiant he takes over the death impurity of the patron. He is transferring evil and impurity and is attaining purity. Heesterman says that this relationship between patron and officiant becomes clearest in the case of the brahmin-officiant. Even though he has a spectator’s role in the ritual, brahmin is the most important of the officiants. “In the classical system his function is to redress the faults committed in the execution of the ritual. He is ... the healer of the ritual, but this must originally have referred to the healing of death. In the preclassical system, then, his role was that of taking over death and impurity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Heesterman says that the concept of single sacrificer as patron-brahmin pair brings out two opposite groups cooperating in the life-winning ritual in the classical ritual texts. Presence of two rival groups is common in ritual contests which are parts of “competing sacrifice”^{iv}. But these two groups are related to each other in a rival co-operation. That means the cooperation between two opposite groups seems to have been characterised by rivalry.^v Heesterman explains different sacrificial contests which are attached to the liturgical operations. For

example, he says about the rivalry between the groups of *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) in the brahmana texts. Both parties exchange food and gifts as sign of their continuous rivalry in sacrificial rituals. The war and racing chariot are also parts of different sacrificial rituals in Indian pre-classical literature. According to Heesterman, this cooperation of rival parties shows that the death must be constantly overcome in order to renew life. It is an ever-repeated cycle of exchanges of life and death. “This [cooperation] meant that one was all the time doubly dependent on the other. One needed the other so as to be able to shed one’s dead, impure self; but, on the other hand, to fill the vacuum thus created, one again depended on the other. *Papam*, ‘evil,’ had to be passed to the other so as to be reconverted into *sri*, ‘good fortune’, but in order to receive it back, one gain depended on the other.”^{vi} But this unending mutual dependence was a vicious circle. For Heesterman, the idea of single sacrificer comes as a way to break this vicious circle of mutual dependence of two rival groups. The ancient ritualists found through the establishment of the practice of single sacrificer as a permanent solution to overcome death and to secure the continuity of life.^{vii} The single sacrificer carries in himself both death and life. “The elimination of the rival brought the cosmic cycle of life and death in one hand; thus the single *yajamana* was enabled to deal ritually with death without incurring the risk involved in the ambivalent cooperation with the others.”^{viii}

By analysing ancient Indian rituals, in his book, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, Heesterman also points out the concept of single sacrificer clearly. He says that the sacrificial rites in Indian traditions, as in any other culture, are periodical regenerations of the cosmos or the winning of life out of death. Although this life-giving aspect of sacrifice was presented symbolically through a violent sacrificial contest, there was a breach in the development of the institution of sacrifice. This breach happened in relation to the famous ritualistic myth of the sacrificial contest between Prajapati, the Lord of Creatures and Mrtyu, Death, in the *Jaminiya Brahmana*^{ix} For a long time, Prajapati and Mrtyu tried to defeat each other without a decision being reached. Finally, Prajapati obtained the decisive ‘vision’ according to which he saw equivalence, a numerical coincidence in sacrifice and thereby he assimilated his opponent, Death, in himself. He defeated death by assimilating it into his own body. That means Prajapati became the seat of life and death. Consequently, there was no contest anymore and Prajapati had no rival in sacrifice. There was only one sacrifice. That was the sacrifice of Prajapati where sacrifice and sacrificer become one and the same. “Prajapati is sacrifice.”^x Prajapati is sacrificer and victim, he is the single creator of death and life, and he is the cosmic man. Heesterman quotes from brahmana text: “Death becomes the self of him who knows thus; when he departs from this world, he passes into that self and becomes

immortal, for Death is his own self.”^{xi} It is on the basis of Prajapati’s sacrifice that all other sacrifices are formulated later. According to Heesterman, this breach, which happened in the ritualistic myth of Prajapati, was the beginning of Vedic ritualism where the sacrificer not only became the cosmic Prajapati but thereby assimilated death.^{xii} Consequently, in Vedic ritualism the single sacrificer stands on his place of sacrifice as the unrivalled master of his ritual universe.

Thus, according to Heesterman, this brahminical theory of the interiorization of the ritual makes the brahmin a prototype of the cosmic man who is at the same time sacrificer, victim and officiant. He says: “Thus the classical doctrine implies ... that the *yajamana* through the knowledge of the equivalences, becomes the integral cosmos, realizing in himself, and thereby mastering, the cosmic alternation of life and death.”^{xiii} By resuming the opposites, the brahmin as *yajamana* carries the cosmos into himself. He does not need to contact with the social world but carries in himself the whole world. Since he possesses both life and death in himself, he becomes the prototype of sacrifice. Heesterman says that this interiorization is made fully explicit in *Brhad-Aranyaka-Upanisad* 1.4.17 which describes about the completeness of the self.^{xiv} Here we read that the one who knows his self has the completeness. His mind is his self, voice is his wife and his breath is his offspring. The eyes are his human properties because through the eye one becomes aware of it. The ear is his divine property because one hears it with his ear. The self is his act because he acts with the self ““This is the fivefold sacrifice; fivefold is the victim, fivefold is man, fivefold is all this. All this he obtains, who knows thus.’ Thus one who ‘knows’ the equivalence based on the number five resumes in himself the universe and performs in himself and by himself the sacrifice without any outside intervention.”^{xv} Heesterman finds that it is from this sacrificial character of the brahmin that the principle of renunciation originates in Indian religious thinking. “The renouncer can turn his back on the world because he is emancipated from the relations which govern it. He is a world in himself; there is no duality for him anymore.”^{xvi} He sees the whole universe in himself. He has the non-dual vision that he sees himself in all creatures in himself and all creatures in himself. “He resumed the sacrificial fire in himself and by himself. Thus it is said of the renouncer.”^{xvii} Thus the renouncer who keeps the control of his five senses and knows his self is capable of knowing the whole universe. He has the supernatural authority over all creatures because he sees all creatures in himself and all himself in all creatures. Thus, according to Heesterman, this is the basic principle behind brahminical supremacy. Therefore, through the findings of Heesterman, we see that the renouncer is the one, who goes away from the world to control his own senses and thereby to

attain the supernatural knowledge of his own self, is a powerful person in the society. He can control the world being outside the community.

Girardian Theory of Surrogate Victim and Single Sacrificer

Based on these indications given by Heesterman if we look at *Yajamana* or brhamin or renouncer in Indian religious thinking, through the eyes of Rene Girard, a question arises in our mind: whether he is the surrogate victim who bears the traits of death and life in himself. René Girard is the modern thinker who influences almost all areas of human knowledge with his mimetic theory and the concept of scapegoat mechanism.^{xviii} Girard begins his mimetic theory with anthropological research and explains almost all areas of intellectual scholarships. Mimetic theory explains the dramatic influence of mimetic desire in human life and its tendency towards potential rivalry and violence. The idea of scapegoat mechanism gives a comprehensive view of the snowballing of violence of all against one which established temporary peace and order in “primitive” societies. Girard interprets the violence behind the sacrificial rituals of religions. In his analysis of different cultural institutions, Girard points out that the sacrificial rituals are used as containment of violence to bring peace and order behind all cultural institutions.^{xix} Girard explains that the sacrificial rites are based on two substitutions. The first one is provided by generative violence, which substitutes a single victim for the members of the community. And the second one, which alone is a strictly ritualistic substitution, is that of a surrogate victim for the original victim. This surrogate victim is a member of the community whereas the first victim is drawn from outside the community. For Girard, this distinction between a ritual victim and a surrogate victim is there because the death of the original victim would promote further violence instead of dispelling it, if he is from the same community. In such cases, since certain conditions must be fulfilled, the killing of the original victim does not take place. Then the ritual victim substitutes the surrogate victim. But at the same time, through the ritual victim, the surrogate victim plays the role of the victim who protects all the members of the community from their respective violence.^{xx} This role of the surrogate victim makes him/her different from the members of the community. “The surrogate victim is simply foreign to the community. Rather, he is seen as a ‘monstrous double.’ He partakes of all possible differences within the community, particularly the difference between within and without; for he passes freely from the interior to the exterior and back again. Thus, the surrogate victim constitutes both a link and a barrier between the community and the sacred.”^{xxi} According to Girard, his/her fate as a future victim confers religious authority on him/her and enables him/her not to grasp political power. In

almost all cultural milieus this surrogate victim became the sacred king who achieved power because of his state as a future victim.^{xxii}

Girard points out that we can understand the king as the surrogate victim from the rituals related to the enthronement of the king and those rituals, which he was supposed to do as a king. In the enthronement ceremony, the archaic king always had ritual responsibilities to perform acts that were normally prohibited by taboos or impure and often occur as accusations in a mimetic crisis, such as incest, rape, the drinking of blood etc. To respect ritually although the divine meaning of the archaic kings, were not much emphasized, these rituals explain such a thought pattern. The king was the representative of God. He offered sacrifices because he carried impurity in himself and at the same time, he was in the danger of being sacrificed.. Girard writes about this combination for example in the African tribal kings or in the trickster in North America.^{xxiii} Girard says: “The king rules based on his future death.”^{xxiv}

In the light of this concept of surrogate victim, if we look at the phenomenon of single sacrifice in Indian tradition, we find that the single sacrificer or renouncer is none other than the surrogate victim. But the renouncer in Indian culture possesses not all the qualities of those surrogate victims who attained the stage of sacred kingship. The kinship was different from the stage of a brahmin. The kings and the warrior group, *Khatrya*, play the second role in caste hierarchy. The renouncer or the brahmin has got a primary role than the king. The power of the king was concentrated only on worldly order, whereas the spiritual and transcendent order was maintained by the activities of the brahmins. The king could give only protection and justice and was to allow himself led in all matters by the brahmins.^{xxv} He had only feeble grasp of *dharma*. He had little authority over the brahmins. He must promise to exempt brahmins from all punishments. Although the king was a sacrificer, it was not sacrifice that gave him the power. In his power he was second to the brahmins because he possessed evil in him. He participated in the evil of the world. That is why he needed to make unending cycles of sacrifices. “This cycle enables the ritual to give full weight to the dilemma of kingship and to handle it effectively.”^{xxvi} But at the same time, because of their ‘desacralized’ position, the brahmins were pure and didn’t need sacrifice for themselves. “Not the king, but the brahmin was emptied of magic and sacrality. The brahmin was ‘desacralized,’ and the burden of connective sacrality came to rest all the more heavily on the king.”^{xxvii} It is here on the ‘desacralization’ of the brahmin that we must focus on to understand the paradoxical nature the phenomenon of renunciation in Indian tradition.

From the explanation of power, priesthood and authority in Indian culture by Heesterman we can find out indications regarding this desacralization. Heesterman notices an important

shift in this development of kinship in which there was a stage of renouncing the worldly power. If we think in Girardian point of view, we find that it is because of this shift of the surrogate victim that the brahmin did not fully become sacred king but remained always as potential victim. In this shift the surrogate victim either renounced or was thrown away from his potentiality as the sacred king in India. If we notice the explanation of Heesterman about the legendary accounts about *Bhisma*, the teacher of *Pandavas* (five brothers in *Mahabharata*), regarding the dilemma of kingship narrated in *Mahabharata*, we can reasonably conclude that this was a stage in the development process of the surrogate victim to the sacred kingship. According to Heesterman, *Bhisma* says to *Yudhistira*, the eldest brother of *Pandavas*, that there was a notwithstanding intervention of Lord Visnu in the creation of kingship.^{xxviii} Lord Visnu created the first king as his ‘mental son,’ but kingship failed in him. “The first three kings wanted no part of it and opted out by renouncing the world. Only with the fourth, does kinship get a fair chance, but then passion and greed also start their corrupting work, culminating in the notorious King Vena. It is only with the seventh in line, Prthu, produced by the holy men out of the immolated body of his father, that the ideal king enters on the scene.”^{xxix} *Bhisma* answers clearly as to the dilemma of the king: either the king must safeguard righteousness by retiring from the world as the first three kings did or he submits himself to the burden of worldly unrighteousness. It is not this question of dilemma of the kingship important for our study here, but the question of the stage of renouncing the worldly power by the first three kings. Heesterman also gives another indication about the origin of the exiled (*aparudha*) king.^{xxx} He says that in the pre-classical Indian texts, especially in the *srauta* ritual and in Jaimiya *Brahmana* prescriptions, we find certain patterns that the sacrificer, after giving away his possessions retires with his wife to the forest as a renewed *diksha*. The same retirement to the forest can also be seen in the case of *Pandavas* and of Rama in epics of *Mahabharata* and in *Ramayana* respectively. According to Heesterman, all these instances of retirement to the forest explain the idea that one should renounce the world in times of distress, when overcome by old age or when vanquished by the enemy. If we reflect in the light of Girardian theory, we find the same scapegoat mechanism in all these instances. These first three kings who failed to be kings in the right sense were the surrogate victims who performed sacrifices on the one hand but failed to act as sacred kings on the other hand. Or, otherwise, they might be the victims who were thrown into the forest to establish peace and order in society. In both cases they were the scapegoats who established order either through their presence or through their absence in the society.

This is an important shift in the development of a surrogate victim into the role of sacred kingship in the Indian cultural situation. These first three kings went away from society and the world but at the same time performed their sacrificial rituals or continued as scapegoats in the forest. This way of escaping from the role of a king as future victim or being continued as future victim out of society might be the basis of the paradox of the phenomenon of renunciation in India. Those who renounce the worldly might and power which is based on their role of a future victim and at the same time continues as surrogate victim is an ideal brahmin in Indian tradition. In Girardian perspective it might be reason for the superiority of the brahmin in India.

This victimage character of the renouncer as a living martyr can establish order and peace in society. He is expressing his role of the victim through his non-involvement in worldly affairs. He is renouncing everything and controlling his senses to escape from the violent contagion of the world. He renounces the world to save his own life because he is not willing to face the violent consequences of the mimetic contagion. Therefore, he withdraws from the world to avoid the consequences of the mimetic rivalry. But such a withdrawal from the world also makes him powerful to control the world from outside. Thus, by renouncing he became able to control and to reign the society as a living surrogate victim. According to Heesterman, this shows that the Brahmin holds author over the people while the king has the power. He says that this universalistic authority “had always been there in specially Indian form in the person of the renouncer, who stood outside society and therefore was the ideal arbiter and consensus maker. When the increased possibilities and resources in society tended to uncontrollable growth and pervasive conflict passed far beyond local society, India naturally had to fall back on the institution and transcendent values of renunciation for guidance.”^{xxxix} According to him, that is why a person like Gandhi, who was a classical exemplar of renunciation, could move India, in spite of its conflicting and contradictory traditions and circumstances.^{xxxii} For Heesterman, the achievement of Gandhi had little to do with his usual image as a not-too-decisive preacher of social worker but his aim was the reorganization of Indian society on the universalistic basis of the renunciatory ideal. This observation of Heesterman seems to be accurate that Gandhi knew that this ‘renunciatory ideal’ was the best and most powerful methodology for Indian society which accepted the model of the brahmin better than that of a king. The powerful methodology of the British government could not win in front of the renunciatory ideal of Gandhi. This Gandhi phenomenon thus showed again that the transcendental and universalistic ideology of the renouncer functions better to form an

order than the worldly power of the king. Such a phenomenon has a strong impact on Indian society even today.

Thus, we find that behind the phenomenon of renunciation in Indian society there is a long history of sacrificial ritualism on the one hand and the idea of surrogate victim as it is in every other culture. But unlike other cultures, the unique shift in the development of surrogate victim into sacred kinship caused the emergence of the category of brahmins or of renouncers in India. The brahmin, or renouncer who attains self control and self knowledge through ascetic practices acquires the status of sage or ascetic and has honourable position in Indian society. But if we look the phenomenon of renunciation in the light of Girardian thinking, we find that the internal reason for their supremacy is of their status of surrogate victim who renounced their potentiality to be future kings. They are surrogate victims without having all the qualities of sacred kingship. They remain in their renounced status of sacred kingship far from the society but in involve in the society from outside. This is the paradox of the phenomenon of renunciation in India.

ⁱ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, 26f.

ⁱⁱ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 27-28.

^{iv} J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 29

^v Cf. J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 28.

^{vi} J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 31-32.

^{vii} Cf. Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Cf. J.C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 53f.

^x J.C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice* 57.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 39.

^{xiv} Cf. J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 39.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Rene Girard presents his theory in his numerous books and articles. Among the sequence of their first publication, Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, translated by Y. Freccero, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1965; Girard, *Violence and Sacred*, translated by P. Gregory, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977; Girard, *The Scapegoat*, translated by Y. Freccero, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986; Girard *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, translated by J.G. Williams, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001 presents the mimetic theory. There are number of books, which summarise the mimetic theory of Rene Girard in different languages. Among them, in German language Palaver 2003 is one of the best ones. The whole bibliography of Girard is there in http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/mimetic_theory_bibliography.html.

^{xix} Cf. Girard, *Violence and Sacred*, 269f.

^{xx} Cf. Girard, *Violence and Sacred*, 101-102.

^{xxi} Girard, *Violence and Sacred* 273.

^{xxii} Cf. Girard, *Violence and Sacred* 269-273.

^{xxiii} Cf. Girard, *Das Heilige und die Gewalt*, Düsseldorf, 2006, 368-372.

^{xxiv} Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*: Research undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort, translated by S. Bann and M. Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, 159. Cf. J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 116.

^{xxv} Cf. *Ibid.*

^{xxvi} J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 117.

^{xxvii} J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 155.

^{xxviii} Cf. *Ibid.*

^{xxix} *Ibid.*

^{xxx} Cf. J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 40f.

^{xxxi} Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 177.

^{xxxii} Cf. *Ibid.*