

Patrick Olivelle

The *Āśrama* System



The History and Hermeneutics
of a Religious Institution

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*The History and Hermeneutics of
a Religious Institution*

PATRICK OLIVELLE

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Preface

It has taken long, far too long, to bring this project to completion. Some of the research was done during the academic year 1977–78 when a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a Visiting Fellowship from Wolfson College enabled me to spend a year in Oxford, England, and Poona, India. Parts of the early chapters were written in 1981–82 when I was back in Oxford, again on a Visiting Fellowship from Wolfson College, and in Poona, on a grant from the American Institute of Indian Studies. Many things—administrative burdens and other book projects—postponed its completion. Time has its own rewards: wisdom, one hopes, accompanies gray hairs, and maturity sometimes creates a better product. The long period of gestation, however, has produced its own debts—debts of gratitude to teachers, colleagues, friends, family, and, yes, even institutions.

Much of the writing was done when I was a member of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. The Department and the University provided a rare atmosphere for personal growth and intellectual stimulation. To my colleagues there a heart-felt thank you. The book was completed in my new home at the Center for Asian Studies of the University of Texas, Austin. The Center and the University have provided both good colleagues and fine resources. In India individuals and institutions, too numerous to list, always responded generously to my often importunate requests. I owe a special debt of gratitude, however, to the late Dr. V. V. Bhide and the staff of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Three friends put their friendship to the test by reading the entire manuscript closely and giving invaluable advice: Steven Collins, Anne Feldhaus, and Richard Lariviere. This book would have been much poorer but for their criticisms and suggestions. Gregory Schopen helped by stretching my imagination, if not my mind, in ways only he can. Richard Gombrich read chapter 3 and caught several inadvertent errors. The editorial staff at OUP—Cynthia Read and Peter Ohlin—was, as usual, excellent and obliging. Cynthia Garver, my punctilious copy editor, detected my every careless error and compensated for my sloppy nature. The book is the better for their help and advice. My wife Suman read the entire manuscript—she, like Cynthia Garver, has an eye for the detail. A special thank-you to Suman and my daughter Meera, who for many years have put up with me as I gazed, glassy-eyed, at a computer screen.

Austin, Texas
February 1993

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Abbreviations

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Abh	Vedānta Deśika: <i>Alepakamatabhaṅgavāda</i> of the <i>Śatadūṣaṇī</i>
ĀgG	<i>Āgniveśya Gṛhyasūtra</i>
AitĀ	<i>Aitareya Āraṇyaka</i>
AitB	<i>Aitareya Brāhmaṇa</i>
ALB	Adyar Library Bulletin
AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
ĀnSS	Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series, Poona
ĀpDh	<i>Āpastamba Dharmasūtra</i>
ĀpŚ	<i>Āpastamba Śrautasūtra</i>
Artha	Kauṭilya, <i>Arthaśāstra</i>
ĀrU	<i>Āruṇi Upaniṣad</i>
ĀsG	<i>Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra</i>
AV	<i>Atharvaveda Saṃhitā</i>
BāU	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
BDh	<i>Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra</i>
BG	<i>Baudhāyana Gṛhyasūtra</i>
BGp	<i>Baudhāyana Gṛhyaparibhāṣasūtra</i>
BhāgP	<i>Bhāgavata Purāna</i>
BhārG	<i>Bhāradvāja Gṛhyasūtra</i>
BhG	<i>Bhagavad Gītā</i>
BI	Bibliotheca Indica, Calcutta
BṛD	<i>Bṛhaddevatā</i>
BSS	Bombay Sanskrit Series
ChU	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
CI	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
EPU	<i>Eighteen Principal Upaniṣads</i> . Ed. V. P. Limaye and R. D. Vadekar
GdH	<i>Gautama Dharmasūtra</i>
GoB	<i>Gopatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
GOS	Gaekwad's Oriental Series, Baroda

HOS	Harvard Oriental Series, Cambridge, Mass.
IHQ	Indian Historical Quarterly
JAAR	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
Jāt	<i>Jātaka</i>
JB	<i>Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa</i>
JMV	Vidāraṇya, <i>Jīvanmuktiviveka</i>
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
JU	<i>Jābāla Upaniṣad</i>
KauṣU	<i>Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad</i>
KKT	Lakṣmīdhara, <i>Kṛtyakalpataru</i>
KS	<i>Kāthaka Saṃhitā</i>
KSS	Kashi Sanskrit Series, Benares
KśU	<i>Kaṭhaśruti Upaniṣad</i>
KūrP	<i>Kūrma Purāṇa</i>
LiP	<i>Liṅga Purāṇa</i>
LSU	<i>Laghu-Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣad</i>
MaitU	<i>Maitrī Upaniṣad</i>
MatsP	<i>Matsya Purāṇa</i>
MBh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
MDh	<i>Mānava Dharmasāstra (Manusmṛti)</i>
MK	<i>Mīmāṃsā Koṣa</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MNP	Āpadeva, <i>Mīmāṃsānyāyaprakāśa</i>
MNU	<i>Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad</i>
MS	<i>Maitrāyaṇīya Saṃhitā</i>
MuṇU	<i>Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad</i>
NpU	<i>Nārada-parivṛjaka Upaniṣad</i>
NSm	<i>Nārada-smṛti</i>
PāM	Mādhava, <i>Pārāsaramādhavīya</i>
PārG	<i>Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra</i>
PB	<i>Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa</i>
PMS	<i>Pūrva Mīmāṃsāsūtra</i>
PraśU	<i>Praśna Upaniṣad</i>
PTS	Pāli Text Society, London
Rām	<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>
RV	<i>Ṛgveda Saṃhitā</i>
ŚĀ	<i>Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka</i>
ŚāñŚ	<i>Śāṅkhāyana Śrautasūtra</i>

ŚB	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
SBB	Sacred Books of the Buddhists, London
SBE	Sacred Books of the East, Oxford
ŚG	<i>Śāṅkhāyana Gṛhyasūtra</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
SuN	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
SUS	<i>Samnyāsa Upaniṣads</i> . Ed. F. O. Schrader
SūS	<i>Sūta Saṃhitā</i>
SV	<i>Sāmaveda Saṃhitā</i>
ŚvU	<i>Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad</i>
TĀ	<i>Taittirīya Āraṇyaka</i>
TB	<i>Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
TPU	<i>The Thirteen Principal Upanishads</i> . Tr. R. E. Hume
TS	<i>Taittirīya Saṃhitā</i>
TU	<i>Taittirīya Upaniṣad</i>
VaDh	<i>Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra</i>
VaiDh	<i>Vaikhānasa Dharmasūtra</i>
VaiG	<i>Vaikhānasa Gṛhyasūtra</i>
VaiSm	<i>Vaikhānasa Smārtasūtra</i>
VāmP	<i>Vāmana Purāṇa</i>
VeS	<i>Vedānta Sūtra</i>
ViDh	<i>Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra (Viṣṇusmṛti)</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya Piṭaka</i>
ViP	<i>Viṣṇu Purāṇa</i>
WZKS	Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens
Yād	Yādavaprakāśa, <i>Yatidharmasamuccaya</i>
YBh	Vedānta Deśika, <i>Yatilingabhedabhaṅgavāda of the Śatadūṣaṇī</i>
YDh	<i>Yājñavalkya Dharmasāstra (Yājñavalkyasmṛti)</i>
YDhS	Viśveśvara Sarasvatī, <i>Yatidharmasaṃgraha</i>
YMtā	Vijñāneśvara, <i>Mitākṣarā</i> on YDh
Ypra	Vāsudevāśrama, <i>Yatidharmaprakāśa</i>

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THE ĀŚRAMA SYSTEM

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Prologue

The Brāhmaṇical tradition uses the term *āśrama* with reference to what it sees as four distinct and legitimate ways of leading a religious life. The four *āśramas* are the modes of life of a celibate student, a married householder, a forest hermit, and a world renouncer. Brāhmaṇical theology considers these *āśramas* as constitutive and interrelated parts of an organic whole made up of the rules (*dharma*s) that govern human conduct; this organic whole is often simply referred to as *dharma*. The two cornerstones of *dharma* are the systems of *āśrama* and *varṇa* (“social classes”). The totality of the Brāhmaṇical *dharma* is often referred to simply as *varṇāśramadharmā*, an expression that modern scholars and native interpreters alike have seen as the closest approximation within the tradition to what we have come to call Hinduism: “Even now,” observes the eminent Indian sociologist G. S. Ghurye (1964, 2), “*Varṇāśramadharmā*, duties of castes and *āśramas*, is almost another name for Hinduism.”

The system of the four *varṇas*—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra—especially within the context of the related system of castes (*jāti*), has been the subject of repeated study by scholars both Western and Indian. Sociologists and anthropologists, as well as Indologists and historians of religion, have made *varṇa* and caste the focus of intense scrutiny from a spectrum of methodological perspectives.

The parallel system of the four *āśramas*, on the other hand, has received much less scholarly attention, apart from platitudes repeated in general studies of Indian culture and religion.¹ Nevertheless, the native tradition, as well as modern scholarship, considers the *āśrama* system a pillar of the Hindu edifice. F. Max Müller (1878, 343), for example, with a touch of exaggeration claimed that the *āśramas* were even more important an institution than caste: “A much more important feature, however, of the ancient Vedic society than the four castes, consists in the four *āśramas* or stages.” Speaking of the *āśramas*, Paul Deussen (1906, 367) at the turn of the century enthusiastically exclaimed: “The entire history of mankind does not produce much that approaches in grandeur to this thought.” Scholarly attention, unfortunately, has not kept pace with scholarly rhetoric. The few studies devoted to the topic are in the form of relatively brief articles and do little justice to the complexity of the subject or the sheer length of its history.

1. Some examples of the way the system is generally presented in such studies are given in section 1.3.1–2 of this volume.

Until now not a single book-length study has been made of the *āśrama* system.² In this book, therefore, I have explored a relatively uncharted territory of the Indian intellectual and religious landscape in the belief that if this system is as important as native theology and modern scholarship take it to be, it deserves to be studied seriously and responsibly.

My aim in this book is fourfold: to uncover the origin of the *āśrama* system, to trace its subsequent history, to describe its relationship to other institutional and doctrinal aspects of the Brāhmanical world and its position within Brāhmanical theology, and to assess its significance within the history of Indian religions.

After dealing with some basic issues of method in chapter 1, I provide in chapter 2 the theological and historical context within which the *āśrama* system was created.³ In the classical texts of Brāhmanism and in modern studies of Hinduism alike, the four *āśramas* are presented as specific modes that a man is expected to assume during successive periods of his life. Accordingly, the very term *āśrama* is most frequently translated as “stage of life.” I demonstrate in chapter 3, however, that the *āśrama* system originated as a theological scheme that presented four alternative paths of religious living to adult males, any one of which they may freely choose. The *āśramas*, furthermore, were conceived as *lifelong vocations and not temporary stages of a man’s life*. In chapter 4 I examine the historical and theological factors that may have influenced the radical change that converted the original system into its classical formulation. Chapter 5 examines the classical system within which the *āśramas* came to be considered stages of life through which each individual should ideally pass, and chapter 6 discusses further developments and modifications that the classical system underwent in the course of history. In the final two chapters, 7 and 8, I explore the growing interrelation between the *āśrama* system and other central institutions of Brāhmanism, as well as medieval theological disputes and controversies surrounding that system.

The *āśrama* system was created as a structure for inclusion—for finding a place within the Brāhmanical world to ideologies and ways of life that challenged many of the central doctrines and values of that world. The classical system in a special way was intended to blunt the opposition between the two value systems—the one centered around the married householder and the other around the celibate ascetic. The success of the scheme in resolving that basic conflict in Indian culture has been taken for granted by many scholars. I hope to demonstrate that a closer examination of the history of the system will show that the issue was never fully settled and that old battles had to be fought over and over again throughout the Middle Ages and down to modern times even after the *āśramas* had become part of the mainstream of Brāhmanical theology.

2. Liebich’s (1936) study—the inaugural lecture at his *Habilitation* at the University of Breslau in 1892—contains just 40 pages, and, although published in a monograph form, it can hardly be considered a major work.

3. In chapter 2 of this volume I reproduce in an expanded and modified form some material contained in the introduction to my translations of the Samnyāsa Upaniṣads (Olivelle 1992).

I

INTRODUCTION

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1

Meaning and Method

At the beginning of this study I want to deal explicitly and in some detail with the problems of meaning and method—the meaning of the term *āśrama* and of the *āśrama* system and the proper ways to study it—because serious and pervasive methodological errors have impaired most previous scholarly works on the history of the *āśrama* system. Failure to understand the meaning of the *āśrama* system within the tradition of Brāhmanical theology¹ and institutions and to evaluate properly the earliest available data are at the root of most problems in modern scholarship on the *āśramas*. They have led to the mishandling of evidence and inevitably to wrong conclusions.

I will argue that the *āśrama* system is primarily a theological construct. The system and its history, therefore, should be carefully distinguished from the socio-religious institutions comprehended by the system and from their respective histories. The history of the *āśrama* system, moreover, should be firmly located within the history of Brāhmanical hermeneutics (*mīmāṃsā*)—that aspect of Brāhmanical theology engaged in interpreting received sacred texts. During the long period of research and reflection leading up to the writing of this book, it became apparent to me that writing a history of the *āśrama* system is indeed an exercise in tracing the hermeneutical controversies and developments within Brāhmanism.

Hermeneutics and exegesis, as Jonathan Z. Smith (1982, 43–52) has convincingly argued, is at the heart of both religious traditions and, consequently, the task of all historians of religion, not just those of Christianity. He offers the telling example of food and cuisine. Human cultures reduce the vast number of potential sources of nutriment to an extremely small number of permissible food items and then use great ingenuity to prepare a bewildering variety of dishes from that limited number of permitted ingredients: “If food is a phenomenon characterized by limitation, cuisine is a phenomenon characterized by variegation” (Smith 1982, 40). Religions, likewise, limit the number of texts and stories that are considered authoritative, thereby forming “canons,” whether they

1. Throughout this work I have used the term “theology” to refer to the systematic study of religious doctrines and practices carried out within the native Brāhmanical tradition. I am aware that some may accuse me of using a term with strong Christian overtones. The reluctance to use this term in a value-neutral and cross-cultural manner, I would argue, may indicate a desire among some to uphold a privileged position for Christian theology. Taken as the intellectual effort by a tradition to understand and explain its religious beliefs and practices, “theology” comes closest—certainly closer than “philosophy”—to defining what Brāhmanical intellectuals, both the anonymous authors of the *dharma* texts and later systematizers such as Śaṅkara, were actually engaged in doing.

are relatively fixed and bounded as in the Judeo-Christian traditions or left vague and open as in most others. Hermeneutics, like cuisine, extends this arbitrary limit, applying the canon according to well-defined rules of interpretation to every conceivable human situation.

Within Brāhmanism the hermeneutical enterprise is at the heart of law and theology. Early in the history of Brāhmanical theology the theory arose that *dharma* is revealed solely and completely in the Vedas. The Smṛtis, which comprise the other class of authoritative literature, were interpreted as deriving their authority from the fact that they are based on the Vedas. Novelty in doctrine, institution, or practice was not recognized. When new ideas and practices arose,² as they were bound to, they challenged the hermeneutical ingenuity of theologians to find a basis for them in the known rules of Vedas and Smṛtis. The fact that most of the major theological and legal works within the Brāhmanical tradition consist of commentaries bears testimony to the centrality of interpretation in theology and law. Here I hope to demonstrate that the creation of and later developments within the *āśrama* system are striking examples of Brāhmanical hermeneutics.

1.1 The Meaning of Āśrama

If we are to properly evaluate the meaning of the *āśrama* system, it is necessary to investigate first the meaning of the word *āśrama* and of cognate terms within the broader vocabulary of the Indian religious traditions in general and of the Brāhmanical tradition in particular. Clearly the authors of the system operated within that linguistic world and shared that vocabulary, even when they stretched the meaning of the term in new and significant directions.

Āśrama is a relatively new term in the Sanskrit vocabulary. The word does not occur in the vedic Samhitās and Brāhmaṇas or even in the early Upaniṣads. This term, I believe, originated as a neologism, a word coined at a particular time in Indian history to express a novel idea or to indicate a novel phenomenon or institution.

Etymologies are not always helpful guides to the meanings of words in actual use. Indeed, even the Indian hermeneutical tradition considered the conventional meaning of a word to have greater force than any meaning that may be derived from its etymology.³ In a neologism like *āśrama*, however, where use has not determined the meaning, its etymology may provide us with helpful insights into its original use and meaning. This is especially true in the case of Sanskrit where early grammarians had accurately described the verbal roots, the function of suffixes, and the derivation of nouns and adjectives. We can be fairly certain that those who coined this word knew the function and meaning of the cognate term *śrama*, which appears frequently in the early vedic literature, and of the verbal root $\sqrt{\text{śram}}$ from which both *śrama* and *āśrama* are etymologically derived. In

2. On the way myths perform the hermeneutical function of understanding the new and the incongruous, see Smith 1982, 90–101.

3. Compare *rūḍhir yogam apaharati* —“the conventional meaning ousts the etymological” and *rūḍhir yogād balyasi* —“the conventional meaning has greater force than the etymological.” Cf. MK 6, 3327; MNP 98.

determining the meaning of the term *āśrama* and consequently of the *āśrama* system, therefore, it will be useful to examine first its etymological roots.

1.1.1. The Meaning of Śrama

In this section I will examine the semantic history of both the verb $\sqrt{\text{śram}}$ and its nominal derivative *śrama*. They appear frequently in the early literature with two related meanings. The first meaning is “to become weary, tired, or exhausted,” and this usually carries a negative connotation. Weariness is something one seeks to avoid or at most to endure patiently; one does not welcome it or willingly accept it. The term is used frequently with this meaning in the context of traveling. Gods, for example, became weary (*śramayuvah*) after pursuing Agni (RV 1.72.2). A bird became tired after flying (AitB 3.25: *aśrāmayat*; BāU 4.3.19: *śrāntah*). The rivers, made to flow by Varuṇa, feel no weariness although they never cease to run (RV 2.28.4: *na śrāmyanti*). Similarly, the Soma juices flow unwearied (RV 9.22.4: *na śaśramuḥ*).⁴ The weariness, however, need not be physical; it may also be mental, as when it is associated with the fear of an enemy.⁵ The negative connotation of *śrama* as weariness is revealed very clearly in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (6.3.3.7), where it is equated with evil (*pāpman*). Weariness may finally result in death; thus in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* death is said to approach in the form of *śrama*.⁶

The second meaning is “to labor, to toil, or to exert oneself.” It implies strenuous activity or exercise which is directed at achieving a positive result or for which a reward is expected. The *Ṛgveda* (10.114.10), for example, states that horses receive a recompense for their toil (*śrama*). The term is used most frequently in the vedic literature, however, to express the toil inherent in religious, especially ritual, exertions.

Śrama is closely related to the vedic sacrifice (*yajña*), and hence it is frequently associated with two other ritual activities: austerity (*tapas*) and praise (*arcana*). A man toils (*śaśramāṇah*) in bringing fuel for sacrifice (RV 4.12.2). The *Ādityas* bestow wealth “on the wearied presser of Soma” (*śrāntāya sunvate*: RV 8.67.6). Manu labored (*aśrāmyat*) at cooking the sacrificial oblation (TS 1.7.1.3). The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (12.3.3.1) states that when the gods performed a thousand-year sacrifice, all the creatures became worn out (*śaśrāma*) after the first 500 years. It is probably within the context of sacrificial toil that the *Ṛgveda* (4.33.11) declares that when toil is absent (*ṛte śrāntasya*) the gods are not inclined to friendship.

As the toil inherent in the sacrifice, *śrama* is associated in a special way with three primordial and archetypal activities: the gaining of heaven by the gods, the discovery of sacrificial knowledge by the vedic seers, and the creation of the world. The gods won

4. In a similar sense, the gods are told at RV 2.29.4: “Of kinsmen such as you never let us be weary” (*mā śramiṣma*). At RV 2.30.7 the author prays: “Let it not vex me, tire me (*śramat*), make me slothful; and never let us say ‘Press not the Soma.’”

5. RV 8.4.7: *mā bhema mā śramiṣma*—“may we not fear, may we not become weary.” Sāyaṇa commenting on this verse interprets the term to mean “oppressed” (*pīḍita*). See also RV 10.105.3 where weariness (*śaśramāṇah*) is associated with the fear of an enemy.

6. BāU 1.5.21; see also BāU 4.3.19.

7. On the meaning of *tapas* in the Vedas, see Blair 1961. On the relation between *tapas*, *śrama*, and the ritual, see Lévi 1898; Knipe 1975, 90–137; Kaelber 1989.

heaven by *śrama* (AitB 2.13). When the nectar of immortality absconded, they searched for it by means of *śrama* and *tapas* (ŚB 9.5.1.2). The seers likewise discovered the meters and the sacrificial bricks through *śrama* and *tapas* (TB 5.3.5.4).⁸ Both gods and seers searched for Speech (*vāc*) in the same manner (TB 2.8.8.5). Then there is the story (ŚB 1.6.2.1–3) of the gods who managed to get to heaven by means of the sacrifice. Prior to that they had lived on earth in the company of humans. In an effort to prevent humans from following them to heaven, the gods erased all traces of the sacrifice on earth. The seers, however, searched for the sacrifice by praising (*arcantaḥ*) and toiling (*śrāmyantaḥ*), “for by toil (*śrama*) the gods indeed gained what they desired to gain, and so did the seers.” Here *śrama* is used clearly as a synonym for sacrifice.

The most significant aspect of *śrama*, however, emerges in the descriptions of the creative activities of Prajāpati. To create the world Prajāpati toiled (*asrāmyat*) and tortured or heated himself (*tapo 'tapyata*). As he was thus worn out (*śrāntaḥ*) and heated (*tepānaḥ*) he brought forth the creatures, which are his offspring (*prajā*). This paradigm is repeated constantly in creation stories.⁹ Evidently the priestly imagination patterned the creative acts of gods after the sacrificial acts of priests:

Most of the creation-legends in the Brāhmaṇas begin in the same way. As the magician must prepare himself for his magic, and the priest must prepare for the sacrifice, by means of self-torture and mortification, so Prajāpati, too, has to prepare himself in the same way for the great work of creation. (Winternitz 1927, I, 220, n. 2)

The toil and exertion of Prajāpati’s creative act carry clear sexual connotations; creation is procreation. The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (7.1.5.1), for example, explicitly refers to the sexual intercourse between Prajāpati and earth. He spread her out and “in her Prajāpati labored” (*tasyām asrāmyat*).¹⁰ The result of such toil is offspring, the goal alike of the creative and the procreative act. So when the gods, whom he had just engendered, tell Prajāpati, their father, that they too would like to have children, he advises them to imitate him in *śrama* and *tapas* (TS 7.1.5.2).

The association of *śrama* with sexual activity is not limited to the gods. After the great flood had wiped out all creatures, Manu, the sole survivor, desirous of offspring, engaged in praise and toil.¹¹ The toil of the aged couple Agastya and Lopāmudrā (RV 1.179) is also associated with sex and the desire for progeny.

The two meanings of *śrama*—weariness and labor—we have discussed have been noted also by Indian grammarians and lexicographers. The *Dhātupāṭha*, the ancient list

8. See also ŚB 1.7.2.23; 1.7.3.2, 14. Agni, Indra, and Sūrya gain superiority over the other gods by praising and toiling (ŚB 4.5.4.2). In the same manner, the gods strengthen Prajāpati when he is exhausted after creation (ŚB 4.6.4.1).

9. See AV 4.35.2; 6.133.3; 10.7.36; 12.5.1; TS 7.1.5.1–2; ŚB 2.2.4.1; 2.5.1.1; 3.9.1.4; 6.1.1.8, 13; 6.1.3.1; 10.6.5.2–6; 11.1.6.1, 7; 11.5.8.1; TB 1.1.3.5. At ŚB 6.1.1.1 the seers create the universe through *śrama* and *tapas*. After the birth of Rudra, Prajāpati asks him why he cries “when you are born out of toil and torture” (ŚB 6.1.3.9). At TB 3.12.2.2–5 and 3.12.4.2–6 Prajāpati is asked to toil (*śrāmyasi*) by various means; all his activities, indeed, appear to involve *śrama*. See also BāU 1.2.2.6; GoB 1.1.1–2, 5, 6, 8.

10. The same expression is used in BāU 1.2.2. See also ŚB 1.8.1.10. On the creative power of heat and its sexual connotations, see O’Flaherty 1973, 40–41.

11. ŚB 1.8.1.7: *so ’rcamśchrāmyaṃś cacāra prajākāmāḥ*—“desirous of offspring, he engaged in praising and toiling.” The same expression is used in the case of Prajāpati at ŚB 11.1.6.7, making clear the parallel between divine and human acts.

of Sanskrit verbal roots, for example, explains that the verb $\sqrt{śram}$ is used with reference to both religious austerity and fatigue.¹²

In the legend of Śunaḥśepa *śrama* is associated with a life of wandering away from human habitats, a meaning that may be a precursor of the later association of *śramaṇa* with wandering ascetics. Rohita has wandered in the forest for a long time in order to escape being killed in sacrifice by his father. When he returns Indra advises him to wander more:

“Manifold is the prosperity of him who is weary,”
So have we heard, O Rohita;
Evil is he who stayeth among men,
Indra is the comrade of the wanderer.
Do thou wander.¹³

As in other passages, here too the fruitfulness of *śrama* is emphasized, but the activity is here related to wandering, whereas the opposite, namely the sedentary mode of life, bears no fruit. This connection of *śrama* with wilderness and wandering, as we shall see, has significant implications for the semantic history of both *śramaṇa* and *āśrama*.

1.1.2 The Meaning of Śramaṇa

Śramaṇa is another important term in Indian religious history that is etymologically derived from the verb $\sqrt{śram}$. Because of its etymological relationship to *āśrama* and because several scholarly studies have attempted to establish a link between the historical realities underlying these two terms,¹⁴ it will be useful to examine briefly the meaning of *śramaṇa*.

This term is used frequently in post-vedic literature and in inscriptions with reference to various types of ascetics. Buddhist and Jain canonical texts use it frequently to designate Buddhist and Jain monks.¹⁵ It appears that at least by the time of Aśoka (middle of the third century B.C.E.) *śramaṇa* was used principally, if not exclusively, with reference to non-Brāhmanical ascetics. The compound word *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa* is used in Aśokan inscriptions to indicate the double class of religious people worthy of honor and donations.¹⁶ A century or so later the grammarian Pāṇini uses the same phrase as an example to illustrate the rule of Pāṇini about compounds in which the component words refer to objects that are opposed to each other.¹⁷ The same com-

12. *Dhātupāṭha*, 4.95: *śramu tapasi khede ca*. For an assessment of its authorship and age, see Cardona 1976, 161–64. See also Bhānuji Dīkṣita on Amarasimha’s *Amarakośa*, 2.7.3.

13. AitB 7.15 (Keith’s translation): *nānā śrāntasya śrīr astīti rohita śuśruma / pāpo nṛṣadvaro jana indra ic carataḥ sakhā caraiveti //*

14. See, for example, Winternitz 1926, 226. Thapar (1982, 276) writes: “The *śramaṇa*, therefore, is one who labours towards an objective and *āśrama* was the process of doing so. Eventually the place where the *śramaṇas* gathered was also called *āśrama*.”

15. For the Buddhist use of the term see Dutt 1960, 31–53. See also Pande 1978; Deo 1956; and Olivelle 1974b.

16. See *Edicts of Aśoka*, Rock Edicts 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 13; Pillar Edict 7.

17. Pāṇini, *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, 4.9: *yeṣāṃ ca virodhaḥ śāśvatikaḥ*. The rule establishes that a coordinative compound (*dvandva*) of words signifying animals between whom there is permanent enmity is declined in the singular. See Patañjali, *Mahābhāṣya*, I, p. 476, l. 9.

pound is also used in the Pāli Canon with a reference similar to that of the Aśokan inscriptions.¹⁸

An examination of early Brāhmanical texts, several of which in all likelihood pre-date Aśoka,¹⁹ however, indicates that the clear distinction and even opposition between *brāhmaṇa* and *śramaṇa* may have been a later semantic development possibly influenced by the appropriation of the latter term by non-Brāhmanical sects such as Buddhism and Jainism.

The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* belonging to the Black Yajurveda contains the earliest reference to *śramaṇa* in Brāhmanical literature:

The *vātaraśana* seers (*ṛṣi*) were *śramaṇas* and celibates (*ūrdhvamanthinaḥ*). The seers went to them in supplication, but they absconded, entering the Kūsmāṇḍa verses one after another. (The seers) found them there by means of faith and austerity.²⁰

In this text *śramaṇa* is associated with three other terms: *vātaraśana*, *ṛṣi*, and *ūrdhvamanthin*. An examination of these may shed further light on the meaning of *śramaṇa* in the early Brāhmanical vocabulary.

The term *vātaraśana* appears first in the Ṛgvedic hymn (10.136) that celebrates an enigmatic figure called *muni*, a title applied in later literature to any holy or ascetic person, but whose original meaning is far from clear.²¹ He is given the epithet *keśin*, “the long-haired one.” The very first verse regards him as participating in cosmic functions: “The long-haired one supports Agni and moisture, and heaven and earth. He is all sky to look upon. The long-haired one is called this light.” The long hair of the *muni* is mentioned seven times in the hymn. In the second verse the *munis* (now in the plural) are called *vātaraśanāḥ* (“girdled with the wind”), and they are said to wear dirty clothes (*malāḥ*). Some scholars have seen in the term *vātaraśana* a reference to their naked condition; it would then be a synonym of the later term *digambara* (“sky-clad” = naked) commonly used with reference to ascetic nudity.²² It is, however, inconsistent for these men to be described in the same verse both as naked and as wearing dirty clothes. The term is more appropriately interpreted in the light of the *munis*’ association with the wind, a recurrent theme in the hymn. The second half of the verse in which the term appears reads: “They follow the wind’s swift course and go where the gods have gone before.” Other verses echo the same theme: (3): “we have pressed on into the wind”; (4): “The *muni* . . . flies through the atmosphere”; (5): He is “the steed of the wind and the friend of the wind”; (7): “The wind has churned for him.” Flying through the air and

18. MN I, 285–86, 400, II, 54; AN I, 180, III, 228.; Jāt I, 57, 187. The two terms also appear in the Greek and Latin accounts of India: Majumdar 1960, 425–48.

19. The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* probably predate Aśoka by at least a couple of centuries. The Dharmasūtras of Baudhāyana and Gautama also are probably somewhat older than Aśoka. For the dates of their composition, see section 3.4.

20. TĀ 2.7: *vātaraśanā ha vā ṛṣayaḥ śramaṇā ūrdhvamanthino babhūvus tān ṛṣayo ’rtham āyaṃs te nilāyam acaraṃs te ’nupraviśuḥ kūsmāṇḍāni tāṃs teṣv anvavindañ chradhdhayā ca tapasā ca.* For a detailed discussion of this text see Malamoud 1977.

21. See Keith 1925, 402; Bhandarkar 1940, 53; Pande 1957, 258–61; Ghurye 1964, 11f; Singh 1972, 182–83.

22. Geldner (1951, III, 369, n. 2) remarks: “D.h. nackten.” Similar interpretations are given by Ghurye 1964, 12; Pande 1978, 23–25; Malamoud 1977, 73. Sāyaṇa, on the contrary, in his commentary on this verse, explains it as a patronymic: “sons of Vātaraśana.” It is doubtful that the term designates a class within the Ṛgvedic context.

being carried by the force of the wind are characteristics of a *muni*'s state. When the term is interpreted within this context, "girdled with the wind" probably means that the *munis*' garments are swirled or blown by the wind or that the wind swirled around their bodies, rather than that they went about naked.

The third verse of the hymn states that the *munis* are *unmaditā maunyena*. The term *unmaditā*, frequently used in later literature with reference to ascetic behavior,²³ can refer to madness, intoxication, frenzy, or trance. The *munis* are thus intoxicated, frenzied, in a trance, or out of their mind as a result of or by the power of their "munihood." This may indicate that their status as *muni* was closely associated with special psychic states or powers that they exhibited. "The prattle of the *muni* Aitasa" (*aitasapralāpa*) in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.33) also suggests the irrational quality of a *muni*'s trance. In the latter episode his son covers Aitasa's mouth while he was prattling and remarks, "our father has gone out of his mind." The *munis* are said to roam wild areas, to tread the path of beasts, Gandharvas, and Apsarasas. They drink from the same cup as Rudra, a god associated with asceticism and the wilderness.²⁴

By the time of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, however, the meaning of the term *vātaraśana* appears to have undergone some changes. The author of this text uses the term no longer as an adjective but as a noun denominating a class of *ṛṣis*.²⁵ In an earlier passage the same text (TĀ 1.23) describes how three classes of *ṛṣis*—Aruṇa, Ketu, and Vātaraśana—originated from the flesh that fell off when Prajāpati shook his body after he had performed austerities (*tapas*). The *ṛṣis* ("seers") are regarded as the founding fathers of the Brāhmaṇical tradition. They discovered the knowledge contained in the Veda as well as in all other branches of learning. This title is one of the highest honors that the authors of Brāhmaṇical texts bestow on a person. Its use here indicates that the Vātaraśanas were considered to have belonged to that elite class of Brāhmaṇical ancestors. It is highly significant, therefore, that the terms *śramaṇa* and *ūrdhvamantḥin* are used to describe them.

The latter term is clearly an adjective qualifying *ṛṣi*. The ambiguity of the term *mantḥin* makes the meaning of the compound word unclear. *Mantḥin* can refer to the penis as well as to the sperm (Malamoud 1977, 73). If it refers to the penis, the compound means "ithyphallic." It would then be a synonym of *ūrdhvaliṅga*, the more common term in later literature, and would confirm the *munis*' relationship to the ithyphallic god Rudra-Śiva already hinted at in RV 10.136.7. If, on the other hand, *mantḥin* means sperm, the compound means "one who retains his sperm." It would then be a synonym

23. See, for example, JU 69: *anunmattā unmattavad ācarantaḥ*—"although they are sane, they behave like madmen." The NpU (154) says that an ascetic "acts like a fool, a lunatic, or a goblin" (*bālonmattapiśācavat*).

24. The information on the *muni* in other early vedic texts is extremely meager. The RV 8.17.14 (= SV 1.275) calls Indra "the friend of *munis*," and the RV 7.56.8 says that the wind roars like a *muni*. The AV 8.6.17 lists "*muni*'s hair" among the evil ones exorcised from a woman. In verse 5 of the same hymn an *asura* ("demon") is called *keśī* ("long-haired"). See also AV 7.74.1; Bloomfield 1899, 98; Malamoud 1977, 73.

25. The point the TĀ text (2.7) wants to make is not that these *munis* were girdled with the wind, but that the Vātaraśana class of *munis* were *śramaṇas* and *ūrdhvamantḥins*. Malamoud's (1977, 72) translation—"Les ceinturés de vent étaient des *ṛṣi* sramanes pleins de continence"—does not take into account this change in meaning of the term or its use as a class name earlier in the text. Sāyaṇa (on TĀ) with greater perspicacity takes it as a patronymic and refers to the earlier chapter of the text that distinguishes the three classes.

of the more common *ūrdhvaretas*. In either case, however, the adjective appears to indicate that the Vātaraśana *ṛṣi*s practiced sexual control of some kind. This does not necessarily imply, however, that they practiced total continence or celibacy.²⁶

Now the syntax of this passage clearly demands that *śramaṇa* should have the same syntactical function as *ūrdhvamāthin*; both should be taken as adjectives that describe the seers. Those who interpret *śramaṇa* to indicate a class of ascetics to which the seers belong are assigning to this term a meaning derived from other, and possibly later, contexts.²⁷ The meaning of this term, moreover, should not be simply assumed to be the same as in these later ascetical contexts. We need to search for its meaning within the context of the vedic use of the related terms $\sqrt{\text{śram}}$ and *śrama*. *Śramaṇa* in that context obviously means a person who is in the habit of performing *śrama*. Far from separating these seers from the vedic ritual tradition, therefore, *śramaṇa* places them right at the center of that tradition. Those who see them as non-Brāhmaṇical, anti-Brāhmaṇical, or even non-Aryan precursors of later sectarian ascetics are drawing conclusions that far outstrip the available evidence.²⁸

The use of the title *ṛṣi*, moreover, demonstrates that the Vātaraśanas were not only regarded as Brahmins but also as part of the elite group of mythical ancestors who were the founders of the Brāhmaṇical tradition. The use of the term *śramaṇa* to describe them, however, indicates that they were a group of special people given to practices and a life style far from common. Taken together with the term *vātaraśana* and its historical link to the *muni*, we may not be too wrong in concluding that the adjective *śramaṇa* referred to their uncommonly strenuous way of life.

We come across this term also in a text of the White Yajurveda, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, generally regarded as one of the earliest of the Upaniṣads. Describing the state of deep sleep in which there are no dreams or desires and in which the individual is in the embrace of the self, the Upaniṣad declares:

In this state a father is not a father, a mother is not a mother, worlds are not worlds, gods are not gods, the Vedas are not Vedas, a thief is not a thief, an abortionist is not an abortionist, a Cāṇḍāla is not a Cāṇḍāla, a Paulkasa is not a Paulkasa,²⁹ a *śramaṇa* is not a *śramaṇa*, and a *tāpasa* is not a *tāpasa*. (BāU 4.3.22)

In this passage the two terms *śramaṇa* and *tāpasa* are clearly nouns denoting classes of people, just as the other words of the list. It is unclear, however, whether these two terms refer to well-established and identifiable groups, in the same way as do, for example, the terms gods, Vedas, and Cāṇḍālas, or whether they indicate broad categories into which individuals fall because of their behavior, as in the case of thieves and abortionists. I prefer to interpret them in the latter sense, which corresponds to the understanding of *śrama* and *tapas* in the vedic literature, than to read into them the later classification of ascetics

26. This interpretation is made by Malamoud 1977, 72, when he translates the term as “pleins de continence.” See also Sharma 1939, 19.

27. See, for example, Malamoud 1977, 73; Sharma 1939, 19.

28. For such interpretations, see Bhandarkar 1940, 53; Chakrabarti 1973, 14; Barua 1921, 242; Chanda 1934, 98; Sharma 1939, 18–20; Pande 1978.

29. A Cāṇḍāla is an outcaste at the lowest end of the social hierarchy. Even his touch pollutes an upper-caste person. A Paulkasa is a similar social outcaste, the offspring of a low-caste father and an upper-caste mother.