6. Wilderness as a Necessary Feature in Hindu Religion

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1. Introduction

Hinduism is full of paradoxes. It can even be argued that this paradoxicality is the core feature of Hinduism – a religion or a religious complex so difficult to define because it does not share core features with the other so-called world religions as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. This can lead to the conclusion that Hinduism as an -ism and as a single belief system is a construction made by the English colonists and, after them, Western scholars or theologians with their predilection for neat categories.¹ Yet, I will argue that it can also lead to the conclusion that Hinduism as an -ism simply has other core features and other ways to deal with issues normally related to religion, and that these may challenge standard definitions of religion both as a notion and as a phenomenon. The paradoxicality implicit in Hinduism is one of the interesting features that can be used not only in a comparative study as such, but also in relation to the theme of this book, namely wilderness.² This article offers two examples of analyses of the idea of wilderness from the Hindu tradition. I argue that the wild or wilderness should, in relation to religion,

1 See the many books on Orientalism, e. g. Inden (1986 and 1990), Nandy (1983), King (1999), or Bloch et al. (2010), just to mention a few.

2 The term paradoxicality is not as far as I know a normal used term in introductory books on Hinduism, but it is always indirectly touched upon. Gavin Flood writes, in his introduction to his book on Hinduism, how he wants to explain its internal coherence as well as its apparent inconsistencies (1996, 3). Wendy Doniger finds the term “Cross-fertilization” between different layers of the tradition” a useful term (2009, 6), Axel Michaels mentions these references to others: “a potpourri of religions, an all-absorbent sponge, a net ensnaring everything, an upside down banyan tree with countless roots” or with reference to Goethe, who writes in a letter in 1824: “I am by no means averse to what is Hinduism, but I am afraid of it, because it draws my power of imagination into formlessness and deformation.” (1998, 17).

not always be seen in contradiction to the tamed or ordered world or as something to avoided, because the wild beasts, or the situation related to the wild, brings disorder. It can also function as a necessary feature of the ordered world and as essential for the upkeep of order. In Hindu religion, wilderness is something that has to be encompassed, embraced and lived through, not something that has to be shunned. The function and use of ideas of wilderness offer a pregnant example of the paradoxicality inhering in Hinduism, and one for which the use of simple dualistic analytical models fall short.

The idea of finding a path to the spiritual world in the wilderness is something we see in nearly all religions (Christian monks and ascetics, sufis, shamans etc.), and of course this invariably involves interrelations between those who seek and those who stay behind in society. But in Hinduism the two spheres are interwoven in a very complex inter-relation.³ In the context of Hinduism, the two spheres of wilderness and ordered society can be understood as counterweights in a system according to which both are necessary for attaining the state of equilibrium that is the goal at all levels – both in relation to the individual person, who lives in the wilderness for a while or for good, and in relation to the world as part of society as well. In relation to an analysis of the Vedic sacrifice, Heesterman (1993, 1–44) points to the fact that the Vedic texts on the one hand stress the opposition between the domestic world (*grāma*) and the wild or jungle world (*āraṇya*) and on the other see those two worlds as interwoven. While the sacrifice is placed in the domestic and ordered world, it does not mean that the jungle is left out in the sacrificial order; it is seen as a necessary complement to the domesticated world. This is seen in relation to the textual description of the horse sacrifice, which should include both the domestic horse and a

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- 3 Geoffrey Samuel (2008) suggests that this form for dialectic is already present in the Buddhist and other early ascetic orders (*śramaṇa*-traditions) in India. He writes p. 239: “...that renunciate ascetics placed themselves outside ordinary society in formal terms, however closely they might in fact interact with it subsequently. In practice, there was an ongoing dialectic between forms of renunciate practice that became more or less assimilated to the needs of the society, and others that positioned themselves at the edges or outside society.” While the groups who placed themselves outside society did it firmly by having other ideals for example by having a special death cult as some of the *śaiva* ascetics as the *Pāśupatas* and the *kāpālikas* and others by doing magic of dubious character; others saw it as their most prominent role to keep a relationship to society. It is the latter group that is of interest, when it comes to the interwoven relationship between the ascetics living in the wild as a wild and the tamed society.

wild animal. But while the horse is to be sacrificed, the wild animal must be released after consecration. “In this way, they are sacrificed and at the same time not sacrificed” (Heesterman 1993, 30). This has to do with the understanding of the two worlds; one is understood as the world of man (the domestic world), and the other as the wild world – the world of Gods and ascetics who strive for living in opposition to the domestic world. Wilderness in Hindu religion should, therefore, not only be understood as a chaotic place; while it may be “out of place” from one perspective, it is “in place” from another. It is out of place in relation to persons living in the world, who follow norms related to society and who strive to maintain it by producing goods as well as having children. It is “in place” in relation to persons who live as ascetics and who are guided by norms that place them on the outside of society or a “life-in-the-world” for a while or for good. We therefore fail to grasp the religious function of wilderness, if we see it only as an opposition to the ordered world to be avoided or abhorred, or as a temporary scene for a *rite de passage*.

In Hinduism, wilderness is characterised by opposition to the tamed, profane world. Therefore, wilderness is geophysically or naturally placed in the mountains, in the forests or in the desert, where isolation from the profane cultivated world is possible. But wilderness can also be placed in a human being, who by his behaviour and look lives as a wild person and who by different practices – for example meditation or other ritualistic behaviour – isolates himself from the profane world while still being a visible part of it.

What is of interest in relation to the broader field of religious studies is therefore that wilderness within Hinduism can, on the one hand, be understood as a chaotic place, where demons or other counterproductive beings live and where disorder rules, and, on the other hand, as a place that leads to an order beyond the order determined by upholding society, namely to the ultimate goal of the liberation of rebirths or *mokṣa*. I will give two examples of how wilderness is both related to the profane life and to an order beyond it.

The first example touches upon Hindu ideals of life. In the Dharma Śāstra literature, the ideals involve on the one hand a householder (*gṛhas-tha*), who secures the socially based life by having children and producing goods, and on the other an ascetic (*sādhu* or *saṃnyāsa*), who turns his back on life in the world by living in the wild or as a wild man. The householder’s most prominent role is to maintain and uphold society, and for that reason he has to orient himself towards the norms and mo-

als related to a life in this world. On the contrary, the ascetic has to orient himself to a life “out of this world”. Therefore, he follows norms that are oriented towards the transcendental world, and by so doing he can loosen his ties to life in this world. One of the necessary outcomes is that he, in many ways, lives a life in opposition to the cultured world, with other ideals to live up to and so he, from a profane viewpoint, lives in the wild or as a wild man.

To live in opposition to the ideals of the socially based world is not only necessary for his individual pursuit of attaining mokṣa or mukti (liberation from the cycle of rebirths), it also secures equilibrium in the world as such because he represents the necessary counterweight to the profane world.⁴ The Dharma Śāstra literature presents the two ideals as mutually dependent – one cannot exist without the other. If there were no householder to secure and maintain the profane world, there would be no room for releasing the ascetic from his profane duties. If there are no ascetics to represent the path of liberation, the man-in-the-world cannot accomplish a better karma by offering food to the begging ascetics. Equilibrium in the world as such cannot be maintained if the one side is missing.

The second example is related to the understanding and the worship of the Great Goddess (Mahādevī). She is a figure who is both represented as the bearer of the ordered world, a benign goddess and the creator of life (epitomizing an ideal of the tamed world) and as the wild, untamed and horrific destructor of life (epitomizing an ideal of the wild, unordered world). She encompasses both aspects and is worshipped accordingly. One day she is worshipped as a Mother, the idealised wife, and as the Great Creator; the next day she can be worshipped as an independent Virgin and as the Great Destructor. This form of worship is found all over India and it can be seen either as an –ism in itself, where the goddess is understood as an independent figure, or as a part of a divine couple.⁵ Goddess worship shows not only how paradoxicality is embraced in

4 The understanding of the equilibrium discourse is found in different philosophical schools in a micro-macro-cosmos system of correspondence, according to which it is crucial to find equilibrium between seeming oppositions in the individual as well as in the universe.

5 To call goddess worship for Śaktism, making it an independent tradition in itself is an ongoing debate among indologists. Gavin Flood underlines, that the Śaktā tradition is less clearly defined than Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism (1996, 175). Wendy Doniger emphasised the independence of the Goddess, but does not call it an –ism (2009, 387–392), and Geoffrey Samuels debates this issue in his book on the origin of yoga and tantra (2008)

Hindu religion, but also how wilderness is assigned crucial functions. In Hinduism, wilderness is not to be defeated, domesticated, but the wild is, instead, assigned crucial functions. The implication is that the “order” of Hinduism entails an embrace of paradoxicality. First, however, I will discuss where the paradoxicality implicit in Hinduism seems to be in play in order to move towards the specific understanding of wilderness as a necessary part of order.

2. Paradoxicality in Hinduism

It is important to stress that paradoxicality can be found in many different aspects of Hinduism and in many different contexts. Still, its most explicit expression is in the Upaniṣads (from 600–300 BCE), where the understanding of the embedded paradoxicality of life, the nature of God, the world, and even the rituals, is represented as the key to salvation or mokṣa. A crucial example is the description of brahman⁶ in the Kena Upaniṣad II, 3, where it becomes obvious how the seeker of truth only comprehends brahman if he or she realises that it is a paradox. The seeker of truth must recognise that one cannot understand brahman by means of deductive, intellectual exercises; the understanding of brahman goes beyond that. The text goes as follows: “He who thinks it not thinks it, he who thinks it knows it not; it is not understood by those who know and known by those who do not know.” (Brockington 1981, 48).

This implicit paradoxicality can be found already in the Ṛgvedic texts, especially in the many cosmologies presented in Ṛgveda 10, with the hymn Nāsadīya Sūkta, X. 129, 1–7 as a very good example. Paradoxicality is here the core feature, not only in the comprehension of the creation of the world, but also in the understanding of the reasons behind everything in the created world. The myth begins in śloka 1 with a statement about what can be said about the stadium before creation and is

6 Brahman is a neuter noun and understood as the essence of the universe or the totality of the universe. In the earlier texts, the Brāhmaṇas, from around 800 BCE, brahman was related to the power within the ritual. In the Upaniṣads it became a principle both referring to the power or essence in the ritual and to the essence of the universe, as well as the essence within all living appearances. Salvation from the cycle of rebirths is reached when the seeker of truth understands that the inner self (ātman) is identical with Brahman, described in famous dictum from the Chandogya Upaniṣad: Tat tvam asi “You are that, or That you are” (Brockington 1981, 41–50; Flood 1996, 47–49).

followed by questions that try to pinpoint what made creation happen. It goes as follows:

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep? (1)

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond. (2)

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat. (3)

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. (4)

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above. (5)

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen? (6)

Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know. (7) (O’Flaherty 1981, 25–26).

At least two things are made clear for the reader or listener.⁷ First of all, the text asserts the limitations of the human mind in comprehending creation. This is done by having the text end where it began, by arguing in a circle, asking nearly the same question at the beginning and at the end. Secondly, it concludes that creation is a never solved paradox, because it is stressed at the end that no one really knows how existence came to be. In my reading of the ślokas, this can lead to the conclusion that paradoxicality is not only something you have to live with, but also something that you have to live by, as an unavoidable and indispensable part of life and the basic feature of existence.

The texts quoted above are of course developed in a special period of time, namely in the later Vedic period from around 1000–300 BCE. Still, they are crucial for understanding the later developments of different soteriological trends in Hinduism, most explicitly found in the different philosophical schools or Darśanas from around the beginning of the

7 The vedic texts were, over a long period of time, orally transmitted.

Common Era. However, I will argue that this basic feature can also be traced or pinpointed in the way the ordinary Hindu copes with his or her life.

2.a. Compartmentalisation strategies

If Hinduism, as I have suggested above, has paradoxicality as one of its core features, it means that Hindus have to cope with this interwoven paradoxicality in different ways depending on social stratification. One approach is to ponder philosophically what this paradoxicality stands for in philosophical investigations. This approach is only a possibility for the intellectual elite. The other main approach would be to apply a compartmentalisation strategy⁸ that would situate this paradoxicality in a special space and thereby enable individuals to cope with it in everyday life. In one way, this paradoxicality is a part of life that may explain why life does not always turn out as planned; in another it is mostly related to the transcendental world. As for the latter, paradoxicality can be coped with by means of a compartmentalisation strategy where profane life, “life-in-the-world”, is placed in one category. Here, paradoxicality is not lived by as an interwoven part of life but as an explanation of life. “Life-out-of-the world” can both categorise the transcendental world, or the life of the ascetics, who have chosen to live in opposition to “life-in-the-world.” Here paradoxicality is lived by as a core feature, which has to be encompassed in life as such.

We also find this compartmentalisation strategy at work in Hindu religion in a micro- and macro-cosmos corresponding system, which shows

8 The analytical use of the idea of “compartmentalisation” which I here apply to the distinction between everyday life and the soteriological quest is inspired by Milton Singer (1971 & 1972) and his elaboration on how Madras Hindu categorized the industrial public sphere and the private domestic sphere as two distinct areas, not only socially and culturally but also in relation to behaviour, norms and conduct precepts. Singer concludes: “In this compartmentalization, the work sphere is “ritually neutralized”, that is, relatively freed from customary norms and ritual restrictions.” (1972, 349). I think this distinction is fruitful to use in relation to understand how Hindus cope with the implicit paradoxicality within Hinduism. The compartmentalisation makes it possible to differentiate between everyday life and the quest for doing well in the world, and the soteriological path. A key point is that, in spite of this mental and spatial compartmentalisation, the two spheres are in permanent interrelated communication.

how the two above mentioned categories of the profane and the transcendental are interwoven. Such a system views the individual that is part of society as a micro-cosmos in relation to the universe, the macro-cosmos. The individual and the universe are mirror images and therefore closely related. Disorder – understood as anti-dharma or anti-dharmic powers – at one level causes disorder at the other and vice versa. For this reason, it is very important for every individual to live up to his or her specific dharma (moral, ethic, rules), outlined according to sex, life stage and caste, and in relation to a life either as part of a “life-in-the-world” or as part of “life-out-of-the-world”. At the same time, this compartmentalisation strategy can be used to outline how moral, ethical and behavioural rules can change in relation to setting or context. In one context, for example in the temple or at religious ceremonies, one set of rules should be followed. In another, for example when doing business, another set of rules should be followed. This also means that the relation between the micro- and macro-cosmos corresponding system changes according to context. For a man “living out of the world”, the ultimate goal is first to understand the interwoven paradoxicality in life, so that he is later able to remove it. The compartmentalisation strategy in play between the man “living in the world” and the man “living out of the world” is to realise that different rules have to be followed according to which sphere you form part of. In some ways, the two life-spheres are in opposition; in others they are closely related and depending on each other. In the overall scheme, both spheres are necessary in the overall pursuit of equilibrium in the world, as well as out of the world, which leads to a dissolution of all oppositions.

As a crucial example of how “the master plan” is not thought of as establishing oppositions for good, but that the oppositions are, rather, temporary and necessary oppositions that exist in order that they may be overcome or integrated later, I turn to a myth from the late Vedic period, namely Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa from around 1000–800 BCE. In this text both the gods and the demons are created as the progeny of Prajāpati (The Lord of creation). The demons are not, as in other religions, created due to some kind of mistake, or as fallen gods, or as the necessary opposition to the Gods or the positive powers. Rather, they play a crucial role in making the world an ordered place, in the creation of the world as we know it, with sky and earth and with day and night (O’Flaherty, 1988,

29–30).⁹ Here the oppositions are established for two main reasons: Firstly, to make the world an ordered place for humans and other creatures to live in; secondly, to give the seeker of truth the possibility of integrating them in himself again or to make a de-differentiation possible between these two seeming oppositions.

The crucial point in the myth is, therefore, not the creation of the gods and the demons in themselves, but their simultaneous birth from the same breath of Prajāpati while he is doing yoga (see below). Both gods and demons are found in the outer world (macro-cosmos) as well as in the individual (micro-cosmos). What may be even more important is the idea that because the demons are created and because they are created as evil, they can also be overcome. In a soteriological perspective, this means that the presence of evil is necessary as an opposition to the presence of good, in the outer world as well as in the individual, that it may be overcome. Or, as Heestermann points out with regard to Prajāpati's relation to the sacrifice: Prajāpati "conquers" both worlds by integrating them in the sacrifice. This is done by his sacrifice of both a wild and a domestic animal (Heestermann 1993, 30). This same pattern can be found in this myth. It is only through the process of overcoming evil that equilibrium, understood as a de-differentiation of opposites, can be attained. Only through the process of overcoming evil can equilibrium, understood as a de-differentiation of opposites, be attained. Therefore this opposition, as all kinds of oppositions in the world, has to be integrated in the life of the individual in order for him/her to overcome it or to dedifferentiate it:

Prajapati was born to live for a thousand years. Just as one might see in the distance the far shore of a river, so he saw the far shore of his own life. He desired progeny, and so he sang hymns and exhausted himself, and he placed the power to produce progeny in himself. From his mouth he created the gods, and when the gods were created they entered the sky (*divam*); and this is why the gods are gods (*devas*), because when they were created they entered the sky. And there was daylight (*diva*) for him when he had created them, and this is why the gods are gods, because there was daylight for him when he had created them.

Then with his downward breath he created the demons; when they were created they entered this earth, and there was darkness for him when he had created them. Then he knew that he had created evil, since darkness appeared to him when he had created them. Then he pierced them with evil, and it was because of this that they were overcome.

9 Here it is important to note that an "ordered" does not mean the ideal world or state of being, but it explains how the world is as it is.

Therefore it is said, “The battle between gods and demons did not happen as it is told in the narratives and histories, for Prajapati pierced them with evil and it was because of this that they were overcome”. And so the sage has said, “You have not fought with anyone for a single day, nor do you have any enemy, O bountiful Indra. Your battles which they tell about are all magic illusion; you fought no enemy today, nor in the past” (*Rig Veda* 10.54.2).

The daylight which had appeared for him when he had created the gods he made into day; and the darkness which had appeared for him when he had created the demons he made into night. And they are day and night. (*Shatapata Brahmana* 11.1.6.6–11; O’Flaherty 1988,30).

The overall goal in most of the philosophical schools within Hinduism is to integrate seeming oppositions, which are seen as merely human constructions. The best way of realising this is to try to integrate those oppositions within yourself or in your life. Similarly, wilderness is both seen as an opposition to the ordered world or to culture, *and* as an integrated part of order or culture. In other words, the wild or wilderness in itself is not something to be avoided, but to be coped with as an integrated part of the ordered world and of life. This is also the way to reach mokṣa, which can be understood as a stage of equilibrium where there are no differences in all kinds of matter.

This soteriology is explained clearly in the philosophy of Sāṃkhya, where equilibrium is the stage where matter or prakṛti and the guṇas (the three strands of all life) are undifferentiated (Brockington 1981, 99–101). To make this possible, the seeker of mokṣa must work with his or her body as a micro-cosmos by integrating all kinds of oppositions in it. But it can also be noticed in orthodox Hindu observance of moral standards in relation to varṇāśramadharmā (different moral/ethics in relation to social class and stage of life),¹⁰ where a person lives through different oppositions during his or her life and in that way integrates them through the course of life. First as a brahmācārya, then as a householder – both āśramas where the person is committed to a life in the world or so-

10 The four āśramas or life stages are as following: 1) Brahmācārya, the celibate living student, who after the upanayana initiation ritual, where he acquires the holy thread and becomes dwija or double born, is now born or bound to the tradition and shall from now on study the Vedic scriptures, 2) Gṛhastha, the householder, who after the marriage ceremony as the initiation ritual to the second āśrama is now bound to the life in this world and is therefore from now on dedicated to family life, getting children and doing well in society, 3) Vanaprastha, the hermit or forest dweller, and finally 4) Sannyāsa/sāṃnyāsin, ascetic (Michaels 1998, 108; Flood 1986, 61–65).

ciety, and later as a renouncer – where one is now obliged to turn one's back on one's former life and live on the outskirts of society (Flood 1986, 61–65).

This distinction between the householder and the renouncer is a focus point in Louis Dumont's book *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980 [1966]). Here he argues that Hinduism can be seen in terms of a dialogue or interrelationship between those two groups. The householder or "man-in-the-world" is defined by his or her social existence and therefore lives within the rules of society – which, according to Louis Dumont, is the caste system. Because of the social restrictions of the caste system, the person "living in the world" can only be defined in relation to others and therefore has no individuality or existence in himself. On the contrary, the renouncer has established individuality by stepping outside the society and its social network (Dumont 1980 [1966], 272). Yet, according to the Law of Manu, one of the most famous of the Dharma Śāstras, the two groups cannot exist without each other. While the householder is the fundament for upholding society, the renouncer is the fundament for creating soteriological values, which then again enter into society. Hinduism cannot function without the dialectical framework between these interrelated oppositions.

The renouncer, alias the ascetic, both relates himself to wilderness and he is related to wilderness by other people in two ways: Firstly, in relation to wilderness as a place seen from the perspective of the profane world, and secondly in relation to wilderness as space, the soteriologically oriented path or world. Wilderness as a place means living on the outskirts of society, in the mountains or in the jungle, where the renouncer isolates himself and lives a simple life following simple principles, removing him from all materialistic yearnings. In that way, he can follow wilderness as space understood as the opposition to the tamed or profane world. In wilderness as space, he can find tranquillity as well as equilibrium within himself. In the end, this should lead him closer to mokṣa, where the relationship to the materialistic or empirical world is dissolved. By following the āśrama-system by first living by the ideals that oblige him to uphold society and later by renouncing those same obligations, he takes in two opposite, but according to the Dharma Śāstras, equally important poles. In that way he can attain equilibrium within himself. While staying in the wilderness, he attains equilibrium in society too by representing the opposite pole to "The Man-Living-in-the-World", whose most prominent role is to represent the opposite pole to the renouncer, for the purpose of securing equilibrium in the world.

The same way of uniting oppositions can be found in Tantric rituals, where for example the consumption of alcohol, the eating of meat and fish, and sexual intercourse with low-caste women – things that are expressly forbidden for twice-born men in the Laws of Manu – create the necessary pollution in an individual, so that he, by himself, can overcome or transcend these differences and thereby attain equilibrium. Or as Gavin Flood writes: “...the tantric Brahman can pursue his soteriological quest for power and liberation through transcending his social inhibition in a controlled ritual context. It is one thing to perform erotic worship with a low-caste woman in a ritual setting, but quite another to interact with her outside that context” (Flood 1996,192).

2.b. Upholding equilibrium in society

The same idea of upholding equilibrium goes for society as such and leads to the above-mentioned all-encompassing compartmentalisation strategy, which again forms the background for a thorough division of labour and the clear-cut understanding of what or who is clean/unpolluted and what or who is unclean/polluted. The same is the case in relation to dharma where the dharma for a “man-in-the-world” and the dharma for the ascetic differ (Flood 1996, 12–13).

When it comes to compartmentalisation strategies in classical Hindu society, the Brahman-priest, the king and the ascetic (*saṃnyāsin* or *sādhū*) or renouncer (*vanaprastha*) are seen as superior in different domains or spheres. The Brahman-priest is superior in the ritualistic public or religious institutionalised sphere and he ensures good relations to the transcendental powers. This secures equilibrium in the transcendental macro-cosmos as well as in the collective micro-cosmos (society). The king is superior in the profane sphere and accordingly the superior figure in profane matters. In other words, the king secures equilibrium in society – a necessity for the work of the Brahman. His work forms a necessary opposition to the life of the ascetic, who is superior in the individual and soteriologically oriented micro-cosmos. Renunciation is, in this way, not only seen as a necessary stage on the individual path to liberation (*mokṣa*) from the eternal cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*), but also as a necessary counterpart to the reign of the king and the reign of the Brahman.

While the first two figures, the Brahman-priest and the king, uphold and relate to moral and ethical virtues in culture, the tamed or ordered world, the ascetic relates to wild and untamed nature. In relation to

the social world, he is therefore set in opposition to the other two. He wanders around in the wild, or at the outskirts of the civilized world as a wild man. His appearance communicates it: he is mostly half-naked, has uncut matted hair, his beard is long and his body is dirty and often smeared with ashes. But without his presence, the work of the other two figures cannot be put in perspective. The opposition is needed. The ascetic has to seek the wilderness. He has to be part of the wilderness to represent, bodily and spatially, the counterpart of the reign of the king of culture. In this way, wilderness both functions as a necessary counterpart to the socially based culture in the binary or multilayered world (the collective level) and, on the individual level, as a station on the way to mokṣa in relation to the four life stages (āśramas) an orthodox Hindu male has to live through during his life (Michaels 1998, 108; Flood 1986, 61–65).

In other words, the way of achieving mokṣa on a personal level and of securing equilibrium in the macro-cosmos is to bring together, and live through, the polarities or dualities between the tamed and the wild, culture and nature, clean and unclean, male and female, and the different dharmas.

The ascetic or renouncer is only one of the figures related to the wild or the wilderness in classical Hinduism. Hindu mythology is full of demons and other monstrous figures which, especially in the Upaniṣads, are explicitly synonymous with elements that uphold saṃsāra and, at the same time, are seen as necessary key figures in the attempt to attain mokṣa. In other words, it is not possible to achieve mokṣa if it is only understood as in opposition to saṃsāra and if the figures that uphold saṃsāra are not there. The same seems to be the case in the great Hindu epics like the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, where the idea of wilderness plays an important role as the representation of the anti-dharmic world that not only has to be overcome but also lived by and experienced before the ordered dharmic world can come into being (Brockington 1981, 62–63).¹¹

Having offered an image of the function of wilderness in Hinduism more broadly, I will now concentrate on a more detailed analysis of the

11 It is obvious in the Rāmāyana, where Rāma, the eponymous hero of the epic, has to live through fourteen years of exile in the wilderness to show not only that he can live up to his dharma as a warrior (the relativistic ethic) because he protects the ascetics living there, but also that it is a necessary stepping stone towards his deification (the universal ethic). (Brockington, 1981, 62–63).

role of ascetics in Hindu society. Axel Michael rightly calls ascetics key figures in understanding Hindu religion both in history and in understanding living Hinduism of today (Michael 1998, 347). Then, I turn to Goddess worship (Śaktism) especially in relation to the worship of the Great Goddess (Mahādevī). The Goddess is a figure of worship that epitomises paradoxicality, a figure embracing tameness and wilderness together and symbolizing the necessary coexistence of opposites. I regard Mahādevī as the most crucial example of how tameness and wilderness are integrated in one and the same figure, and of how both perspectives depend on each other in a multilayered understanding of life and death, sickness and health, dharma and antidharma. These two examples touch upon the same relation between wilderness and tameness, but with two important differences: 1) While the Goddess is related to the transcendental world but with obligations to both the transcendental world and the profane world (this can be called a top-top-down relation), the ascetic is related to the profane world and with obligations both related to the profane and the transcendental world (this can be called a down-down-top relation). 2) While the ascetic represents the wild or wilderness in relation to the man in the world, the Goddess encompasses both the wild and the tamed. The one and the same Goddess can both be described as wild and furious and as tamed and domesticated. While the ascetic is either or, the Goddess is both and. Therefore, in Hindu religion, the Goddess and the ascetic are, in a sense, mirror images with inverse profane/transcendental indicators, and wilderness is both idealized and sanctioned in ascetic practice as well as in Goddess worship, and assigned a necessary function for the maintenance of order both with in the world and in the individual.

3. Case 1: Ascetics

The ascetic lives in fundamental opposition to the householder's domestic life and therefore also to the domestic fire rituals. For that reason, he has to give up all the utensils used in the domestic rituals and instead, in his ascetic practice, attempt to heat the inner fire (tapas) in the body or micro-cosmos. In other words, the Vedic fire ritual is internalised. The sacrifice becomes a self-sacrifice. The ascetic is socially dead; he lives in opposition to the socially engaged life. This makes him pure because he does not touch or engage with anything that can make him impure. He no longer performs the fire ritual to communicate with the gods;

he is the sacrificial fire himself. For that reason, many ascetics sit in the middle point between four fires, looking at the fifth – the sun – or they sit with a bowl of hot coals on their head. The ascetic is smeared with ashes (*vibbhūti*) for similar reasons (Flood 1996, 90–91; Michaels 1998, 347–348).

There are two forms of ascetics in living Hinduism of today. First, the *vanaprastha* and the *saṃnyāsin*, who follow the pattern of what I call the relativistic *dharma* of *varṇāśramadharmā* – meaning that a person cannot renounce the world before he has lived through the life stage as a householder. Second, the very diverse group of *sādhus*, who choose the ascetic path as their overall life style as a kind of a soteriological call and renounce the world no matter their position in life, and who withdraw from following the path of *varṇāśramadharmā*.

3.a. *Vanaprastha* – the third *āśrama* or stage of life

A *vanaprastha* (from Sanskrit *vana*: “forest” and either *prastha*: “gone to” or *prus*: “dwelling”) denotes the third *āśrama* or stage of life out of four in the Vedic *āśrama* system prescribed in the *Manusmṛti*. The *āśrama* begins when a person is between the age of 50 and 75, when his skin has become wrinkled and his hair grey, and when he has seen the son of his son, which means that his son is now able to take over the commitments in society as the head of the family (Flood, 1996, 63). The *vanaprastha* disengages himself from all family ties except that of his wife, who may accompany him to the wilderness if she chooses to do so. The *vanaprastha* stage of life, which should be without any form of material desires, is as already mentioned in opposition to the former stage of life as a *gṛhastha*. One’s position in this stage of life is shown by, for one thing, one’s clothing – usually, the *vanaprastha* wears only a single piece of clothing, and he does not cut his hair, beard and nails. Further, he is required to live not only in the wilderness but also *by* the wilderness, subsisting exclusively on food growing wild in the forest. He eats raw or uncultivated food, such as roots, green herbs, wild rice and grain. The only thing he brings along to the wilderness from his former life is the sacred fire and the implements required for the daily and periodical offerings. He is not allowed to accept gifts from anyone, except for what may be absolutely necessary to sustain life. Yet, he must honour, to the best of his ability, those who visit his hermitage. This shows how he still has important obligations toward society.

He lives as a hermit for the sake of himself, but he still has to engage in society.

The hermit's time in the wilderness must be spent reading the Veda, making oblations and undergoing various kinds of austerities. This helps him to subdue worldly passions and gives him the tools to manipulate his mind, so that he slowly feels indifferent to all kinds of worldly objects (Flood, 1996, 63). This stage does not only denote a beginning transition from a material to a spiritual life but also a beginning transition of the mind, where everything becomes undifferentiated or of equal importance. The vanaprastha stage is therefore a stage in between that of a full born member of society with the obligations related to society and that of an ascetic. Wilderness, mostly related to the woods or the jungle, is understood as the place where this transition can happen. By living in, and by, the opposition to culture and the materialistic life in the wilderness, the vanaprastha is on his way to a stage of equilibrium within himself (the micro-cosmos).

The vanaprastha stage shows how wilderness, in a Hinduistic context and in relation to the āśrama system, can be understood in at least three ways. Firstly, as a concrete geographical place a person needs to go to find inner peace and to forget all material desires; secondly as a way of living, where the person lives as a wild with no materialistic goods and relates himself to the wild by looking like a wild and eating food mostly found in the wild; and thirdly as a state of mind where the wild is no longer understood as oppositional to the tamed, but as something that has to be encompassed in a unified system where a clear-cut differentiation between oppositions known from the profane world disappears. The fourth āśrama, living as a saṃnyāsin, shows that if the process of transition in the third āśrama is successful, the transition of the mind should be completed.

3.b. The fourth stage of life as a saṃnyāsin

As a significant difference between a vanaprastha and a saṃnyāsin, as a total renouncer, is the use of fire. The saṃnyāsin shows a total disengagement in life in the world: he no longer uses or maintains his sacred fire. He lives only to beg or eat raw food because he is no longer able to cook his own food. This way of living fits perfectly into the structural system of Lévi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss 1963, 221–230), as also suggested by Gavin Flood (1996, 63). It also fits the system of oppositions that I have out-

lined here: If fire and cooked food are the symbols of culture or the tamed world, and raw food is the symbol of nature, the untamed world, of wilderness, then the *saṃnyāsin*, by renouncing the sacred fire, also has renounced culture. The only relation he has to society lies in his begging of food, which is done for the sake of the people living in the world, who by giving food to a *saṃnyāsin* can attain good karma.

3.c. The dedication of life to asceticism

The Sanskrit terms *sādhū* (good man) and *sādhvī* (good woman) refer to renouncers who have chosen to live a life apart from or on the edges of society in order to focus on their own spiritual development. They either live alone or together with a sectarian group of equals in the mountains, at the sacred riverbanks or on cremation grounds, all places which can be categorised as wilderness in the sense of a place in opposition to ordinary life in society. They differ from the group of *vanaprasthas* and *saṃnyāsin* because they do not necessarily follow the *aśrama* scheme but choose, whenever they feel ready to do so, to renounce “the life in the world”, dedicating themselves to the soteriological path of achieving *mokṣa* while still living (*jīvanmukti*). Conversations with *sādhū*s, though, indicate that a personal crisis in relation to family problems, exclusion from the extended family, crime, and avoidance of an arranged marriage are often mediating causes for choosing to become a *sādhū* (Michaels 1998, 349).

No matter the motive for becoming a *sādhū*, their religious goal is to live in a state of transcendence with no individual attachments to the profane world. This does not mean that they are not engaged in society at large or that they perform no religious functions. Theologically, they are seen as the counterweight to people engaged in the profane world, adhering to the relativistic *dharma* according to *varṇāśrama* (social class and life stage) as *śvādharma* (individual *dharma*). And the life of the *sādhū* and the *sādhū* himself is seen as one big sacrifice or sacrificial offering (Michaels 1998, 354).

Around 4 or 5 million *sādhū*s live in India today, and they are widely respected because of their ability to live without any attachments to ordinary material life, their indifference to all forms of physical pain and food, and their complete abstinence from sex (Samuel 2008, 181). However, they are also feared because, by living in a state of transcendence, they are believed to be able to manipulate things in the world, to do

magic, or to curse people. Sādhus occupy a unique and important place in Hindu society, particularly in villages and small towns, where they are considered to be the living embodiments of transcendence and the living images of religious illumination and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (Michaels 1998, 348).

In the widest sense, the ambiguity towards the sādhus, who embody wilderness both by living in concrete “wilderness” areas and by living as wild persons in opposition to the tamed ordered world, is a manifestation of the ambiguity Hindus have towards wilderness. It is threatening, because it is out of order. It cannot be controlled and therefore one never knows what the outcome will be if one relates to it in some way. But wilderness is also attractive, because it is a place where transitions can happen. The profane world or “the-life-in- the-world” can be seen from without, and consequently coped with as something that should not be striven for. In that way a person engaged in the wilderness can release himself from the bonds that bind him to the empirical karmic world, and, in the end, he can thereby transcend it.

There are three primary sectarian divisions within the sādhu community, which follow the overall sectarian division of the Hindu community as such: Śaiva sādhus, Vaiṣṇava sādhus and Śākta sādhus. They devote themselves to different gods in the Hindu pantheon in their endeavour to transcend themselves, and, in the state of transcendence, also transcend the gods. Their lifestyles seem to differ; especially the Śaiva sādhus seem to follow a more austere and radical path than that of the Vaiṣṇavas, and in relation to the social world, they often emphasise the need for a radical separation more and a complete commitment to a life lived in contrast to the social world. The Aghorīs are a crucial example. They live on the cremation grounds, eating and drinking out of human skulls. Conversely, most of the Vaiṣṇava sādhus openly emphasise an obliged engagement in the social world, and by begging and chanting religious songs while wandering around in the villages, they are believed to bestow good karma on the villagers (Michaels, 1998, 348–354).

Within these overall and general sectarian divisions, numerous subsects may be identified, each of which reflects different lineages and philosophical schools and traditions. What binds the group of sādhus together is that they live on the edge in the untamed and wild world and in contrast to the relativistic dharma, the rules of society.

4. Case 2: The Goddess – a figure uniting contrasts

A functional parallel, in the world of the deities, to the soteriological idea of neutralizing oppositions, the overall idea behind the compartmentalisation strategy, can be found in the goddess known as Mahādevī. The Goddess not only unites opposite poles within herself (the tamed and the wild), but she also lives them out or symbolises the coexistence of opposites. She is depicted both as the benign Mother goddess, who creates benevolence in the social world, securing that the śakti-energy will manifest itself through the women bearing children, and as the horrific Virgin goddess who slays humans. She manifests the śakti-energy in a form that takes human lives in the service of a greater cause as, for example, the maintenance of the Universe in order that people may attain mokṣa, etc. Mandakranta Bose (2010, 12–13) differentiates between the Goddess' function as an image of either a philosophical/metaphysical or a social archetype. This fits my differentiation between the Goddess understood in relation to either the soteriological or the social world. Behind her archetypes typology, Bose intends to understand the kinds of ideals that nurture the conceptions of the female gender, their assigned role, and the treatment of women in Hindu society. This of course influences the archetype model which distinguishes between the following four types: 1) mother/nurturer; 2) wielder of power/protector; 3) wife/helper/daughter; 4) destroyer. O'Flaherty (1986), who is inspired by Ramakrishna, differentiates between the mother of tooth and the mother of breast. The goddess of breast embodies the material virtues as motherhood, generosity and subservience to her husband. The goddess of tooth is, in many ways, the contrast to the goddess of breast. She is, first of all, independent and furious, and she can be both erotic and dangerous (O'Flaherty 1980, 90–91).

The divisions of Bose and O'Flaherty are fruitful with respect to understanding how different names given to goddesses differ from each other and how they idealize different roles of women and different aspects of women's lives. In relation to Mahādevī, it is important to understand that she encompasses all aspects in one and the same figure. Wilderness and tamedness are here united; in Mahādevī opposites coexist. The paradoxical nature and the multiple identities of the goddess have made a clear definition of Śaktism as an entity in itself, and not just as a part of either Śaivism or Vaiṣṇavism, difficult to formulate. From my point of view, the genius of Śaktism is that it is both an autonomous division as well as an important part of the other two divisions, which is in line with the paradoxicality found in other parts of Hinduism. It is also in line with the theme of

this book and the arguments in this article about wilderness both understood as a place, as a state of being and as a state of mind. Wilderness is, from one perspective, oppositional to order, and from another, it is a necessary condition for the attainment of order.

I suggest that Śāktism can be seen as an exploratory field, in which we can approach an understanding of the general paradoxicality within Hinduism, while also coming to an understanding of the multilayered idea of wilderness. First of all, wilderness can be understood as the necessary counterweight to tameness and the tamed, both as a place and as a state of being. Secondly, wilderness is a necessary feature in the process through which order (understood as the condition in which dharma rules) replaces disorder (understood as antidharma). In Śāktism, we find the representation of wildness, as well as tameness, in one and the same figure, namely the goddess herself. On the one hand, she is the creator and upholder of life, the nurturer, the devoted wife and mother, representing the ideals for upholding the social order/the tamed world. On the other hand, she is described as the independent, wild, tameless and furious demon killer, and bloodthirsty destroyer, symbolising the need to destroy the demons (personifying the wild as a negative power) in the world as well as in the individual. (Brockington 1981, 123; Samuel 2008, 248). Clearly, the wild can both be seen as a positive, as well as a negative, power. When respect to the goddess, we see clearly how she is a figure encompassing seeming oppositions within herself, how she herself encompasses paradoxicality. The many double aspects of the goddess, here in the form of Kālī, are described as follows in the Mahānirvāṇa Tantra from around the sixth century:

Though you have form, you are formless,
Through your māyā you assume many forms,
You are the beginning of all, but you have no beginning,
You are the mistress, the destroyer and the preserver
(Mahānirvāṇa Tantra, 4.34, translated by Mandakranta Bose, 2010, 32).

4.a. The goddess as both tamed and wild

The narratives about Hindu goddesses and their double-bound nature can be traced back to the Vedic literature,¹² but it is especially in the Tantras and in the Puranic literature from around the fifth century and on-

12 Even though she played a peripheral role and only a few hymns are dedicated to her, she played an important role as being both a life-giver and a mother or nur-

wards that we find a thorough Devī (goddess) mythology. The most prominent figure for an understanding of the double-bound nature of the Devī is the goddess Durgā, who is both depicted as a wild, independent warrior goddess slaying demons and as a loving, caring mother and wife idealising domestic life. In the first aspect, she is depicted as an independent force, the reason behind, as well as the upholder of, the world. As Rachel McDermott (2005) emphasises, Durgā “offers her devotees either worldly enjoyment (*bhukti*) or liberation (*mukti*)”. This supports the argument of this article, because it demonstrates that she supports not only the man “living in the world” (*gṛhastha* and the *gṛhīni*), but also the ascetic, who is oriented “out of this world” (McDermott 2005, 3607).

The description of Durgā as a demon slayer and as an omnipotent entity can be found in a part of Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa called Devīmāhātmya, in the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa and in various tantric texts (Flood 1996, 174–176). When depicted as the idealised mother and wife, she is most often described in relation to Śiva and can be related closely to Pārvatī as one of her many names. This aspect is played out in the Skanda Purāṇa (Bose 2010, 30). When depicted as an independent self-reliant power, she can be described as Durgā herself or as Kālī,¹³ who – despite her being depicted as a devourer of blood offerings – is also an embodiment of pure consciousness and the omnipotent power of the universe. This aspect is given a profound expression in a Tantric text from the Kālīkula school (Bose 2010, 35).

One of the most interesting ambiguous and ambivalent goddesses is the goddess for smallpox and other skin maladies mostly called either Śītalā or Māriyamman. She represents lay or village Śaktism, and is not only understood as the reason for the disease (disorder), but also as the cure of the disease (order). Thus, it is obvious how she both represents order and disorder, and it is only by pleasing her that order will be attained or secured. Śītalā or Māriyamman also has the ability to do both (Samuel 2008, 246–248).

turer as Uṣas, Aditi, Vāc, Pṛthivī or Śrī or as a life-destroyer as Nirṛti who represents death and anger (Boose 2010, 15–25).

- 13 As Boose (2010, 33) rightly stresses, Kālī emanates from Durgā and can be seen as her antithesis – at least when Durgā is depicted in her creating and sustaining aspects. What is of interest is that they both emanate from the same primeval energy known as either śakti, prakṛti, or māyā and sometimes understood as Brahman. That means that the same energy can manifest itself in at least two presumably opposite figures.

While Axel Michaels argues that the understanding of ascetism is the key to understanding Hinduism, Brockington argues that the key is found in the study of Hindu goddesses. "In short, a study of Hindu goddesses is not so much a study of one aspect of the Hindu tradition as it is a study of the Hindu tradition itself" (Brockington 1996, 123). I have pointed to the necessity of studying both for understanding Hindu religion. They function as mirror images of each other with inverse transcendental/profane indicators. In relation to the theme of wilderness, the study of Hindu goddesses offers another necessary layer for understanding the paradoxicality within Hinduism and how this paradoxicality is closely related to the understanding of wilderness as both benign and as destructive.

5. Conclusion

When a person decides to become either a *śaṃyasin* or a *sādhu*, a ritual of renunciation will be conducted, in which it is communicated to everybody that this person is departing from all relations to the social world. Sometimes the renouncer symbolically performs his own funeral rite in front of the sacrificial fire, which means that he consumes his old socially related self. At the same time, he is freed from the relativistic part of Vedic religion which has the Brahman-priest as its most important figure. His liberation from this category of Vedic religion is also shown by his removal of his holy thread and abandonment of the sacred fire. He is no longer part of the tradition that has been his overall guiding principle through his life in the world. He is therefore out of place and space, and he must live in the wilderness as a wild man, and in all matters uphold the opposition to ordinary social life. Yet, by doing so, he demonstrates an obligation to the social or profane life, where he functions as its counterweight in a system that aims for equilibrium between oppositions. At the same time, by living through wilderness as a place, and by taking in the wilderness both as space and as a condition for himself, he can accomplish a state of equilibrium within. The religious geography of wilderness is therefore twofold. It is both placed on the outskirts of the profane world, in the mountains and in the jungle, and it is placed within the person who seeks wilderness as the necessary opposition to tameness within himself. Only then can a person strive for transcendence and *mokṣa*. This is a condition of opposition to the created world, but also a state of equilibrium and undifferentiation. It is the epitome of paradoxicality, but also

where paradoxicality stops. As shown in the quotation from the *Kena Upaniṣad*, Brahman is only a paradox if the seeker of *mokṣa* tries to encompass it from a profane or worldly perspective. Seen from a soteriological perspective, Brahman is undifferentiated and therefore an entity or a condition in which paradoxicality is dissolved. The conclusion follows that the interwoven paradoxicality within Hinduism is only paradoxical as long the Hindu seeker is part of the world; while in the world the seeker requires the paradoxicality as a necessary stepping stone.

The ascetic supports the individual soteriological path, but he simultaneously also supports the social relativistic world: Firstly, by having lived through the life stage of the householder (*gṛhastha*). Secondly, by living as a beggar he offers the man “living in the-world” the possibility of fulfilling his *dharma* by offering food to the ascetic. Thirdly, by functioning as the necessary counterweight in the world so that equilibrium may be attained in the micro-cosmos as well as in the macro-cosmos. Therefore, wilderness is, in Hindu religion, not only a dangerous and chaotic place, but also a sanctioned space that leads, ultimately, to cosmos. It is important to note that wilderness in Hinduism is thus not only understood as a place, but also as way of living, where the person looks and lives as a wild, and as a stage of mind, where the wild and the tamed have equal importance. As a geographical place in India, wilderness is most often related to the mountains, the desert, and the jungle, as well as the cremation ground. As a way of living, it can be seen in the way the person looks, lives and eats; as a stage of mind it shows in the way the person relates himself/herself to the surroundings, assigning all things equal importance.

The same form of ambiguity in relation to wilderness can be noted in the understanding and the worship of the *Devī*. She idealizes the tamed and ordered world, and, at the same time, the wild and unordered world. As the archetype of womanhood in the *grihini*-stage, she is seen as the upholder of ordinary life in the world, securing the basis of the social world by manifesting the *śakti*-energy in forms that uphold life. At the same time, she is depicted as the opposition or counterweight to the social world. She is untamed, wild, furious and, most importantly, independent. This figure, most often depicted as *Kālī*, lives in the unordered wilderness, eating flesh and drinking blood while slaying demons. She symbolises the disorder necessary to uphold or maintain order. While the Goddess epitomises the unity of opposites that is striven for in Hindu religion, the ascetic functions as the opposition to the man “in the world”. Looking at the ascetic in isolation, though, his primary

goal is to encompass the oppositions within himself. This can be done by following the *śrama* system, as a one-at-a-time system. Or it can be done by means of rituals, mostly known from Tantrism, where oppositions are united before they are dissolved.

Fundamentally, the ascetic cannot live without the householder and vice versa; the furious aspect of the *śakti*-energy cannot exist without the benign aspect, and vice versa. The same goes for wilderness in relation to tameness, the unordered world in relation to the ordered world: together they are each other's antidotes in a corresponding system striving for equilibrium. Seen from that perspective, the socially based order or culture cannot be legitimised, understood or even lived through, without the necessary counterweight of wilderness. From the perspective of the relativistic world, this is the necessary function of the idea of wilderness in Hindu religion. This does not only provide insight to the paradoxicality which can be found within Hindu religion; it also contests the general understanding of wilderness as seen in opposition to culture or the domesticated world in a conventional dualism. Wilderness can both be seen as a place in and out of space, as a geophysical place, as well as a state of being and a state of mind. It is not in opposition to the ordered world, but a necessary counterweight which has to be lived through in order that one may encompass it.

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