CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY
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Asceticism has been the ideal of Indian life from time immemorial. The ascetic or the holy man has played an important role in the social and religious life of the Indians. The most venerable characters in the Hindu epics are the ascetics. Heroes like Sri Rama, the Pandavas and the Kauravas never did anything important without consulting these holy men whom they called Raja Gurus. Drona, Kripacharya and Vasista were royal counsellors and were held in high esteem. These venerable ascetics of ancient India have their successors in Modern India. These holy men fashion their lives on the mythological figures. They are treated as the embodiment of wisdom and purity. The great religious teachers of India are men who have conquered their senses. Adisankara, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Vivekananda and Aurobindo are the great sons of India who have communicated to their countrymen the essence of their spiritual experiences. Even today, the holy men are held in high esteem as God's chosen men who have done great 'sadhana.' Asceticism is still considered the highest type of life and the best method of holy attainment. The traditional veneration for the holy men arises mainly out of the popular faith that the holy man has attained that state of being that others can only aspire for.
The ideal of asceticism has been the outcome of a slow and long evolution through centuries. Many elements and ideas, beliefs and practices so mingle that it becomes essential for us to have a clear idea of the different factors which have gone to constitute the whole concept of asceticism.

The word 'asceticism' is derived from the Greek word - 'akesis' which meant exercise and training for the purpose of strength, skill and mastery in the athletic games.¹ The word is variously understood. Asceticism may be defined as

- a mode of life involving abstinence from self-indulgence; a renunciation of the desires of the flesh and of pleasure in worldly things through self-mortification or self-denial.²

It is also viewed as

- a system of conduct in which the realization of the moral life is attempted by means of a complete subjugation of sensuous impulse and worldly desire.³


These definitions lead us to the conclusion that asceticism is an ideal which aims at detachment from the materialistic world, subjugation of impulses and renunciation of the worldly desires.

The ascetic or holy man is generally thought of as one who rigidly denies himself ordinary bodily gratifications for conscience sake; one who aims to compass holiness through mortification of the flesh; a strict hermit; one who lives a life of austerity.

The holyman, thus, is a religious man who gives up all earthly desires and detaches himself from the mundane life. His aim is to reach a higher spiritual status by religious self-discipline. People can easily recognise him by his dress (saffron robe), his habits and the sect marks.

The holyman is a common sight in India and occupies a unique place in society. A sadhu embodies the spirit of India and is important a feature in the life and civilization of India that a study of his characteristics and his relations to general population throws considerable light on

the impact of the holy man on the society. The holy man is the object of veneration and commands the wondering attention and respectful homage of the multitude.

Asceticism, therefore, is not so much the name of a moral theory as of a practical method of realising spirituality. It implies this element of theory that the everlasting good for man is something outside of and opposed to his animal nature and the ordinary interests of mundane life. The regulation of impulses which morality requires is not possible without subjugation of lower impulses in the presence of higher needs. Asceticism is the theory that one ought to deny one's desires totally. All orthodox systems of philosophy agree that the goal of life is liberation (Moksha) from this world of suffering and most of them maintain that to achieve this goal, renunciation of worldly desires is essential.

Like all other ideals, asceticism is a distinctly difficult condition attainable only by a very few. It is considered the highest type of life and the best method of holy attainment. The religious mendicant, with his ideals of self-renunciation and ascetic practices, has obtained universal admiration among the people and his motives and methods stand as the most highly approved in
all the annals of religion. Asceticism, began as an individual institution, has developed into a religio-social institution. Asceticism is thus seen to be a process of long evolution. It has shown great vitality and readiness to adapt itself to changing circumstances without forsaking its fundamental principles. It has among its rank, a fairly large number of outstanding personalities. The ascetic origins are thus seen to be very ancient.

The holy man represents one of the characteristic features of Modern India. He is a person who gives up all earthly pursuits and wanders with a beggar's bowl in hand from place to place, making pilgrimages to the holy places of India or one who separates himself entirely from men and devotes years to the solitude of wilderness in the cultivation of piety. The holy men are conspicuous figures in India, recognizable by their dress and habits. The ascetic's saffron robe, the sect marks, hair dressing, the rosaries and various ornaments that the ascetic adorns himself with, the elm bowls, arm rests etc. attract the attention of the general public.

For the preservation of the soul and the furtherance of its aspirations, it is necessary that the body, with its senses, appetites and desires, should be kept under restraint
and be mortified and supressed. Asceticism, with its insistence on the repression of passions, is regarded as a means to the purification of mind, such purgation being an essential condition for the attainment of a complete knowledge of Brahman. The general aspects that prompt men to ascetic practices are - a desire to propitiate the unseen power which is intensified by personal or national troubles, a wish to work out one's own salvation or emancipation, a yearning to prepare oneself by purification of mind and body, despair arising from disillusionment and defeat in the battle of life or merely vanity stimulated by the admiration which the multitude bestow upon the ascetic.

It has become a familiar pattern in life that anybody who wants to escape from society, from his wife, from authorities, pretends to be a yogi. Saffron robes, a trident, a shaven head and the ability to speak a language understandable to the ordinary men a language often mixed with metaphysical ideas - these are enough for any pretender to pass for a holy man. The common man, who has some vague ideas about the impressive heritage of the country, is gullible and even a thousand bogus sanyasis won't cure him of this susceptibility.
The profession of a holy man has been of pre-eminent
dignity in the eyes of the Indian people. That the ascetic
occupies the highest place in the national esteem since
the earliest ages, is a fact which speaks volumes for
the condition and psychology of the Indians. The holy men
are, to a great extent, religious teachers ('Gurus') of the
masses and this must be kept in mind in any estimate of
their values or otherwise to the community. Though there
are undoubtedly many fake ascetics, to the multitude, a
majority of these religious mendicants are types and
examples of a holy life. These men become the symbol of
faith and admiration of the Indian community. It is for
this reason that many people in India don the yellow robe
of this profession and make capital out of this popular
sentiment.

There are innumerable ascetics who are entirely non-
productive and live upon the charity of common people. A
few of them, doubtless, are, sincere and are seeking after
communion with God. But the vast majority are lazy and
rotten to the core. Their life is obviously worthless and
they are morally pestiferous in their influence upon the
whole community. Yet people accept them as the highest
types of piety in the land. Even the poorest among them
would give his last morsel to these worthless men. There
are very few in India who would dare to refuse an offering to these ascetics because they are ready to invoke dreadful imprecations upon those who decline to give anything to them. Despite the fact that these men trample under foot every law of God and are utterly useless to the whole society, the people regard them very highly and shower their offerings upon them.

The holy man, real or fake, becomes the popular ideal of a great man, the guide and leader of the people, friend of the poor and scornful contemptor of the exalted. He is too prominent in the Indian world to escape attention. The reputation for sanctity which accompanies self-repression and detachment from the world, brings popular admiration of the people. Many ambitious men and seekers of publicity are attracted into the ranks of the ascetics in order to enjoy these congenial advantages. The ideas of asceticism which have a great influence in the East, found their way to Europe and though condemned and suppressed earlier, did not fail to make a deep impression on western thought.

In Indian literature, as in Indian life, the holy man is a familiar form. The ascetic has become an object of importance to the Indian writers as a religious leader or a sage with great powers of good, loved and revered by people through out India. The influence of the Swami in
India is so great that he is regarded as a national figure and a symbol of faith. The simple faith in the superior wisdom of a 'Guru' shapes the action and conduct of many other characters in literary works. The ascetic in literature also aims at detachment from desire, passion, quest for happiness and concern for belonging and he emerges as a freer and detached man. He no longer worries about his identity or goal in life. As in life, there are real and fake ascetics in literature too. The real ascetics are true to their mission and the fake ones disguise themselves as Sadhus or holy men for their personal benefits.

The ideal of asceticism runs through Indo-Anglian fiction as a recurrent motif. Even writers who are seemingly indifferent to the spiritual aspects of life, have not been able to ignore it altogether because it is a pervasive cultural ideal in India.

From a close study of the Indian Novels in English, dealing with asceticism, broadly emerge four distinct images of the holy man. The first image of the holy man concerns itself with the genuine ascetics who wield a positive influence on others through their very benign presence and selfless actions. The wandering ascetic in Sudhin Ghose's *The Flame of the Forest* is a young woman.
Mynah, the Kirtani, who had a mystic experience which has transformed her life. In Bhabani Bhattacharya's *A Goddess Named Gold*, the wandering ascetic resolves the crisis which is partly his own and partly the result of avarice and misunderstanding. In two of Kamala Markandaya's novels - *Possession* and *A Silence of Desire*, one meets real ascetics who influence the fictional characters. In *Possession*, the influence of Swami on Valmiki is so great that when the latter has to decide about his own life, he is drawn towards the Guru, his guide, before Caroline finds him. Here the role of the Swami and his influence on Valmiki are positive. In *A Silence of Desire*, Kamala Markandaya depicts the nuances of relationship between the spiritual and non-spiritual spheres of life. We find a constant conflict between reason and faith, spiritualism and non-spiritualism and we are left to draw our own conclusion. The Swami here functions not as an individual but as a public figure and his role is complex and ambiguous.

Uma Parameswaran opines:

Of all the Swamis in Indo-Anglian literature, the Swami of *A Silence of Desire* is one of the best portrayals.  

The second image of the holy man is about one who wears the mask of asceticism, but throws it away at the end by force of circumstances and gets back to his original self. This aspect of the holy man finds an elaborate treatment in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* in which Kalo, a poor blacksmith, who is failed for stealing a bunch of bananas, poses as a holy man with a view to taking avenge on society. But once, he realises that the mask of asceticism has grown out of proportion, he throws it away and starts living the life of a blacksmith in a village.

The third image of the holy man relates itself to the eventual transformation of ordinary men into true ascetics. This image is exquisitely exemplified in R.K.Narayan's *The Guide*, which deals with transformation of the protagonist, Raju, from a railway guide into a 'Guru'. The mask of asceticism that Raju is forced to put on, becomes in the course of time, his face.

The fourth image of the holy man uniquely pertains to a modern 'yogi' who strikes a right balance of the sensuous and the sublime. This fresh image of an ascetic finds a powerful and artistic expression in Bhabani
Bhattacharya's last novel, *A Dream in Hawaii*. The novel reveals how Meeloy Mukherjee, a professor of Indian philosophy, is metamorphosed into Swami Yogananda by the cumulative effect of his own spiritual hunger and the need and desire of his student paramour, Devajani. The garb of asceticism helps him achieve the union between the vedantic thought that he teaches and its practical working out in his own life. Yogananda is presented not as a dry formulation of yogic concepts, but as a human being with his frailties. He achieves his sainthood rather with self-fulfilment than with self-denial unlike the conventional saints.

The four images of the holy man—the true, the fake retreating to the original self, the fake becoming true and the union of the sensuous and the sublime— as presented in Indian Fiction in English, are worked out in the following chapters through the most representative novels selected for the purpose.