

---

*The History of Janakpurdham: A study of asceticism and the hindu polity*, by Richard Burghart

Daniela Bevilacqua

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/366>  
DOI: 10.4000/ebhr.366  
ISSN: 2823-6114

**Publisher**

CNRS - UPR 299 - Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 July 2020  
Number of pages: 108-111  
ISSN: 0943-8254

**Electronic reference**

Daniela Bevilacqua, "*The History of Janakpurdham: A study of asceticism and the hindu polity*", by Richard Burghart", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 54 | 2020, Online since 15 March 2022, connection on 22 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/366> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.366>

---



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## ***The History of Janakpurdham: A Study of Asceticism and the Hindu Polity***

by Richard Burghart. Kathmandu: Himal Books. 2016, 489 pp., 14 black and white photos, ISBN 978-9937-597-28-9, USD 47.

Reviewed by Daniela Bevilacqua

I started my research on the Ramanandi sampradaya – the largest Vaishnava order in North India whose ascetics are also called Bairagis – by reading Richard Burghart's articles extrapolated from his doctoral thesis, which was unpublished at the time and represented a Holy Grail in the imaginary of those interested in a multidisciplinary approach. Thanks to Martin Gaenszle, this incredible work is finally available, enriched by a selection of Burghart's photographs collected from the archives of the University of Aberdeen Library.

*The History of Janakpurdham* is a very dense work that meticulously unravels the politics, social relationships and ascetic settlements of the Kingdom of Nepal, giving an example of how ethnohistory can help our understanding of the past and the present.

The work contains 18 chapters organised into five parts, with a ground-breaking Introduction. Here, Burghart provides a detailed discussion of F.G. Bailey's and L. Dumont's theories of social hierarchies and castes. Bailey regarded caste as a system of ranks validated by ritual social usage but also by control over productive resources; whereas Dumont based his interpretation on ritual purity. According to Burghart, the two scholars shaped their assumption based on the idea that there was only one hierarchical order in the traditional Hindu social system. However, Burghart draws attention throughout his work to the fact that Brahmins, ascetics and the king either accepted or rejected the relative superiority of the other two. The relationship was complex because 'Brahmins and ascetics were liable to be the subjects of the Lord of the Land. The Brahmins and the king were often disciples of ascetic preceptors. The king customarily had a Brahmin preceptor. The king as well as the ascetics of certain sects engaged the services of Brahmin priests' (p. 15). The five parts of Burghart's work

thoroughly analyse these relationships in the specific socio-historical context of the Kingdom of Nepal.

Part I introduces the main subject of research: the Ramanandi sampradaya, its foundation in the fifteenth century and subsequent development through stages of including and excluding certain members from its lineages, its inner organisation and the vows a Ramanandi has to make, and the characteristics of the ascetic group, the latter being built on the transmission of the guru's *mantra*. Part II uses this specific religious group to investigate interactions between ascetics and political powers on the basis of royal donations of land in Janakpurdham, a site in south-eastern Nepal that was discovered and developed by the arrival of Vaishnava sadhus around the end of the eighteenth century. Brahmins and ascetics received *kusa birta* land as a gift from kings who wanted to obtain their blessings to ensure their success and the prosperity of their kingdoms. Ascetics were exempted from paying revenue on the land. However, since this produced no financial profit, many abbots (*mahants*) preferred to secure revenue by collecting rights on crown land. Consequently, they gained great influence in the region, acting like lords in their own kingdom.

This analogy is pursued in Part III where the abbots' rights and duty are analysed in relation to the king and sharecroppers. Attention is given to the organisation and structure of the monasteries/palaces (*sthan*) built as the abode of the deities (mostly Ram, Sita and Lakshman) as well as to the hermitages that appeared in the eighteenth–early nineteenth century, after new revenue regulations enabled ascetics to establish hermitages on crown land. With this new law, itinerant Renouncers or Great Renouncers of the Ramanandi sect could rent a plot of crown land, build their small monastery and enjoy tenure of the plot. This led to the organisation of a Circle of Fifty-Two Hermitages organised in opposition to the main regional *sthans*. Through this circle, Bairagis were able to claim authority to settle disputes concerning breaches of customary law within the circle. Part IV analyses the development of monasteries (*mathas*) in Janakpurdham during the period 1901–1951 in relation to the transformation of the Nepalese polity. It focuses on the formation of a market of land rights, with a proliferation of offices in the district administration that aggravated rivalry between co-disciples in

*sthans* and led to factionalism, which disrupted the activities of the monasteries.

Part V focuses on the landowner (*zamindar*) and caste hermitages that were built in Janakpurdham from the turn of the twentieth century and which transformed the city from a pilgrimage centre for itinerant ascetics into a centre capable of hosting pious Hindu householders. This prompted the migration of traders and shopkeepers, thus facilitating access and promoting investment in Janakpurdham. The market mechanism, which was also linked to the economy of British India, became the most significant means of allocating land, labour, capital and commodities in the eastern Tarai, rendering the administration of Janakpurdham outdated as a group of local kingdoms. It was at this time that monasteries were organised under the Temple Trust Corporation of Nepal, which supported the creation of town councils to administer the town of Janakpurdham and its citizens. Furthermore, the Temple Trust Corporation initiated changes that disrupted the monastic organisation to such an extent that abbots converted from local kings to Trust employees. Thus, whereas in the traditional Hindu polity ascetic sects were thought to be a special case, with the king respecting their customary laws, in a modern polity uniformity in the land tenure system, access to land and equalitarian identity as citizen ruled out the peculiarity of being a *sadhu*.

As this short description of the contents shows, this work deserves particular credit not only for scrutinising important theories regarding Hindu social hierarchies, but also for clarifying how these hierarchies are created in the first place, and how they develop according to the needs at the time and to current events. Furthermore, Burghart's multidisciplinary approach, testifying to how a historical, diachronic approach can benefit from an anthropological, synchronic approach and vice versa, contributes to the debate on the collaboration between anthropology and history, providing a pioneering example. The description of the development of Ramanandi monastic lineages and of their fluctuating relationship with the Kingdom of Nepal, together with glimpses from the present, makes for a lively and consistent example of Janakpurdham. The result is a thoughtful commentary on Ramanandi *sadhus*, giving context to these reputed spiritual masters that reveals their markedly earthly characteristics as individuals who

had to find compromises between their religious discipline and the social context in which they lived.

**Daniela Bevilacqua** is a South-Asianist and obtained her PhD in Civilizations of Africa and Asia from Sapienza University of Rome and in Anthropology from the University of Paris Nanterre. Her PhD research was published by Routledge under the title *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India: The Śrī Maṭh and the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya in the Evolution of the Rāmānandī Sampradāya*. She is now a Post-Doc Research Fellow at SOAS, working for the ERC-funded Hatha Yoga Project (2015-2020).  
[db28@soas.ac.uk](mailto:db28@soas.ac.uk)