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Changing the narration, adjusting the order: The independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and the bestowing of the title of Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya

#### Abstract

In early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a group of radical Rāmānandī ascetics led by Swami Bhagavadācārya challenged the mainstream narration that claimed Rāmānanda, the supposed founder of the order, as part of Rāmānuja's *paramparā*. Their purpose was to get rid of the Rāmānujī legacy and declare the independence of the Rāmānandī from the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*. Through several religious debates, the reformists were able to affirm their stand. The event had a further important development: the recognition of Rāmānanda as a Jagadguru and bestowing the title of Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya in order to provide the *sampradāya* with a religious leader. This change, however, was not accepted unanimously by the inner branches of the *sampradāya*. This paper aims, then, to describe how the challenge to the mainstream narration led to important structural changes within the *sampradāya* that continue developing till the present.

Keywords: Hagiography, Rāmānanda, Bhagavadācārya, Rāmānandī independence, Jagadguru

#### INTRODUCTION

Rāmānanda is a distinctive character in the Indian medieval religious landscape. According to popular tradition, he established the Rāmānandī order (*sampradāya*), which opened the path of devotion (*bhakti*) to all, without distinction of gender, caste or religion. However, when it comes to Rāmānanda, we have to face uncertainties about his place and date of birth; whether he was part of the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* and, therefore, whether he really established the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. These uncertainties are due to the fact that, although Rāmānanda is regarded as an iconic figure of medieval India, there is still a lack of evidence that has left certain aspects of his life open to debate and, at the same time, has created a narrative gap that could be filled in different ways over the centuries. For this reason, hagiographies dealing with Rāmānanda's life show a development of his life story according to the specific historical context in which the authors lived or the historical development of the religious approaches of the *sampradāya*. For the same reason, since the 19<sup>th</sup>

century several scholars have tried to deal with the enigmatic figure of Rāmānanda,<sup>1</sup> and with the history and organization of his *sampradāya*.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I look at Rāmānanda as the “subject” and at the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as the “agent” involved in the spread of an alternative narration to support the *sampradāya* claim of independence from the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*. Therefore, I focus my attention on the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on the activity of Svāmī Bhagavadācārya, the main character in this history. This specific topic has been already analysed in the work of Pinch (1996), Agrawal (2010b), and van der Veer (1987), who, interestingly, have highlighted different aspects of the issue by focusing on the reconstruction of the historical context (Pinch), the ethnographic data about the early consequences of the independence among Rāmānandīs (van der Veer) and the attentive reading of Bhagavadācārya’s literary production (Agrawal). While relying extensively on the works of these scholars, I try to unify these three approaches, bringing new material from Rāmānandīs’ sources produced in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and data from fieldwork among Rāmānandīs conducted between October 2011 and October 2013.

The paper will briefly introduce hagiographic works produced since the 17<sup>th</sup> century to focus then on the 20<sup>th</sup> century events, describing briefly the historical context which favoured the Rāmānandīs’ stand of independence and the theological debates that followed. These debates will be analysed in detail since they caused the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* to declare its independence and, later on, to create the title of Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya. Through various examples of hagiographic works produced from the 1920s till the present, we will see how the historical context influences the mind-set of the writers (religious leaders, followers or devotees) and how they manipulated the narration, reinterpreting and recreating (or creating) past stories to satisfy the needs of the day.

#### A HISTORICAL GLIMPSE OF RĀMĀNANDA’S HAGIOGRAPHIES

As I have described in detail elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> the representation of the figure of Rāmānanda changed over time according to the needs of the period, and the location and the religious approach of the religious Rāmānandī centre which produced the hagiography.

Beginning with the early hagiographies, i.e. Nābhādās’s *Bhaktamāl* and the *Parcaī* of Anantadās (17<sup>th</sup> century), Rāmānanda is described as an avatār of Rām and a bridge between Rām

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the work of H.H. Wilson (1846), M. A. Macauliffe (1909), G. Grierson (1918), Farquhar (1920, 1922), Dvivedī (1940), Śrīvāstava (1957), Caracchi (2017[1999], 1989), Agrawal (2010).

<sup>2</sup> See the work of R. Burghart (1978a, 1978b), P. van der Veer (1987a, 1987b, 1989), Pinch (1990, 1996a, 1996b), Horstmann (2002), Clementin-Ojha (2005, 2009); Bevilacqua (2016, 2017, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See Bevilacqua (2018:18-58).

and the world. He was a *sat guru* who could direct his disciples toward the religious path that was most suitable to them and he was the man who opened the *bhakti* to the four *varṇas* and to women. He was a Rām *bhakta* and a *tyāgī* (detached ascetic) at the same time and he was also linked to Rāmānūja and had twelve disciples. However, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day, the attention on the narration of details of Rāmānanda’s life has increased particularly. This attention derived from the need to stress the group’s identity as a response, at first, to pressures for orthodoxy under Rajput rulers<sup>4</sup> and, later, to criticism from the British Raj and Christian missionaries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the diffusion of the vernacular press had also endorsed the issuing of popular books which became the tools through which various Vaiṣṇava currents could stress their identity and stories of their founders (Lutgendorf 1994:78).

The primary purpose of Rāmānandīs’ hagiography was to focus attention on the life and teachings of their guru Rāmānanda. In this period, popular works – such as the *Rasik prakāś bhaktamāl* (1849 c.), the *Bhaktisudhāsvād tilak*, and a section about Rāmānanda’s life in the *Bhaviṣya purāṇa* and in the *Agastya saṃhitā*<sup>5</sup>– were produced by the *sampradāya* to magnify its lineage through glorification of Rāmānanda, who was not only described as an incarnation of Rām, but also as a learned instructor who produced his own corpus of texts in Sanskrit.<sup>6</sup> In effect, to “compete” with other traditions, the *sampradāya* opted for representing a more “Sanskritic” Rāmānanda, who was a proper *ācārya* (preceptor).<sup>7</sup> As we will see in the next section, this identification of Rāmānanda as an *ācārya* became of fundamental importance in the hagiographies of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which it had a specific purpose: to satisfy the request of independence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*.

#### THE RĀMĀNANDĪ SAMPRADĀYA IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, groups of peasant Śūdras claimed the social status of Kṣatriya on the basis of past “historical evidences” and through the use of a Vaiṣṇava morality and vocabulary based on the lives of Rām and Kṛṣṇa (Pinch, 1996: 81-114). Pinch supposes that those lower castes that could improve their economic condition under the British Raj were attracted by

<sup>4</sup> For the Rajput influence, see Horstmann (2002), Clementin-Ojha (2005, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Agrawal (2010a: 246-261) has done extensive studies on this work. See also its complete translation by Caracchi (1989).

<sup>6</sup> The attribution of a literary production to Rāmānanda is problematic since we have both works in Sanskrit and in vernacular languages. This duality of languages corresponds to a duality of teachings that have led scholars to doubt the authorship of one or the other (See Srivastav 1957: 100-147; Agrawal 2008; Caracchi 2017: 93-146; Bevilacqua 2018: 40-47)

<sup>7</sup> The *ācārya* is one who «reveals supreme knowledge and behaves accordingly [...]. The *ācārya* is one who is entitled to offer his teaching (*upadeśa*) in any field of knowledge, destroying ignorance» (Pellegrini 2004: 314-316).

Rāmānandī ascetics since they «were overtly directing their new economic resources toward an articulation of a religious, as well as social, identity» (1990: 127). Not only had Rāmānandīs always attracted followers from low castes into their *sampradāya*, but had also encouraged «a pure lifestyle as a way of undermining the caste discrimination that stigmatized low-status populations» (Pinch, 1996: 39). This approach permitted Rāmānandīs to increase their strength in the Gangetic area and facilitated the social ascent of low Śūdra and *achhut* (untouchable) *jātis*, which became the base for the *jāti* (Kṣatriya) reform movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>8</sup>

While Vaiṣṇavism gave some castes an ideology that formed the basis of their identity, Rāmānandīs were also influenced by the spirit of reform, identity and independence that was developing in 20<sup>th</sup> century India.

This can be clearly seen when considering the figure of Bhagavadācārya (c. 1880-1977), one of the pivotal figures of the contemporary history of the *sampradāya*. Bhagavadācārya was a strict *tyāgī* and a political *sādhu*.<sup>9</sup> He held great respect for Gandhi, who inspired him to write three works in Sanskrit – *Bhārat pārijātam*, *Pārijātāpahār* and *Pārijātsaurambh* – and to be an active supporter of social movements, especially those to eradicate untouchability. His involvement in the Gandhian movement to allow the entrance of “untouchables” into Hindu temples earned him the opposition of Hindu conservatives, to the extent that some *sādhus* used to call him *nāstik*, meaning one who has no respect for the Vedas. He was also influenced by the Ārya Samāj, especially in his feelings towards the nation, although he thought that «the founder of the Ārya Samāj, Svāmī Dayānanda, was a self thinker (*svayam vicārak*). But his thinking is too illiberal (*sankucit*). He was a revolutionary, but his revolution was limping and lame. He was not very far sighted» (Swāmī Nigmānanda 1971: 119).

Like Bhagavadācārya, other Rāmānandīs were influenced by the political and religious scenario of the day, which in turn pushed some of them to make changes in their *sampradāya* as well. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement was organized to declare the total independence of Rāmānandīs from the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*. The reason was to eliminate some elitist behaviour that Rāmānujīs displayed towards Rāmānandīs and to bring back to the *sampradāya* the egalitarian spirit that had been at the core of Rāmānanda’s teaching.

The link between the two *sampradāyas* was old: Nābhādās in his *Bhaktamāla* claims that

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<sup>8</sup> These movements could be defined as a case of sanskritization, a process whereby lower castes modify their beliefs, rituals and practices in order to be closer to those who are dominant in the religious landscape (Srinivas 1971: 6).

<sup>9</sup> Pinch refers to the case of another political *sādhu*, Baba Rāmendra who was «very much part of the Rāmānandī, Vaiṣṇava ethos» and «who was in fact the central instigator of peasant dissent in Awadh between 1919 and 1922». Pinch stresses that he used a morality founded on the *Rāmcaritmānas* to combat landlord tyranny (1996: 11-12).

Rāmānanda was part of Rāmānuja's *paramparā*,<sup>10</sup> and in an 18<sup>th</sup> century meeting in Galta, the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* was recognized as part of the *catuḥ sampradāyas*<sup>11</sup> through an official association with the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*. However, since the two *sampradāyas* did have key differences in religious beliefs and behaviour – in particular, not all Rāmānandīs followed rules of commensality or had specific rules for the recruitment of new *sādhus* – Rāmānujīs used to treat Rāmānandīs as inferiors.

The negative view that Rāmānujīs held of Rāmānandīs was well-known at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as testified by an article written by Vijaye Raghav Prapann, *Ācārya-paramparā ke apratīya puruṣa: Svāmī Bhagavadācārya*, contained in the *Śrī Maṭh prakāś*:

[...] Rāmānujīs did not respect Rāmānandīs, and used not to respect even the *mūrti* of Rām, whose feet they refused to worship.

In the Rām temple, Rāmānujīs were ashamed to prostrate themselves following the *saṣṭāṅg daṇḍavat* and to recite the Rām mantra as well. In fact, they considered the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* as a part of their own *sampradāya*. This theory was followed by some “half” Rāmānandīs, where half means that, although they worshipped Rām, they followed Rāmānuja's teachings. Nevertheless, they were not learned *sādhus*, but more of *pahlvāns* (wrestlers), who knew something about the *sampradāya* only because of having spent time with Rāmānujīs. Against this group of supporters of the dependence of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* upon the Rāmānujī ones, there was the group composed by Bhagavadās, Raghuvardās, other *mahants* and the *akhārās*. (2001: 293, my translation).

Another author, paṇḍit Rāmcaritrācārya, wrote in an article entitled *Sarvobhuama Paṇḍit Rāj Svāmī Śrī Bhagavadācārya jī Mahārāj* and published in *Svāmī Bhagavadācārya śatābdī smṛti granth*, that these half Rāmānandīs were not educated, which served as other reason why Rāmānujīs considered them inferior:

Before their independence, Rāmānandīs were considered to be *sādhārṇa Vaiṣṇavas* (simple or rough), to such an extent that Rāmānujīs could employ them as *gulāmīs* (slaves) during the Kumbh Melā, where Rāmānandīs used to carry their palanquins. Moreover, the same Rāmānandīs considered Rāmānujīs to be their *ācāryas*, so that they had to show them respect (1977: 110, my translation).

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<sup>10</sup> According to Caracchi, the *paramparā* in the *Bhaktamāla* is not complete, as Nābhādās mentions only three gurus (Devācārya, Hariyānanda and Rāghavānanda) between Rāmānuja and Rāmānanda, which seems insufficient to cover the temporal gap between the two. The traditional birth and death dates of Rāmānuja are 1017–1137 C.E. (Caracchi, 2017: 36).

<sup>11</sup> The four orthodox Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas*: *Śrī sampradāya* by Rāmānuja, *Sanaka sampradāya* by Nimbārka, *Rūdrā sampradāya* by Viṣṇusvāmī and *Brahmā sampradāya* by Madhva.

Both scholars and Rāmānandīs claim that the situation worsened because of the behaviour of the *ācārya* of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava Totadri Maṭh, *mahant* Svāmī Anantācārya. He did not prostrate before the images of Sītā and Rām in Rāmānandī temples, refusing even to accept *prasād*, the ritual offering of food or drink (Pinch, 1998: 65). Van der Veer describes other episodes that could have added tension to the atmosphere in Ayodhya: another *ācārya* from Mysore refused commensality with Rāmānandīs, despite showing respect before the *mūrti* of Rām. Later on, a Rāmānujī who was teaching Sanskrit in the Catuḥ Sampradāya Vedānta Vidyālaya, refused to teach those who did not have Rāmānujī marks (the disc and the conch), claiming that the mantra given by the Śrī Vaiṣṇava was stronger than that given by Rāmānandīs.<sup>12</sup>

After such events, feelings of disdain began to spread in the *sampradāya*, to such an extent that a reformist group was established to resolve the situation: *mahant* Rāmśobhadās of Maṇirām kī Chāonī of Ayodhya after the umpteenth humiliation decided to get rid of Rāmānuja's legacy and, to accomplish this project, he turned to Bhagavadās and Raghubardās,<sup>13</sup> two Rāmānandīs well-versed in Sanskrit and competent in religious questions (Agrawal 2010: 250). Under the leadership of Bhagavadācārya, particular attention was given to the figure of Rāmānanda, who had to appear as the founder of the *sampradāya*. Therefore his role as *ācārya* had to be further stressed and all links with the Rāmānuja's *paramparā* had to be eliminated.

Bhagavadācārya himself describes this time period in his autobiography, as reported by Agrawal (2010: 251):

The times were terrible. We had to change the *guru-paramparā*. The difficulty of such a task among the *sādhus* is beyond imagination for outsiders. [...] We also needed a committee to do research into the *paramparās* and to establish that there was no connection between Rāmanujā and Rāmānanda.<sup>14</sup>

In 1919 Bhagavadācārya had established the Śrī Rāmānandiya Śrī Vaiṣṇava Mahāmaṇḍal (Association of the Rāmānandīs Śrī Vaiṣṇava) and the Purātattvānusandhāyinī Samiti (Archaeological Research Committee) to find materials and evidence that could support the Rāmānandīs' request for independence (R. Shastri, 1971: 123). As a result of the efforts of the committee, a new Saṃhitā of Śrī Madhvālmīki with a new *guru-paramparā* was found in Revāsā. Raghuvardās declared to have discovered it just by chance because the page on which it was written was being used as wrapping paper (*ibidem*).

<sup>12</sup> However, van der Veer does not mention his source of information (cf. 1988: 103).

<sup>13</sup> These were the original *dīkṣā* names of the two Rāmānandīs, as *-dās* is a common ending among Rāmānandī names. Later on, after the victory they substituted *-dās* with *-ācārya*, to stress their position as preceptors.

<sup>14</sup> *Svāmī Bhagavadācārya*, vol. 1, p. 86.

The introduction to this *Vālmiki Saṃhitā* claimed the antiquity of the work, explaining that the *sampradāya* had delayed its publication because the time was not then ripe (Śrīvāstav 1957: 40). The *paramparā* reported here is the only one in which there is no connection between Rāmānūja and Rāmānanda: it begins with Rāmcandra, who was followed by twenty-one gurus; it ends with Rāmānanda, and it transmits the Rām mantra. Bhagavadācārya declared it to be the only *paramparā* composed by a Rāmānandī *ācārya*, Agradās, who was third in the lineage from Rāmānanda. As a consequence the *paramparā* had to be considered as true (Agrawal 2010: 252).

However, there were various *paramparās* which were assumed to be Rāmānanda's. Nābhādās's *paramparā*, for example, begins with Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī, and included Rāmānūja and, after three successors, Rāmānanda; in this lineage the Rām mantra is not transmitted.<sup>15</sup> The *paramparā* presented in the *Rāmārcana paddhati* still shows a link between Rāmānanda and Rāmānūja,<sup>16</sup> but because it begins with Rām and Sītā, and bequeaths the Rām mantra, the presence of Rāmānūja is unexplained because he is in this way associated with the 'wrong' mantra. In the *paramparā* promoted by Bhagavadācārya, Burghart explains: «The mantra was divulged by Ram Candra and was transmitted down through twenty-two generations to Rāmānand without passing through any of the Dravidian preceptors of the Sri sect» (1978: 128-133).<sup>17</sup> Beginning with Sītā and Rām and transmitting the Rām mantra, this *paramparā* fully supported the claim of Rāmānanda as founder of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. This event had major consequences since, as Pinch states, «the ability to postulate the details of guru *paramparā* constituted the ability to control the past and was the logical route to prominence and power in the *sampradāya*» (1996b: 556).

#### THE DISPUTE BEGINS AND DEVELOPS

The first result of this alternative *paramparā* was a clash between those Rāmānandīs who supported the inclusion of Rāmānanda in the lineage of Rāmānūja, and those who supported Rāmānanda's independence.

The first dispute occurred in 1920 in the Hanumān Gaṛhī in Ayodhya, when the *mahant* of the Baṛā Sthān, Śrī Rām Manohar Prasādācārya (once the guru of Bhagavadācārya) came to face his

<sup>15</sup> In effect, innovation in a *sampradāya* may also occur through a change of the mantra. Burghart has argued that, comparing among spiritual genealogies, «there can be significant differences in the records of the transmission of the mantra from guru to disciple», therefore every genealogy is a record of a strategy in which the sect has reinterpreted its past in order to compete more effectively (1978: 127).

<sup>16</sup> The *paramparā* reported by Burghart is: Rām Candra, Sītā, Visvakṣen, Sathkop, Nathmuni, Pundrikaksa, Rām Miṣra, Yamunācārya, Mahāpurnācārya, Rāmānūja, Kureṣa, Madhvācārya, Vopodevācārya, Devācārya, Purūṣottam, Gaṅgādhar, Rāmeśvar, Dvārānanda, Devānanda, Śrīyānanda, Hariyānanda, Rāghavānanda and Rāmānanda (1978: 128).

<sup>17</sup> The *paramparā* reported by Burghart is: Rām Candra, Sītā, Hanumān, Brahmā, Vasistha, Prasara, Vyasdeva, Sukadeva, Purūṣottamācārya, Gaṅgācārya, Sadācārya, Rāmeśvācārya, Dvārānanda, Devānanda, Syamānanda, Śrutānanda, Cidānanda, Pūrṇānanda, Śrīyānanda, Hariyānanda, Rāghavānanda and Rāmānanda (1978: 132).

disciple in a *śāstrārtha* (theological dispute) based on a comparison between the Rāmānandī and the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

The first question that Bhagavadācārya was asked was whether he could explain the evidence that Rāmānandīs presented to claim their right to independence. The atmosphere of the dispute and the replies that Bhagavadācārya gave are summarized in twenty-five points reported in the *Śrī Maṭh prakāś*:

[...] Gurudev said: “The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* and the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* are the same”.

Bhagavadās replied: “No, Gurudev, they are different”.

In response to his answer, the *mahant* (Gurudev) started to abuse him verbally, so the *mahant* of the Nashil *gaddī* told him: “Mahant jī, please ask what you want to ask, but do so peacefully. You cannot use abuse. Right now Bhagavadās is not your disciple, but rather the spokesperson of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*”.

Hence the guru, addressed Bhagavadās and asked him to explain how the two *sampradāyas* could be different.

The disciple came in front of the guru and started listing the reasons:

The Rāmānujī *paramparā* began with Lakṣmī and continued with Nāthyamuna up until his present *ācārya*; the Rāmānandī *paramparā* began with Sītā and continued with Rāmānanda up until his present *ācārya*.

The behaviour and views of the two *sampradāyas* are different.

Although Rām and Nārāyaṇa are not different, Rāmānandīs worship Rām while Rāmānujīs worship Nārāyaṇa.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, all the mantras addressed to God are accepted, even though the main one utilized is the Rām mantra. By contrast, the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* considers other mantras to be useless.

Rāmānandīs appreciate any mantra, while the Rāmānujīs view the Rām mantra in a negative light.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the four Vedas are consulted, while the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* consults works that are more Dravidic.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* the *tulsī* necklace is always worn: it is a sign of dharma to keep it, and without it one cannot even give water to some else. This tradition does not exist in the other *sampradāya*.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there is the habit to end some names with the words *prasād* (ritual offering) and *śaraṇa* (shelter), a habit that is not present in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

Rāmānandīs take food from the hands of Brahmans from the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*, while Rāmānujīs do not reciprocate by accepting food from Rāmānandī Brahmans.

Another name for our *sampradāya* is *Śrī sampradāya*, while they do not use this name.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* anyone can follow the path of devotion, while in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* only educated *dvija* can follow the path.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, secret instructions are given since the beginning, which does not happen in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the *pūjā* is always commenced with the sound of the conch, while the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* does not utilize this instrument.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, there is a tradition to keep the *śaligram* together with the *cakra*, while the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* does not do the same.

The Rāmānandī *sampradāya* has used the *pañca saṃskāra* for centuries, while the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* does not use them.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there is the practice of all the ascetics of taking their meal together.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* the *pūjā* to Hanumān is performed and its *prasād* is also accepted, while the same is not done in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

One of the principles of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is that Rām gave the Rām mantra to Jānkī, and she gave it to her disciples. Śrī Rām Prasād jī Mahārāj described this in several *ślokas*, and the same is stressed by Śrī Raghunat Prasād jī Mahārāj. The same principle, until few days ago, was accepted by my guru as well. But in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*, there are no signs of the Rām mantra being used.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, the water used for the *ārtī* is disposed of outside in a respectful manner, which does not happen in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

There are no connections between the hymns of the Rāmānandīs *ārtī* and those of the Rāmānujīs.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are several groups: *raktśrī* (red), *śuklaśrī* (white), *laṣkarī*, *golśrī* (spherical), *luptśrī* (missing). Instead, there are no differences in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are *kāthiyā*, *munjiyā*, *khākī*, *tapasvī*, *jaṭādharī*, *pañckośī* – all of which are not present in the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

In the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are only two stages of life (*āśrama*) among *sādhus*: *brahmacārī* and *saṁnyāsī*. Instead, among Rāmānujīs there are all the *āśramas*.

In the temples of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* there are statues of Rām, Lakṣmaṇ and Jānkī, while in those Rāmānujīs there are only statues of Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī.

When Rāmānandīs go to temples belonging to one of the other *catuḥ sampradāyas*, they always worship the main *mūrti* with the *saṣṭāṅga daṇḍavat*, while Rāmānujīs do not do the same (2001: 295-298, my translation).

It is impossible here to explain point by point Bhagavadācārya's list, but it is clear that in order to justify the Rāmānandī as an independent *sampradāya*, he stressed differences of praxis, the *upāsana* (rules of cult) and *acārā* (rules of conduct) between the two groups.

After his reply, Bhagavadācārya asked his guru if Rāmānandīs should be considered as a *sampradāya* or a *panth*. It is said that the *mahant* was unable to give a reply and left the hall. The 'Rāmānujī side' reacted to Bhagavadācārya's victory with a booklet named *Śrī sampradāya-dik pradārśan* (Demonstration from the Śrī *sampradāya* side) to prove the ability of the term Śrī *sampradāya* to cohesively address both Rāmānujī and the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. Bhagavadācārya replied with the *Śrī sampradāya pakṣa* (Protection of the Śrī *sampradāya*), in which he restated the uniqueness of the Śrī *sampradāya* as a label to indicate the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* (*ibidem*). Unfortunately, I do not have more specific information about the theoretical exchanges presented in these works.

Another dispute took place in 1921, during the Ujjain Kumbh Melā. As usual, some Rāmānujīs wanted to go to take bath in the palanquin, but this time Rāmānandīs were not willing to carry it. This led to a theological dispute, this time between Rāmānujīs and Rāmānandīs. The Rāmānujī front was represented by the Svāmī of the Totadri Maṭh, Śrī Rāmrapann Rāmānujdās,

while the Rāmānandī front was represented by Bhagavadācārya. It was decided that the debate would take place in the camp of the Digambar *akhārā*. The judges of this *śāstrārtha* were Śrī Mahant Rāmdularedās from the Digambar, Śrī Mahant Sītārāmdās from the Nirvānī, *mahant* Śrī Jagannathdās from the Nirmohī and Śrī Kamaldās from the Baṛābhai Dariyam.<sup>18</sup> The dispute had to be conducted in Sanskrit and any speech had to be presented in written form, which should be translated into Hindi as well. Each speaker had fifteen minutes at their disposal (Prapann, 2001: 14-15). The main source of debate was the *guru-paramparā* and the different mantras (R. Shastri, 1971: 124).

Bhagavadācārya won the first exchange of the debate, but the theoretical contest had just begun. After the first *śāstrārtha*, a pamphlet called *Tattvodbodhan* was presented by Svāmī Anantācārya as a reply to the *Rahasyodghāṭan* of Svāmī Bhagavadācārya, which the Rāmānujī faction claimed had some inaccuracies. They exhibited this work only three days before the end of the Kumbh, so as to impede the Rāmānandīs to reply. However, Svāmī Bhagavadācārya was able to write another pamphlet called *Tattvodbodhan mīmāmsā* through which he won the match point for the Rāmānandī case.

The last clash occurred in 1926 in the one-month Kumbh held in Vrindavan.<sup>19</sup> Rāmānandīs refused again to carry the palanquins used by Rāmānujīs for the *pradakṣiṇā* (circumambulation) during *ekādaśī*. Therefore, two more *śāstrārthas* were settled, one in the camp of the Cār Sampradāya Khālsā and one in the temple of Śrī Govind. This time the topics were whether insults against Rām and Kṛṣṇa were present in Rāmānujīs' *granthas*, and whether the conduct of Rāmānujīs could match those of other Vaiṣṇavas from the *catuḥ sampradāyas*, especially the Rāmānandīs. As Rāmānujīs were found to be too different in various regards, they were supposed to no longer be part of the *catuḥ sampradāyas*, nor be allowed to share ground with Vaiṣṇavas at the major festivals.<sup>20</sup> To justify themselves, Rāmānujīs published a work, *Prastūt prasaṅga* (Relevant subjects) to which Bhagavadācārya again replied with the *Śrī paramparā paritrāṇ* (Protection of the tradition)<sup>21</sup> and *Prastūt prasaṅgabhang* (Disappointment of the relevant subjects) in which he

<sup>18</sup> As noted by van der Veer (1988: 104), the jury was composed by the chief *mahants* of three *akhārās* and *tyāgīs*, so that a conclusion in favor of the Rāmānandī position was assured. It is likely that their choice as judges was made not only to favour the Rāmānandī side, but also in regard to the importance that *akhārās* have during the Kumbh Melā.

<sup>19</sup> I could not find any reference about the Vrindavan Kumbh Melā except online. According to a website called Vrindavan Online (<http://www.vrindavanonline.in/city-guide/vrindavan-kumbh>, accessed January 2018) the *Purāṇas* describe a transcendental universe where the Kumbh Melā is held in eight different places, including Vrindavan.

<sup>20</sup> This is what Rāmcarāṇa Shastri has written, but at several religious gatherings I attended, I found that these were not implemented.

<sup>21</sup> Purushottam Agrawal describes this work as «no-holds barred attack on anybody not agreeing with Bhagavadācārya's position [...] characterized by an aggressively missionary tenor, intolerant about even slight dissent» (2010b: 230).

declared the difference between the two *sampradāyas* once and for all (R. Shastri, 1971: 124).

#### THE PUBLICATION CONTINUES

After these *śāstrārthas* Bhagavadācārya published other works on the life of Rāmānanda in support of his stance. In 1927, he published the *Śrīmad Rāmānanda digvijaya*, declaring it to be the authentic biography of Rāmānanda. The work is written in Hindi and Sanskrit and has the purpose to «correct the hagiographic deficiencies present in the Rāmānandī tradition» (Pinch 1996: 563) with the use of sources such as *Vālmīki saṃhitā*, *Agastya saṃhitā* and *Bhaviṣya purāṇa*, plus some additional information. It is here that date and place of birth of Rāmānanda became fixed as 1299 CE, in Prayāg, Allahabad (Śrīvāstav 1957: 47).

This work also supported the creation of another biography called *Prasaṅga pārijāt*. According to Śrīvāstav (1957: 4-17), the *Prasaṅga pārijāt* was first mentioned in the journal *Hindustani* in October 1932 by Śrī Śāṅkardayalu Śrīvāstav who attributed the work to Cetandās, supposedly a disciple of Rāmānanda, in 1460 CE. To preserve the text from corruption, Cetandās had written in *deśvāri*, a Prākṛit language close to Sanskrit and spoken in the north-western area of the Indian subcontinent (Caracchi 1999: 46). Precise details were given about the life of Rāmānanda, and many miracles were ascribed to him, especially those connected with the power of his conch, through which he was able to revive corpses and to re-convert Muslims to Hinduism (Śrīvāstav 1957: 5, 7).

In the same period, an anthology under the name *Bhagvān Rāmānandācārya* was edited by Śrī Haricaraṅlāl Varmā Śāstrī, with articles written by several Rāmānandīs. According to Śrīvāstav, the work is valuable because it throws light on various attitudes within the *sampradāya* (1957: 50). In fact, not all intellectuals shared the same ideas: many agreed on the details of the life of Rāmānanda, but obviously there were still disagreements about the authorship of Rāmānanda's works and about the origin of the *sampradāya*, since not all the Rāmānandīs completely agreed with Bhagavadācārya's position.

In effect, although Bhagavadācārya won the *śāstrārthas*, these did not affect the position of the *sampradāya* in its entirety, or to be more precise, it did not affect the internal rules of Rāmānandī centres. In fact, as I could verify during my fieldwork, there are still *rasik* Rāmānandīs who do not agree with the decisions and the activities of Bhagavadācārya.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, although the

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<sup>22</sup> I had a conversation about this topic with a learned Rāmānandī whom I met in March 2012 the Lakṣmaṇ Kilā of Ayodhya, one of the biggest centres in the city. According to him, Bhagavadācārya was a talented scholar and intellectual, but no one had the right to change the *paramparā* or to create a *bhāṣya*, because a *bhāṣya* can only come from God's inspiration. Bhagavadācārya made two mistakes: he wrote two *bhāṣyas*, the *Jānkī* and the *Ananda bhāṣya*, which created confusion among the *sādhus*, without having a real big effect on the *sampradāya*. In fact, Rāmānandīs

“alternative narration” was successful and obtained its specific aim, from the inner perspective this narration continues to be discussed and, as we will see below, further re-worked.

#### CHANGES AFTER THE INDEPENDENCE

The most important consequence of the *sampradāya* independence was the appointment, for the first time, of a “Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya”, a unique religious leader, for the many branches of the *sampradāya*. The title of Jagadguru is attributed to *ācāryas* who shaped new philosophical systems and who began their own *guru-paramparā*. However, the title and office of Jagadguru in the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* is a recent usage. It seems that the number of *ācāryas* in the *sampradāya* has always been limited compared to that of *sādhus* coming from lower classes. Therefore, Rāmānandī *sādhus* were never recognized for their doctrinal or theoretical knowledge and this is another reason why they were considered part of the Rāmānujī *sampradāya* until the time when Bhagavadācārya asserted the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*’s independence.

Because of this victory and his accomplishments on behalf of the *sampradāya*, Bhagavadācārya received the title in 1977, when he was almost 100 years old. The title was retrospectively conferred on Rāmānanda, not only to give a semblance of antiquity to an office that was actually new, but also to stress further the idea that Rāmānanda was an *ācārya* and the founder of his own *sampradāya*.

Therefore, Bhagavadācārya not only provided the *sampradāya* with an official version of its history and that of its founder, but also indirectly began a tradition of Jagadguru Rāmānandācāryas. Similarly, Bhagavadācārya decided to build the Śrī Maṭh, a temple/monastery, on the spot where, according to the Rāmānandī tradition, Rāmānanda used to have his own *āśram* in Varanasi. The Śrī Maṭh became the official seat of the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya and a symbol of the institutionalized charisma of both Rāmānanda and Bhagavadācārya. After Bhagavadācārya’s death the office and title passed to Śivarāmācārya and after him to the present Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya. The title of Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya gives special status not only to Rāmānanda, but also to those Rāmānandī ascetics who are appointed as Jagadguru. In fact, the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya is considered not only to be the successor and avatār of Rāmānanda, but also an avatār of God (Rām) himself. In this way, he obtains the status of demi-god, or a representative of God on earth.

Narrations about the life of Rāmānanda including particular details connected to his place of birth and place of teaching – Pañcagaṅgā in Varanasi – have a particular importance for the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya. Today, in effect, there are a few more Jagadgurus

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continue to follow the *bhāṣya* written by Rāmānūja because Rāmānanda did not write any *bhāṣya* – he simply made the teachings of Rāmānūja available to more people.

Ramandacarya in different parts of India, who have been elected in the preceding decades for reasons that are more political and economic than religious (see Bevilacqua 2018: 115-127). Despite holding the charge of the Śrī Maṭh and being recognized by the majority of Rāmānandī ascetics as the real leader of the *sampradāya*, Rāmnaresācārya further confirms his authority through the production of written sources.<sup>23</sup>

#### CONTEMPORARY PUBLICATIONS

The hagiographic tradition is still particularly active in the Śrī Maṭh. The Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya continues the literary activities started by Bhagavadācārya and, through the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Smārak Sevā Nyās (Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Memorial Service Trust), he continues publishing works about Rāmānanda and his *sampradāya* in short articles, or proper hagiographies. Here, stories already present in earlier hagiographies are retold in the light of contemporary ideas. In the following pages, I will illustrate some significant features of these narrations.

The *Śrī Maṭh prakāś* is a collection of short articles divided into four sections: the history of the Maṭh, the history of Rāmānanda and his disciples, the religious characteristics of the *sampradāya* and the Jagadguru Rāmānandācāryas. The accepted life story of Rāmānanda is that of the *Agastya samhitā* with the addition of new details that highlight the portrait of Rāmānanda as a supporter of dharma in general, and Vaiṣṇava dharma in particular. A detail that is often mentioned by authors is Rāmānanda's ability to re-convert Muslims to Hinduism by blowing his conch, or his being a supporter of a *bhakti* movement concerned with religious equality (Tiwari, 2001: 44-47; Vasudev Singh: 48-55). In all the articles Rāmānanda is described as a disciple of Rāghavānanda, who, in the past, was supposed to have belonged to Rāmānuja's *paramparā*. In fact, as the independence of the Rāmānandīs' independence is well established today, the fact that Rāmānanda was a disciple of Rāghavānanda does not seem to create any particular issue (Śarma, 2001: 38). In fact, today authors prefer to emphasize Rāmānanda's training and skills in developing the *sampradāya*. For example, Vasudev Singh writes:

As there were differences in theoretical issues, Rāmānanda left the Śrī *sampradāya* and continued with his own independent doctrine that was called Rāmavat or Rāmānandī *sampradāya*. In this *sampradāya* there were several *akhārās* and *maṭhs*, and the initiated *sādhus* were called *vairāgī* or *avadhūt* (2001: 50, my translation).

This is actually the stand of the present Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Rāmnaresācārya, and it is clear

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<sup>23</sup> On the role of Rāmnaresācārya and the other Jagadguru Rāmānandācāryas, see Bevilacqua (2017, 2018)

that through this kind of works he tries to legitimise and give authority to his actions.

*Swāmī Rāmānanda: The pioneer of Rām bhakti* is the English version of *Pāyāspayī*, a Hindi text written by Dayākr̥ṣṇa Vijayvargiya (former chairman of the Rajasthan Sahitya Academy). It was translated into English by Devarshi Kalanath Shastri and published by the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya Smārak Sevā Nyās in 2009. The work is a hagiography with many dialogues and with particular attention to details. In this narration, Rāmānanda becomes a saviour of the nation, someone who fights against Muslim invaders and the caste system so as to keep the Hindu people united.

Another important article published by the Śrī Maṭh concerns the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir, a temple/*havelī* located in Daraganj, the oldest suburb of Prayag, which has been under the jurisdiction of the Śrī Maṭh since the late 1990s, when the Caudhrī family gifted it to the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya. From this article, *Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya prākāṭya dhām*, we come to know that the Caudhrī family obtained the land in 1803. When they visited the place they found there many Rāmānandī ascetics who explained that the area was the place where Rāmānanda was born. The article describes the story of the place and how it reached the hands of the Jagadguru. The Jagadguru's nominal ownership of the Śrī Maṭh and the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir temple links him with “original” spots connected with the life of Rāmānanda. Consequently, when he publicizes his religious events, he describes himself as *Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya padpratisthit Rāmānandācārya jī Mahārāj*, to stress that he is situated (*pratisthit*) on the *pad* (seat) of Rāmānanda (the Śrī Maṭh), and describes the Ṭhākur Harit Mādhav Mandir as *ādya Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya prākāṭya dhām*, i.e. the abode of the original Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya. With this attitude, Rāmānandācārya attempts to actualize information existent in latest Rāmānanda's hagiographies: that Rāmānanda had his *āśram* in Pañcagaṅgā and that he was born in Prayag.

As the role of Rāmānandācārya depends on the figure of Rāmānanda and his authority is based on the fact that he is located in the supposed original place where Rāmānanda taught, it is in his interest to spread and canonize a specific portrait of Rāmānanda. Therefore, Rāmānandācārya's production of hagiographies highlighting Rāmānanda as well as the site in which the Śrī Maṭh is located today has to be interpreted both as an instrument to spread the teachings of Rāmānanda and as a way to stress his own authority and right as the official Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya in the *sampradāya*: the more the narration of the life of Rāmānanda is enriched and his status heightened, the more the value of the title of Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya increases, and by consequence the status of those who carry the title.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I briefly described how the narration of Rāmānanda's hagiographies changed according to the need of his *sampradāya*, focusing on the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it became an instrument to obtain its independence from the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*.

Although the guru-image of Rāmānanda remained consistent over the centuries up to the present day, it is evident that the attention given to some details of Rāmānanda's life story increased when the Rāmānandī community had to stress its identity in response to newly emerged religious environments. Being the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, a religious order composed mostly by wandering ascetics of lower caste origin, they would often ask for theoretical help from the Rāmānujīs.<sup>24</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rāmānanda's image was sanskritized and also modernized. However, when a new national independent spirit sustained by more egalitarian ideologies, and sometimes revolutionary approaches, began to spread in India since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the behaviour displayed by learned Rāmānujīs was no longer accepted.

We have seen how the presentation of alternative narrations of the life of Rāmānanda was of fundamental importance at that time: the life of Rāmānanda was reshaped, some details definitively fixed and, most importantly, any link with Rāmānūja was excluded. This alternative narration was manifested in works written – or “discovered” – by Rāmānandī intellectuals for the purpose of reinforcing the independence of the *sampradāya*, allowing the *sādhāraṇa* Vaiṣṇavas, who were nevertheless politically powerful and were already one of the largest order in North India,<sup>25</sup> to separate themselves from any low “performance”, and to deal with any major theological or organisational issues through their own *ācārya*, and later on their own Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya.

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<sup>24</sup> For example, as Clémentin-Ojha notices during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Raja Rām Singh questioned the Vaiṣṇava dharma and asked the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* to reply to sixty-four questions about dharma, the Rāmānandī *mahant* of Galtā called up Rangācārya, a Rāmānujī of Vrindāvan, for he was not well-versed in theological debates (1999). This event demonstrates not only that Rāmānandīs recognized themselves as part of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* and that Rāmānujīs were cooperative with them, but it would also support the assumption that Rāmānujīs were identified as the *ācāryas* of the Śrī *sampradāya*, whereas Rāmānandīs performed more devotional or physical endeavours.

<sup>25</sup> See Pinch (1996) and Bevilacqua (2018: 80-97).

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