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Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires

Many people assume, largely because of Gandhi's legacy, that Hinduism is a religion of non-violence. William R. Pinch shows just how wrong this assumption is. Using the life of Anupgiri Gosain, a Hindu ascetic who lived at the end of the eighteenth century, to explore the subject, he demonstrates that Hindu warrior ascetics were not only pervasive in the medieval and early modern Indian past, but were also an important component of the South Asian military labor market and crucial to the rise of British imperialism. Today, these warriors occupy a prominent place in modern Indian imaginations, ironically as romantic defenders of a Hindu India against foreign invasion, even though they are almost totally absent from the pages of Indian history. William Pinch's innovative and gloriously composed book sets out to correct this historiographical deficiency and to piece together the story of the rise and demise of warrior asceticism in India from the 1500s to the present. Implicit in his approach is the need to measure modern mythologies of Hindu warrior asceticism against the real-life experiences of powerful, violence-prone ascetics. This is a book which has as much to say to students of religion as to historians of empire, and will no doubt be taken up by both.

WILLIAM R. PINCH is Professor of History at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. He is the author of *Peasants and Monks in British India* (1996).

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Acknowledgments

I have been on Anupgiri's trail since 1994. If these pages are set between two hard covers, it means I am no longer chasing after the Great Warlord. I have let his trail go cold and have turned to other things. But Anupgiri and I have had happy times together and I would be remiss not to acknowledge the many fine memories I owe him. Not least of all, I have flown on his back to Britain and India repeatedly these last ten years. So first of all, he has my heartfelt gratitude. I hope I have done him and his men (and women) justice in the pages that follow. God knows he did not make it easy; and God knows there is much more to be said about him. One question that I was never able to resolve, and therefore (as is the historian's wont) completely elided in the pages that follow, is the manner of his death. In a way, this is fitting given that he was, theoretically, immortal. All we "know" is that his decline was sudden and unexpected. Was he poisoned by the British, as some of his descendants today quietly claim? Or by a woman close to him, as others allege? Certainly everybody had a motive. Like the uncertainty that surrounds the location of his final resting place, his *samadhi*, the cause of Anupgiri's death is a nagging question. Perhaps someone else will have the energy to take it up.

There are many others to thank. First among the living is Kailash Jha, who puts in an occasional appearance in the pages that follow. My adventures with Anupgiri, particularly in Bundelkhand, would have been much less enjoyable – and much less fruitful – but for Kailash's companionship, friendship, and wisdom. Indeed, he became so closely associated in my mind with this work, and with Anupgiri, that in the end I could not conceive of writing the book without putting him in it. If Anupgiri still inhabits this world – and to my way of thinking this is not entirely out of the question – then a good measure of him surely resides in Kailash. He will not be the first great man said to have been "metempsychosically kidnapped" by a death-defying *yogi*.

Abha, Kailash's wife, also deserves praise and thanks. She did not complain (too much) when I stole Kailash from her, and (in any case) she did not burn our clothes, flea-ridden and stinking though they may have

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been, when we came back to Delhi from our jaunts in the north Indian countryside. For this, and for the constant hospitality she extended to me and my family, I bow in gratitude.

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History is, as I never tire of telling anyone who will listen, a conversation with the past. That conversation could not take place if we could not hear voices of those who have gone before us. Here again I have much to be thankful for, in India as well as Britain. When I was not wandering the byways of Bundelkhand, my most interesting conversations with the past occurred in the reading room of what used to be called, in a simpler age, the India Office Library. My children laugh when I tell them how I like to spend my vacations. If they knew the caretakers of the past at what is now known as the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library, they would understand my idea of a good time.

All that remains is to apologize to my wife, Jennifer, and my children, Pearse and Helen. Anupgiri has taken me from them. Maybe now he will give me back.

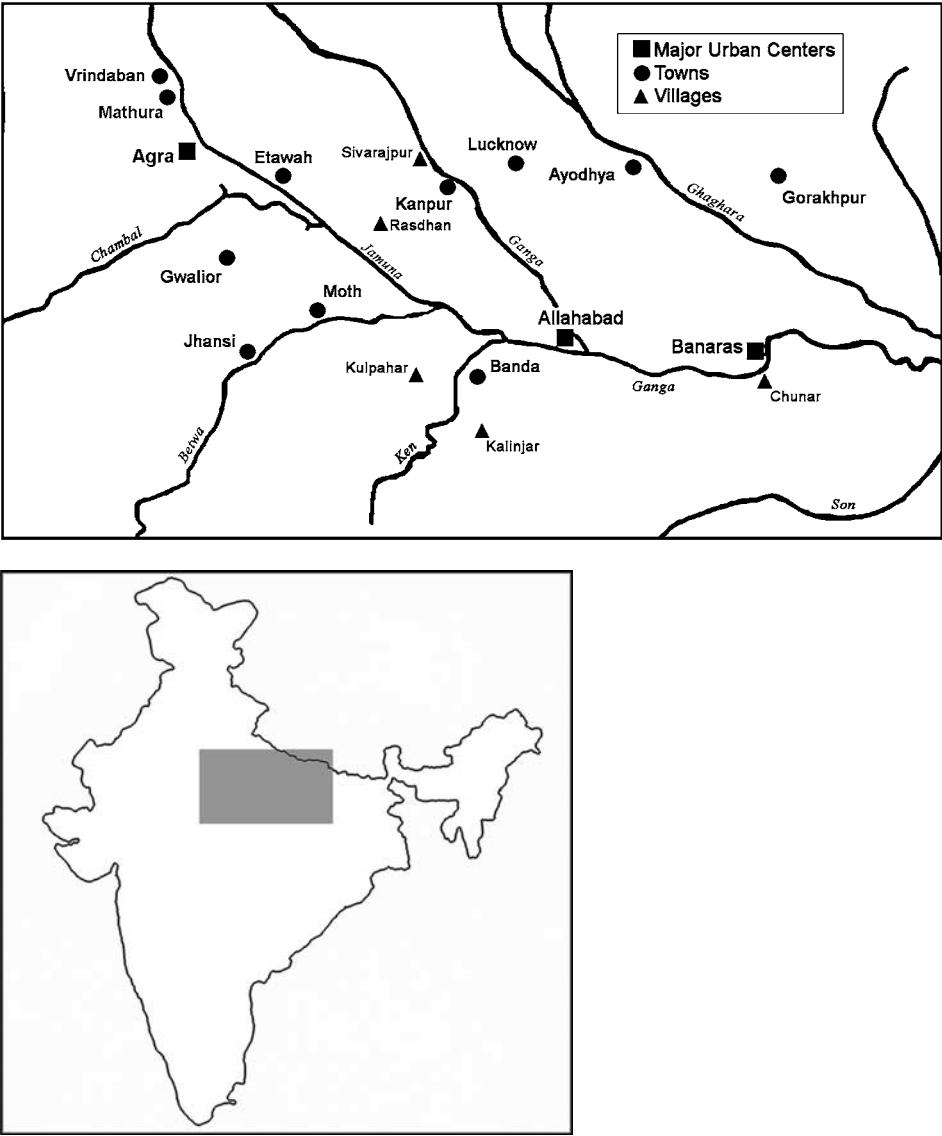
Vijay Pinch
Middletown, CT
26 February 2005

Glossary

[For more detailed discussion of these terms, see the relevant index entries]

<i>akhara</i>	lit., “exercise arena” or “wrestling pit”; refers in ascetic content to armed regiment or branch of order
<i>atith</i>	lit., “guest”, mendicant ascetic
<i>bairagi</i>	lit., “bereft of emotion”; generic term for ascetic; often used for armed Vaishnava ascetic
Bhairava	a horrific form of Siva, “haunt of the cremation ground”
<i>bhakta</i>	devotee
<i>bhakti</i>	devotion, love of God
<i>chakra</i>	sharp-edged metal disc used as a projectile weapon by medieval and early modern <i>yogis</i> ; also yogic term for each of the seven centers of energy in the human body; from Sanskrit <i>chakram</i> (wheel)
<i>chela</i>	student, disciple; can also mean slave or adopted son
Dasnami	lit., “ten-named”; Saiva ascetic order said to have been founded by the ninth-century Shankaracharya
<i>fakir</i>	ascetic, often applied to Sufis
<i>gosain</i>	lit., “in control of emotions”; generic term for ascetic; often used for armed Saiva ascetic
<i>jagir</i>	revenue estate
<i>jaidad</i>	revenue assignment specifically earmarked for the maintenance of troops
<i>kaula</i>	of or relating to clan, <i>kula</i> ; in tantric context, refers to “hardcore” of religio-sexual practices that predated philosophical, or “high-caste,” tantra
<i>kumbha mela</i>	pilgrimage festival that alternates every three years between Allahabad, Ujjain, Hardwar, and Nasik, the centerpiece of which is the procession of armed ascetics known as the “ <i>Shahi Snan</i> ” (imperial swim)
<i>mahant</i>	abbot, chief, commander

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<i>mandir</i>	temple	
<i>masjid</i>	mosque	
<i>math</i>	monastery, structure that houses ascetics	
<i>mazar</i>	grave	
<i>naga</i>	warrior ascetic; thought to connote nakedness, from Sanskrit <i>nagna</i> (naked)	
<i>nath</i>	lit., Lord; often used to signify a <i>yogi</i> who follows in the tradition of the eleventh-century Gorakhnath	
<i>pindari</i>	marauder, usually associated with Maratha wars	
Rajput	lit., progeny of kings; extended clans of warrior-rulers (Kshatriya) with many branches throughout northern India	
Ramanandi	follower of Ramanand (c. 1400?)	
<i>Ramcharitmanas</i>	lit., “Tale of the Sacred Pool of Rama”; the story of Rama as told by Tulsidas, c. 1600	
<i>randi</i>	prostitute	
<i>sadhu</i>	monk, anchorite; from Hindi <i>sadhana</i> (discipline, concentration)	
<i>samadhi</i>	deathless meditative state achieved by the most adept <i>yogis</i> ; also a stone marker to signify the location at which such a state was achieved	
<i>sangam</i>	confluence	
<i>sanyasi</i>	lit., “renouncer”; generic term for ascetic; often used for Saiva ascetic	
<i>tapas</i>	austerities that generate supernormal power	
<i>tarvaif</i>	courtesan	
<i>vajroli</i>	urethral suction, an ascetic sexual practice thought to generate supernormal power, particularly when employed during intercourse with a <i>yogini</i>	
<i>yogini</i>	a ravenous, bloodthirsty female consort of Bhairava, able to confer supernormal powers to those human sexual partners skilled enough to couple with her	



Map 1. Anupgiri's India.