

Original Research Article

SECTARIAN DIVERSITY TO SHARED IDENTITY: EXAMINING THE CASTE FORMATION OF THE BAIRAGI COMMUNITY IN COLONIAL INDIA

Abstract

Vaishnavism as a form of devotion remained an important part of the social milieu across space and time in the Indian subcontinent. In medieval times many new forms of worship with new philosophies emerged within Vaishnavism. The new form of devotion is propounded by Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Madhvacharya, and others who worship different forms of Vishnu incarnation. This paper shows how different Vishnuites sects united and came under the single umbrella term “Bairagi”. Furthermore, the primary focus of this study lies in unravelling the intricate complexities associated with the formation of the Bairagi caste. How “multiple identity bearing community” developed caste consciousness from an open heterodox sect. So, the present article examines the socio-economic, and political conditions to trace the development of caste consciousness among Bairagis from precolonial to the colonial era. The conflict for power and resources in the late 18th century determined the identity of Bairagis in a more pervasive form. Specifically, the article aims to explore how the multifaceted organizational structure of the Bairagis sect which was initially formed to counter Shaivites, gradually transformed into the caste structure. The investigation seeks to shed light on the nuanced factors of how the sect identity dissipates, giving way to the emergence of the Bairagi caste. Interestingly, the sect and the Bairagi caste persisted side by side. My endeavour is also to raise the question of self-definition, or community consciousness, and its relation with the historical experiences of the Bairagi through oral history.

Keywords: Akhara, Bairagi, Caste formation, Chatur sampradaya, Dawara, Vaishnavism etc.

Introduction

1. Bairagis: Who they were

Bairagi is defined as one devoid of all worldly desire and passion. They are worshippers of Vaishnav distinguished from sannyasin who are savites. “Sanyasi and Bairagi akharas lie in warrior monks known as Nagas, who in earlier centuries were mercenary soldiers, traders, landowners, and petty kings” (Lochtefeld, 2001). Another meaning to which put the word “Bhrag” is leopard skin and the Bairagi is due to wearing leopard skin (MacLagan, 1914). In popular culture, they are known as “Shami”. This is because Bairagis had Swami as their last name. They were known by different names like pujari, mahant, Baisnab. Bairagis or

Vaishnav are synonymous terms. In the oral history told by Bhatt's caste genealogist of Bairagis told the story that Bairagis are manasputra (human son) of Brahma who were worshiper of Vishnu. They were ascetics hence known as Bairagis as they had renounced the world. The story further tells that if all the sons of Brahma became ascetics than how the world progress, so Brahma asked Bairagis to marry. Few Bairagis started living a married life. Those who started household life known as Sansari Bairagis. Vaishnav Bairagi as sects consist of varied people from different strata, but Herbert Risley pointed out that Bairagis as caste had restricted connotation. Risley mentioned that caste claimed Chaitanya who lived in 17th century as its founder in context of Bengal. But this can be contested as the Bairagis or Vaishnav united in 18th century. Secondly Bairagis sect consist of teaching of Ramanuja who lived in 12th century. There were no single founder Bairagis sect, but it was combined decision of leaders of varied Vishnuites sect to united as Bairagis to counter Shaivites. The caste norms gradually developed in the sect as would see in the later part of the paper.



Image 1. A Vaishnavite or Bairagi Ascetic. Gouache,

<https://wellcomecollection.org/> Wellcome Collection

<https://jstor.org/stable/community.24901933>.

Objectives of the study

Following are some objectives of the study on this research highlights the interplay between historical context, Sectarian Diversity to Shared Identity of Bairagis.” These are to:

1. Examine the historical formation of “Bairagis” as a united Vaishnavite sect in India.
2. Observe the conflict shape the identity of Bairagis sect in a more pervasive form in India
3. Evaluate the society of Bairagis conform to caste rule without conforming to caste.
4. Discuss the Bairagis act as a vehicle of social mobilization in 18th and 19th centuries.
5. Investigate the colonial state perceives and conceptualize the Bairagi caste.

Research Methodology

The research is based on primary and secondary sources of information. **The primary data resources have been collected from various state government archives.** The major sources for this study are anthropological and ethnological works of colonial administrators and officials e.g., Skinner, James Tashrih al-Aqvam, which describes the origins and occupations of several Indian tribes, castes, and religions, other such reports are used in the research. Subsequent Census of India and various reports prepared by the provincial government give valuable information about the Bairagis. **I also** explored the Oral history narrated by caste members of Bairagis itself and the Pothis/genealogical book of Bhattas who kept genealogical records of Bairagis.

Debate and Discussion

Bairagi origin can be debated. But in general, they are a heterodox sect whose origin can be traced back to the Chaitanya movement of 14th ce. R.V. Russel on the other hand pointed out that Bairagis are different from Kabirpanthi, Satnami, Sikh, and also from the Chaitanya sect of Bengal. W. Crooke's “The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western India” traced their origin i.e., of orders to the south and their strength in the region NWP where worship of Rama and Krishna had been always strongest. Bairagi teaching leads some sub-sections like Hari-Das in Rohtak, the Kesho-panthis in Multan the Tulsi-Dasis, Gujranwala, the Murar-panthis the Baba Lalis. The history of the Bairagis begins with Ramanuja, who is believed to have resided in the south of India and taught there 12th CE, but modern scholars like David N. Lorenzen are uncertain when Bairagis orders came into being and he pointed out that they formed into akharas like Dasnami ascetics did. Bairagis Chatur samprdaya are worshippers of Vishnu in different incarnations like Radha - Krishna and Ram Sita.

G.S Ghurye pointed out that the formation of fighting Akhara had taken place between 1650 and 1700. **We** come to know from the copper plate inscription that the Mahant of Khaki Akhara on Simhastha fair A.D. 1702, complaint Peshwa about the conflict between Gosayin and Bairagis and got the decision that Bairagis shall bath at the Ramakunda and the Samnyasis at the Trimukha (Trimbak) Kushavarta. The arrangement continued today. On the basis of the inscription, G.S Ghurye put bairagis naga organization as late as 1700. In Jaipur chronicle information given by Nimbarki Pandit Vrajavallabhasharanaji, Vaishnav akhada dated back to 1713 A.D.



Image. 2 Distribution of Bairagi population in 1987, Data Source: Joshua Project

The turmoil of the 18th century and the Bairagis

Various Vaishnav sect was in a constant fight with more organized Shaiva ascetics or Gosayin. The fight was not merely sectarian but on the acquisition of resources, trade routes, and pilgrimage (Van der Veer, 1994). Bairagis like other ascetics Shivaites i.e., gosayin, Dadupanthi engaged in commerce and money changing and this is described in account of Tieffenthaler who is writing from the Chhatarpur. Also, Bayly mentioned there was an expansion of communication under the Mughals before the 1720s; so, pilgrimage and trade thrived in the 18th century. So, the conflict between the Bairagis and other ascetic orders intensified in the 18th century.

The oral history tells us that a Goswami vowed not take meal till he had not killed a Bairagi, and the Bairagis had similar story on their side. In Nasik, a great massacre of Bairagis had taken place at the Simhastha fair in 1690, at the hands of Saiva Samnyasis. Again, in Haridwar the oral tradition tells us that hundreds of Bairagis slain by Gosayin. Earlier even in Vishnuites there were internal division and competition and it can be seen in history Rajasthan. The Vishnuites united themselves during four successive conferences against Shaiva menaces. During four Vishnuites conference Vrindavan 1713 which held in

Brahmapuri (Jaipur) during 1726, and in Jaipur around 1734, and the last one in Jaipur 1756. Accordingly, Vishnuites united as *Chatur samprdaya* and formed various *Akhara* and *Ani* i.e., fighting army (further details on Bairagis organization given latter section of the paper).



Image3.-Swami Balananda, who organized Bairagis into some fighting units at the Galta conference 1760, A.D. Source- google images

Even Peter Van de Veer uses the term *Chatur samprdaya Khalsa* denoting the fighting character and compared it with the Sikh military organization Khalsa. This can be seen in how the identity of Bairagis had been shaped.

The organizational structure of Bairagis: Tracing the substance of the Caste

Richard Burghart's research reveals the existence of a regional organizational structure among the Bairagis, known as Mandal, which originated from the Ramanandi sect. These mandals, deeply rooted in northern and central India, and extending into the Nepalese terai, exhibit a well-developed hierarchical organizational framework. Notably, they even imposed taxes on the peasant population. The leader of the mandal is referred to as Sri Mahant (See, Burghart, 1976). However, my focus lies on the ordinary followers of the Bairagis sects who underwent a gradual transformation into a distinct caste entity.

However, according to tradition and oral history, there were four sampradayas or what we called sects of Bairagi.

- A. Ramanuja'sor Ramanandis 36
- B. Nimanandi -Nimbadiya 12
- C. Vishnu – swami or vallabhacharya sect 2
- D. Madhvacharya sect 2

Besides, there were minor sects of Bairagis like Bendiwala and Chaturbhujia claiming their mythological origin. Each sampradaya had its sect mark to be put forehead denoting different meaning traditions. The “mark” is used as a symbol of divinity and also denotes a different identity. This is how Bairagis no means a homogenous, simple sect but rather a complex with multiple identity-bearing sects.

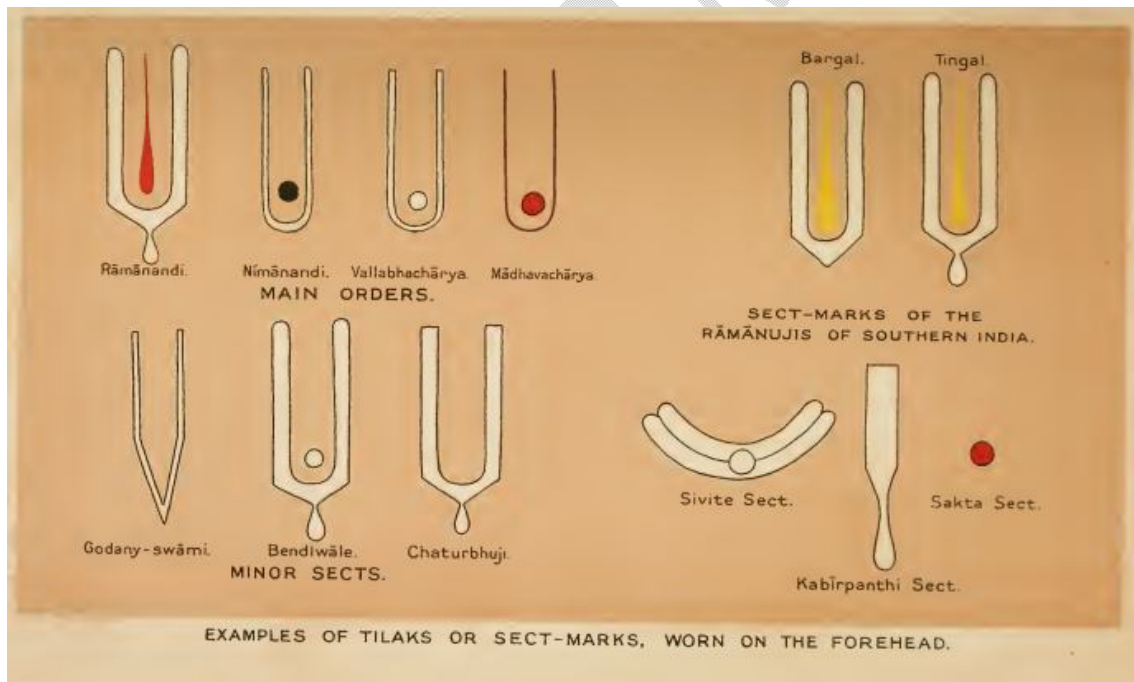


Image 4. Different Tilak of belong to different sect of Bairagis. Source(Russell, 1916)

It was also held that Bairagis formed into several akhara. The following are the seven Akharas of Bairagis i.e., Digambari, Khaki, Munjia, Kathia, Nirmohi, Nirbani, Niranjani, and Lasgari. Each akhara had its own customs to be followed. However, Akhara is not the closed-ended category. This is documented by R.V Russell “Any member of one of the four Sampradayas can belong to any one of the seven Akharas, and a man can change his Akhara

as often as he likes, but not his Sampradaya”(Russell, 1916). This is how Bairagis no means a homogenous, simple sect but rather a complex and multiple identity-bearing sect.

Further, according to tradition, Bairagis Akhara is divided into Dawaras. Each Dawara is named after the founder ascetics within the Sampradaya. The first six Dawaras (schools) are Anbhimandi, Dundaram, Agarji, Telaji, Kubhdji, and Ramsaluji (MacLagan, 1914) (K.S Singh in his anthropological work “People of India: Rajasthan” also pointed out that Bairagis had 52 exogamous clans). From here we can trace some substance of caste in Bairagis. However, the Dawara had no special purpose but they became exogamous clan groups or gotra over a period. Married Bairagi are considered inferior to celibate and the latter don’t allow the former to take them with food. Even so, Bairagis fined those members who indulged in intercourse or who kept the women. Gradually marriage became the accepted norm in the Bairagi community.

Oral tradition tells us that those Bairagi who started marrying were called Sansari while those who remained celibate were called Nihang. But those who marry follow some rules like caste, they don’t marry in their own Dawara and not of their mother in case Bairagis have the illegitimate son of Bairagi. Interestingly it is important to look at these Dawaras turned into Gotras and act as exogamous groups. Like some gotras in the case of Nimawat named after the Sampradaya itself.

However, few contemporary observers pointed that the Bairagis remained outside Hindu fourfold division of Varana and had no place in the Hindu caste community, but Bairagis became both caste and order. Herbert Risley also pointed that Bairagis are different in many ways from other Hindus. But in fact, Bairagis were integral part of the Hindu community as they enable low strata people to come to central line of rituals as they often denied.

Herbert Risley give the following account of the Bairagi Caste in context of Bengal;

“They are regarded, and have come to regard themselves, as a caste, but they have not the most notable mark of caste, namely exclusiveness, and therefore it may still be said with all truth that they do not hold by caste. Many Hindus can join the Baisnabs, from the lowest Chandal to the highest Brahman. In many cases they would actually gain in caste position by doing so”.

The Bairagis in 19th century seemed to show dual character i.e., that of caste and that of open heterodox sect. The Bairagis enrolled anyone in the sect, but gradually following the certain caste norms and had porous boundary. But at the end of colonial rule or in the 20th ce, Bairagis ceased to be heterodox category and became full-fledged caste.

In his work, Nesfield's “Brief view of The Caste System of North-Western Provinces and Oudh” 1882 wrote that “Bairagis was threatening to become caste”. He further argued that in that respect Bairagis are in the footsteps of Gosayin. As pointed out by Van de Veer Vairagya means passionless and anyone one became Bairagi even after marriage controlling his lust as did Ram. So gradually Bairagis started marrying. They got lands which are offered by devotees for the benefit of the poor. The boy disciples whom they

initiate into their order are often their illegitimate sons, and it is to such disciples that they bequeath the lands given to them for a purpose so entirely different. Probably the day is not far distant when marriage will be openly recognized as one of the customs of the order, and the Bairagis will then have become a caste like the Goshayens (Nesfield, 1882). Peter Van de Veer argued, "A mixed caste of Bairagis, originating from the fusion of the various dvijacastes of which the order is composed, would have as little success as the so-called Gosain castes". The process did not seem so smooth as mentioned by Nesfield, we should look into the process of conflict and consensus among Nihang and Sansari, which itself needs further study. Also, Van De Veer failed to estimate the success of the Bairagis caste.

Further W. C. ORR pointed out that before the end of the conflict period i.e., between the Bairagis and Shaivitesascetics, the caste problem was being solved itself. The fighting orders numerically strong started matrimonial alliances among themselves. At the end of wars, they became agriculturists, merchants, and moneylenders on the lands they had seized, or had received as a reward for their services. They receive respectable positions, especially in Rajput states (Orr, 1940)¹.

M.A Sherring in "Hindu Tribes and Caste, Vol III" categorized Bairagi as mixed caste. He argued such religious orders as those who "have abandoned their castes and have attached themselves to the one or the other of these communities (The Satani or Sanatan, the Jangam or Virasaiva, and other religious sects) which, although starting with the renunciation of caste, have in reality formed themselves into two separate castes or tribes, with their own laws and usages. Russell pointed out that the custom of married Bairagis like that of ordinary Hindu caste such as Kurmis. He also pointed out that few of them got zamindari status by Marathas and were made Feudatory Chiefs of the Nandgaon and Chhuikhadan States.

Challenging Brahmanical Hegemony

The Brahmanical-Kshatriya nexus is well-studied by historians. But the Bairagisect also emerged important group that conform to the benediction of the rulers. In Bharatpur dominion Bairagi ascetics of Nemawat and Ramawat order got considerable influence on the raja. And Bairagi temple became locus important rituals. Further, the mahant of the temple took tithe on grain exported for sale in the bazaar (Bayly, 1988).

During the ending days of Aurangzeb, while he was in the south, he permitted, authorizing five Bairagis to move freely about the whole Empire with standards and kettledrums, at the head of companies both of horse and foot (Orr, 1940). Jai Singh had the body of a soldier called Ramanandis or known as Balanandis and but later failed to subjugate them².

In the 19th century under Wajid Ali Shah there was a fight over Hanuman Garhi³ between Ghulam Hussain and Bairagis, the former defeated. After finding that the false claim made by

¹Orr, W. G. (1940). Armed Religious Ascetics in North India. Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 24(1), 81-100.

²Note. See Archival study of Thiel Horstmann on Vishnuites of Rajasthan

³Note. Ghulam Hussain claimed that it was built over a Masjid

Ghulam Hussain, Nawab ensured the protection of Hanuman Garhi with the help of the British (Gopal, 1993). Thus, Bairagis emerged important force in society.

In the religious sphere, Bairagis also challenged the Brahminical hegemony over sacred space and emerged as keepers of Vishnuite shrines as Mahant making the post hereditary in some cases. Bairagi Mathas had spread all over the country and enjoyed land endowment, which had possibly an important role in the local economy. Even today famous temple of Hanuman Garhi is under the Bairagis. Herbert Risley pointed out that Bairagi converted Chakmas to Vaishnavism. In Punjab Haryana, UP, Bairagis had cross-caste followers like peasant weavers, etc., thus having hegemony over a large body of people. Even people give offerings to Bairagi caste members on festivals like Govardhan puja to seek blessing. In oral tradition it was said that Bairagis are Brahmans in Brahmans and kshatriya in kshatriyas. The Brahmans had four kartavias (duty), Bairagis had ten. Thus, claiming a superior position than Brahmans.

Also, as Risley mentioned that renunciant particular lower caste like khatik who became Bairagi perform rituals for their own caste. Thus, challenging the hegemony of Brahmin over the performance of ritual which was denied to lower cast. Bairagis became the agent of social mobilization and Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1972).



Image: 5- Bairagis: The tradition of Saint Warriors in India

Russell pointed out that Bairagis have a good social position and high caste take food from them, and Brahmins usually but not always take water from them. Bairagis enrolled anyone except the impure ones and had a large recruitment from lower castes. The person who lost their caste due to famine in 1897, obtained a respectable position. Women which considered of bad character and abandoned by their caste and openly lived with men (Russel, 1916). Thus, Bairagis became a vehicle of social mobilization challenging Brahminical hegemony

Bairagis and Colonial State

Colonial states documented the Bairagis in different ways. Risley in census of Bengal 1872 define Bairagis in the category "Persons of Hindu origin not recognising Caste". In the census of 1881 Bairagis were categorized inferior as inferior religious mendicants and beggars. In 1891 they were categorized again as "group 8" named devotees. In 1901 in Punjab Bairagis clubbed under caste Faqir. This is due implementation of the Punjab Alienation Act as it is deemed necessary to be categorized as an "agricultural tribe" to get land ownership. To which the colonial state denied to some groups. However, many Bairagis in Punjab are from peasant Jat cast.

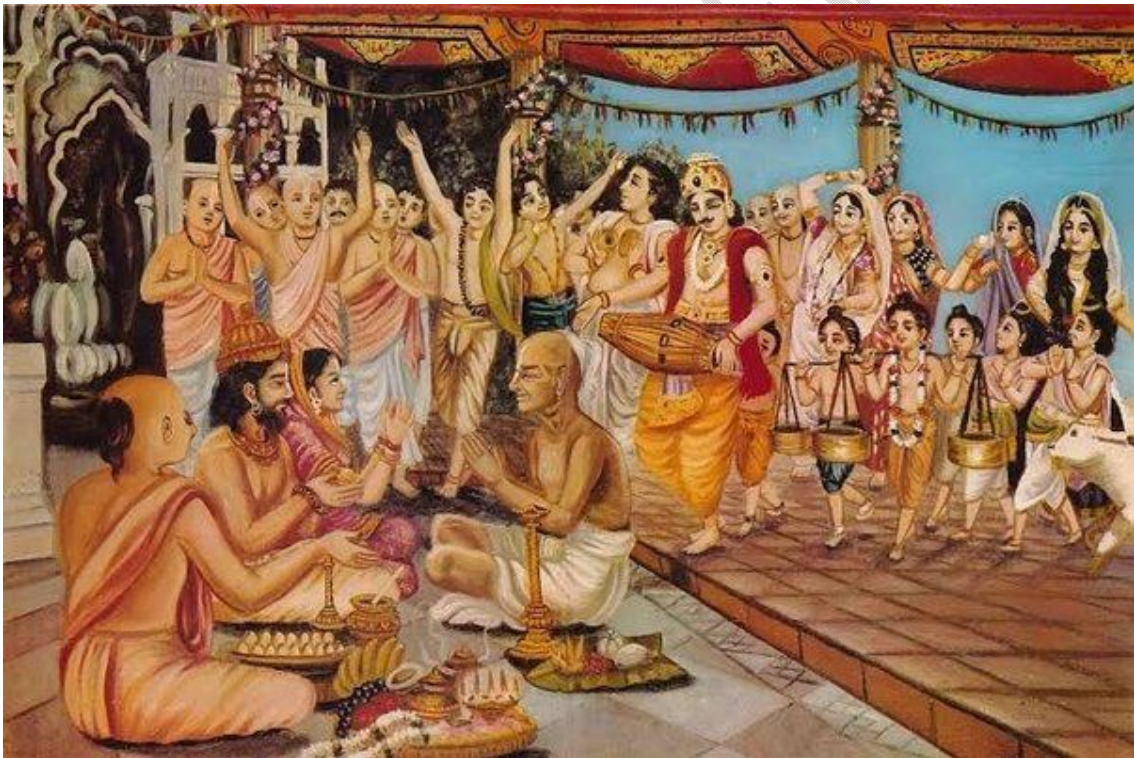


Image: 6-Why are Bairagi, Vaishnav and Swami considered OBC even Though they are Upper Cast Brahmin- Sources: www.google.com

However, the census of 1901 divided the people of India into three tribes and 7 castes which include Bairagis in the seventh category "The castes formed by a change in customs, i.e., the formation of new castes as a consequence of the neglect of established usages or the adoption of a new ceremonial practice or secular occupation" (Census of India, 1901). Herbert Risley describes the lower section of Bairagis as "The mendicant members of the Vaishnava

community are of evil repute, their ranks being recruited by those who have no relatives, by widows, by individuals too idle or depraved to lead a steady working life, and by prostitutes” (Risley, 1891). Further Bairagis create trouble for the colonial state as they disturb settled peasantry by forming Akhara and asking villagers to wander with them to singing Bhajans. James Wise also give the following description of Bairagis in context of Bengal.

“The Bairagi and Bairagan Vaishnavas are of evil repute, their ranks being recruited by those who have no relatives, by widows, by individuals too idle or depraved to lead a steady working life, and by prostitutes. Vaishnavi, or Boistubi according to the vulgar pronunciation, has come to mean courtesan. A few undoubtedly join from sincere and worthy motives, but their numbers are too small to produce any appreciable effect on the behaviour of their comrades. The habits of these beggars are very unsettled. They wander from village to village, and from one Akhāra to another, fleecing the frugal and industrious peasantry on the plea of religion, and singing songs in praise of Harí beneath the village tree, or shrine” (Wise, 1883).

Table 1. Distribution of the population of Bairagis in U.P

DISTRICT.	Madhava Acharya.	Nimawat.	Ramanandi.	Others.	TOTAL.
Dehradun. .	...	...	530	139	669
Saharanpur	...	...	...	43	43
Muzaffarnagar.	...	..	511	446	987
Meerut. .	***	156	1,586	2,396	4,138
Bulandshahr. .	...	...	429	2,279	2,708
Aligarh. .	...	...	974	3,183	4,157
Agra			496	1,259	1,759
Farrukhabad	...	12	60	233	805
Mainpuri		9		69	98
Etawah	***		22	268	290
Etah	1	1	35	160	197
Bareilly			148	610	758
Bijnor	...			539	639
Badaun	...	2	120	397	519
Muradabad	3		1	239	243
Saharanpur			241	600	841
Pilibhit	...	12	57	335	404
Cawnpore	...		61	389	450
Fatehpur			17	128	145
Banda	1	...	52		53
Hamirpur	...	...	45	163	208
Allahabad	2	1	58	312	373
Jhansi	...	3	58	109	170
Jalaun	2	28	22	183	284
Kumaon			0	25	25
Garhwal			...	105	165
Tarai			24	24	48

Lucknow			291	1,439	1,730
Unnao		.	17	...	17
RAS Bareli			27	6	33
Sitapur		.	161	335	496
Hardoi		.	...	337	337
Kheri		.	348	396	744
Faizabad			1,474	543	2,017
Gonda		.	877	64	941
Bahraich		.	19	201	220
Sultânpur			47	69	116
Total	13	261	9,283	22,321	31,878

Data source:W. Crooke (1896)

Russell also pointed out that caste is also responsible for a good deal of crime and thieves and robbers often disguised as Bairagis hard to detect. Women Bairagis enjoyed more freedom than upper-caste women. In Bengal, Parna Sen Gupta had shown that Bairagi women deployed as female teacher counterparts to gurumoshaya. *He pointed that it was due to fewer restrictions on women's mobility, and seclusion in low-caste Bairagi women. But they were always not looked at as ideal by either the colonial state or society due heterodox morality of the sex* (Sengupta, 2011).

Bairagis had multiple identities for example in Haryana, the Jat peasant who became lay followers of Bairagi converted to the Bairagis caste over a period of time, but kept the last of their Jat gotras, unlike the other Bairagis who kept "Dawara" as their gotra e.g., Nimawat. Similarly, Kalladhilri the ancestor of the Bedi family of Una, was also the predecessor of the Brahman Kalladhari mahant of Dharmsal in the Una tahsil, who are Bairagis, as well as followers of Nanak, whence they are called Vaishnav-Nanak-panthi. Such complexity had existed in the Bairagis elsewhere in the other provinces (Rose et al., 1911).

Conclusions and Finding

Nicholas Dirks pointed out that social identity in the precolonial is heterogeneous, complex conjunctural, and changing and caste was just one category among many others, one way of organizing and representing identity. He further argues that was under the British that "caste" became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. Modern caste was constructed under hegemonic colonial rule (Dirks, 2001). It was the product of the process in which knowledge was accumulated to know India by the colonial state.

While Susan Bayly argued that the element of "traditional" caste taking shape as early as 18th century. And caste-like social order became increasingly apparent later Mughal period. She rejected the notion that caste was orientalist fiction. She pointed out that caste-conscious became more pervasive under the British but denied that it was simply the creation of colonial officials. She talks about of "man of prowess" who spread the Brahminical norms. She gave reference to ascetic and Brahman-led monastic orders like Ramanandi and non-elite adherents

coming into contact with their networks and gaining 'spiritual capital'. This was a means of translating personal prowess and achievement into claims of inherited worth and 'caste' status (Bayly, 2001). Bairagis follow an independent path transforming the sect into the caste. The formation of the Bairagis caste is a precolonial phenomenon and the process exuberated not by categorization and objectification done by the colonial state but rather than the changing socio-economic dynamics due presence of the colonial state. The turmoil of 18th century helped the Bairagis holding a specific place in the society and gradually they started behaving like caste and eventually transformed themselves into the caste. As Nicholas Dirks talks about categorization was sometimes a localized phenomenon, but Bairagis get uniformity of their Chatur sampradaya tradition all over India. The "Chatur sampradaya" itself transforms into gotra and clan onto which Bairagis delve their caste legitimacy.

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