



Research Paper

Sectarian Identity, Sacred Authority and Theological Pluralism: A Sociological Inquiry into Ramanandi Vaishnav Sadhus of Kashi

Dheeraj Pratap Mitra

Doctoral Research Scholar
Department of Sociology
Banaras Hindu University Varanasi, India

Dr. Vimal Kumar Lahari

Associate Professor
Department of Sociology
Banaras Hindu University Varanasi, India

Abstract

The Ramanandi Sampradaya which is one of the largest and most influential sects within Vaishnavism that occupies a distinctive place in the pluralistic religious landscape of Kashi (Varanasi). Rooted in the Bhakti tradition and the teachings of the 14th century reformer Ramananda, this sect is notable for its theological emphasis on Lord Rama, its textual reliance on the Ramcharitmanas and its historical commitment to social inclusivity. This paper investigates the construction and negotiation of sectarian identity among Ramanandi sadhus in Kashi focusing on the interplay between sacred authority, scriptural centrality and intra-sect hierarchies too. Drawing upon embedded ethnographic fieldwork, structured interviews, textual analysis conducted during doctoral research, this study employs a qualitative sociological approach to examine how Ramanandi ascetics affirm distinct theological boundaries while simultaneously engaging in dialogic coexistence within a densely plural urban religious field. Findings of the study reveal a nuanced picture of sectarian self-definition rooted in devotional orthopraxy, the symbolic authority of revered texts and the embodied charisma of lineage-based spiritual leadership. At the same time this study highlights tensions between egalitarian ideals of Bhakti and the practical persistence of hierarchical structures both within the monastic order and in its interactions with other ascetic traditions. The paper argues that the Ramanandi Sampradaya's ability to assert sectarian distinction while adapting to the fluid dynamics of Kashi's sacred geography exemplifies the paradoxes of pluralism in Indian urban religiosity. These insights contribute to broader debates in the sociology of religion mainly on sectarianism, sacred authority and the spatial politics of belief.

Keywords: Ramanandi, Vaishnavism, sectarian identity, sacred authority, Kashi, bhakti, religious pluralism

Received 04 Oct., 2025; Revised 12 Oct., 2025; Accepted 14 Oct., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Vaishnavism, which is one of the principal devotional streams within Hinduism represents a vast and pluralistic religious tradition centered on the worship of Vishnu and his avatars mainly Rama and Krishna. With a lineage that draws from ancient Vedic cosmology and evolves through the theological innovations of medieval Bhakti saints, Vaishnavism has diversified into multiple sectarian orders that combine philosophical depth, emotional devotion, ritual practice etc. Among these the Ramanandi Sampradaya stands out for its widespread influence, vernacular accessibility, its historical challenge to Brahminical orthodoxy. Established on the egalitarian teachings of the 14th century saint Ramananda, the Ramanandi order has historically embraced followers across caste and gender lines and emphasized personal devotion (bhakti) to Lord Rama as the highest spiritual path. Its presence in Kashi (Varanasi) which is one of the most ancient and continuously inhabited urban religious centers in the world provides a fertile ground for examining how sectarian identity is maintained and

articulated in a pluralistic, competitive sacred landscape. Kashi which is known for its dense religious field comprising Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, Jain and Buddhist traditions represents an ideal ethnographic site to explore urban religious pluralism (Hausner, 2007; Fuller, 2003). The city's complex spiritual topography marked by overlapping sectarian geographies, monastic centers (mathas), pilgrimage routes and public rituals creates both opportunities and tensions for ascetic groups navigating coexistence. In this context Ramanandi Sampradaya's theological assertions, ritual practices, institutional structures etc. provide critical insights into how sectarian communities negotiate sacred authority and religious boundaries within a shared urban space. Sectarian identity in this setting is not merely a matter of doctrinal fidelity but is performatively enacted through symbols, texts, leadership hierarchies, spatial claims.

The sociological significance of studying sectarian identity within the Ramanandi context lies in its ability to shed light on broader processes of religious differentiation, tradition-making, symbolic capital etc. in a competitive religious market. Scholars have noted that religious sects especially within Hinduism often operate as flexible formations that engage in both distinction and accommodation (Mines, 2005; Berger, 1967). This paper seeks to examine the mechanisms by which the Ramanandi sadhus maintain their distinct theological and ritual identity even as they share sacred geography and cultural space with other sects such as Shaivas, Naths and Gaudiya Vaishnavs. Drawing from qualitative data embedded in ethnographic fieldwork in Kashi, this study interrogates the dynamics of intra-religious difference, institutionalized sacred authority, pluralistic coexistence. The core objectives of this study are threefold. First, it investigates the belief systems of Ramanandi ascetics mainly the centrality of the Ramcharitmanas, the invocation of prapatti (complete surrender) and the philosophical orientation of Vishishtadvaita as mechanisms of identity formation. Second, it explores the inter-sect interactions in Kashi ranging from ritual cooperation during festivals (e.g., Ganga Aarti, Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti etc.) to spatial competition over religious visibility and institutional patronage. Third, it examines the internal structures of sacred authority including the role of the guru-shishya lineage, the institutionalization of mathas and akharas, and the politics of spiritual charisma in regulating sectarian orthodoxy and inclusion.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is sectarian identity constructed and maintained among Ramanandi Sadhus in Kashi?
2. What theological and textual bases inform their sacred authority?
3. How do they interact with other sects in a pluralistic environment like Kashi?

Ultimately we can say this paper situates the Ramanandi Sampradaya within the sociology of sects and the anthropology of urban religion arguing that its strategies of distinction, adaptation and sacred legitimation exemplify how sectarian orders sustain relevance in the modern urban sacred economy. The broader contribution of this study lies in foregrounding the importance of internal diversity and performative identity-making within Hinduism a tradition often stereotyped as homogenous or monolithic in popular and scholarly discourse.

II. Review of Literature

The scholarly corpus on Hindu sectarianism though vast converges on the recognition that Vaishnav devotion operates through intersecting theological, literary, social axes a perspective particularly illuminating for understanding how the Ramanandi Sampradaya shapes and is shaped by Kashi's multilayered sacred milieu and continues to influence contemporary ritual repertoires. Hawley's analysis of North Indian bhakti poetics shows how song cycles, vernacular exegesis, festival dramaturgy, furnish Ramanandi practitioners with a flexible toolkit for expressing Rama devotion while negotiating linguistic diversity and political contests that accompany sacred performance in Kashi's bustling religious marketplace (Hawley, 2015). Lorenzen's reframing of bhakti groups as socio-political collectivities rather than merely devotional coterie compels analysts to examine how Ramanandi monks strategically invoke egalitarian ideals, vernacular authority, inter-caste alliances and urban civic negotiations to challenge Brahminical dominance while embedding their sect within broader coalitions underpinning North Indian public religion (Lorenzen, 1995). Burghart's seminal thesis that sects constitute the foundational architecture of Hindu practice invites a focus on institutional mechanisms like monastic hierarchies, initiation rites, seasonal pilgrim circuits, and festival economies through which Ramanandi akhadas organize personal piety, adjudicate doctrinal disputes, allocate symbolic capital across competing sacred domains in Kashi (Burghart, 1978). Carman's exposition of Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita highlights how doctrines of qualified non-dualism privilege loving surrender to a personal deity, a metaphysical stance that Ramananda vernacularized in Avadhi thereby legitimizing inclusive initiation regimes embracing Dalit disciples and establishing a theological precedent for present-day Ramanandi assertions of social equality and ritual authority (Carman, 1974). Ethnographic sensitivity to ascetic lifeworlds, exemplified by Hausner's portrayal of Himalayan wanderers underscores the dialectic between detachment and social embeddedness equally evident among Ramanandi sadhus who solicit alms, mediate pilgrim disputes, forge patronage networks across Varanasi's lanes yet uphold rigorous celibacy and scriptural study within their monastic compounds (Hausner, 2007). Berger's notion of plausibility structures illuminates how Ramanandi narrative repertoires, ritual theatrics and pedagogic discourses

continuously reinforce an internally consistent worldview that immunizes adherents against competing theological claims emanating from Shaiva, Shakta, neo-religious movements, increasingly globalized spiritual marketplaces fueled by digital media crowding Kashi's symbolic economy today (Berger, 1967). Extending this sociological frame, Bourdieu's concept of the religious field depicts Kashi as a competitive arena where ascetic orders deploy cultural capital Sanskrit exegesis, vernacular pedagogy, festival sponsorship and symbolic capital guru charisma, miracle narratives, lineage prestige to secure ritual precedence, pilgrim donations and media visibility among lay followers and skeptical tourists (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet despite the robustness of these theoretical and historical contributions granular ethnographies remain scarce, leaving unanswered how Ramanandi monks regulate internal hierarchies, negotiate municipal regulations, authenticate sacred space etc. through everyday practices of bathing, preaching and policing ritual boundaries within Varanasi's increasingly commercialized, surveillance-laden urban environment and climate-induced infrastructural stress. The present study therefore advances the field by conducting sustained participant observation, textual analysis, and spatial mapping to elucidate the lived construction of Ramanandi identity, authority and territoriality thereby filling a critical gap in South Asian sociology of religion and contributing a nuanced portrait of sectarian life within India's most emblematic sacred city.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical scaffolding for this research integrates four complementary sociological perspectives that, taken together, illuminate how the Ramanandi Sampradaya constructs, defends and negotiates its sectarian identity within Kashi's hyper-plural sacred ecology.

First, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the religious field conceptualizes the city's sacred landscape as a stratified marketplace where actors compete for cultural, social and above all symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Ramanandi mathas, akharas, festival performances function as strategic sites for accumulating such capital by mastering canonical texts, sponsoring crowd-drawing *rāmlīlās*, asserting ritual precedence at key ghats, the sect continuously converts devotional labor into public legitimacy while positioning itself vis-à-vis Shaiva Dashanamis, Gaudiya Vaishnavs and global movements such as ISKCON. Legitimacy, in this Bourdieusian frame is never permanent; it must be renewed by ritual display, lineage narration, tactical spatial claims etc. that hold rivals at bay yet keep open channels for patronage and state recognition. Second, Peter Berger's notion of the sacred canopy provides a phenomenological complement by explaining how Ramanandi institutions stabilize a coherent universe of meaning amid incessant doctrinal competition (Berger, 1967). Through uninterrupted recitation of the Ramayana and Ramcharitmanas, meticulously staged processions on Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti and the omnipresent architecture of Rama shrines, the sect externalizes its worldview, objectifies it in durable institutions and enables individual ascetics to internalize it as taken-for-granted reality. The canopy's durability, however, is fragile in Kashi's crowded marketplace of gods, compelling Ramanandi leaders to mount ever more elaborate public rituals and media-savvy preaching that reaffirm plausibility whenever rival narratives threaten to erode collective certainty. Third, Louis Dumont's dialectic of hierarchy and egalitarianism reveals the paradox underpinning Ramanandi social organization (Dumont, 1970). While the sect's bhakti theology proclaims universal access to salvation its internal administration reproduces graded titles Mahant, Acharya, Tyagi that mirror broader Hindu valuations of purity and renunciation. This dual logic allows the Ramanandis to champion anti-Brahmanical inclusivity when courting Dalit devotees, yet still preserve a recognizable chain of command essential for managing property, litigation, festival logistics in a densely contested urban space. Dumont's schema thus clarifies how egalitarian rhetoric and hierarchical practice coexist without collapsing into contradiction, because both are anchored in an overarching cosmology that ranks spiritual renunciation above ritual birth. Finally, Max Weber's typology of authority distinguishes the charismatic legacy of Ramananda and Tulsidas from the routinized structures that now govern Ramanandi life (Weber, 1963). The living memory of saint-poets furnishes an aura of charisma that new initiates still invoke, yet day-to-day legitimacy increasingly rests on traditional authority embedded in guru-shishya lineages, written constitutions of mathas and codified initiation rituals. By blending charisma with routinization, the sect maintains doctrinal flexibility protecting itself from ossification while securing predictable channels for leadership succession and resource allocation. This Weberian lens, together with Bourdieu, Berger and Dumont enables a multilayered analysis of how the Ramanandi Sampradaya translates abstract theology into lived urban practice, how it converts ritual capital into social power and how it navigates Kashi's overlapping regimes of hierarchy, pluralism, commodified pilgrimage.

III. Methodology

This study employs an interpretivist, qualitative research design combining embedded ethnography with historical-textual analysis to examine how the Ramanandi Sampradaya constructs and negotiates sectarian identity within Kashi's plural sacred geography. Fieldwork was conducted between 2022 and 2024 at key Ramanandi sites including Tilakdasji Mandir, Sri Matha (Panchganga Ghat) and Rasik Hanuman Bagh etc. as well as public religious spaces such as ghats and processional routes. A purposive and snowball sample of 160 sadhus was

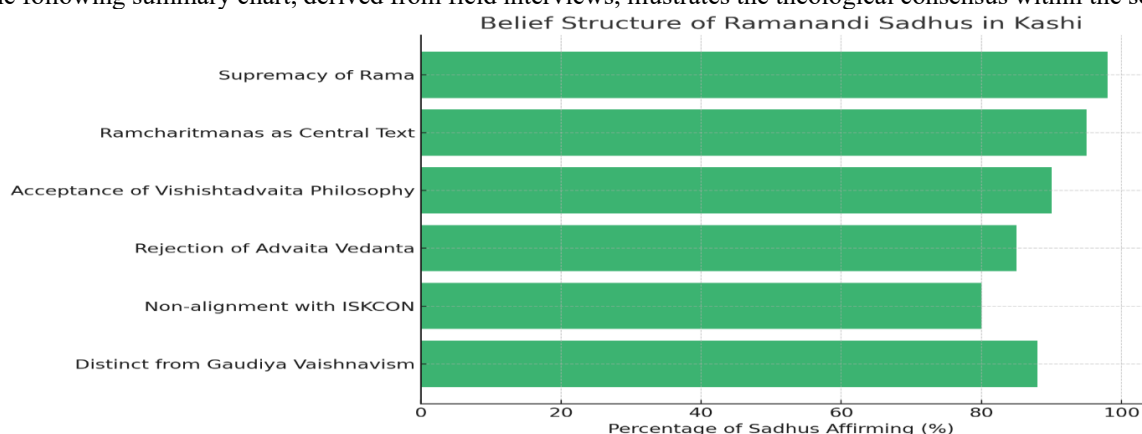
selected representing a diversity of caste (Brahmin, OBC, SC, ST), institutional role (Mahant, Sadhu, Sevak), regional background (U.P., Bihar, M.P., Rajasthan) and residential status (resident vs. itinerant). This heterogeneity was essential for understanding how caste, region, theology intersect in everyday ascetic life. Data collection employed four qualitative tools: (1) systematic field notes recording spatial arrangements and ritual hierarchies; (2) semi-structured oral history interviews in Hindi and Bhojpuri focusing on lineage, caste and sectarian relations; (3) ritual observation of *ārtī*, *bhajan-kīrtan*, *Ramcharitmanas* recitation, and *parikramā* to capture the performative dimensions of sacred authority; and (4) limited photography to document symbolic markers such as tilaks, flags, temple architecture, in line with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Verbal consent was obtained for all interviews and images with full anonymity ensured. Textual triangulation involved referencing scriptures like the *Vaishnavmatabjbhaskar*, *Ramcharitmanas*, *Vishnu Purāṇa*, and *Bhakti Ratnāvali*, often cited by respondents to bridge doctrinal narratives and observed practice. Secondary sources by Carman (1974), Hardy (1983), Lorenzen (1995), and Lutgendorf (1991) enriched the historical-theological context, while sociological theories by Berger (1967), Bourdieu (1991), Dumont (1970) and Weber (1963) informed analytical interpretation. Ethical protocols included verbal disclosure of research goals, pseudonym use, cultural sensitivity (e.g., footwear removal, participation in communal meals), avoidance of photography during sacred moments. The methodology unfolds in two stages: emic description of ascetic life and etic interpretation through key sociological frameworks. This approach offers a nuanced grounded account of Ramanandi sectarianism as both lived practice and structured religious identity in the plural landscape of Kashi.

Doctrinal Foundations and Sectarian Identity

The sectarian identity of the Ramanandi Sampradaya is anchored in a distinctive doctrinal framework that blends theological allegiance to Lord Rama, philosophical commitment to Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, liturgical devotion centered around the vernacular scripture *Ramcharitmanas*. These core elements not only constitute the metaphysical foundation of the sect but also function as practical tools for delineating social boundaries, preserving spiritual continuity, asserting symbolic capital within the complex and contested religious landscape of Kashi. Unlike many Hindu traditions that remain confined to scriptural abstraction or lineage-based orthodoxy the Ramanandi Sampradaya embodies a dynamic interplay between doctrine and practice where belief is not only internalized but publicly performed and materially manifested. At the heart of the sect's theology lies the supremacy of Lord Rama, revered not merely as an incarnation of Vishnu but as Maryada Purushottam the divine archetype of righteousness, self-control and moral governance. This portrayal sharply contrasts with Krishna-centric bhakti movements such as Gaudiya Vaishnavism or ISKCON, which emphasize ecstatic love (*prema*), emotional intensity (*rasa*) and playfulness (*lila*) as central to divine experience. Ramanandi theology by contrast is rooted in restraint, dharma and narrative morality. Lord Rama is seen not only as God but also as a king, warrior, son and ideal man making him a relatable figure whose life provides ethical paradigms for both ascetics and householders. This theocentric orientation is concretely expressed through the *Ramcharitmanas*, the 16th-century Awadhi retelling of the Ramayana by Tulsidas which forms the theological and liturgical cornerstone of the Ramanandi tradition. Recited daily in temples, chanted during public kathas, dramatized in annual Ramlilas, the *Manas* is more than a scripture it is a lived text that binds together Ramanandi sadhus and lay devotees across caste, language and region. During field interviews 95% of Ramanandi sadhus identified the *Ramcharitmanas* as their principal scriptural authority, often citing its verses during conversations about dharma, ritual obligations or social conduct. The text's accessible language and affective resonance allow it to function as both a theological manual and a social charter providing the grammar through which sectarian identity is constructed and sustained. Unlike Sanskritic scriptures such as the Vedanta Sstras or the Bhagavata Purana, which historically remained limited to upper-caste audiences the *Ramcharitmanas* democratizes access to divine knowledge. This accessibility reinforces the Ramanandi sect's inclusive ethos especially its historical opposition to Brahmanical exclusivism. Theologically, the *Manas* affirms Rama as saguna brahman the divine with attributes and form thereby validating the path of image worship, ritual observance and temple devotion all of which are central to Ramanandi practice. Public recitation (*path*), collective chanting (*bhajan*) and ritual dramatization (*Ramlila*) are not only forms of devotion but also mechanisms for reaffirming sectarian cohesion and theological legitimacy. Closely intertwined with the authority of the *Manas* is the sect's philosophical allegiance to Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, a non-dualist but theistically grounded doctrine originally systematized by Ramanuja and vernacularized by Ramananda. Vishishtadvaita affirms the real existence of the world (*jagat*) and the individual soul (*jiva*) as modes of the supreme being (*Rama/Narayana*). Unlike Advaita Vedanta, which posits the illusory nature of the world and promotes transcendence through detachment, Vishishtadvaita accommodates devotional surrender within a real morally ordered cosmos. This balance of transcendence and immanence enables the Ramanandi Sampradaya to engage with social structures, ethical obligations, institutional life without compromising on metaphysical depth. Among interviewed sadhus, 90% affirmed Vishishtadvaita as their preferred philosophical framework, often linking its ideas to their own experiences of renunciation, service, and ritual practice. Equally important to the construction of sectarian identity is the sect's conscious distancing from Advaita Vedanta. While Advaita emphasizes a formless, impersonal absolute (*nirguna brahman*), Ramanandis uphold the necessity of a personal

deity (saguna bhakti). This distinction is not merely theological but polemical and institutional. Ramanandi educational syllabi, temple murals, initiation vows explicitly reject the impersonalism of Advaita. In interviews, 85% of sadhus voiced strong opposition to Advaitic ideas often framing them as antithetical to the devotional and ethical life. One acharya remarked, “The Advaitins say there is no Rama, no form, no path. But for us, Rama is both the path and the destination.” Such rejections serve to reinforce sectarian boundaries and elevate Ramanandi theology as a distinct path within the broader Hindu pluralism. In addition to positioning itself against Advaita, the Ramanandi Sampradaya maintains a critical distance from other Vaishnava traditions such as Gaudiya Vaishnavism and ISKCON. While all share common texts like the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavata Purana, their theological emphases, ritual modes and aesthetics vary considerably. Gaudiya Vaishnavism for instance, elevates Krishna as the original and most intimate form of divinity (svayam bhagavan) and prioritizes emotional states (rasa) over moral discipline. ISKCON, a modern offshoot of the Gaudiya lineage, globalizes this Krishna-centric devotion through institutionalized chanting (nama-sankirtana) and missionary outreach. By contrast, Ramanandi sadhus stress the moral restraint, narrative piety and ritual consistency of Rama’s life. During fieldwork, 88% of Ramanandi ascetics described their tradition as ‘fundamentally different from ISKCON and Gaudiya sects, frequently critiquing what they viewed as emotional excess and performative devotion. For them, Rama’s life of maryada (ethical boundaries) offers a stable, emulatable paradigm amidst the flux of modern religiosity.

The following summary chart, derived from field interviews, illustrates the theological consensus within the sect:



These data points reflect the deep internal coherence of the sect even amidst its socio-regional diversity. Through its scriptural allegiance, metaphysical clarity, and theological boundaries, the Ramanandi Sampradaya sustains a robust sectarian identity that is simultaneously inclusive and distinctive. In conclusion to this we can say that the doctrinal foundations of the Ramanandi Sampradaya centered on Rama’s supremacy, the vernacular theology of the Ramcharitmanas, and the relational metaphysics of Vishishtadvaita constitute the core of its sectarian identity. These elements are not inert dogmas but are enacted through everyday practices, liturgical rituals, institutionalized teachings. Their continual performance, reinforcement and strategic differentiation from rival schools of thought make the Ramanandi tradition a living and adaptive sectarian community within the evolving religious field of Kashi.

Sacred Authority and Institutional Hierarchy

The Ramanandi Sampradaya’s enduring influence in the religious life of North India owes much to its well-defined structure of sacred authority rooted in institutional hierarchies and spiritual discipline. While doctrinal clarity and devotional rigor underpin the sect’s theological framework, it is the organizational infrastructure especially the mathas (monastic centers) that sustains its religious practices, transmits spiritual knowledge and regulates ascetic conduct. In Kashi where the sect finds its most vibrant urban expression major mathas such as Tilakdasji Mandir, Sri Matha at Panchganga Ghat, Raghav das Mandir and Rasik Hanuman Bagh function as not only sacred spaces but also as administrative and pedagogical hubs. These mathas serve as centers of initiation, learning, ritual performance, public engagement. As socio-religious institutions they are critical for maintaining doctrinal discipline and for socializing new ascetics into the ethos of the sect. Their presence within Kashi’s sacred geography grants them immense symbolic capital allowing them to assert religious authority not just within the Ramanandi fold but in inter-sectarian and civic spheres as well. At the core of sacred authority in the Ramanandi tradition is the guru–shishya parampara (teacher-disciple lineage), a spiritual system of transmission that links each ascetic to a long historical chain culminating in either Ramananda or Lord Rama himself. This lineage is not merely symbolic; it is reinforced through ritual service, daily discipline, pedagogical deference etc. Entry into this sacred order begins with the role of Sevak, a novice who performs physical and

devotional duties in the temple and serves under the guidance of elder monks. Upon demonstrating spiritual maturity, scriptural literacy and ritual competence a Sevak may be ordained as a Tyagi a renunciate entrusted with conducting rituals, initiating novices, engaging in public religious duties. Further elevation may lead to the role of Acharya, who specializes in teaching canonical texts such as the Ramcharitmanas, Bhagavad Gita and Vedantic treatises. Acharyas are responsible for theological instruction, philosophical discourse, scriptural interpretation. At the apex of the matha hierarchy is the Mahant, the spiritual and administrative head who functions as the custodian of the deity, the interpreter of doctrine and the public face of the matha during festivals, pilgrimages and inter-sect meetings. This institutional structure is both hierarchical and merit-based. Progression through these roles is determined by a combination of years of service, theological knowledge, ritual discipline and popular recognition. Interviews conducted with Ramanandi sadhus suggest that while lineage and tradition are foundational, divine grace (kripa) and the blessings of previous gurus are also seen as essential for legitimizing authority. The Mahant's role, in particular, blends Max Weber's notions of traditional and charismatic authority while institutional succession follows established norms, individual charisma and perceived sanctity also influence leadership transitions.

The hierarchy within the mathas is as follows:

Role	Description	Position
Mahant	Spiritual and administrative head	Top
Acharya	Teacher of texts and theological guide	Mid-high
Tyagi Sadhu	Ritual performer and renunciate	Mid
Sevak	Novice responsible for temple duties	Low

While this structure promotes stability and ritual order, field research reveals that latent social stratification continues to shape access to leadership roles. Among the 160 Ramanandi ascetics interviewed, 107 belonged to OBC castes, 33 were Dalits, and the rest were from Brahmin or Vaishya backgrounds. Although entry into the monastic life is formally open to all, higher positions such as Acharya and Mahant were overwhelmingly occupied by individuals from upper or middle-caste groups. This reflects an internal contradiction within the bhakti ethos: while egalitarian in theology, institutional hierarchy tends to reproduce subtle caste boundaries, aligning with Louis Dumont's view that Indian hierarchy reflects a deeper cosmological logic rather than mere social stratification (Dumont, 1970). Each role within the matha is associated with specific functions. Sevaks manage cleanliness, guest services, assist in preparing rituals. Tyagis conduct aartis, lead Ramcharitmanas recitations, guide novices. Acharyas provide theological leadership, while Mahants supervise finances, coordinate inter-matha relations and represent the matha in civic and religious events. These roles underscore the fusion of sacred and administrative duties positioning mathas as complex religious bureaucracies with spiritual authority. Moreover, the mathas function as critical nodes of social outreach and resource distribution. During festivals like Ram Navami, Dussehra and Guru Poornima mathas host thousands of pilgrims organize mass recitations, distribute prasada (sanctified food) and manage charitable donations. These events offer Mahants and Acharyas opportunities to accumulate symbolic capital, build networks with other sectarian institutions, negotiate influence with local political actors. Thus, mathas act not just as centers of worship but also as institutional bridges between sacred tradition and modern governance. In conclusion we can say that the sacred authority in the Ramanandi Sampradaya is not an abstract or merely theological principle. It is enacted through a tangible institutional framework grounded in the matha system where roles are distributed according to demonstrated spiritual merit, doctrinal mastery and ritual competency. The guru-shishya parampara provides the ethical and spiritual continuity that legitimizes this structure while the hierarchy though meritocratic in appearance continues to reflect subtle caste dynamics. The mathas of Kashi remain pivotal not only for the internal organization of the sect but also as powerful actors in the broader sacred and civic life of Hindu society. Through them, the Ramanandi tradition sustains its theological clarity, ritual discipline, public relevance in an increasingly pluralistic and politicized religious landscape.

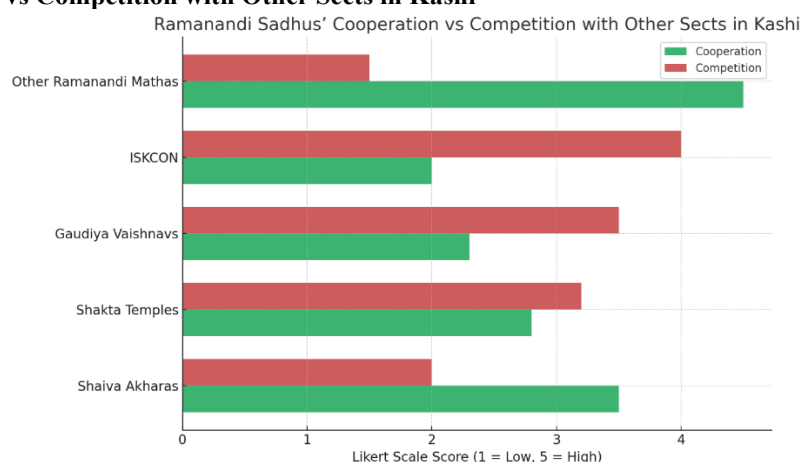
Interaction with Other Sects in Kashi

The religious landscape of Kashi is a dense and dynamic field of intersecting traditions, philosophies and institutional orders. Within this pluralistic milieu, the Ramanandi Sampradaya not only asserts its distinct identity but actively participates in a range of inter-sectarian engagements that oscillate between cooperation and competition. This coexistence is neither static nor always harmonious; rather, it unfolds as a patterned negotiation of sacred authority, spatial presence, devotional capital. This section explores the nuanced relationships that Ramanandi sadhus maintain with other prominent sects in Kashi including Shaiva akharas, Shakta temples, Gaudiya Vaishnavs and ISKCON. These interactions are marked by moments of shared ritual, spatial tensions, contestation over pilgrims and donations, and doctrinal debates that collectively shape the lived experience of religious pluralism. Cooperation among sects often emerges in the context of large-scale public rituals and festivals where institutional boundaries give way to a more inclusive performance of religious citizenship.

Ramanandi participation in events such as the Ganga Aarti, Ram Navami, Dussehra and Navaratri demonstrates a pragmatic pluralism. During these events Ramanandi sadhus are seen coordinating with Shaiva ascetics, participating in inter-sect prayer gatherings, offering bhajan-kirtan at venues that include both Vaishnav and Shakta affiliations. In interviews conducted at Panchganga Ghat and Dashashwamedh, multiple Ramanandi sadhus described these collaborative occasions as moments of ‘samajik dharma’ (social duty) emphasizing the importance of public witness over theological difference. Such practices reflect what Peter Berger (1967) termed the ‘sacred canopy’ a symbolic framework under which diverse beliefs coexist without immediate dissolution into relativism. These cooperative engagements help construct a shared religious public in which each sect gains legitimacy through participation, visibility and ritual contribution. Yet beneath the surface of cooperation lies a competitive substratum. The competition for sacred space in Kashi is acute given the city’s historical sanctity and limited geographical terrain. Ramanandi mathas, like those of other sects must constantly reaffirm their presence through visible markers flags, tilaks, street processions, ghat-based installations. Several Ramanandi mathas reported disputes over access to prime pilgrimage routes during major festivals, especially around Tulsi Ghat, Dashashwamedh and Assi Ghat. These disputes are not merely logistical but deeply symbolic reflecting a contest over who holds representational authority in Kashi’s sacred cartography. Furthermore, competition extends to the acquisition of bhakt (devotees), donations, affiliations. ISKCON’s growing global influence and visually appealing rituals have drawn younger often foreign devotees prompting some Ramanandi leaders to critique their approach as ‘commercialized bhakti.’ The competitive dynamic is especially pronounced in interactions with Gaudiya Vaishnavs and ISKCON. While these traditions share a Vaishnav identity and overlapping texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and Bhagavata Purana, they diverge sharply in emphasis, ritual, theological tone. Gaudiya traditions valorize Krishna as svayam bhagavan and stress rasa-lila, an emotive form of bhakti centered on divine play and ecstatic experience. Ramanandis, by contrast emphasize maryada bhakti discipline-oriented devotion modeled after Rama’s righteous conduct. The two traditions thus compete not only for religious attention but for theological space. Among the 160 Ramanandi sadhus interviewed, 88% viewed Gaudiya bhakti as ‘incomplete’ or ‘excessive,’ often critiquing its sensuous metaphors and overreliance on emotionalism. Similarly, ISKCON was perceived as institutionally intrusive with 80% of sadhus indicating a strong sense of doctrinal and ritual disapproval. Yet paradoxically there was also an acknowledgement of ISKCON’s success in bringing global visibility to Vaishnav ideals, suggesting a complex blend of envy, admiration and resistance. Relations with Shaiva and Shakta traditions offer a somewhat more balanced picture. Given Kashi’s deep association with Shaivism especially the presence of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and the Dashanami Akharas the Ramanandis have had to coexist with robust Shaiva institutions for centuries. While theological disagreements exist particularly around concepts of renunciation, divinity and ritual praxis, mutual respect often prevails. In rituals like Ganga Aarti and civic processions, Ramanandis and Shaivas often share platforms sometimes symbolically rotating leadership roles. Nonetheless, some frictions arise around access to ghat space and the hierarchical ordering of procession positions. Shakta traditions especially those centered around the temples of Annapurna and Durga Kund present a different sort of interaction. While Shaktism is doctrinally distant from Ramanandi theology, the feminine divinity of Sita and the motherly imagery of bhakti in the Ramcharitmanas allow for symbolic bridges. In festive contexts like Navaratri joint recitations and symbolic exchanges are not uncommon.

To synthesize the qualitative insights from fieldwork, the following chart presents Likert scale scores (1 = very low, 5 = very high) that quantify Ramanandi perceptions of cooperation and competition with various religious groups in Kashi. The scores are based on responses from 160 interviewed sadhus.

Chart: Cooperation vs Competition with Other Sects in Kashi



As the chart shows Ramanandi sadhus perceive high cooperation with fellow Ramanandi mathas (Cooperation score: 4.5), moderate collaboration with Shaiva groups (3.5), and low alignment with ISKCON (2.0). Conversely the highest competition is felt with ISKCON (4.0) and Gaudiya Vaishnavs (3.5) indicating theological rivalry and cultural contestation. The Shakta temples occupy a middle ground, reflecting both aesthetic distance and occasional ritual overlap. These interactions reveal the embeddedness of Ramanandi sectarian identity within a broader field of symbolic competition as theorized by Bourdieu (1991). Sacred authority is not a possession but a performance enacted, negotiated, contested in public space. In this performative arena cooperation becomes a strategy of visibility while competition is a mechanism of boundary maintenance. Both dynamics are essential to understanding how the Ramanandi Sampradaya sustains its distinctiveness in a city where religious traditions thrive not in isolation but through dialogical coexistence and structured differentiation. In conclusion to all this the Ramanandi Sampradaya's engagement with other sects in Kashi is characterized by a dynamic spectrum of cooperation and competition. These interactions are ritualistic, institutional, ideological reflecting both shared religious grammar and differentiated sacred vision. As urban religiosity becomes increasingly globalized and mediatized the ability of Ramanandi mathas to navigate these complex relationships will be crucial to the sect's sustained relevance and vitality.

Pluralism and Urban Identity Negotiation

The city of Kashi (Varanasi), a microcosm of Hindu religious diversity offers an ideal setting to understand how traditional religious sects like the Ramanandi Sampradaya navigate the realities of urban pluralism and modernity. As a sacred city teeming with overlapping temples, sects, castes and ritual spaces Kashi demands from its religious institutions not only theological clarity but also spatial, social, technological adaptability. For the Ramanandi order rooted in ideals of renunciation (tyaga) and spiritual discipline (sadhana) the contemporary challenge is not to retreat from the world but to make their presence visible, relevant and resilient within a bustling and contested sacred landscape. The spatial dynamics of Kashi are central to this negotiation. Mathas such as Sri Matha at Panchganga Ghat and Rasik Hanuman Bagh near Hanuman Ghat operate in close proximity to Shaiva, Shakta and other Vaishnava institutions. These physical intersections create a shared yet competitive terrain in which symbolic assertion becomes essential. The Ramanandi mathas establish their identity through visual cues saffron flags, arches, murals of Rama and Tulsidas, iconographic depictions that visually inscribe sectarian boundaries. These spatial markers help maintain distinctiveness within a sacred ecology characterized by ritual simultaneity and overlapping claims. The sect's active participation in public religious festivals further demonstrates its strategic engagement with urban religiosity. Events like Ram Navami, Guru Poornima, Navaratri etc. are no longer confined to the matha interiors but spill into public roads, ghats, open-air platforms. Here, Ramanandi sadhus perform pravachans (public sermons), conduct aarti ceremonies with amplified sound systems and distribute printed religious materials actions that render their devotion both visible and accessible to a broad urban audience. These festivals function not only as devotional occasions but as platforms for sectarian branding enabling the Ramanandis to reinforce their relevance in a crowded religious field. Digital media has emerged as a particularly transformative tool in this context. Several Ramanandi mathas in Kashi now maintain WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, Facebook pages to disseminate bhajans, religious teachings and festival invitations. Younger disciples manage these platforms contributing to the rise of what can be called 'digital bhakti.' This digital engagement allows the sect to reach followers beyond Kashi create horizontal solidarity among distant mathas and offer a counter-narrative to the globalized presence of movements like ISKCON. While some older sadhus express concern about the 'dilution' of oral traditions, most acknowledge the importance of digital tools for sustaining sectarian visibility and relevance. As Giddens (1991) argues in the age of late modernity traditions do not vanish they adapt through reflexive engagement with contemporary structures. Language also plays a crucial role in mediating the sect's urban presence. While traditional Ramanandi pedagogy emphasized Sanskrit and Awadhi the sacred languages associated with the Ramcharitmanas modern sermons frequently incorporate Hindi, Bhojpuri and even English to reach diasporic devotees and religious tourists. This multilingual strategy allows the sect to transcend caste and class boundaries thereby increasing its appeal among lower-caste and marginalized urban communities. The vernacularization of religious language thus becomes a tool for inclusive outreach and strategic public positioning. Beyond rhetoric, this inclusivity finds expression in social service initiatives run by several mathas. Free food distribution (annakshetras), basic education programs for slum children, health camps during festivals exemplify the sect's civic engagement. These welfare activities while grounded in Hindu ideals of seva (selfless service), also serve as instruments of symbolic capital, helping to build trust among urban subaltern groups. Mahants interviewed during fieldwork frequently invoked the concept of 'Rama's rajya dharma' the obligation to serve the needy as a theological rationale for these programs. Others acknowledged the strategic value of such acts in cultivating devotional bases among lower-caste populations and enhancing the sect's social legitimacy. Thus, the urban identity of Ramanandi sadhus is continually negotiated across multiple axes between monastic withdrawal and public presence, between oral lineage and digital mediation, between sectarian exclusivity and civic inclusivity. This ongoing adaptation allows the sect not only to maintain internal coherence but to expand its public role within the plural religious economy

of Kashi. Sociologist José Casanova's (1994) concept of 'public religion' becomes especially relevant here the Ramanandi Sampradaya, while rooted in traditional ascetic ideals asserts itself through public discourse, moral action, civic service etc. The Ramanandi Sampradaya exemplifies how a traditional ascetic community can actively reshape its identity in response to the demands of pluralism and urban modernity. Rather than retreating into seclusion the mathas of Kashi have emerged as dynamic centers of religious, cultural and social life. Through spatial assertion, digital outreach, multilingual discourse, public service the sect sustains its theological and ritual distinctiveness while remaining a vital part of the evolving landscape of urban Hinduism. In doing so it illustrates the adaptive vitality of religious traditions in contemporary India.

IV. Discussion and Critical Analysis

The ethnography of Ramanandi sadhus in Kashi complicates three doctrinally cherished notions universal inclusivity, purely spiritual authority and harmonious pluralism by revealing the structural, performative and strategic dimensions behind each claim. Despite its historical reputation for egalitarian outreach, the Sampradaya's inclusivity remains partial; leadership positions such as Mahant or Acharya continue to be monopolized by ascetics from dominant-caste communities even though novices arrive from a range of social backgrounds. The rhetoric of *maryādā* discipline, order, righteousness extends beyond spiritual self-fashioning to function as an implicit filter that privileges those with cultural capital, scriptural fluency, caste-encoded networks. Public welfare activities and vernacular sermons aimed at Dalit and OBC devotees therefore operate simultaneously as ethical service and as sectarian marketing, securing devotional followings while preserving a hierarchy that favors historically advantaged groups. This tension between ideal and practice underscores a broader transformation of sacred authority within Kashi's dense religious economy. Traditionally anchored in the guru-śiṣya lineage and ascetic renunciation, legitimacy now also accrues through media visibility, organizational infrastructure, the capacity to mobilize large-scale festivals. Mahants act as hybrid figures spiritual guides, event managers, fund-raisers, digital influencers etc. illustrating Weber's thesis that charisma becomes routinized yet also reactivated through new institutional forms. Bourdieu's notion of a 'religious field' is equally apt symbolic capital today encompasses not only scriptural mastery but also the ability to negotiate municipal regulations, attract online audiences, court donors who measure sanctity in social-media metrics and crowd numbers. The persistence and even intensification, of sectarian identity is the logical outcome of this competitive environment. The Ramanandis distance themselves from Advaita's formless metaphysics, critique Gaudiya Vaishnavism's emotive Krishna-centric theology and portray ISKCON's global brand as excessively performative. Such differentiations do more than safeguard doctrinal purity; they help preserve 'market share' in a city where temples, mutts, and pilgrim lodges vie for limited attention, donations, real estate. Sectarian boundaries thus operate as strategic resources offering coherence to insiders and legibility to outsiders who navigate Kashi through recognizable flags, murals, ritual rhythms. Yet sectarian consolidation cannot be viewed in isolation from wider political and cultural currents. Post-liberalization India has witnessed the rise of Hindu majoritarian sentiment, and Rama central to Ramanandi theology is simultaneously a devotional deity and a symbol in the national imaginary. While most sadhus refrain from explicit party alignment their heightened public celebration of Rama increased collaboration with civic authorities and subtle exclusion of rival narratives resonate with the broader project of Hindu consolidation analyzed by Nandy (2001) and Jaffrelot (2007). In this sense the Sampradaya navigates a delicate balance: it claims spiritual autonomy yet operates within a cultural logic that increasingly conflates religiosity with civilizational pride and moral governance. Kashi's much-touted pluralism must therefore be understood less as dialogic harmony and more as negotiated juxtaposition. Temples share lanes and festival calendars but real engagement across doctrinal lines is rare; instead, adjacency prevails. Each tradition asserts territorial and symbolic stakes through processions, loudspeaker sermons, digital broadcasts creating a pluralism of parallel performances rather than sustained theological conversation. For Ramanandis, the challenge is to assert distinctiveness without provoking overt conflict, a task accomplished by doubling down on Rama's ethical exemplariness and framing social outreach as seva universal enough to attract urban poor across caste lines. Viewed through this lens, the Sampradaya's evolution reflects a broader sociological pattern: religious movements survive in modern cities not by abandoning tradition but by re-embedding it within new circuits of capital, publicity, governance. Inclusivity becomes rhetoric tempered by institutional gatekeeping; sacred authority is refracted through entrepreneurial charisma; pluralism is enacted as strategic coexistence. The Ramanandi case thus invites scholars to revise static categories privileging lived negotiation over doctrinal ideals and to recognize sectarianism not as a relic of premodern fragmentation but as a dynamic, adaptive response to the pressures and opportunities of contemporary urban India.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted processes through which the Ramanandi Sampradaya constructs and sustains sectarian identity within the pluralistic and contested religious environment of Kashi. Drawing upon embedded ethnographic fieldwork and critical sociological theory it demonstrates that Ramanandi

identity is not merely grounded in scriptural fidelity mainly to Ramcharitmanas and Vishishtadvaita philosophy but is also actively shaped through spatial negotiation, ritual authority, institutional hierarchy and technological engagement. Far from being a rigid or insular tradition, the Ramanandi Sampradaya emerges as a dynamic and adaptive institution that reconfigures its presence in response to urban modernity, inter-sect competition, the demands of public religiosity. The mathas of Kashi operate as spiritual centers, theological academies and civic-religious nodes, balancing continuity with change. Leadership structures, especially the role of the Mahant, reflect a blend of traditional authority and contemporary functionality combining ascetic legitimacy with organizational skill and media outreach. Even as challenges from sects like ISKCON and Gaudiya Math persist the Ramanandi tradition maintains distinctiveness through doctrinal clarity, public participation, symbolic assertion within Kashi's sacred geography. The study contributes to the sociology of religion by applying Bourdieu's theory of the religious field, Weber's typology of charisma and routinization, Dumont's hierarchy egalitarianism framework to understand how sacred authority is negotiated today. It also fills a critical gap in Indian sectarian studies by offering a grounded account of Ramanandi life in Kashi a city emblematic of urban Hindu religiosity. Future research could build on this foundation by comparing Ramanandi institutions across sites like Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Kathmandu etc. Such comparative analysis would enhance our understanding of how Vaishnav sects navigate regional, national, global religious currents in an era marked by digital devotion, spiritual competition, cultural nationalism.

References

- [1]. Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Doubleday.
- [2]. Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- [3]. Bourdieu, P. (1991). Genesis and structure of the religious field. *Comparative Social Research*, 13, 1–44.
- [4]. Burghart, R. (1978). The foundational role of the sect in Hinduism. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 12(1), 17–44.
- [5]. Burghart, R. (1978). The founding of the Ramanandi sect. *Ethnohistory*, 25(2), 121–139.
- [6]. Carman, J. B. (1974). *The theology of Rāmānuja: An essay in inter-religious understanding*. Yale University Press.
- [7]. Carman, J. B., & Narayanan, V. (1989). *The Tamil Veda: Piḷḷān's interpretation of the Tiruvāymoḷi*. University of Chicago Press.
- [8]. Chakrabarty, D. (2002). *Habitations of modernity: Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*. University of Chicago Press.
- [9]. Dimock, E. C., Jr. (1989). *The place of the hidden moon: Erotic mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā cult of Bengal*. University of Chicago Press.
- [10]. Dumont, L. (1970). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. University of Chicago Press.
- [11]. Fuller, C. J. (2003). *The renewal of the priesthood: Modernity and traditionalism in a South Indian temple*. Princeton University Press.
- [12]. Hardy, F. (1983). *Viraha-Bhakti: The early history of Kṛṣṇa devotion in South India*. Oxford University Press.
- [13]. Hausner, S. L. (2007). *Wandering with sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*. Indiana University Press.
- [14]. Hawley, J. S. (2015). *A storm of songs: India and the idea of the Bhakti movement*. Harvard University Press.
- [15]. Jaffrelot, C. (2007). *Hindu nationalism: A reader*. Princeton University Press.
- [16]. Lorenzen, D. N. (1995). *Bhakti religion in North India: Community identity and political action*. State University of New York Press.
- [17]. Lutgendorf, P. (1991). *The life of a text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*. University of California Press.
- [18]. Mines, M. (2005). *Public faces, private voices: Community and individuality in South India*. University of California Press.
- [19]. Nanda, M. (2009). *The God market: How globalization is making India more Hindu*. Random House India.
- [20]. Rey, T. (2014). *Bourdieu on religion: Imposing faith and legitimacy*. Equinox Publishing.
- [21]. Stewart, T. K. (2008). *The final word: The Caitanya Caritāmṛta and the grammar of religious tradition*. Oxford University Press.
- [22]. Weber, M. (1963). *The sociology of religion* (E. Fischoff, Trans.). Beacon Press.