



Ethnography and grounded theory in the study of ascetic communities: A comparative methodological analysis

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Abstract

Ascetic communities occupy a distinctive yet understudied position within the sociology of religion. Whether located in monastic institutions, akharas, pilgrimage centres or dispersed spiritual networks, these communities embody complex intersections of renunciation, ritual discipline, authority, mobility and social organization. In the Indian context especially, ascetic traditions like Ramanandi, Shaiva, Naga, Kabirpanthi, Jain and Buddhist monastic orders continue to shape religious culture while simultaneously adapting to urbanization, media expansion, institutionalization, and other changing forms of public religiosity. Despite their sociological importance, the study of ascetic groups presents significant methodological difficulties arising from issues of access, secrecy, symbolic communication, fluid identities and the tension between insider experience and outsider interpretation. Against this background, the present paper comparatively examines the suitability of ethnography and grounded theory for the study of ascetic communities. This paper argues that ethnography remains indispensable for understanding the lived world of asceticism through participant observation, immersion and contextual interpretation whereas grounded theory offers a more systematic framework for generating conceptual categories and theoretical explanations emerging from field data. The paper further evaluates the applicability of both methodologies in the study of single sectarian traditions as well as comparative multi-sect research. Drawing upon qualitative methodological debates in sociology and anthropology, the study ultimately suggests that an integrated methodological orientation combining ethnographic depth with grounded theoretical analysis provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding contemporary ascetic formations.

Keywords: Asceticism, ethnography, grounded theory, sociology of religion, ascetic communities, participant observation, comparative methodology

Introduction

The sociology and anthropology of religion have undergone significant transformation over the past century gradually shifting from the exclusive study of belief systems and institutional religion toward the examination of lived religious practices, embodied spirituality, ritual performances and everyday forms of religiosity. Early sociological thinkers such as Émile Durkheim and Max Weber approached religion as a fundamental social institution shaping collective consciousness, moral order, authority and social action (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Weber, 1922/1978) [4, 15]. Anthropological approaches later expanded this framework by emphasizing ritual symbolism, local meanings, experiential dimensions of sacred life etc. particularly through ethnographic engagement with communities that had previously remained outside formal institutional analysis. Within this broader intellectual transition, ascetic and monastic traditions increasingly emerged as important subjects of sociological and anthropological inquiry because they occupy a paradoxical position in society: although seemingly detached from worldly life, ascetics remain deeply entangled with social, cultural, economic, and political processes. The growing academic interest in asceticism is also connected to wider debates concerning modernity, identity, religious revivalism and the transformation of sacred authority in contemporary societies. Ascetics are no longer studied merely as isolated spiritual practitioners or mystical figures removed from ordinary life; rather, they are increasingly understood as actors situated within complex institutional, symbolic and

political networks. Scholars have shown that ascetic communities often participate in religious mobilization, pilgrimage economies, caste negotiations, educational activities, media production and public religious discourse (Burghart, 1983; Hausner, 2007) [1, 8]. In many cases, ascetic institutions function simultaneously as spiritual centres, social organizations, custodians of tradition, sites of power (Mitra, 2025) [10]. This layered nature of ascetic life has generated methodological interest because such communities cannot easily be studied through standardized quantitative approaches alone. Their practices, meanings, silences, hierarchies and symbolic systems require interpretive and immersive forms of qualitative inquiry.

Ascetic Communities in Indian Context

India possesses one of the world's oldest and most diverse ascetic traditions shaped through Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religious cultures. Vaishnav ascetics, especially the Ramanandi sect which emerged as influential devotional monastic orders with extensive networks of maths, akharas and pilgrimage institutions emphasizing devotion to Rama (Lorenzen, 1995; Mitra, 2025) [9, 10]. Shaiva traditions, including the Dashanami order associated with Adi Shankaracharya, institutionalized disciplined renunciatory practices while Naga sadhus became known for militant asceticism and strong sectarian organization. Kabirpanthi traditions challenged ritual orthodoxy and caste hierarchy through devotional renunciation. Jain and Buddhist monastic communities developed rigorous systems of discipline, non-violence, and organized sangha life.

Contemporary India has also witnessed neo-spiritual ascetic formations linked with media culture, yoga institutions, and transnational religious movements. Centres such as Varanasi and the Kumbh Mela continue to function as major sites of ascetic interaction, pilgrimage and religious authority.

Research Problem

The study of ascetic communities presents significant methodological challenges due to ritual secrecy, symbolic communication, hierarchical authority and strong insider-outsider boundaries. Access to doctrinal knowledge, initiation practices and everyday institutional life often remains restricted for external researchers. Moreover, ascetic identities are shaped by sectarian affiliation, caste, lineage, gender and regional culture making them socially fluid rather than fixed. Contemporary ascetics also negotiate complex relationships between renunciation and public engagement through institutional management, media participation and political involvement etc. These layered realities raise an important methodological question regarding whether ethnography or grounded theory provides a more suitable qualitative framework for studying ascetic life.

Research Questions

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does ethnography contribute to the sociological study of ascetic communities?
2. In what ways does grounded theory differ methodologically from ethnographic inquiry?
3. Which methodology appears more suitable for single-sect and comparative multi-sect studies?
4. To what extent can ethnography and grounded theory be integrated within ascetic research?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To examine the role of ethnographic methodology in the study of ascetic communities.
- To analyze grounded theory as a qualitative methodological framework within the sociology of religion.
- To compare the strengths and limitations of ethnography and grounded theory in ascetic studies.
- To propose a suitable methodological framework for researching ascetic communities in contemporary society.

Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to the sociology of religion by addressing an area that remains methodologically underexplored despite the historical and cultural significance of ascetic traditions. By comparatively examining ethnography and grounded theory, this paper also contributes to broader debates within qualitative methodology concerning interpretation, reflexivity, theory generation and field engagement. Furthermore, the study holds relevance for future research on sectarian identities, monastic institutions, pilgrimage networks, religious authority and contemporary transformations in spiritual life. In a context where ascetic communities are increasingly interacting with media technologies, political structures, urban institutions and global religious movements,

methodological clarity becomes essential for producing sociologically grounded and analytically rigorous research.

Conceptualizing Ascetic Communities: Sociological Perspectives

1. Meaning and Concept of Asceticism

Asceticism occupies an important place in the sociological understanding of religion particularly within traditions where renunciation functions as a source of spiritual authority and moral discipline. It generally refers to practices of self-restraint, bodily control, austerity, celibacy and withdrawal from material attachment pursued for spiritual realization or moral purification. Sociologically, however, asceticism extends beyond individual spirituality and operates as a socially organized and culturally meaningful way of life (Weber, 1978) ^[15]. Renunciation often involves distancing oneself from worldly ambition, family obligations, and sensual pleasure, yet ascetics rarely remain isolated from society. They continue to participate in ritual leadership, pilgrimage networks, teaching traditions and institutional structures etc. This creates a complex relationship between withdrawal and social engagement. Asceticism therefore represents both an embodied discipline and a collective social institution where practices such as fasting, silence, ritual observance, austerity communicate symbolic meanings related to purity, legitimacy, discipline and sacred authority.

2. Characteristics of Ascetic Communities

Ascetic communities across India differ by sect, region, lineage and ritual style, though certain features appear again and again in most traditions. Celibacy remains one of the clearest markers of ascetic identity because it represents control over bodily desire and emotional attachment. It matters deeply. In many monastic orders, restraint over food, sleep, sexuality and comfort is linked with spiritual discipline and ritual purity. Practices such as fasting, barefoot travel, prolonged meditation, silence and minimal consumption are often treated as ways of reshaping the self through bodily regulation rather than mere religious performance. Daily life inside monasteries, maths and akharas is usually organized through strict ritual routines involving prayer, recitation, scriptural study, service, communal observance, and these repetitive practices slowly create a shared moral atmosphere that keeps institutional continuity alive across generations. The Guru-Shishya relationship occupies a central place here. Authority is transmitted through initiation, lineage memory and embodied teaching, not simply through written doctrine or formal office. Symbols matter constantly. Clothing, bodily marks, hairstyles, ritual objects, and sectarian insignia communicate status, affiliation and spiritual legitimacy. Yet hierarchy continues inside many ascetic groups despite ideals of renunciation and equality, often shaped by lineage prestige, caste background, ritual authority and access to institutional resources (Dumont, 1980) ^[3]. Mobility also shapes ascetic life strongly, especially through pilgrimage circuits and gatherings like the Kumbh Mela where sectarian interaction becomes publicly visible.

3. Ascetic Communities as Social Institutions

Ascetic communities are usually imagined as spaces of withdrawal from worldly life, yet in practice many of them function as organized social institutions with their own

systems of authority, administration, discipline and resource management. Maths and akharas across India do far more than provide spiritual shelter. They regulate initiation, maintain sectarian traditions, manage property, organize festivals, supervise disciples, and preserve lineage continuity across generations. Some institutions control temples, pilgrimage centres, educational trusts, gaushalas or charitable services, and because of this their social presence extends well beyond ritual life alone. Authority inside these institutions comes from different sources. Scriptural knowledge matters but so do charisma, lineage affiliation, ritual competence, public reputation and the perceived spiritual power of a guru or mahant. Over time, personal charisma often becomes institutional authority especially when disciples, donors, sectarian networks begin protecting and expanding a monastic centre. Economic support is equally important, though often discussed quietly. Donations, pilgrimage economies, temple revenues, land ownership and patronage from wealthy devotees help sustain everyday institutional functioning. This reality complicates the older image of asceticism as fully detached from material structures. Patronage keeps these institutions socially alive. Devotees seek blessings, legitimacy, ritual guidance, healing or moral direction while ascetic communities depend on public support for survival and expansion. Their legitimacy is never fixed. It is shaped continuously through ritual performance, public visibility, sectarian reputation and competition for symbolic authority within the wider religious field.

4. Classical Sociological Perspectives

Classical sociological theory provides important conceptual tools for understanding ascetic communities. Max Weber interpreted asceticism as a form of disciplined ethical orientation linked with religious worldviews and systems of authority. His discussion of charisma remains especially significant for the study of ascetic leaders whose legitimacy often depends upon perceived spiritual power, self-discipline, and extraordinary religious capacity (Weber, 1978) ^[15]. Weber also emphasized the relationship between ascetic ethics and social action, arguing that religious discipline may shape economic behaviour, institutional organization, and moral conduct. Émile Durkheim approached religion primarily through its collective and ritual dimensions. His concept of collective consciousness helps explain how communal rituals within ascetic communities generate solidarity, moral integration and shared symbolic meaning (Durkheim, 1995) ^[4]. Ritual practices in monasteries, akharas, and pilgrimage settings reinforce social cohesion while simultaneously distinguishing sacred space from ordinary social existence. Louis Dumont contributed significantly to the understanding of hierarchy and purity within Indian social organization. His analysis of homo hierarchicus remains relevant for examining the symbolic distinctions, ritual status systems and purity based hierarchies operating within ascetic traditions (Dumont, 1980) ^[3]. Although ascetic communities may reject worldly identity, they often reproduce symbolic distinctions associated with ritual rank and sectarian prestige. Victor Turner introduced the concepts of liminality and communitas, both of which are particularly useful for understanding pilgrimage based ascetic interactions. Turner argued that ritual transitions create liminal spaces where ordinary social structures may temporarily weaken

producing intense forms of collective experience and symbolic unity (Turner, 1969) ^[14]. Large religious gatherings involving ascetics often display such dynamics while simultaneously reproducing institutional hierarchy and sectarian competition.

5. Contemporary Transformations in Asceticism

Ascetic traditions in contemporary society are undergoing important transformations shaped by urbanization, globalization, and technological change and shifting forms of religious authority. Urban centres such as Varanasi increasingly host large institutionalized monastic networks integrated into tourism, education, media activity and political discourse. Media technologies and digital religion have significantly altered the visibility of ascetic communities. Many contemporary ascetics maintain online platforms, livestream rituals, circulate spiritual teachings through social media and participate in digitally mediated religious networks.

Commercialization has also influenced ascetic institutions through expanding pilgrimage economies, branded spirituality, yoga industries and transnational religious markets. Simultaneously, many ascetic organizations participate more openly in political mobilization, religious nationalism, public campaigns concerning morality and cultural identity. Gender inclusion represents another area of transformation, as women ascetics and female monastic leaders increasingly gain visibility within religious institutions that were historically male dominated. Institutional expansion through educational trusts, hospitals, charitable activities and international networks further demonstrates that contemporary asceticism cannot be understood solely through older images of isolated renunciation. Rather, ascetic communities continue to adapt dynamically while negotiating tensions between spiritual discipline, institutional growth, and public engagement.

Ethnographic Methodology and the Study of Ascetic Communities

1. Meaning and Nature of Ethnography

Ethnography emerged historically within anthropology as a method concerned with the close observation and interpretive understanding of human life within its natural social setting. Unlike survey based or experimentally structured approaches, ethnography seeks to understand how individuals and communities construct meaning within everyday practices, rituals, interactions and institutional arrangements. The method developed most prominently during the early twentieth century when anthropologists began undertaking long term fieldwork among communities previously studied through secondary accounts or colonial records. Ethnography thus represented a methodological shift from distant description toward immersive engagement with lived social realities.

The foundational influence of Bronisław Malinowski remains central in this regard. Through his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski argued that social life could only be understood through sustained residence within the community being studied, active participation in daily activities and detailed observation of ordinary practices (Malinowski, 1922) ^[11]. His emphasis on 'being there' fundamentally transformed qualitative inquiry. Ethnography after Malinowski increasingly came to involve prolonged field immersion, participant observation and the systematic

recording of social interaction. Rather than treating culture as an abstract system of beliefs alone, ethnographers attempted to understand how meaning operates through concrete practices, gestures, spatial arrangements, ritual actions and social relations.

Within the sociology and anthropology of religion, ethnography gained particular importance because religious life often cannot be adequately understood through doctrinal texts or institutional records alone. Rituals, bodily practices, emotional experiences, silence, sacred performance and symbolic interaction require close engagement with the social worlds in which they unfold. Ascetic communities especially present realities that are experiential rather than merely conceptual. The significance of bodily discipline, devotional intimacy, ritual repetition and spiritual hierarchy frequently becomes visible only through long term field presence.

The later work of Clifford Geertz further deepened ethnographic interpretation through the concept of 'thick description.' Geertz argued that ethnography should move beyond surface observation to interpret the layered meanings embedded within cultural practices (Geertz, 1973) [5]. A ritual gesture, a bodily mark, a silence during prayer or the arrangement of space within an akhara may appear insignificant externally yet carry profound symbolic meaning within the internal logic of the community. Ethnography therefore does not simply document behaviour; it attempts to interpret the webs of meaning through which behaviour becomes socially intelligible. In the context of ascetic communities, ethnography becomes particularly valuable because ascetic life is structured through symbolic discipline, ritual embodiment, spatial organization and forms of sacred interaction that cannot easily be separated from the environments in which they occur. The ethnographer enters not merely a field site but an entire moral and symbolic universe shaped by hierarchy, devotion, renunciation, memory and institutional tradition.

2. Key Features of Ethnography

One of the defining features of ethnography is long term immersion within the social setting under study. Ethnographic knowledge develops gradually through repeated interaction, observation, participation and familiarity with local routines. In studies of ascetic communities, this long term engagement becomes especially important because trust, access and informal communication often emerge slowly. Ritual practices, internal hierarchies, sectarian tensions and embodied routines may remain inaccessible during brief visits or formal interviews. Sustained presence allows the researcher to move beyond staged performances and observe the rhythms of everyday ascetic life. Ethnography also emphasizes the insider perspective, often described through the distinction between emic and etic understanding. Rather than imposing external categories prematurely, the ethnographer attempts to understand how participants themselves interpret their practices, identities and experiences. In ascetic settings, categories such as renunciation, purity, devotion, detachment or spiritual discipline may possess meanings that differ significantly from secular sociological assumptions. Ethnography therefore prioritizes interpretive sensitivity toward local conceptual worlds.

Naturalistic observation constitutes another important feature of ethnographic inquiry. Social life is studied within

its ordinary environment rather than through artificially controlled settings. For ascetic studies, this may involve observing ritual preparation before dawn, communal meals within monasteries, interactions between gurus and disciples, pilgrimage movement, donation practices or the organization of temporary camps during religious gatherings. Such observation helps reveal how institutional structures and symbolic practices operate within lived contexts. Contextual interpretation further distinguishes ethnography from purely descriptive observation. Actions are understood in relation to broader cultural, historical and institutional settings. A practice such as ritual fasting, for example, may simultaneously communicate spiritual discipline, sectarian identity, symbolic purity and institutional legitimacy. Ethnography attempts to situate such practices within wider systems of meaning rather than isolating them as individual behaviour.

Reflexivity has also become increasingly important within contemporary ethnographic methodology. Researchers now acknowledge that ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the positionality, background, assumptions and interactions of the observer. In studies involving ascetic communities, reflexivity becomes particularly necessary because researchers may encounter strong emotional responses ranging from reverence and fascination to skepticism or discomfort. The ethnographer must therefore continuously examine how access, interpretation, language, caste position, gender, and institutional affiliation shape the production of knowledge.

3. Methods Used in Ethnographic Study of Ascetics

Participant observation remains the central method in ethnographic studies of ascetic communities because much of ascetic life becomes meaningful only through long term presence within the field. Researchers often spend extended periods inside monasteries, maths, akharas, pilgrimage camps or travelling groups, gradually observing ritual behaviour, institutional routines, patterns of discipline and informal structures of authority that may not appear in formal interviews alone. Small interactions matter deeply here. A disciple's bodily posture before a guru, silence during ritual preparation, seating arrangements during communal meals or ordinary conversations held after evening prayer frequently reveal subtle hierarchies and emotional relationships operating within ascetic life. Informal interaction therefore becomes extremely important because discussions during travel, shared tea, and preparation for festivals or casual gatherings often produce reflections on renunciation, sectarian conflict, spiritual struggle, or institutional politics that structured questioning may fail to uncover. Life history interviews are equally valuable since many ascetics narrate their identities through stories of pilgrimage, suffering, initiation, family separation, revelation or moral transformation, and these narratives usually connect personal experience with caste background, regional culture, education and sectarian belonging in complicated ways. Ritual observation also plays a major role because initiation ceremonies, communal worship, sectarian processions and public performances during the Kumbh Mela allow the ethnographer to examine how sacred authority and collective identity are enacted publicly. Visual ethnography has become increasingly useful as well, particularly for documenting clothing styles, bodily markings, ritual objects, spatial arrangements and symbolic

performances that textual description alone may overlook. Throughout the research process, detailed field notes remain essential because many interactions occur unexpectedly and some of the most meaningful observations disappear quickly if they are not recorded carefully.

4. Suitability of Ethnography for Ascetic Studies

Ethnography is highly suitable for studying ascetic communities because ascetic life is lived through practice, routine, bodily discipline and symbolic interaction rather than through doctrine alone. Many aspects of renunciation cannot be understood properly from outside observation or fixed questionnaires. Practices such as fasting, silence, celibacy, meditation and ritual austerity carry meanings that become visible only within everyday social settings. Ethnographic immersion allows the researcher to see how these practices shape relationships, discipline behaviour and create moral authority inside monastic life. This matters a lot. The method is also useful because ascetic communities communicate meaning through symbols and everyday actions that outsiders may easily overlook. The arrangement of space inside an akhara, the order in which food is served, the bodily posture of disciples before a guru or the careful maintenance of ritual purity all reflect systems of hierarchy, legitimacy and sectarian identity. Such things rarely appear clearly in formal interviews. They emerge slowly through observation and repeated interaction. Ethnography also helps reveal the ordinary side of ascetic existence which formal theological texts often ignore. Ascetics deal with institutional responsibilities, conflicts over authority, emotional attachment to disciples, financial pressures and negotiation with devotees while still attempting to maintain ideals of renunciation. The field reality is rarely simple. Long term engagement allows the researcher to understand how spiritual ideals are adjusted within everyday institutional life. Silence itself becomes meaningful in many ascetic settings. Controlled speech, ritual repetition, bodily gestures and moments of stillness often communicate authority and discipline more strongly than direct explanation. These experiences are difficult to capture through detached analytical methods because they depend heavily on atmosphere and shared symbolic understanding. Ethnographic presence allows the researcher to experience how sacred spaces are socially produced and emotionally inhabited over time. The emotional dimensions of ascetic life also become clearer through immersive fieldwork. Relationships between gurus and disciples, feelings of devotion, anxiety regarding discipline, sectarian pride or loyalty toward a monastic institution shape everyday interaction in important ways. Sacred places such as monasteries, caves, ghats and pilgrimage camps carry emotional weight too, and that meaning usually unfolds gradually through continued presence within the field rather than through brief observation alone.

5. Ethnographic Studies on Ascetic Communities

Several important ethnographic studies have contributed substantially to the understanding of ascetic communities. Louis Dumont examined renunciation and hierarchy within Indian civilization emphasizing the relationship between purity, status and religious withdrawal (Dumont, 1980) [3]. Later ethnographic works moved beyond structural analysis toward lived religious experience and institutional practice. Sondra Hausner's study of wandering ascetics in the

Himalayan region remains particularly significant for understanding mobility, pilgrimage and everyday ascetic interaction (Hausner, 2007) [8]. Her work demonstrates how renunciation is continuously negotiated through travel, institutional affiliation and social encounter. Daniel Gold's ethnographic engagement with devotional traditions similarly explored the relationship between spirituality, locality, and religious identity (Gold, 1987) [7]. Studies on akharas and monastic orders have also revealed the institutional and political dimensions of asceticism. Ethnographic research conducted during the Kumbh Mela has highlighted how sectarian identity, ritual authority, public spectacle and organizational hierarchy intersect within large scale pilgrimage settings. Such works collectively demonstrate that ascetic communities are not isolated remnants of tradition but dynamic social formations shaped by history, economy, ritual performance and institutional negotiation.

6. Strengths of Ethnography

The greatest strength of ethnography lies in its experiential depth. Through prolonged immersion and sustained interaction, ethnography provides access to dimensions of social life that remain inaccessible through distant observation. In ascetic studies, this depth becomes essential because renunciation, devotion, ritual discipline and sacred authority are lived realities rather than abstract concepts alone. Ethnography also enables nuanced cultural understanding by situating practices within their local symbolic and historical contexts. Rather than reducing asceticism to universal categories, ethnography reveals the diversity of meanings operating within different sectarian traditions and institutional environments. Rich narrative detail further strengthens ethnographic analysis by preserving complexity, contradiction and ambiguity within lived experience. Another important strength is sensitivity to context. Ascetic communities are internally diverse and shaped by regional culture, institutional history, caste dynamics, gender relations and changing political conditions. Ethnography allows the researcher to examine how these factors interact within specific social settings rather than imposing overly generalized conclusions.

7. Limitations of Ethnography

Despite its strengths, ethnography also faces important limitations. Subjectivity remains a persistent concern because ethnographic interpretation is deeply influenced by the researcher's positionality, emotional engagement and field relationships. In studies involving ascetic communities, researchers may become overly sympathetic toward participants or unconsciously romanticize spiritual practices. Over identification with the community represents another methodological risk. Prolonged immersion may blur analytical distance making critical interpretation more difficult. Limited generalization also poses challenges because ethnographic studies typically focus on specific communities or localized settings rather than statistically representative populations. Ethical challenges frequently arise in ascetic research as well. Questions concerning consent, ritual secrecy, sacred knowledge and representation require careful negotiation. Some practices may be considered inappropriate for public documentation while internal conflicts or institutional politics may create tensions regarding confidentiality. Access itself often remains

difficult because many ascetic communities maintain guarded boundaries toward outsiders, particularly in relation to initiation rituals, internal hierarchy, and sectarian disputes.

Grounded Theory and the Study of Ascetic Communities

1. Meaning and Development of Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory emerged during the mid twentieth century as a significant methodological intervention within qualitative sociology particularly in response to concerns that social research had become excessively dependent upon rigid theoretical frameworks detached from lived social realities. Developed primarily by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory sought to establish a systematic qualitative methodology through which theory could emerge inductively from empirical data rather than being imposed upon it beforehand (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) ^[6]. The approach represented an important departure from conventional deductive research models where hypotheses derived from pre existing theories are tested against collected evidence. Instead, grounded theory begins with social processes, interactions, and experiences observed within the field itself.

At its core, grounded theory is based upon the assumption that social reality is dynamic, processual and continuously constructed through interaction. The task of the researcher is therefore not merely to describe social life but to identify patterns, categories, relationships and processes emerging from empirical observation. Theory in grounded research develops gradually through sustained engagement with data, constant comparison, coding, conceptual abstraction and interpretive refinement. This inductive orientation makes grounded theory particularly relevant for fields where existing conceptual frameworks remain inadequate or where social transformations are rapidly altering previously stable categories. Within the sociology of religion, grounded theory gained importance because many religious practices and identities cannot easily be explained through static doctrinal models or universalized theoretical assumptions. Ascetic communities especially present forms of social life shaped by fluidity, symbolic negotiation, and institutional transformation and changing relationships with modernity. Traditional understandings of renunciation, detachment, authority and spiritual discipline are increasingly intersecting with urbanization, media visibility, institutional expansion, economic networks. Grounded theory offers methodological flexibility for examining these evolving realities without prematurely reducing them to fixed conceptual schemes.

The contribution of Glaser and Strauss was particularly significant because they attempted to formalize qualitative inquiry without sacrificing interpretive openness. Earlier qualitative research had often been criticized for lacking methodological rigor or systematic analytical procedure. Grounded theory responded to this criticism by introducing structured analytical techniques such as coding, theoretical sampling, constant comparison and memo writing while still preserving sensitivity to social context and lived experience. Rather than treating data collection and analysis as separate stages, grounded theory conceptualizes them as interconnected and simultaneous processes through which emerging concepts guide further inquiry. For the study of ascetic communities, grounded theory becomes relevant because many dimensions of contemporary asceticism

remain insufficiently theorized. Questions concerning digital spirituality, caste mobility within monastic orders, commercialization of pilgrimage, changing gender roles or institutional transformations cannot always be adequately understood through classical models alone. Grounded theory enables the researcher to generate concepts emerging directly from field engagement with ascetics, disciples, ritual spaces and institutional networks.

2. Major Features of Grounded Theory

One of the defining characteristics of grounded theory is the simultaneous process of data collection and analysis. Unlike linear research models where data are first collected and later interpreted, grounded theory requires continuous interaction between fieldwork and conceptual development. Initial observations and interviews generate preliminary categories which then shape subsequent data collection. In ascetic research, early interactions within monasteries or pilgrimage settings may reveal emerging themes such as ritual hierarchy, institutional authority, or tensions between renunciation and organizational expansion. These themes subsequently guide further interviews, observations, and comparative analysis.

Coding represents another central feature of grounded theory methodology. Coding involves systematically organizing qualitative data into conceptual categories that capture recurring patterns, meanings or social processes. Through coding, fragmented observations gradually become analytically meaningful. In studies of ascetic communities, codes may emerge around themes such as 'discipline,' 'initiation,' 'ritual authority,' 'institutional legitimacy,' 'pilgrimage identity,' or 'negotiated detachment.' These categories are not fixed in advance but develop through repeated engagement with empirical material. The method of constant comparison further distinguishes grounded theory from more descriptive qualitative approaches. Every new piece of data is continuously compared with previously collected material in order to refine categories, identify variation and examine relationships between concepts. An interview with a wandering sadhu, for example, may be compared with observations from a monastery based ascetic order to understand differing interpretations of renunciation and institutional belonging. Through such comparison grounded theory gradually moves from isolated description toward conceptual explanation.

Theoretical sampling constitutes another important methodological principle. Participants and field sites are selected not through statistical representativeness but according to their relevance for developing emerging theoretical categories. If early findings suggest that caste background significantly shapes ascetic authority, the researcher may intentionally seek participants from diverse caste locations and sectarian traditions to deepen analytical understanding. Data collection therefore remains flexible and conceptually guided rather than predetermined. Memo writing also plays a crucial role within grounded theory. Memos function as analytical reflections through which researcher's record conceptual insights, interpretive questions, theoretical connections and emerging hypotheses during fieldwork. In studies of ascetic communities, memos may document reflections on ritual symbolism, emotional interaction, institutional power or contradictions between doctrinal ideals and everyday practice. These analytical notes eventually contribute to the development of broader

conceptual frameworks. The principle of saturation marks the point at which further data collection no longer generates substantially new conceptual insights. Saturation does not imply that every aspect of social life has been fully understood; rather, it indicates that core categories have become sufficiently developed and analytically stable. In grounded studies of asceticism, saturation may occur when recurring themes concerning authority, renunciation, institutional discipline or symbolic identity begin to repeat across multiple observations and interviews.

3. Types of Grounded Theory

Over time, grounded theory evolved into multiple methodological traditions reflecting different philosophical assumptions and analytical orientations. The earliest form, often referred to as Classical Grounded Theory remained closely associated with the work of Barney Glaser. Glaser emphasized theoretical emergence and argued that researchers should avoid imposing excessive analytical structure upon data. In this version, concepts are expected to emerge organically through open coding and sustained comparison. Classical grounded theory tends to prioritize analytical flexibility and caution against forcing data into rigid interpretive categories. Straussian Grounded Theory, developed primarily through the later work of Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin introduced a more systematic and procedural approach to analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)^[13]. This version emphasized structured coding stages such as open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Straussian grounded theory attempts to map relationships between categories more explicitly and is often considered methodologically more organized. Critics, however, argue that excessive proceduralization risks constraining interpretive openness.

A later development emerged through Constructivist Grounded Theory associated with Kathy Charmaz. Charmaz challenged the assumption that theories simply emerge objectively from data and instead emphasized the co-constructed nature of qualitative knowledge (Charmaz, 2006)^[2]. According to this perspective, researchers actively participate in the production of meaning through their interactions, interpretations, positionality and theoretical sensitivity. Constructivist grounded theory is particularly relevant for religious and ascetic studies because field relationships, symbolic interpretation and emotional interaction significantly shape the research process itself. For studies involving ascetic communities, constructivist approaches often prove especially useful because meanings associated with spirituality, renunciation, devotion and authority are relationally negotiated rather than transparently observable. The researcher's own presence, cultural background and interpretive framework inevitably influence access and analysis.

4. Application of Grounded Theory in Ascetic Studies

Grounded theory offers considerable analytical potential for the study of contemporary ascetic communities because many dimensions of modern ascetic life remain socially fluid and theoretically underexplored. Traditional sociological models often portray asceticism primarily in terms of withdrawal, discipline and spiritual renunciation. However, grounded field research increasingly reveals more complex realities involving negotiation, adaptation, institutionalization and symbolic reinvention. One important

area concerns the changing meanings of renunciation. Grounded inquiry may reveal that renunciation is not always understood as complete rejection of worldly engagement. Some ascetics maintain digital platforms, manage educational institutions, supervise economic networks or participate in media discourse while simultaneously presenting themselves as renunciants. Such findings may lead to concepts such as 'negotiated renunciation' or 'institutional asceticism.'

Grounded theory is also useful for examining caste negotiations within ascetic orders. Although many sectarian traditions formally reject caste distinctions, field data may reveal subtle hierarchies operating through lineage prestige, ritual access or institutional authority. These dynamics often remain hidden beneath official discourse and become visible only through sustained comparative analysis. The emergence of digital asceticism constitutes another important area of inquiry. Contemporary ascetics increasingly use social media, livestreamed rituals, online teaching platforms and digital networks to maintain visibility and attract followers. Grounded analysis can help conceptualize how spiritual authority is being reconfigured within technologically mediated environments. Similarly, grounded theory allows researchers to examine gender transformation within ascetic institutions. Women ascetics and female monastic leaders are gaining greater visibility in many traditions challenging historically male dominated structures of authority. Field based conceptualization may reveal changing patterns of legitimacy, participation and symbolic recognition. Grounded approaches are equally valuable for understanding institutional power and commercialization. Many ascetic organizations now operate through extensive economic networks involving pilgrimage tourism, donations, property management, religious branding and charitable institutions. Rather than treating commercialization simply as corruption or decline, grounded theory enables more nuanced analysis of how economic activity intersects with spiritual legitimacy and organizational survival.

5. Coding in Ascetic Research

Coding in grounded studies of ascetic communities involves transforming empirical observations into conceptual categories capable of explaining broader social processes. Initial open coding may identify recurring themes such as 'spiritual discipline,' 'ritual obligation,' 'guru authority,' 'pilgrimage identity,' or 'institutional hierarchy.' These categories emerge through repeated engagement with interviews, field notes, conversations and ritual observation. As analysis develops, broader conceptual relationships begin to appear. The category 'guru authority,' for example, may connect with initiation practices, institutional succession, emotional devotion and symbolic legitimacy. Similarly, 'negotiated renunciation' may emerge through observations revealing how ascetics balance spiritual ideals with organizational management or public visibility. The concept of 'ritual hierarchy' may develop from repeated patterns concerning seating arrangements, ritual access, food distribution or initiation rank within monasteries and akharas. 'Symbolic capital,' drawing conceptually from Pierre Bourdieu, may help explain how ascetics accumulate prestige through discipline, austerity, scriptural knowledge or public recognition. Coding therefore gradually moves from descriptive observation toward conceptual abstraction and theoretical integration.

6. Strengths of Grounded Theory

One of the greatest strengths of grounded theory lies in its capacity for theory generation. Rather than merely applying pre existing frameworks grounded research allows sociological concepts to emerge from empirical engagement with lived reality. This becomes particularly important in studies of contemporary asceticism where rapid institutional and cultural transformations may exceed older explanatory models. Grounded theory also encourages conceptual innovation. New categories and interpretive frameworks may develop through field analysis enabling researchers to theorize emerging forms of spirituality, authority, and institutional organization. Its methodological flexibility allows researchers to adapt inquiry according to evolving field realities rather than remaining confined within rigid research designs. Another important strength is analytical depth. Through constant comparison and systematic coding, grounded theory moves beyond surface description toward explanation of social processes and relationships. This analytical orientation helps reveal how ascetic identities, institutional hierarchies and symbolic practices are continuously produced and negotiated.

7. Limitations of Grounded Theory

Despite its strengths, grounded theory also faces several limitations when applied to ascetic studies. One major criticism concerns excessive fragmentation. The process of coding may divide complex lived experiences into isolated conceptual units potentially weakening the holistic texture of religious life. Ritual atmosphere, emotional intensity, sacred silence or embodied spirituality may resist reduction into analytical categories. Grounded theory may also risk reducing lived experience to conceptual abstraction. Ascetic practices are often deeply affective, symbolic and experiential; excessive emphasis upon coding and theoretical construction can sometimes distance analysis from the phenomenological richness of religious life. Analytical complexity represents another challenge. Grounded theory requires continuous comparison, conceptual refinement and methodological sensitivity making it demanding for researchers handling large amounts of qualitative data. The process is also highly time intensive because data collection, coding, memo writing and theoretical development occur simultaneously over extended periods. Finally, grounded theory does not eliminate interpretive subjectivity. Categories do not emerge automatically from data; they are shaped by researcher decisions, theoretical sensitivity, language and analytical perspective. Reflexive awareness therefore remains essential, particularly in studies involving spirituality, sacred authority, and culturally embedded forms of ascetic life.

Comparative Analysis of Ethnography and Grounded Theory

1. Philosophical Foundations

Although ethnography and grounded theory are both located within the broader field of qualitative inquiry, they emerge from somewhat different philosophical orientations and methodological priorities. Ethnography is rooted primarily in interpretivist traditions that emphasize meaning, lived experience, symbolic interaction and cultural understanding. Influenced by phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and interpretive anthropology, ethnography assumes that social

reality cannot be understood independently of the meanings actors attach to their practices and relationships (Geertz, 1973) ^[5]. The ethnographer therefore attempts to enter the symbolic world of participants and interpret social life from within its cultural context. Grounded theory, while also associated with interpretive sociology, places greater emphasis upon inductive analytical development and conceptual abstraction. Its central concern is not only understanding meaning but generating explanatory categories and theoretical propositions from empirical data. Whereas ethnography often privileges immersion and contextual interpretation, grounded theory prioritizes systematic comparison, coding and analytical refinement (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) ^[6]. The difference is subtle but important. Ethnography seeks to understand how a world is lived; grounded theory seeks to explain the processes through which that world is socially organized and reproduced.

This distinction may also be understood as the difference between meaning and conceptualization. Ethnographic inquiry attempts to remain close to the texture of lived experience. It values narrative depth, symbolic nuance and contextual richness. Grounded theory, by contrast, gradually moves toward conceptual reduction and analytical categorization. The aim is not merely to document complexity but to identify recurring social patterns capable of theoretical articulation. In the study of ascetic communities, ethnography may focus upon the experiential atmosphere of a monastery, ritual silence during initiation, or emotional devotion between guru and disciple, while grounded theory may ask how authority is constructed, how renunciation is negotiated, or how institutional legitimacy is maintained across contexts. The philosophical distinction also shapes the researcher’s relation to the field. Ethnographers frequently emphasize immersion, relational intimacy and interpretive sensitivity. Grounded theorists, while still engaged with participants, often maintain stronger analytical distance in order to conceptualize emerging processes systematically. Nevertheless, both methodologies share certain assumptions. Each rejects purely positivist notions of detached objectivity, recognizes the importance of context, and treats social reality as dynamic rather than fixed. Both approaches are therefore particularly valuable for studying religious and ascetic communities where symbolic meaning, institutional process, and lived experience remain deeply intertwined.

2. Comparative Methodological Framework

The methodological differences between ethnography and grounded theory become more visible when examined comparatively across research objectives, analytical procedures and epistemological orientation. While both methodologies depend upon qualitative field engagement, they differ significantly in the type of knowledge they seek to produce.

Dimension	Ethnography	Grounded Theory
Objective	Cultural understanding	Theory generation
Nature	Descriptive-interpretive	Analytical-conceptual
Research Design	Immersive	Iterative
Focus	Lived experience	Social processes
Data Analysis	Narrative interpretation	Coding and abstraction
Outcome	Thick description	Emergent theory
Researcher Role	Participant observer	Analytical interpreter

Ethnography is primarily concerned with understanding social worlds in their cultural specificity. The emphasis falls upon detailed observation, contextual interpretation and experiential depth. Knowledge emerges through prolonged engagement with people, practices, spaces and symbolic systems. The final ethnographic account typically presents a 'thick description' of social life that preserves ambiguity, contradiction and contextual complexity (Geertz, 1973) [5]. Grounded theory operates differently. Although it also relies upon field data, its analytical direction is more explicitly conceptual. The researcher continuously compares observations, develops categories, refines conceptual relationships, gradually constructs theoretical explanations. The research process becomes iterative rather than purely immersive because data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. Rather than concluding with descriptive interpretation alone, grounded theory seeks to produce analytically transferable concepts concerning social processes and institutional dynamics. In practical terms, an ethnographic study of an ascetic monastery may describe everyday routines, ritual gestures, sensory environments, symbolic interaction and the moral atmosphere of communal life. A grounded theoretical study of the same institution may instead analyze how authority is negotiated, how hierarchy is reproduced, how discipline is internalized, or how spiritual legitimacy is constructed institutionally. Both forms of knowledge are valuable, yet they differ in orientation and outcome.

3. Suitability for Single-Sect Study

For intensive studies focused upon a single ascetic sect or monastic institution, ethnography appears methodologically more suitable because it allows deeper immersion into the symbolic and experiential universe of the community. Ascetic traditions are rarely reducible to formal doctrine alone. Their social reality is embedded within ritual performance, bodily discipline, oral transmission, emotional attachment, spatial organization and subtle forms of interaction that become intelligible only through sustained field presence. A detailed ethnographic study of the Ramanandi community, for example, would require close engagement with practices of initiation, devotional discipline, guru-disciple relationships, ritual hierarchy, pilgrimage routines and institutional organization within specific maths or akharas. Many aspects of such communities are communicated through gesture, silence, bodily conduct, symbolic performance rather than explicit verbal explanation. Ethnographic immersion enables the researcher to observe these dimensions in their everyday context. Ethnography is particularly effective in capturing what may be described as the internal moral and symbolic universe of ascetic life. The meanings attached to renunciation, ritual purity, service, celibacy or spiritual authority cannot always be translated directly into abstract sociological categories without losing experiential depth. Participant observation allows the researcher to understand how these concepts are embodied within everyday routines and institutional relationships. The immersive nature of ethnography also helps address the insider-outsider tension frequently present in ascetic settings. Trust is often developed gradually through repeated interaction participation in ordinary activities and sensitivity toward institutional norms. In many monastic communities, formal interviews alone reveal little because important knowledge

circulates informally through lived interaction and relational familiarity. Ethnographic engagement therefore provides methodological flexibility necessary for entering socially guarded environments. Furthermore, single sect studies frequently require sensitivity to historical continuity, lineage identity, and localized institutional culture. A Ramanandi monastery in Varanasi, for instance, may possess its own ritual style, organizational history, caste composition and devotional emphasis distinct from other Ramanandi institutions elsewhere. Ethnography allows such contextual specificity to remain visible rather than collapsing diversity into generalized theoretical categories.

4. Suitability for Comparative Multi-Sect Study

While ethnography is highly effective for intensive single-community research, grounded theory becomes particularly useful for comparative studies involving multiple ascetic traditions, institutional settings or changing forms of religiosity. Comparative multi sect research often requires the identification of recurring social processes, institutional patterns, and conceptual relationships across diverse contexts. Grounded theory provides methodological tools for generating such comparative analysis systematically. In studies comparing Shaiva and Vaishnav ascetics, for example, grounded theory enables researchers to examine how different traditions conceptualize renunciation, authority, ritual discipline or institutional legitimacy. Rather than remaining confined to descriptive comparison alone, grounded analysis seeks to identify broader social processes operating across sectarian variation. Concepts such as 'ritual hierarchy,' 'institutional charisma,' 'negotiated detachment,' or 'symbolic authority' may emerge through comparative coding and analysis. Grounded theory also proves useful for comparing urban and rural monastic groups. Ascetic institutions located within metropolitan religious centres often interact differently with media, pilgrimage economies, political organizations and global spiritual networks than smaller rural monasteries. Through constant comparison, grounded theory helps reveal how institutional adaptation, economic management or public visibility shape contemporary ascetic life differently across locations.

Similarly, the contrast between traditional and digitally mediated ascetic communities presents new methodological challenges that grounded theory is particularly equipped to address. Contemporary ascetics increasingly maintain online platforms, conduct livestream rituals, circulate teachings through social media and build transnational followings. Existing theories of renunciation may not adequately explain these developments. Grounded theory allows conceptual categories to emerge from empirical observation rather than forcing contemporary realities into older conceptual frameworks. Comparative grounded research is also advantageous because it facilitates analytical abstraction without entirely abandoning empirical complexity. Through theoretical sampling and constant comparison, researchers can examine how caste, gender, institutional structure, regional culture or technological change influence ascetic communities across multiple settings. Such conceptual flexibility becomes especially important in contemporary religious contexts characterized by rapid transformation and organizational diversification.

5. Methodological Challenges in Both Approaches

Despite their differences, both ethnography and grounded theory confront significant methodological challenges when

applied to ascetic communities. Access remains one of the most persistent difficulties. Many ascetic institutions maintain guarded boundaries regarding internal rituals, organizational politics, lineage succession and sacred knowledge. Researchers may initially encounter suspicion especially when studying communities that value ritual secrecy or spiritual exclusivity. Trust therefore becomes central to the research process. In both methodologies, meaningful data often emerge only after prolonged interaction and relational familiarity. Ascetics may alter behaviour in the presence of outsiders or selectively present idealized versions of institutional life. The researcher must continuously negotiate the tension between participation and observation. Positionality further complicates field engagement. The caste background, gender, language, religious identity, institutional affiliation and personal disposition of the researcher can significantly influence access and interpretation. In ascetic settings especially, the researcher may encounter strong emotional reactions ranging from reverence to skepticism. Reflexive awareness becomes essential in order to prevent uncritical romanticization or dismissive interpretation. Ethical concerns also remain substantial. Questions surrounding informed consent, representation, confidentiality and documentation of sacred practices require careful negotiation. Some rituals may be considered inappropriate for recording while internal disputes or institutional conflicts may involve sensitive information. Both ethnography and grounded theory require ethical sensitivity toward the social and symbolic significance of religious practices. Language presents another challenge because many ascetic traditions rely upon specialized ritual vocabularies, oral traditions, scriptural references, and symbolic expressions that resist direct translation. Misinterpretation becomes possible when researchers impose external conceptual categories without sufficient linguistic and cultural familiarity. Researcher bias similarly affects both methodologies. Ethnography risks over identification with participants due to prolonged immersion whereas grounded theory may produce excessive analytical abstraction detached from lived experience. In studies involving spirituality and renunciation, researchers often carry implicit assumptions concerning authenticity, morality or religious value that shape interpretation unconsciously. Finally, sacred secrecy itself creates methodological tension. Certain dimensions of ascetic life are intentionally concealed, restricted or communicated selectively according to ritual status and institutional hierarchy. Researchers must therefore recognize that complete transparency may neither be possible nor ethically appropriate within sacred communities.

6. Toward an Integrated Methodological Framework

The comparative analysis presented above suggests that neither ethnography nor grounded theory alone is fully sufficient for understanding the complexity of contemporary ascetic communities. Ethnography provides immersion, contextual depth, symbolic sensitivity and experiential understanding while grounded theory contributes analytical rigor, conceptual development and theoretical abstraction. Rather than treating these methodologies as mutually exclusive, a more productive approach may involve their integration. An integrated 'Ethnographic Grounded Approach' would combine prolonged field immersion with systematic conceptual analysis. Ethnographic engagement would allow researchers to enter the lived world of ascetic communities through participant observation, ritual

involvement, informal interaction and contextual interpretation. Simultaneously, grounded theoretical procedures such as coding, constant comparison, memo writing and theoretical sampling would help transform field observations into broader sociological insights. Such an approach appears especially suitable for the study of contemporary asceticism because these communities exist simultaneously as symbolic worlds, institutional organizations, emotional networks, and evolving social formations. Purely descriptive ethnography may struggle to explain broader structural formations while excessively abstract grounded analysis risks losing experiential richness. Their combination therefore offers a more balanced methodological orientation. An Ethnographic Grounded Approach would also help bridge micro-level experience and macro-level social process. Ritual gestures, bodily discipline, emotional devotion, pilgrimage movement, institutional hierarchy, caste negotiation and digital religious practices could be examined simultaneously as lived realities and conceptual processes. In this sense, methodological integration does not dilute either tradition; rather, it strengthens the sociological capacity to understand ascetic communities in their full symbolic, institutional and historical complexity.

Discussion

The comparative examination of ethnography and grounded theory in the study of ascetic communities reveals broader methodological and sociological implications extending beyond the immediate question of research design. Ascetic communities can no longer be understood merely as isolated religious formations existing outside modern social processes. Contemporary ascetic institutions increasingly function as dynamic organizational networks shaped by urban expansion, pilgrimage economies, media circulation, political engagement, transnational mobility and technological transformation. This changing landscape requires methodological approaches capable of addressing both lived religious experience and wider institutional restructuring.

One of the most significant implications emerging from this study is the recognition that ascetic communities are historically adaptive rather than socially static. Classical representations often portrayed ascetics as figures detached from worldly structures and committed primarily to spiritual withdrawal. While renunciation and discipline remain central to ascetic identity, contemporary field realities suggest a more complex relationship between withdrawal and engagement. Monastic institutions now participate in educational activity, charitable work, religious tourism, media production, environmental campaigns and political discourse. Ascetic organizations increasingly operate within networks of funding, public visibility, and institutional management that resemble other forms of organized social authority. This does not necessarily indicate the decline of asceticism; rather, it demonstrates its capacity for institutional transformation under changing historical conditions.

Such transformations also challenge conventional sociological distinctions between 'traditional' and 'modern' religion. Ascetic traditions historically associated with pilgrimage routes, oral transmission and localized monastic structures are now interacting with digital platforms, global audiences, and mediated forms of religious authority. Social media presence, livestreamed rituals, online spiritual

discourse and transnational devotional networks have altered how ascetics communicate legitimacy and maintain public influence. In this context, renunciation itself acquires new meanings. Ascetics may continue to reject household life while simultaneously engaging with technologies, institutions, and economic systems embedded within modern society. The sociological study of asceticism must therefore move beyond binary assumptions that position spirituality and modernity as mutually opposed domains.

The findings of this paper also highlight the importance of methodological pluralism within the sociology of religion. Religious life rarely unfolds in forms that can be adequately captured through a single methodological lens. Ethnography contributes experiential depth by enabling close engagement with ritual practices, symbolic meanings, bodily discipline, emotional relationships and sacred environments. Grounded theory, however, provides analytical tools for identifying broader processes such as institutionalization, commercialization, gender transformation and the reconfiguration of authority. When used together, these methodologies create a more comprehensive framework capable of addressing both micro-level interaction and larger social change. Methodological pluralism becomes particularly important in the study of ascetic communities because these groups exist simultaneously as spiritual worlds, institutional structures, cultural performances. A monastery, akhara or pilgrimage camp is not simply a religious site; it is also an organized social environment shaped by hierarchy, economic exchange, symbolic power, collective memory. Ethnographic immersion helps reveal how these realities are lived and experienced while grounded analysis helps conceptualize how they are socially reproduced and transformed across contexts. The broader implication is that qualitative research in the sociology of religion increasingly requires methodological flexibility rather than rigid adherence to singular paradigms.

Another important issue emerging from this discussion concerns reflexivity. Studies involving ascetic communities inevitably confront questions regarding the positionality of the researcher. Ascetic traditions often evoke emotional, moral or spiritual responses that shape field relationships and interpretation. Researchers may experience fascination, reverence, discomfort, skepticism or personal transformation during field engagement. These responses are not external to the research process; they become part of the conditions through which knowledge is produced. Reflexivity therefore functions not merely as methodological self-awareness but as an ethical and epistemological necessity. The need for reflexivity becomes even more pronounced within contexts marked by sacred authority and symbolic hierarchy. Researchers entering ascetic settings frequently encounter institutional expectations regarding behaviour, dress, ritual participation and respect for spiritual authority. Access to knowledge may depend upon maintaining trust and relational sensitivity. At the same time, excessive identification with participants risks weakening analytical distance. Reflexive practice helps negotiate this tension by acknowledging that ethnographic and grounded knowledge are always produced through situated interaction rather than detached observation alone.

Broader structural transformations associated with globalization and urbanization further complicate the sociological understanding of ascetic life. Pilgrimage centres such as Varanasi increasingly function as urban

religious economies where ascetics interact with tourism industries, international devotees, political organizations, media institutions and transnational spiritual movements. Religious authority now circulates through networks extending far beyond localized monastic communities. Ascetics travel internationally, manage educational institutions, engage with environmental activism, and participate in digitally mediated forms of public discourse. These developments indicate that asceticism is becoming progressively embedded within global cultural flows.

The idea of a religious economy is especially useful in understanding these shifts. Ascetic institutions today often compete for visibility, patronage, discipleship, ritual legitimacy, symbolic recognition within increasingly crowded religious marketplaces. Pilgrimage festivals, televised rituals, online sermons, and institutional branding contribute to new forms of religious competition and public performance. Yet these developments should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of spiritual decline or commodification alone. Economic activity and sacred legitimacy have historically coexisted within many religious traditions. What appears distinctive today is the scale and visibility of institutional expansion within media-saturated environments.

Media culture has further transformed the representation and circulation of ascetic identity. Ascetics once encountered primarily within pilgrimage sites or monastic institutions now appear regularly on television channels, YouTube broadcasts, social media platforms and digital religious forums. Public spirituality increasingly operates through visual performance, mediated charisma, technological accessibility. This shift raises important methodological questions because digitally mediated religious life cannot always be understood through conventional field based observation alone. Future studies of asceticism may therefore require expanded methodological approaches combining physical immersion with attention to virtual religious spaces and digital interaction. Ultimately, the broader discussion emerging from this study suggests that ascetic communities continue to occupy a significant yet evolving position within modern social life. They are neither untouched remnants of tradition nor fully secularized institutions absorbed by modernity. Rather, they represent adaptive religious formations negotiating continuity and change simultaneously. Understanding these transformations requires methodological approaches capable of moving between lived experience, symbolic meaning, institutional process, broader structural change. Ethnography and grounded theory, particularly when integrated reflexively, provide important tools for such sociological inquiry.

Conclusion

The present study has attempted to comparatively examine ethnography and grounded theory as qualitative methodological approaches for the study of ascetic communities. Through the analysis of their philosophical foundations, analytical procedures, methodological orientations and applicability within religious sociology, it becomes evident that both approaches offer important yet distinct contributions to the understanding of ascetic life. Neither methodology, however, appears entirely sufficient when employed in isolation particularly in relation to contemporary ascetic formations that exist simultaneously

as symbolic worlds, institutional networks, ritual communities, and evolving social organizations. Ethnography remains indispensable because it provides access to the experiential, cultural and embodied dimensions of ascetic existence. Through participant observation, immersive fieldwork, informal interaction, contextual interpretation, ethnography captures the textures of lived religious life that often remain inaccessible within more abstract forms of analysis. The everyday rhythms of monastic discipline, the symbolic meanings attached to bodily practices, the emotional intimacy between guru and disciple, the ritual ordering of sacred space, and the silent dimensions of spiritual authority all become visible through sustained ethnographic engagement. Ascetic communities frequently communicate meaning not through formal doctrine alone but through gesture, repetition, atmosphere, spatial organization and embodied performance. Ethnography therefore preserves the complexity and depth of these lived realities in ways that are sociologically invaluable.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that grounded theory contributes a different but equally significant methodological strength. Its emphasis upon inductive analysis, conceptual development, theoretical sampling, and constant comparison enables researchers to move beyond descriptive interpretation toward broader sociological explanation. Contemporary asceticism is undergoing substantial transformation under conditions of globalization, urbanization, digital mediation, commercialization and institutional expansion. Traditional categories of renunciation and withdrawal no longer adequately explain the diverse forms through which ascetic communities engage with modern social processes. Grounded theory allows new conceptual categories to emerge from empirical field realities themselves. Processes such as negotiated renunciation, digital asceticism, institutional charisma, gender transformation and symbolic legitimacy become analytically visible through grounded comparative inquiry.

The comparative discussion also reveals that the suitability of methodology often depends upon the nature and scope of the research problem. Ethnography appears especially effective for intensive single sect studies where deep immersion within a specific symbolic and institutional world is required. Grounded theory becomes particularly useful in comparative multi sect research where the identification of broader social processes and conceptual patterns is necessary. Yet the boundaries between these approaches should not be understood as rigid or mutually exclusive. In practice, meaningful sociological research on ascetic communities increasingly requires methodological flexibility capable of combining experiential sensitivity with analytical rigor. For this reason, the paper has argued in favour of an integrated methodological orientation described here as an 'Ethnographic Grounded Approach.' Such an approach recognizes that ascetic communities cannot be adequately understood solely through descriptive immersion or conceptual abstraction. Ethnography allows entry into the lived world of asceticism while grounded theory provides tools for interpreting the processes through which that world is organized, sustained, negotiated and transformed. Their combination enables the researcher to connect micro level

ritual practice and emotional experience with broader institutional, economic, political and cultural dynamics.

The study further suggests that ascetic communities should no longer be approached as static remnants of premodern religiosity. They are adaptive social formations continuously negotiating relationships with media culture, pilgrimage economies, political movements, urban institutions, global religious networks and digital technologies. Contemporary ascetics may simultaneously embody renunciatory ideals and participate actively in public life through organizational leadership, social activism, education, media communication and institutional management. Such transformations demand renewed methodological sensitivity within the sociology of religion. Future research on asceticism must therefore adopt flexible and reflexive qualitative methodologies capable of responding to changing forms of religious life. Researchers will increasingly need to combine traditional field immersion with attention to mediated spirituality, virtual religious networks, transnational pilgrimage circuits and institutional transformations shaped by globalization. Methodological innovation is not simply a technical concern; it is central to how religious worlds are interpreted sociologically. Ultimately, the study of ascetic communities requires approaches capable of engaging simultaneously with symbolism, embodiment, institutional process, social hierarchy, emotional experience and historical change. The sociology of asceticism demands methodologies capable not only of entering sacred worlds but also of interpreting the complex social processes through which those worlds are continuously produced, negotiated, and transformed.

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