The Guru in South Asia

New Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame

ROUTLEDGE

The Guru in South Asia

This book provides a set of fresh and compelling interdisciplinary approaches to the enduring phenomenon of the guru in South Asia. Moving across different gurus and kinds of gurus, and between past and present, the essays collected in this volume call attention to the extraordinary scope and richness of the social lives and roles of South Asian gurus. Prevailing scholarship has rightly considered the guru to be a source of religious and philosophical knowledge and mystical bodily practices. This book goes further and considers the social engagements and entanglements of these spiritual leaders, not just on their own (narrowly denominational) terms, but in terms of their diverse, complex, rapidly evolving engagements with 'society' broadly conceived. The book explores and illuminates the significance of female gurus, gurus from the perspective of Islam, imbrications of guru-ship and slavery in pre-modern India, connections between gurus and power, governance and economic liberalization in modern and contemporary India, vexed questions of sexuality and guru-ship, gurus' charitable endeavours, the cosmopolitanism of gurus in contexts of spiritual tourism, and the mediation of gurus via technologies of electronic communication.

Bringing together internationally renowned scholars from religious studies, political science, history, sociology and anthropology, *The Guru in South Asia* provides exciting and original new insights into South Asian guru-ship.

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Contents

List of contributors ix
Acknowledgements xii

1 The multifarious guru: an introduction 1
JACOB COPEMAN AND AYA IKEGAME

2 The governing guru: Hindu *mathas* in liberalising India 46
AYA IKEGAME

3 The slave guru: masters, commanders, and disciples in early modern South Asia 64
WILLIAM R. PINCH

4 The political guru: the guru as éminence grise 80
CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

5 The gay guru: fallibility, unworldliness, and the scene of instruction 97
LAWRENCE COHEN

6 The female guru: guru, gender, and the path of personal experience 113
KAREN PECHILIS

7 The dreamed guru: the entangled lives of the amil and the anthropologist 133
VEENA DAS

8 The mimetic guru: tracing the real in Sikh–Dera Sacha Sauda relations 156
JACOB COPEMAN

9 The mediated guru: simplicity, instantaneity and change in middle-class religious seeking 181
KATHINKA FRØYSTAD

10 The cosmopolitan guru: spiritual tourism and ashrams in Rishikesh 202
MEENA KHANDELWAL

11 The literary guru: the dual emphasis on bhakti and *vidhi* in western Indian guru-devotion 222
JEREMY G. MORSE

12 Continuities as gurus change 241
DANIEL GOLD

Index 255

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1 The multifarious guru

An introduction[1]

Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame

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guru / n. **1** a Hindu spiritual teacher. **2** each of the first ten leaders of the Sikh religion. **3** an influential teacher or expert: *a management guru*. – ORIGIN from Hindi and Punjabi, from Sanskrit *guru* 'weighty, grave' (cf. L. *gravis*), hence 'elder, teacher'.

multifarious / adj. having great variety and diversity > many and various. (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

The phenomenon of guru-ship has been a classic and enduring theme within South Asian scholarship, but nevertheless critical aspects of the social lives and roles of gurus remain under-explored. Bringing together scholars from religious studies, political science, history, sociology and anthropology, this book aims to provide an innovative and interdisciplinary set of approaches to the guru and open up for analysis terrains either untouched or dealt with only cursorily in previous studies. The principal aim of this book is thus at once modest and considerable: it is to demonstrate the diversity of social sites and conceptual domains in which gurus have participated and continue to participate. Rather than focus on a particular sect or leader, this book provides insights into the wider political and social significance of guru-ship in pre-modern, modern and contemporary South Asian society. The book moves across different gurus, and kinds of gurus, defining the term 'guru' broadly – not only does this collection deal with categories of South Asian religious leader variously called *maharaj, sant, baba, sadhu, mahant, swami, sanyasi*, and *acharya*, it deals with guru-ship as a kind of principle or model with particular capacities of structuration.[2] Considering guru-ship as a set of principles as much as specific persons enables us to better apprehend significant ways in which 'guru-ship' affords movement across social and conceptual domains in addition to ways in which logics of guru-ship act as conceptual modelling tools for other forms of social phenomena.

Recent literature has begun to move beyond the study gurus and their 'sects' in narrowly denominational terms and instead place them in the context of their multiple roles in South Asian society more generally (Peabody 1991; McKean 1996; Prentiss 1999; Copley 2003; Fuller and Harriss 2005; Warrier 2005;

Beckerlegge 2006; Shah 2006; Barrett 2008; S. Srinivas 2008; Copeman 2009; T. Srinivas 2010; see also Khare 1984). Studying gurus and the structures of experience and belief they embody 'in their own right' is no doubt important and continues to have its place, but we welcome this turn to a broader approach because it gives due recognition to the extraordinary breadth of social roles and entanglements of gurus. This book seeks to reflect on this expansive analytical move and to take it further. We insist that it is not that gurus have only recently begun to participate in non-denominational domains – extending beyond the ashram, so to speak – but that scholars, influenced by Latour (1993) and others, are now less prone to unhelpfully fence off the practice of 'religion', say, or politics, from other areas of life (see Spencer 1997). We are thus now better able to 'see' the manifold extensions and entanglements of the guru.

Such an emphasis on the remarkable range of social positions that gurus, broadly defined, occupy (and indeed have occupied) prompts a note on the titles of the chapters that comprise this book. In adopting a particularising 'definite article' format ('The governing guru', 'The cosmopolitan guru', etc.) our aim is to draw attention to the diversity (and in some cases novelty) of themes covered. The format of the titles is thus a contrivance, or tool, that seeks not to essentialise the figure of the guru as, say, intrinsically 'governmental' or 'cosmopolitan' (far from it), but rather to highlight the diversity of thematics and conceptual schema generated by 'the guru' and dealt with in this volume. Indeed, taking our cue from the essays brought together in this book, we draw attention in this introduction to the guru's capacity to participate in, and move between, multiple symbolic and practical spheres,[3] the aim being to reassess some of the key existing literature on guruship[4] while developing a kind of analytical toolkit in order to aid future studies and stimulate new thought on the matter of the extraordinary phenomenon that is South Asian guru-ship.

As we have already noted, we are interested not only in the ways in which gurus are translated into new and sometimes unexpected contexts in present times, but also in considering how the guru was *always* a social form of peculiar suggestibility; a veritable 'vector between domains' (Carsten 2011: 2). Indeed, the guru is a prolific producer of 'domaining effects'; effects that occur when the logic of an idea associated with one domain is transferred to another, often with interesting or unanticipated results (Strathern 1992: 73). In many ways, this book is a study of the domaining effects of gurus. The prolificness of the guru in this regard is connected to its extraordinary propensity for becoming apt for given situations, whether the situation is one of quasi-legal adjudication (Ikegame, this volume), political mentorship (Jaffrelot, this volume), anti-stigma campaigns concerning leprosy or HIV (Barrett 2008; Mehta and Pramanik 2010), a liberalising economic milieu (Frøystad this volume) and its connected frame of globalising cosmopolitanism (Khandelwal this volume) or indeed the high-profile anti-corruption campaigns of 2011 (one of whose leaders was yoga guru Swami Ramdev – see Cohen this volume). Such 'aptness' is consequent on a guru's ability to respond to the vagaries of situations in ways that allow him or her to be *carried forwards*: The agent [guru] keys into the momentum of the situation and surfs its

possibilities' (Thrift 2010: 261). This sense of 'carrying forward' by way of an ability to 'harvest' situations is suggestive of the expansibility of the guru, an idea we develop later in this introduction. We also ask: what are the conditions of possibility of such 'harvesting'? Through analytical discussion of the essays in this book, we explore in this introduction the ways in which gurus have crossed domains and become apt for given situations, drawing in and re-composing diverse aspects of Indian social life in the process: from sexuality to new media; from slavery to imagination and transgression; from Brahmanical orthodoxy to the arts of government; from milieus of modernising reformist fervour to those of convention and continuity. Needless to say, while intervening in and mediating these phenomena in various ways, the guru is not reducible to any of them. Following Carsten (2011), we suggest that the multiplicity and diversity of these interventions points towards a sense of the guru's *uncontainability*. Surely their power to act in such a diversity of situations and projects partly rests on the polyvalent meanings of gurus themselves, and their unusual capacity to accrue resonances that, because of the nature of gurus' participation in multiple fields and discourses, are simply uncontainable.[5] We return to this sense of uncontainability below.

Recent key scholarly works have focused on 'middle-class' gurus such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati (not to be confused with his namesake, the founder of the Arya Samaj), Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba, the latter two each claiming millions of devotees. These studies pay close attention to the nuanced links between these gurus and processes of economic liberalisation, globalisation and technological modernity. In terms of the typology proposed by Nanda (2009), Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba are type 1 gurus, whose appeal is critically dependent on the miracles they are said to perform, whereas Swami Dayananda Saraswati is an instance of a type 2 guru, for his appeal lies principally in his exposition of Hindu philosophy (chiefly the Vedas) such that it may be applied to contemporary practical concerns (for instance business management – see Fuller and Harriss 2005). Type 3 gurus, according to Nanda, are primarily known for teaching yoga or meditation (Swami Ramdev would be a high-profile example).[6] What links each type, says Nanda, is their comparability to CEOs, and a pronounced evangelism, in respect of which she quotes media commentator and Hindutva supporter Swapan Dasgupta's (2005) contention that 'the real energy of contemporary Hinduism' lies in its 'living saints':

> There is a thriving tradition of what can be loosely called evangelical Hinduism. It comprises the likes of Asaram Bapu, Murari Bapu, Swami Ramdev, Amma, Satya Sai Baba, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and many others who feature on the various religious channels on TV. *They are the Pat Robertsons and the Billy Grahams of modern Hinduism*. They are able to inspire and motivate individual Hindus far more successfully than purohits and pontiffs.
>
> (original emphasis)

The reference to evangelical Christian preachers is instructive on several levels. That the Hindu right seeks to operationalise gurus in support of its agenda is hardly a novel proposition. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP – 'World Hindu Council') famously seeks (and is frequently granted) the support of such gurus in initiatives to combat 'minority appeasement', the building of a Ram Mandir, and so on, and Nanda cites evidence that the organisation is actively seeking to harness the evangelical potential of such gurus. Moreover, such gurus – mirroring the highly mediatised presence of US evangelicals – may possess and appear on their own television channels. Sociologist Dipankar Gupta (2009: 260–1) also draws a comparison between India's 'living saints' and US evangelical Christians. Seeking to debunk worn-out perceptions of Indian 'exceptionalism', Gupta questions whether India's so-called 'passion for godmen' implies some unique Indian predilection for the mystical. For Gupta, though Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell may look and sound different from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar or Asaram Bapu, 'what is categorically not different is the fact that the evangelist and godman are both showmen, skilled in whipping up collective effervescence, skilled also in verbal pyrotechnics or crude shows of legerdemain'. Like Dasgupta, Gupta points to the presence of these gurus on Indian cable TV as a factor connecting them to the US 'holy man' variant; and, presumably drawing on Kakar (1982) and others, he sees Indian 'godmen' as equivalent to US psychoanalysts who 'soothe the febrile temperaments of middle-class Americans' (Gupta 2009: 261).

We agree that the study of high-profile Indian spiritual gurus and their milieus can tell us much about contemporary middle-class predicaments and sensibilities, and aim to show below that their study can illuminate important features of new media in the subcontinent (see also Frøystad this volume). This kind of analysis is also in sympathy with our aim of exploring the lives of gurus beyond the ashram, so to speak, and several recent ethnographies have underscored the importance of middle-class 'godmen' for understanding the ways in which faith 'travels' (in particular, T. Srinivas 2010). But there are several dangers here. The comparison with US evangelism is certainly instructive up to a point given the VHP's evident attempts to instrumentalise gurus for evangelical purposes (Dasgupta's comments imply a direct emulative link between the phenomena; cf. Jaffrelot's [1996: 76] theorisation of Hindutva organisations' strategy of simultaneous stigmatisation and emulation of the minorities by whom they feel threatened). However, as can be the case with projects of comparison, it results in a simplification. The term 'Indian godmen' is frequently made to subsume massive differences beneath its obviating moniker. It has purchase insofar as it refers to what Nanda (2009) calls the 'new gurus' – those who tend to be followed by well-heeled Indians (and indeed many foreigners), who purvey a new age-ish spirituality, and who are 'practically CEOs of huge business empires' – but its prevalence could all too easily lead to an impression that such gurus are the only game in town, that *all* gurus share such characteristics.

Study of such publicly visible 'hyper' gurus is extremely important for reasons already stated, and several of the essays in this book contribute to key debates about their prominence, but the rise of globalising middle-class gurus, who appear

on television and possess millions of devotees, is only part of the picture. In addition to contributing new perspectives on such figures, this book explores the lives and roles of non-Hindu gurus (Copeman), perspectives on 'the guru' from outside Hinduism (Das, Pinch), gurus who stand as advocates of their lower-caste/class followers (Ikegame, Copeman),[7] more minor gurus who do not necessarily appear on television or claim millions of devotees (Gold, Khandelwal) and the complex and multifaceted roles of gurus in history (Morse, Jaffrelot, Pinch, Pechilis) and myth (Pechilis, Morse). While we may be sympathetic to Gupta's assault on the western appetite for 'exotic' India, it is important not to obscure what is genuinely distinctive about the Indian experience of guru-ship, and to avoid a situation where scholarly and public representations of hyper gurus or 'godmen' substitute for recognition and analysis of the radically variegated figures and milieus of the guru in actuality.

A distinction introduced by Benjamin (2000) and further elaborated by Harriss (2007) might be helpful here. The distinction is between South Asia's 'local' and 'corporate' economies, and our suggestion is that categories of guru may be loosely assimilated to the division: ' "local economies" are diverse and complex . . . and provide most of the population with their accommodation, work and livelihoods. Their links with government are through middle and junior bureaucrats and local political leaders . . . "[C]orporate economies", on the other hand, are the arena for industrial, bureaucratic and IT sector elites; they are plugged into higher level political circuits, and have quite direct links with state-level and national parastatal agencies (including finance corporations and development authorities). They operate through "master planning" and mega-projects', which have made it possible for the capitalist, or upper middle classes, to achieve hegemony in the shaping of the urban form (Harriss 2007: 4).

Of course, we see the majority of Indian spiritual leaders as analogous to local economies, more diverse and complex than headline-stealing hyper gurus; and though they represent the majority of guru-led communities, they are likely to be less politically influential than 'parastatal' corporate (hyper) gurus who, with their vast resources, are able to engage in high-profile development works and achieve hegemony in public discourse and representation (and to some degree, academic debate). But the connection is not only analogical. Gurus and their institutions participate in and help form the 'local'/'corporate' division of which Benjamin and Harriss write. That is to say, the relationship is both conceptual and thoroughly material: it is one of personal connections, transactions and flows of money/spirituality – as examples provided below and throughout the book demonstrate.

Anti-gurus and non-human gurus

We seek now to elaborate further on what we earlier called the uncontainability of the guru, and delineate several of its features. First, we examine how the category of 'guru' is uncontained to the extent that even those who campaign against what they see as the pernicious influence of gurus sometimes come to be treated as

gurus themselves; second, we explore the powerful and complex role of the guru in imagination and fantasy, such that the guru–disciple relationship may surface in different situations as a 'model of' various societal relations – or at the very least as a 'model for' apprehending them; finally, we draw on recent literature in order to investigate the guru as an expansible figure who employs a variety of well-honed techniques in order to extend his/her influence.

We begin with what we call the anti-guru paradox. Copeman's chapter provides an example of this. The focus of his chapter is on a controversy that took place in 2007 in which the guru presiding over the north Indian devotional order the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) was widely considered by mainstream Sikhs to have blasphemously imitated Guru Gobind Singh, who in 1708 had proclaimed himself the final living Sikh guru. The scandalous suggestion, according to orthodox Sikhs, was that the DSS guru was claiming an affinity with Guru Gobind Singh or, worse still, proclaiming himself as his successor within a tradition which, though embedded in guru-ship, has expressly forbidden new *dehdari* (bodily, or living) gurus. But this was hardly the first time a claim to living guru-ship had emerged in a tradition within which this is expressly forbidden. Ironically, given that his reformist mission included putting an end to a contemporary resurgence of *dehdari* guru-ship, in the early nineteenth century Dyal Das (1783–1855) ended up being elevated to the status of a guru by his followers (Singh 1952: 52). The very person seeking to proscribe the guru became one. Copeman thus notes that the *dehdari* guru is an insurgent category in Sikh contexts, and we might say that it is an uncontainable one, too, for gurus – even 'anti-gurus' – tend to beget gurus. As Gold (1987) vividly shows in reference to the Radhasoami movement, sets of intersecting and proliferating lineages produce dense networks of gurus and branches. One may become a guru by descent, by initiation, by designation of a former guru, be reborn as the incarnation of a former guru, and so on.[8] Cutting the network of gurus, as Guru Gobind Singh sought to do, could never be a simple prospect.

In our possession is a photograph of one of the most significant Indian rationalist activists of the twentieth century, taken shortly before his death in 2009. Devoting much of his life to exposing confidence tricks perpetrated by gurus ('self-styled godmen'), he shared the opinion of another noted 'anti-guru', Khushwant Singh (2003: 34–5), that 'the growth rate of crime and corruption is directly proportional to the rise in the number of such frauds and charlatans'. Singh also quotes fellow atheist A.T. Kavoor with approval: 'The question is not whether there is God or not. What worries us more is the blind belief in godmen. In the name of God they are cheating the people. God, if there is one, himself did not create wristwatches, gold chains or rings. Yet, the godmen claim they create these things and fool people.'[9] (In a fascinating aside in her magnum opus on Sathya Sai Baba, T. Srinivas [2010: 296] notes that the presence of serial production numbers on watches and other items said to be materialised by the guru constitutes, for sceptics, 'a weak spot in the materializations thesis'.) Now the anti-guru activist depicted in the aforementioned photograph has a bedraggled look about him, with extremely long white hair, and a beard half way down his

front – in other words, he appears positively *sannyasi*-esque. In person, the famed 'mischievousness' or eccentricity of the guru was also evident. Disembarking from the third-class compartment of a train in early 2009 he immediately pointed to the anti-impotence pill advertisements festooning the railway station, declaring 'what's the use since I've left my girlfriends at home'. Having spent a number of weeks travelling with such activists in Bihar, Karnataka and elsewhere, we can attest to the peripatetic nature of their lives – rarely do they have a notion of where they will be sleeping on any given night, only hoping that the local anti-superstition committee might have arranged food and a room at their destination. And as with gurus (see Rinehart 1999), hagiographies abound.[10] The format is strikingly similar to those we find with 'divine humans', with an emphasis on the gifted child and enumeration of signs of future greatness. An example follows:

> Prabir spent his early childhood in the railway towns of Kharagpur and Adra. Growing up with god-fearing parents in this multicultural township, Prabir had keen interest in gods and godmen. As a child he spent hours with these religious people. As a result, he learnt magic and all the other tricks these godmen practiced at a very young age . . . He grew up to have keen interest in politics and developed excellent oratorical skill . . . An avid reader, his interests include anthropology, archeology, history, psychology, sociology and, of course, politics. As a result, his understanding of the human mind as an individual and the social human being as a species is vast. With this knowledge of the human mind [he possesses] a rare understanding of all human problems . . . Once the Rationalists' Association was established, he had to face severe animosity from various groups of spirituals and godmen. An immensely courageous and upright person, he faces all attacks with the help of his keen intellect, understanding and the worldwide network of support and goodwill that he enjoys.[11]

The following hagiographical details of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar possess a similar emphasis on giftedness and prowess in learning: 'Born in 1956 in Southern India, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was a gifted child. By the age of four, he was able to recite parts of the Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Sanskrit scripture and was often found in meditation . . . By the age of seventeen in 1973, he had graduated with degrees in both Vedic literature and physics'.[12] Of course, there are certain key inversions – whereas gurus such as Sathya Sai Baba are often said to have performed miracles as children (T. Srinivas 2010: 56–7), Prabir is said as a child to have learned all the godmen's 'tricks', and whereas Sri Sri Ravi Shankar associated with holy men to learn from their grace, Prabir associated with them in order to expose their malfeasance – the hagiographical template is nevertheless not dissimilar to that found in the cases of those the rationalist seeks to debunk.

While it can appear as though Indian 'anti-gurus', in self-defeating manner, replicate the institutions they seek to critique – appearing in the likenesses of holy men, while also duplicating their symbols of non-attachment and stimulating a similar hagiographical excess, and so on – it is in fact not so simple. For often,

when a rationalist activist dons saffron robes and flowing locks and performs 'miracles', replication is a conscious strategy – this is imitation to disarm. Having amazed his/her audience, the rationalist dramatically disrobes, before demonstrating how these 'miracles' – now revealed to be no more than tawdry tricks – can be performed by *anyone*. Like Yukhagir hunters in north-eastern Siberia who transform their bodies into the image of their prey all the better to catch and kill them (see Copeman this volume), atheist activists dress up as *sadhu*s all the better to unmask them; *similarity is strategy*. But there are less tactically motivated replications, too. What we are seeking to establish here is simply that even those most dynamically opposed to 'guru logics' can find it difficult to escape them, even if sometimes they are reproduced knowingly or strategically. (It is worth mentioning here that some activists themselves, with a certain ironic pleasure, use the term 'anti-guru'. At the recent sixtieth birthday party of a leading activist, a sign on the stage read: '60 years old with the help of no gods'. On one side of the notice was a picture of the activist's biological parents, and on the other a photograph of his 'ideological father', the aforementioned recently deceased rationalist, and the notice 'My anti-guru'. A sense of a lineage of anti-guru gurus was thus generated.)

If anti-gurus can become 'gurus', gurus may also of course become 'anti-gurus'. The iconoclastic 'sex guru' Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) was a famously prolific debunker of his fellow gurus. For Rajneesh, 'they were all worthless "bullshitters", not holy men but "holy dung". Swami Muktananda, a contemporary Indian guru with a large following, was an "Idiotananda" ' (Kakar 2008: 29). However, if it takes a guru to be an anti-guru then one is confronted again with a sense of the inescapability of guru logics. Rajneesh is also an exemplary case in the performativity and/or theatricality of guru-ship: 'Rajneesh self-consciously prepared for his public appearances as does an actor for his role. In later life he would use make-up, wear rich robes that accentuated his broad shoulders and jewel-studded caps that hid his baldness' (ibid.: 14). Moreover, central to the self-representation of Mata Amritanandamayi are those occasions on which she 'dresses up in the regalia of the goddess [Devi] and thus "reveals" her goddess aspect (*bhava*) to her devotees' (Warrier 2005: 3). Again, dressing up in order to *reveal*. As was noted above, Copeman's chapter similarly focuses on a case of one guru dressing up as another, the copier guru attempting to reveal an affiliation of sorts, via the copy, with the copied guru. It is tempting to follow Butler (1998: 722) here and make the point that such dressing up, rather like the relation of drag to 'proper' gender, enacts the very structure of performance and impersonation by which all guru-ship is assumed.

No doubt many guru postures and gestures are mimetically acquired techniques of the body – necessary corporeal indicators of a guru's guru-ship – but there is a further aspect to the question of 'guru mimesis'. Butler (ibid.: 727) notes that incorporation may be understood as a kind of psychic miming. If legitimate guru-ship requires the claimant to partake of prior gurus and other divine forms, then a whole array of mimetic techniques comes into play as part of a methodology of incorporation. Thus, a Mumbai-based guru who claims to be the reincarnation of

Shirdi Sai Baba adopts mannerisms and accoutrements said to be characteristic of the forbear guru,[13] while Gold records in his chapter in this book that the son of a deceased guru in Gwalior, soon after his father's passing, began uttering unexpected remarks of the sort formerly made by his father. Was the father-guru now acting in and through the son? Whatever the case, it is clear that a certain mimetic proficiency can be very helpful for gurus or would-be gurus in matters of succession and incorporation. 'Guru culture' comprises a particularly dense complex of imitative registers. Anti-superstition activists partake in what is in fact a great Indian tradition of dressing up as gurus, and whose participants are not least gurus themselves.

Beckerlegge (2010) provides a further example of the anti-guru paradox. In a revealing discussion of the Vivekananda Kendra, a lay service organisation influenced by Swami Vivekananda but also affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which maintains 206 branch centres across India, we learn of an intriguing critique of 'guru culture' from within the Hindu nationalist movement. Such a critique, which contrasts markedly with the VHP's endorsement by and of a variety of Hindu spiritual leaders, usefully calls our attention to internal differentiations within Hindu right attitudes towards gurus. Named after a swami, the *kendra* can hardly discount the category of 'guru' entirely, but the movement's founder, Eknath Ranade, disparaged all too ready acceptance of 'avatar-hood', was sceptical about the role of ascetics in providing humanitarian service, and generally critical of charismatic personality cults (in contrast to which the *kendra* emphasises the *ordinariness* of its mission and membership). However, in 2008 on the occasion of Guru Purnima, the *kendra*'s present vice-president said of its founder, Ranade, that he:

> . . . did not establish himself or even Swami Vivekananda as the Guru of Vivekananda Kendra. Any specific name or form of God also would have brought limitations on our capacity for representing the whole society. Therefore, Mananeeya Eknathji has seen to it that Omkar . . . would be the guide for us . . . when we say that Omkara is our Guru it means we see divinity in each and everything . . . Thus this is a day to remember all the Gurus who have contributed in continuation and propagation of the Vedic principles. Actually as we bow down to Omkara as Guru we are paying our obeisance to all the Gurus in our culture.
>
> (cited in Beckerlegge 2010: 80)

The idea of *omkara* – the Hindu sacred syllable – as a kind of guru is interesting for several reasons. First, categories of guru-ship once again seem uncontainable, for even in an organisation critical of the institution, guru-ship clearly remains important *as an idea* even as it resurfaces in another form (*omkara*). Second, this shapeshifting quality of the guru – the ready capacity of the originary template of the living person as a manifestation of the divine (Gold 1987: 3) to be transferred into other objects or concepts – alerts us to what is a wider phenomenon of transfers of guru logics across scale and form, of which this volume provides several vivid examples.

What is perhaps the most famous example of all has already been referred to: the banning of living gurus by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, when he proclaimed himself the final living Sikh master and designated the text that has become the central devotional focus of orthodox Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib, as the next and final guru of Sikh tradition – the book thus replacing living gurus as the focus for devotional veneration (McLeod 1996). Another form of depersonalised guru is the *collective guru*. This is an idea introduced in Jaffrelot's chapter in this book, which explores the role of gurus as advisors to post-colonial politicians in India and a shift in the position of the guru from the ideal role of preceptor and philosophical guide to the king to sleazy Mafioso during the time of Indira Gandhi's Emergency.[14] Combining biography, journalistic reports and other recent historical texts, Jaffrelot demonstrates how gurus may legitimise forms of rule but also delegitimise particular rulers if thought to be specialists in morally dubious tantric ritual.

Of particular interest here is the role of the RSS. Jaffrelot explains that though Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who founded the RSS in 1925, actively sought to avoid guru-status, he designated the movement's saffron flag (*Bhagva Dhwaj*) as the guru of the movement. RSS members' physical training and ideological instruction was thus to take place 'under the eye of this imaginary guru'. But the RSS' relationship with guru logics does not end there. It is itself the archetypal collective guru, a contemporary depersonalised analogue of the Raj guru, who acts as counsellor to official bearers of power. Not only are the ascetic qualities of the movement pronounced (for instance, its leaders take *sannyas*), its annual conference with BJP leaders takes place during the festival of the *Guru dakshina*, a yearly ceremony in which RSS members reaffirm their commitment to the organisation.[15] And, while it possesses formal links with the BJP, the RSS sees itself in ideal terms as guru not only to the political party but to the nation in its entirety. Thus, while the guru is usually a human, 'it can be depersonalized and become a kind of principle' (Jaffrelot this volume). It is this important idea that the guru may subsist as a principle as much as a specific person that facilitates variegated 'scaling up' and 'scaling down' of what can *count* as a guru. And such scaling, of course, begs the question of how the principle is remade as it enlarges, contracts or takes on new forms.

The RSS is not the only non-human or collective guru that is of interest. We have already seen how a book and a flag can take on qualities of guru-ship. Jaffrelot (this volume) offers the further example of an effigy exalted as a guru: 'The Mahabharata epic . . . relates how a young "out-caste", Eklavya, to whom no guru wished to teach the art of archery – reserved for the warrior castes – modelled the effigy of a guru and trained to great effect under his watch'. (Cohen, in his chapter in this book, also recounts Eklavya's story, but to a quite different purpose. For Cohen the story prompts the searching question: *what is it to be denied the relation to a guru?* Pechilis's chapter, conversely, asks what it is to be denied the *position or status* of guru.) For some, serving as a component of nationalist narrativisation and rhetoric, India herself constitutes a collective guru to the world. As is well known, ever since Swami Vivekananda's Chicago visit in

1893 where he addressed the Parliament of Religions, Indian gurus have, so to speak, ministered to the world (or at least, Euro-America). It is also well known that travelling gurus have in recent years 'flourished as never before and [that] they are key agents in globalising Hinduism' (Fuller and Harriss 2005; see also Gold 1988: 121–2; 2005; Forsthoefel and Humes 2005). But the idea that a country might be a spiritual guru is qualitatively different, albeit perhaps not all that surprising given that the country is also, on occasion, deified as Bharat Mata (see Ramaswamy 2008). For instance, a documentary film from 2001 is titled 'India: A Tribute – Spiritual Guru to the World'. The idea is particularly prominent among Hindu right activists. The Hindu nationalist organisation, Hindu Jagruti, has on its website a page titled, 'Why is Bharat the "Spiritual Master (Guru)" of the World?' (In classic Hindutva style, the answer is rendered in bluntly demographic terms, with the high number of Indian gurus – separated into 'Guru', 'Sadguru' and 'Paratpar gurus', and on a scale from 70–100 per cent 'spiritual advancement' – contrasted in tabular form with far lower numbers of gurus and saints located in 'rest of world'.)

Grammar of understanding

We moved in the above section from the anti-guru paradox to consider the extensibility of the guru model such that the guru, as a kind of principle, may appear in many different forms. Each instance describes different facets of the guru's uncontainability. But the extensibility of guru logics is not limited to the surfacing of the guru in forms other than that of divine human. Also significant are the ways in which guru logics can act both to structurally determine and as a means for apprehending particular human situations – such as, for instance, Hindu–Muslim relations.

In a chapter of extraordinary ethnographic richness, Das weaves together dream and memory, telling and explication, the Islamic figure of the *amil* and the Hindu guru into a complex whole that brings together 'classical' themes – ritual, sacred speech, asceticism – with the very contemporary concern of communal relations. Moreover, as is the case in Pinch's chapter, it also provides non-Hindu perspectives on 'Hindu' gurus to the extent that the figure of the guru – in an imaginative sense – acts as a kind of mediator between 'communities'. However, the entanglements of the guru are not connotative in some warm, fuzzy way of inter-communal harmony. Akin to a *pir* and yet simultaneously transgressively other, the guru is a figure of distanciating connection. The dreamed guru in Das's chapter appears to unsettle any notion of clear boundaries between Islam and Hinduism, and this makes the figure all the more ambiguous from the *amil*'s point of view. Unnamed and a source of great danger, the guru cannot be simply translated as '*pir*' (Das emphasises there are no easy translations to be had). Relations with gurus – even imaginative or dreamed relations – are liable, as in Jaffrelot's chapter, to all too easily take on a menacing hue. At stake, asserts Das, are 'the affects that surround particular figures [so that] the question becomes, how is one to be a *Muslim amil* in a world so saturated by the whisperings and the machinations of *shaiytan*

[satan]?' Our point, after Das, is that, ambiguous as the guru is, he remains the conceptual point of departure for the Muslim *amil* as he seeks existential grounding in an entangled world. He is the figure through which 'encounter' is apprehended.

Tropes of renunciation and/or guru-ship may be draw upon by individuals or institutions as 'available models' in order for them to not only comprehend their own situations or predicaments but to make them comprehensible to others. Various Christian organisations in India have famously articulated versions of Jesus as a guru-figure for purposes of 'native' apprehension (see, for instance, the chapter 'The word made flesh: the crucified guru' in the book, *One Gospel – Many Cultures* [Oduyoye and Vroom 2003], which presents a set of global proselytising case studies). In the following example, taken from a news report published in 2007, trainee medics in Tamil Nadu drew upon imagery of renunciation in order to protest against a yearlong extension of their Bachelor of Medicine/Surgery (MBBS) courses because of a new compulsory rural service scheme. Not only did the medics strike and undertake a 'fast unto death', they also sported 'saffron dress and carried books on their heads to drive home the point that they have to forgo everything if the Centre went ahead with its decision and extended the MBBS course by a year'.[16]

A further such example is discernible in the work of the Delhi-based Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti (Dadhichi Body Donation Society), an organisation that employs ascetic tropes in order to promote the donation of bodies for dissection and medical research.[17] Leaders of the movement explain that the donated body is to be thought of as supremely sacred because it is a *guru*: a teacher to future generations of medics. Further, in order to help assuage the general reluctance of the public to forgo cremation rites, recruits are characterised as renouncers of their bodies and/or cremation. (This is after the mythic sage Dadhichi who is said to have renounced his body – specifically, his bones – in order for them to be made into weapons.) Body donors are given saffron scarves to wear at the ceremonies at which they prepare their wills, which of course recalls the formal vows undertaken by initiate renouncers. The ideal-typical renouncer is not cremated, performing his or her own mortuary rites at the time of initiation. The *samiti* thus foregrounds the ascetic as an archetype for the body donor who must forgo cremation. The *samiti*'s use of the trope of renunciation is no doubt a tactical deployment of a (mostly) revered assemblage of categories for furthering the ends of medical utility. But we would insist that the usage is also a means of explaining – to self and to other – the deeper import and necessity of a set of novel and in some ways discomfiting medical practices. The point is simply that a key aspect of the lives of renunciation and guru-ship in the subcontinent is their existence as a set of available conceptual materials or principles readily deployable for purposes of apprehension and/or pedagogy.

It is also the case that where scholars understand the model of the guru–disciple relationship as key to the structuring of other social relationships the model as a means of comprehension once again comes into its own. In other words, guru-ship is a two-fold *model for* – a model for scholarly as well as local apprehension. For instance, a recent incisive study of Dalit leadership in Tamil Nadu (Gorringe

2010) sees the guru–disciple relationship as a kind of cultural precedent for the radically asymmetrical leadership structures of Dalit social movements in the state. However, while Dalit leaders are frequently characterised as ' "superior beings" – to be revered and followed' (ibid.: 126), it is also the case that, as in Das's chapter, no easy translations pertain. In particular, Gorringe points to the prevalence of discussion, debate and argument on the part of followers concerning the character and modus operandi of Dalit leaders as a necessary qualification of guru-ship as an explanatory model. Moreover, the historical marginalisation of the group acts as a further qualifier, for 'we cannot assume . . . that prevalent cultural patterns and relationships extend to those who have habitually been excluded from the body politic' (ibid.). While the latter point is extremely persuasive,[18] it should be pointed out that debate and argument concerning authenticity and direction of the leader is far from absent in contexts of guru-ship (see Gold this volume; Copeman this volume; Khandelwal 2004: 160) to the extent that the presence of these attributes in the contexts examined by Gorringe may attest more to the 'fit' of the guru–disciple model than to its incompatibility.We turn now to a third aspect of the guru's uncontainability: the practical and conceptual techniques employed in order to augment the expansibility of the guru.

Expansive agency

Introducing a recent important volume on leadership in India, Price (Ruud and Price 2010: xxiv) draws attention to the 'expansive agency' that characterises the style of leadership she terms 'lordly' in the subcontinent. Drawing on works by Burghart (1996) and Brass (1965), Price (Ruud and Price 2010: xxv) notes that 'constituents' perceptions of their head as a benevolent person of expansive agency form a major element of allegiance to lordly leadership in the South Asian context . . . A [lordly] divinity protects creatures in a multitude of ways, according to his/her desire or will. The human lord of this model may offer protection in the glamorous and generous mode of monarchs or in the spiritual efficacy and knowledge of gurus.' Taking this notion of lordly expansive agency as our starting point, we now explore specific techniques of expansibility. This emphasis on the *specifics* of expansibility is important for, as Gorringe (2010: 120) argues, resorting to the nebulous concept of charisma 'can hinder analysis and obscure the complex processes, mechanisms and relationships that constitute leadership'.

We provided examples above of guru-ship, as a kind of principle, extending from human to nation. Similar 'ideologies of scale' (Tsing 2000: 347) inhabit such pronouncements as 'all the world is my ashram', reported to have been made by Dadaji, a guru famous for 'renouncing' renunciation and celibacy and for his film star followers (Singh 2003: 148). While in this case the guru is 'de-collectivised' (scaled back down to the human), imagery of the guru's constituency is similarly world-wrapping in nature. In this section, then, we move from the depersonalised guru that exists as a kind of principle in non-human forms via sets of scale-making

practices back down to the human guru who nevertheless 'scales up' in order to extend his reach (variously to include the whole of the world and entirety of the universe). Such techniques of expansibility form a further key aspect of the guru's uncontainability.

Dadadji's declaration is an example of an *imagistic* technique of expansibility. Such world-wrapping imagery abounds: we have attended Nirankari gatherings during which the traditional American spiritual 'He's got the whole world in his hands' was sung, and indeed, the presiding guru is frequently depicted cradling the globe in his arms; and we learn of images in the official Sathya Sai Baba museum of Puttarparthi such as 'Sai Baba straddling the globe, balancing the universe on one finger, and a NASA space photograph believed to show Sai Baba's imprint on earth, suggesting his divine reach into the celestial plane' (T. Srinivas 2010: 138).

Spectacles of humanitarianism are a further means of generating and conveying such imagery. As Copeman explains in his chapter, the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) devotional movement, based in Haryana, holds the Guinness world record for most blood donated in a single day. A feat detailed in the 'miracles' section of the movement's website, the appearance of the guru's name in such an iconically global publication provides both critical evidence and means of achieving world-wrapping prowess. There are shades here of the Indian 'institutional' big-men described by Mines and Gourishankar (1990: 762), who 'attract followers and enact their roles as generous leaders through the charitable institutions that they control' – with the obvious caveat that the DSS guru's charitable actions target expansion on an altogether different scale than the south Indian examples discussed by these authors. The Delhi-based Sant Nirankari guru, too, has been able to take on a new expansibility via the large quantities of blood donated to the Red Cross in his name. Here the guru acts as the knot of centripetal and centrifugal movements in which devotees offer blood to their guru in a centripetal movement from many to one, with the guru, in a centrifugal movement from one to many, symbolically transferring the same blood to patients in need and the nation at large (see Copeman 2009: ch. 4). The anonymous structures of humanitarian blood donation, in other words, allow the guru's love and influence to travel outwards from an exemplary centre in a consummate enactment and image of his expansibility. Though the Nirankari tradition is not a yogic one, there may also be an element here of the guru – in classic yogic fashion – using devotees' bodies to enter the bodies of others (see White 2009). (The chapters in this book by Gold, Das and Copeman each provide examples where the authorial voice of the guru is ambiguous or obscure as a consequence, variously, of yogic penetration, spirit possession, impersonation, or the mischief of dream.) Considered to contain the guru's love, knowledge and intentions, devotees' donated blood thus also carries forth the guru's personality such that a blood transfusion comes to offer much more than mere physical relief. As a twentieth-century yogic practitioner and scholar explains, it is the teacher's ability to inhabit others' bodies that allows them to progress on the path of yoga: 'The more people's bodies a yogi is able to make his own by entering into foreign bodies, the greater the number [of bodies]

will be pervaded by his mind, and the more he will be able to use his own action-energy (*kriya-shakti*) for the general welfare, in his all-pervasive form' (White 2009: 166). Harnessing the humanitarian structures of voluntary blood donation, the Nirankari guru similarly increases his dominion, expanding and fortifying both his own body and the corporate body of the sect.

Ironically given that our subject is the guru's uncontainability, containment forms a second strategy of expansibility; more specifically, *expansive containment*. By this we mean 'extending in order to include and including in order to extend'. Gold's chapter, which presents a wonderfully subtle personal exploration of continuity and change as one guru passes away to be succeeded by his son, provides an interesting example of this. Offering a rich longitudinal perspective on the development and changes in the relationship between presiding gurus and their disciples at an ashram in Gwalior and beyond, Gold describes how individual personalities can impact profoundly upon devotional experience. Initiated into the *sant mat* tradition (creed of the Hindi poet-singers such as Kabir) at an early age, Malik Sahib combined a career in the civil service with a gradual path towards guru-ship, beginning to initiate disciples into a form of Radhasoami practice (see Gold 1987; Juergensmeyer 1991) on the passing of his own guru in 1940. His professional life afforded opportunities to attain a following: 'As he was transferred around the state to different postings, he found new groups of disciples, some of whom stayed with him till the end of his life.' His son and successor Maharajji, however, toured well beyond the state – for instance, to Himachal Pradesh – and integrated local folk songs from these travels into the movement's repertoire more generally. Such diversity, in turn, 'helped integrate new local folk cultures into his devotional field'. Without wishing to impute crass instrumentalism to such acts of incorporation, such generative inclusiveness nevertheless begins to provide a sense of what we mean when we say 'extending in order to include and including in order to extend'.

The expansive self-definitions of Sathya Sai Baba, alluded to above, provide a further example. S. Srinivas (2008) and T. Srinivas (2010) have documented the extraordinary scalar shift in the biography of Sai Baba from minor local guru in the 1940s to – by the mid-late twentieth-century – 'global' hyper guru. As S. Srinivas (2008: 67) explains, Sai Baba enfolds categories of guru, *sant* and avatar. While a sant may be a guru and a guru a sant, 'all gurus may not emerge from the sant tradition, nor are all gurus avatars' (ibid.). The latter point is significant. As Warrier (2005: 36) observes, though devotees have historically affirmed their gurus' avatar-hood as incarnations of specific deities – most typically Vishnu – present-day gurus' explicit claims to avatar status are in fact relatively novel. Let us look more closely at the avatar-hood of Sai Baba, which we see as being connected to the aforementioned shift from local to global guru.

Born in 1926 and named Sathyanarayana Raju, in 1940 he declared he was Sai Baba; that is, the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918), a saint from the town of Shirdi in Maharashtra whose ritual and theological repertoire included elements from both Islam and Hinduism – though his followers have largely expunged the Islamic elements and tend to follow a Vaishnava worship sequence closely

associated with Krishna *bhakti*. As T. Srinivas (2010: 58) explains, 'this open declaration of affiliation with Shirdi Sai Baba and inscribed subtle declaration of affiliation to Krishna was, and is, a recurrent theme in Sathya Sai Baba's discourses, from the 1940s to the 1960s, and then again from the 1990s to the present'. To be clear: 'Sathya Sai Baba does not claim that Shirdi Sai Baba was his guru: he claims to *be* Shirdi Sai Baba. "The two bodies are different but the divinity is one" is his common formulation of this identity' (S. Srinivas 2008: 69). Already having identified himself with Krishna and Rama, the most renowned and revered of Vishnu's other avatars, in 1963 he claimed to be an incarnation of the god Shiva and his consort Shakti. He also prophesied his final form as Prema Sai, to be born eight years after his death in southern Karnataka. He thus added to his already burgeoning collection of associations, allowing him to further his reach theologically and socially (T. Srinivas 2010: 65): 'He could claim Brahminic status (through Bharadwaja [the *gothra* through which he was born Shiva-Shakti]), within the Hindu Shaivite tradition (as an incarnation of Shiva), an appeal to female devotees (through the female Shakti principle), Islamic Sufi sainthood (through the "flash-back" of his previous incarnation as Shirdi Sai Baba), the potential to prophesy his future divinity as Prema Sai (the saviour of the universe in an immoral age), and the Hindu concept of divine androgyny (as he declared himself to be the unification of male and female principles in the universe)' (ibid.: 66).

Containment comes to form an aspect of his uncontainability because a feature of his being uncontained is his containing everything. He 'contains' his spiritual forebears and a range of other associations/affiliations (there is seemingly no limit to them) and this contributes dramatically to his expansibility. Affiliations are not only claimed explicitly but also suggested in more subtle ways. For instance, many devotees view Sathya Sai Baba's fondness for animals as evidence of a further affiliation with Dattatreya (thought to be an animal-loving god and also identified with Shirdi Sai Baba). 'Relational speculation', to employ Carsten's (2011) phrase, is positively encouraged. Having himself revealed a set of multiple and layered associations, devotees appear to be adept in taking (proliferating) them further: here the guru, as signifier, to employ Derridean terminology, is not fixed to a signified but points beyond itself to other signifiers in an indefinite referral of signifier to signified. The relational speculation fostered by the drama of the staged revelation of his divine personality thus further increases and augments the dispersed habitation of his divine self. A picture emerges, then, of a kind of strategic unfolding, that is also simultaneously an *enfolding*, for its structuring logics are those of encompassment and commensuration: 'The operational core of the guru-sant-avatar-future fourfold narrative is the modality of strategic ambiguity . . . the various plastic forms [of his divine identity] cover the various possibilities. This modality of strategic ambiguity located in temporal stretching enables Sathya Sai Baba to transform himself from local guru to global godman' (T. Srinivas 2010: 74). For 'hyper-' or middle-class gurus avatar-hood appears to have developed into an index of spiritual worth and means of obtaining distinction among 'the vast array of gurus in India's teeming urban spiritual supermarket' (Warrier 2003: 234, 2005: ch. 2; see also Copeman 2009: 143). What Sathya Sai

Baba has done, no doubt influencing other gurus in his wake, is to perfect the art of sacred unveiling, performing a kind of *genealogical diversification*, enfolding diverse spiritual provenances as an exemplary means of expanding appeal and reach. This is a kind of semiotic or associational uncontainability; the guru as collector of associations.

For T. Srinivas (2010), such genealogical diversification forms the basis of a particular kind of cosmopolitanism. The 'engaged cosmopolitanism' that characterises the Sathya Sai Baba movement is rooted in a form of 'social inclusivity' that enfolds 'conflicting opinions and diverse positions'. Such inclusivity is consequent on the 'grammar of diversity' developed by the guru himself (ibid.: 329), something akin to what we called above associational or semiotic uncontainability. Such a 'matrix of possible meanings . . . allows devotees powers of agency . . . in picking the required ingredients for their personal transformation' (ibid.). Khandelwal's chapter in this book, which explores contemporary 'guru culture' in the north Indian town of Rishikesh, also employs cosmopolitanism as an analytical category. Khandelwal shows how gurus, monks and their ashrams accommodate a variety of 'spiritual tourists' in search of self-transformation. Here a certain form of cosmopolitanism is found not so much among visitors as among the hosts. Gurus and renouncers typify a certain detachment (from the world), displacement (from the comforts of domestic life the better to achieve non-attachment), aloofness (from social and ritual convention), and openness to variations in bodily practice (e.g. a forgiving attitude towards the ritual/behavioural missteps of visitors), and as Khandelwal shows so effectively, it is just such qualities that figure prominently in scholarly definitions of cosmopolitanism (e.g. Pollock et al. 2002). The form of cosmopolitan dialogue that emerges in Rishikesh, then, is critically dependent on the particular conventions *already present* in a place of pilgrimage and renunciation.

However, if their hosts mostly tolerate visitors' manifold social and cultural differences, such tolerance of difference is quite different from the political recognition of difference in Euro-American multiculturalism: the ethos of neo-Vedanta treats social and cultural difference as illusory and therefore meaningless. Moreover, Rishikesh cosmopolitanism has its limitations. Undesirable non-Indian spiritual seekers are categorised pejoratively as 'hippies' or 'fake *sadhu*s', and despite these gurus' rhetorical embracement of all religions, Muslims are noticeable for their absence. The coexistence of a rhetoric of embracement and chauvinistic attitudes in the religious town of Rishikesh is perhaps suggestive of an inherent contradiction of globalising Hinduism and its proselytising gurus. While gurus are adept in flexibly selling different messages and goods according to the needs of Western spiritual seekers, they can also foster exclusivistic Hindu nationalist attitudes among Indians at home and in the diaspora. The VHP, which was established in order to mobilise Hindus throughout the world, is a case in point. The VHP uses anti-globalisation rhetoric at home by arguing that Hinduism is under attack from 'foreign' threats (Christianity and Islam), while it is itself a key agent of the globalisation of Hinduism. Van der Veer (2002) urges us to regard these religious movements as offering an 'alternative cosmopolitanism', with the potential for considerable ideological and technological creativity.

Differently located and of another scale entirely, the mode of 'guru cosmopolitanism' identified by Khandelwal is nevertheless comparable to that described by T. Srinivas, with the creation of a sacred cosmopolitan milieu dependent on the enlarged cosmopolitanism of guru figures themselves. In the case discussed by Khandelwal, particular 'local' ascetic principles already suggest the cosmopolitanism that flourishes in the context of spiritual tourism. In T. Srinivas's case, the manifold religio-cultural provenances condensed in the figure of Sathya Sai Baba allow for processes of cultural translation that she terms 'cosmopolitan'. As we saw earlier, though physically discontinuous with Shirdi Sai Baba, he and Sathya Sai Baba are, in spiritual terms, to be counted as one. But not only that. Shiva, Shakti, Dattatreya, even (controversially) Jesus, are counted as one in the containing figure of the uncontained guru. How are we to think of this mode of personhood? Certainly, such containment of diverse provenances forms an element of the guru's centrifugal or extensible personality – the spiralling outwards that Mines and Gourishankar (1990) have discussed. The language of 'count-as-one' derives from the philosopher Badiou (2006). Influenced by mathematical set theory, multiplicities of any kind (from plants to situations to materials), as a consequence of limitations on human perception, are nevertheless counted as one. For Badiou, there follow from this a number of complex political and ontological implications that we are unable to explore here.[19] Given that for Badiou *all* phenomena is counted (perceived) as one, despite its multiplicity *in actuality*, it is not necessarily clear how or whether we can distinguish thoroughly strategic enfoldings of the multifarious into images of singularity, such as that performed by Sathya Sai Baba. In consequence, the language of count-as-one may be useful only up to a point. If we continue to employ the language of count-as-one we do so not in the sense of this being a kind of inevitable epiphenomenon of human perception, but rather as a deliberate means of 'extending in order to include and including in order to extend'.

Perhaps a more helpful model is that provided by Fausto in his work on mastery and magnification in Amazonia (2008). Just as Mines and Gourishankar (1990) looked to the classic Melanesian 'big man' as a helpful model in elucidating styles of leadership in south India, Fausto turns towards Strathern's Melanesian concept of the magnified person in order to explicate Amerindian notions of mastery and ownership as these are manifested in particular persons. Fausto (2008: 6) cites ethnographic research from among the Kanamari of western Amazonia where the term *warah* expresses a relation of 'container–contained, singularity–plurality, such that "the name of a person followed by *–warah* designates not only that person's body, but also, in the case of chiefs, all those who call that person 'my body-owner' ('my-chief'), along with all the belongings of the person whose name forms the noun-phrase X-*warah*" ' (Costa cited in Fausto 2008: 4). The figure of the owner-master, in other words, is 'the form through which a plurality appears as a singularity to others' (ibid.: 6). It is important to note that such magnified persons, or 'inclusive singularities', do not appear as representatives, occupying the place of others, but rather 'as a people' – that is, 'as the form through which a collective is constituted as an image [and] presented to others' (ibid.).

Such a model of inclusive singularity may be brought to bear on the question of guru-ship in at least two ways. First, it may help us further our understanding of the avatar-guru who piles up (embodies, contains) multifarious associations, including in order to extend. But the Amazonian owner-master who, as a magnified person, appears to others 'as a people' is also suggestive of the way in which a guru may contains his/her followers. The avatar-guru is doubly magnified, so to speak: first, they contain their former incarnations, and second, in respect of others, they appear as the collective image of their followers. This has implications for gurus' relationship with democracy. India is famous as the land of 'vote bank' politics, where different caste groups are seen to vote in elections en masse as single entities, and usually according to the instructions of their 'caste leaders' (see Khilnani 1997: 79). These, too, are a kind of magnified person, and as the essays in this collection by Gold, Jaffrelot, Ikegame and Copeman show, it is not only caste leaders, but also gurus, who are vital 'container actors' at election time (Ikegame's chapter shows that the categories of guru and caste leader are perfectly capable of collapsing into one). Gold (this volume) refers to the Indian media's coinage of the term 'Ballot babas' to describe the phenomenon, the assumption being that the recruitment by political parties of consummate 'inclusive singularities' constitutes simultaneously the recruitment of those whom they contain (their followers) (see also Chatterjee [2004: 50] on the state's engagement with governed populations through their 'natural leaders').[20]

Such a logic is further reproduced in respect of the guru's 'miraculous feats'. For instance, Warrier (2003: 256) notes that Mata Amritanandamayi's devotees view the enlargement and spread of her devotional movement as evidence of her miraculous powers, whereas in fact it is 'the perseverance of . . . devotees . . . themselves that has made this institution building possible in the first place'. In other words, followers of the Mata are responsible for the miracles they attribute to her. The participatory production of such miracles is ideologically denied both by the movement's literature and by devotees themselves. The guru's followers fetishise the energy they have produced together as a power inherent to the 'magnetizer'-guru (Mazzarella 2010a: 724). Plurality, again, is presented as a singularity to others, but devotees' self-perceptions are structured similarly, for their productive actions are understood as being 'contained' by the magnified person of the guru.

We have thus suggested that an aspect of gurus' uncontainability is their unusual capacity to key into the momentum of given situations and 'harvest' them so as to generate a sense of 'carrying forward', and that this is possible, at least in part, because of the polyvalent meanings of gurus themselves. 'Guruness' can attach to different people (is uncontainable), while persons may use guruness to expand themselves (ironically, through strategies of containment). All of this raises the question of media. Do recent developments in print and electronic media contribute to gurus' expansive agency, enabling them all the better to extend a sense of their presence? Of course, the guru historically is no stranger to technologies of mediation. For instance, in Morse's (this volume) discussion of the Datta *sampradaya*, we learn that this tradition's central focus is the Marathi liturgical

text, the *Gurucaritra*, and the Sanskrit hymn to the guru, the *Gurugita*, while Chatterjee (1993: 45) has drawn attention to the centrality of print media in the popularisation of Ramakrishna among the Bengal middle class. But what of more recent changes in the form and reach of media technologies? It is to these questions that we now turn.

The guru in the age of mechanical reproduction

On 2 March 2010, Tamil television channel Sun News broadcast videotapes in which the prominent south Indian religious leader Swami Nithyananda and a young woman, apparently the Tamil film actress Ranjitha, were shown in a number of 'compromising positions'. Later that same day numerous other national and regional channels aired the videos and reported the incident as a sex scandal involving the 'self-styled godman'. At the same time, several more videos involving the guru, the Ranjitha look-alike, and another woman were being uploaded onto YouTube. The next day a group of young men forcibly entered Nithyananda's Bidadi ashram, near Bangalore, and vandalised buildings. It was alleged that Nithyananda's driver-cum-manager filmed and sold the tape to the TV channel. On 21 April, after several weeks of hiding, Nithyananda was arrested in Himachal Pradesh by Karnataka police on charges of rape, committing unnatural sex acts, criminal intimidation, criminal conspiracy, cheating, and deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious sentiments under sections 295A, 376, 377, 420, 506(1) and 120 of the Indian Penal Code. Nithyananda was kept in custody by the Bangalore Police until 23 June. A video of him being released from custody was also released on TV and the Internet.

The televised Nithyananda episode dramatically presents us with two important themes for analysis of contemporary gurus. The first concerns the manner in which contemporary media technologies caused the guru's alleged activities to become instantaneous nationwide and global news. The guru was betrayed by the very same technologies that had hitherto enabled the global circulation of his image and teachings, proliferating his influence and 'presence'. Secondly, this scandal demonstrates the ineradicable link between a guru's sexuality, or lack of it to be precise, and his authority and legitimacy. The indelibility of this mystical connection seems to suggest that the ultimate condition of being a guru is celibacy or the total negation of sexual desire. Despite this public conviction, there are many local traditions that allow gurus to marry, and some that even make marriage obligatory in becoming a guru. Even among orthodox Brahmins, it is not uncommon for devotees to share among themselves the secret knowledge of their guru having a wife (for examples of non-celibate gurus see Peabody 1991, Gold 1988: 102).

Born in 1978 in Tamil Nadu, the youthful Nithyananda was fast becoming a high profile face among the globalising hyper-gurus. By the time of the scandal, his foundation – Life Bliss Foundation – claimed to have centres in 33 countries. According to one participant, the expensive meditation workshop offered by

Nithyananda claims to provide techniques of meditation 'deeper and more transformative' than those available elsewhere in the spiritual marketplace (Malhotra 2010). On the Bangalore–Mysore highway, prior to the scandal, could be seen several gigantic cutouts of the guru wearing a big smile alongside messages such as, 'I am not here to prove that I am God. I am here to prove that you are God'.

Such messages are reflective of those of his predecessors who travelled to the West since the late nineteenth century spreading new forms of Hinduism which, in turn, provided inspiration to alternative spiritual movements in North America, Europe and beyond. As is well known, a large number of gurus have travelled overseas and in consequence become key agents of a globalising Hinduism. In the nineteenth century, Hindu religious reformists such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), founder of the Brahmo Samaj, and Protap Chunder Mozoomdar (1840–1905) travelled abroad and began interpreting Hinduism in the light of European Christian moral values, or vice versa in the case of Mozoomdar. (For a useful overview of travelling Hindu gurus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Saha 2007; for detailed biographies of gurus specifically in America see Forsthoefel and Humes 2005.)

However, it is the spectacular success of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893 that is widely considered to mark the beginning of 'globalising' Hinduism. Vivekananda gave a series of classes and lectures in the United States and instructed workers who would later spread his philosophy. Another prominent first generation travelling Hindu guru, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), moved to the United States in 1920 and began teaching the practices and philosophy of yoga and meditation. The teachings of Vivekananda and others were not always similar, but they all contributed towards the creation of so-called Neo-Vedanta or Neo-Hinduism. Vivekananda in particular articulated a clear monistic vision of Hinduism in which 'each individual was able to achieve the direct experience of God-realisation and the diversity of various religions and sects merely meant that they were different paths to the same goal' (Wessinger 1995: 176). Apart from this message that 'the individual can have direct experience of ultimate reality', Vivekananda's strong denial of the Christian doctrine of original sin seems to have strongly appealed to Americans searching for alternative religious experiences (ibid.: 180).

Vivekananda's universalised version of Hinduism was extremely successful, not only because it made Hinduism open and accessible to non-Indians, but also because it elevated Hinduism to a status equal to that of other world religions, especially Christianity. Meanwhile, he sought to sanitise and resolve various tensions and transgressive aspects inherent within many guru traditions. He erased, for instance, the terrifying iconographical image of the bloodthirsty Goddess Kali who, for Vivekananda's own guru Ramakrishna, was the ultimate goal of all the religious paths (Saha 2007: 489). The eccentric boundary-crossing behaviour of Ramakrishna – dressing and eating like a Muslim (Wessinger 1995: 175) or experiencing menstruation by having periodic discharges of blood through

the pores of his skin (Mehta 1993: 182) – was no longer on the agenda. However, Neo-Vedanta was not quite 'India's spiritual gift to the world' as some Hindu writers wish to believe, but rather a result of previous interactions between India and the West. Some scholars have argued that the construction of Neo-Vedanta is a prime example of how romanticised, Orientalist images of 'mystical' or 'spiritual' India contributed to the construction of the self-awareness of modern Indians (King 1999). Others point out that Vivekananda and his early followers belonged to the newly assertive bourgeois class that emerged as beneficiaries of the burgeoning colonial administrative system based in Calcutta (Vivekananda was of the *kayastha* caste from which the British recruited most of their administrators) (Chowdhury 2001: 124; Raychaudhuri 1989: 221).

If, in such instances, Hinduism is, so to speak, 'disambiguated' for purposes of presentation to non-Indians, in her chapter in this book, Frøystad offers an exemplary account of how urban Indian middle classes consume new forms of Hinduism that were originally designed for the benefit of *Western* audiences. Rather then merely treating this as a phenomenon of 'reverse-globalisation', she locates their consumerist spiritual quest within a tension between intellectualism and instantaneity or simplicity, which has been, as French indologist Biardeau argues, a feature of Indian religious traditions for centuries. For instance, in opposition to the closed adult male-only intellectualism of the Brahmanical elite, Buddhism, and later *bhakti* movements, emphasised devotion and the importance of direct sensory experience of the divine.

Olivelle (1990) regards the nomadic wandering of the solitary renouncer as an early, Vedic-era, form of asceticism. Like other structuralist understandings of renunciation (e.g. Dumont 1970; Das 1977; Thapar 1982), he views Indian asceticism as an 'anti-culture', which embodies everything which settled Indian village community life denies. However, he carefully avoids the claim that Indian asceticism is *counter*cultural, since it does not seek to overturn or transform the existing social structure. Rather, it purports to exist outside of that structure. The argument is that, with the development of the monasticism of Buddhism and Jainism and finally the establishment of Brahmin *matha* institutions by the Shankaracharya in the eighth century, the 'wilderness' of early asceticism was domesticated. But the tension between the 'wilderness' and 'village' remained a part of the Indian religious ethos, the wilderness of Indian asceticism always providing freedom and the village the bondage of rules and obligations (ibid.: 132).

While Frøystad's middle classes enjoy a restricted, 'tasteful' wilderness through the religious experiences that techno-savvy gurus are able to offer, Morse explores in his chapter an interesting synthesis of the tension between self-forgetting devotion (*bhakti*) and self-restricting rules (*vidhi*). Morse argues that in the Datta sampradaya of west India, the act of reading itself is the primary mode of religiosity among the high-caste (mostly Brahmin) devotees. Reading here is a bodily, sensual act. Morse regards the tension between devotion (and possible transgression) and rules not simply as two contradictory modes of religiosity. They can co-exist as a result of the efforts of Brahmins to include a popular

devotional ethos within their own otherwise highly conservative tradition. This seeming contradiction or tension, he argues, actually stimulated the very core of Brahminhood which emphasises the important role of the guru in the ideal life cycle. The figure of Dattatreya is particularly important here. Dattatreya, the arch-guru, is imagined as an incarnation of the three main gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, brought together in a single form. Dattatreya is therefore a guru as a god, but he is *more than* gods since 'the guru can offer what the gods cannot'. Morse reminds us that the guru-*shishya* relationship is of cardinal importance in the ideal Brahmin life cycle. Only the guru can guide, instruct and transfer vocational and salvific knowledge through the *upanayana* ceremony and the tutelage that follows.

In Frøystad's detailed account of contemporary Indian middle-class spiritual seekers, perhaps we witness a contemporary quest for freedom beyond the confines of community or family life. Their preference for instantaneity or simplicity reveals a strong desire to participate not only intellectually but also sensually in this new Hindu religious culture. In response to this, gurus are flexible enough to adopt new narrative styles (autobiographical and impressionist), simple Hindi or English, and performative skills which evoke intimacy and playfulness. Frøystad provides a fascinating description of how Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, whom she calls 'one of India's ultimate embodiments of instantaneity', speaks and performs in front of a large audience. Use of modern high-tech sound systems means he is able to talk softly while addressing large crowds. This creates an impression that he is casually chatting to each one of them, 'directly'. He also often giggles and playfully crosses the boundaries of religious differences by, for example, wearing a Sikh turban and a sword (compare with the chapters in this volume by Cohen and Copeman on gurus and 'dressing up'). The serious message of the sameness of all religions is expressed with childlike playfulness in a manner that enables the many thousands of his followers to feel close to him. Cautious manipulation of media forms makes it possible to have an intimate one-to-one relationship with a guru who might otherwise seem distant and inaccessible.

Globalising hyper gurus and transnational religious movements have been effective in employing technologies of mechanical reproduction in order to spread their messages and maintain their authority (see, especially, S. Srinivas 2008, T. Srinivas 2010). These technologies have developed and diversified from print media (books and god posters etc.) to include diverse forms of audio-visual recording (cassette tapes, VCRs, DVDs), radio, films, television, and the Internet (Babb and Wadley 1995; Dasgupta 2006; Hughes 2009; Meyer and Moors 2006; Meyer 2009; Rajagopal 2001; Saha 2007). While new technologies, especially satellite TV and the Internet, enable new forms of transmission and community building, older technologies do not simply die out. For instance, publication of the books of the aforementioned guru Rajneesh (Osho) has accelerated since his death in 1990 (Urban 2005). There are thus multiple new means for gurus to transmit their presence to often globally dispersed devotees. Not only for travelling global hyper gurus, but also among orthodox Brahmin gurus who do not travel overseas

because of purity restrictions (*kalapani*), new media technologies have become extremely important to reach followers residing in North America and the Gulf States (Saha 2007: 493–495).

It is worth asking, however, whether such broadening or *extension* of presence may be accomplished without consequences for its *intension* or meaning (Laidlaw 2007). Or, to paraphrase Rajagopal (2011: 1035), are we witnessing the increase of influence through spatial extension or its weakening through dislocation? To attempt an answer it is necessary to examine more closely questions of 'aura' and mediation. Despite the prediction of modernisation theory that as mediating technologies of reproduction develop religiosity would lose its intensity and diffuse into modern secular sensitivities, many scholars of religions recognise that the opposite has been the case. Media and religion are now frequently characterised as being complementary rather than antagonistic to one other (Stolow 2005; Meyer and Moors 2006; Meyer 2009; Engelke 2010). The exponential unboundedness and translocality of religious experience has caused scholars to redefine their categories of religiosity, requiring them to pay less attention to the boundaries of religious practice and rather more to the means by which religiosity is communicated:

> [. . .] religion can be analyzed as a practice of mediation, to which media, as technologies of representation employed by human beings, are intrinsic. It is important to note that this perspective extends the notion of media, which implies modern devices such as films, radio, photography, television, or computers – the usual focus of scholars studying media – towards the inclusion of substances such as incense or herbs, sacrificial animals, icons, sacred books, holy stones and rivers, and, finally, the human body, which lends itself to being possessed by a spirit.
>
> (Meyer 2009: 11)

Following Meyer, reconsidering gurus as *media* enables us to revisit classic arguments concerning the guru as a mediator while analysing gurus' use of technologies of mechanical reproduction. In a rejoinder to popular scholarly opinion that postulates the 'loss of aura' in the age of mechanical reproduction, Dasgupta (2006), through a careful reading of Benjamin, argues '[i]t would be a mistake to assume that the aura vanishes with technological mediation; rather, its character changes given its displacement from the time and space of tradition in ritual and religion to the mobile and fragmented temporality and spatiality of modern experience' (Dasgupta 2006: 256). How then do contemporary gurus maintain their aura while acting as mediators between earthly and spiritual planes?

Historically, and in the present, the guru has been represented either as a guide who leads devotees to the Supreme Being or as himself a primary object of faith (Gold 1988). Even among contemporary hyper gurus the two types are discernible. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1914–2008), founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement, and Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), founder of ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), both

presented themselves as extremely knowledgeable yet *human* teachers, while other high-profile gurus, notably Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi, emerge as *avatar*s or embodiments of the divine (Gold 2005: 220–221). As Gold and others point out, in most guru-inspired religious movements, gurus are represented both as respected teachers *and avatar*s, and gurus switch as a matter of convenience between the two images according to the demands of devotees and social and cultural circumstance.

Though the appearance of the guru as teacher and as *avatar* may be strikingly different, both are nevertheless types of media. Respected teachers transmit sacred knowledge and practical means of self-transformation to their followers, while through the body of the *avatar*-guru devotees may come to witness transcendent being. (Sathya Sai Baba, of course, expanded his avatar-hood ad infinitum, claiming that one could see any and every divine figure within him.) Both are types of media which simultaneously assure us of the existence of the transcendent (ultimate salvation or the divine being) and its *unattainability*. Such a paradoxical message of accessibility and unattainability is a crucial mechanism in maintaining the authority and charisma of the guru.

The guru as a mediator presents us with a further paradox. Most guru-inspired religious movements began life as social and political movements opposed to hierarchical social structures and the monopolisation of religious knowledge and/or rights of access to god(s) by religious elites (Turner 2011: xxiv–xxv). Such movements were founded on the insistent promise that one could directly communicate with the supreme being without relying upon the sacred knowledge and rituals monopolised by Brahmin elites. Many medieval religious movements in India, such as *sant* movements in the north (Gold 1987), Sikhism in western India (Copeman this volume), and Lingayatism in the south (Ikegame this volume), were iconoclastic, subaltern and revolutionary, at least in the beginning. But in the process of, to employ Weber's terminology, the 'institutionalisation of charisma', gurus themselves became a centre of devotion. Some developed exclusive guru lineages of a radically asymmetrical nature. The guru as mediator does not, though, disappear as a result of the institutionalisation or 'routinisation' of charisma. The institutionalised authority of gurus is frequently challenged and replaced by new guru movements in which the guru offers renewed social change and a revision of religious aspirations.

In an era offering ever-increasing forms of mechanical reproduction, globalising religious movements seeking to reach their globally dispersed followers have been active in what Benjamin called the 'reactivating of aura'. The messages and teachings of the guru must be easily available (reproducible, consumable), while at the same time it is of critical importance that his/her singularity and uniqueness is maintained, for it is the latter which ensures the transcendent nature of the guru and his/her teaching. Dasgupta (2006: 255) argues, employing Benjamin's concept of the 'distant effect', that the aura 'signifies authority in that its distanciation from its audience confers a socially recognized privilege on those sanctioned to maintain this distance'. He further claims that this effect which, prior to mechanical reproduction, was locked in a specific location in a particular time and place

in order to ensure auratic authority and social privilege, has retained a positive role in the contemporary era of mechanical reproduction. We may look, for example, to the figure of the hugging guru Mata Amritanandamayi (also known as Ammachi or Amma) whose devotees regard Amma dolls as containers of her sacred presence, thereby enabling them to carry her with them far and wide (Raj 2005: 140). The Amma doll is not simply a mass produced copy. Their producers claim that in crafting the dolls they use a piece of cloth that Amma has herself worn, making each doll a unique device that activates her aura. The Amma doll, which is simultaneously unique and one of thousands, connects each devotee to Amma's body and ensures the presence of the singular body of Amma even at a distance. The Amma doll seems not to dilute her aura but to reactivate it at home. Here can be noticed the dialectical effect of what Mazzarella (2006: 496) has called 'close distance' in which 'a carefully calibrated blend of the approachable and the awe-inspiring' enhances auratic authority. Technologies of mechanical reproduction thus seem less to have undermined the authority of gurus than to have successfully amplified it while creating scattered but connected spaces of the faithful.

But media technologies are not always loyal in their auratic image creation. Around the time of the Nithyananda scandal, the extent to which there has been a subaltern 'takeover' of media technologies was beginning to be recognised. Since the famous *Tehelka* sting operation in 2001 (see Mazzarella 2006), the technology of the sting operation or exposé has been radically democratised. *Tehelka*, then an Internet-based journal, sent journalists pretending to be arms dealers to meet with the secretary of the then ruling BJP, who was filmed in his office receiving a cash bribe in exchange for implied favours. Corruption in the government itself was hardly shocking news, though the dramatic visibilisation of the scene of corruption was sensational enough. However, now we see not only the investigative journalism that *Tehelka* claims to embody but several cases of ordinary young women secretly recording conversations or filming scenes of their in-laws demanding unreasonable sums in dowry and then sending these videos to the national media. Guru killing has many precedents (see the elaborate argument about the killing of gurus among wandering ascetics in Bengal in Openshaw 1998), but the Nithyananda case was the first example of 'killing the guru' from below via the use of modern media technology.

The sting operation by *Tehelka* in 2001 embarrassed the BJP led government, but *Tehelka* suffered a backlash and subsequently was forced to close down (*Tehelka* has been reincarnated since as a paper-based magazine). A similar parallel could be seen in the case of Nithyananda. On his institution's professional-looking website, a campaign was started called 'All sides Exposed', which featured a host video with interviews of ashramites supporting Nithyananda. The site also contained the images of 1,200 letters in blood sent to the Bangalore high court from devotees from all over the world as well as news of their legal action against the ex-driver. When we visited his Bidadi ashram in November 2010, devotees were building several guesthouses for visitors. With his movement restricted by the conditions of his bail, Nithyananda had begun a new meditation workshop

'eN-Kalpataru' using Skype. From pictures posted on the institution's website, it is clear that a number of devotees have treated their guru's usage of Skype as an opportunity to take his *darshan*. Here again the 'distant effect' or 'close distance' of affective immediacy and the aura of the guru were carefully orchestrated via the use of media technology. Like many other guru scandals, this one too became merely a test of the true loyalties of the guru's devotees.[21]

Guru erotics

The Nithyananda sex scandal was scandalous not merely because it visually exposed his (supposed) sex acts. Rather, it was disturbing because it was felt that the controlled 'distant effect' of his guruhood had been violated. Instead of regarding the guru from a ritually and socially constructed 'distance', people were suddenly transported into his bedroom. Producing and representing the comfortable distance between the public (or devotees) ensures the paradoxical co-existence of the transcendental nature of the guru *and* his public immediacy. In the case of Nithyananda, the scandal seemed to assume complete precedence over his mediated authority.

Of course 'guru scandal' is not itself a new phenomenon. Succession scandals among militant ascetics in the early nineteenth century (Pinch this volume), the infamous 'Maharaj Libel Case' of the 1860s, the deportation of Osho from the United States, the murder and sex abuse allegations within Sathya Sai Baba's ashram, and the murder charge against Kanchi Shankarachariya in 2004, are just a few examples. In a literary version of the televisual and Internet exposés discussed above, various writers have in addition been concerned to 'uncover' homoeroticism within the teachings of various saints and saintly figures. Books such as *Kali's Child* (Kripal 1995), which discusses Ramakrishna, and Joseph Lelyveld's *Great Soul* (2011), on Gandhi's life and career, have often been accused of entertaining baseless charges against great men, resulting in nationwide controversies involving both scholars and political activists, calls for bans, and sometimes physical violence. Cohen's important chapter in this book delineates a more nuanced and layered homoeroticism. His essay focuses on the guru as a teacher of youth and attends to questions in such a context of the guru's age and desire. As there is no single ideal type of either teacher or guru, Cohen's essay eschews a single argument and tracks across a series of figures of contemporary ethical pedagogy. The first such figure, Guruji, is a Banaras (Varanasi) tantrik who at a given moment is claimed as being something like gay by a man who visits him for the relief of anxiety and 'worries'. Discussion focuses on the sexual and more generally normative license of this guru: the tantrik's desire may mark his fallibility, but it also underlies an ethical space in which it is through disciplined repetition of a scene of instruction that one may learn: in this case, to live amid the worries of adulthood. To open up reflection on the guru's fallibility and how the disciple establishes such a relation to a scene of instruction, the text turns to reflection on the relations of Drona, Ekalavya, and Arjuna in the Mahabharata and to the work of a

Dalit exorcist in Banaras. The text turns back to the relation of the guru to what is termed the contemporary 'accusation' and 'promise' of homosexuality in India, through a suggestion that the much debated sexual subjectivity of the revered Sri Ramakrishna be conceptualised through a particular gendered figuration of childhood that establishes the teacher's unworldliness. A rendering in modern Hindi devotional literature of a story from the Padma Purana is utilised to develop the conception of the teacher's unworldliness as an eroticised homosociality, as is a discussion of a religious teacher who had an earlier life as a drag queen. This connection between erotic figuration and the pedagogic and ethical question of the possibility of learning despite the fallibility and worries of adulthood is contrasted with other conjunctions of normative homosexuality and normative Hinduism in the figure of television guru Baba Ramdev.

In view of the examples presented above, the Nithyananda case might be legitimately classed as 'just another' guru controversy. Nevertheless it possessed several exemplary features. First, there is the aspect of its mediatisation. As was noted above, the scandal, intensely visibilised, became a YouTube phenomenon and was reported on national news and even in some international newspapers. To borrow from Thompson's (2005: 43) discussion of media and political scandal in the UK, it seems likely that the growing prevalence of controversies involving gurus has less to do with a general decline in the moral standards of gurus than with the changing ways in which, and the extent to which, the activities of gurus are made visible in the public domain. Second, the scandal revealed the extent to which modern Indian sensitivities are still invested in the icon of the celibate, non-sexual guru-renouncer. From such a standpoint, whether the guru had affairs with female disciples was less important than the fact that he had violated the ideal of the sacred guru-renouncer. In fact, if one has the patience to watch extremely long YouTube clips, it is clear that, in the expression of one commentator, 'there is no sex as we know it'. One could even say that the intimate acts captured in the video were no more than religious discipleship frequently allows, including 'unusual, physical intimacies (such as massaging the feet) between female disciples and male guru' (Khandelwal 1997: 93). Nithyananda himself claimed in his statement that 'I am not a man. There is no way I could have indulged in sexual activities with women. Do a potency test on me.'[22] We thus move from the testing of devotees' loyalty (see the chapters by Copeman and Morse this volume), to testing of the guru. Claiming his impotency as a proof of his innocence may be pitiable but it reveals what is at stake within modern ascetic ideals.

The concept of *brahmachari* (celibacy) as a crucial linkage between sexuality and Indian nationalism has been the subject of much scholarly discussion (Alter 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Chowdhury 2001; Kakar 1990; Nandy 1983; Prakash 2000; Skaria 2010). Two prominent nationalists, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, although quite differently, were notable for their re-interpretation of the traditional concept of *brahmachari* as a way to achieve perfect self-control and true Indian masculinity. Classical Hindu texts define *brahmacharya* as the first

stage of the four-fold ideal life cycle. *Brahmacharya* is considered to be the stage of initiated studentship, which marks the ritual initiation of second birth for high-caste twice-born boys. Combined with South Asian ideas of seminal discharge as a loss of vital energy (Srivastava 2007), modern nationalists developed the concept of *brahmachari* as one opposed to Western masculinity (Alter 1994b: 49; Chowdhury 2001: 120–149). While Western masculinity was based on physical strength, its Eastern counterpart was viewed as an embodiment of spiritual strength deriving from self-control over bodily desires and especially total restraint from sex. In the construction of ascetic nationalism, womanhood can similarly only enter in the form of an idealised Mother, certainly not as sexual partner or wife (Chowdhury 2001: 131–135; Charu Gupta 2001, especially ch. 5).

However, in the case of Gandhi the woman is already an ideal mystic. According to Mehta (1993: 182), Gandhi came to believe that 'if he was ever to grow into a perfect *brahmachari* – achieve universality and union with God – he must, like some Hindu *brahmachari* mystics, become physically and spiritually more like a woman, or, rather, embrace in his person both male and female attributes' (Mehta 1993: 182). For Gandhi, like most of his contemporaries, female sexual desire simply did not exist and the early history of Hindu eroticism was completely forgotten (Doniger 2011). On the perfect *brahmachari*, Gandhi writes: 'Even his sexual organs will begin to look different . . . it is said that impotent [men] . . . desire erection but they fail to get it and yet have seminal discharges . . . But the cultivated impotency of the man whose sexual desire has been burnt up and whose sexual secretions are being converted into vital force . . . is to be desired by everybody' (quoted in Mehta 1993: 182).

Echoing the militant ascetics of the eighteenth century (Pinch this volume), the ideal model of the ascetic nationalist develops pure loyalty towards the nation and the vital force derived from complete self-control becomes a strong force against colonial domination. Here it seems that the erotic religious imaginary of older versions of Hinduism – which thrived through ancient cults of fertility, medieval devotional eroticism, and tantric traditions – has been completely subsumed by modern incarnations of asceticism. However, as Doniger (2011) argues, the two aspects – one the path of domesticity (or eroticism), the other the path of renunciation – have historically co-existed in the Hindu imaginary. The genealogy of female gurus, which Pechilis carefully traces in her chapter, describes one such interaction between these two paths. Traditionally women have been completely excluded from the *gurukula* system in which student-disciples reside with the guru and study at his feet, enabling master-gurus and student-disciples to develop intimate relationships and a lineage of philosophical thought. Women represent 'domesticity' (marriage, kinship, and practicality), defined in opposition to the kinless creation of the guru lineage (see also Pinch and Ikegame this volume), within which they thus cannot hope to participate. Yet despite this structural obstruction, female gurus existed even in canonical Hindu scriptures. Here Pechilis evokes resonances with one of the strongest feminist messages of the 1960s and 1970s: 'the personal is political' (Hanisch). Situated outside the institutionalised system of initiation and renunciation, female gurus are inevitably

transgressive. But instead of directly confronting the dominance of the male, they have subtly redefined and appropriated a number of rules and conventions characteristic of the guru–disciple relation. By questioning, testing and tricking their male counterparts or husbands, female gurus of pre-modern times caused them to realise limitations intrinsic to the knowledge-centred path towards spiritual insights, thereby opening new paths of personal experience. Moreover, contemporary female gurus have even begun prioritising the personal experience of devotees over the presence of gurus and centralised organisations. Importantly, what this suggests is the survival of a long established alternative path to male-centred asceticism within the Hindu imaginary. To put this in terms of the analytic construct introduced above, we see that uncontainable guru-ship could not be contained in one gender only.

Powers of the guru

Following our earlier discussion of 'ballot babas' and devotee mobilisation, we now consider more closely the political lives of Indian gurus. A recent *Wall Street Journal* news item, headlined 'India's Government by Guru', stated: 'Only an incorruptible man can beat a corrupt system. That's what many Indians have begun to think after witnessing a spate of graft scandals.'[23] The report was in response to high-profile campaigns spearheaded by yoga guru Swami Ramdev and Gandhian activist Anna Hazare in 2011 against state corruption and the flow of 'black money' to foreign bank accounts. The point about incorruptibility is significant. As Ikegame notes in her chapter, a guru's putative kinlessness can cause him to be seen as an ideal figure for politics because, lacking children to direct funds to, gurus are considered far less likely to succumb to corrupt practices. (See also Cohen [2004: 187] on perceptions of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who did not marry, as a worldly ascetic. This meant that, like issueless Hijra politicians, he could be better imagined as serving the nation rather than being parasitical on it for family gain.) It should be noted that the celibate yoga guru Ramdev has on more than one occasion voiced his intention to form a political party. Might Hazare and Ramdev be considered heirs to the saintly political idiom, discussed by Morris-Jones (1963) and Nandy (1970) and most famously exemplified by Gandhi, where in a seeming challenge to Dumont's (1970) insistence on an absolute distinction between the politico-economic arena of *artha* and the moral order of *dharma*, (ascetic) suppression of desires comes to legitimise – *to lend force to* – political participation? While Ramdev invokes Gandhi in calling for a '*satyagraha* against corruption',[24] he has also demanded the hanging of corrupt politicians and, as we shall see, has also called for the creation of a 'yoga army'. Despite such periodic 'saintly' challenges to politics as usual, however, for Jaffrelot (this volume) the more powerful underlying model, frequently occluded by the theatrics of the saintly intervention, is one in which ascetics and politicians *collaborate* in the exercise of power. Such a perspective requires that we maintain Dumont's distinction between *artha* and *dharma* while calling attention to ways in which political power nonetheless 'has constant relations' with the spiritual sphere.

The aforementioned *Wall Street Journal* item proceeds to bemoan the political interventions of such unelected figures as Ramdev and Hazare whose campaigns of civil disobedience have led to a situation in which 'fasts and protests – and, at times, mob violence – are now common vehicles of policy-making' (cf. Chakrabarty 2007). Unelected and unaccountable, the author's view is that gurus should be kept separate and separable from the political domain. Government ministers were trenchantly critical of Swami Ramdev for engaging in anti-democratic 'political *asana*s'; that is, for mixing yogic spirituality with politics. Having being forcibly removed by police from the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi where he was undertaking an anti-corruption fast, Swami Ramdev was reported to have threatened to set up a yoga militia for self-defence: ' "Next time at Ramlila, it will be Ravanlila. Let's see who gets beaten up." Baba Ramdev detailed the arms training plan: "Twenty youth from each region will come forward for the fight against corruption. These young people should be 35–40 years old. Not only men, young women must also join them. They must be dedicated, ready to make the ultimate sacrifice. They will be given arms training. We will build an army of 11,000 men and women." '[25] Congress spokespeople described the interventions of Ramdev and Hazare, variously, as 'anti-national' and 'anti-democratic'. These events in summer 2011 were certainly dramatic, but not altogether novel. The chapters in this book by Pinch, Jaffrelot and Ikegame allow us to take a longer view and consider the multiple political entanglements of guru figures in South Asia.

In Jaffrelot's chapter, for instance, we learn that accusations concerning gurus' lack of democratic accountability are not new. As we noted earlier, the RSS would like to consider itself a kind of Raj guru, and its influence, in particular over the Janata Party when it was in power having ousted the Congress, post-Emergency, in 1977, led to accusations that it was 'seeking a role incompatible with democracy'. Parliamentarians sympathetic to the RSS were accused of a 'dual membership' discordant with (and deeply compromising of) their elected status. Politicians of all varieties seek the assistance of gurus, whether in public or secretly (usually when either they are Tantric or in other ways 'disreputable' [Jaffrelot this volume] or when their party's public stance, as with the CPM in West Bengal, is 'anti-guru' [see McDaniel 2000: 79]). But they seek, so to speak, to contain them even as they deploy them. But 'uncontainable' gurus are not necessarily amenable to their own controlled deployment, as we have seen. The case of government attempts to harness the authority of Sikh 'holy-man' figure Bhindranwale provides a telling example of this.[26]

As we have noted, a further aspect of the 2011 guru-led anti-corruption campaign was Ramdev's declaration of militaristic intent. Pinch's chapter, a brilliant exploration of relations between slavery and religious discipleship in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century north India, demonstrates that the notion of the guru as a military commander also possesses historical antecedents. Exploring the 'shared ground of slavery and discipleship', Pinch's chapter attempts to account for and interpret critical changes in the intellectual history of spiritual and political authority in relationship to the values and ethics of being a

devotee. The problem of slavery – and being enslaved – is examined and problematised in order to provide a better understanding of the nature of authority – political and religious – in South Asia. What results are important insights on the nature of power, both worldly and otherworldly.

Many of the *chela*s in pre-modern ascetic armies, notes Pinch, were in fact 'slaves acquired in their infancy by their guru-commanders'. In the nineteenth century the practice became increasingly controversial partly as a result of testimonies from former slave-*chela*s but also through the efforts of Company officials who tackled the issue in tandem with that of 'thuggee'. As in Gold's chapter, the principal case study concerns the succession of guru-ship. On the death in 1804 of Anupgiri, commander of a prominent *gosain* army, it was his infant son, Narindragiri, who was installed as his successor, rather than his militarily accomplished brother Umraogiri. Kanchangiri, a senior *chela* of Anupgiri – possibly with the connivance of the political agent John Baillie – had outmanoeuvred Umraogiri in order to become the power behind the throne. The intrigue lies in the origins of the 'son' Narindragiri, for in fact evidence points towards his being purchased as a slave-*chela* in Lucknow. This substitution of an adopted slave-disciple for kin-member in fact demonstrates the mutability of each category. As Pinch remarks, 'slavery, discipleship, birth, and "adoption" – and the mediation of these statuses by officials of the Company state – were central to the transition from late Mughal to early British rule'. There is a further point concerning kinship: as we noted above in respect of Ikegame's chapter, gurus' 'kinlessness' can cause them to be viewed as trustworthy political actors. Pinch notes that guru-commanders may have similarly favoured slave-*chela*s because, unlike 'voluntary' *chela*s, they perforce had no competing loyalties to natal kin (see also Kasturi [2009] on kinship and asceticism).

One of the vital insights of Pinch's chapter is that common to slavery and renunciation is social death – in both cases, one's former life is abandoned. Such 'functional similarities between discipleship and slavery', states Pinch, 'would have given rise to the social, semantic, and historical proximity [between them]'. It should be noted that the kind of slavery at stake in the case of ascetic armies was not that of the racialised Atlantic variant. Indeed, Anupgiri and Umraogiri began their military careers as slave-disciples, rising in each case to the level of guru-commander. The key observation is that there are points of overlap between master–slave, guru–*chela* and parent–child relationships. They may be 'forms of each other'. The chapter concludes with a fascinating meditation on Akbar's nuanced reflections on slavery and discipleship (Akbar was himself conceived on occasion as 'a kind of Sufi *pir* and Hindu guru all rolled into one' – cf. Das [this volume]).

If in pre-modern north India master–slave and guru–*chela* relationships both involved 'absolute submission to the will of another' (Pinch this volume), the authoritarian or coercive nature of the guru's leadership continues to be much commented upon. During the aforementioned anti-corruption agitation of 2011, political analyst and economist Jayati Ghosh stated: 'Ramdev and Hazare are fundamentally very populist. They are authoritarian, with a simplistic message

and are extremely socially and politically conservative.'[27] Kakar (2011), too, has commented on a relation between 'godmen' and 'the anti-intellectual and authoritarian tendencies of Hindu society'.[28] We could easily take this perspective further: Borneman (2004: 4), for instance, has recently argued that among the most notable aspects of totalitarian regimes 'is their reliance on both premodern and modern forms of sovereignty, death cults and biopolitics, as well as a demand for subjective identification with the father'. Often known to their devotees as 'Pita Ji' or 'Bapu' – both terms mean father – gurus frequently seem to achieve just such a subjective identification. The guru's medicalised humanitarianism, already referred to and which is dependent on the guru's access to the bio-capital of the devotee's body, is suggestive of the ready incorporation of the biopolitical into forms of traditional sovereignty. Borneman (2004: 19) also notes that 'Mussolini, Hitler, and Ceausescu . . . each had a peculiar relation to the conjugal couple, marriage and reproduction. Mussolini, for example, organized large collective weddings in the name of the people.' Likewise, we were present when the DSS guru, whom his devotees call Pita Ji, performed just such a collective wedding in Sirsa, Haryana, with more than 30 couples marrying during the same simple ceremony.

Moreover, the oft-noted admiration of Hitler among some sections of the Indian middle classes has been attributed to his guru-like qualities. In a recent essay on British Second World War propaganda in India, Mazzarella (2010b: 9) quotes a 1941 administrative report from the Indian northwest:

> "India, as you know, is the land of mystics and people here especially the masses have a great faith in mysticism. Certain sections of the mystics, perhaps impressed by the Nazi successes in Europe, have come to believe that Hitler has been endowed with some supernatural powers and that is why he has been successfully challenging the invincible might of the British Empire." . . . And while the British . . . routinely tried to discredit the Congress by associating it with fascism, the following comment was overheard in February 1941 by a Ministry informant in Madras: "Hitler is a good man; he does not drink or smoke and is a vegetarian; only in the matter of violence does he differ from Gandhi."

It should be noted that our purpose in presenting these examples is to note the (longstanding) currency of such perceptions rather than simply to endorse their conclusions. Given the extremely wide range of 'styles of adherence' it would be foolish to generalise too readily concerning the forms of power embodied in guru–*chela* relationships. Certainly, far from unquestioning obedience, studies of 'middle-class' gurus such as Mata Amritanadamayi (Warrier 2005) and Swami Dayananda (Fuller and Harriss 2005) have emphasised the role of picking and choosing one's guru from among the many presented in the present 'dense religious marketplace'. In contrast to Kakar's (1982: 47) contention that devotees are infantilised by their dependence on spiritual masters and the claim that gurus replace 'true listening' with 'submission' (Badrinath 1993: 46), Warrier (2003)

sees gurus such as Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba as forming part of a landscape of religious figures in which choice and flexibility reign supreme, with devotees acting reflectively to revise their religious identities as they see fit. It is not lack or alienation (Kakar 1982; Varma 1998) or the desire to prostrate themselves before an imposing authority figure which leads mainly middle-class Indians to join such movements, but 'the hope of increasing possibilities and multiplying opportunities' (Warrier 2003: 231).

McKean (1996), like Nanda (2009), Warrier (2005) and Fuller and Harriss (2005), draws a portrait of devotees as consumers. She is far more willing than these other authors, however, to embrace the familiar depiction of the guru as an authoritarian figure. Like the corporate manager, she says, the guru 'desires to control subordinates' (McKean 1996: 9). While we cannot endorse her broad-brush characterisation of contemporary gurus as thuggish 'big men' whose modus operandi is 'greed, guile, and violence' (ibid.: 23), there is nonetheless much of interest in her analysis. In particular we would point to her introductory remarks concerning the guru–devotee relationship as one of radical asymmetrical exchange. 'The figure of the guru', she states, 'provides a model for relations of asymmetrical exchange . . . The guru always gives more than the disciple or devotee could possibly reciprocate' (ibid.: 5). This asymmetry and indebtedness has had, for centuries, consequences that exceed the specificity of the guru–disciple relationship – for instance, their complex imbrication with Company rule as discussed by Pinch (this volume; see also Pinch 2006). We turn now to a significant contemporary 'recombination' of this relation between guru–disciple asymmetry and governance – in particular, as it pertains to state policies of economic liberalisation.

Guru governmentality?

Recent years have seen increasing scholarly attention directed towards the contribution of guru-led (or inspired) sects to 'modern, secular, developmental activities' such as relief work after major disasters, the setting up of hospitals and colleges, and so on (Shah 2006: 244; Beckerlegge 2006; S. Srinivas 2008; Copeman 2009). Indeed, the provision of free eye operation and 'checkup' camps and blood donation activities form part of a 'common repertoire of social service engagements' undertaken by guru-led service organisations (Warrier 2003: 241).[29] One could say that such activities are at once emblematic and a furtherance of the guru's multiple societal 'entanglements'. But what has this to do with McKean's (1996: 5) aforementioned remarks concerning asymmetrical exchange?

A critical way in which devotees seek to repay their indebtedness is through acts of *guru seva* as a kind of counter-gift that can never measure up (hence its repetition). Now, though gurus declare that their humanitarian activities are *manav-seva* (service of humanity), devotees may view them just as much (if not more) as *guru-seva*, since it is their gurus who ask them to do it and whom, in effect, their activities serve to glorify. Though classically involving ministering to the guru 'by performing the work of a menial, by massaging his feet, and by

writing down his words' (Mayer 1981: 158–159), *guru-seva*, in many contexts, is typified by a very particular corporeality that can involve physically imperilling tests of devotion. Gold (1987: 175–6), for instance, recounts the devotion of Gorakh, a *nath* yogi, to his guru Matsyendra. Gorakh procured food for his hungry guru in exchange for both of his eyes. Similarly, in founding the *khalsa*, the 'pure' Sikh order, Guru Gobind Singh demanded that five volunteers offer him their lives. Such stories demonstrate 'the disciple's ardent desire to serve' (ibid.). As has already been suggested, the corporeality of *seva* persists in a newer domain of the medicalised gift – blood donation, the pledging of eyes and bodies, the organisation of free 'health camps' for the poor – such that we might begin to speak of a biopolitics of devotion. Such service is 'humanitarian' – for instance, health camps are usually co-organised with an organisation such as the Red Cross – and yet, for devotees, their participation is a gift to – service of – the guru. In other words, the large-scale service feats enacted by a multitude of guru-organisations are in large measure an effect of a guru–devotee model typified by asymmetrical exchange; guru-*seva* the repeated attempt to repay that which can never be repaid.

'Governmentality', a term famously introduced by Foucault (1991), has been much elaborated and adapted in recent years the better to take into account the concurrent processes of economic liberalisation globally in our time (e.g. Rose 1996). By speaking of 'guru governmentality', our aim is simply to draw attention to ways in which the Indian state now 'borrows' from or harnesses the guru–devotee relationship in order to fulfil certain governmental ends. For Foucault (1991), governmentality referred to 'a nexus of institutions, of objects, and of disciplines – especially "population" and "economy" as objects of knowledge and zones for systematic intervention – that took hold in Western European society at some point in the eighteenth-century' (Spencer 2007: 109). The concept aimed to illuminate the multitude of techniques employed in the organisation of power, bringing to the fore the *how* of exercising power (Merlingen 2003). It was concerned, in other words, with 'the conduct of conduct' (Dean 1999: 10). Moreover, Foucault was interested in non-state modes of the exercise of power at least as much as in those officially embedded within state institutions (Spencer 2007: 109). And as Ferguson and Gupta (2002: 989) note, the concept of governmentality more recently has been refined in order to take account of intensified logics of economic liberalisation globally: 'Although this move to neoliberalism has often been understood (and variously celebrated or lamented, depending on one's politics) as a "retreat" or "rolling back" of the state [scholars have stressed] that it has, rather, entailed a transfer of the operations of government (in Foucault's extended sense) to non-state entities [such that] the social and regulatory operations of the state are increasingly "de-statized," and taken over by a proliferation of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations'.

A number of compelling examples suggest that throughout India quasi-autonomous guru organisations are resituating themselves in relation to state provision activities, with gurus treated increasingly as a kind of governmental shortcut well suited to the present economic milieu. For instance, when in 2007 the rate of farmer suicides in Maharashtra could finally be ignored no longer,

'instead of attending to the problems of indebtedness and low infrastructural facilities under which cotton farmers in Vidharbha labour, the ministers [advocated] breathing lessons by Sri Sri Ravishankar and religious discourses by other assorted swamis' (Gupta 2009: 81). Ikegame's chapter provides a further vivid example of this phenomenon. Her chapter analyses the ways in which the guru tradition has refashioned itself within the neoliberal economic and political agenda of the Indian state through an examination of 'localised' guru institutions in Karnataka (called *matha*s) and their various welfare activities.

There is a longstanding tradition of socially and politically active *matha*s in rural Karnataka. Recently, many powerful *matha*s – Veerashiva, but also Brahmin and backward caste – have expanded their social activities and now operate thousands of educational institutions, free hospitals, free mid-day school lunch schemes, and even courts at which the guru resolves everyday conflicts. Many commentators do not hesitate to say that the *matha* has become a parallel state. Far from being disturbed by this development, the BJP-led state government has begun to use *matha*s as their executive agents through which the state distributes funds. Such a combination of the *matha* and state sponsorship forms an example of what Ikegame calls a Sacred Public–Private Partnership. The idea that if private and public funds are directed through a guru-led organisation, the money would be well spent (more wisely than through government agencies) is widely shared among the people of Karnataka, partly as a consequence of the fact, referred to above, that a renouncer's lack of kin creates an impression of incorruptibility.

Indian guru-led movements' profile is thus increasingly prominent as a key component of the quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations that 'fill in' for a state in the process of abandoning its commitment to socialist principles. Guru governmentality is not 'just another' agency of devolved governance. First, its mode of operation is *guru-seva*, such that we witness a relationship consequent on radical asymmetrical exchange harnessed for governmental ends in an era of liberalisation. Second, as a consequence of this, the 'work' of humanitarian provision – whether the context is developmental, disaster-relief, or the giving of 'civil gifts' in health camps (Cohen 2011) – is, from a devotee's perspective, likely to be far from value-neutral. So, for instance, the leprosy medicine prescribed by Aghor ascetics is *prashad*, brimming with the guru's blessings (Barrett 2008: 94, 122); Sathya Sai Baba's biomedical hospitals 'rest on a spiritual vision' and are offered on the understanding that 'the day will surely come when the hospital will be superfluous since all will be healthy, accepting the *sadhana* way' (S. Srinivas 2008: 125); and certain Nirankari devotees donate their blood with the emphasis being as much on spiritually transforming transfusion recipients as saving them (Copeman 2009: ch. 4). We add the important caveat, however, that such understandings, significant though they are, must not be carelessly generalised. It is certainly not always the case that guru movements, in taking on multiple roles of provision, infuse what were previously viewed as 'secular' practices with a new and transformative religiosity – Ikegame's chapter in this book illustrates this point well. The more important point is that retooling *guru-seva* governmentally is at the same time the repurposing of an 'authoritarian' aspect of

the devotional relationship in order to produce 'humanitarian' or 'developmental' effects. Insofar as a logic associated with one domain (*bhakti*) is transferred to another (governmental), with the production of potentially unanticipated results (e.g. life *changing* as well as life saving blood transfusions), we are provided here with a further striking example of the domaining effects of the guru.

All this is also reminiscent, of course, of the idea of the guru as an inclusive singularity. Magnified persons, they contain a devotee constituency mobilisable not only for electoral but also for developmental purposes. For instance, the recruitment of voluntary blood donors in the country is conducted according to just such a model of mobilisation (Copeman 2009). But it can be difficult to 'contain' the container, as the 2011 corruption controversy demonstrated, and harnessing the intensity of the guru–devotee relationship for governmental or other ends is by no means a simple operation; moreover, the guru as a political actor is not always an uncontroversial proposition for those who would safeguard 'democracy.' The guru's multifarious political roles, nonetheless, are such that we may begin to think in terms of a 'guru governmentality'.

Conclusion

This introduction has sought to elaborate the book's conceptual and thematic contributions while demonstrating the virtues of an interdisciplinary approach. The book is by no means dismissive of the rich existing literature on spiritual leadership in the region; rather, it seeks to build on it and take it further. Troubling propriety and crossing easy boundaries, 'the guru' does not refer to a consistent body of knowledge and practice (Cohen this volume). Perhaps the quality most common to the guru across its manifold individuals, institutions and logics is that of uncontainability. Guru-ship is a suggestible form: as a principle-cum-model it affords movement between domains; the extension and transformation of modes of power; scaling up/down; the expansion/containment of persons. But general theoretical constructs can at best explain only some aspects of specific realities; indeed, 'details explain the life forms of generalities' (Jenkins 2010: 71), and it is finely hued details that the following chapters provide.

As a domain crosser par excellence, the figure of the guru demonstrates that such domains – religion, politics, economy, 'local' culture, 'global' culture – 'are mutually implicated, in ways that cannot be anticipated but have to be explored and narrated' (Jenkins 2010: 93). The guru thus comes to appear something like Mauss' 'total' social phenomenon. This observation gives rise to recognition of several possible analytical limitations that we see as requiring further elaboration in future scholarship. First, statements to the effect that gurus cross domains or boundaries seem to unhelpfully entrench (or reinstate) such boundaries in stating that they have been breached. We might respond that we are merely drawing attention to boundaries delineated by the subjects of our analysis and that in any case maintaining certain distinctions is necessary in order to be able to recognise their porousness in given situations (the signal extensibility of the guru's form and reach in this case) – but a discomfiture remains.

Second, our characterisation of the guru as a magnified person or 'inclusive singularity' would require a refinement that granted greater recognition to the potential for messiness and inconclusiveness inherent within the strategies of affiliation and enfolding we examined. To return to Sathya Sai Baba, T. Srinivas (2010: 68) notes that 'having established himself as an avatar on earth to educate human beings, he then [sought] to establish a connection to divine beings from other faiths'. One such connection was with Jesus Christ, but 'some divinities are difficult to enfold' (ibid.: 86), and a degree of controversy (what T. Srinivas terms a 'translation failure') resulted. We may also recall here the 'Maharaj libel case' of the 1860s, which hinged on allegations of adulterous behaviour among *gosain*s of the *pushtimarg*. The *gosain*s' claim was that they were enacting Krishna's play, but though counted as 'part' of the founder guru Vallabha, it was a bridge too far to count them as one with Krishna (the claim seemed simply opportunistic) (Gold 1988: 90–91). The *gosain*s were thus *not* counted as one with Krishna; what thereby resulted was a classic in the genre of 'guru scandal'. The guru therefore cannot be assumed to always enact successful containment.

We have explored here the guru's expansive agency, but it is necessary to re-emphasise the differential multiplicity of meanings condensed within guru-ship that are the condition of possibility of such agency. Famously, for Lévi-Strauss (1950: xlix–l), a floating signifier was 'a meaning-bearing unit that nevertheless has no distinct meaning' (Faubion 2010: 93). Lévi-Strauss was discussing the Pacific islander concept of *mana*, but the guru, too, possesses the 'semiotic limitlessness' characteristic of the floating signifier. Floating signifiers are 'especially effective carriers of the transcendent and the absolute . . . in lacking determination, the floating signifier also positively conveys an omnipotentiality that remains not merely undifferentiated but also auratic, atmospheric, ineffable, beyond articulation' (ibid.). Gurus, likewise, have been famously characterised as being beyond all limiting categories (Babb 1986: 147; T. Srinivas 2010: 66). It seems likely that it is at least in part because the guru is a floating signifier, lacking determination, that it can participate in so many domains while generating a sense of omnipotentiality. If the floating signifier constitutes 'the semiotic abyss that is also a plenitude and thus a topos of the excess that can only be experienced, never pinned down or spelled out' (Faubion 2010: 93), we might say that the chapters in this book do not so much pin down but are themselves the staging posts of guru-ship as it crosses disciplinary domains.

Notes

1 We would like to thank Daniel Gold, Deepa Reddy and Alice Street for extremely helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this introduction.

2 While many gurus are 'ascetics' (though see the 'Guru erotics' section below) only a few ascetics attain guru-hood.

3 The phrasing here is inspired by Carsten's (2011) approach to the domain-crossing propensities of blood.

4 Of course, the vastness of this literature requires that we be extremely selective.

5 We draw here on Carsten's (2011) insistence on the literal and conceptual 'uncontainability' of blood.

6 Nanda is careful to state that in practice these 'types' are prone to overlap in various ways.
7 See also Khare (1984).
8 See also Padoux (2000: 45) on a distinction between 'fabricated' (*kalpita*) and 'not-fabricated' (*akalpita*) gurus in the Tantric tradition.
9 On high-profile rationalist campaigns against Sathya Sai Baba see T. Srinivas (2010). See also Quack (2011) for a study of anti-superstition activism more generally in South Asia.
10 On guru hagiography see also Babb (1986), T. Srinivas (2010).
11 http://rationalistprabir.bravehost.com/
12 http://srisriravishankar.org/biography
13 http://www.shreedarshan.com/saint-sadguru-aniruddha-bapu.htm
14 From 1975–1977 democracy was suspended in the country, with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi effectively ruling by decree.
15 Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party).
16 *The Hindu*, 30 November 2007.
17 A fuller account is available in Copeman (2006).
18 See, however, Khare (1984).
19 For a sustained attempt at applying Badiou's work to problems in the social sciences, see Humphrey (2008). We are indebted to Giovanni da Col for encouraging us to explore the work of Fausto in this context.
20 Politicians, too, may be framed as inclusive singularities – see, for instance, the Emergency-era slogan: 'India is Indira and Indira is India' (Rajagopal 2011: 1015).
21 'Close distance' was also characteristic of the brief appearance of high-profile Arya Samaj leader and activist Swami Agnivesh in the house of India's controversial reality TV show Bigg Boss in November 2011. The news of the 72-year-old guru exposing himself to 24-hour camera surveillance was splashed across the media. Prior to entering the house he had split from Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement after having been caught on camera making critical remarks about 'Team Hazare'. In fact, recalling the notorious holy man confidence tricksters of the *Kautiliya Arthasatra* (see Mabbett 2010), the accusation was that he had been placed by the Indian government as a kind of secret agent in order to poison the movement from within. Though his choice of media was bold to say the least, his entry into the house was carefully choreographed. He did not participate as a contestant but as a guest and stayed in the house for only a few days. (This meant he did not have to do the embarrassing dance routine.) He managed to persuade quarrelsome inmates to grant him a separate room for sleeping, to call him 'Swamiji' and to show him respect despite their thinking him an obscure soothsayer on first encountering him (*The Hindu*, 11 Nov. 2011). It is not certain if he succeeded in his original intention of conveying messages of social justice to younger viewers, but his carefully managed exposure certainly contained elements of performative elevation and distance as well as invasive scrutiny. Like Nithyananda before him, he sought to employ the same technologies that had 'exposed' him in order to reconstitute a measure of his 'auratic authority'.
22 *Times of India*, 30 April 2010.
23 *Wall Street Journal*, 7 June 2011.
24 http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/ramdev-threat-will-build-an-army-arm-protesters-110874&cp
25 Ibid. I.e. it will not be the play (*lila*) of the righteous god Ram, but the play of the demon-king Ravana.
26 Initially a campaigner against perceived heresy within Sikhism, Bhindranwale became the figurehead of the Khalistan movement. He was killed in 1983 along with 500 of his followers in Sikhism's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, by Indian Armed Forces.
27 *The Guardian* (London), 5 June 2011.
28 *India Today*, 9 May 2011.

29 Warrier (2003) suggests that such organisations engage in *seva* activities at least in part as a means of divesting themselves of wealth for tax purposes.

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2 The governing guru

Hindu *mathas* in liberalising India[1]

Aya Ikegame

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Introduction

Using a highly elaborate theoretical schematisation, Louis Dumont re-asserted in the 1970s the long-held colonial assumption about Hindu society that there is a clear distinction between the religious domain (authority) and politico-economic domain (power), that the former always dominates and encompasses the latter, and that the latter always needs to be legitimised by the former (Dumont 1980: 33–49, 65–72, 152–8 and especially 287–313). This view has been widely criticised and many scholars have endeavoured to overturn this dichotomy and to emphasise instead the centrality of the king or dominant castes in Indian society (Appadurai 1981, Dirks 1987, Raheja 1988a, 1988b: 498).

The debate over whether the so-called 'Brahmin model' or 'Kingly model' has better credentials has crossed several disciplinary boundaries and has stimulated many further scholarly investigations not only among anthropologists, but also among historians and Indologists (notably Inden 1978, Heesterman 1985). Many have rightly stressed that the distinction between the two realms – of religion and politics – was not as clear-cut as Dumont claimed, and they have pointed out that kings and dominant castes play an important ritual role in maintaining social structures. This view that kings and the powerful embody not simply military and political power, but have religious functions as well, has enriched our understanding of the meanings and distribution of power within South Asia. Yet, very few studies have examined the political (or even secular) strength of the religious realm (a notable exception is Pinch 2006). Latterly, as structuralism and even post-structuralism have become unfashionable, the debate over Kingly and Brahmanical models seems to have lost its original spark. The structural separation of religion and politics has, though, somehow continued to haunt our understanding of everyday life in South Asia. Meanwhile, the similarity and continuity between the two domains has been largely ignored except in a few, but important, works on big-men and the political culture of South India (Mines 1994, Price 1989, 1996).

While anthropological understandings of the relationship between religion and politics have not been the subject of any major theoretical re-assessment, the rise of Hindu nationalism since the late 1980s and the subsequent violence in many

parts of India naturally led anthropologists to study this new form of 'politicised Hinduism' or religionised nationalism (van der Veer 1994, Hansen 1999). At the same time, political cultures inherited and nurtured within Hinduism were left unexamined. The political culture of Hindu religion is highly diverse, including religious sites which are the loci of power among the powerful as well as the more mundane, everyday functions of religious institutions by which the poor are fed, sheltered and sometimes educated, the sick are treated and sometimes cured, and disputes are heard and sometimes solved. This 'secular' (or one might even call it 'civic') culture of Hindu religion has grown into a vast form of welfare enterprise without much scholarly attention. The trend is particularly visible among trans-local or global guru organisations that have successfully attracted the support of the urban middle classes within India and beyond. The Satya Sai Organisation, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and the Ramakrishna Mission are especially active in the areas of education and health.[2] With generous donations from devotees all over the world, these globalised organisations run educational institutions and hospitals providing free education and health care for the poor in India. Local religious institutions have also joined in these welfare enterprises and have increased their public presence immensely. These organisations are even taking on the organisation of the government-funded mid-day meal scheme in Karnataka state, and vans emblazoned with the images of gurus go around the cities and villages providing food to government schools as part of this service. It is estimated that about 40 per cent of government schools in Karnataka receive mid-day meals from religious organisations. In the shadow of Hindutva political propaganda and violence, the everyday life of ordinary Indians in the South has thus been infused with aid from the world of spiritual Hinduism, which is gradually taking over the realm of responsibilities which the socialist nation state once claimed to itself.

This chapter analyses the ways in which the guru tradition has refashioned and re-situated itself within a neo-liberal economic and political agenda of the Indian state and other international organisations by looking at very 'localised' guru institutions called *maṭhas* in Kannada (*maṭhs* in Hindi) and their various welfare activities. While famous trans-local gurus such as Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar attract large numbers of urban middle-class Indians, the more locally specific gurus studied here maintain an inherited group of devotees which often overlaps with an existing caste or sub-caste community within a limited geographical area often no larger than a few districts. The devotees' adherence to a particular guru is therefore not (necessarily) by their own personal choice. Rather, they are born into a particular guru's hold. By contrast, in a study of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, Maya Warrier (2003) has argued that among supra-local gurus a process of 'secularisation' is taking place. By 'secularisation' she means 'a process where religious affiliation comes increasingly to be seen not as a requirement, but as an option' (ibid.: 213). In this process, she argues that religion has become 'the result of individual construction through a process of conscious choosing and selecting from a range of possibilities and options' (ibid.: 213–14). At a supra-local level, she argues, this secularisation

signifies not the retreat of religion from public life, but 'a decline in the public, community-affirming and socially-binding aspect of religion' (ibid.: 214).

Compared to supra-local gurus, the variety of gurus discussed in this chapter may be understood to belong to a rather older style of religion with mostly community-oriented concerns that are not intended to address the individual devotees' needs. Our gurus certainly have a more closed, but not necessarily exclusive, circle of devotees and their concerns are mostly (though not always) related to the welfare of a caste or sub-caste community. Nonetheless, the way in which Karnataka gurus try to exercise their power and influence equally involves the use of the new ideas and practices of governance and civil society which people increasingly find to be more effective in addressing their problems than the institutions of the nation state. Community oriented, locally specific gurus thus present an alternative process of secularisation in which a new form of leadership has been emerging. This chapter analyses how this new form of leadership has been supported by people who re-interpret the concept of renunciation and renouncer in the context of very this-worldly concerns.[3]

Mathas in Karnataka

Hindu mathas tend to have a much stronger presence in people's everyday life in Karnataka than elsewhere in India. This is partly because the numerical strength and political dominance of the Lingayats (about 20 per cent of the state population) has made the matha more visible and influential. The religious tradition of the Lingayats or Veerashaiva has a tendency to place a much larger emphasis on their gurus and mathas than on priests and temples. For instance, many vacanas (prose-poems) composed by Lingayat saints in the twelfth century deny the superiority of Brahmins, and question their claim to have the exclusive birth-right to conduct religious rituals. The early Lingayat saints, instead, argued that ordinary people could communicate with the supreme God, Shiva, through the mediation of a guru. One has to be cautious, though, in generalising about the Lingayat or Veerashaiva tradition as an anti-Brahmin or anti-caste system. The self-consciousness of Lingayats as propagators of universal humanitarianism (anti-caste, egalitarian, pro-women etc.) had more to do with the self-fashioning of their caste identity in the early twentieth century (Boratti 2010). In reality, Lingayats possess a variety of guru traditions and teachings, and they have maintained very strong sub-caste identities and hierarchies. Lingayat gurus and their mathas have, as a consequence, become a crucial force in promoting a sense of solidarity and community (which is often a sub-caste community rather than that of Lingayats as a whole) through establishing a kind of self-help system within their group.

In the first half of the twentieth century, a large number of Lingayat youths were able to achieve higher education in urban areas thanks to the free hostels run by their mathas. To achieve this, many gurus took the initiative in collecting donations from their devotees in order to support education for their caste youths both in villages and urban areas. At the same time, many Lingayat gurus re-fashioned themselves from mystical beings into more modern, 'rational' leaders. Most of the

currently influential mathas in the state – Suttur matha in Mysore district, Siddaganga matha in Tumkur district, and Sirigere matha and Murgha matha in Chitradurga district – have had charismatic gurus who effectively mobilised their devotees and transformed the matha institution into a centre of community development (see for example Sadasivaiah 1967). The current generation of gurus have sought to follow the visions of their predecessors while also transforming the matha into a modern enterprise which could generate its own resources on a much larger scale.[4]

Aside from the Lingayat mathas, Karnataka is home to several important Brahmin mathas. Sringeri for Shaiva-Sumartha Brahmins, Udupi for Vaishnava-Madhava Brahmins, and Melkote for Sri Vaishnava Brahmins are three major centres of Vedic philosophy in the state. The strongest of them all, Sringeri, the seat of a Shankaracharya,[5] formerly enjoyed a quasi-independent jagirdari status under princely rule. The Brahmin mathas exercise their influence mainly through temples attached to the mathas. This is the major difference between Brahmin mathas and their Lingayat counterparts. In the Lingayat tradition, the temple has not been given much importance. Devotees may instead worship the tombs of gurus (*gaddiges* or *samādhis*) as loci of transcendent power, but visiting sacred sites is not an important part of their religious life. For Brahmins and others, on the other hand, as many scholars have argued, the temple has long been a locus of power where powerful kings and big-men compete with each other through temple patronage and the redistribution of rights and honours (see especially Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976). Since the early twentieth century, non-Brahmin castes began to form associations to 'up-lift' their caste by raising education levels and establishing networks of personal influence to secure better employment. Brahmins, though, were relatively slow and much less visible in this self-assertive caste movement. As the basis of non-Brahmin caste assertion was geared towards resisting Brahmin domination, the making of a modern Brahmin identity was constantly challenged by those demanding an equal share of status (both ritual and social) and resources. In this context, the Brahmin caste association appeared as an anomaly and even 'morally untenable and unjustifiable' (Bairy 2009: 91). Despite this, they managed to establish many pseudo-caste associations in the form of 'corporate associations' among professionals and entrepreneurs within 'secular' settings (ibid.). Brahmin mathas did not provide for the welfare of their specific sectarian community as much as their Lingayat counterparts, nonetheless Brahmin mathas did not lose their traditional ties with their sectarian members. In recent years, several gurus from Brahmin mathas have been actively involved with the Hindu nationalist network. Most prominent among them is Vishweshwara Theertha Swami of the Pejawar matha, one of eight Vaishnava mathas in Udupi. The Pejawar guru was a leader of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in Karnataka, and has since been one of the most prominent public figures in the state. Another is the young guru of the Ramachandrapura matha, Raghaveshvara Bharati Swami. He turned a small matha in a jungle into a gigantic cow protection centre where he built hundreds of luxurious bungalows with air conditioned units for his wealthy urban devotees who support his noble cause.

Apart from the Lingayat and Brahmins mathas, there are many so-called caste mathas (*jāti maṭha*) in the state. The most prominent of them is the Adichunchanagiri matha in Mandya district. By taking over and expanding a matha and a small goddess shrine on a small hill in the early twentieth century, Adichunchanagiri has become the sole religious authority of the Okkaliga community, a politically powerful dominant agriculturist caste in the state. It is widely believed that the open support given by the Adichunchanagiri guru, Balagangadhara Swami, to the Okkaliga political leader, H.D. Deve Gowda, in 1993 enabled his party, the Janata Dal, to win the state assembly election (*The Hindu*, 26 April 2006). The phenomenon whereby devotional sects act as vote banks for a particular political party ranging from so-called secular parties such as the Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) to the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, has become very familiar elsewhere in India (see Cohen 1999: 281–286, Gold and Copeman in this volume). In Karnataka, the political ambitions of religious sects and their spiritual leaders are similarly deeply ingrained in the existing caste-divided politics of the state. Yet in an interesting divergence from the example of gurus standing as candidates in elections, presented by Gold in this volume, Karnataka gurus do not seem to be interested in themselves becoming elected politicians in Karnataka, and they rather try instead, while still influencing it, to keep at a distance from the 'dirty world' of politics.

Since the early 1990s, backward castes, Dalits and Adivasis have begun establishing their own mathas and gurus. This tendency has intensified in recent years (Ikegame 2010, Sugata 2007). Of course, the backward castes have always had their own caste gurus or priests who provide religious services for the community. However, there has lately been a proliferation of so-called OBC (Other Backward Classes) mathas which do not directly relate to the guru traditions among lower castes (for example Oddie 1984; Yocum 1990). Instead, one senses the less sophisticated nature of these new mathas. Most OBC gurus are young and uneducated, and they are largely under the strong influence of a few politicians. Their ultimate goal is, though, to attain something like the status of the Adichunchanagiri matha, the symbol of the united Okkaliga community, and to similarly be able to generate resources among themselves through the running of expensive medical and engineering colleges and by providing services for their caste community.

Gurus at work

In October 2009, unprecedented floods hit the northern districts of Karnataka. These areas, unlike the southern districts, have not benefited from the economic miracles of the IT and business process outsourcing (BPO) sectors seen since the 1990s. They have instead remained largely underdeveloped and impoverished. Infrastructural inadequacy and long years of neglect by the state government made the impact of this natural disaster worse. More than two hundred thousand houses were destroyed, several hundred people were killed and many more were displaced. Farmers lost their crops and children lost their school textbooks.

At the time of the Karnataka floods, the mining barons-cum-ministers, the

Reddy brothers of Bellary district, were busy engineering a coup against the Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa (see also Sanjana 2008, 2010; Sugata 2009). Every day, newspapers reported the news of pro-Reddy Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) being kept at five-star hotels in Goa and Hyderabad far away from a possible counter operation from the pro-Chief Minister (CM) faction. The same newspapers also covered the news of many religious organisations, mostly Hindu mathas, undertaking initiatives to raise funds for flood relief. The contrast was plainly clear: bad politicians and good swamijis. Apart from religious organisations, NGOs and private companies also joined in the rehabilitation campaign. Indeed, the scale of private initiative in the flood relief and following rehabilitation was unprecedented in Karnataka.

In central Karnataka, the guru of Sirigere matha, an influential Lingayat matha, Dr Shivamurty Shivaharya, called for donations for the victims of the floods. Within a few days, their devotees and supporters brought 195 quintals (112 lbs) of rice, 184 quintals of jowar (a kind of millet), 240 saris, 100,000 rotis, 30,000 chapatis, 2 big sacks of coconuts, 1 quintal of chatnipudi (powdered dry chutney), and children's clothes. On 7 October 2009, the matha sent 100 volunteers to Hungund and Badami taluks and three trucks and three buses were used to carry these foods and goods. Meanwhile, several state ministers and MLAs promised to donate money ranging from 5 lakhs to 50 lakhs rupees each. The amount of money collected (including sums promised) by the Sirigere matha was said to be 5 crore rupees (50 million rupees which is about 700,000 pounds sterling).[6] Sirigere matha declared its intention to build 500 concrete *pakka* houses with this money. Many other gurus led a '*padayātre*' (pilgrimage on foot) with local politicians to raise relief funds. The Suttur guru, Shivarathri Deshikendra Swami, led a procession in Chamaranajagara district in southern Karnataka,[7] and the Murgha matha guru, Shivamurthy Murugha Sharana, undertook a similar padayatre in Chitradurga district in central Karnataka.[8]

Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa announced on 19 October that the government would take steps to move all the 226 flood-prone villages by March 2010. Yeddyurappa said that 'we will take steps to build new villages under public–private partnership (PPP)'.[9] Under this scheme, funds from the state and corporations would go to NGOs and religious institutions (mostly mathas) entrusted to take responsibility to construct new villages with new amenities and infrastructure. Every day, state advertisements appeared on the front page of major newspapers announcing foundation stone laying ceremonies (*śankusṭhāpane*) in new villages. Such advertisements typically feature pictures of one or two gurus and the caption 'divine presence (*divya sānnidhya*)', the pictures of chief guests, often Yeddyurappa himself and other ministers, the list of villages and corporates who contributed money towards the construction, and the guests of politicians belonging to different political parties at the bottom.

The Reddy brothers finally joined in, on a much bigger scale, when the rehabilitation works began transforming from a potlatch of generosity among gurus (see also Copeman in this volume) into a holy alliance of the state, corporates and mathas: a new sacred PPP. On 27 October, Revenue minister Karunakar Reddy,

the eldest brother, announced that the iron-ore mine owners along with other philanthropists would launch a programme to construct 50,000 houses in six districts. Janardhan Reddy, the second brother, said that the mine owners of Bellay had decided to contribute Rs 500 crore towards this programme. Since this was a private initiative, they did not invite the chief minister Yeddyurappa to the ceremony. When he was asked if the ministers from Bellary were running a parallel government, Janardhan, the Tourism minister, said: 'when mathas have been entrusted with the responsibility for constructing houses, what is wrong in the construction of houses with contributions from miners?'[10] But although they did not need the CM's approval, the parallel-state built on money still needs sacred recognition. The big men with purely monetary power therefore invited a guru to pray for the initiative taken by their mining company.[11]

The sacred triangle of the state–corporation–matha as a new PPP has been a most notable government policy since the BJP took control of the government in May 2008. The state government had been distributing funding towards mathas under the name of development, with flood rehabilitation work becoming the most visible demonstration of this new form of governance by the state. At the time of relief operations, none explicitly opposed the participation of religious institutions in the rehabilitation works, except for Dalit organisations (although later many 'secular' civil society organisations began criticising the new sacred PPP initiated by the then chief minister). One of these, the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation (HRFDL), a relatively new platform organisation for Dalits, openly criticised the way in which the rehabilitation activities of religious institutions re-affirmed the existing caste hierarchy and discrimination against Dalits. In an interview, the state Convenor of HRFDL, Basavaraj Kowthal, provided me with several examples of such discrimination.[12] Thus most of the food distribution centres were set up in upper-caste colonies where Dalits were not allowed to enter or themselves hesitated to enter; one swamiji came to a village in Bellary district, started constructing one or two houses, and demanded that villagers change the name of the village to reflect the swamiji's name. Kowthal reckoned that several major Lingayat mathas, Adichunchanagiri matha, the Art of Living etc., each received 1 to 5 crore rupees directly from the state budget. According to him, the process of rehabilitation initiated by Hindu mathas amounted to nothing but the sanskritisation of village life and a justification of caste discrimination. He saw the state encouraging mathas to do charitable works as evidence of a deliberate anti-Christian missionary agenda of the BJP by taking over their opponents' forte. Kowthal insisted that the government should distribute public funds not through the religious mathas but directly to the village panchayats.

To have a more accurate picture of caste discrimination during the rehabilitation work, we need to await completion of the final report of the assessment conducted independently by the HRFDL, but a climate of not questioning the activities of Hindu religious organisations in rehabilitation work in the state was apparent and interesting. Indeed, when on certain occasions Kowthal expressed his concerns during public meetings, he was verbally and sometimes physically attacked by participants who felt strongly that people should not criticise the

wonderful work the mathas were doing. The strong concern presented by the HRFDL and other Dalit organisations is not without foundation. After the devastating earthquake of 2001 in Gujarat, as Simpson and Corbridge (2006) have reported in detail, Hindu nationalist organisations seized the occasion to rebuild the most affected region of Kachchh as an imagined sacred Hindu nation. The most striking example Simpson and Corbridge presented was the initiative that the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, an International Hindu fundamentalist organisation) took in assuming responsibility for rebuilding a village. They changed its original name of Lodi into a more sanskritised name of Keshav Nagar (Krishna's city) and did not allow Muslims and Dalits who had previously lived there to settle within the new village (Simpson and Corbridge 2006: 579–581). The Hindu nationalist organisations used neo-liberal political language such as 'public–private partnership' in order to justify their participation in the rehabilitation activities of Gujarat. We could indeed say that the language and symbols used in flood rehabilitation in Karnataka had already been well tested in Gujarat in 2001. It is arguably no exaggeration to say that the efforts of Hindu nationalist organisations to rebuild Kachchh as a sacred Hindu nation were one of the elements inspiring the Gujarat pogrom in 2002 during which nearly 2,000 Muslims were killed.

There is some legitimacy to the claim made by some Dalit organisations including HRFDL that the welfare work accomplished by mathas during the flood rehabilitation in Karnataka contributes to the Hindutva agenda which seeks to re-build India as a Hindu nation and serves to aggravate communal divisions. Nevertheless, it would be unfruitful to dismiss their activities simply as communal and to paint Karnataka gurus as supporters of fanatical Hindu nationalism. Rather, it is probably more productive to investigate how and why people are attracted to gurus and mathas as providers of a new form of governance. Intriguingly, some Dalit activists, including Basavaraj Kowthal, are not unhappy with the activities of certain so-called 'progressive' gurus. And pro-Dalit gurus have become increasingly indispensable in public meetings organised by Dalit organisations. The guru has thus emerged as a new leader even among 'secular' organisations.

Kingship, leadership, and guruship

The use of a common language and symbols in public rituals among kings, powerful big-men, and gurus has characterised the political culture of South India. It is something that people can immediately recognise and which enables them to participate in public debate (Price 1989). When the successor of a retiring guru takes over a matha, the young guru will be crowned and may sit on the throne on which the skin of a tiger will be spread. He will then be put on a type of palanquin, according to the rank of his matha, before he is carried in procession. The entire ritual resembles that of the king's enthronement (*paṭṭābhiṣēka*) and they do not hesitate to call it so. In the past there were many royal insignias (*birudus*) that symbolised the guru's status, and which accompanied the procession. People struggled to ensure that their guru would carry more prestigious insignias than

rival gurus. Others would object, viewing the guru's status, which was often linked to his caste background, as unsuitable for the type of palanquin on which he was sitting or the colour of the umbrella which his followers were holding above him (Koppedrayer 1991). Just as the king summons his subordinates to his durbar to discuss state matters, and a local big-man calls for a panchayat meeting in order to settle village disputes (Srinivas 1976), so the guru does the same. A devotee would go to the matha to see the guru and to receive the guru's teaching and blessings. The devotee may need a blessing for his newly opened shop or his daughter's coming marriage, but he also asks for more practical advice from the guru. If it is during the election season, we may thus see local big-men discussing with the guru which political party they should support (Ikegame 2010).

The role of the guru as an arbitrator of local disputes has long been recognised (Galanter 1971, 1972), but has never previously been studied ethnographically. In Sirigere in 2004, the guru, Dr Shivamurty, started a weekly court with high-tech computer facilities in which he acts as the sole judge. I attended his court in May 2008 and March 2010. His court (*nyāyapīṭha*) is extremely popular both among villagers in the surrounding districts and the middle classes in urban areas. Every Monday, he deals with more than ten cases from early morning until late at night. People say that they come here because it is cheaper, quicker and more effective than civil courts. The guru's court is certainly cheap, since the guru does not take any money for his services, and no expensive legal representative needs to be hired – although litigants often put some small amount of money (from Rs 10 to Rs 100) in a box for donations (*kānike*). It is quicker to start a hearing there than in the civil court: in the Sirigere court, normally once the appeal has been submitted, the case will be opened within one month, although this does not necessarily mean that it will be closed sooner. Indeed many cases can go on for years. The Sirigere guru told me that he does not want to rush into a hasty settlement that might cause more grief, especially on the socially weaker side of the litigation.[13] It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of this court. It requires more systematic investigation to determine whether decisions of the gurus are accepted by both the parties,[14] but the way in which the guru uses his personal influence during the court hearings is convincing enough for people to believe that it might indeed work. During the hearing, he often calls local big-men (village heads, caste elders, and local MLAs) to find out what the real issue is, or to make sure that his decisions are properly followed. He also calls local police and asks (or orders), for example, someone troublesome to be placed in custody for a few days in order to teach him a lesson. While the guru is dealing with such cases, politicians suddenly come to receive the blessing of the guru and touch his feet in public. Their visit to a guru, as Lawrence Cohen has noted, has become 'a fetishized commodity' (1999: 281) in India. The guru's court indeed enables 'the transfer of charisma' (ibid.) to happen. After the conspicuous act of submission takes place, the guru will introduce to the audience a beautiful young woman who came with her husband and the guru appreciates him for having married her despite the fact she was a divorcée. In this way, the progressive messages and tales of morality and humanity are often delivered in the middle of everyday conflicts over the division

of inherited land or the maintenance demand from a neglected first wife. The spectacle of his court where dozens of cases are being heard, some with cries and shouts, and the many colourful characters constantly coming and going is a conspicuous reflection of the galaxy of his power.

While the gurus in Karnataka exercise a considerable degree of power and influence, most of them maintain a high degree of accessibility. The Sirigere guru carries his mobile phone with him at all times and answers any call that he receives. In the case of the guru of Murugha matha in Chitradurga, it is even more extreme. He is undoubtedly the most controversial Lingayat guru in Karnataka as a result of openly training non-Lingayat lower-caste youths (including Adivasis and Dalits) to help them in establishing their caste mathas and by giving them plots of land belonging to the Murugha matha (Ikegame 2010). The Murugha guru always keeps an earphone and microphone on him so that he can answer a call immediately. People in his matha did not think twice before giving us the mobile phone number of the guru and encouraged us to call him immediately. Of course, to meet and to talk to certain gurus, we needed to go through more traditional procedures of bringing gifts (fruits, coconuts, some cash, etc.) and prostrating before him, but for most of the modern gurus these formalities are no longer a matter of great importance. This accessibility is probably part of a conscious effort on their part to present themselves as providers of various services. It is also a reflection of what contemporary disciples want from their gurus. As Kathinka Frøystad argues in this volume, they prefer more approachable, intimate, and playful gurus to more traditional, remote and fastidious ones.

The activities of the gurus or swamijis of Karnataka clearly fit with the definition of 'institutional big-men' developed by Mines and Gourishankar (1990). According to their argument, institutional big-men 'attract followers and enact their roles as generous leaders through the "charitable" institutions that they control' (ibid.: 762). They used this term in order to distinguish South Indian big-men from the Melanesian variety who do not hold any institutional affiliation and who maintain their status solely through personal charisma. In South India, by contrast, charisma is less important and the matha is the charitable institution through which gurus exercise real power and influence and establish their 'big-men' status. The fact that many mathas maintain their original caste, or sub-caste constituencies conforms to the manner of the South India big-men's social function described by Mines (Mines 1994). However, devotees and gurus in Karnataka are presenting their gurus as something very different and even opposed to the image of the non-religious big-men, notably politicians.

The distrust felt by people towards politicians has become increasingly explicit and intense. People I have chatted with while visiting mathas in rural Karnataka often uttered the word 'politician' or 'politics' with strong contempt. 'They are all corrupt.' 'We cannot trust them.' People who make such typical statements seem to believe, or want to believe, that gurus are different from politicians or ordinary people like themselves. During interviews with devotees and the administrators of mathas, I frequently encountered expressions such as: 'the guru does not have any relative. Therefore he cannot be corrupt.' A man who works for one of the schools

run by Sirigere matha said: 'Just imagine, how much can one *sanniyāsi* spend?' Here renunciation is understood as a lack of kin, and the lack of kin makes the guru incorruptible. Politicians, on the other hand, misuse public money for the benefit of their own kin (we can see exactly the same discourse on the legitimacy of kinlessness among self-assertive Hijra politicians, see Reddy 2003). Concerning this lack of kin or kinlessness, the guru of Sanehalli, a branch-matha (*śākhe maṭha*) of Sirigere said that 'the guru does not have any relation (kin), therefore he can create a special relation with anyone'.[15] The kinlessness of the guru does not keep him away from people but assures him of multiple relationships with people or society at large. In carefully tracing the change in the practice of succession and nomination of the heads of several important mathas in Karnataka, Sood termed this particular kinship 'alienated kinship' (Sood 2006: 116–144) and he described how alienated kinship can work as a new bond of the community:

> The alienation of the swami from the bonds of kinship into the nether-space of a subject who has died socially but lives on corporeally, who is loosed of his immediate family but now beholden to his extended kindred family, who may never marry but holds all the people of the community as his children.
>
> (Sood 2006: 121)

Sood has argued that 'alienated kinship' is key to understanding the strong link between a caste community and the head of a matha (the guru). Kinlessness or alienated kinship thus performs an important function in uniting a community. This was underlined in an interview I conducted (in Kannada) with an aged former factory worker – I call him Nanjappa here – who was a central figure involved in establishing a new matha and guru in 1992 for the Kuruba (shepherd) community, the largest OBC caste in Karnataka. The Kuruba matha (Kaginele guru peetha) was one of the first so-called OBC mathas in the state. Many lower castes, Dalits, and Adivasis have been establishing similar own-caste mathas in the hope of bringing 'harmony' to their community and increasing its political presence. Their enthusiasm for stronger representation in a wider political area has not diminished, but the means of achieving their goals has transformed from the form of 'secular' caste associations towards organisations with a cultural and religious flavour: the matha. I asked Nanjappa why the Kuruba community needed to have a matha and gurus and what was the difference between a caste association and the matha. He did not answer my question immediately, but after carefully reflecting upon the question, he finally spoke:

> Well, regarding a caste association (*jāti sangha*), people say it is mine (*nannadu*), it is mine (*nannadu*). But the matha becomes *ours* (*nammadu*). The difference is this.[16]

None could own the guru or the matha. This ensures that the guru or the matha will work for a community. It seems that this idea of the guru holding a community together has now extended from a specific caste community towards the

wider society. Together with the idea of kinlessness as a basis for incorruptibility, guru-kinship has emerged as a new, 'clean' channel by which resources may be re-distributed more efficiently among deserving people than through the state itself. Sirigere Taralabalu matha guru, Dr Shivamurty Shivacharya, thus stated at a public meeting:

> There is nothing wrong with the government giving financial aid to the mathas and temples which are public institutions (*sārvajanika samsṭhegaḷu*). Mathas and Swamis are people's property (*janara āsti*). Giving aid is, after all, the principal duty of the government. Therefore, the chief minister should not be afraid of criticism and continue the good work.
>
> (*The Vijaya Karnataka*, 19 May 2010, translated by the author)

The basis of the claim that mathas are public property derives from the very idea of the kinlessness of renouncers, as we have seen. The idea that a guru being separated from a kin network enables him to act as the uniting force of a wider community has in this instance developed into a much larger claim. The guru is here considered to be an embodiment of the public as a whole. He does not act like a king, but works as an ultimate public servant.

The matha as the twenty-first-century Jagir

Interestingly, while gurus and matha supporters claim that the mathas and gurus are 'public property' or 'ours', legally speaking the mathas have ceased to be public institutions. In November 2000, the Karnataka Legislative Assembly finally approved the Karnataka Charitable Endowments and Hindu Religious Institution Bill which encompasses the seven different Acts hitherto in force in the different regions comprising the state.[17] This new Act mostly underlines the spirit of the colonial system of controlling religious institutions according to which the state appoints officers and staff to administer them and pays their salaries. The major difference is that the mathas included under the colonial legislation are not covered by the new Act of 2000. The matha is now fully independent of any state control except for the income tax office, which belongs to the central government. As far as the state government is concerned, it cannot interfere in the affairs of mathas, either in matters of their day-to-day administration or even their succession disputes. After the new Act was approved, many major temples were moved from the control of the state Muzrai (religious and charitable endowment) department and associated themselves with mathas in order to enjoy this freedom of supervision. Udupi Madhava Brahmin mathas now hold the famous Krishna temple in Udupi, and Ramachandrapurada matha headed by the cow-loving guru has been granted responsibility for another important temple, Mahabaleshwara, at Gokarna. In colonial times (under the rule of Mysore princely state), Sringeri matha, the seat of the Shankaracharya, controlled a vast jagir territory where no kind of state control, including police, could enter. So too today, the mathas of Karnataka now potentially have jagirdari status, and gurus can become powerful

jagirdars to whom even the Mysore king would formerly have needed to submit. The difference is that there was only Sringeri in the nineteenth century, but now we have hundreds of potential jagirdaris.

As the matha has legally become a 'private institution' with uncontrolled income from temples and other sources, people have begun comparing the matha with the state itself. A man managing educational institutions under Suttur matha, another powerful Lingayat matha running hundreds of schools and colleges including a designated University in Mysore district, described their massive administrative building standing in front of Mysore palace as 'just like a Vidhana Soudha', which is the seat of legislature of Karnataka in the capital city of Bangalore. Suttur's 'Vidhana Soudha' accommodates many different types of people including Muslims, Dalits and non-Lingayats – working for various projects and institutions under the Suttur matha's management. The man himself was not a devotee and claimed that the guru was aware of his indifference towards religion but did not care about it. He said 'the guru just wants hardworking people'. Secularisation within the matha institutions seems to contribute towards the idea that the matha has grown to something more than a mere caste-specific religious organisation. People attending the Sirigere court called the guru's court 'a supreme court', and suggested that his court was above the other informal courts such as a village elders' court or caste courts, and that his decisions were followed by such 'lower courts'. Here again, the fact that the Sirigere guru's influence is exceeding the community of the agriculturist Sādarus, a sub-caste of Lingayats, who were and are still the main devotees of the matha, ensures that his institution can be said to have some of the characteristics of a modern nation-state. Describing mathas as a form of parallel state is not only suggested in academic analysis of this particular institution in Karnataka (Sood 2006), but has also become a ubiquitous everyday practice. The idea of matha as a parallel state has even led to the irony of a state institution being described as a matha: in a recent interview with a controversial Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University (controversial because of his unsympathetic attitude towards lower castes), who happened to be a Lingayat, the journalist mocked him by saying that the University has become his matha (*The Vijaya Karnataka*, 18 November 2009).

By enlarging traditional functions – education, conflict resolution, and healing – the matha has finally appropriated the 'logic and languages of stateness' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). In this sense, the matha is becoming, as Kapferer (2005) called it, an 'oligarchic-corporate state', a formation of power based on kinship, ethnicity and religion grouped around key patrons. The oligarchic-corporate state operates differently from the nation-state and goes beyond the fixed boundaries of the nation-state. The matha is still small in the size of its stateness, but it has potential to extend its influence into much wider territories. The matha as a twenty-first-century jagir is, though, still happy to form a holy alliance with the state and corporations, a sacred PPP, rather than assert entirely unique systems of governance of its own. The Sirigere guru will never declare the independence of his court from the existing civil court system; rather, he prefers to be incorporated into it. He declares that since he refers to and respects decisions made by civil

courts, he thinks that they should do the same in respect of his own. All the schools run by mathas follow the state or central government curricula and syllabi. Some mathas add their own religious and cultural programmes, but none tries to develop any independent educational programme. Perhaps acquiring a more independent status is regarded as a possible future reward that may come from the state government for their present role as co-operative partners. But whatever future may lie ahead, for the moment the new system of distribution of resources developed between the state and matha seems to be functioning as an effective alternative style of combined and associative governance within the state of Karnataka.

Conclusion

In recent years, scholars have drawn attention to connections between the rise of neo-liberalism and intensified religiosity in the world. For instance, in analysing the Pentecostal revival in the US and Africa, Jean Comaroff argued:

> The recent expansion of faith-based social services has challenged the separation of powers that underlay the ideals, if not always the practice, of most twentieth-century liberal democracies. These days, the life of the spirit extends ever more tangibly to profane realms beyond the space of sanctuary and the time of worship, heralding a significant reorganization of the modernist social order as a whole.
>
> (2009: 20)

The case of the Karnataka mathas described in this chapter seems to exemplify this 'reorganization of the modernist social order'. However, their reworking is being developed neither through an intensification of religiosity nor by the infusion of 'spirituality' into the realm of an order which was previously considered to be secular or a-religious. The Karnataka gurus' participation in this larger neo-liberal project of decentralisation, privatisation and deregulation has instead arisen largely through re-interpretation of the very secular, mundane and this-worldly functions, which the matha and the guru already possessed. Such re-interpretation seems to be founded on a particular perception and understanding of guru-kinship.

The guru has become an alternative big-man to politicians and other power holders in South Indian political culture. The guru-kinship of kinlessness (or 'alienated kinship') was the maker of the distinction by which the guru could claim a much higher moral ground than mere politicians trapped in small and potentially corrupting kin networks. Spirituality or the holiness of their existence was, therefore, not necessary in the case of Karnataka for them to assume the structure and authority of a state apparatus. The holy alliance of the state, corporations, and the mathas is not so much to do with the commercialisation of religion, or corporate takeover of the 'spiritual' described by several scholars (Nanda 2009, Carrette and King 2005). Many mathas do not refrain from commercial activities of all sorts from the running of medical and engineering colleges to the

selling of sacred cows' products, yet the current transformation of the matha from a localised caste-specific institution into a quasi-state mechanism of resource distribution is evidence that the people of Karnataka are experimenting with an alternative form of civil society. This experiment is extremely tricky and fraught with danger. The new role of gurus in Karnataka might well lend legitimacy to communal politics, and recently there has been a proliferation of guru scandals of all sorts in the mass media. From sex scandals to land grabbing (on the guru scandal, see Introduction), news stories have fuelled people's imagination about corrupt bad gurus while at the same time reinforcing the desire of people to have truly trustworthy gurus and expressing anxieties about this new form of governance.

The Sirigere guru was not immune from tabloid exposés. After being raided by the income tax office, the Sirigere guru was accused by a weekly magazine *Hai Bengaluru* of being a secret banker for the then Chief Minister Yeddyurappa.[18] The guru told me that he suspected that the raid was engineered by mine owners (he did not mention their names) against whose company the guru had ruled in an industrial dispute brought to his court. He also mentioned that he might sue the *Hai Bengaluru* for publishing a baseless story. Apart from the raid by the income tax office, the recent controversial inclusion of the Lingayat Sādaru community, to which most of the Sirigere devotees belong, within the category of OBC entitled to benefit from state reservations may also pull him down from his newly attained status of ultimate public servant to that of a mere caste leader.

At the time of writing (October 2011), the cash–politics nexus in Karnataka has been further exposed with the eviction from office, arrest and imprisonment of the mine-owning Reddy brothers and Chief Minister Yeddyurappa. The extent to which these exposés may disrupt guru, caste and political partnerships and the parallel state economy remains to be seen. For the moment, however, the power of gurus continues and depends on the idea of their incorruptibility, which provided their legitimacy in the first place. This idea has become precariously balanced as their unsupervised economic and social activities have mushroomed to hitherto unimagined proportions.

Notes

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2 There are many other trans-national and national religious organisations eagerly engaging in charitable work. Among other things, they participate in mass blood donation schemes (Copeman 2009), organise food camps for the poor (Zavos 2011), and treat stigmatised diseases (Barrett 2008).

3 We can see a similar reinterpretation of renunciation in a novel 'donation theology' encouraged by a religious sect in Delhi, where cadaver donation is viewed as a synthesis of piety and modern utility (Copeman 2006, 2009).
4 Most gurus are in their fifties or sixties, but an exception is the guru of Siddaganga matha, Shivakumara swami, who was 103 years old in 2010. He is the only guru who has experienced the entire history of modernisation of the matha institution since the mid-twentieth century.
5 There are four key religious and pilgrimage centres whose heads are described as Shankaracharyas in modern India: Dwaraka, Sringeri, Puri and Jyotirmath. They claim to be the inheritors of the sovereign power of the four maths founded by the great ninth-century Hindu theologian Adi Shankara. Against all classical traditions, Kanchi claims to be the fifth.
6 *The Vijaya Karnataka*, 9 October 2009, *The Hindu*, 10 October 2009.
7 The target of the Suttur Matha was set to raise Rs 1 crore from the district towards the Chief Minister's relief fund (*The Hindu*, 14 October 2009).
8 The Murgha matha said that they raised Rs 5 lakh in one single day with which they purchased clothes and other materials which were distributed among the affected people in Raichur district the next day. *The Hindu*, 10 October 2009.
9 *The Hindu*, 20 October 2009.
10 *The Hindu*, 28 October 2009.
11 *The Hindu*, 30 October 2009.
12 The interview was conducted in Bangalore in November 2009.
13 The Sirigere guru told me that it is usually easy for him to discern which side is telling a lie, but that it is difficult to ensure that the weaker party (mostly women, he says) receives justice. He also said that the reason why he drags certain cases on for years is that a woman once committed suicide after hearing his judgement. Following this experience, he decided to keep cases going rather than reaching a conclusion which might cause another loss of life. (From an interview conducted in December 2009.)
14 The guru's court at Sirigere is currently being researched by the author together with Prof. Janaki Nair of Jawaharlal Nehru University.
15 Interview with Panditaradhya Shivacharya Swami in Sanehalli village, Chitradurga district, December 2009.
16 The interview was conducted in the Mysore branch of the Kaginele guru peetha, November 2009.
17 The seven acts which existed in the princely states of Mysore, Hyderabad, Bombay and Madras presidencies, Coorg, and others remained effective even after those areas were integrated into Karnataka in 1957. The new integrated Act was drafted in 1997 but was not approved until 2000. Despite the controversial decision of not including mathas, the Act was approved without much debate. *The Legislative Assembly Debate*, 26 November 2000.
18 *The Hai Bengaluru*, 21 August 2009.

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3 The slave guru

Masters, commanders, and disciples in early modern South Asia[1]

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> 'His Majesty, from religious motives, dislikes the name *banda* [slave], for he believes that mastership belongs to no one but God. He therefore calls this class of men *chela*s, which Hindi term signifies a *faithful disciple*.'
>
> – *Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak, ca. 1595* (ibn Mubarak 1927: 263)

The above sentiment (attributed by Abu'l Fazl to Akbar, the Mughal emperor) suggests that slavery bore an uneasy, and ideologically productive, resemblance to discipleship in early modern South Asia. This is because the absolute subjection of enslavement served as an apt metaphor for the willing subjection of the disciple, or *chela*, to the will of a preceptor, or *guru*. In fact, Abu'l Fazl added that 'banda' had become synonymous with 'one who chooses discipleship' (I return to this point in the conclusion). The emphasis on the slave-like subjection of the disciple was all the more appropriate after the early fifteenth century, as the rise of the *sant* tradition in northern India elevated the power and status of the guru to new heights – as either a direct conduit to a divine truth or even divinity itself, or as a living and breathing God-here on earth (see Gold 1987). Indeed, in the context of the spreading popularity of sant sensibilities in this period, Akbar's comment takes on an ironic cast: as living Gods, or 'Godmen', some men could in fact aspire to the kind of 'mastership' that Akbar had reserved for the transcendent deity.[2]

I will have more to say about the Akbar quote and its political, military, and ideological contexts in the latter part of this chapter. As becomes clear in the pages that follow, however, the overlapping ideological ground of slavery and discipleship was not simply the basis for high-minded imperial pronouncements. Slavery and discipleship, as it turns out, were fused in military and social historical fact, particularly in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century north India. Or, to put it more plainly, many of the *chela*s who populated the ranks – even (perhaps especially) the upper-most ranks – of the 'ascetic armies'[3] were, in fact, slaves acquired in their infancy by their guru-commanders. Given the prominence of slavery in pre-modern cultures generally, including in South Asia, it is no surprise that slaves show up as a significant feature of military asceticism. What is perhaps surprising is that the slave origins of *chela*s became, by the early nineteenth

century, an increasing source of controversy and scandal, even among ascetics. Indeed, some of the distaste for slavery was articulated by former *chela*s who themselves were acquired as slaves in their infancy. No doubt, this was in part a function of what constituted 'respectability' under the new British-Indian dispensation. But only in part. Sorting these matters out is one of the tasks of this chapter. My broader aims, however, are to draw attention to the shared ground of slavery and discipleship, to reflect on the ways that slavery helps us better understand the relationship between *guru* and *chela*, and to investigate the specific context of Akbar's opinion on the relationship between slavery and discipleship.

I The military history of slavery and discipleship

It is as well to start at the end. In the 1760s Company forces in Bengal (which in those days included Bihar) were confronted with itinerant bands of armed ascetics occasionally entering the province and causing havoc. This matter came to a head of sorts in the winter months of 1772–73, and no less a figure than Warren Hastings was forced to take note. 'As must have been apparent to all the members of the Board,' many hundreds of these men – 'sinasses' in the early modern English rendering (from *sanyasi*) – had begun 'thronging' the streets of Calcutta. Many thousands more periodically wandered the countryside, ostensibly for the purpose of pilgrimage. Most of these men were 'continually armed with swords, lances, and matchlocks'. According to Hastings and his informants, these wandering bands of armed men played upon the religious credulity of the people and thus gained knowledge of the precise whereabouts of stored treasure in the villages and towns of Bengal. These they would then plunder. For Hastings this was intolerable, not least because it cut into the agrarian revenues the Company could collect in Bengal. It was not simply a law and order problem: it was a question of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Hastings decided to craft a systematic policy to deal with the matter. He penned a descriptive statement laying out the problem, from which the above quotations are drawn, and then drafted legislation to effectively banish such armed 'vagrants' from the province (Hastings 1773). The protracted policing operations that resulted from this legislation lasted about 30 years. Over time the entire episode was enshrined in the historical narrative as the 'Sanyasi and Fakir Rebellion' (see esp. Hunter 1897 and Ghosh 1930).

In his January 1773 'minute on the subject of the Sinasses', Hastings pointed out that he had informed himself about the various 'sects' responsible for the lawlessness and violence. Of particular note was the fact that the members 'neither marry or [sic] have families but recruit their number by the stoutest of the children which they steal in the countries through which they pass'. As it happens, in the nineteenth century Indian ascetics would become notorious for making off with other people's children. This was thanks in part to the publicizing efforts of another official, William Sleeman, better known as the nemesis of 'thuggee'. In one of his many publications about the cultic quality of Indian crime, Sleeman pointed to 'religious mendicants, whether Hindoos or Muhammadans', as among the main culprits when it came to the insidious profession of 'megpunnaism', that

is, the 'Murder of Indigent Parents for their Young Children (who are sold as Slaves)' (Sleeman 1839: 11).

Sleeman's and Hastings' association of asceticism with the trafficking in children cannot be dismissed out of hand as Orientalist hyperbole – though there is no denying that each contributed to the development of 'Orientalistism' (the currently stigmatized kind) in important, if contradictory, ways. There is additional evidence that eighteenth-century ascetics, particularly armed ascetics, dabbled in the business of slaving, and that they even drew their own military recruits from children acquired as slaves from indigent parents. A hint of this is given by Gholam Hosein Khan, the late eighteenth-century historian, who described the men accompanying the 'saniassi-fakir' commander Rajindragiri, who in 1751 came to the rescue of Safdar Jang of Awadh in the defence of Allahabad fort, as 'slave-boys' (Khan 1789: 298–299). Similarly, a *sanyasi* insurgent named Govindgeer who was captured in Bengal in 1794 stated in a deposition that two well-known fakir warriors had begun as the slaves of the notorious fakir commander Majnu Shah but had established their own independent command and spheres of operation ('Deposition' 1794). It is difficult to know, however, whether these individuals were indicating actual slavery or were using the term metaphorically to connote the depth of devotion to their guru-commanders. This problem is cleared up to a large degree through an examination of the official correspondence concerning the 'gosain'[4] armies who assisted the Company campaigns that resulted in the capture of Delhi in 1803 and the extension of British power up to the borders of the Punjab soon thereafter. In fact, two figures who emerge prominently in this correspondence, the gosain brothers Anupgiri and Umraogiri, were probably included among the 1751 'slave-boys' mentioned by Gholam Hosein Khan. According to gosain oral tradition collected by the Hindi literary scholar Bhagvandin in the early twentieth century, Anupgiri and Umraogiri were brothers born into a poor brahman family from Kulapahar village in present-day Mahoba district, in the heart of Bundelkhand. Soon after the children were born their father died. Their mother, left destitute, either gave or sold the two boys to Rajendragiri (Bhagvandin n.d.: xix–xx).[5] As with the deposition of Govindgeer noted above, the evidence pertaining to Anupgiri and Umraogiri and their followers makes clear that not only were gosain recruits drawn from purchased or otherwise appropriated children, some of those recruits rose to positions of high rank – and even top rank – within their ascetic military organizations.

Concerning the armies of Anupgiri and Umraogiri, two pension-related disputes are of particular interest.[6] The first concerned the *chela*s of Kanchangiri, who was himself the senior *chela* of Anupgiri. Kanchangiri had been a major behind-the-scenes player between 1803 and 1806 while the British were trying to 'settle' the frontier province of Bundelkhand and, at the same time, maneuver their troublesome gosain allies there into retirement. Kanchangiri died in 1808. Eventually, in 1815, his main captains decided to apply for Company pensions, citing Kanchangiri's (and, by extension, their own) loyal service during the previous decade. There were five main applicants: four claimed to be *chela*s of Kanchangiri and one (a child) was described as the natural-born son of a fifth *chela* who had

died just prior to Kanchangiri's death. As Kanchangiri had performed considerable service for the Company, the agent in charge accordingly began drawing up the pension documents. At this point, a woman named Aqila Begam (also known as Chehtee Begam) intervened and claimed to be the late Kanchangiri's principal concubine and heir. She insisted that four of the gosains in question (including the one who had died just prior to Kanchangiri himself) were 'mere slaves purchased with her own money and that they worked as her slaves in Kanchan Gir's lifetime'. She added that the fifth gosain, Jagatgiri, who was being represented as the senior *chela*, was merely 'a slave purchased for a hundred rupees when he was only three or four months old' and that 'she had adopted him with the consent of her husband'. The five original gosain applicants, for their part, conceded the truth of the matter. So a new pension was hammered out that granted Aqila Begam a significant share.[7]

The second dispute occurred over a decade earlier and was potentially more serious as it concerned the mantle of Anupgiri himself. Moreover, the details that emerged suggested either fraud on the part of the military and political agent then in charge of Bundelkhand, John Baillie, or that he had been manipulated as a pawn of the aforementioned Kanchangiri. Precipitating the dispute was Anupgiri's sudden death on 3 June 1804. Following this event, Baillie quickly installed a child named Narindragiri, allegedly Anupgiri's infant son, as legal heir and nominal commander of the gosain army. Kanchangiri was appointed as his manager, and became in fact the power behind the throne. This was no mean development, as the gosain army was the most powerful fighting force in Bundelkhand at the time. Baillie claimed that the installation of Narindragiri was consistent with Anupgiri's dying wish. As he put it in a private note to his handler and friend, Graeme Mercer, the day before the gosain commander's death, 'on the occasion of my visiting him this morning, he made an exertion for the purpose of requesting my protection of his infant son which I thought would have proved fatal' (Baillie 1804a). Apparently all the gosain 'captains' were content to go along with this arrangement, save one – Umraogiri, Anupgiri's brother. According to Baillie, he 'departed from the [coronation] tent with some appearance of displeasure' (Baillie 1804b).

As was probably evident to anyone in Bundelkhand watching at the time, the installation of a young child at the head of the gosain army was a situation ripe with intrigue. For his part, Umraogiri was furious. He had rushed to Anupgiri's side when the latter fell ill because he claimed to be the senior-most gosain figure in north India and thus the rightful heir to Anupgiri's army. His displeasure at being outmaneuvered by Kanchangiri was punctuated by the fact that he considered that individual his subordinate, the *chela* of his inferior, Anupgiri. Indeed Umraogiri claimed that Anupgiri had passed control of Kanchangiri to him along with the leadership of the gosain army in Bundelkhand. In a detailed petition to Governor General Richard Wellesley two years later, in 1806, Umraogiri rehearsed all this and pointed out that as far back as 1753, upon the death of his and Anupgiri's 'spiritual preceptor' Rajindragiri, he – and not his brother Anupgiri – had been put in charge of the gosain army and that his rank as such had been

certified by the receipt of a *khilat* or 'robe of honor' from no less a personage than Nawab Safdar Jang of Awadh, in whose military establishment Rajendragiri and his men had served since 1751. Umraogiri further asserted that Anupgiri was fully cognizant of this and had intended for him to take over in Bundelkhand upon his own death in June of 1804. As he put it (in the English translation of his petition):

> It is now two years since ['Anoop Geer'] sent for me in haste in his last illness; and committing into my hands his ring and his chelah Kunchun Geer, resigned his soul to his creator. With these facts all the chiefs and Rajahs of Bundlecund are acquainted but it is probable that Captain Baillie, who had the charge of the affairs of that Province, was not fully apprized of them. While I was engaged in mourning for the death of my late brother, the above mentioned chelah, in concert with the other officers of the Government, availing himself of my absence, by various pretexts carried Captain Baillie to his House and persuaded him to place on the Musnud [*masnad*, throne] a child of five years of age born of a Musselman woman in my brother's family. The Chelah considering my presence in the Province to be extremely hostile to his views, procured thro' Captain Baillie, a letter later addressed to me by his Excellency Lord Lake advising me to withdraw from all interference in the management of public affairs and to retire to some place within the company's dominions when an adequate provision would be assigned by the British Government for the support of myself and my followers. On the receipt of his Lordship's letter I immediately proceeded to the Headquarters of the army at Cawnpore.
>
> ('Translation' 1807)

Thus despite his ire, Umraogiri did as he was told and kept quiet. He retired to the banks of the Ganga at Sivrajpur near Kanpur, and eventually died in January 1809 in Banaras. His own *chela*s later applied for and received substantial pensions.

However, there appears to have been more to the coronation of Narindragiri than met the eye at the time. Umraogiri may have been withholding some crucial information, perhaps to maintain form or even retain some degree of influence over Narindragiri and Kanchangiri should his appeal to Wellesley have failed. According to a revelation by the aforementioned Jagatgiri (who had himself been identified by Aqila Begam in 1815 as a purchased slave) a full 35 years later, in 1841, Umraogiri had harbored serious doubts about Narindragiri's authenticity. Though Umraogiri's 1806 statement indicates that he regarded the child as the son 'born of a Musselman woman in my brother's family', in fact (according to the 1840 statement) it was 'not known whether he [Narindargiri] was born of her or not'. Jagatgiri suggested that Narindragiri himself was illegitimately acquired in Lucknow.

> . . . the Begum went to Lucknow having obtained permission from Himmut Buhadoor [Anupgiri's *nom de guerre*] and from thence she wrote that a son was born to her[,] but none of the family would eat with Nurindurgir, and considered it improper, and even to this day, Raja Oomraogir and his family

> have this objection believing him [sic: not] to be the Begum's son but no body can speak with certainty on this subject.
>
> ('Enclosure' 1841)

Given the timing and the fact that Narindragiri was 5 years old at the time of Anupgiri's death in 1804, this subterfuge had probably occurred in 1799. On the face of it, then, it would appear that Kanchangiri had orchestrated a coup in 1804 and had managed to elevate to the head of the gosain army a child of questionable origins somehow acquired in Lucknow. It is unclear whether Kanchangiri's coup occurred with or without Baillie's connivance. It was Umraogiri's stated opinion in 1806 that Baillie was ignorant of the truth and had been manipulated by Kanchangiri, but it is possible that Umraogiri was wary of leveling an accusation of outright collusion at Baillie given the latter's rising star in official circles. (Baillie would soon become the Resident at Lucknow, possibly the plum position in the political branch at the time.) Nevertheless Baillie may have known of the fraud being perpetrated by Kanchangiri and still let himself be manipulated by him, as the installation of the infant Narindragiri instead of the veteran Umraogiri served his (and the Company's) interests. After all, assuming Baillie did know the truth of Narindragiri's birth, he could nonetheless pretend ignorance of Kanchangiri's machinations – thus protecting himself from official censure – and yet subject Kanchangiri to his will by holding over him the threat of exposure. By 1804 the Company wished for nothing more than the removal of the gosain force from Bundelkhand, despite the crucial assistance that force had rendered in securing the province during the just-concluded Anglo-Maratha hostilities. Baillie's leverage over Kanchangiri could and did effect this eventuality by 1806. By contrast, Baillie would have had no influence over Umraogiri. Had the veteran gosain ascended to the *masnad*, he could easily have exercised a free hand. Following the precedent of Anupgiri, he could continue to play the British off against recalcitrant Rajput chieftains and Maratha warlords while maintaining a pretence of assistance to Company forces, and thereby perpetuated the gosain collection of the lucrative *jaidad* (troop maintenance) revenues. Indeed, this had been the gosain métier for decades, at the very least.

Whatever the verdict on the question of culpability, a larger point requires emphasis: slavery, discipleship, birth, and 'adoption' – and the mediation of these statuses by officials of the Company state – were central to the transition from late Mughal to early British rule in Bundelkhand.

II Social death, social birth

How to interpret the presence of slavery in armed asceticism in the eighteenth century? One response would be to retreat into the discourse of scandal: to note the contamination of discipleship with slavery so as to condemn it.[8] This is, in fact, more or less what Hastings and Sleeman did. Hasting's 'sinasses' only pretended religious renunciation (*sanyas*). In reality, they stole children and acquired wealth – hardly the behavior of the properly religious. Sleeman's ascetics

were, similarly, 'mendicants in disguise'; their many 'species of crime' were the proof of their religious insincerity.[9] Tellingly, Umraogiri and Aqila Begam joined in this discourse of scandal, and did so in a way that suggests this was not simply a matter of the British imposing their own moral will on Indian society, as is so often taken to be the case. Umraogiri and his 'family' refused to break bread with Narindragiri because they were suspicious of the boy's origins; he was neither son nor *chela*, neither fish nor fowl. Aqila Begam denounced the gosain *chela*s of Kanchangiri as 'mere slaves purchased with her own money'; even Jagatgiri, who claimed to be the natural-born son of Kanchangiri, had been purchased. The fact of having been purchased seemed, by implication, to undermine the quality of their discipleship. For Umraogiri and Aqila Begam, slavery clearly carried more than a whiff of scandal. Umraogiri's response, moreover, couched in the rhetoric of 'family' and commensality, hints at the place of caste in the constellation of such attitudes.[10] Clearly South Asia had its own discourse of status and decorum sufficiently capacious to absorb the new pretensions to dignity, honor, and propriety brought to bear politically by the British in the late eighteenth century.

Were we to immerse ourselves likewise in the discourse of scandal, we would miss, I think, the significance of discipleship's proximity to slavery. This significance stems from a key common denominator of both slavery and discipleship, namely, the social death (and rebirth) that resides at their respective hearts.[11] That social death is a central, defining feature of slavery was for too long obscured in historical scholarship, due mainly to the intertwining discourses of property and freedom so central to the Anglo-American historiography of slavery. The emphasis on freedom and on its opposite, unfreedom, as the basis for understanding slavery obscured the social dimension that is, in fact, more pertinent to the slave's existence. It also rendered anachronistic those slaves who exercised considerable autonomy and agency in the pre-modern world. The discourse of property meanwhile draws attention to the market transaction – the moment of sale and purchase. Since this was the manner in which the slave was inscribed in documentary evidence (in the form of a receipt), it more easily entered the realm of the historian. But the moment of sale was only the beginning of the slave's narrative, and the putative essence of slavery, from the point of view of the master. From the point of view of the slave, being sold in the market – which usually meant being transferred from one master to another – was neither the beginning nor the essence of slavery. Based on those few slave memoirs that exist, the starting point was life before slavery, the world that predated 'natal alienation' – the world of family, parents, siblings, perhaps even (for the lucky, at the risk of romanticizing) social status and comfortable belonging. From the point of view of the enslaved, slavery meant the loss of family, or 'natal alienation', and consequent 'social death'.

That social death is key to discipleship is perhaps more obvious, if less commented upon by historians. Being a disciple, becoming subject to a preceptor, requires cutting, or at the very least substantially loosening, the bond to one's natal parents and family. This was not always a voluntary act. Modern social

norms – often and even usually observed in the breach – require that an 'age of consent' be reached, or parental/guardian consent given, before a declaration of discipleship is considered proper,[12] but this is precisely because so many pre-modern 'initiations' were coerced, that is, occurred either as a result of active capture (as a function of force brought to bear) or some form of social or economic distress. For those in the latter condition, brought on by the vagaries of climate or disease in a pre-modern agrarian society, discipleship would have constituted an informal socio-economic safety net. But either coerced or voluntary, the social migration to discipleship involved the abandonment of a former life, a 'social dying' so as to enter a new life – or simply to remain physically alive. And the functional similarity between discipleship and slavery would have given rise to the social, semantic, and historical proximity already noted.

With every social death comes social rebirth. The interstices of the slave's new social relations may be understood as 'marginal kinship', an indicator of the fact that the slave's status in the 'family' group, howsoever defined, was secondary to the status of 'natural-born' children. That this was a factor in the denunciations of slave-*chela*s by both Umraogiri and Aqila Begam in the early nineteenth century seems clear. However, being a slave *chela* was not an obstacle to military advancement in the eighteenth century. Indeed, it may have been an advantage: children perforce abandoned or sold by their destitute parents to the ascetic armies would have made especially obedient *chela*s, since, unlike those who voluntarily joined the order, slave *chela*s would not have possessed competing loyalties to a natal family. This would, presumably, account for the rise to commanding positions of the fakir slaves of Majnu Shah, mentioned in Govindgeer's deposition of 1794, and Anupgiri and Umraogiri, who were themselves acquired as infants from their destitute mother. And the slave *chela* acquired in infancy would be more deeply imprinted with both devotion to the guru-commander and to his warcraft. This is certainly the message contained in another tradition collected by Bhagvandin in the early twentieth century, about Anupgiri's childhood – which we may regard as his social rebirth. According to Bhagvandin,

> . . . [O]ften when Anupgiri was free of any duties to his guru he would make soldiers out of clay and amuse himself by having them do battle; he would make himself the captain and order them about. It is said that one day Anupgiri was fully absorbed in this game when all of a sudden his guru called him to do some work. He left the game and came to his guru and began working according to his instructions. But while working he continued to glance sideways at his clay soldiers, but out of regard for his guru he continued working. Guruji understood his state of mind and surmised, 'in his heart he is very devoted to me as well and hence he doesn't want to violate my orders.' He happily gave his blessing, 'hey "Anupa," why waste any more time playing with clay? Surely by now you've become a real commander, so put aside your games and focus on your work.'
>
> Anupgiri accepted this blessing and from that day forward gave up his games and threw himself body and soul into the service of his guru.

> Guru Rajendragiri knew his [Anupgiri's] destiny and arranged physical exercise for him – wrestling, wooden swordplay, and *banethi* [stick fighting exercises] – and by the time he was approaching the age of nineteen gosain Anupgiri had become, by the good graces of his guru, fully versed in the military sciences, horseback riding, and for breakfast every morning he would take the milk of two water buffaloes.
>
> (Bhagvandin n.d.: xx)

The point here is not, of course, to ascribe the entirety of gosain military ability to the social dynamics of enslavement. One should certainly not discount the significance of the blended Saiva-Shakta, yoga-tantric religious culture in which gosains were immersed – particularly the veneration of Bhairav and his attendant yoginis, the esoteric ritual attention to whom confers a variety of supernormal powers – or the more mundane likelihood that the corporate institutional structure of the akhara and the guru–*chela* chain of command lent itself well to the new modernizing demands of warfare in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, gosain soldiering seems to owe some of its disciplinary effectiveness to complementarities of slavery and discipleship in the early modern era.

However we may calibrate the effects of these various structuring influences, what struck contemporary observers was complete mental subjection of gosain *chelas* to their gurus in the early nineteenth century. As Acting Magistrate Bird put it in April 1810 when seeking to understand the role of gosains marauders in the violence that rocked Banaras in the preceding October, their leaders

> . . . exercise over the minds of this class of people a very peculiar kind of influence. From the singular nature of their institutions and habits, the lower orders *are peculiarly in subjection to the will of their superiors*, whose privileges secure them a deference and respect, especially in religious matters[,] which rank and riches alone can seldom command.
>
> (Bird 1810)[13]

Gosains had been key participants in the violence of 1809, and given the proximity of a massive ghat structure – a combination of warehouse, loading dock, barracks, and luxury apartments – built by Umraogiri in the late eighteenth century and the timing of gosain involvement, it is likely that the men involved were connected to the rapidly demobilizing (and increasingly unemployed) armies of Anupgiri and Umraogiri.[14] Bird estimated the number of gosains in Banaras to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of 23,000 men, a sudden rise from the estimated 10,000 gosains who were said to reside there a decade earlier. So what Bird was describing was not simply a large population of gosain rabble, but a coherent force of men who followed orders to the letter. Whether these men were slaves or disciples misses the point. What mattered was that their gurus exercised complete control over their minds and bodies. Their gurus were their lords. Gosain *chela*s were wholly subject to and dependent on the will of their masters.[15]

III Akbar's opinion

As in pre-modern Europe, Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere in Asia, so in South Asia and the Indian Ocean world: slavery was a common feature of social, political, and economic life. The wide compass of slavery in the pre- and early-modern world meant that slavery did not possess the same kind of sting that it would in later centuries.[16] This earlier slavery was not the stigmatized cul de sac, the zero sum game that it would later become after race made policing the bondage that slaves were subject to socially practicable on a continental, indeed, oceanic scale. Pre-modern slaves could even become sovereigns – indeed, during the Delhi Sultanate this was a routine affair (Jackson 1990; Jackson 2006; Kumar 2006). Slave nobility was not even a male preserve (Chatterjee and Guha 1999). The relative fluidity of pre-modern slavery is what accounts for the semantic confusion that bedevils its wider world-historical examination: none of the many words for 'slave' that arise out of pre-modern circumstances can ever carry the 'essentializing' stain of racialized slavery in the Atlantic world.

That said, slavery was no picnic, and voices were, on occasion, raised against it. This chapter began with one such voice, that of the Mughal emperor Akbar (via the pen of Abu'l Fazl), and it is appropriate to return to it here. Two things are particularly noteworthy about Akbar's distaste for slavery. The first is that he saw discipleship as its antidote. To recall:

> His Majesty, from religious motives, dislikes the name *banda* ['slave'], for he believes that mastership belongs to no one but God. He therefore calls this class of men *chelah*s, which Hindi term signifies a *faithful disciple*.
>
> (ibn Mubarak 1927: 263)

There is much to ponder here. On the face of it, the passage seems to operate on two levels, as an expression of belief but also a comment on expression. While Akbar asserts, indirectly, a distaste for slavery – 'for he believes that mastership belongs to no one but God' – his principal concern seems to have stemmed from semantic comfort: he was uneasy with 'the name *banda*' (indeed, quite literally, as the original Persian includes a parenthetical comment on the difficulty of rendering the word in proper *Farsi*)[17] and preferred the term *chela* and all that it signified. Perhaps this reflects his acknowledgment that, believe what one might about the dignity of man (or, more precisely, the importance of rendering unto God that which is God's, namely, 'mastership'), things being what they were – and the early modern state being the limited affair that it was – even so grand a figure as the Mughal emperor could not even begin to contemplate legislating against such a widespread practice as slavery. The passage thus fell well short of an outright ban. It is better to think of it, perhaps, as a 'pious wish' (which is how it is regarded in Subrahmanyam 2005: 211). Akbar both acknowledged the existence of the practice of slavery and sought to soften the impact of subjection.

But the imperial sentiment is, at the same time, more than the expression of a pious wish. In order to effectively engage in public wishful thinking – in order to

use the Mughal 'bully pulpit' to good rhetorical effect – the emperor and Abu'l Fazl had to employ meanings that they took to be widely subscribed. Thus the passage builds upon commonly held assumptions about discipleship and slavery. It would be taken as given that being a disciple ran counter to being a slave in the sixteenth century, even if the two possessed a similar basic subjection to a master. Whereas the *banda*'s subjection was imposed from above, the *chela*'s subjection was appropriated from below. Nonetheless, despite the conflicting trajectories of enslavement, Abu'l Fazl observes in the following passage that the term '*banda*' had come to signify 'disciple', or rather, one 'who leaves the path of selfishness and chooses the road of spiritual obedience', among other meanings.

> Various meanings attach to the term *slave* [*banda*]. *First*, that which people in general mean by a slave. Some men obtain power over such as do not belong to their *sect*,[18] and sell and buy them. The wise look upon this as abominable. *Secondly*, he is called a slave who leaves the path of selfishness and chooses the road of spiritual obedience.[19] *Thirdly*, one's child. *Fourthly*, one who kills a man in order to inherit his property. *Fifthly*, a robber who repents and attaches himself to the man whom he had robbed. *Sixthly*, a murderer whose guilt has been atoned by payment of money, in which case the murderer becomes the slave of the man who releases him. *Seventhly*, he who cheerfully and freely prefers to live as a slave.

So the considerable semantic convergence between the worlds of slavery and discipleship extended into the world of family as well: Abu'l Fazl's third definition of *banda* is 'one's child'. That this was so was due, no doubt, to the basic hierarchical similarities that pertained to the master–slave, parent–child, and guru–*chela* relationships, which allowed them to become mutually constituting fields in the early modern world: together they provided an overlapping vocabulary, grammar, and language within which absolute subjection to the will of another might find expression and meaning. Thus, if slavery may be understood as a form of marginal kinship, it is also a form of discipleship; likewise kinship and discipleship may also be understood as forms of slavery, and as forms of each other. The differences between them reside not in the relation itself, but in the production of the relation.

The second thing that is significant about Abu'l Fazl's reference to Akbar's reflections on slavery and discipleship is that it occurs in the context of a description of the Mughal infantry, in *A'in* number 6 of Book 2 of the *Ain-i-Akbari* (ibn Mubarak 1927: 261–265). Thus, for Abu'l Fazl – and presumably for Akbar and the Mughals more generally – slavery, family, and discipleship were not only ideologically relevant to each other, together they were functionally pertinent to the supply of military labor in early modern northern India. In hindsight, then, perhaps it is not so surprising that questions of slavery, family, and discipleship intersect so forcefully in the context of gosain military entrepreneurship in the eighteenth century. This is also a useful reminder that the understanding of slavery and discipleship in terms of 'adoption' and family legitimacy was not simply due

to the introduction of European epistemological norms in the early nineteenth century.

From a more practical, military historical vantage point, another question arises: How many *banda-chela*s were there? This question is difficult to answer with any certainty. Abu'l Fazl provided numbers for some of the various categories of men described in the section on the infantry, but not all. They included matchlockmen (twelve thousand), porters, palace guards, runners and spies (numbering one thousand), gladiators ('more than one hundred thousand' in total, though at court 'one thousand of them are always in readiness'), wrestlers, slaves (or *chela*s), palanquin bearers ('there are many in this country' but 'at court several thousand are kept'), and 'half-troopers' (matchlockmen and archers who are paid by the emperor but serve with the *mansabdar*s [military nobility]). Since the *chela*s received the lowest pay of all these groups, at '1 Rupee to 1 dam *per diem*', it is likely that they existed in fairly large numbers. Certainly there was plenty of warfare and agrarian dislocation in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and therefore plenty of scope for acquiring slaves. In any case, however many there were, the emperor treated them well. Abu'l Fazl concluded his discussion of the *chela*s with the observation that

> His Majesty has divided them into several sections, and has handed them over to active and experienced people, who give them instruction in several things. Thus they acquire knowledge, elevate their position, and learn to perform their duties with propriety.
>
> His Majesty who encourages everything which is excellent, and knows the value of talent, honors people of various classes with appointments in the ranks of the army; and raises them from the position of a common soldier to the dignity of a grandee.

The above passage is a reminder that Akbar's guru–*chela* bond with common soldiers was forged in the context of a dangerous and rapidly evolving court politics. As is well known, the late 1570s saw the emergence of a new kind of religio-political formation in Mughal affairs: the so-called '*din-i illahi*', in which the emperor was conceived as a divinely illuminated being, a kind of Sufi *pir* and Hindu *guru* all rolled into one, with whom select members of the ethnically and religiously diverse nobility were able to forge direct discipleship bonds (Richards 1978; Richards 1993: 44–49).[20] The idea, according to John Richards, was to bind the heterogeneous nobility to him and counter the centrifugal tendencies of an imperial system that involved a hierarchical sharing of power. To what degree such master–disciple bonds actually worked to centralize power in the person of the emperor is, of course, difficult to say. Indeed, Abu'l Fazl's grandiose depictions of Akbar as a divinely inspired, all-wise, all-powerful being in the *Akbarnama* and *A'in-i Akbari* could be read against the grain as a way of compensating for the inherent weakness of the Mughal emperor – that, as the lynchpin of the empire, Akbar's behavior was increasingly constrained, that he was hemmed in by his immensely powerful nobles. Akbar's elevation of slaves to

the status of *chela*s, even raising some to 'the dignity of a grandee,' suggests that the emperor sought to cast a much wider net for master–disciple loyalties than simply among the multi-ethnic imperial elite. Like Hegel's paradigmatic master, then, we may conclude that Akbar desperately needed his slaves: he needed them to be his willing disciples – but not simply to achieve proper recognition. He needed to people the court with his own men, devoted agents who knew their duties and could 'perform [them] with propriety.'

Notes

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2 It is worth noting that Akbar toyed with the notion of himself as a kind of semi-divine being, evinced most famously in the ambiguous, multi-trajectoried slogan 'Allah-u Akbar' ('God is Great' or 'Akbar is God') that was promoted at court in the 1580s. Akbar wasn't alone in suspecting there was something special about his appearance in the world at this particular juncture in time. See Subrahmanyam 2003.

3 For more on the category 'warrior ascetic', see Lorenzen 1978 and Pinch 2006.

4 The term 'gosain' is functionally synonymous with 'sanyasi' in that it refers to an ascetic; however, whereas the latter derives from *sanyas*, or renunciation, the former derives from 'go' or 'gau' – which can have a multitude of meanings including cattle, arrows, the world, the senses, and the four compass points – and 'sain', meaning lord. Thus 'gosain' can be taken to mean 'lord of the world', 'controller of the senses', and 'master of cows'. In some senses, then, gosain carries the opposite meaning of renunciation. This prompts a recalibration of what we mean by the term 'ascetic' and, *inter alia*, 'religion'; see Pinch 2006: introduction.

5 This is similar in its essentials to an account I received in Jhansi from Umraogiri's descendants in 1999. Bhagvandin unfortunately does not indicate the source for this story, but he probably spoke with gosain descendants in places like Kulpahar, Banda, Bilhari, Rasdhan, Allahabad, Jhansi, and Banaras. Padmakar's ballad, '*Himmatbahadur Virdavali*' (ca. 1793), which describes the battle of Anupgiri and the Bundela Rajput Arjun Singh in 1792, itself does not provide biographical details of this sort. This is not surprising, inasmuch as Padmakar – trained in the traditions of Rajput court poetry – sought to describe Anupgiri as a valorous, sophisticated warrior-king and would have been unlikely to insert details about his common origins. Similar anxieties marked Persian historical representations of slavery in the Delhi Sultanate; see Kumar 2006.

6 These and related disputes are described in much greater detail in Pinch 2006: chaps. 4–5. I cite the relevant Company correspondence below.

7 Wauchope 1815–1816; see also 'Note on Reversions to Jagat Gir's Allowance' enclosed in 'Genealogical Tables of Gushain Family' 1933. The 'Note' summarizes the Persian documents in the Central India Agency office, Indore. Judging by the tenor of the cover letter to the file, the information concerning Jagatgiri's birth was still a well-guarded secret in 1933, over a century later.

8 Another response would be to note the virtue of slavery in discipleship so as to redeem it (slavery).

9 'There is hardly any species of crime that is not throughout India perpetrated by men in the disguise of these religious mendicants; and almost all such mendicants are really men in disguise; for Hindoos of any caste can become Bairagis and Gosains; and Muhammadans of any grade can become Fakirs' (Sleeman 1839: 11; for a wider discussion, see Pinch 2006: chap. 6).

10 Interestingly, Umraogiri had implicitly disdained such questions of status three decades earlier. He declared to John Bristowe, the resident at the court of Asaf ud-Daulah, that he was not like the others in Asaf's service. He was 'no *Motteseddy* [pen-pushing clerk] but a soldier,' and 'he considered himself obliged to his sword for everything he held' (Bristowe 1775).

11 Obviously relevant here is Patterson 1982; see also the discussion in Chatterjee 1999: 26–28; Guha 2006: 162–168; and Miers and Kopytoff 1977. Other definitions of slavery are, of course, possible (see Chatterjee and Eaton 2006: 1–16, 17–43).

12 A sense of this can be had in the regulations governing who can join the Bharat Sadhu Samaj: 'Any Sadhu who has attained the age of 18 years, lives a life of purity and renuciation, is inspired by spiritual ideals, has no family ties, is interested in the work of social and religious uplift and has been initiated in the way of the Sadhu life, shall be entitled to become a member of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj' (*Bharat Sadhu Samaj* n.d.: 3). The ascetic orders do still acquire children. Daniel Gold describes having encountered a gruff old Saiva sadhu tending a cradle in the 1990s and being told that the child was 'offered' by devotees in fulfilment of a vow (email communication, 6 September 2010). Similar tales are the stuff of popular lore in many ascetic institutions; see, e.g., Bali 1983: *passim*. Other recruits to present-day *akhara*s (ascetic organizations) join in their adolescence. According to Mahant Yogendragiri of the Mahanirvani Panchayati Akhara in Daraganj, Allahabad, about 2 to 5 percent join the akhara 'out of their own sense of *vairagya* [detachment from the world], but the rest come because of some misfortune, whether they've failed the exam, or run away from home out of anger, etc.' (personal conversation, 10 November 1999).

13 Emphasis added. This large file consists of extracted letters from the Bengal Political and Bengal Judicial proceedings concerning the 1809 violence and its aftermath. I am grateful to Jennifer Howes, Curator of APAC Prints & Drawings, for helping me access this material.

14 For a detailed examination of the 1809 episode, especially its topographical, architectural, and religious dimensions see Pinch 2011.

15 Richard Eaton's preferred definition of slavery works well in this context: slavery is 'the condition of uprooted outsiders, impoverished insiders – or the descendents of either – serving persons or institutions on which they are wholly dependent' (Chatterjee and Eaton 2006: 2).

16 The classic statement of this is, of course, Ghosh 1992.

17 This point is not noted in Blochmann's translation. For the Persian, see ibn Mubarak 1872: 190 (lines 1–6). I am grateful to Jos Gommans for his close examination of this passage and clarification of key terms used by Abu'l Fazl.

18 My italics. Much depends upon what is meant by 'sect' here. In fact, Abu'l Fazl uses the term *a'in*, which incidentally is the same term used for the title of the larger work, namely, the *A'in-i-Akbari*. Usually *a'in* is translated as 'institution' (thus, the *A'in-i-Akbari* is often translated as the 'Institutes of Akbar'), but it can also mean 'law' or 'rites' and probably in this context invoked the Islamic proscription against enslaving a fellow Muslim. Jos Gommans, email communication, 25 August 2010.

19 Abu'l Fazl's term for 'spiritual obedience' is '*iradat*', or 'discipleship', a term he deploys earlier, in the compound '*iradat-guzin*', or 'disciple' (lit., 'one who chooses discipleship').

20 Richards argued, moreover, that '[t]he numbers of [*din i-illahi*] disciples grew rapidly – to perhaps a majority of the Mughal *amir*s [nobles]' (Richards 1993: 48). At the end of Akbar's reign, the *amir*s numbered 283, of whom an inner circle of 73 were ranked 2,500 *zat* or greater (Richards 1993: 143).

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4 The political guru

The guru as éminence grise

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In one of his attempts to characterize Indian politics, Ashis Nandy suggests that: 'the uniqueness of the Indian concept of power lay in its strong "private" connotations. The most respected form of power was power over self – self-control – particularly regulation of one's instinctual and materialistic self.' Nandy adds in the same spirit: 'There is always some pressure on the rulers to indulge in the language of conspicuous asceticism and self-sacrifice, and to vend even the most trivial politics as part of a grand moral design – as if power over one's own self, the moral self dominating the self-seeking instinctual self – legitimises one's political power' (Nandy: 1980, pp. 50–51). Here Nandy makes indirect reference to the notion of *swaraj*, which in India designates an individual's spiritual control of himself but also, in the political vocabulary of the freedom movement, the control of one's national destiny, that is to say, independence. This principle was at the heart of the Gandhian approach, as the Mahatma (the 'great soul') sought at the same time both spiritual accomplishment and freedom from the British yoke – from which stemmed his political ambivalence, torn as he was between a personal quest and a political agenda, as if self-control were the precondition of successful political mobilization.[1]

Is this really the typical configuration for politics in India, as Nandy suggests? Must this duality between the public and private spheres be a mask of Janus reflecting the relation, in each individual political figure, between the private (even secret) foundations of their personality and their influence over men and society? In fact, the two faces in question are not always united in the same individual, as was the case for Gandhi. Indian politicians, far from pursuing a lone spiritual quest, are happy to use the services of a *guru*, in conformity with the canons of the Hindu tradition. This tradition – that Nandy ignores – held for the sovereign to be flanked by a chaplain whose moral standing gave him a right of regard over the State's affairs. How did this arrangement survive the secularization of the public sphere, as reflected in the – secular – Constitution of 1950? In the new Indian Republic, must politicians hide their *gurus*, or can they still display them? It would seem in fact that sometimes they do have to hide them, while at other times they must ensure that their existence is known to the wider public. The degree of secrecy varies because the association with a *guru* can reinforce the legitimacy of those politicians who know how to make use of him. The rise to

power of the Hindu nationalist movement has confirmed this possibility, though the *gurus* in question happen to be of a new type.

The prince's counselors: secret figures for judicious public use

The old Hindu pattern

In the old Hindu conception of the state, the sovereign, of the *kshatriya* (warrior) caste, must be associated with a Brahmin (a member of the priestly caste), who reinforces his status and serves him as a counselor – who indeed legitimizes him by inspiring his actions. The king is guided by the *purohita* or 'he who goes before' for matters touching on *dharma* (the socio-cosmic order, that of the world of castes and that of the cosmos, which together have a homothetic relationship). According to Robert Lingat: '*Dharma* can only be realized through their cooperation: the Brahmin is the veritable brain of the king' because, in the *Dharmashastra* (the treaties of the *Dharma*, amongst Sanskrit, the founding texts of literature), 'the king, by the very reason of the power with which he is invested and which permits him to do everything, must not take a decision before having demanded the counsel of competent and enlightened people, foremost among whom are naturally the Brahmins (Lingat, 1967: 240–242; Coomaraswamy, 1985; Hocart, 1978, p. 259)'.[2] According to the texts of Ancient India, the sovereign thus did not exercise the right of supreme authority: he required the approval of the Brahmins, who embodied the highest values and who confirmed the royal nature of the *kshatriya* or, on the contrary, denied it using genealogies of their own making (Reiniche, 1995; Kumar, 1989).

The practices actually followed in the Hindu kingdoms up until the British Raj were a little different. While the theoretical basis of the caste system gave Brahmins a superior status to the *kshatriya*, the sovereign easily escaped the guidance of his 'chaplain' (Dumont, 1966: 353)[3] on all non-religious matters. Moreover, the Brahmin lived off the largesse of his 'patron': it was the king's duty to be generous to him and to protect both his person and his worldly goods. The Brahmin was thus materially dependent on the sovereign. Nicholas Dirks writes in this respect that 'in South India, during the entire period of British colonisation, the crown was not as hollow as it has generally been thought to be. Kings were not subordinated to brahmins; the political sphere was not merged with the religious sphere' (Dirks, 1987: 4). The subordination of the king to the Brahmin was thus relative, and varied from case to case. But practice caught up with theory in one essential point, in that the differentiation of the spheres of spiritual authority and temporal power was confirmed. These two domains were represented by the two emblematic figures who were, as their names indicate, complementary: *Rajah* (king) and *Raj guru* (king's *guru*), the first a *kshatriya* and the second a Brahmin.

This power structure, which was not unique to India, as A.M. Hocart demonstrated in comparing India and different European kingdoms (Hocart, 1978),

disappeared from official circles after Independence in 1947 and the installation of a secular political society. Even if the Indian Constitution made no explicit reference to secularism until 1976, following an amendment proposed by Indira Gandhi, this was indeed the philosophy behind it from its promulgation in 1950. In India, as elsewhere, the role of spiritual counselors was thus thrown into question after the establishment of the Republic. Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister from 1947 to 1964, favored a rationalist and secular political style. He was always distrustful of religious figures. For example, he reinforced the power of the State over Hindu temples, whose revenues – stemming from their land holdings and the sometimes considerable donations they received – were directly managed by the administration to prevent embezzlement (*RHREC*, 1960–62; Jaffrelot and Tarabout, 2011). In addition, he created in 1957 the *Bharat Sadhu Samaj* (the Association of the Ascetics of India) which was meant to bring together hermits and other wandering ascetics, whom the Prime Minister saw as little better than parasites, and use them in the realization of the Five Year Plans![4] Most politicians, however, continued to maintain close ties to their *guru*, from whom they took counsel and from whom they expected above all a supernatural protection. They also saw in them an additional guarantee for the success of their affairs. These relationships were ostensibly private but could be publicized on occasion by a politician seeking additional legitimacy, as the example of Indira Gandhi shows.

The hidden counselors of Indira Gandhi in the light of day

In spite of her proclaimed agnosticism – which she inherited in large part from her father – Indira Gandhi resorted more often to *guru* than many other Indian statesmen (or statewomen). She turned first to Ma Ananda Moyi, a Bengali woman whose disciples had built an *ashram* (a sort of hermitage) in Dhaka in 1931, but who passed her life traveling the roads of India until her death in 1982. She also consulted Jiddhu Krishnamurti, a theosophist based in the United States who returned each autumn to India. She principally solicited his help during the Emergency, the period of 18 months from 1975 to 1977 during which she suspended democracy in order to block legal action against her and hamper the rise of the opposition, who were demonstrating in the streets. This authoritarian phase of her political career was a difficult time for Indira Gandhi. Racked by doubt, she sought help from Krishnamurti. We know, thanks to confidences she made to Pupul Jayakar, one of her intimate friends and a disciple of Krishnamurti, that she said to him one day in 1976: 'I am riding on the back of a tiger . . . what should I do?' Pupul Jayakar indicates that Krishnamurti 'refused to advise her, but suggested that she take everything, her own life, all the conflicts, the sorrows, the attacks on her, her actions, the wrongs, and look at them as if they were one problem, and then act without motive or fear of consequences' (Jayakar, 1992: 312).

Indira Gandhi's relationship with Krishnamurti was first of a personal nature, because she sought from him psychological and moral support. This relationship nonetheless fit the traditional mold associating a political leader and a spiritual

counselor. The way in which Indira Gandhi strove to make this otherwise private relationship public confirms this: her aim was to be seen with a man who enjoyed great spiritual prestige.

In the same period, Indira Gandhi sought to obtain the support of another of her *gurus*, Vinoba Bhave, to give the Emergency a veneer of respectability. Bhave was then one of the last living close disciples of Gandhi. His prestige stemmed from his activities undertaken with the Mahatma, who had designated him in 1921 as the head of his *ashram* at Wardha, in Maharashtra, and from his own personal initiatives. Two months after Gandhi's death in 1948, Bhave founded the *Sarvodaya Samaj* (literally the 'Society of Universal Service') which was at the origin of the *bhoodan* (literally 'gift of earth') movement, whereby he asked landowners to cede part of their holdings to poor peasants. To this end, he crisscrossed India on foot over the course of 15 years before retiring to his *ashram* in Paunar where he stayed with his disciples. Though a recluse, Bhave nonetheless remained very present on the national public scene, playing the role of *Sarkari guru* (*guru* of the regime), to use the expression favored by journalists (Bhave, 1994). Indira Gandhi mainly consulted him in the 1970s. She had a long meeting with him in his *ashram* on 2 January 1974, and visited him again on 7 September 1975, a few months after she had declared the state of Emergency. Bhave had already given his approval to the new order, seeing in it an 'era of discipline'. He thus appeared as the '*rishi* [literally, the seer, the man for whom the future holds no secrets] who had legitimized Mrs Gandhi's action' (Ostergaard, 1985: 221). The importance given to the fact that he had 'given his blessing' to the government – the press, under censorship, devoted several editorials to this event – is a clear indication of the strength of the link that persisted in India between temporal power and spiritual authority.

Indira Gandhi never missed being photographed with her different *gurus*, which is a sign of her constant concern to give the most publicity possible to these meetings. Though such relationships might seem to form part of the 'hidden face' of power, politicians like Mrs Gandhi in fact see them as a resource. They are not only considered legitimate; they are necessary for political legitimacy. The ritualized form of these encounters is worth highlighting here. They should preferably take place in the *ashram* of the *guru*; the politician thus must make the effort of going there. The politician begins by kissing the master's feet, the appropriate form of address of an inferior to his superior, and receives in exchange a blessing by the gesture of a hand upon his head. Whatever happens to follow is, at best, unimportant: the essential point is to receive this blessing, the *darshan* (vision) of the *guru*, and to be seen at his side. Another of Indira Gandhi's *gurus*, Devraha Baba, liked to give this blessing with his feet. Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv were thus photographed with their heads covered by the feet of this frail man, seated before his hut on stilts on the bank of a sacred river, the Yamuna, a tributary of the Ganges. Their exchange stopped there, but the symbolism of this gesture was very strong and photographs of it circulated widely.

Despite the officially secular nature of the Indian Republic, the 'Godmen' thus did not disappear from the entourage of politicians who, following the prime

example of Indira Gandhi, drew psychological support and symbolic strength from them. This explains the public use Indira Gandhi made of her privileged relations with many *gurus*. The unveiling of this hidden face of politics is, however, not without limits. Certain *gurus* are less legitimate than others. This is above all the case of the tantrics, particularly when their occult activities have a criminal dimension (!).

Tantrism and crime: the hidden face of politics

Tantrism borrows some elements from shamanic practices but acts principally to reorganize elements of Hinduism using inverted rituals whose ultimate aim is salvation (or *moksha*) (Biardeau, 1981: 162).[5] Instead of asceticism, it glorifies desire, notably in the form of sexual experiences, and instead of preaching non-violence, it permits animal sacrifice. It is also associated with the transgression of prohibitions and with black magic.

The powers of tantrics are used in politics in different respects. First of all, for a politician, to be associated with a tantric has a similar value to having an astrologer who, like a fortune-teller can bring him luck. Secondly (and symmetrically) the powers of a tantric can be used to disqualify a rival using the 'evil eye', which is reminiscent of certain uses of sorcery in sub-Saharan Africa. Indira Gandhi confided to Pupul Jayakar that she had received 'secret reports of tantric rituals and black magic rites, being performed to destroy me and my sanity' (Jayakar, 1992: 440). In 1982 she called on Krishnamurti to deliver her from these spells, which, according to her, he did. Indira Gandhi thus believed in the power of tantric rituals and in the antidote that a man like Krishnamurti could offer her. She had already solicited experts in tantrism to protect her younger son, Sanjay, on trial following the Emergency on several counts of corruption. Pupul Jayakar's account is very clear on this point: in 1979, Indira Gandhi decided

> to perform Laskshachandi Path, a ritual where a hundred thousand verses were recited to invoke the primordial power and energy of Chandi, the all-encompassing mother. These rituals were held in the Kali temple of Jhansi. The *yagna*, the oblations to fire, and the recitation of the verses were conducted *in secret* from 1979 to 1983. It was a period when I saw her often, a period when she spoke freely of her problems, but never during our many meetings and conversations did she reveal her contact with living rituals connected with elemental female energy. While she sought protection and *power* for her son in the sanctuaries of Chandi, in secret rituals of shamans and tantrics, she was also in contact with J. Krishnamurti. This raises imponderable questions. At what impenetrable level of her unconscious did she hold these contradictory, explosive energies? The one, the path of the *seer*, the way of negation of power, of compassion, of liberation, likened to walking the edge of a sword and the other, the way of Chandi, of primordial female energy, *wielding the sword of power*. Could these two cosmic forces be held in one consciousness? And yet, outwardly, meticulously in word and deed, she trod the secular path,

> never losing step, refusing to mingle her role of Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, the inheritor of a rational scientific temper, her responsibilities as Prime Minister with her own inner necessities.
>
> (Jayakar, 1992: 470–471)

Indira Gandhi's behavior shows that in India, and doubtless elsewhere, relationships between religious figures and politicians can take three forms: on the official level, it is the absence of the relation which prevails, as it did for the agnostic Nehru; on the unofficial, but not illegitimate, level, Indira Gandhi turned to the most lawful *gurus*, such as Krishnamurti or Bhave; finally, on the secret level, there was the Indira Gandhi, disciple of tantrism, of whom we know almost nothing. Indira Gandhi never spoke of her participation in tantric rituals to Pupul Jayakar, who was, however, her closest confidante. She disclosed only her fear of tantric attacks to Jayakar, who had to make her own inquiries concerning Indira Gandhi's participation in tantric rituals. This activity constituted one of the real hidden facets of politics.

Tantrism has particular affinities with power, as illustrated by the central position occupied by the notion of *shakti*, or the feminine principle; *shakti*, generally translated by 'energy' or 'power', is held by tantrism to be the 'active principle in the universe' (Biardeau, 1981: 162), and is principally manifest in the cult of the goddess Kali/Durga. *Shakti* is power. Indira Gandhi seems to have been fascinated by this equation. She was electrified by hymns to the glory of the goddess: the cult of the *shakta*, the *sapta sati*, was for her 'like thunder; it fills the ears, the heart, it pervades all' (Jayakar, 1992: 442). She may have seen herself as the *shakti* of India. At any rate, she was often associated with *shakti* in the collective Indian imagination. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then a Jana Sangh leader, compared her to Durga when she declared war on Pakistan in 1971 and led India to victory. The affinities between tantrism and power (and more precisely the powers of tantric *guru*) explain why so many politicians resort to their services.

Indira Gandhi herself finally turned to one of these *gurus*, Dhirendra Brahmachari, who had in the 1950s built something of a reputation as a yoga expert and so had worked his way into Delhi high society. He began to teach yoga to Indira Gandhi in 1958 and soon became one of her inner circle, which earned him the nickname 'Rasputin'. He was very often by her side, to such an extent that even her collaborators complained it was sometimes difficult to speak to her alone. Brahmachari reinforced his role as 'king's chaplain' by officiating during family rites, such as the funeral of Sanjay, Indira's youngest son, who died in 1980 (Malhotra, 1989: 188). However, he was a new breed of *yogi*, one of the modern *gurus* who embraced a religious career for less than disinterested reasons and who strove to gain acolytes among the social elite, and even abroad. A biographer of Indira Gandhi notes that Brahmachari 'drove a Toyota and flew his own private aircraft, which, he insisted, had been donated to him by his foreign devotees' (Malhotra, 1989: 188). After the electoral defeat of Indira Gandhi in 1977, Dhirendra Brahmachari was the target of many judicial inquiries. He was most notably accused of having set up an illegal arms factory (Jayakar, 1994: 347). But these lawsuits were suspended once Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980. For

her, Brahmachari's bad reputation, of which she could not have been unaware, was not a sufficient reason to break with him. When those close to her pressed her to explain how she could keep such a person in her entourage, she replied 'There must be a reason!'. For Pupul Jayakar, this reason could be none other than the tantric obedience of Brahmachari: 'An adept of that esoteric science, he was one of those people who frightened Indira by evoking dark tantric rites practiced in secret sanctuaries by those who wished to destroy both her and Sanjay. Brahmachari doubtless spoke to her of other equally powerful rites and mantras (ritual formulas) which could protect her from these evil forces' (Jayakar, 1994: 348). Dhirendra Brahmachari was finally shown the door of the Gandhi household in 1984 after the death of Indira, by her elder son Rajiv. But other tantrics continued to insinuate themselves into the corridors of power.

The attraction another of these tantric *gurus*, Chandraswami, has held for politicians of every stripe in the 1990s is a particularly telling example. Chandraswami began his political career as Congress Youth leader in the Hyderabad region. But his reputation as a tantric *guru* grew in the 1970s and he abandoned his political career to become a more or less 'secret' counselor of politicians. He justified this association by referring to the traditional ties between men of power and men of God in classical Hinduism: 'The tradition of this country is that kingship and religion are inextricably interwoven. The relation between the *rajah* and the *rishi* and the relation between *rajniti* and *dharma* are like the relation of soul and body. They are inseparable.'[6] However, as a good tantric, Chandraswami was more than a simple counselor to the prince. He admitted to holding different powers corresponding to three kinds of ritual: the *maha mrityunjay yajna* (a ritual whose aim is to conquer death); the *bagla mughi yajna* (a ritual aiming to eliminate enemies); and the *rudra mahayagya* (a ritual intended to do harm to one's adversaries). He stressed that he had never used these last two powers. But journalists investigating his *ashram* reported that eleven Brahmins had gone there in his absence to carry out a specific ritual meant to 'harm the enemies in several ways but it does not involve any physical attack; it is just the mental prowess of a tantric, who has attained it through *sadhana* [meditation] over a long period of time'.[7] The mantras recited by the eleven Brahmins were intended to dumbfound enemies and to daze them (*stambhan*), to disturb their spirit (*uchachadan*) and to provoke conflicts among them (*idveshwan*). According to Chandraswami's disciples, the *guru* indulged in this practice on numerous occasions.

Whether such episodes are true or false is of little interest. What is important is that Chandraswami tried to dress tantric practices up in the Hindu tradition associating a king and his chaplain, and that in spite of their public denunciation of such practices, many politicians sought to benefit from his powers. This contradiction between private attitudes and public discourse was particularly obvious in the hearings organized by the Commission of Inquiry presided over by Justice Jain, whose task was to shed light on the assassination in 1991 of Rajiv Gandhi. As Chandraswami had been accused by the police of having played a role in this affair, Justice Jain interrogated the politicians who had frequented him. In answer to his questions, former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar declared: 'I was

introduced to him [Chandraswami] in 1971 in this capital city of India [New Delhi] by a friend, a Congress minister [whose name he did not mention], who described him as a great person who had supernatural powers.' Naturally, Chandra Shekhar insisted that he had never believed such stupid allegations: 'Many times I asked him: "What are your tantric powers? I want to see these powers. I've met many tantrics, but none so far has ever shown me their powers." '[8] Chandra Shekhar nonetheless sought to be associated with Chandraswami, as did many other politicians[9]. Another major figure of the 1990s, Narasimha Rao, was even closer to him. Chandraswami declared before the Jain Commission that when he visited Rao at his official residence when he was Prime Minister of India (1991–96) his car was not inspected, which was a highly exceptional privilege. However, at the same hearing he contested allegations that he had used *yagya* [sacrificial rites] to help Rao become Prime Minister[10].

The contrast between Chandraswami on one hand and Vinoba Bhave or Krishnamurti on the other is striking. Chandraswami claimed to fit, like them, into the traditional Hindu scheme, fulfilling the functions of a spiritual counselor to men of power, but politicians publicly denied using him in this role. Though they might secretly resort to his services, they could not take public advantage of the relationship. Chandraswami is held in opprobrium as a tantric and an adept of practices with a sulfurous reputation. This was one reason why the Jain Commission was so closely followed in the press: it uncovered these illicit attitudes and as a result de-legitimized a part of the political class. No public personality had any interest in revealing that particular aspect of the hidden face of politics, and all indeed denied having believed in his powers. Naturally, Chandraswami was so vehemently rejected by public figures because of the suspicion that he had participated in the plot against Rajiv Gandhi and engaged in criminal activities.

Chandraswami had his place on the shady side of politics not only as a tantric but also as a 'Mafioso', having used his status as spiritual counselor to serve as an intermediary in questionable affairs. With disciples in the business world – and in international contraband – as well as in Indian political circles, he was well placed to intervene in transactions among them. In this way he organized financial operations on behalf of his disciple Adnan Khashoggi, a Saudi arms merchant and, via him, for his friend the Sultan of Brunei as well as for the al Fayed brothers, Egyptian businessmen (whom he most notably aided in their purchase of Harrods' department store in London). He collected money – some of it dirty – from rich diaspora Indians (including the pickle magnate Lakhubhai Pathak), who used his services to approach those politicians who were his disciples, and whose approval they needed – if necessary, in exchange for a bribe transmitted by Chandraswami – to operate, or even invest, in India. Finally, and most important, Chandraswami was accused of having participated in secret operations directed against Rajiv Gandhi, as noted above: not only was he designated as one of the close associates of President Giani Zail Singh, who had sought to remove Rajiv Gandhi from the post of Prime Minister, but, more importantly, he was suspected of having played a role in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, though the Jain Commission was never able to prove this. Chandraswami, like Dhirendra Brahmachari, had to remain

behind the scenes not only because of his tantric practices, but also because of his ties to the criminal world. Such a combination is not rare, and does not only concern tantrics. Tantrics are probably more likely to swim in the troubled waters of crime, but the temptation can be strong for other *gurus* to act likewise. Their privileged access to the powerful attracts all those who wish to use these saintly figures' mediation to obtain unwarranted favors. They can, moreover, exercise their influence at their own will, to their own benefit or to that of a third party, all the while feigning the greatest disinterest.

Contrary to Ashis Nandy's hypothesis, the ideal of austerity is clearly not the principal virtue in contemporary Indian political life. It might have had a preponderant role during the freedom movement because of Gandhi's actions. But things have changed in post-Independence India; while the spiritual sphere is separate from political power, it has constant relations with it. In fact, this arrangement reflects the traditional rapport between the Brahmin (the *guru*) and the king (*kshatriya*). Nehru had marginalized this arrangement in the name of state secularization, but it reappeared at the highest level with Indira Gandhi. Though not an official phenomenon, politicians nonetheless can judge it opportune to make this secret public, to show that they are closely linked to sages, in line with the traditional configuration of power. The only *gurus* to not enjoy any natural legitimacy and who must, as a consequence, remain in the shadows, are the tantrics who, not satisfied with their knowledge of black magic, maintain ties to the universe of traffickers and criminals. In this case, the revelation of secrets such as those that came to the surface during Chandraswami's hearing by the Jain Commission has a powerful de-legitimizing effect, which claimed Narasimha Rao as one of its prime victims. However, beyond the individual relationship between a politician and his or her *guru*, the question of the secret counselors of power and their current incarnation must be asked in today's India in relation to the Hindu nationalist movement, in which the notion of *guru* has been reinvented, yet continues to maintain ambiguous ties to the public sphere.

The RSS, a new kind of *Raj guru*

In Hinduism, the *guru* is usually a man or a woman, but it can be depersonalized and become a kind of principle which can also assume a much different form. The Mahabharata epic thus relates how a young 'out caste', Eklavya, to whom no *guru* wished to teach the art of archery – reserved for the warrior castes – modeled the effigy of a *guru* and trained to great effect under his watch, a sign that the value of the relation with the master stems first and foremost from the subjectivity of the disciple. The malleable nature of the notion of *guru* facilitated its adaptation, as illustrated by the role the RSS (*Rashtriya swayamsevak sangh*, National Volunteers' Association) has played for 50 years in the corridors of power.

The RSS was created in 1925 by high-caste Hindus – mostly Brahmins – who were concerned by the pan-Islamic tendencies of India's Muslims and by the cultural impact of British colonization, notably in terms of conversion to Christianity (Jaffrelot, 1996). The better to defend Hinduism, its founder, Keshav Baliram

Hedgewar, chose to modernize it by taking on its enemies' strong points, but putting them in a familiar framework by 'vernacularizing' them. Thus he gave the movement a uniform based on the British police, but this paramilitary attire went hand-in-hand with discipline derived from Hindu martial arts. Hedgewar wished to develop a sense of the Hindu nation using Western patriotic symbols. The flag armies salute was one of these signs of respect and national allegiance. He not only gave the movement the saffron flag (the colour of Hinduism) of Shivaji, a Maharashtra warlord who had battled the Mughals in the eighteenth century, but made this *Bhagva Dhwaj* (literally 'saffron flag') the *guru* of the movement (Andersen and Damle, 1987: 90). In this way he indicated that he himself would not be the *guru* of the RSS, but that the source of inspiration had to come from this flag, symbol of the nation of which the RSS was the vanguard. Every morning and evening the members of the local branches (*shakha*) of the RSS gather together across India for sessions of physical training and ideological propaganda under the eye of this *guru* in non-human form. Each session begins with the raising of and salute to the flag, which then 'watches over' the exercises, much as Eklavya trained under the eye of his inanimate *guru*.

In the RSS' case, the *guru* metaphor goes beyond the flag as the organization defines itself as a collective *guru*, not just because it is literally the flag-bearer of the nation, but because it claims to have exceptional spiritual qualities. From the outset Hedgewar insisted that the cadres of the movement lead a life of renunciation (or *sanyas*): not only must they abstain from all professional activity and not found a family, they must also renounce in the course of their career a fixed address, their devotion to the movement implying an itinerant lifestyle. They had as well to practice a kind of asceticism, with spartan lodgings and a frugal diet. Hedgewar wished to make these preachers (*pracharaks*) into real *karma yogi.* A *karma yogi* devotes himself to the yoga of action, a discipline implying a complete detachment from the benefits of action for oneself.

The RSS spread as the number of *pracharak* grew and the network of *shakha* expanded. At the same time the movement became more sectarian in both senses of the term. First, it took on certain features of Hindu sects since in addition to the austere discipline practiced by its members it strove to abolish caste distinctions within the movement – Hindu sects are egalitarian in nature – and created a complex ritual structure with its own calendar of festivals and other commemorative celebrations. Second, its Hindu nationalism took on a xenophobic air, which led to the violent rejection of Christian and Muslim minorities. The RSS thus early on aroused British suspicions during the colonial era, not only because of its paramilitary dimension, but because of the violence it inflicted on minorities. The RSS, therefore, cultivated a taste for secrecy that Hedgewar had already experienced as a member of the Anushilan Samiti, a revolutionary secret society he had joined in Calcutta in his early career. The movement perfected its technique of clandestine operation following Independence in 1947 when one of its former members, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, whom he held responsible for the Partition of India. In response, Nehru banned the movement for two years, insisting it had no place in a secular society unless it reformed its practices.

Many RSS activists went underground before Sardar Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister, legalized the movement once it adopted a Constitution in keeping with the regime. Indira Gandhi again banned the RSS in 1975 during the Emergency on the ground that it was an anti-secular movement ('communal', to use the preferred Indian term). A number of its leaders joined the underground resistance. These recurring bans reinforced the RSS's secretive modes of operation. But its primary vocation kept it in any event somewhat apart from the public sphere, in the shadows or, more precisely, in the corridors, from whence it could pull the strings.

Hedgewar's successor, Madhav Shiv Golwalkar, who, incidentally, was called 'Guruji' because of his past sojourn in an *ashram* and his appearance since then (long hair and beard as well as saffron robe) promoted the RSS as a social movement with a mission to influence politics, as a source of moral, or even spiritual, inspiration. Taking on the traditional arrangement of Indian politics, he underlined that 'The political rulers were never the standard-bearers of our society. They were never taken as the props of our national life. Saints and sages, who had risen above the mundane temptations of self and power and had dedicated themselves wholly for establishing a happy, virtuous and integrated state of society, were its constant torch-bearers. They represented the *dharmasatta*. The king was only an ardent follower of that higher moral authority' (Golwalkar, 1966: 92–93). And for its part the RSS saw itself as consisting of worldly abstainers, of *karma yogis*, who overcame temptations thanks to an ascetic discipline. This is why Golwalkar and those who succeeded him at the head of the RSS wanted to make it a veritable *Raj guru*. One of the most influential ideologues of the movement until the end of the twentieth century, K.R. Malkani, defined this role as that of a 'moral counselor'.[11] Golwalkar clearly was thinking along the same lines when he said: 'We aspire to become the radiating center of all the age-old cherished ideals of our society – just as the indescribable power which radiates through the sun. Then, the political power which draws its life from that source of society, will have no other goal but to reflect the same radiance' (Golwalkar, 1966: 103).

The RSS initially tried to set itself up as princely counselor to members of the Congress party, but Congress did not share its views. The RSS thus decided to play this role vis-à-vis the party it helped to create, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (Indian People's Association), on the occasion of the first general elections in 1952 (Graham, 1990). This party was quickly taken charge of by *pracharak* of the RSS who remained very close to the 'mother house'. The BJS garnered around 10 percent of the vote until the 1970s. In 1977, it merged with other parties to form the Janata Party, which, profiting from the unpopularity of the Emergency, overthrew Indira Gandhi's Congress Party. The BJS returned many members of Parliament and three among them – including Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Kishna Advani – took up government posts. The RSS could finally aspire to act as *Raj guru*. The RSS's English-language press mouthpiece, *Organiser*, offered to help the government 'raise the national and social conscience of the people'.[12] Golwalkar's successor, Babasaheb Deoras, worked hard to meet with important ministers – not just those of the former BJS – to win them over to his cause. The Hindu nationalists were then pushing three specific issues. They wanted a law

abolishing the slaughter of cows (the cow being a sacred animal for Hindus but consumed by members of other religions). They also wished to strengthen legislation regarding conversions in order to limit the influence of missionaries. Finally, they wished to ban certain school history texts, whose authors they accused of 'Marxist distortions', of underestimating the past role of the RSS, of insufficiently emphasizing the exactions of the Muslim invasions and of incorrectly promoting the thesis of an Aryan invasion (since, for Hindu nationalists, the Aryans could be nothing other than native to India).

The pressures exercised by the RSS in its self-appointed role as *Raj guru* quickly incapacitated those members of the Janata Party who came not from the BJS, but from the socialist movement or from Congress splits. The RSS was accused of seeking a role incompatible with democracy, that of an extra-constitutional party: how could a group not subject to the verdict of the ballot box seek to influence the public domain via its representatives within the political system? The question would not have been asked had this group not had privileged relations with some parliamentarians and certain ministers. These were accused of 'dual membership': they could not at the same time be the elected representatives of a party, the Janata Party, which had its own program, and be members of a movement with a markedly different ideology. This conflict triggered the collapse of the Janata Party and the fall of the government in 1980. The leaders of the RSS were embittered by these events, all the more so as former BJS members went on to form a party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) which kept its distance from the RSS.

This attitude was, however, purely tactical as the leaders of the BJP continued to treat the RSS as a collective *guru*. In 1994, party president Lal Kishna Advani declared:

> The *sadhu* and the *sannyasi* or, I would say, even the RSS have a moral and ethical influence on us. After all, there are thousands of *pracharak* who are our peers, our equals in all respects, who never aspired for any office. Therefore we respect them.[13]

In 1994, this kind of observation could only be expressed behind closed doors, in a tête-à-tête interview, because the threat of a new campaign to expose the links between the BJP and the RSS hung over the Hindu nationalist movement. Whenever a leader of the BJP was questioned publicly on the matter, he would systematically reply that his party pursued very different objectives from the RSS, generally described as a cultural organization. He would insist at all costs that at no moment did the RSS influence the political path of the BJP. In practice, although the RSS might not dictate the daily conduct of the BJP, it did serve to inspire the party broad policy outline. The form this collaboration took was long held secret, its meetings being organized with the greatest discretion. Such was the case of the annual conference during which the head of the RSS would meet with BJP MPs. This conference generally took place during the festival of the *Guru dakshina*. In the Hindu religion, *Guru dakshina* is the ceremony in which

disciples of a *guru* honour their master on his birthday by making a donation (*dakshina*). The RSS reinterpreted this traditional ceremony. For the RSS, the *Guru dakshina* became the festival during which the movement's members paid homage to the saffron flag – the *guru* of the RSS – and made it a donation (*dakshina*), a sort of dues which financed the movement. The fact that the head of the RSS met BJP MPs on the day of the *Guru dakshina* was highly symbolic: it made the RSS the *guru* of these Hindu nationalist political figures, in short, a *Raj guru*.

Though the relationship between the BJP and RSS long kept to the shadows, it has become more public since the BJP took power in 1998. The new public nature of the BJP–RSS relationship was strikingly demonstrated during the swearing-in of the second Vajpayee government in 1999. When the BJP first formed the government, in 1998, the RSS remained true to its legendary discretion. However, in 1999, two of its leaders, H. V. Seshadri (the Secretary General of the movement) and K.S. Sudarshan (who later took over as head of the organization in March 2000) were seated in the front row during the ceremony of investiture. It was under their watchful eyes that the Prime Minister, Vajpayee, and the other members of government, including Advani, swore their oath on the Constitution, in response to the Master of Ceremonies, the President of the Republic. The RSS seemed even more a public player in the political game when the ministers who had come from the movement paid their respects to Seshadri and Sudarshan, some of them performing *pranam* (touching their feet and then their own chest) to receive their blessing. No representative of the press made anything of this allegiance which, 20 years earlier, had sparked the debate on 'dual membership'. This change of attitude may stem in part from the fact that the RSS had itself started to play the public relations game. In April 1998 – one month after the formation of the first Vajpayee government – the meeting of the representative council of the RSS, the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (Pan-Indian Assembly of Representatives) – was, for the first time, open to journalists. The leaders of the RSS were warm and inviting – it was clearly a public relations exercise – and self-confident. Sudarshan replied to a incredulous journalist that 'with a government that is not hostile to us, we will be able to work better'.[14] 'Work better' mainly meant exercise more openly the role of counselor. In July 1998, the head of the RSS, Rajendra Singh, was thus able to chair a meeting to which had been invited members of the administration of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India. The audience included the Chief Secretary (head of the state administration) and the Director-General of Police of Uttar Pradesh. Rajendra Singh opened the session with a speech on the theme 'nationalism and honesty', his favorite subject, which he tackled from the familiar angle of the virtues of nationalism and the need to be virtuous to strengthen the nation.[15] Rajendra Singh was there in his role as *Raj guru*: to advise not just the government, but also its right hand, the administration.

The RSS sought, too, to exercise this kind of influence on different ministers, including the Minister of Education, in order to transform the school curriculum, most notably the history text books. The Minister of Human Resources and Education, Murli Manohar Joshi, a former member of the movement, readily assisted

them. He named a former *pacharak*, Krishna Gopal Rastogi, to the National Council for Educational Research and Training.[16] Shortly thereafter, Marxism disappeared from the political science curriculum, which provoked such an outcry in Parliament that the government had to backtrack.[17]

Despite this reversal of policy, the fact remains that the political influence of the RSS continues to grow, without giving rise to the same indignant protest encountered in the 1970s and 1980s. This development doubtless owes much to the fact that the movement feels protected by those in power, as Sudarshan himself confided. But it also owes something to the fact that Hindu nationalists were in power precisely because their ideas had found a growing echo in Indian society. It is true that only a fifth of the electorate voted for the BJP in 1999 and, to add a further nuance, voting for the BJP did not necessarily imply support for the more radical positions of the RSS. But this evolution of the electoral body reflected the growth in public opinion in favor of the Hindu nationalist program. As a result, it seemed less necessary for the RSS to hang back in the shadows. Better still, it might even be useful to the BJP to publicize the relationship it has with this movement because of its reputation of dedication and cleanliness. The approach taken by Prime Minister Vajpayee was particularly illustrative. Atal Bhari Vajpayee, at the time when he served as the right arm of the founder of the BJS, Shyam Prasad Mookerjee, already came across as a moderate within the Hindu nationalist movement. Year after year he built up the image of a man of compromise, which he refined further when, as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Janata Party, he showed himself to be open vis-à-vis Pakistan, facilitating the issue of visas to Indian Muslims with family on the other side of the border. The BJP capitalized on his image, even when Vajpayee was replaced in 1986 as the head of the party by the more militant L.K. Advani: the party knew it would need a leader capable of winning votes from the center. Vajpayee thus became the candidate for the post of Prime Minister when the BJP won the largest number of seats in Parliament, though still far from an absolute majority, which necessitated finding partners. It fell to Vajpayee, the most diplomatic of the Hindu nationalists, to constitute a coalition which today brings together 18 different parties.

Out of concern for his image, Vajpayee long avoided being seen in the company of RSS members. In 1979, during the debate on 'dual membership', he refused to sit in the front row of an RSS meeting organized to protest the show trial of which the organization claimed it was the victim.[18] He changed strategy once in power, allowing himself to be photographed during RSS demonstrations saluting the flag in the manner of the *swayamsevak* in the *shakha* (right hand at chest level, palm turned downwards). However, he has avoided wearing the uniform of the movement.

The conjunction of spiritual prestige due to ascetic discipline and power over men and society is not as such a common pattern in India – contrary to Nandy's assumption. Certainly, the impact of Mahatma Gandhi over Indian politics tended to project this pattern as a dominant one, but it did not displace a more traditional arrangement in which ascetics and politicians collaborate in the exercise of power.

Indeed, the relations that politicians maintain with their *guru* continue to occupy a central role in Indian politics, despite the secularization of the regime and even

though the identity of the actors has changed over time. The couple made up of the man of power and the man of God, heir to the arrangement that prevailed at the top of the State in the Hindu Kingdoms, has endured until the contemporary period, as the relationship of Indira Gandhi with her *guru* shows. But the *Raj guru* also took on tantric traits and saw the emergence of the RSS, a sort of collective counselor to the regime.

As a result, the relation this power arrangement has to the public sphere has also evolved. While political leaders may, notwithstanding the secular character of the Constitution, show themselves in public with their spiritual counselors and even gain from it in terms of legitimation, when it concerns a Vinoba Bhave or a Jiddhu Krishnamurti, this kind of publicity becomes counter-productive when those involved practice tantrism and even more so when they are implicated in shady affairs.

The relations between the RSS and the BJP government constitute another, more complex, case, because it involves two institutions and not two individuals, but the logic at work is very similar. The image of integrity the RSS has managed to construct through its austerity and its social work has tended to be seen as an asset by its political offshoot, the BJP which capitalized on the prestige of this collective brand of asceticism, with the result that, when he was Prime Minister, Vajpayee could find it useful to be seen with the leaders of the RSS who claimed to act as the conscience of the power structure. Vajpayee went so far as to declare during the most recent electoral campaign that 'the RSS is my soul', a striking echo of the arrangement at the summit of the State during the classical era, as if the zealots of the Hindu tradition were really in a position to re-establish a political order where the government would be accompanied by a *Raj guru*.

Notes

1 Readers who wish to know more about this question might find interesting the second part of Jaffrelot 1998.
2 According to A.M. Hocart, the spiritual counselor of the king, being both the 'guide of his conscience' and his 'specialist in ritual matters', holds the keys to the prosperity of the country and 'necessarily becomes the most influential man in the kingdom. The king directs political life, which consists for the most part in the application of the rules established by the priests to obtain prosperity' (Hocart, 1978, p. 259).
3 I borrow the word 'chaplain' from L. Dumont, who specifies 'We translate *purohita* by chaplain, but the idea of a spiritual delegation or avant-garde, almost a *major ego*, must be kept in mind' (Dumont, 1966, p. 353).
4 *Hitavada*, 15 April 1956 and *Statesman* (Delhi), 27 March 1957.
5 'The structure, identical in its elements, is changed completely by a different use' (Biardeau, 1981, p. 162).
6 Interview with Chandraswami, *India Today*, 31 October 1995. Before the Jain Commission charged with investigating the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Chandraswami systematically insisted on the spiritual aspect of his personality. He declared that as a *sadhu* (ascetic) it was his duty to erase from his memory everything that had happened before his retreat from the world. He stressed that his relations with politicians had been guided by 'spiritual reasons' alone. (*Frontline*, 3 November 1995).
7 These events, and the quotations, are taken from *The Pioneer*, 15 October 1995.
8 *The Times of India*, 18 April 1996.

9 The extent of the network of Chandraswami's disciples became strikingly clear in 1996 at the wedding of the daughter of Vidya Charan Shukla, who had been a minister under Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao. Press reports mentioned the great number of people – politicians included – who 'queued up to touch his feet' as a sign of respect and to receive his blessing (*The Times of India*, 24 April 1996). The funeral of Chandraswami's mother was also an occasion for a number of Indian politicians, some holding or having held high office, to meet the *guru* (*Statesman* (Delhi), 21 April 1993).
10 *The Times of India*, 11 March 1996.
11 K.R. Malkani interview with the author, 16 November 1989, New Delhi.
12 *Organiser*, 28 May 1977
13 L.K. Advani interview with the author, 11 February 1994, New Delhi.
14 Quoted in *Frontline*, 24 April 1998, p. 117.
15 *Hindustan Times*, 27 July 1998.
16 Rastogi is the author of an autobiography – with a preface by Sudarshan – which sparked considerable controversy, as he recounted how, during the Partition riots between Hindus and Muslims, he had shot a Muslim woman in cold blood, to spare her the violence of a Hindu mob (*The Asian Age*, 25 October 1999).
17 *Frontline*, 26 November 1999.
18 *India Today*, 16 March 1979, p. 27.

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5 The gay guru

Fallibility, unworldliness, and the scene of instruction

Lawrence Cohen

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Into the woods

G. says: 'You know, Guruji is also in this line. . . .'

This essay begins in a long-ago moment of conversation that demands some context. A friend from Banaras, call him G., is talking to me. It is 1993: a different world. My attention has drifted to something else, a magazine article I have been reading on an emerging 'gay group' in Delhi. G. and I are both in Delhi at the time – I have a meeting with my academic advisor at the University of Delhi – and I am thinking about a recent visit we both made to the gay group in question.

The group meets at a coffee house in the city center, and identifies itself discreetly by a red rose placed on the table. G. still finds the idea of a gay group mildly preposterous. In Banaras, he and his friends used to go in groups to cruise (*ghumna*) for men in the city's parks: going with friends used to be enjoyable, and it was a way to defend against the '*gunda* types', guys that is who would threaten violence unless you paid up after fooling around (Cohen 1995b). But increasingly, G. says family matters and their accompanying worries (*chinta*) and pressure weigh upon him. Park friendships are slipping away.

Back in the enjoyable days I had several times asked G. what commonality linked park friends. You might say I was queuing behind all the other researchers in the late 1980s moving across the world's economic margins in search of 'men who have sex with men' to interview in the name of AIDS prevention. The name of the game at that point was the discovery of alternate categories for sex, relationship, and community, categories that presumptively would allow the emerging welfare assemblage of non-government organizations (NGOs), identity-based organizations, and state agencies to craft more meaningful information to modify risky behavior (Cohen 2005). Perhaps I too was searching for a word.

G., in 1989 pressed to play the game, at times responded: *sab is* line *mein hain*, they are all 'in this line'. To be in this line, as a young man, was to find oneself unexpectedly enjoying other young men, encounters mediated through a sexual look [*nazar lagana*] and touch [G. had myriad ways of describing the park touch, challenging the banality of my hoping for the right word: he would often summarize these with the untranslatable phrase *log yuyu karte hain*]. So for G. to tell me that his sometime advisor and counselor Guruji was also in this line was

seemingly to place him within a similar circuit of the visual and haptic. But – and this point should be underscored – for G. to link together the guru and the gay was in some measure a response to a world in which auditors like myself were an emerging and ever more ubiquitous presence. By the early 2000s the ground would shift. G., like the park friends with whom he used to go around, would then be as likely to use the word *gay*, whether or not there was a researcher present. But this newer, more stable referent of the gay would not link to the guru in quite the same way.

But we are in 1993. The last time G. had accompanied me to the red rose table at the coffee house, days before this conversation, we had met two other men. One lived in Delhi and the other was an out-of-towner like ourselves, in his case from Chandigarh and then graduate school in New York. Our conversation had focused on a form with global pretensions (Altman 2001), the coming-out story. The conversation had been in English, and G. did not speak much. Back in 1993 and in Delhi, 'gay' often implied a particular class – people unlike G. with access to fluent English – and a particular practice: talking about yourself with strangers. If G. (no less a cosmopolitan in his own city) easily moved among and between most of the groups in the Banaras parks, in this particular Delhi scene he had had little place and little incitement to speak. All you did, he had challenged me afterward, was to jabber (*bakbak*) about *being gay*. What, I remember him having asked me, is the point?

But on this day I am compelled by the beauty of the rose and do not want, research or not, to have another such conversation about gay as bakbak. I bury myself in the magazine. I am not certain whether G.'s mocking of the Delhi red rose scene lies mostly in its foreignness: a group seemingly defined more by stranger sociability than by the trust, as in Banaras, of park friends allowing one to encounter park strangers safely. Or perhaps, given how G.'s experience of park scenes in either city was changing in the face of family pressures, I presume that what was at stake for him in the red rose scene was its elitism, its dissonant relation to his more recent and sometimes overwhelming experience of pressure and chinta. These men, English-speaking and world-traveling, could not be bearing the worries he has. If park friendships grow thin and stretched in time, as each friend in this line has his own familial pressure to bear, the Delhi men appear to G. to occupy a world unaccountably outside of the worried life. My own presumption – the vulgarity by which I seem able to introduce a sociological gaze into the confused affects of friendship – does not go unnoticed by either of us. But what seems most at stake at this moment is an imminent death.

Before G. invokes his Guruji, he has been talking about his brother's two-wheeler accident, a serious head injury leaving him bed-ridden, uncommunicative, and 'cracked'. This conversation is a familiar one between us: I had earlier been angry because G. did not want to bring his brother to a doctor I knew. We both had a sense this brother was dying. G. decided, as I seemed suspicious of Guruji's treatment, to take me to meet him. We went to Guruji's home: his wife and some other young men were there. Guruji looked me over, examined my palms and my manner, and gave me an amulet to wear and some advice: a daily discipline or *niyam*.[1]

G. has talked about Guruji a lot in reference to his brother's condition and other sources of worry. This day I am not listening; as I remember it I am still frustrated that G. will not take his brother to the neurologist. I immerse myself in the article on the new gay groups, ignoring him. And then, the hook, from G., bringing it all together: 'You know, Guruji is also in this line. . . .'

Instructing the worried life

Now he has caught me. Years later, this essay is one response.

G. has heard me do interviews with the old people, and also with men in the parks. He knows what I look and sound like when I think I am doing anthropology. I begin to look and sound anthropological now. What do you mean, I say, that Guruji is in this line? He is married – I have met his wife.

My question is not really worth answering: as if many of the men we know in this line in Banaras are not also married. But G. says, to make a point that should have been obvious from our visits to Guruji (didn't I see his use of magical *mantra-tantra*, the sexual innuendo lacing his comments to me, and his easy deployment both of Sanskrit and of low-status, Hindu and Muslim forms of assessment and discipline): 'he is a *tantrik*.' What force this teacher and advisor has, what makes him compelling as a guide through life's troubles, is bound up somehow to practices that trouble propriety and easy boundaries.

Some years even earlier, in the late 1980s, I had worked in a Dalit slum where many men and women had cultivated relations with gurus they often called exorcists (*ojha*s) or tantriks. I spent a year visiting one of the exorcist-tantriks, sitting in on nightly sessions where he would become possessed by the goddess and engage the ghostly presences possessing the children or women who were brought to his home. He gave me manuals of magic, mantra-tantra and *asli indrajal*, full of spells to bring down an enemy and capture the heart of a beloved. He had been introduced to me by an acquaintance as that man's guru, and my time with him was structured by my own sense of what a teacher was. I asked him to 'teach' me mantra-tantra, and he responded by offering me books to read, a sort of public tantra, pamphlets of incantations one could find at bus stand and train book stalls and sometimes near temples, *dargah*s, and fairs. But most of the men I knew that claimed the ojha as a guru were not interested in becoming some kind of tantrik themselves. They sat in on the possessions and the nightly contest of wills unfolding between the exorcist and the afflicted, but their conversations with him happened at other times. As in Guruji's home, these talks indirectly engaged the everyday afflictions of worry and things one might do and avoid and wear to protect oneself.

At the point G. tells me Guruji is 'in this line', I have been hearing about Guruji for some months. G. has been particularly afflicted by the great, indebting expenses in his life. Within a short period of time, his eldest brother returned from years away with a pregnant wife and soon after got into the accident rendering him cracked; his eldest and beloved sister was hospitalized with stomach pains and died; a second brother was diagnosed with heart disease and G. was told an

expensive operation was necessary; and their father grew himself cracked from all this chinta and could no longer work, placing all the family's burdens on G.

Chinta: from a small store near his house, G. now buys *gutka*, the pleasurable, carcinogenic mixture of betel nut, tobacco, and spices, and constantly chews it. When I insist, after meals where I seem to eat three times as much as G., on reminding him that gutka causes cancer, G. tells me that it relieves the worries. A doctor he knows has given G. pills for the worries: they are benzodiazepines, anti-anxiety medication. G. takes what appears a high dose. And G. visits Guruji once a month or so: he brings varied things Guruji has asked for, and reports on the progress of various errands he has done for Guruji with the bureaucracy or local fixers or in various markets. Guruji suggests or modifies a particular niyam for G.'s constant worries.

G.'s niyam varies: I am not paying sufficient attention to it. Around that time, it seems to center on G. going in Banaras early each morning to the Ganga, the Ganges River, taking chapatti dough that his sister had prepared to feed the fish, bit by bit.

How might Guruji, even inattentively engaged, inflect thinking about the guru and the relevance of his or her sexual difference to the possibility of a progressive relation, whether (1) pedagogic, (2) therapeutic, or (3) devotional? For G. in those years, these three inflections of becoming and of getting by were bound together. To term them 'progressive' may demand a philosophical dualism and betray the explicitly Vedantic and monist teaching of at least some of the gurus I will discuss. By the term I mean that the relation to the guru or teacher as it emerged in a set of Banaras conversations, including mine with Guruji and with G., was marked by a persistent focus on a self-formation through practice that could come to distinguish chinta – the worried life – from something else. In the case of Guruji, this something else was tied to the promise of the tantrik.

G.'s relation with Guruji was not intensely devotional. Being a tantrik did not mean that Guruji's habit of trying *yuyu karna* – fondling – some of his disciples was always appreciated. G. sometimes doubted whether Guruji was able to relieve much chinta. In a very different context, describing why he avoided the Bengali Quarter in Banaras in which I used to live, G. once told me: they [Bengalis] practice tantra in their temples, it is not safe there. But the dangers and errors of tantra in itself, as with the excesses and gaps within Guruji's practice, were not a pressing invalidation of the niyam or of the man. What seemed at stake in G.'s attachment to Guruji and to the discipline, the niyam, he offered was not a kind of person or even a kind of relation but a kind of event, a return amid the persistence of worries to what we could term a scene of instruction.

By tantra and the tantrik, I am neither necessarily referring to a consistent body of knowledge and practice nor its dominant modern forms (for the latter, see Urban 2001, 2003, White 2000).[2] 'Tantra' here, both for G. and for many people in the Dalit slum in Nagwa mentioned earlier, refers to a wide range of practices – possibly involving the gender and propriety-crossing work of the exorcist, or possibly the troubling of sexual or gustatory norms by the advisor or teacher as these might inform qualities of an adult's long-term relation with him or her.

Tantra might on occasion stand for the ethnically different and dangerous, as did G.'s estimation of the Bengali Quarter, but it primarily marked the possibilities and limits of advice and self-transformation on the social margins in that time.

If the ojha who gave me books of spells referenced one register of a public tantra, available in book stalls at particular, often liminal places, a second and popular register appeared in Banaras, in both Hindi and English, in popular 'sexology' and 'crime' magazines over the 1990s and since (Srivastava 2007). 'Tantriks' were staples of these genres: familiar male figures of criminality and lustful excess that attracted the credulous and betrayed their trust. In the discourse of the corrupt tantrik, a limit to the possibility of living outside of worry is rehearsed.

There were varied ways G. might discuss the limit to his guru's ability to relieve chinta. In my presence, the difference between G. and myself tended to predominate, especially in moments as that following the Delhi gay group meeting when that difference rendered itself acute. The bakbak of the gay, particularly in the privileged voice of English that seemed to him to inoculate itself against the worried life, pointed toward the palpable maldistribution of chinta in the world system, against which even a local tantrik and Guruji might only achieve so much.

This essay marks a first pass at thinking about the guru in the wake of G.'s provocation, too long ignored. It moves across different gurus, and kinds of gurus, not to make a claim that these are all minor variations on a single cultural or historical type. Nor, given that I am not attempting a genealogical inquiry, do I hold up the guru as an ideal type in the understanding of an emergent historical situation. The species of inquiry undertaken here might best be described as a sort of 'as if' procedure. If we were to assume the impossible coherence of a concept – the guru – over time, what might we learn about practices like advising, teaching, healing, or devotion amid our problems, and the problems of those, through vehicles like anthropology, for whom we come to care? What might we learn, in other words, if we could take 'the guru' *as if* it were both a stable and a meaningful concept across a range of disparate situations and fractured and shifting universes of discourse? Such as if procedures, I will suggest, may themselves be familiar components of scenes of instruction. One comes to honor the guru – one comes, indeed, to love him or her as a devotee – by holding simultaneously to the guru as a necessarily failed *and* powerfully idealized and perfected advisor, teacher, giver of niyam.

The guru, as I will treat it, is on the one hand a critical site of transformation, privilege, and perhaps danger – marginal, excessive, doting, punishing, brilliant, and *burdened* – and on the other an idealized, perfected form or copy or consolidation of a range of specific and all-too-human forms of instruction: and this doubled guru makes me think of the ancient story of Ekalavya, to which I turn.

Ekalavya (1)

What is it to have a relation in time to a scene of instruction, to a guru? We might begin by asking an opposed question: what is it to be denied this scene?

Here I am mindful of the resonant account, from the Mahabharata, of Ekalavya (*Adi Parva: Sambhava* 134). Ekalavya is refused the legitimacy of studying under the greatest teacher of his age: he responds by retreating into the forest and creating an image or copy of the teacher, toward which he directs his discipline and respect.

We might begin by reviewing the story and some of its recent glosses.

Ekalavya is a prince of the low-status Nishada (in colonial and subsequent parlance, his inferior status is rendered as 'tribal'). Like many an aspiring youth of his time, he hopes to be taught by the renowned archer and teacher Drona. Ekalavya journeys to Hastinapura to join the boys learning the great martial art of archery from Drona. Hastinapura is the Kuru capital: Drona has been appointed teacher of the royal Pandava and Kaurava cousins residing there whose future war with each other will be at the center of the great epic. The cousins are all Ksatriyas, warriors: among them Drona includes his own son Aswatthaman in the lessons. Aswatthaman and his father are Brahmans: somewhat incongruous figures in this martial scene of instruction. But placing a high-status Brahman student, of the same household and relative status as his father and teacher, among this group of powerful Ksatriyas is one thing. Teaching a lowly Nishada, prince of his people or not, turns out to be another.

Drona is particularly sensitive to status. Growing up a poor Brahman in the Ksatriya-dominated world of the text has presented its challenges to him. When Aswatthaman was born, Drona's martial and ascetic discipline was not enough to feed the young boy: he needed a patron and so sought out his old friend Drupada, now king of Panchala. The first version of the Ekalavya story I encountered, as a student long ago, was the late nineteenth-century translation by K. M. Ganguli: here is Ganguli's version of Drona himself recounting what happened to make him decide to seek out Drupada and offer his skills as a teacher. In the words of the guru:

> And it so happened that one day the child Aswatthaman observing some rich men's sons drink milk, began to cry. At this I was so beside myself that I lost all knowledge of the point of the compass. . . . I was desirous of obtaining a cow . . . after I had come back unsuccessful, some of my son's playmates gave him water mixed with powdered rice. Drinking this, the poor boy, was deceived into the belief that he had taken milk, and began to dance in joy, saying, '*O, I have taken milk. I have taken milk!*' Beholding him dance with joy amid these playmates smiling at his simplicity, I was exceedingly touched.
>
> (Mahabharata 1: 133 from Ganguli 1883–1896: vol. I: 277)

Drona the father has failed as a milk giver. His wife Kripi is absent from this section of the narrative: presumably, the story follows the weaning of Aswatthaman as a shift from the milk-giving of a mother (the breast-giver) to that of a father (the householder and possessor of milch-cows). Others mock the boy and mock his father for letting the child subsist on this facsimile of milk.

Drona, desperate and humiliated, decides to take up a youthful offer of support from his erstwhile classmate Drupada, made years earlier when they both were

training under their mutual guru Agnivesa. But further humiliation for the Brahman ensues when the king plays grown-up Hal to Drona's Falstaff. Drupada refuses the claim of their boyhood friendship, made within the intimacy of the *gurukul* (the domain or extended household of their guru). The young man's ignoring of wealth and status is unbecoming to Drupada's adult duties as a king.

Drona wants redress, and journeys to the court of Hastinapura, where he is made welcome: he becomes a guru and a proper householder. Drona asks his new students the royal cousins for an unnamed gift once they achieve the skills he will be teaching them – we presume he will ask for some revenge against Drupada. Of the princes, only the future hero Arjuna offers to give whatever is asked of him. The relation of this teacher and this student is now marked off against all others by the totality of this future gift. The guru is both exemplary of skill and burdened, in this case by humiliation. The beloved student is that one who will give up everything to the guru. Drona in turn promises that Arjuna will be the greatest archer of their age.[3]

This exchange of exemplary gifts and totalizing commitment is threatened by the promiscuous situation of teaching: there is always another student who may yet be more promising. Drona's burden and its resolution in the promises of world-mastery he makes to Arjuna and also, if implicitly, to his own son Aswatthaman, must be protected by restricting the gurukul and managing the distribution of lessons within it. The challenge is not only outsiders like Ekalavya. Given the humiliation by Ksatriyas that drives him, Drona resorts to anxious tricks to ensure that Aswatthaman receives extra training to exceed the young Ksatriya princes. Most of the princes are deceived. Arjuna, however, sees through these tricks and is able to demand the same additional training. Within the gurukul, both the actual child and the student who will give everything are set apart, protected, from the rest.

Initially, Ekalavya is easily managed. Drona does not need to resort to deceptions: within the moral world of Hastinapura and its surroundings, Nishada princes cannot reside with Ksatriyas and Brahmans. Ekalavya is sent away. There is no voice in the text proclaiming this rejection as an ironic repetition of Drona's own humiliation. In some modern renderings of the epic for children, such a teacher is troubling. Arjuna is the one to refuse the Nishada boy and to implore Drona to send him away.[4]

We are not offered Ekalavya's thoughts upon this rejection. The boy retreats to a place it has become conventional to term the forest. K.M. Ganguli writes that

> the Nishada prince, touching Drona's feet with bent head, wended his way into the forest, and there he made a clay-image of Drona, and began to worship it respectfully, as if it was his real preceptor, and practiced weapons before it with the most rigid regularity. In consequence of his exceptional reverence for his preceptor and his devotion to his purpose, all the three processes of fixing arrows on the bowstring, aiming, and letting off became very easy for him.
>
> (Mahabharata 1: 134, from Ganguli 1883–1896: vol. I, 280)

If in Drona's gurukul, the best students must see through an older man's subterfuges to gain access to all that he has to teach them, in this lonely part of the forest Drona offers nothing and yet everything to his earnest disciple.

The story of Ekalavya concludes with a different exemplar of the total gift to the guru, the *guru-dakshina*, than that which will be demanded of Arjuna. The gurukul princes and Drona are wandering close to where Ekalavya practices. A dog accompanying their servant finds Ekalavya first and starts barking, interrupting his practice. Shooting a volley of arrows, Ekalavya sutures the creature's mouth shut but does not kill it. The dog returns to the gurukul who recognize in its transformation a marvel of archery, and seek out the source.

> And beholding that man of grim visage, who was totally a stranger to them, they asked, 'Who art thou and whose son?' Thus questioned, the man replied, 'Ye heroes, I am the son of Hiranyadhanus, king of the Nishadas. Know me also for a pupil of Drona, laboring for the mastery of the art of arms.'

Despite his earlier efforts to limit the *gurukul*, Drona sees in Ekalavya's skill a threat to his promise to Arjuna and to alleviation of his own burden. His response has vexed many modern readers. Ganguli offers this version:

> When Ekalavya saw Drona approaching towards him, he went a few steps forward, and touched his feet and prostrated himself on the ground. And the son of the Nishada king worshipping Drona, duly represented himself as his pupil, and clasping his hands in reverence stood before him (awaiting his commands). Then Drona, O king, addressed Ekalavya, saying, 'If, O hero, thou art really my pupil, give me then my fees.' On hearing these words, Ekalavya was very much gratified, and said in reply, 'O illustrious preceptor, what shall I give? Command me; for there is nothing, O foremost of all persons conversant with the *Vedas*, that I may not give unto my preceptor.' Drona answered, 'O Ekalavya, if thou art really intent on making me a gift, I should like then to have the thumb of thy right hand.'

The brutal condition for Ekalavya's recognition by his guru-made-flesh destroys his own future of mastery.

> Hearing these cruel words of Drona, who had asked of him his thumb as tuition-fee, Ekalavya, ever devoted to truth and desirous also of keeping his promise, with a cheerful face and an unafflicted heart cut off without ado his thumb, and gave it unto Drona. After this, when the Nishada prince began once more to shoot with the help of his remaining fingers, he found, O king, that he had lost his former lightness of hand. And at this Arjuna became happy.
>
> (Mahabharata 1: 134, from Ganguli 1883–1896, vol. I, 281)

The guru of the margin

A second provocation for this essay was offered me by Jacob Copeman, in his asking me to think about the vexed relation of several modern Hindu gurus to the accusation and promise of homosexuality. With the Delhi High Court's 2009 striking down of the Indian Penal Code's Section 377 prohibiting carnal intercourse against the order of nature, one of the most prominent critics of the court and defender of the former law has been the television guru, yoga master, and political activist Baba Ramdev. Ramdev is an important, intriguing figure for thinking about emerging intersections of gender and sex, politics, publicity, and the disciplined body. In 2011, his primary public political interventions shifted from fighting the decriminalization of homosexual sex to joining other prominent figures across the political spectrum in India calling for an independent commission to guarantee a check on state corruption. Ramdev organized a large protest in Delhi, despite lacking the requisite permits for such a large gathering: the Congress Party-led government (most attacks on corruption in this period have additionally been attacks on Congress rule) aggressively cracked down on the event. Seeking to evade the violence faced by his followers, Ramdev disguised himself in women's clothes but was apprehended so cross-dressed.

Ramdev's challenge is to homosexuality as a particular kind of promise emergent with late twentieth-century Indian neoliberalism and its global milieu. By 'promise', I want to underscore three themes that were frequently repeated within the English-language, relatively elite, and NGO [non-governmental organization]-dominated network assembled in opposition to Section 377. This network was comprised largely of varied, activist, rights-based, and public health constituencies that have come into place with the global spread of AIDS, the withering of the development state, and the consolidation of welfare capital through powerful funders like the Gates Foundation. The themes, each both a presumptive cause and effect of state tolerance of the human relations criminalized under 377, could be summarized as (1) a politics of rights, (2) a rationality of public health, and (3) a culture of secular modernity. To the extent that opposing 377 was legible as this protective triad of liberal governance, varied challenges to the 'un-Indian' situation produced by decriminalizing homosexuality and its allied carnal relations were legible to the network as dangerously illiberal and anti-modern.

Homosexuality has also emerged as accusation in proximity to the modern figure of the guru, perhaps most painfully in relation to the American historian of religion Jeffery Kripal's work analyzing the ecstatic experience and biography of the late nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna. Kripal extended to modern Hindu mysticism a theory he had begun to formulate within his own United States based training within a Christian monastic order: that there was a close and interreligious linkage between same-sex eroticism and the apperception of the divine within mystical experience. Kripal's method focused on a close reading of Bengali-language descriptions of Ramakrishna' s discussions set down by his devotees against the severe bowdlerization of these in their English-language rendering.

I term both the form of Kripal's argument and the critical, often quite wounded responses to it as twinned sites of *accusation* neither to accede to Kripal's many critics nor to defend his text against these. To extend the more cogent of the critiques beyond their sometimes troubled presumption of his intention, Kripal's argument *in its form* reprises, if in modern liberal parlance, the colonial project of reading Indian religiosity as perverse. At the least, *Kali's Child* is spectacularly inattentive to the historical formation of effeminate and homosexual accusation (and self-accusation) in the late colonial period and subsequently (Nandy 1983, Cohen 1995a, Sinha 1995, Luhrmann 1996, Vanita 2009). The tragedy is that Kripal's analyses are often spectacularly insightful in attending to the poetics of ecstatic experience, but the denunciatory field in which they locate themselves may render them illegible to a self-respecting public.

The term that I have encountered specifying the unusual quality of their guru, among devotees of Sri Ramakrishna both in West Bengal and abroad, is that of his 'unworldliness'. For many of his devotees, Ramakrishna's intimate sexual and gender play marks his transgressive status as a powerful *and unworldly* figure, placing him more in the premarital place of the innocent child than that of the sexually transgressive adult. The frame of unworldliness is familiar to varied Hindu devotional literatures. I think of a rendering of a story from the Padma Purana in the devotional Hindi-language publication *Kalyan* detailing the 'alaukik prem', the unworldly love, of the deities Shiva and Vishnu ('*Shiv-vishnuka alaukik prem*' 1993). The gods arrive to remedy a series of bloody events that occur when two groups of students of renowned sages accuse each other of dishonoring their respective sectarian commitments to guru and to God, leading to violence and many deaths. Having resurrected the fallen combatants of both gurukuls, the gods repair to a sylvan glen where they lie down together and rest and then engage in spirited horseplay with each other in a pond. This series of images invokes the spectacle of a love that stands in powerful distinction to the expected comportment of adult relationship, but the physical intimacy elaborated between the two gods – playfully wrestling and splashing one another and lying together in comfortable repose – suggests less the figure of normative adult desire or its deviation than the homosocial attachments of youth. If the burden of being a young disciple in the Ekalavya episode is to learn to bear the adult desires of the guru – there the weight of Drona's humiliation and painful need for restitution – here the gods address the limit of that burden by reprising a different form of youthful attachment.

If some of the accusations and counter-accusations that emerge in the wake of the publication of *Kali's Child* often come across as highly personalized, they are nonetheless examples of a common condition of what I have elsewhere termed ethical publicity (Cohen 2010), that is the coming to know one's habitation of a local moral world through the mass mediated experience of participating in and as a wounded public. If taking offense becomes a common condition for the organization of mass publics, media gurus like Baba Ramdev may be seen as literally teaching the experience of offense in the formation of an ethical public.[5] As such, the unworldly love of the *Padma Purana* as taught by the editors of the Gita Press

who produce *Kalyan* offers a contrastive teaching, one that I would want in my own idiom to claim as queer. Such queerness does not presume an explicitly sexual content but imagines a form of pedagogic correction not organized around the imposition of adult burden, that painful reality of facing the future that G. called chinta or pressure. But such a claim may not be possible.

G., at least the G. of those Delhi conversations now long ago, might laugh at the presumption that pressure could be so easily alleviated through a contrastive ethic of non-futurity or a particular gloss on the Padma Purana. Chinta was a trenchant condition of marginal life, intensified in the assuming of adult burden. And yet what Guruji the neighborhood tantrik tried to give him was precisely a way to live in a different relation to those adult burdens. Here the question of the tantrik's multiple transgressions – embodied for G. in the older man's groping and dirty talk with young people – may or may not offer a critical context for his gift of a discipline or niyam to relieve this affectively organized generational frame.

What is more clear is that Guruji, as G. talked about him, did not appear as a figure who needed to be protected from accusation. Like the object of devotion, Guruji marked himself against the usual norms of adult and husbandly propriety. But his acting against age-specific norms, in familiar speech and groping of the younger men who came to him for the relief of a burdensome adulthood, did not place him in a condition of unworldly innocence that must be defended against latter-day claims of sexual deviance. The innocent godman in Kolkata might playfully address, in language, gaze, and touch, the *Geworfenheit*, the thrownness, of his devotees. In a different age, this play risks accusation as it is subject to new procedures of truth. But Guruji's own serious play does not risk accusation. Rather, it demands accusation. The possibility of Guruji's niyam not being a failure may depend on his coherence as a tantrik.

And in proximity to me, and the English magazines and red roses and men from everywhere, this coherence may in a certain moment find itself in hesitant extension: Guruji, beyond the world of categories that informs risk, may nonetheless find himself in a 'line': this line.

Ekalavya (2)

The two Dronas – on the one hand, the brilliant but burdened man who demands everything, offering recognition through a radical act of giving by the disciple that may lead to triumph [Arjuna] or utter failure [Ekalavya], and on the other the idealized Drona that unflinchingly guides Ekalavya through his solitary labors – frame for me a figure of the guru that begins to instruct me how to pay attention to Guruji in Banaras as well as to some of the stakes as varied scenes of instruction encounter the promise and accusation of contemporary homosexuality. What I have been suggesting is that the particular figure of the marginal, bad-behaving tantrik that G. offers in his adoption of Guruji's niyam may not depend on the separation of an idealized guru and the all-too-human subject of desire. Kripal, in offering a theory of ecstatic mystical experience rooted in the sexual object specificity of desire, could be taken to be doing something similar: to argue for the value

of a scene of instruction not separated from the burden of adult desire. But whether through or against intention, this particular collapse of the guru's doubleness cannot evade giving and receiving accusation.

Ekalavya's relation to Drona has been taken by at least one contemporary scholar as a metaphor for the predicament of the modern Indian intellectual, who fashions his or her own version of the idealized (Western) teacher he or she may not have full access to, achieves proficiency, and pays the unexpected cost, like Ekalavya's thumb (Shankar 1994). The rhetoric effectiveness of such an analogy depends on distinguishing the two Dronas through a binary of authentic versus inauthentic scenes of instruction.

My reading has been to approach the duality of Arjuna and Ekalavya, and of their respective Dronas, not as a cautionary tale regarding historically specific (here, racialized and neo-colonial) scenes of instruction. Rather, I collapse the two young men and their distinct fates into a single account of the challenge for the student, the afflicted, or the devotee to establish a relation with both the Dronas. Or reversing the frame, the actions of the guru in establishing a scene of instruction may involve both a gift exchange in the face of adult burdens and a form of idealization in which the guru becomes a copy free of the same.

How might a disciple address the challenge of this duality to the scene of instruction? G. identifies Guruji as a tantrik whose behavior both secures and troubles the possibility of alleviating worries and cares. I have suggested that such scenes might register as 'queer' to the extent that they resist both the mandate of a promised progression and the wound of a hurtful accusation. The point is not to rescue the guru from Baba Ramdev and others through the incantatory mantra-tantra of queer utopianism as much as it may be to trouble both the liberal promise and the painful accusation of 'the gay' in contemporary India through the doubled figure of the guru.

The drag of the guru

P. was ousted from many in his gay circle of friends in Mumbai; a charismatic businessman, AIDS activist, and drag performer, he would inevitably get drunk and then violent at big parties, creating unusually painful disruptions. When he moved away from Mumbai to join a different branch of the family business, some in this circle noted the move was at their behest: that P. needed to get away from the party scene to heal himself.

When some years later P. returned to Mumbai, he had become not only a devotee of a famous guru and teacher of yoga with a growing international following but also a teacher of his guru's meditation and somatic techniques. He described his flowing white robes to me as 'it's like being a drag queen again'. Might we take him seriously here?

Unlike Baba Ramdev, P.'s guru did not offer his teachings as a bulwark against homosexuality as a Western disease of desire, nor did he promise yoga as a cure for AIDS (Ramdev did). Like Ramdev, P.'s guru was immensely popular. But the range of his devotees tilted toward a more elite population. Ramdev spoke almost

entirely in Hindi whereas P.'s guru used English extensively. Ramdev's embodied healing addressed the national as well as the individual body. P.'s guru is attractive worldwide, not only among Indian emigrants. I have met many of his followers in California, where I live. A number of them are lesbian and gay, and their guru's philosophy and discipline may articulate with other spiritual disciplines and projects of community. Homosexuality is not as available as a figure of excess for P.'s guru as it is for Ramdev.

P. was sent away, according to his friends, precisely because his own earlier version of excess at gay functions and institutions was destructive both of local community and, in his ever more chaotic activism, of effective AIDS prevention. On the other hand, his excess as a drag queen and brilliant, charismatic presence was cherished and valued in its ability to break beyond both convention and selfishness in creating something like community. In a short 'gay' film P. was involved in making before his exile, two drag queens fight over a beautiful young man. The queens are exquisitely wounded creations, intertextually linked to multiple other globally dispersed sites of drag. At stake in debates over P.'s behavior in the years before he was banished was a question of how to read and to value what I am here terming excess.

His guru's teaching of yoga, for P., within a tiered structure of subordinate teachers to an extent resembling a multi-level marketing scheme, created a form and a discipline that seem, to use the language of some of his friends, to have healed his destructiveness. The guru did not counsel abstinence from pleasures but, rather like G.'s Guruji, a particular frame to manage life's assaults: here not niyam but a conception of 'art'. P. teaches this conception in workshops and on retreats. Art is a different matter than interdiction, and must be approached with a different range of affects than the teaching of renunciation and the prevention of excess. Art rethinks excess. The guru, P. says to me, is nothing but camp.

And along with the guru being 'drag' and 'camp,' he uses a third figure: *natak*, drama.

Back when he did AIDS work, P. wrote an essay for an international NGO and funder delineating excess as a public health problem. In it, he described natak as the unfolding of ever more intense affects amid not only gay parties but other sites of eroticized male homosociality, an unfolding that could lead to violence and that troubled the AIDS prevention focus on the adequacy of both the exercise of reason and the creation of community.

One contribution to the intensification of drama between men in Mumbai was for P. the partial bridging of class among men who have sex with men. G.'s encounters with the elite gay world in Delhi were of a much more stratified world in which men like him from small towns circulated as sex workers but were less entangled in the affective dramas of the middle-class queens. I am cautious at such generalizations: in any event, they are not mine but circulated at various times as differences ascribed to these two urban milieus. In any event, if for G. pain and estrangement came from the worries of family and poverty, worries for which the pleasurable sociality of men in this line were less and less available as alternative sociality or respite, for P. both estrangement and healing lay in the possibilities of natak. His relation with his

guru, and his becoming a guru himself, offer a certain reworking of drama as what his guru terms *art*, the natak of drag as an artfully excessive scene of instruction as opposed to the natak of the crazy life he abandoned.[6]

P. might not have managed the journey back. His guru's art as it moves along the multi-level chain of devotees-turned-teachers often fails as a scene of instruction. A family friend of mine was hospitalized for a regimen of chemotherapy in Delhi, producing her own version of institutional natak when the nursing staff continued to miss the critical scheduling of treatments. A staff oncologist and disciple of P.'s guru counseled the patient that her anger and frustration were standing in the way of an improved prognosis, and counseled her taking on the discipline of the same guru's art of living. The invocation of the idealized guru amid repeated institutional failure produced a disjunction for this friend: 'All you know how to offer here is the art of dying!' Art, as available in the clinical setting, refused her incandescent natak in the name of life. The distinction between righteous anger as a claim for oneself and the crazy life P. abandoned may not be easy to parse, but perhaps this at its most successful is what P. attempts in framing the art of his own guru-ship as drama, drag, and camp.

Drona, to return to the Mahabharata, might in P.'s idiom display a dangerous excess of natak. Full of painful feelings of humiliation and a desperate need both for revenge and for protecting his Brahman lineage from any such future pain, he struggles to define the boundaries of the gurukul: Arjuna survives, Ekalavya does not. But perhaps we can reframe the figure of the paradigmatic disciple as simultaneously both young men, joined at the thumb, negotiating the destructive and extraordinary powers of the teacher's natak in remaking their world.

Notes

1 The scene of instruction between Guruji and myself, in the small room where he saw visitors, was not quite the inadvertent 'fiasco' that Veena Das (this volume) recounts as all but inevitable in her own movement across local moral worlds to be treated in the presence of the goddess and her priest. In my case, there were the expected pretensions and affects – the distrust of and desire for Guruji's truth – a footing visible across my face as something between piousness and a smirk.

What emerged, in the room, was very similar to what Das frames as the 'deciphering of desires'. Das' initial hope, and the source of fiasco, was that the goddess, through the priest, should be able to offer a diagnosis without Das having, as the devotee, to enunciate them. If I too wanted Guruji to decipher my own situation without my offering much, he nonetheless engaged me with a claim on the commensurability of 'this line' that had evidently brought me into G.'s world and thus his own.

2 See for example Das (this volume) on 'the linguistic and ritual intimacy between Hindus and Muslims, especially among amils [Muslim healers] and tantriks.'

3 Indeed, all the princes of the gurukul upon the completion of their training will be asked to fight Drupada. The Kaurava cousins bring an army but fail to conquer the king; Arjuna and his brothers, the Pandavas, manage to capture Drupada on their own and force him to give up part of his kingdom to Drona. Arjuna fulfills the promise of the pedagogic relation.

The epic, however, is not done with the triangular relation between Drona and Drupada as mediated by Arjuna. Drona, now that he can claim the equivalent status of a king, declares an end to his enmity. But Drupada now carries the burden of humiliation.

A king in this world (Drona and a few others excepted) is not a guru: Drupada cannot call upon his students to alter the future through the total gift of guru-dakshina. He can, however, call upon progeny. Like the guru, whose labors are directed toward the future through the crafting of extraordinarily skilled beings who can fulfill the demand of guru-dakshina, Drupada sets about to create a set of extraordinarily skilled children. He performs a sacrifice to the gods and gains both a son, Dhrishtadyumna, who will eventually kill Drona only to himself be killed in turn by Aswatthaman, Drona's son, and a daughter, Draupadi, who will marry not only Arjuna but his four brothers as well.

In effect, Drupada reworks the effects of the teacher through the action of the sacrifice, eclipsing the bonds of the gurukul by the bonds of (magical) kinship: a son to destroy the teacher and a daughter to marry the students. This reworking anticipates the great war between the Kaurava and Pandava cousins that will place Arjuna and his brothers in opposition to the kingdom of Hastinapura and thus to Drona. Arjuna's plight, recounted in the Bhagavad Gita, lies in finding himself set against both his guru and his kinsmen.

4 See for example the 'kids' fable' version of the story at http://www.kidsgen.com/fables_and_fairytales/indian_mythology_stories/eklavya.htm [downloaded July 20, 2011].

5 See both Jaffrelot 2008 and the comments in response of Copeman (this volume). Like Jaffrelot I want to attend to offense both as an emergent condition and as learned; like Copeman I recognize the deep historicity of offense and am troubled by the claim that the condition of offense can be reduced to the design of powerful 'interests'. Copeman suggests instead an 'emergent politics of the devotional real'. If the television publics of Baba Ramdev, notwithstanding their occasional mobilization in the form of the protest rally, do not emerge with the affective intensity of the contemporary internet-mediated Sikh publics discussed by Copeman, they nonetheless may make a claim on the condition of the devotional real for many. My effort here to juxtapose Ramdev's teaching on homosexuality with the devotional ethic of a text circulated by the Hindi journal *Kalyan* is to suggest alternative renderings – under the respective signs of accusation and of promise – of how particular homosocialities make claims on the devotional real, and vice versa.

However, both the Sikh and the Dera Sacha Sauda devotion discussed by Copeman center on sacrificial relations established through excessive bodily giving-over. The Padma Purana story recounted in Kalyan attends to an extreme of devotional excess that brings about the end of a community and of a world: all the Vaisnavite and Saivite members of the two gurukuls sacrifice themselves in a total war of devotional realism. The beautiful appearance of the deities after the carnage offers, I am suggesting, the childlike unworldliness of the devotional figure, here the deities, as a contrastive figure to what we might term the sacrificial condition of adult devotion.

6 For a powerful example of how P.'s guru turns natak into art, see Frøystad (this volume). Frøystad suggests that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's teaching utilizes body and technology to produce an intense intimacy – playful, girlish, and childlike, perhaps as with Sri Ramakrishna a recognizable embodiment of the *unworldly* – that is however not 'sexual.' I would argue that P.'s own exquisite art, in his earlier incarnation as a drag queen, also staged a particular intimacy that placed the sexual into question. But the drag – if it drew on the narrative conventions of failure, celebrating a subject whose gender, age, and embodiment places her in a position of estrangement from the object of desire – did not work through the position of the child. The drag queen, in P.'s earlier performances at parties and on film, is inevitably too old for the young men she encounters, a dissonance that comments on the threat and eruption of violence in what P. terms the *natak* of gay life. When P. returns from exile as a teacher, he could be said to have shifted the register of performative intimacy from a gender performance that is 'too old' to one that is 'too young,' the less threatening gender shift of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

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6 The female guru

Guru, gender, and the path of personal experience

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In the modern West, personal experience as a modality and method for change is inextricably tied to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. With its validation of women's feelings that they are unfulfilled in traditional roles, its emphasis on critical reflection on the experience of gendered social roles by individuals and in consciousness-raising group meetings, and its crystallization in phrases such as Carol Hanisch's 'the personal is political', feminism has understood personal experience to be both a catalyst and a path for self and social transformation. It is through the theme of personal experience that 'second wave' feminism intersected with spiritual movements outside of mainstream religion that became prominent during that era,[1] including Wicca, which drew primarily on European Goddess traditions, Zen Buddhism as popularized by D.T. Suzuki, the Zen-inspired Erhard Seminars Training (Est), and what can be called a 'second wave' of Hindu-inspired gurus in the United States, including Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation), A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (International Society for Krishna Consciousness; ISKCON), and Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga).[2] As Harvey Cox observed in 1977, these religious movements were especially appealing to devotees because they emphasized practice rather than doctrine: 'The influence of Oriental spirituality in the West is hardly something new. . . . But there is something new about the present situation. In previous decades, interest in Oriental philosophy was confined mostly to intellectuals and was centered largely on ideas, not on devotional practices' (Cox 1977: 9). That is, people were interested in doing the spiritual work themselves through devotional practices, and these religious movements encouraged that through various practices, including group rituals (the circle, dancing, chanting) and meditation.

Amplifying the validity of personal experience and women's empowerment aspects of the feminist message, these themes intersected in the significant number of prominent female Hindu-inspired gurus who came to power in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and became public leaders to numerous followers across the globe in what I have previously called a 'third wave' of gurus in the United States.[3] These female gurus have already changed the terms of some of the lingering questions about the previous guru movements headed by men: Since a woman is the guru, obviously a woman can play a top leadership role in the organization, and a

woman as the guru forecloses many of the questions of the vulnerability of female devotees to male gurus' sexual demands.[4] This chapter makes the case that women's presence as gurus in history and the present day fundamentally changed the terms of the definition of a guru to mandate inclusion of personal experience of the world as directly related to spiritual knowledge. Within the dominant tradition of male gurus, personal insight is valued in the context of structures such as guru lineage, received teachings, and emulation of a specific guru as practiced in the intimacy of the *gurukula* system. In contrast, a prominent theme in the tradition of female gurus is personal experience both in the sense of independent spiritual realization outside of initiation in a lineage (many female gurus are self-initiated), as well as a pragmatic orientation that relates experience of the world to spiritual knowledge. Personal experience was especially significant to women and served as a cornerstone of their authority since they were not originally included in the definition of guru – there is no term for 'female guru' in Sanskrit – thus, instead of relying on the de facto qualification by gender open to men, women who wished to have the authority of a spiritual teacher (guru) had to innovate with what was at hand.[5]

Redefining knowledge

The earliest Hindu texts to describe the guru–disciple relationship are the classical Upanishads, which scholars date from the seventh century bce to the beginning of the Common Era.[6] While these philosophical texts are attached to specific earlier Vedic hymns and are thus considered to be the 'culmination of the Vedas' (*Vedanta*), they are distinctive from the hymns by their consistent emphasis on dialogue between teacher and student, on separation from the ordinary social world (the setting is the forest), and on meditation as the key practice. The Upanishads played a major role in outdating the Vedic practice of blood sacrifice (at which the hymns were sung as liturgy), and have been very influential on the development of Hinduism over the centuries: 'Upaniṣads are the vedic scriptures *par excellence* of Hinduism.'[7]

One of the two oldest Upanishads, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* ('Great-forest-teaching'; the other is the *Chandogya Upanishad*), provides a brief portrait of a female teacher (guru), Gargi Vacaknavi, among the male brahman sages. It is very important that she is represented in the revealed (*shruti*, 'that which is heard') literature that has been recognized for millennia as canonical in Hinduism. She is a learned woman who ultimately serves as judge for a competition among the male sages in a formal philosophical debate staged by a king, who offered prize money to the sage who could demonstrate the greatest knowledge of *Brahman* (the subtle, unified essence of the universe, as distinct from the priestly caste identity). At first, a teacher named Yajnavalkya assumes that he is the best and tries to claim the prize. Other brahman scholars, including the lone female scholar Gargi, rise to challenge him. In their first encounter (3.6), she engages him in regressive questioning.[8] When he finally answers 'the worlds of Brahma', and she questions him on that, he warns her not to ask too many questions 'lest [her] head should

split apart'. After a brahman male takes a turn, Gargi returns to powerfully press Yajnavalkya (3.8): 'as a warrior son . . . might string his unstrung bow, take in his hand two enemy-piercing arrows, and advance against you, so I have advanced against you with two questions' (Roebuck 2003: 52).[9] The 'arrows' are her two questions, again regressive. When he gives the answer of the 'imperishable' (*aksara*), she declares that no other brahman will surpass him in discussion of Brahman.

Although she is clearly in a position to judge his answer, Gargi is not included in the list of 'sons' who are 'in the lineage of the teachers,' which includes Yajnavalkya and others who questioned him, at the conclusion of the text (6.5, Roebuck 2003: 104), although she is mentioned in later genealogies (Lindquist 2008: 409–411). There is a difference to which the omission points: In a provocative article, Ellison Banks Findly argues that Gargi's regressive questioning offers a new model of guru instruction:

> Instead of meditating upon the scriptures of ancient tradition or affirming the new tradition by consulting a forest teacher, Gārgī does the obvious thing: she asks a series of straightforward questions using the relationships she observes in the world. . . . If taken to their extreme, then, Gārgī's questions would violate the sanctity of *guru*-knowedge as currently formulated by Upaniṣadic society – secret wisdom not personally discovered from one's own experience, but understood and accepted (with personal insight, to be sure), as given by the master.

Findly intriguingly asks, 'what better way to introduce slightly off-beat elements than through the character of a woman?'[10] Gargi contributes a novel approach in the domain of the public discussion of philosophy by emphasizing the role of personal experience in the context of learning, as opposed to rote repetition of received tradition, which characterizes the approach of other questioners. Although her methodology challenged the understanding of guru in her time, in fact her understanding came to dominate subsequent representations of the guru path, which came to be viewed and is understood today to combine both received teaching and personal experience.

Marriage as a gurukula

Two stories of wives as gurus from the twelfth century offer both contrast to and continuity with the story of Gargi. Both the *Yoga Vasishtha*, informed by bhakti, and the *Tripura Rahasya*, informed by Tantra, represent the gurus as behind the scenes wife-queens to their kingly husbands, in contrast to the brahman-identified public debate of Gargi the teacher (guru) questioning Yajnavalkya.[11] In continuity, the queen-wives both use unconventional, to say the least, methods to instruct their husbands in the path of self-realization.

The *Yoga Vasishtha* presents the story of a married royal couple, King Shikhidvaja and Queen Chudala.[12] This king and queen do everything together, including

studying spiritual texts, from which '[t]hey came to the conclusion that self-knowledge alone can enable one to overcome sorrow' (Venkatesananda 1984: 334). However, the queen alone continues her contemplation and proceeds deeper into self-discovery, achieving an awareness of pure consciousness (*Brahman*) beyond the illusions of duality and ego: 'Day by day the queen grew more and more introverted, rejoicing more and more in the bliss of the self. She was utterly free from craving and attachment. Without abandoning anything and without seeing anything, she was natural in her behavior and spontaneous in her actions. All her doubts were at rest. She had crossed the ocean of becoming. She rested in an incomparable state of peace' (Venkatesananda 1984: 336). King Shikhidhvaja recognizes Chudala's state of radiance and peace, and he asks her to explain to him how she had attained that state. Her response, given that she is in a different state of consciousness, is rather opaque: 'I remain rooted in that which is the truth, not in the appearance. Hence I am radiant. I have abandoned all these, and I have resorted to something other than these, which is both real and unreal. Hence I am radiant' (Venkatesananda 1984: 336). Unfortunately, the king does not understand that her words are signifiers of a higher consciousness, so he paternalistically dismisses her teaching: 'You are childish and ignorant, my dear, and surely you are prattling!' (Venkatesananda 1984: 337). And with that rejection, the king sets off into the forest to practice the by then conventional methods of asceticism, including world-rejection, vegetarianism, mantra repetition, and meditation for 18 years, all of which is observed by the queen who, through her own personal experience of the teachings, has not only achieved awareness but is able to check on him through divine vision and flying through the air at intervals while she is running the kingdom.

When she sees that his mind had ripened, she flies to the forest to help him attain enlightenment, transforming herself into a conventional brahman male ascetic since Sikhidhvaha 'might once again spurn her teaching, considering that she was an ignorant girl' (recall that the protagonists are of the royal, not the priestly, caste in the first place) (Venkatesananda 1984: 349). In that guise, she teaches her husband relevant philosophical concepts primarily through the telling of parables that illustrate what one can and should learn through life experiences, including 'his' (her) own story as a brahman male named Kumbha; a story of a man who fails to grasp a celestial jewel, which 'he' identifies as a story 'which resembles yours [her husband's]'; and an elephant who lost his freedom. When in response her husband overconfidently burns his hut and possessions to demonstrate that he has renounced everything, she reminds him that the real work is not the renunciation of materials such as possessions and the body, but instead one's sense of ego.

After an extended philosophical dialogue on that topic, she decides to test him by subjecting him to various experiences. For example, the 'brahman' discloses that he has had a curse placed upon him, so that he becomes a woman during the night only: Would the king mind marrying him so that he could be fulfilled as a woman by living as a wife at night? This does not bother the king, and he marries 'her' and then consummates the marriage. The 'brahman' devises another test: He creates an elaborate pleasure-garden, complete with a beautiful bed and a handsome young man. Then, the king's 'wife' makes love to the young man when she knows that the

king is surreptitiously watching. When confronted, the 'wife' hurriedly makes excuses for herself, by denigrating the nature of women: 'They are wavering in their loyalty. They are eight times as passionate as men. They are weak and so cannot resist lust in the presence of a desirable person. Hence, please forgive me and do not be angry.' The king does not dispute this characterization, but his response indicates that he is free from anger: 'It is appropriate that I should henceforth treat you as a good friend and not as my wife' (Venkatesananda 1984: 380).

His answer demonstrates that he is beyond the lust and anger symptomatic of the ego, and she reappears as his wife before him. When she asks him to describe his enlightened state, he recognizes the limits of language – which he had failed to recognize before in denigrating his wife's enlightened speech as 'prattle' – and he praises her as his guru: 'What I am that I am – it is difficult to put into words! You are my guru, my dear. By your grace, my beloved, I have crossed this ocean of samsāra [cycle of birth and rebirth]; I shall not once again fall into error' (Venkatesananda 1984: 381). As in the story of Gargi, this story is framed by patriarchal elements (the subservience and denigration of women; the need for a brahman male teacher, the 'honorary male' guise of the female teacher, etc.), yet the woman teaches through stories and actions that represent experiences in the world beyond the subject matter of authoritative revealed teachings. Furthermore, in the story of Chudala, she is explicitly recognized as a guru.

The *Tripura Rahasya* also presents a story of a princess who teaches her husband awareness of the divine self by reasoning through experience. The tale of Princess Hemalekha and Prince Hemachuda is introduced in the context of a teaching on the importance of associating with wise people; as a means to realization of the truth, such association is known as *satsang*. The prince's association with Hemalekha is an illustration of this lesson, for he becomes enlightened by her. During the course of their married life, Hemachuda notices that his princess does not seem to take pleasure in anything, especially his advances. Hemalekha reveals to him that she is pondering an important question: 'It is not that I do not love you, only that I am trying to find what the greatest joy in life is which will never become distasteful. I am always searching for it, but have not attained it yet.'[13] She claims that though she has been looking for it for quite some time, she has 'not reached any definite decision, as is a woman's way', and requests his help. Amplifying her self-deprecating manner, her husband remarks that 'women are indeed silly', and then asserts that the answer should be obvious to her, just as it is known to any living creature – including a crawling insect: 'That which is pleasing is clearly good and that which is not so, is bad.'

At first, Princess Hemalekha appears to adopt his perspective, as she accepts him as a teacher: 'True that women are silly and cannot judge rightly. Therefore I should be taught by you, the right discerner.' However, she proceeds by radically deconstructing his answer:

> The same object yields pleasure or pain according to circumstances. Where is then the finality in your statement? Take fire for example. Its results vary according to seasons, the places and its own size or intensity. It is agreeable

> in cold seasons and disagreeable in hot seasons. Pleasure and pain are, therefore, functions of seasons; similarly of latitudes and altitudes. Again, fire is good for people of certain constitutions only and not for others. Still again, pleasure and pain depend on circumstances.
>
> (Saraswathi 1971: 26–27)

The princess offers several other parables, including ones on beauty and love, to illustrate her point that pleasure is conditional, whereas the mind should be steered from such partiality toward pure consciousness. Given that the entire story of the prince and princess is framed by a concern about the kind of people with which one associates, these parables illustrate the principle by relating stories allegedly from people's lives – with the one on love said to be drawn from the princess's own life story (which is later revealed to be full of symbolic meaning). The method of these stories is to demonstrate that life experiences point to higher truths. Eventually, through her teachings her husband becomes a *jivanmukta* (one who reaches liberation while still alive in the material body), and they together enlighten the rest of the kingdom, which becomes a giant *satsang*.

The two royal women, Chudala and Hemalekha, are represented in the stories as achieving enlightened consciousness through their own reflection on existential topics. In the case of Chudala, she contemplates the question, 'Who am I?' In the case of Hemalekha, she contemplates the question of everlasting joy in life. Both women did have training in spiritual matters: Chudala and her husband together engaged in spiritual inquiry and they were initially guided by seers; Hemalekha was the adopted daughter of a great sage. Still, the texts make clear that their enlightened consciousness comes from their own path of life experiences in dialogue with higher spiritual wisdom; indeed, in several places in the *Tripura Rahasya* Hemalekha's spiritual wisdom is approvingly qualified as 'practical'. Both the genesis of these women's spiritual quests, and their methodology for teaching it to their husbands, engage personal experience in the world.

Their complete self-realization is not represented as deriving from initiation by a guru, but by their own reflections. This challenges the model of education by guru, especially living with the guru as in the *gurukula* (guru family/residence) system, known from Vedic times, in which the disciple(s) lives with the guru. For example, Yajnavalkya is said to have lived with his guru, Vaishampayana. For men, it was uncontroversial to live with a male guru and so the *gurukula* model was a practice for them, but to my knowledge there are no classical examples of women participating in this model, probably due to cultural issues of perceived impropriety. Indeed, the two royal women in fact inverted the *gurukula* system, for their students – their husbands – lived with them. The bond of marriage provided the possibility for their spiritual instruction and contextualized their status as guru.

The conflict in going public

The biographies of two early female gurus from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries complicate the emerging picture of the female guru. They are historical

women who were publicly recognized as gurus; as such, there are tensions that play out in their life stories that speak to religious and social issues. In both cases, their relationship to the status of wife is represented as problematic. Queen Chudala and Princess Hemalekha were represented as teachers as *sahadharmini*, 'an intellectual companion to her husband in issues of the mind, who still exercised a good deal of independent judgment' (Findly 1985: 39). In contrast, the ethos that informed the lives of the early female gurus was one of *pativrata*, in which a wife's duty was to devote her life to her husband's, as demonstrated through obedience, ritual practice, and bearing sons (Findly 1985: 40–41). For both of the early historical female gurus, there was controversy over their self-determination directly related to their status as wives.

According to Bahinabai's (1628–1700) autobiography, she was a profoundly spiritual woman who persisted in the devotional path in spite of the obstacles of poverty and a violent and jealous husband. Born to brahman parents in the town of Devagaon, some 50 miles from the Ellora caves in the region now known as the state of Maharashtra, even as a child she demonstrated special interest in places of pilgrimage, images of God, and songs and stories of the saints. When she was 11 years old, she had visions of the then-living saint Tukaram (1608–1649) and his chosen deity Panduranga: 'Says Bahiṇī, "Tukā is my good *guru*, and my brother. Could I but meet him, it would be supreme happiness" ' (v. 21.12).[14] In successive visions, the saint gave her a mantra as well as spiritual instruction (v. 25.7). Her husband, skilled in the Vedas, severely disapproved of her devotion to a charismatic poet-saint who was non-brahman – later in her autobiography, she calls her husband 'simply the image of rage' (v. 98.25). She recalls the conflict:

> The people thought all this [her visions of Tukaram in dreams] very strange, and came in crowds to see me. My husband, seeing them, gave me much bodily suffering. He could not endure seeing the people coming to see me. And moment by moment his hatred increased. He exclaimed, 'It would be well if this woman were dead. Why do these low people come to see her?'. . . . My husband now began to say, 'We are Brāhmans. We should spend our time in the study of the Vedas. What is all this! The *shudra* Tukā! Seeing him in a dream! My wife is ruined by all this! What am I to do?. . . . Who cares for saints and *sādhus*! Who cares for the feeling of *bhakti*?'
>
> (vv. 31.1–4, 32.1–2, 4)

One of the issues of authority that this passage reveals directly involves gender. The husband is the one who is supposed to have a public presence and the one who is supposed to be the teacher; that Bahinabai transgresses these gender role boundaries results in her being beaten ('much bodily suffering') by her husband. The other issue of authority, very much related to gender, is the brahman husband's argument with the authority of a 'low caste' man, who is both excluded from the traditional, revealed knowledge of the Vedas and is instead a proponent of a new direction in religious knowledge, *bhakti* (devotional participation),[15] and his wife's recognition of the latter's authority; through the husband's behavior, this

male argument is violently expressed across the body of a woman – his wife, an intimate. She essentially says in her autobiography that Tukaram became her guru, by appearing to her in successive visions in which the saint gave her a mantra (sacred verbal formula) as well as spiritual instruction (v. 25.7). The claim that visions were a part of her experience in the world is in this instance bolstered by the fact that the saint's lifetime overlapped with hers, though in other guru–disciple stories vision encounters with the guru are not dependent on contemporaneous lifetimes.

Erasing issues of whether the guru and disciple formally met in person, the first chapter of Bahinabai's autobiography locates her in a guru *parampara*, or unbroken lineage of gurus, which is defined in the text as originating in a mantra that Shiva bestowed on saints, who then transmitted it through their bhakti.[16] Bahinabai, full of bhakti, received the mantra from Tukaram: 'Because Bahiṇi placed her undivided devotion [bhakti] at the feet of Tukobā [Tukārām], she received [the *mantra* through him]' (Abbott 1929: chapter 1, v. 1.8). What her husband was unable or unwilling to grasp was then-contemporary understandings of spirituality which related directly to one's experience in the world, which is a hallmark of bhakti. It was at this intersection of personal experience in the world and leadership that bhakti and guru merged. Bahinabai was contributing to the creation an alternative religious heritage, one that related directly to literature in the Marathi language, and her autobiography and devotional verses became a part of this heritage.[17]

Tarigonda Venkamamba (popularly Venkamma; ca. 1800–1866) was a Brahman from Tarigonda on the Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu border. A main theme in her life story is her many challenges to custom and tradition.[18] As a child, she composed and sang devotional songs, which prompted her father to send her for training to the guru Subramanya Desika (perhaps in a *gurukula* arrangement). When she became renowned as an excellent student of his, her father halted her education and insisted that she be married. Venkamma demonstrated resistance to that plan: She not only refused to help her mother with household duties (duties she would be expected to perform when married), claiming that she would 'work only for God', but she rejected suitors. When her father insisted that she marry, she did not let her husband approach her (Tharu and Lalita 1991: 123).

When her husband died early on, the villagers insisted that her head be shaved, as was the custom, to signify publicly the inauspiciousness of widowhood. Venkamma refused, however, drawing a distinction between outward signs and inward purity: 'So long as our inclinations are pure, the merciful Lord will not be offended with us even when we set aside worldly customs and manners. And if our inclinations are impure, though we may pay all homage to customs and manners, the Lord will not spare us. So please leave me alone' (Chirantanananda 1979: 90). She also claimed that she remained married – to God (Tharu and Lalita 1991: 123). After a village priest had a barber forcibly shave her head, she immersed herself in the river offering prayers to Krishna and her full, long hair immediately reappeared (Chirantanananda 1979: 87). One story relates that she was reviled by her community as a prostitute, vain and mad, but that she was

accepted back into the community after she burned a superior religious leader's (*acharya*) throne (Tharu and Lalita 1991: 123). Another story relates that after she received initiation from a renowned male guru, Rupavataram Subrahmaniya Shastri, she sat to meditate behind the village temple but was driven away by the priest, and she then traveled to Tirupati.[19]

Venkamma claimed that she had never been educated, and her learning and compositions were thus outside of traditional lineages; instead, her writings were born from the Lord's grace and her own devotion:

> I did not learn in my younger days even the alphabet from any teacher. I have not studied even the rudiments of prosody, nor have I read any literary works. Like a stringed instrument in the hands of a musician I sing. As the Lord, out of his infinite grace, dwelling upon my tongue – verily as He makes me sing, I sing. I have absolutely no claim to originality.[20]

Her statement can be interpreted in several ways: as an affirmation of the role of personal experience in the world, as a claim of bhakti, and as a self-effacing gesture of modesty that is expected of accomplished women in a patriarchal society. In addition to her devotional poetry and songs, she composed accessible compendia of Sanskrit originals, including the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Venkatachala-mahatmya*, the *Raja-yoga-sara*, and the *Vaisishtha-Ramayana*;[21] in the latter, she tells the story of Chudala and Shikhidvaja from the *Yoga Vasishtha* 'at considerable length in her compendium', which suggests the possibility of an emerging self-reflexivity by female gurus.[22]

The international presence

These historical gurus set the foundation for twentieth-century female gurus; how much has changed by the twentieth century is apparent in the striking earliest example of the public presence and acknowledgement of a woman as guru in the personage of Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), who by 1926 had a public following in India:

> In fact, in 1926 Ma, or 'Mother' as Nirmala had come to be called, completely stopped feeding herself and for the rest of her life was fed by the hands of her close devotees. That same year Ma completely abandoned her dharma, or sacred duty, as a Hindu wife and began her endless travels around India, accompanied by her husband and attracting devotees wherever she went. Thousands came to receive her blessings and bathe in her ecstatic spiritual state. Many reported that one glance from Ma awakened in them a spiritual energy so powerful as to redirect their entire life.
>
> (Hallstrom 2004: 86)

A key to understanding the unschooled, self-initiated Anandamayi Ma's reception as a female guru is the perceived opportunity for women to have intimate

access to the divine, which was possible only because God had come in female form in the beautiful figure of Anandamayi Ma. One of her earliest disciples was Gurupriya Devi (1899–1990), who became the guru's personal attendant. This provided a chance for girls and women to feed, massage, bathe, and clothe the guru, which would not have been possible with a male guru. As a corollary, men were not able to interact with Anandamayi Ma in this way, and several male devotees reflected poignantly on what they perceived to be their disadvantage (Hallstrom 2004: 92–93). However, an equally important key to understanding her public reception is that many of her early disciples were male, beginning with her husband. Notably, sacred biographies of the guru resolve the tension of marriage evident in the stories of historical female gurus, insofar as her husband is represented as readily accepting her guru status (an aspect of which is that the marriage is never consummated) by taking initiation from her and supportively participating in her mission as her chief disciple.[23]

Two themes in the status of Anandamayi Ma as guru are especially relevant to this study: her refusal of the socially defined role of 'woman'; and the guru's emphasis on her own and her devotees' personal experience. These overlapping themes illuminate both gender issues and the style of authority in the careers of female gurus who emerged in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century in the 'third wave' of gurus in the United States.[24] I will consider three of the best-known gurus through these themes: Ammachi (Mata Amritanandamayi Ma), Shree Maa of Kamakkhya, and Gurumayi (Swami Chidvilasananda of Siddha Yoga).[25] What is particularly interesting is the distinctive contours of the themes in the lives of each of the gurus.

As Judith Butler, drawing on Monique Wittig, has pointed out, when people who are socially defined as women refuse a substantial part of that definition – her example is the refusal of heterosexuality – such people are refusing 'woman' on society's terms that it is a binary constituted in opposition to men (Butler 1990: 143–144). The women who refuse wish to define themselves in other terms; in the examples discussed here, they define themselves in terms of spiritual practices. Anandamayi Ma refused the definition by constituting her marriage on terms other than ordinary social expectations. In particular, she entered into periods of *mauna*, or silence lasting for a long period, even up to several years, both before and during her marriage, and she followed 'only her *kheyal*, or the reflection of the divine will, in any action' (Hallstrom 2004: 87). Revealingly, when Lisa Hallstrom went to India in the summer of 1990 to do research on Anandamayi Ma's followers, one of hosts told her: ' "My dear Lisa," Bithika said emphatically, "Ma was neither a woman nor a saint!" '.[26]

In contrast, Ammachi (b. 1953), Shree Maa (b. estimated between 1938 and 1948) and Gurumayi (b. 1955) refused the male as spouse. Within this group of three we see a further contrast: In the case of Ammachi there was violence, whereas the refusal was not controversial in the biographies of Shree Maa and Gurumayi. According to official biographies, Ammachi's parents and brother physically and mentally abused her because they misunderstood her episodes of spiritual ecstasy (such as dancing or being in trance) and they were enraged by her rejection of their

plans to get her married (Raj 2004: 206; 'River of Love' 1999). For both Shree Maa and Gurumayi, the subject of marriage did not come up; even as young women their spiritual practice was recognized and valued by others. Shree Maa encountered opposition from her family over her frequent practice of deep meditation (*samadhi*), to the extent that she tried to run away from home but was stopped by a portrait of Jesus above the door that spoke to her, saying: 'I am with you always. You don't need to leave to find me' (Biernacki 2004: 182). Later, she became a wandering renouncer in the Himalayan Mountains during her late teens and twenties, performing spiritual practices (*sadhana*) and meditation; opposition was voiced by her uncles, but only on the issue of not completing her academic studies first, not on the issue of marriage. In her life prior to assuming the mantle of guru, Gurumayi – then known as Malti Shetty – was brought at the age of 5 by her parents to Swami Muktananda's ashram in Ganeshpuri some 80 km north-east of Mumbai (Bombay) on their weekend spiritual retreats. In making weekend study possible, Swami Muktananda modified the traditional *gurukula* system so that students could *temporarily* (for the duration of a weekend) live at the guru's residence (the ashram). He initiated her at age 14 and she began to live at the ashram, performing spiritual practices and meditation toward self-realization, which she termed 'Baba's [her guru Swami Muktananda's] own state'. The tradition's accounts of her life do not represent the topic of marriage as arising.

Whether married, refusing marriage, or ignoring marriage, the female gurus put their spiritual practices and teachings first. In rejecting sex as a definition of marriage, wife, and woman, they also refuse to sexualize their identity. In this light, the female gurus' nearly universal adoption of Ma (mother; note that Amma also means 'mother') in their spiritual name can be viewed as claiming the post-sexual authority of mother.[27] The gurus are post-sexual in two senses: not identifying themselves as sexual in the first place, in contrast to definitions of 'woman' in conventional society, and assuming a title whose authority is directly linked to a result that supersedes the sexual act. In the Indian context, the use of the title, 'mother', is also nuanced by the fact that traditionally people use kinship terms to address each other, not given names.

Female gurus engage in a variety of spiritual practices (*sadhana*), including renunciation, pilgrimage, solitude, dancing and chanting; the one they all seem to practice in common is deep meditation (*samadhi*). *Samadhi* points to an essential difference that is understood to differentiate a guru (or other category of religious exemplar) from ordinary people: The gurus experience the fundamental unity of the universe in contrast to the fragmented perception of ordinary folk.[28] How do they transmit this experience to their followers? Or, to put this another way, how does the mother pass this knowledge on to her children? In the case of Ammachi, it is through a personal, individual hug. As Selva Raj describes, this physical contact is transgressive:

> Beyond the ritual and religious contexts, touching and kissing a person of another gender, especially strangers, is a taboo in Hindu social relations – more so when it involves touching and kissing a religious teacher or guru. But

> Ammachi embraces, hugs, strokes, and kisses her devotees with total disregard to their gender, moral condition, and physical purity. Thus her darshan [seeing and being seen by a revered figure] defies not only traditional Hindu norms concerning purity, pollution, and bodily contact between the devotee and the embodied divine but also societal norms and rules governing gender relations. Darshan is Ammachi's discourse on defiance.
>
> (Raj 2004: 214)

Informing the transgression is Ammachi's own identity as being from a low-caste community. There are several messages in the guru's trademark gesture. One is that the personal experience of a loving embrace from a guru is transformative, an expression of love that is more meaningful than traditional social and religious rules. Another is the unity of the gesture in contrast to the divisiveness of social and religious identities. In Maya Warrier's ethnographic study of Ammachi's devotees, many people pointed to the guru's successful cultivation of equality in her community (Warrier 2005: 76–78).

Shree Maa creates an even more radically horizontal community in her ashram in Napa, California. Here is the scene of worship in the Devi Mandir as described by Loriliai Biernacki:

> Several different people, including Shree Maa, sit at different places facing this altar, reciting and making various ritual offerings, never in unison. Besides this central shrine are numerous individual shrines next to it and along the adjacent walls. Devotees each take a seat at one among the various shrines and separately perform their own recitation of Sanskrit texts (or something else, English or vernacular) along with ritual offerings to whatever deity they choose. Upon entering, one finds a group of individuals each reciting a different text, each making separate offerings to different deities. With all this individual choice one might expect a chaotic cacophony, but the surprising effect is rather a melodic, pleasing drone. No voice becomes the central melody around which others must attune or harmonize or pitch themselves against. . . . This exemplifies the style of Shree Maa . . . hers is a decentralized mode of community that retains the individual autonomy of all participants.
>
> (Biernacki 2004: 188)

Further, Biernacki likens Shree Maa's approach to Julia Kristeva's notion that 'each one of us find her own individual language', as well as Chris Weedon's emphasis on postmodern feminism's 'decentering of singularized notions of power' (Biernacki 2004: 188). The individualized, self-determined worship in a shared context of other worshipers is the personal experience at the center of practice at the ashram.

By comparison, Siddha Yoga is a much more systematized, vertical organization constructed of hierarchies to manage various aspects of the institution, including spiritual instruction, finance, and research. In the mid-1990s, however,

Gurumayi effected an important shift away from her guru Swami Muktananda's and her own practice of personally interacting with devotees, especially at weekend Intensive programs, toward an absence of the guru's presence. Brief discussion of the change in Siddha Yoga publications encouraged the view that by her absence, the guru sought to encourage devotees to focus on *their* practice of the teachings rather than on *her* presence (Pechilis 2004: 229–233). Recently this goal has been supported by several initiatives, including closing the Shree Muktananda Ashram to all but long-term students; enhancing the status of regional centers by holding more, including 'global', activities at them; promoting the home-study courses; and holding small group retreats of 25 people.

Thus, though it is hierarchical in structure, through these initiatives Siddha Yoga of today explicitly provides paths and methods for applying the teachings to one's own life situation. Lola Williamson has intriguingly contrasted Gurumayi's focus to that of her guru Muktananda's, drawing on a distinction made by Richard Gombrich: Muktananda was 'soteriological' in focus while Gurumayi is 'communal':

> Soteriological religions emphasize the practices and beliefs that are necessary for attaining salvation – and attaining it quickly. Communal religions emphasize practices and beliefs that ensure the continuity of social life. . . . Much of [Gurumayi's] teaching is directed toward practical, everyday matters of living in the world. . . . Although the Hindu-based practices of chanting Sanskrit texts and performing worship (*puja*) still occur in Siddha Yoga, Gurumayi's emphasis is discovering one's own inner wisdom through contemplating ordinary daily experiences within the context of scriptural texts or Gurumayi's or Muktananda's words.
>
> (Williamson 2005: 154, 155, 156)

The practical, 'communal' nature of the Siddha Yoga path today brings together spiritual knowledge and personal experience in the world, grounding the former and enhancing the meaning of the latter. The guru remains present to devotees as their spiritual guide, accessible through physical personal encounter, through Siddha Yoga's expansive use of technology (Pechilis 2004: 233–236), through a network of regional teams she empowers to represent her (Williamson 2005: 161–162) and through visions devotees report that they have of her, but the focus of the path is on performing the practices oneself.

Clearly, there are different models at work in each of these present-day female guru's paths, yet a pronounced commonality is their emphasis on personal experience in the world as spiritual, whether it is enacting love through a mantra-hug with Ammachi, performing a personal puja in a group context at Shree Maa's ashram, or participating in Gurumayi's programs that bring ordinary experience and spiritual teachings together. For Ammachi and Gurumayi, very established and widely known translocal gurus, the emphasis on pragmatic experience has taken an important turn toward institutionalized social service. Ammachi has organized disaster relief, farm relief, and construction of homes for the poor

as well as hospitals and education centers; Gurumayi has organized bringing teachings to prisoners and a project to deliver nutrition and medical care to children in rural villages in India.[29] I view these turns toward social service as participating in the cosmopolitanism of Indian guru movements identified by Meena Khandelwal in this volume, insofar as the gurus are promoting a form of engagement that has international recognition and currency as within their spiritual frame, and, as Aya Ikegame provocatively suggests in this volume, the guru at the helm becomes contexualized in such widespread community-based activities as the kinless leader who becomes an 'embodiment of the public as a whole' and the 'ultimate public servant'.

Concluding remarks

From classical times until the present, female gurus have explored and promoted the possibility that personal experience in the world is closely related to spiritual knowledge. Gargi used regressive questioning about the natural world in order to test the brahmin sage Yajnavalkya's knowledge about the supreme spiritual concept, *Brahman*. Although she was not called a guru, she acted as one since she was qualified to judge Yajnavalkya's knowledge. Her mode of relating the natural world to supreme knowledge is distinctive from her male colleagues' metaphorical use of the natural world to signify brahman, which is the mode of teaching among the males – represented especially as father to son – throughout the text. Replacing the intimacy of father and son with that of husband and wife, Chudala and Hemalekha act as gurus to their husbands and teach them spiritual wisdom through contemplating stories of personal lives (which resemble their own), demonstrating that life experiences lead to higher spiritual wisdom. Early female gurus in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pushed the envelope in making their guru activities public, as gurus out in the world, and suffered violence due to their attempts to chart paths to spiritual knowledge quite different from received tradition. The female gurus of the twentieth century and today build on this legacy of forging an interconnection among women, experience in the world and spiritual knowledge.

In reviewing historical and present-day Hindu female gurus, a feminist lens helps us to focus on the gurus' methodological assertion, stemming from the Upanishads, that personal experience in the world is a valid path to knowledge about oneself that leads to spiritual evolution. The feminist lens provides us with other ways of understanding the relationship between personal experience and religion than the much-described excess of emotions in many mystical expressions, as well as the links between some aspects of New Age traditions and capitalism's excess in its celebration of individual freedom for the purposes of status-enhancing consumption (on the latter see Urban 2005). Both historical and present-day female gurus demonstrate a sustained, pragmatic doing in the world as the path and thus there is a self-conscious relating of the teachings to the world and a concomitant exposure of the teachings to the world.

An important phenomenon emerging from this nexus is new ways of imagining the relationships among women, personal experience and Indian spiritual wisdom.

One facet is what I call a new discourse of constructive disappointment. Guru relationships are intimate – which today can be and is achieved by various means, including technology – and with that there is both an opportunity for profound joy and a risk of deeply wounding disappointment. Gurus attract and inspire devoted followers, and so it is not hard to find flattering testimonials, often in the form of biographies of the gurus. My interest is more in the discourse of disappointment and its possibilities. There have certainly been academically critical studies of the guru, including those that explore topics such as the hermeneutical suspicion surrounding gurus and ways to evaluate a guru (Narayan 1989, McKean 1996, Storr 1997, Copeman 2009), as well as non-scholarly literature that castigates gurus, from sensationalist exposés to a growing corpus of complaints by former devotees on the internet. What we now see emerging are personal critical reflections that more calmly and less polemically reflect on areas of disappointment in or perceived limitations of the guru, written by former devotees who reflect on their experiences with the guru in the context of a longer view of their own evolving life experiences. Such reflections have emerged mainly around female gurus, for example Gurumayi of Siddha Yoga (Caldwell 2001, Szabo 2009) and Gurani Anjali of Yoga Anand Ashram (Chapple 2005), although the genre includes reflections on experiences with male gurus (see Gold chapter in this volume). Another facet is the wider context today of acclaimed popular literature by women who describe their use of accessible Indian traditions such as gurus and yoga to examine ongoing life experiences (Gilbert 2006, Shapiro 2010, Dederer 2010). Interpreting this popular literature in a feminist vein, Judith Warner suggests that there is an 'inward-turnedness' of women today as 'a direct rebellion against the outward-bound trajectory that their own mothers took' (Warner 2011), and we can underscore the women's attraction to Indian traditions as a catalyst for their reflections on their life journeys. The variety of current literatures refashions established links among women, personal experience and Indian spiritual wisdom in critically reflecting on the nature of the guru–disciple relationship and other life experiences.

Notes

1 Though see Hannigan 1990 on some significant differences between new religious movements and new social movements.
2 Recent critical scholarly evaluations of these Hindu-inspired gurus can be found in Forsthoefel and Humes 2005. For a discussion of various gurus to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with excerpts from their writings, see Tweed and Prothero 1999.
3 Pechilis 2004a: 34–35. In this essay, I draw on materials published in Pechilis 2004, both my own writings and those of the contributors to the volume, and Pechilis 2011b.
4 For a comparative consideration of women's leadership in new religious movements, see Puttick 1999; for a comparative consideration of codes of sexuality in new religious movements see Palmer 2004; on female Hindu ascetics' avoidance of the sexuality issue see Khandelwal 2004: 141–174; on female gurus and sexuality see Pechilis 2004a: 7–8. There are many discussions online and in print about specific male gurus' sexuality.

5 On the problem of Sanskrit terms for female religious specialists, see Pechilis 2004a: 5–6, and Khandelwal 2004: 7–8.
6 See Olivelle 1996: xxxvi–xxxvii on dating the Upanishads.
7 Olivelle 1996: xxiii.
8 Example: 'Then Gārgi Vācaknavī questioned him. "Yājñavalkya," she said, "since all this [world] is woven on the waters, as warp and weft, on what are the waters woven, as warp and weft?" "On air, Gārgi." "On what is air wind woven, as warp and weft?" "On the worlds of middle-air, Gārgi." ' Roebuck 2003: 47.
9 Both Black (2007: 147, 151) and Lindquist (2008: 418–419 and 419 fn. 52) note the masculine image the character is represented as using to describe herself; Lindquist especially points to the warrior imagery as not only a debating tactic but a 'masculinizing' of Gargi. In her study of Christian mystics, Grace Jantzen discusses the phenomenon of 'honorary male' (1995: 51–59).
10 Findly 1985: 49–50 and 45, respectively. In her discussion, Findly draws on the evaluation of Gargi by the famous eighth-century philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, Shankara. Two scholars in recent publications contribute to this discussion. Brian Black agrees with Findly that Gargi is innovative, but not in her use of regressive questioning, which he says is characteristic of Upanishadic argumentation; rather, '[i]n Gārgī's case, she poses her challenge to orthodoxy not so much by what she says, but how she speaks and conducts her arguments . . . she addresses the assembly, employs sarcasm, and adopts an aggressive mode of address' (Black 2007: 155). That is, she speaks cognizant of her subject-position and context in the world. Steven Lindquist argues that Gargi is one of several 'anomalous' characters and 'the issue appears to be a larger one of a changing ideology behind the possession of knowledge and what that knowledge is', especially 'the displacement of the ideology of Brahmins-by-birth versus Brahmins-by-practice/knowledge' (Lindquist 2008: 417).
11 As Christopher Chapple notes, the main protagonists of the *Yoga Vasishtha* (*YV*) are Rama, familiar as the kingly hero of the Ramayana epic and incarnation of Vishnu, and Vasishtha, a sage whom Shankaracarya referred to as the first sage of the Vedanta school; Vasishtha, who teaches Rama in the *YV*, thus links the text with the Vedanta tradition. However, Chapple also remarks upon the diversity of traditions in the text: 'Threads of Vedānta, Jainism, Yoga, Sāṃkhya, Śaiva Siddhānta, and Mahāyāna Buddhism are intricately woven into the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*; it is a Hindu text *par excellence*, including, as does Hinduism, a mosaic-style amalgam of diverse and sometimes opposing traditions' (Chapple 1984: xii; see x–xi on date). I tend to put the emphasis on bhakti, because the *YV* insists that Rama, enhanced by higher knowledge, then resumed his royal duty of ruling; thus, the text's emphasis on action in the world makes what the *YV* does for the epic *Ramayana* parallel with what the *Bhagavad Gita* does for the *Mahabharata*.

The *Tripura Rahasya* text is in praise of the Goddess, which associates it with the Tantric Shakta theaology. The frame story is that a sage named Dattatreya teaches Parashurama higher wisdom; tradition views both of these characters as incarnations of Vishnu.
12 Venkatesananda 1984: 333–383. The *YV* has other stories that involve women who attain higher knowledge; for example, Queen Lila, who is taught by the goddess Saraswati (pp. 51–77); the demoness Karkati, who attained higher knowledge by her own meditation – personal experience – ('She had gained direct knowledge of the supreme causeless cause of all by her own examination of the intelligence within her. Surely, direct inquiry into the movements of thought in one's own consciousness is the supreme guru or preceptor, O Rāma, and no one else' [80]), then heard teachings by a king and his minister (77–87); and a very interesting take on the Ahalya story (89–96).
13 Saraswati 1971: 26. The story and the quotes from it that follow are from pp. 26–27 (in the text, sections 4:1–15).
14 Sources in English for the study of Bahinabai include: Anandkar 1979; Feldhaus 1982; Abbott 1929. My numbering of verses follows Abbott as I use his translation.

15 Scholars have tried to find bhakti, or at least links to bhakti, in Vedic literature; see Pechilis (2011a).

16 The mantra originated with Shiva, who gave it to his wife Parvati; Matsyendra heard it from within the belly of a fish, 'thus through him the supreme *mantra*, that Shiva held in His mind, became effective through *bhakti*'; he passed it to Goraksha (Gorakhnath), who passed it to Gahini, then Nivrittinath, then Dnyaneshvar, then Satchidananda; then Vishvambhara gave it to Rahava (Chaitanya), then to Keshava Chaitanya, who passed it to Babaji Chaitanya, to Tukoba (Tukaram), and through him to Bahinabai. See Abbott 1929: 1 (vv. 1.1–9).

17 Tukaram's devotional poetry is rendered in a refreshing style with helpful introduction in Chitre 1991. Bahinabai wrote abanga verses: 'The abanga is an elaborated, regularized form of the popular Marathi *ovi* meter, which is used in the songs women sing as they grind flour or husk grain. An abanga has rhymed lines and expresses religious sentiment. The form is associated with the Varkari sect, especially with the saint-poet Tukaram, and flourished between the end of the thirteenth century and the seventeenth century' (Tharu and Lalita 1991: 107–108). Seventy-eight of Bahinabai's 473 verses are an autobiographical account (*atmanivedana*) (Tharu and Lalita 1991: 108); seven of the verses are on wifely duty (Pechilis 2004a: 29). Other verses expound religious themes such as the nature of the true guru (*satguru*), bhakti, repentance, sainthood, morality, God's names, the nature of a 'true brahman', the sacred place of Pandharpur, and the bhakta Pundalik (Pechilis 2004a: 27). A brief review of Bahinabai in the context of Marathi literature is in Bhagwat 1995.

18 Information on her life story is in Chirantanananda 1979 and Tharu and Lalita 1991: 122–126. The sources of the information on her life story that they present are not clear to me, though both articles note that the guru is popularly known today.

19 Chirantanananda 1979: 88–89. She mentions her guru in her *Venkatachala-mahatmya*.

20 Chirantanananda 1979: 91, quoting from her *Venkatachala-mahatmya*.

21 Chirantanananda 1979: 90. He claims that she lists her works at the conclusion of her *Bhagavata Purana*. Tharu and Lalita note that: 'Her work was apparently well known in her time, although it is scarcely read even in scholarly circles today and is difficult to locate in library collections' (123), though they also note that: 'Her songs, composed for different occasions (lullabies, bathing-songs, bride-dressing songs, and so on), were popular and continue to be sung' (124). They found references to 15 works by Venkamma (123–124), including *Dwipada Bhagawatam* (Life of Lord Krishna in Couplet Form), *Siva Natakam* (The Dance of Siva), *Parijatapaharanam* (Stealing the Celestial Parijata Flower), *Narasimha Satakam* (A Hundred Poems on Narasimha), *Venkateswara Mahatyamu* (On the Greatness of Venkateswara), *Chenchu Natakam* (A Play about Chenchu), and *Vishnuparijatamu* (The Divine Flower of Vishnu); Srinivas Rayaprolu has provided a translation of an except from the latter (125–126). Chirantanananda provides the name of one of the texts as *Venkatachala-mahatmya*, indicating that it is a text glorifying Venkatachala, or Tirupathi, which is probably more accurate than Tharu and Lalita's suggestion.

22 On the theme of reflexivity: another historical example is Gauribai (1759–1809), a female guru from Gujarat, who was compared to the poet-saint Mirabai (Pechilis 2004a: 29); a contemporary example is the belief that Shree Maa is an incarnation of Ramakrishna's wife Sarada Devi (Biernacki 2004: 181), as well as a biography's assertion that: 'When Anandamayi Ma died in 1982, she appeared to Shree Maa in a vision, handed her a white lotus, and said, "now the responsibility is yours" ' (Biernacki 2004: 198 n. 14, paraphrasing Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *Shree Maa: The Life of a Saint* (Napa, CA: Devi Mandir, 1997): 222). Most frequently, contemporary female gurus are viewed as incarnations of the Goddess.

23 The guru's other prominent early disciple, Jyotishchandra Rai, called Bhaiji (respected brother), constructed her first ashram in 1929; see Hallstrom (1999: 41–49) on the guru's early years of gaining a public and the gendered issue of her speaking before

men in her transition to guru: 'The years at Shahbagh Gardens [1924–28] were characterized by the tremendous growth of the circle of those devoted to Nirmala and by her resulting transformation to Anandamayi Ma' (42).

24 Pechilis 2004a: 34; the last section of the essay offers other reasons for the popularity of female gurus in the last quarter of the twentieth century. See also Saha 2007.

25 Information for this discussion is taken from Raj 2004, Biernacki 2004, and Pechilis 2004b unless otherwise specified.

26 The host understood Ma as God; Hallstrom 2004: 89.

27 Swami Durgananda explains that the title 'Gurumayi' contains a reference to 'mother': 'The name came from an *abhanga*, a devotional song by the Maharashtrian poet-saint Tukadhyada which has the refrain 'Avadali Gurumayi.' In Marathi, *gurumāyi* means 'guru-mother,' although a closely related Sanskrit word, *gurumayi*, means 'one who is filled with the guru' (1997: 605, no. 247).

28 For an example see Pechilis 2004a: 4–5.

29 An aspect of social service that is important to consider but that is beyond the scope of this chapter is the extent to which it legitimizes *seva*, or the service that all devotees are expected to offer to the guru. While many have written of the difficulty of Westerners in accepting the perfect, infallible nature of the guru, another issue is the suspicion people have for doing unpaid volunteer work for a guru whose organization is wealthy.

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7 The dreamed guru

The entangled lives of the amil and the anthropologist

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This story starts with a dream that I happened to tell a friend living in a low-income neighborhood in Delhi during the course of my work on urban poverty over the past decade.[1] The protagonist of this story is a Muslim man known for his piety. He has performed the *haj*, is engaged in local politics and is also a healer (*amil*) who uses forms of occult knowledge within the bounds of legitimate practice as set by the Quran and the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet). Hafiz Mian, as I shall call him, has often shared with me his concerns over how to maintain the purity of Islamic teaching in his life and especially in the healing practices he deploys to cure the many ills caused by beings of the unseen world. The term for the unseen world is *neadeeda duniya* – that which one cannot see with the eyes – and refers to beings of the occult world whose presence can be sensed with other organs such as that of hearing and touch, even if they cannot be seen. The figure of the guru emerges in this chapter not directly but in the context of our conversations about my dream and the story of Hafiz Mian's own travails that it elicited. Hafiz Mian puzzled over the question of whether Hindu symbols in dreams of a Hindu man or woman could be regarded as the secret working of Shaiytan as some passages in texts on interpretation of dreams within Islam might be read to mean. Guru Maharaj, an unnamed guru – a figure of imagination – appears at an odd moment in Hafiz Mian's stories though his actual relation to Guru Maharaj, or for that matter, any other guru, never emerges clearly. The guru here figures not in his own right but as someone who haunts the possibilities of transgression for a Muslim amil. I shall argue that unlike some other figures in Hafiz Mian's narrative such as 'the priest of the black knowledge (*kale ilm ke pujari*)' – Guru Maharaj cannot be characterized as 'evil' though he has, of necessity, to traffic with evil. Hafiz Mian's narrative manages to unsettle notions of clear boundaries between Islam and Hinduism, which does not imply that we can either assimilate his narrative within secular notions of equality of all religions, or, within notions of syncretism as a relational possibility between Hinduism and Islam.

Let us return to the dream that provoked some of this discussion. Sitting in the tiny *baithak* – a small room at the entrance to his house where he received visitors and clients – I saw that Hafiz Mian had acquired a copy of an Urdu book on dreams entitled *Khwab aur unke Tabir* that claimed to be based on an authoritative book on dream interpretation, entitled *Kamil Al-Tabir*, by Abu al-Fazl Hussain

Ibn Ibrahim bin Muhammad al Tiflisi.[2] The preface to the book asked 'What is a true dream (*saccha khwab kya hota hai*)?' and went on to describe three types of dreams – first, a dream caused by purely physiological reactions of the body, second a dream sent by Allah and the third, a dream sent by Satan, or Shaiytan.[3] The first of these was not to be regarded as a dream at all because it did not convey news of another time or place;[4] the second was a true dream since it was sent by Allah and gives indications of what is to come; and the third was a dream meant to spread confusion in the minds of the faithful and hence was to be regarded with great caution. Hafiz Mian told me that though his expertise was not in dream interpretation, as a person who engaged in healing against the troubles caused by occult beings, he was in special danger of the guiles of Shaiytan. Hence he was mindful of what dreams might tell – especially, as dreams were the only part of revelation left to mankind (to speak precisely, dreams are one forty-sixth part of revelation as per the Islamic tradition).

At this point, I happened to mention that I had a recurring dream that left me somewhat bewildered because I could not fathom from where it could have come. This was the dream.

> I am going in a train but this is some earlier period of history. (It is not clear to me who the young woman I am calling 'I' is in the dream. She certainly bears no resemblance to me as a visual image.) There are some British soldiers who come into the train. I know that an Indian revolutionary terrorist is in the train disguised as a Sikh and it is my work to distract the soldiers so that they do not discover him.[5]

The rest of the dream is completely confused. I know that the train keeps moving and never reaches anywhere. I keep trying to engage the soldiers in banter. There is a feeling of dread that we will be discovered at any moment but all I know is that the train keeps moving. Nothing in the story is resolved.

More than 20 years ago when I was working on militancy in the Punjab, I told this dream to Audrey Cantlie who famously brought anthropological work into psychoanalysis (Cantlie 1993).[6] Audrey told me not to look for any deep meanings – according to her my dream probably meant that I knew in my heart that I was not able to understand terrorism. I did not offer this insight to Hafiz Mian but my recurring anxiety that I might be misrepresenting people I come to know intimately in my ethnographic work because they are not really comprehensible to me, probably gets expressed at moments such as the one I was sharing with Hafiz Mian.

Hafiz Mian first cautioned me that it is not so wise to tell one's dreams to 'just anyone' because if told to a person who does not know how to interpret it, the dream can have effects in the world – transforming what could have remained hidden and latent, into reality.[7] This was especially true for the dreams sent by Shaiytan. He then pronounced that the fact of moving away could be a harbinger of good news if you are going toward, say, a place where you can see a *basti* (a settlement) with a market, a mosque or other signs of peaceful activities – on the

other hand, going toward a wilderness was not a good sign though seeing green grass or trees was again a good sign. What was important, he said, was not what one saw but the feeling of dread (*khauf*) that I described. He feared for me since the signs of the dream were not clear. Perhaps a Hindu healer or a diviner would be better able to tell what such a dream meant and help me to take precautions? I said that I had my own *ishta* goddess (beloved or chosen goddess) and that I left all to her wishes. The conversation moved to other things.

It was some time after this conversation that a woman from a Hindu family in the neighborhood who had been facing many difficulties persuaded me to accompany her to a local well-known temple of the goddess Santoshi Ma which had gained a steady reputation for its miraculous powers in the past 20 years or so. One of the priests in this temple, she said, manifested the divine presence of the goddess in his body every Thursday. The common expression for the event is '*unki chauki lagti hai*' which is hard to translate. Literally, it means he establishes a '*chauki*' – where we could think of chauki as a protected and sacred square space within which a ritual takes place for a limited duration. The term has migrated to other spheres so that a police picket might be referred to as chauki and the term *chauk*, a masculine form of chauki, is the public space for a market or a public event. My Hindu friend told me that many people in the area had received solace and direction from this manifestation of Santoshi Ma and now regarded the priest as a guru to be consulted in the face of difficulties even when he was not possessed by the goddess.[8] While on Thursdays the priest was to be approached as the goddess, on other days he was treated as a guru. As goddess he had special powers of divination but when he came out of his trance as the goddess, he had no memory of what he had said but could give advice on how to follow what the 'goddess' had said. My friend told me 'When you are presented before the goddess – you are not allowed to say anything except affirm what she tells you. Under no conditions must you *say* no.' Hafiz Mian, when he heard that I was going to visit the temple and the injunction not to speak, said that indeed, the manifestation of the goddess might be able to discern my dream and what lay ahead since the proper thing for a healer was to be able to infer the true desires of the disciple without anything having to be told.

My visit to the temple was a bit of a fiasco but to my astonishment, my Hindu friend just shook off the event by saying that the present priest had just inherited the *gaddi* (the seat) from his father and was perhaps not so adept. What happened in the temple (where most devotees were from the adjacent low-income areas) was, that despite my protests, I was ushered to the head of the queue of devotees standing before the divine presence. The attendants had warned me that the goddess knows all and she will tell me why I had been brought into her presence. 'Whatever happens, do not speak – you can only nod your head in the affirmative.'[9] The priest as the manifestation of the goddess spoke in a falsetto, presumably feminine, voice, and pronounced: 'There is a problem with your business – the profits are not coming.' I remained mute – she quickly moved to another direction: 'Ah, I see – someone is ill – do not worry he will be cured.' I was still mute – 'nod your head', the attendant said to me but I could not affirm this assertion of what had brought me

there. After two more attempts, the priest/goddess was a bit exasperated and asked, so what is it that you want? And for some reason, much to my own embarrassment, I blurted out, '*Gareebon ki seva karne ki ichha hai* – I desire to serve the poor.' Prompt came the reply – *langar laga denge* – we will have a langar (free public feeding) in your name. I will not pursue the absolute tangle I had created. I could see as I waited for the details of the langar to be fixed that the priest/goddess did not have much difficulty reading the desires of others assembled there. This child looked sickly – she would take the child in her lap and command, 'bring him again next week'. This one needed a job, that one required the goddess to assure that her husband would be released on bail. I felt a bit ashamed. If the unwritten contract here was that devotees came with desires that could be comprehended within this local moral world, I had failed the test as an ethnographer. But I could not have found a way to bear false witness to myself in the presence of the goddess in whatever form. My behavior closed some doors for me but it opened other unexpected ones. Most importantly for me, it crystallized a question: what regions of language were indicated by the two experiences I described? First, there was Hafiz Mian's warning that telling a dream might make the latent possibilities of a dream real in the material world. The second was the expectation that the priest/goddess's speech would just emanate from her and would decipher desires without the devotee's having to express them in language. The reason I could not have a future on the lines on which we were moving in both cases was that I had said too much. But this very failure on my part allowed a new conversation to emerge with Hafiz Mian.

Whose dream was it anyway?

The next time I met Hafiz Mian, he told me that the text on dream interpretation that he was reading was very good because it was fully alive to the dangers that the Shaiytan posed; for, he (Shaiytan) cunningly manipulated the close relations between dreams and prophecy. One problem with our present understandings of such texts, he said, was the emphasis people placed on the faculty of *seeing*. Dreams, he explained, are partly about images that come to you unbidden (see Khan 2011) but also what you hear and what you sense.[10] Did you, for instance, *see* the figure of the revolutionary (*inqalabi*) in your dream – did you *see* the figure of the British soldiers? I realized then that I had not actually *seen* who was hiding in the train, I had just known. Sometimes, said Hafiz Mian, there are people who appear in your dreams and even when you are awake you can sense someone to be around you, who are figures from some other past – *kisi guzre zamane ki hasti* – but they have reality – *unka wajud kayam hota hai*.[11] He then proceeded to tell me the story of his own ancestors and how he had come to inherit the knowledge of an amil and how it made him walk a tight rope between *nuri ilm* (luminous knowledge) and *kala ilm* (black or dark knowledge) (see Ewing 1997; Flueckiger 2006, p. 119). I give some parts of this story to show how the idea of the Guru Maharaj comes to find a place in this narrative and ultimately provides a clue to Hafiz Mian's concern that I might harm myself if I said too much as I had on both occasions. Incidentally, it seems like a good diagnosis of my many troubles.

Ancestral memories

Hafiz Mian did not remember his grandfather or what he looked like but he knew a lot about him. He told me about the life of his grandfather in a pretty straightforward way but it is obvious that this narrative is stitched together out of many different stories he had heard from his aunt and his mother. Though voiced by a male amil, we might consider the story as a braiding of childhood memories with sediments made up of women's voices that convey dispersed experiences of affliction, terror and healing. I use the indicative tense in what follows to convey the fact that Hafiz Mian, in his telling, bestowed these stories with a kind of facticity. Toward the end he introduced a twist that might encourage us to re-read this account a second time in a subjunctive mood – expressing wish, emotion and possibilities rather than actualities.

Hafiz Mian's grandfather, Nihal Shah, was a chowdhury of a group of villages in the Sardanha Estate in the former North-West Provinces. The family, according to his account, belonged to a minor branch of the Muswi Sayyid family, the rulers of Sardanha who claimed descent from Ali Muswa Raza, the eighth Imam, and had originally belonged to Afghanistan. Because of their closeness to the British and the services they had rendered during the Kabul mission, the Muswi Sayyid family had to flee their home. They resettled in India and were awarded the Sardanha Estate. After the mutiny of 1857 the title of Nawab Bahadur was conferred on the ruler for his help to the English army. Nihal Shah was a relative by marriage of the dominant clan and was given rights to the revenues of a group of villages in the estate. According to Hafiz Mian, his grandfather was never very interested in either managing his lands or taking part in politics.[12] A different struggle was at stake for him.

Hafiz Mian did not know from whom his grandfather received the knowledge of healing but the two most prominent features of Nihal Shah's life that he gathered from family lore were: one, that Nihal Shah specialized in reading *vazifa* (ritual repetition of certain texts in Arabic) and, second, that he had a special relation with two extremely pious jinns, Abu-Hassan and Atum.[13] Muslims consider jinns to be real creatures of smokeless fire, mentioned in the Quran and hadith (sayings of the Prophet). Jinns were created before Allah created humans and just like humans are bestowed with free will. As in the case of human beings, jinns too are divided into different tribes, sects, and religions. There are jinns who have accepted Islam and others who are kafirs. While Hafiz Mian did not know how the jinn named Abu-Hassan came to be an associate of Baba Nihal Shah, he had heard that Atum was of Mongol descent and had taken the form of a child during a period when his grandfather was performing austerities in the Shavalik hills in order to acquire learning from Baba ji (an affectionate term that Hafiz Mian used.) It was only later that Baba ji discovered that Atum was a jinn. Except for one fault – namely, that he had a very bad temper due to the warrior lineage from which he came – Atum was considered dutiful and devoted to Baba ji.

Some jinns like to inhabit the wilderness or are to be found near graveyards and abandoned buildings. Sometimes you can see a snake and this might be a jinn who

has taken that form since jinns can change form at will. Humans often fear jinns for the capacity to cause mischief. Shaiytan (whose Islamic name is Iblis), was a fallen jinn who fell into disfavor with God because he had defied God and had refused to prostrate before man – however, as attested in the Quran and the hadith literature, there have been many instances of pious jinns. Abu-Hassan and Atum came from very well-respected and high status *kabilas* (lineages). Baba ji did not call upon Atum very often but with Abu-Hassan he had a companionship in which they would discuss matters of faith, and events in the world. Hafiz Mian used the analogy of newspapers and said that Abu-Hassan brought news of different worlds since the jinns could travel into the lower skies and picked up news about future events. Though jinns are normally forbidden to take the human form, Hafiz Mian said, they can take human appearance in the presence of pious people like Nihal Shah. Unfortunately for Hafiz Mian these jinns who were the protectors of their family left after his grandfather's death and revealed themselves but once to his aunt (his father's sister). This aunt was the source of the stories of Abu-Hassan and Atum that Hafiz Mian had heard, hinting at an intimacy between Nihal Shah and his daughter that played a crucial role in the transmission of some knowledge of the occult that she acquired, though such knowledge is usually forbidden to women. According to Hafiz Mian, the family had gone into moral decline and even if the jinns wanted to help they were unable to do so, because they were not allowed to be present to those who had not observed the strict discipline of the amil. With this background on some of the occult figures (there were others such as *muakil, hamzad* and various left-handed tantric occult beings that I cannot take up here), I turn to the first Hindu figure whose stories are braided with the story of the moral decline to which Hafiz Mian made an allusion. This segment of the story brings me back to Hafiz Mian's oblique suggestion that in order to decipher my dream I had to first understand how figures from some other past come to haunt one's life.

Princess Padmini: dangerous intimacy

Hafiz Mian told me these episodes in the life of Baba Nihal Shah.

Baba ji was often lost in his own imaginary world (*khayali dunia*) but once when he was back in his *haveli* (private mansion with a courtyard) he was met by a group of elders from the village who warned him that a member of his clan was conspiring against him and that if he did not pay attention to his lands and to village affairs then he was in danger of losing his position of authority. Worse, they told him that in his absence, an abandoned temple with an idol of Kali had become the meeting place of many amils of the dark knowledge (*kala ilm*) and that rumors of young girls being abducted and sacrificed were in circulation.

Baba ji immediately summoned Abu-Hassan to his side and consulted with him as to what was the best course of action. The jinn advised him to fortify himself by reading appropriate vazifas in a purified state.[14] Baba ji withdrew to his *hujra* (sanctuary and prayer room), made a circle around himself (*hisar dala*) and in that protective circle he meditated on the events in the temple.[15] With his inner eye

he could see that various nefarious things were being done and that even the innocent Hindus of his village were being deceived by the cunning priests of Kali who, according to Hafiz Mian, was not even a goddess but Shaiytan who had taken that form.

Without describing every move that Baba ji made in countering this evil that had grown right on his doorstep because of his inattention, I will come to the point when Baba ji had entered the temple and gone into the inner sanctum where he found a beautiful young girl with flowing tresses wailing at her fate. The girl told him that she belonged to a Muslim family and had been brought there by guile and was to be sacrificed that night. Baba ji was so moved by her plight that he was about to take her hand in his to assure her that he would rescue her, when suddenly Abu-Hassan zoomed in front of him and forcibly pulling his hand away he admonished Baba ji: 'What were you going to do Baba ji? Can't you see that she is a form created by Shaiytan?' The woman then revealed herself to be indeed a demoness (*rakshasi*) with a terrifying form. Baba ji immediately threw at her some black pearls he was carrying with him and recited some words and she ran away screeching.

All would have ended well and Baba ji would have destroyed all those priests of darkness but he was unprepared for an attack from a host of beings commanded by the priest – including a fierce kabila of kafir jinns. He called again on Abu-Hassan but the jinn at that moment had been summoned by his own master, the Sultan (ruler) of jinns and he could not come precisely at that moment (*hazri na laga saka*).[16] Baba ji was forced to call on Atum who was, of course, very powerful but not very poised. Seeing the enemy kabilas of the kafir jinns, he got into fierce battle and in the process managed to also kill the girl.

Baba ji tried to control Atum's fury, telling him that the important thing at that moment was to rescue him from that place and not to get into a full fledged battle since his (Baba ji's) spiritual force was getting weaker. The result of Atum's impulsive behavior was that though Baba ji got out from that temple, the soul of the girl who was killed by Atum became attached to Baba ji. That night she came to him in his dream and said 'I am Padmini – for years I was captured by the evil priests and had to do whatever evil tasks they asked me to do but I have always longed for you. I am your slave. I am still not dead for in my previous birth I committed myself to fire and was not given proper death rites – I have only one desire and that is to serve you. Please accept me as your apprentice.'

To cut a long story short, Baba ji was stuck with the soul of this woman – he began to make her manifest by lighting a fire and reciting some verses so that the smoke would take her form but always within the protective circle. Gradually he became attached to her. Meanwhile under pressure from his family he married and in the course of the next few yeas had five successive children. Hafiz Mian's father was the second, the eldest being a girl who was very pious. Babaji made Padmini promise that she would always serve his family and would never harm them. None of his family knew about this secret relationship that had grown on him.

Once when Padmini was very adamant, begging and pleading that she wanted to become a proper disciple of Baba ji, he softened and allowed her to come with

him to the forest where he was to perform some austerities for a period of 40 days (*chilla*). He drew a hisar (protective circle) and began to read vazifa. With the help of a magical fire that he lighted he made a powerful *maukil* appear to aid him. And then he conjured Padmini to appear within the circle.

I take a moment's detour to briefly explain the concept of maukil and its appearance at this stage of the narrative. A maukil is a category of angels who are deployed to do work on earth and one of their main tasks is to protect the words of the Quran. While a jinn can be commanded by an amil, the maukil cannot be so commanded and will come to the aid of an amil only if he (the amil) is in a pure state and engages in recitation of the Quran. While this much is agreed on in the various texts on amils and their practices, the amils in India, Pakistan and Iran, according to Hafiz Mian, add another category of maukil because they have experience of this entity. This is the category of maukils who are guardians of scriptures of other religions and could be of demonic inspiration but are not necessarily so.[17] Finally maukils of each category can be divided between the jamali (gentle) maukils and *jalali* (fierce) maukils – corresponding to a division of *jamali* and jalali attributes of God. Nihal Shah was forced to call upon the maukil because the jinn, Abu-Hassan, was not pleased with the fact that he was initiating Padmini into his dearly guarded secrets and Baba ji wanted to avoid confronting him on this matter. Baba ji was confident of his own spiritual correctness so that he could trust that the maukil was of *nuri ilm* (knowledge on the side of light) for if bad energies flow within you then despite your good intentions you can bring a bad muakil into your presence. Still, Baba ji would have to be on guard because neither of his trusted jinns were present – Abu-Hassan because of his distrust of the growing relation between Baba ji and Padmini; Atum, because Baba ji did not trust him to keep his cool.

One strand of the story in the adventures of Nihal Shah that I need to introduce here relates to his having been summoned by the King of Nepal (Hari Singh, according to Hafiz Mian, but since Hari Singh Dev ruled a part of Nepal during the fourteenth century, there is a mix of names and dates.) Anyhow, Baba ji had been successful in helping the king acquire a son whom he named Shamsher. I cannot go into the manner in which historical references (a Dev Shamsher Bahadur Rana did become Prime Minister of Nepal for a short period in 1901) are folded into the narrative but for the present purposes I only note that this relation to the King of Nepal appears off and on in the narrative to establish that the Hindu Kings were very knowledgeable about the powers of Nihal Shah, gave him honor, and were apparently the source of his later riches.

To return to the moment when Baba ji is in his hisar with Padmini and the maukil. When they were in the middle of the ritual performance, a calamity occurred. Urgent news came that the King of Nepal (Hari Singh) was on his death bed and had asked for Nihal Shah to be brought there immediately. Summoning Abu-Hassan, Nihal Shah sent him to Nepal to administer some medicines immediately while he followed with the help of Atum.[18] Unfortunately, the Shah of Nepal died and Nihal Shah had to stay on for the coronation of his heir, King Shamsher.

It was many months before Baba ji could return to his village. On his return he learnt the grievous news that since the hisar had been broken by his leaving in the middle of the ritual, evil spirits had gained access and that Padmini (or her conjured form) was killed magically and her corpse was ill treated – lit. *uski laash ke sath badsaluki ki gayi*. I do not know what is the nature of this ill-treatment – I have learnt not to ask certain questions both because of the delicacy of the relationships I have to maintain but also because, frankly, I am frightened to learn.

Baba ji was successful in gaining access to the soul of Padmini and he knew that unless proper *kriya-karma* – i.e., death rites according to Hindu rituals – were performed, her tortured soul would continue to wander and be used for various nefarious rites. It is important to note that dead bodies and their proper burial or cremation are a major preoccupation in the world of amils. Hindu corpses that have been cremated but not given proper post-cremation rituals and feasts are a source of danger. The amils on the side of darkness can capture their ashes, which carry all the potency of illnesses and misfortunes that the dead man or woman had suffered. Such ashes, known as *masan*, can be fatal if fed to or rubbed on someone's body. I draw attention to Hafiz Mian calling the rites *kriya-karma* and not simply disposal of the dead, showing the linguistic and ritual intimacy between Hindus and Muslims, especially among amils and tantriks.

However, as Nihal Shah was preparing to perform the rituals for Padmini's soul, she again begged him to let her stay as she did not want to leave his side. Baba ji agreed on two conditions. First, she was never to become manifest unless called upon by him or one of his descendants. Second, she would undertake to ensure that the knowledge of an amil, that he was proud to hold, would never disappear from his descendants. The reason for the second condition was that Baba ji was already apprehensive that his son (Hafiz Mian's father) was not showing any inclination to take on the work of an amil – he was much more interested in horses and in sports than in pursuing the knowledge that Nihal Shah had gathered with such difficulties. 'With the decision to believe Padmini, and to spare her soul total annihilation, my grandfather planted the seed of a poisonous plant in the lives of his descendants', said Hafiz Mian.

The flowering of the poisonous plant

Let us move to the tumultuous years of 1946 and 1947 and the upheaval that the Partition caused in these regions. Nihal Shah had died a few years earlier. The movement of the Muslim families in the villages of Sardanha began with the abduction of two girls from a poor family who had gone out to the forest for daily ablutions during a relative calm, and were captured by a group (*jatha*) of young Sikh men.[19] Hafiz Mian's aunt's young daughter, who was barely 12 years old, had gone out with them, unknown to the elders. When news came of their capture, the aunt was utterly distraught. For the first time after the death of Nihal Shah, she went into his sanctuary and started to read a vazifa that Nihal Shah had taught her to be used in case of an emergency. The aim was to summon Abu-Hassan. When the jinn came into her presence (*hazri lagai*) she started crying and said

'Abu-Hassan, what kind of friend are you? Have you not seen what misfortunes have befallen Nihal Shah's family and you have not once cared to inquire about us?' Abu-Hassan gently explained that had to obey the order of the jinns and he was not free to come into the presence of anyone and aid him if he was not an accomplished amil. Unfortunately, he said, Nihal Shah's son had abandoned the ways of his father. Abu-Hassan consoled her by giving her news about her daughter – all three girls, he said, had killed themselves to save the honor of their families. Strangely, according to him, this news instead of adding to her agitation, calmed her and she asked Abu-Hassan what she could do to save her family.[20] He urged her to abandon the village where, he said, Muslims were no longer safe. He regretted that he would not be able to visit them any longer but he hoped that these adverse circumstances would teach Nihal Shah's son that the inheritance of an amil is not to be squandered away. Then he left.

That night, under the cover of darkness, the family left their traditional haveli (mansion).They split into two teams. One team consisting of Hafiz Mian's father, two of his uncles (one father's brother and one mother's brother along with the elder aunt) as well as a few other women and children left for Pakistan hoping to catch up with other Muslims on the way there. Hafiz Mian compared this to the hijra, the Prophet's migration to Medina.

The second team consisting of Hafiz Mian, his mother (with whom he was left behind in India), another uncle and some other relatives, began a journey to a small town in Himachal that was to remain in India where some of his matrilineal relatives had a summer residence. (His mother's family was from Delhi.) 'Before I tell you what happened to me', continued Hafiz Mian, 'let me tell you about what happened when the *kafila* (caravan) of my relatives reached Lahore – for, unknown to them, Padmini had now attached herself to my father. My aunt was the only one among them who knew about the pact made by Nihal Shah with Padmini, so what happened then put my father in a complete confusion.'

While Hafiz Mian glossed over what he had heard about the travails faced by the group as they travelled through the nights toward Lahore, he mentioned that due to the rains, some women and children caught fevers and died and that the men had to fight marauding bands of Sikhs. His descriptions were vague. This vagueness stands in contrast to the specificity of events he described pertaining to the inheritance of amiliyat (the knowledge and status of amil) – figures of the occult or the *nadeeda duniya* are semiotically dressed with names and attributes of personas, place names as well as dates – a point I will elaborate in the concluding reflections.[21] In this storied past, the topography of Lahore in these turbulent years was defined not just by the overt political events of independence for India and Pakistan and the mass movement of populations across the borders but also by vast changes taking place in the occult world. The most significant aspect of this turbulence was the ominous fact that the dead had been disturbed.

Hafiz Mian's aunt subsequently returned to India after a fight with her brother (Hafiz Mian's father). Hafiz Mian told me, almost shamefacedly, that his father had promised to come and get his wife and son later but he never returned. They learnt from various relatives that his father had met and married another woman,

a muhajir (a term referring historically to those Muslims who performed the hijra with the Prophet but here referring to migrants who went from India to Pakistan). For Hafiz Mian the father is the cause of his mother's sorrows and also the one who abandoned the obligation to carry on Nihal Shah's legacy, leaving his young son to carry on this burdensome task. Let us go back to the occult events in Pakistan in its early years.

Hafiz Mian says that there were two kinds of places in Lahore at that time that were full of dangers for Muslims – one was the temples (mainly Kali temples but he mentions Bansidhar temple which used to house an image of Lord Krishna) and the second was the cremation grounds.[22] Hafiz Mian's father Gulshan and the rest of the family including his two uncles had found a house in an area inhabited by the ironsmiths near the Ravi river. It is here that his father discovered that an abandoned temple on the edge of the cremation ground by the river was inhabited by the worshipers of the dark knowledge dominated by a priest by the name of Ramdev. These worshipers consisted of both Muslim and Hindu amils and their activities were spurred by the fact that riots had left many dead without any proper cremation rituals or burial. As I noted earlier, dead bodies, the exhumed dead as well as ashes from hastily cremated bodies, are considered to be potent resources for the practices of black knowledge.

A further set of events led Hafiz Mian's father to realize that as the descendants of Nihal Shah, his family and he were in great danger from the black amils who would take revenge for the humiliations inflicted on them by Baba ji in his life-time. The black amils had managed to lure his two uncles (the ones who had accompanied his father to Lahore) to become amils of the dark knowledge – a complete betrayal of Nihal Shah's inheritance. His father would thus have to force his way into abandoned temples to bring them out, follow them to the cremation grounds (where they were meeting up with amils of all kinds and summoning the jalali (fierce) maukil who were guardians of other scriptures) to try and bring them back home. Hafiz Mian's aunt was certain that somehow Padmini was aiding and abetting these events so she told her brother (Hafiz Mian's father) about the pact that Nihal Shah had made with Padmini. 'In telling my father about this pact, my aunt dug a deep abyss in which the whole family would fall', said Hafiz Mian.

Hafiz Mian's father, never one for restraint and patience, called upon the soul of Padmini and reminded her that she had pledged that she would ensure that Nihal Shah's knowledge would be protected and transmitted to his descendants. Now, he said his brother and brother-in-law were in danger of betraying that very knowledge that was precious to Nihal Shah, and he was summoning her to help. What he did not realize, said Hafiz Mian, was that calling out to Padmini released her as a force into the world.

Once Padmini was released and the constraining hand of Nihal Shah was removed, Padmini became the full embodiment of every imaginable evil impulse. She made the children suffer by igniting magical fires so that they felt they were burning but the fire was not visible to anyone. She caused children to die, blinded one and was in general a figure of fury and revenge.

It was at this stage that Hafiz Mian's aunt returned to India and pleaded with him to take on the mantle of his grandfather. Hafiz Mian was completely untrained in the arts of the amil's practice but she recalled the close relation that Nihal Shah had maintained with the royal court of Nepal. She sent him there in search of a powerful guru who was a very old man now but who would still be able to give him some of the knowledge that Nihal Shah had shared with him. From this guru who was also the royal astrologer, Hafiz Mian learnt the basics of what it was to draw the protective circle, how to recite appropriate vazifas, what duas to read when in doubt so that Allah could send him the right message in the form of a dream. While all of this seemed to Hafiz Mian to be legitimate knowledge (*nuri ilm*) the guru told him that Nihal Shah had been able to summon the help of jinns who had saved him from the priests of darkness as was the case in his encounters in the Kali temple. But now, if Hafiz Mian had to deal with the wild and satanic forces let loose by Padmini, he would have to take a decision to trust himself completely to a companion that the guru could direct him toward but who could only be conjured by Hafiz Mian's own work.

It turns out that this 'work' was a meditation he had to perform in the cremation ground with the help of a mantra for 40 consecutive days (chilla). Hafiz Mian was not able or willing to give details of this apprenticeship but at the end of this period, he was befriended by a very ordinary looking man who told him about a secret destination to which they would have to head. Hafiz Mian described to me his apprehension that he was being led into non-Islamic practices but the fear that Padmini would devour his whole family overwhelmed him, though he also felt that he was risking his own destiny now and in the hereafter (*akhiriyat*) for a father who had abandoned them. He even feared that this companion was none other than the one-eyed liar (Masish ad-Dajjal), the false Prophet who is said to appear at the end of the world to lead the pious astray and against whom the Prophet warns in one of the hadiths.

Guru Maharaj and the scene of Darshan

I had fully expected Hafiz Mian to say that the secret destination was some cave in the Himalayas because some of the Hindu diviners or healers I have worked with always have a segment of the story in which meditation in a secret cave in the Himalayas figures in some way. I was surprised then when Hafiz Mian told me that the secret destination turned out to be Sindh in Pakistan. He and his companion had gone there without having obtained official visas, travelling through the deserts of Rajasthan. In Sindh they headed to the shrine of Hazrat Lala Shahbaz Qalandar, the well-known Sufi saint of the Suharwardi silsila. And it is from here that a miraculous journey ensued.

Hafiz Mian and his companion were given a direction and a piece of paper with some words written in red ink on it. Walking through the night they reached a deserted village with an old abandoned Kali temple. There was a thick darkness that enveloped everything. There in front of the temple they recited the words and as if by a magical key, the scene shifted and they found themselves entering a

golden gate. Inside a woman in white ushered them into the presence of a luminous person but Hafiz Mian could see that there were signs of the dark magical practices having been performed – black pearls, a vessel full of red liquid that looked like blood, skulls of animals. Hafiz Mian was repelled – but, to his surprise, his companion bowed reverentially before this figure and said, 'Guru Maharaj, we have come to your sanctuary – we do no have recourse to any other person against the terror (*atank*) of Padmini.'[23] Guru Maharaj spoke with a voice that resembled rumbling clouds and he said, 'Do not speak of any terrors. We know this is the grandson of Nihal Shah – that is why we have permitted you to come here because Nihal Shah's grandson cannot be denied.'

Guru Maharaj then invited his two visitors to take their seats in the presence of the image of Kali. Hafiz Mian said that he had always been scared of the image of Kali but that day when he learnt that all the amils of India and Pakistan, whether of the nuri ilm or the kala ilm, whether on the side of light or the side of darkness, were gathered there, he saw that the darkness of Kali was like the blueness of the clouds that signified the Prophet. He saw that her tongue that was sticking out was not that of a blood-demanding demoness but of a shy girl who has inadvertently done something wrong. He participated in some ceremonies that he does not understand but at the end of which, Guru Maharaj conjured the image of a woman he learnt was Padmini. Guru Maharaj said, 'Should the last rites be performed for you Padmini? You have suffered enough over the centuries, now leave Nihal Shah's family alone – they are not the ones who made you suffer – do not torment yourself and do not torment them.' But Padmini just laughed and said, 'I have brought the grandson of Nihal Shah into your presence – I have fulfilled my promise to him. But even you Guru Maharaj are not capable of releasing me.'

Guru Maharaj told me, go my son, and learn that you have to fight evil. This is not evil that *you* have put into the world – maybe this Padmini is a young princess over whom the powerful kings fought – Muslim kings, Rajput kings. Maybe she is just a girl whose corpse was insulted as in the satanic madness (*vahshiyat*) during the Partition – but the hurts that have been caused cannot be just taken away. If you want to pursue nuri ilm, you will have to first know what is darkness, what is the black ilm that Nihal Shah's own act in forming a pact with Padmini let loose in the world, gave her wajud (reality, being).

Hafiz Mian concluded suddenly and almost as an anti-climax, '. . . this is how I came to be an amil. But no one understands how difficult the world of the amil is – he is always scared of early death, of mistaking the evil for the good – but this is the life that was intended for me . . .' And then as I was ready to leave he said, '. . . truthfully speaking, I cannot vouch that all this happened – these were stories I heard from my aunt – were they true? Was Padmini the legendary princess of Padmavat?[24] Can we ever be free from the imagination of the past (*mazi ka tassavur*)? That is why I said to you, maybe that revolutionary terrorist hiding in the train that you are trying to protect in your dream, maybe he has wajud – find out what kind of wajud, just as I try to find out what stories am I destined to hear here as an amil? This anthropology that you do, maybe, it is like amiliyat . . .'

Finding a footing in the world: concluding reflections

In my concluding reflections on this story I want to accomplish two related tasks. First, I want to ask how such a story as that related by Hafiz Mian might find a footing in the world. Second, I want to offer a comparison with lives of Muslim subjects we have come to know from other ethnographies from South Asia. Starting from the moment when I told Hafiz Mian my dream and his scattered observations on figures from a not yet understood past, I have begun to see the genre of ethnography as narrating lives that must in some aspects elude us. Amiliyat as a therapy takes help from figures that are brought into being through utterances and narrations – but all within the protective circles we draw around ourselves. Some words from Stanley Cavell's (2010) autobiographical reflections might be taken to express the thought, thus:

> I think here of my various revaluations of Wittgenstein's opening of his *Philosophical Investigations* by his citing Augustine's quasi-memory and description of his learning language, a passage that seems to express a time when memory and dream and hallucination are not as yet as dissociated as they will become, and we are as if bearers of invisibility, witnesses of lives we do not understand, or care for, stealing words also with unknown lives of their own. If there is such a task as remembering the present, the task is philosophy's – as if we chronically forget to live.
>
> (p. 41)

The concept of 'footing' was used by Erving Goffman (1981) within sociology to suggest the alignment that an interactant establishes with his or her utterance within a communicative space. Thus, for instance, a speaker taking an utterance for a vouched-for fact takes up a different footing than the speaker who utters the same proposition as a hypothetical one, or one who speaks with irony (Hank 1996). Goffman used this notion to vastly complicate the picture of hearer and speaker as singular transparent entities within a dialogical situation. For the hearer, for instance, he argued that we could distinguish at least three positions – that of the one who 'overhears', the ratified hearer who is not specifically addressed and the ratified hearer who is specifically addressed. However, useful as Goffman's corrective is to assuming that in face-to-face communications we can unambiguously know who the speaker and hearer are, it does not make space for the fact that there are broader and more local ideologies of discourse which lead us to differentially weigh the importance of phonation, gesture, proximity, tone and other bodily emanations of language. In his analysis of shamanic performance, for instance, Hank (1996) argues that a shaman's prayer is the sedimentation of a language acquired over a lifetime. The shaman learns and reworks the words to embody his own experience, weaving this with formulaic parts and citations for establishing authority of canonical texts or utterances. Even the question of whether the weight of ritual speech is to be carried by a phoneme, a word, a sentence or some other unit of language is not settled by abstract universal criteria but by the

demands of the ritual (see Das 2008). There is the further issue of how one might come to perform one's attachment or distance from one's enunciation not as a matter of individual style but within economies of knowledge and performance as shown by Latour (2010) in the context of science and law.[25] Thus, a question we would ask of Hafiz Mian's speech is: how attached is he to his enunciation? Unlike the prayer of the shaman which Hank characterizes as a delicately structured instrument for the creation of a participation form (in Goffman's sense), in which various classes of spirits are made present in a controlled sequence, Hafiz Mian learns only through dispersed interactions with beings intimate (his aunt) and distant (Guru Maharaj) how, or in which kind of modality he must assume responsibility for spirits that were let loose by the careless speech of his grandfather, aunt and father. Even as he assumes responsibility for enacting the rituals he must inherit, he cannot be sure if his participation in this form of knowledge is to be classified as licit or illicit. Find out, he tells me, what kind of wajud do figures in your dream have; showing, that for speech to find a footing in the world, the world must come to have a say in it.[26] Despite the most concerted efforts we might make, we might fail – he as an amil and I as an ethnographer – since the harms that were put in the world as in the figure of Padmini or the British soldiers and the disguised revolutionary of my dream, need to be confronted as real, but we find ourselves lost as we try to bring our language to bear on these but cannot trust the guidance we receive. The movement between the 'facts' indicated through various markers of time, space and names (King of Nepal, Hari Shah; Sardanha Estate, Partition, the Kali temple on the banks of the river Ravi, the Lohar katra in Lahore) and the dream-like language of memory intersect to show the unruly and troubled relation that language bears to the world. What does this mode of enunciation tell us about the appearance of Hindu figures such as Guru Maharaj in the text of this Muslim amil?

If I were to be content with a purely semiotic analysis of the text generated by Hafiz Mian my analysis would stop after showing the figurative trajectory of jinn, maukil, hamzad[27] and such figures as a correlative of the theme of divination and magical healing. The figure of the guru would appear here purely as having a functional 'value'. That is to say that as in Propp's analysis of folk tales the function of helper, for instance, could be played by human or animal figures so that terms values and functional values were seen as exchangeable (see Propp 1968). In that case the guru could be exchangeable with the pir on the grounds of personal devotion of their disciples; the maukil with Hanuman since both act as messengers. But we have seen how troubled Hafiz Mian was as to whether the figures of Guru Maharaj or the companion that was conjured by his performance of the mantra given to him by the guru in Nepal were the figures sent by Shaiytan and whether he was risking his akhirat, his hereafter, in dallying with these personages. I suggest that analogies with fairytales or myths break here as one encounters the question of the affects that surround particular figures and the question becomes how is one to be a *Muslim* amil in a world so saturated by the whisperings and the machinations of Shaiytan?

In his work on the biography of a Muslim man living in Delhi who converted to the Ahl-e-hadis sect, Deepak Mehta (2011) argues that far from Barbara Metcalf's

(2004) understanding of life stories as stable elaborations of valued cultural patterns firmly rooted in established interpretive communities, the struggle over what it is to be a Muslim reveals ongoing tensions between religion and politics, global and local events, Ahl-e-hadis and other Muslims as well as between Muslims and Hindus. In Mehta's account these struggles run not only between different communities but also *within* the community and even within a single family. Other ethnographies, however, seem to suggest a far more comfortable relation between the self and forms of Islam (characterized as vernacular) practiced by Muslim subjects.

As an example of the latter, let us take Joyce Flueckiger's (2006) loving portrayal of a female Muslim healer in the city of Hyderabad. Acutely aware of the criticisms that what Amma (the healer) practices is not proper Islam in part because of the way various Islamic mystical ideas seem to sit seamlessly with Hindu mythical figures, Flueckiger argues that in Amma's own perceptions her practices do not flout the injunctions of Islam in any manner. In her words:

> I want to make room for the possibility that one basis for shared identity might also be *religious* (emphasis in the original), at the same time acknowledging the contemporary use and meanings of the terms Hindu and Muslim that mark important distinctions outside the healing room. At the healing table itself, narratives, rituals, and cosmology include what are often identified as Hindu and Muslim traditions and motifs but Amma emphasizes what is shared across traditions and does not consider particular narratives or rituals that she performs to be either Muslim or Hindu. However, these fluid boundaries of identity are specific to the context of these (and other ćauraste) sites; as axes of identity move out of the healing room, identities might solidify.
>
> (p. 171)

The term ćauraste refers to crossroads which in the Indian context implies, not the place at which a choice has to be made as to which road to take, but rather a confluence of various kinds of people and possibilities. Thus Flueckiger makes the delicate point that there are specific sites (healing rooms, dargahs), which are considered to be natural sites of interaction and confluence between Muslims and Hindus. Her ethnography reveals that in this milieu, terms are easily translated across Hinduism and Islam – the pir is referred to as guru, Hanuman as messenger reveals affinities with maukils, Vishnu and Ram are considered to have been earlier prophets before the coming of Mohammad. In an earlier paper, I too have described such translations and the work they perform in the life of another Muslim respondent from another low-income locality (see Das 2010). However, my point was that sometimes such translations simply point to words at hand – they do not entail any commitment to the enunciation on the part of the speaker but only to the task of getting ahead and maintaining civility with one another. In Hafiz Mian's life, terms such as guru or references to the goddess Kali are not made lightly – they carry lethal possibilities of corruption, danger and of risking one's hereafter.

How is one to account for these kinds of differences? In the case of my own ethnography there are significant differences between neighborhoods and even within families. Neighborhoods in which returning immigrants from the Middle East are gaining influence in local affairs are marked by discussions that center around what is a purer Islam. Similarly in places where local politics of mosques are heavily influenced by sectarian divisions, the earlier practices of attending dargahs or breaking the coconut on an auspicious occasion begin to be put into question. A new field of contestation is opened out. As Mehta (2011) astutely observes, the term Muslim might be regarded as a floating signifier – its meaning and content are not given in advance.

Yet the proximity of the Hindu in the life of the Muslim (and vice versa) is a significant feature of ethical discussions and for framing the self for Muslim subjects as I have argued elsewhere (Das 2010). As I understand it, one task of ethnography is to track how even intimate projects of self formation are embedded within larger political events (Das 2007) but it is also the case that very specific local ecologies are implicated in the way in which terms such as jinn, maukil or guru receive life. When Cavell refers to Augustine '*stealing words also with unknown lives of their own*', I can only be glad that anthropology and amiliyat found points of connection to bring forward a different meaning to the imagined life of a guru than would have been found in Hindu sources alone.

In recent years we have learnt much about the new forms that institutional guru complex (i.e. relations between gurus, disciples, and the institutions centered around them) has taken. Some scholars have analyzed the emergence of new types of gurus in relation to urban anxieties and/or nationalist projects (Babb 1986, Sarkar 1992, Srinivas 2008); others have shown how gurus come to participate in forms of governmentality (Copeman 2009; see also Introduction in this volume), and yet others have documented their roles in national or regional mobilization (McKean 1996; Jaffrelot 1996). The place of the guru in global mediascapes shows the role of religious-technical media in the defining of religious publics. However, there is a real dearth of studies on how the gurus define themselves and their internal struggles in becoming new kinds of subjects. Hafiz Mian and his relation to Guru Maharaj show the tremendous burdens of inhabiting forms of knowledge that come with amiliyat. The relation with other religions is not a matter of making choices as in a religious market place but rather of being drawn even against one's explicitly articulated wishes into questions of good and evil that belong to the world one is born into and for which one is compelled to take responsibility.

In recent years the anthropology of religion has become much more attuned to the fact that religious traditions do not exist in isolation from each other – rather, religious pluralism is the normal condition in which religious subjectivities are formed. In his recent work on dilemmas of devotion and agency in the context of conversion to a religious sect within Hinduism, Amit Desai (2010) paraphrases the dilemmas that devotees face in this elegant way – 'How are we to live in society with people who are not members of our panth?' While in the case of those mono-theistic religions that require devotees to exercise agency in refusing the lures of

other religions, the most typical scene as Webb Keane (2007) describes it, is of recent converts demonstrating their allegiance to their chosen religion by self-consciously distancing themselves from the past and making themselves anew. Yet this emphasis on individual agency and freedom to choose, as also to be able to offer explicit justifications for one's choice, is more a feature of the transformation of Christianity under conditions of *modernity* as Keane emphasizes. After all, forcible conversions or collective conversions were equally a part of the history of Islam and Christianity. Yet, what is the weight of the past that bears on one in the form of ancestral spirits who demand allegiance (in Keane's formulation) or in the way in which unbidden thoughts and dreams come to one as Khan (2011) puts it? A more complex view of human subjectivity is at play here in which agency and patiency, making one's fate and accepting one's fated presence in the world, autonomy and dependence are seen as two interwoven aspects of human existence. Authentic self-expression might well entail, as Guru Maharaj says, some responsibility toward the fact that there is evil in the world even if one has oneself led a pious life. As Hafiz Mian says, he is fated to hear stories of suffering and to traffic with the very beings he is trying to renounce or turn away from.

It is part of anthropological commonsense that the figures of the guru and the amil are full of ambiguity – they embody spirituality but are also figures of transgression (Das 2008). Transgression, however, is more than the breaking of boundaries. It is also a scene of excess since it must join contraries in itself. The most telling moment for me was one in which Hafiz Mian's fears of the figure of Kali were transfigured – where he earlier saw her posture as evil and terrifying, he now sees a shy girl sticking out a tongue in an inadvertent gesture of having made an error. Yet he must also remain in doubt about his hereafter, his akhiriyat – a burden that he must bear as the burden that amiliyat imposes upon him – he compares it to what I do in anthropology.

Notes

1 I thank Deepak Mehta, Roma Chatterji, Sylvain Perdigon, Bhrigupati Singh, Naveeda Khan, and Urmila Nair for discussions on matters taken up in this paper. I am grateful to the editors, Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, for their thoughtful comments. The person named as Hafiz Mian is special, as the reader will see – my gratitude to him and other friends living in the neighborhoods of Delhi who have shared their lives and thoughts. I am grateful to all members of ISERDD for their research support. Except for the names of the *jinns* and other occult beings, all other names are pseudonyms.

2 There are many popular books and pamphlets in Urdu on meaning of dreams that circulate in Muslim localities. Scholars too have been fascinated by the textual tradition of dream interpretation in Islam (see Al-Baghdadi 2006; Blad 1856; Gouda 2006). Amira Mittermaier (2011) has provided an important analysis of the actual practices of dream interpretation on three different sites in Cairo, Egypt, that takes up the question of imagination in everyday life. None of these texts, though, ask questions about what it means to confront symbols of other traditions in one's dreams.

3 I note here that according to some other amils, there are specialized angels and jinns who are responsible for sending good dreams and bad ones.

4 Naveeda Khan (2011) considers such dreams as manifestation of the concerns, anxieties and weaknesses within the individual, expression of the *nafs* or earthly spirit of the

individual. These dreams, she says, are not the sites of psychic battles internal to the individual but of a self, revealing its weaknesses to itself. Hafiz Mian was dismissive of such dreams as of no importance whatsoever. They were caused, he said, by gas or pain or numbness caused by sleeping in a wrong posture – you just need to turn over and the dream will disappear, as he said. For Hafiz Mian true dreams were those that carried some intimation of the future – '*bisharaton ke siva, nabuyat ki koi chhez baki nahin* – except for the potential for intimating the future (in dreams) there is nothing left of prophecy in this world.'

5 My use of the terms revolutionary and terrorist captures the sense of how the person is characterized in the dream – it is not a deliberative statement.

6 Audrey Cantlie has been closely associated with THERIP, The Higher Education Network for Research and Information in Psychoanalysis.

7 The hidden or latent does not refer to the latent content of the dream as in Freud(1913) but to latent aspects of reality. In other words, telling the dream to the wrong kind of person could make what was only a potential come into being in the world. Such dangers did not attach to the good dream but a dreamer cannot decipher what is a good or bad dream without the help of an expert.

8 On the emergence and popularity of the goddess Santoshi Ma, see Das (1980), Lutgendorf (2002a and 2002 b)

9 I might mention here that in the Vedic texts, gods do not speak to humans directly. Although the manner in which gods and goddesses speak to humans undergoes considerable transformation in later Hinduism, fragments such as the one I describe in this case seem like traces of that past. I thank Charles Malamoud for pointing this out to me. This aspect of the speech of gods is described with great finesse in a conversation between Malamoud and Marcel Detienne (see Detienne 1995).

10 Mittermaier tells the story from Ibn Sarin, the famed Arab writer on dream interpretation, in which he gave two different interpretations of the same dream because he 'read' the faces of the two different men who told him about that dream differently. Mittermaier concludes that, 'According to this story, it is essential for interpreter and dreamer to meet face-to-face.' (Mittermaier 2011, 62).

11 Compare Maurice Blanchot's (1982) formulation that the dream is the premonition of the other, it is not becoming another. See also Farbman (2005).

12 I have no way of confirming whether the particular ancestry sketched by Hafiz Mian is indeed correct. I found often that dates and names got mixed in his narratives so that names of historical personages and the dates do not always match the historical record. As for Sardanha estate it has a colorful history, which I cannot fully recount here. However, here is the description given in the *Golden Book of India* by Sir Robert Lethbridge (1900) that gives an alphabetical list of all titles bestowed by the British. Referring to the title of Nawab bestowed on Ahmad Shah Sayyid who succeeded to the estate in 1882, the description says:

'The family are Muswi or Mashadi Sayyids, descended from Hayat Ali Musa Raza and originally residing at Paghman near Kabul. On account of services rendered to Alexander Barnes in his Kabul Mission, and subsequently to the English in their retreat from Kabul, they were expelled from Kabul and settled at Sardanha. When the mutiny occurred at Meerut, the head of the family, Sayyid Muhammad Jan Fishan, Khan Sahib raised a body of horses, consisting of his followers and descendants; accompanied General Wilson's force to the Hindan; was present in both actions and thence to Delhi where he remained with the headquarters camp till the city was taken when his men were employed to keep order in Delhi. For these eminent services the title of Nawab with a suitable *khilat* was conferred on him.'

Although Hafiz Mian did not know anything about the earlier history of this estate, Sardanha had been awarded as a jagir in 1777 to a German mercenary by the Mughal Emperor along with a title. The mercenary, Walter Reinhardt, variously identified as a carpenter, a butcher, or a gypsy had arrived in a ship of the French navy that he

abandoned and then offered his services to various princely kingdoms as well as to the Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam. He either had a mistress or was married to one Begum Sumroo, widely reported to be a dancing girl who, at his death, succeeded him as the ruler of Sardanha. The story of her conversion to the Roman Catholic faith as well as the contentious case around her heir, Doyce Sombre, from whom the East India Company confiscated the estate on grounds of his 'lunacy' is detailed in Fisher (2010) and Taneja (2008). The Imperial Gazeteer of 1931 also mentions confiscation of estates that were later granted to Sayyid Muhammad Jan Fishan. I give this lengthy description to make the point that different neighborhoods in Delhi contain very different kinds of stories – amils or other kinds of healers and diviners in other neighborhoods have different kinds of pasts that bear on their relation to their practice in significantly different ways. To give one example, Anand Taneja finds that jinn stories in abandoned ruins in Delhi are hooked into the life of the city and its past in a different way than the stories of jinns that will emerge in Hafiz Mian's story, though events criss-cross each other in these dispersed spaces (see Taneja 2006).

13 The amils I know distinguish between those who make the ritual taviz or falita – sacred words or numerals inscribed on paper or metal and worn as protection or in the latter case soaked in water that is then imbibed; and those who help dealing with afflictions caused by occult beings – *bhut, pret, jinn vagerah ki harkaton se nijat dilana*.

14 Vazifa is a practice of recitation of a prayer (dua) or of the name of God. According to the more strict interpretations of Islam, it can become *bidah* or incorrect innovation if not performed according to the strict rules of Islam but I did not sense any such anxiety on the part of Hafiz Mian.

15 It was impressed upon me again and again that an amil never performs any ritual or recites the vazifa without drawing this protective circle around himself, for his work attracts dangerous occult beings often sent by Shaiytan.

16 Hazri or *peshi* is sometimes used to refer to trance as it indicates the presence of a spirit. However, in this narrative hazri refers to the jinn presenting himself much in the way office workers indicate their presence by signing an attendance register.

17 The sub-classifications among these two types of maukils are subtle – for now, I only note that the maukils who guard other scriptures are not by definition evil but can be made the vehicles of demonic communications while Shaiytan cannot influence the maukils that guard the words of the Quran since the words of the Quran are the major shields against Shaiytan.

18 Here I should note that even though he was an amil, Baba ji was not able to overcome the constraints of time and space while as jinns, Abu-Hassan and Atum could move from one place to another in the blink of an eye.

19 The term jatha implies an organized and often mobile band of young men on the move usually in warfare or in guerrilla type resistance. The implication here is of organized violence by the Sikhs against the Muslims during the Partition.

20 The strangeness that I register here was pointed out to me by Hafiz Mian – it does not reflect any astonishment on my part since this was the standard narrative of heroic sacrifice by girls and women that I had heard many times in the course of my earlier work (Das 2007).

21 For the moment let me just flag the fact that anthroponyms, toponyms and chrononyms are more in evidence for the occult beings than the people in Hafiz Mian's life – thus, for instance, his mother throughout remains ammi and aunt remains phuphi while subjects of collective travails are referred to as 'women and children of the house'. Men are given proper names more often than women in his narrative but the greatest elaboration of personal traits is reserved for the occult beings. This dressing of semiotic figures exhaustively by names, dates and spatial locations might be compared to the iconization of figures geared toward creating a referential illusion or a facticity.

22 I have been unable to find references to this temple in the literature on Lahore. However, a survey of temples and cremation grounds in Lahore in 2005 found a temple on the

banks of the Ravi near an earlier cremation ground that is called the Krishna temple and is supposed to be maintained by the Pakistan Balmiki Sabha. The survey, however, notes that the secretary of the Balmiki Sabha contended that this temple was a Kali temple at the time of the Partition and that followers of Ram and Krishna do not want to offer worship there. In the story that follows, I think the reference to a temple near the cremation ground might refer to this Kali temple.

23 It is again part of the semiotic dressing of these occult beings that the companion spoke in a sanskritized Hindi whereas Nihal Shah, the jinns and even Padmini spoke more in Urdu.

24 Hafiz Mian is referring to a legend depicted in Jayasi's poem, Padmavat (1540) of the historic siege of Chittor by Aluddin Khilji, the Delhi emperor in 1303 in order to seize Padmini, the legendary beauty and the queen of Chittor, for himself. According to the story when Aladudin Khilji captures her husband by stealth she, along with other queens and women of the palace, consign themselves to the fire. Alaudin enters Padmini's palace triumphantly but is only able to find her ashes. Although the medieval language of Hindawi in which Jayasi wrote is not widely understood, the story circulates through school text books as well as in popular literature. Hafiz Mian is not familiar with the poet but knows the legend. The historical accuracy of this legend is much debated.

25 For purposes of my analysis the distinction between utterance and enunciation is not very useful. Some scholars reserve the term enunciation to mean the domain of mediation between the virtual structures of language and their actualization.

26 I think here of the distinction between error and superstition in Wittgenstein according to which in the latter case, even if I have not made an error I may turn out to be wrong because the world comes to have a say in guiding my utterance toward a reference that was not in my horizon of thought. The best discussion of this distinction is to be found in Travis (2006).

27 I have not been able to give much attention to the figure of hamzad which is seen as a kind of shadow of the self or a doubling of the self that tries to put obstacles in the path of the good. Hamzad appears to be the equivalent of al-Qarin mentioned in the Quran. Sylvain Perdigon (2011) points to the ambiguous meanings attached to the word. It may, he says, refer simply to a human companion but other more ominous meanings are evident in, for instance, Surat-al-Sukhruf that says 'But as for anyone who chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Most Gracious, to him We assign a shaytan to be his Qarin (XLIII,36, as cited in Perdigon (2011). I do not have extensive stories on the hamzad but Perdigon gives us a sense of the darkness of this relation in his subtle analysis of al-Qarin that he encountered in the accounts of Palestenian women in Lebanon who faced difficult pregnancies and birth. Hafiz Mian did refer to the notion that hamzad (the non-human companion of the self) is in constant struggle with ruh, the spiritual aspects of the self, but did not elaborate through examples and stories leading me to conclude that he did not encounter many of these struggles in his healing practice,

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8 The mimetic guru

Tracing the real in Sikh–Dera Sacha Sauda relations[1]

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This chapter explores a controversy consequent on an alleged act of imitation by one guru of another guru, which occurred in 2007. The guru presiding over the Haryana-based devotional order the Dera Sacha Sauda (henceforth the DSS) stood accused of publicly copying, in the manner of his dress but also ritually, Guru Gobind Singh – the final living Sikh guru according to orthodox Sikhs. Photographs depicting the imitation – initially published in local newspapers but soon in massive circulation via electronic media – provoked sustained civil unrest in areas of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi from May–June 2007, with the loss of several lives. In 2008 there was even an attempt to assassinate the DSS guru.

Reportage focused on the DSS guru's imitative dress – his turban (*dumala*), decorative plume (*kalgi*), dress (*chola*) and waist-belt (*kamar-kassa*) were all reminiscent of Guru Gobind Singh as he is represented in popular religious (or 'calendar') art. But the alleged copying went beyond the merely sartorial. The guru is seen distributing a pink liquid substance (said to be a mixture of water, milk and Rooh Afza sharbat[2]) to devotees in an action strikingly similar to the distribution of *amrit* (baptismal nectar) at the Sikh baptism ceremony, though the substance is tellingly renamed '*Jaam-e-Insaan*' ('Wine of Humanity') in the DSS appropriation. Moreover, just as, at their baptism, Sikhs take the name 'Singh' or 'Kaur', thereby obliterating (at least in theory) their caste identity, text accompanying the images as they were first published declared that baptised devotees of the Dera Sacha Sauda were now to shun their family names, taking instead the name '*Insaan*' – 'Human'.

Incitement to discourse

The case helps to illuminate several significant emerging features of the public representation of 'religion' in India. First, Sikh protests against the imitation and the DSS defence point to contestation about rights of representation – about who can represent the likeness of a particular guru and in what way. As I argue below, one way of framing the events is as an infringement of ritual-intellectual property, an act of plagiarism. Second, much of my material derives from online debates about the episode. Since these debates served to advance the offence and fury of

which they themselves were representative, I am concerned with online representations of 'the religious' that participated in the events they described. The online discussion forums I explore move fluidly between visceral abuse and sophisticated theological debate: meanings and definitions of Sikhism are debated; DSS devotees provide detailed, robust defences. For all the tremendous unreliability justly associated with Internet sources, the web has developed into an important arena of debate, reflection and critical engagement in respect of devotional religion and the nature of guru-ship.

Of course, such nuanced reflections often appear among much abuse and invective. For instance, a video is available on YouTube of a Sikh youth viewing television images of the baptism ceremony; the youth is ultimately moved to throw his *chapal*s (sandals) at the TV screen depicting the DSS guru.[3] Hundreds of comments, the majority abusive, are posted below such videos. For instance: 'Fuckin psycho sala Haryane da gand (brother-in-law,[4] asshole of Haryana)! Na Raheem na Raam da . . . Eh baba hai Haraam da (He belongs neither to Raheem or Ram. He is a bastard)'.[5] Nevertheless, amid the sloganeering and diatribes, many sophisticated arguments are posited and debated. While official institutions continue, of course, to speak on behalf of adherents, the Internet facilitates, in some online settings at least, a level of disintermediation, affording users a new level of participation in theological debate and dispute. As well as being a key source for this chapter, the mediatization of these events thus forms a critical component of the story itself: images of the DSS imitation were soon multiply dispersed by way of television and the Internet, both fuelling the Sikh protests that were already underway and creating an intense awareness of the events throughout the Sikh diaspora (see Baixas and Simon 2008; see also Frøystad, this volume on gurus and media).

Axel (2001, 2008) has underlined the importance of images of the mutilated corpses of Sikhs martyred in the cause of Khalistan which circulate on the Internet. Displayed prominently on many Sikh websites, Axel (2008: 1156) suggests that the significance of the tortured Sikh body must be gauged in reference to the perfect *amritdhari* body, masculinized and adorned with beard and turban: the visual images of mutilated martyrs 'signify the antithesis of the *amritdhari*'s pure and unscathed body – and in that signification they reemphasise the meaning of the *amritdhari* man's historic valorisation'. The circulation of pictures of the DSS guru, also by way of the Internet, was in some ways analogous. The violence of the image is, of course, of a different order in each case (actual physical violence in the first case, violence of representation in the second), but the circulation of the imitative image, for a time at least, was characterised by a dramatic intensity and relentlessness of reproduction that bear comparison with the images of mutilation discussed by Axel.

I have already mentioned the YouTube clip in which a Sikh youth is shown hurling his *chapal*s at the image of the DSS guru. Similarly, the website www.jhoothasauda.com (a corruption of Sacha Sauda, the world lie, or false – *jhoota* – replacing *sacha*, 'true') contains image after image of the DSS guru 'as' Guru Gobind Singh. Moreover, this image, too, presents a kind of tortured

body, for what is presented, from an orthodox Sikh standpoint, is precisely a disfigured depiction of Guru Gobind Singh. In popular portraits in Sikh households and calendar art, it is Guru Gobind Singh who figures most prominently. As McLeod (1992: 34) states: 'the kingly Guru Gobind Singh . . . frequently appears in resplendent attire. Decked with jewels, richly embroidered, and armed with an ostentatious sword, he answers an insistent demand for conspicuous display'. It is the bodily image of Guru Gobind Singh, then, which is both most highly prized and displayed, and it is this very image that the DSS guru is considered to deform by way of his copy. Indeed, I discuss in more detail below the troubling distortion effects that many mainstream Sikhs considered to be engendered by the copy. Axel (2008: 1151) notes further that what is perhaps most at stake in reference to the circulation of mutilation images is the 'incitement to discourse' they prompt. This chapter, as well, is concerned with a kind of deformed image that circulated as a critical incitement to discourse. This discourse took many forms but centred, most importantly, on claims and counter-claims to the devotional real.

Politics of the real cause

Given the recentness of these events, the academic literature concerning them is not substantial. Neither has a literature developed on the DSS as it has done for, say, the Radhasoami movement.[6] Though scattered mentions of a rise in Punjab's 'Dera culture' were to be found in publications such as *Economic and Political Weekly* since the early 2000s, at the time I began writing about the DSS's large-scale public service projects in 2005 (see Copeman 2008; 2009a) I could find no mention of this movement in the literature. Subsequent to the dramatic events of 2007, however, this has changed. The emergent literature on the DSS and 'dera-ism' (e.g. Ram 2007; Baixas 2007; Baixas and Simon 2008; Jodhka 2008; Lal 2009) has helpfully situated the events of 2007 in the context of the caste and electoral politics of the region. Noting that *dera*s – that is monasteries or the extended residential sites of religious leaders; frequently just glossed as sect – attract a large number of Dalit and other marginalised communities, they see the rise to prominence of a host of *dera*s in Punjab in recent years as consequent on persistent discrimination by Jat Sikhs. Hence the view that Sikh outrage against the blasphemous DSS copy was merely a cover for what was, in essence, a caste-based attack on the DSS. I quote from one of the articles: 'this controversy is but an epiphenomena [sic] of a larger dynamic of caste-based identity politics and Dalit assertion which if not dealt with quickly and promptly could certainly lead to civil strife in Punjab' (Baixas 2007: 4065). Critical also was the DSS endorsement of the Congress in the 2007 Punjab Assembly elections which resulted in the loss of a considerable number of seats by the Akali Dal. The DSS crisis, in this interpretation, was manufactured by Akali political leaders in order to 'teach a lesson' to the DSS: 'Once the Akalis came to form a government of their own in Punjab in 2007, they lost little time in taking umbrage at the public posturing of the Sirsa-based *dera* and asserted, in the name of all Sikhs, that the Dera Sacha Sauda chief had hurt their religious sentiments' (Lal 2009: 231).

Such details are no doubt vital for understanding the events of 2007, and I find persuasive the argument put forward in most of these articles that the Akali Dal viewed the imitation as a convenient occasion for it to deter the DSS from future dalliances with the Congress. However, neither are the events of May 2007 reducible to such arguments. For instance, how would such an approach account for the *readiness* of 'ordinary' Sikhs to be mobilised in protest? To view the case *only* as an epiphenomenon of caste and electoral politics, or as another instance of what Jaffrelot (2008) has recently called 'the art of being outraged', runs the risk of leaving unexamined the complex responses of mainstream as well as *khalsa* Sikhs to the pictures of the DSS guru, and also the motivations of the DSS in producing and circulating the images in the first place.

In focusing on such questions in this chapter I certainly do not mean to replace a 'political' with a 'religious' approach – the distinction is in any case hardly a helpful one – but rather to expand the definition of politics in viewing these events as an unfolding of an emergent politics of the devotional real in north India. Of course, statements to the effect that 'hurt religious sentiments are just a garb under which vested interests are trying to forward their case' are themselves representative of a familiar politics of the real whereby 'true' causes are always to be located in a political economy of self-interest.

I thus seek to engage the questions outlined above with reference to these online debates, as well as newspaper reports and theories of mimesis. Fieldwork I conducted among DSS devotees in Sirsa, Haryana in 2004 – though conducted well before the controversy occurred – also informs the analysis

No more gurus

Before turning to these debates it is necessary to provide a few contextual details. First, Sikhism is a 'holy-man tradition' that eschews holy-men – at least, it has eschewed them since Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final living Sikh guru, declared an end to the line of gurus in 1708. The spiritual energies of the guru were henceforth to be considered as embodied in the *Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book, which is made up largely of verses composed by gurus in the Sikh lineage (Gold 1987: 21). And herein lies a telling ambiguity: for 'if Sikh tradition today appears as a heritage with no active focus in a holy man, it keeps alive at least the *ideas* of guru and lineage' (ibid.) With new *dehdari* (bodily, or living) gurus expressly forbidden, this is nevertheless a religion wholly embedded in guru-ship. From the beginning, much fraught activity and contestation has centred on distinguishing the person of the true guru: the real as opposed to the fake or impostor. For instance, when the founder Guru Nanak overlooked his son Sri Chand in selecting his successor, his affronted son set up his own (according to orthodox accounts) 'un-Sikh sect', and when the eighth Guru Hari Krishan Ji declared that his successor would be found in the village of Bakalay, a host of dubious aspirants congregated in the area. Moreover, though Gobind Singh called an end to the institution of the *dehdari* guru, this didn't stop many from believing that the line of gurus continued after the tenth (Singh 1952: 52). Ironies abound: though the

Sikh reformist leader Dyal Das (1783–1855) sought in the early nineteenth-century to, among other things, put an end to a resurgence of *dehdari* guru worship, his followers elevated him to the status of a guru – 'precisely what Dyal Das had been declaiming against' (ibid: 127).[7] The *dehdari* guru, indeed, is an insurgent category, and the issue persists today: Sikh tracts and Internet sites complain about '*dhongi* [fake] *baba*s', '*pakhandi* [fake] *sant*s' 'guru pretenders', 'spurious gurus', 'impostor saints' and 'pseudo-*sant*s'. Proscribed in 1708, the figure of the living guru just won't stay banished.

The injunction 'No more gurus' is thus experienced as being perpetually under threat – not least because there are a host of devotional orders, predominantly in the *sant* tradition, whose turbaned spiritual masters appear 'as if' Sikhs and, indeed, frequently hail from Sikh backgrounds. Prior to the DSS controversy, the most notorious case of 'impostor' guru-ship in recent times concerned the Sant Nirankari Mandal in the late 1970s (though see also Meeta and Rajivlochan 2007 on Baba Bhaniara's alleged crafting of a new 'Granth'). Any devotional movement with links to Sikhism and a *dehdari*, i.e. living, guru is problematic from an orthodox Sikh perspective. However, as the example of the Radhasoamis indicates, judicious avoidance of direct associative claims can forestall serious tensions (Juergensmeyer 1991: 86). In the Nirankari case, however, the issue of what I earlier called copying that distorts was added to the already sensitive issue of its *dehdari* guru-ship – the movement was accused of illegitimate deployment of Sikh vocabulary and symbols. An article published in the *Sikh Review* (1994: 26) elucidates the objections:

> [The Nirankaris] never cease from attempting to disfigure and distort many of [Sikhism's] cherished ideals and institutions. Imitation breeds obliquity. The word Nirankari itself is borrowed from the Sikh chroniclers . . . In imitation of Guru Gobind Singh's Panj Piare (the Five Beloved of Sikh history), [former Nirankari guru Gurbachan Singh] has created his Sat Sitare (Seven Stars) . . . Their religious book, a collection of Punjabi verse, incipient and elementary in character, by Avtar Singh, with little literary grace and spiritual content, is designated Avtar Bani in the manner of gurbani, i.e. the Sikh Gurus' utterance. In Nirankari congregations gurbani is frequently and copiously quoted, but with a deliberate slant. The purpose invariably is disapprobation of the Sikh way of life. Sikh scriptures are quoted and expounded openly to suit the Nirankari bias.

I would add that 'Sacha Sauda' (usually translated as 'true deal'), too, like 'Nirankari', is 'borrowed from the Sikh chroniclers' – specifically an episode in the life of the first Sikh guru, Nanak (see Baixas and Simon 2008).[8] In 1978 Sikh activists, some of whom were from the *jatha* (religious order) of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, protested at a Nirankari gathering in Amritsar.[9] At least 13 of the protestors were killed, allegedly by Nirankari bullets – an episode frequently considered by Sikh studies scholars as foundational in the creation of 'Sikh terrorism' (Meeta and Rajivlochan 2007: 1909). Two years later, in 1980, the Nirankari guru Gurbachan Singh was assassinated in retaliation.

The intimacies and distances that characterise the relationship between Hinduism and Sikhism are also significant in seeking to account for Sikh sensitivity about the use of its imagery and teaching. An assumed 'affinity' between the religions is precisely what spurred Sikh reformists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to insist on ever more elaborate differentiation by means of symbolism and attire. The 'sociological' significance of and emphasis upon external forms in Sikhism – dress, ritual, architecture, and so on – is usually seen to be reflective of an anxiety about reversion – the possibility of a collapsing back into the Hindu fold (Singh 1952: 63). The Singh Sabha reformist organisation had its origins in just such a movement to purify a brand of Sikhism – sometimes called 'Sanatan Sikhism' (Oberoi 1994) – that embraced living gurus, icons and Hindu-style pilgrimages. The critical function of external forms within the Sikh 'identificatory habitus' (Michaels 2004) might thus help further explain Sikh defensiveness about the appropriation or imitation of them. Moreover, it is surely telling that just prior to the DSS controversy in 2007 Hindutva organisations had reasserted their periodic claim that Sikhism is but a subdivision of Hinduism. For instance, it was reported that all over Delhi 'the Sikh identity is being rigidly enforced. In response to the recent statement by the RSS that Sikhism was a branch of Hinduism, Sikh educational institutions in Delhi have asked their students to grow their hair and beards or face expulsion. The Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee says it's the only way to protect their identity'.[10] The unwelcome reiteration by the RSS of a view of Hinduism's 'synthesising apperception' (Khare 1976: 261) – in this case the kind of coercive encompassment of which Jains and Buddhists have also complained – appears to have set the stage for the Sikh response to the DSS guru's public imitation of Guru Gobind Singh.

The Dera Sacha Sauda and its milieu

But what of the DSS? Founded in 1948, its headquarters lie in Sirsa, Haryana state. Like all such devotional orders it denies the sect status ascribed to it by Sikh authorities and media commentators ('Sacha Sauda is not a new religion, cult, sect or wave. Sacha Sauda is that spiritual activity by which God is worshipped under the guidance of Satguru').[11] Its signature list of 'rules' include vegetarianism, the recitation of the name of god ('*ram nam*') and refraining from untruths. Like other devotional movements with their origins in the north Indian *sant* heritage – 'the creed of the saints, a tradition associated with such figures as Kabir and Nanak'[12] (Babb 1986: 17) – the DSS is an avowedly social reformist spiritual organisation, which aims – according to its official website – to 'save people from the complexities, malpractices and superficial rituals that had been afflicting religion'.[13]

So far, so unremarkable. However, several features of DSS spiritual practice do set it apart – quite dramatically – from comparable *sant* orders. The third and present DSS guru Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan succeeded to the guru-ship in 1990, and it is by way of the innovations introduced under his leadership that the DSS has achieved distinctiveness and, it must be added, notoriety: for

the DSS has in recent years come to possess a very particular relationship with *excess*. Its leaders and devotees alike understand the movement to be on a very special mission, its guru a figure of the stature of Krishna or Jesus. It seeks massive expansion. Moreover, it is via large-scale spiritual-cum-service initiatives such as mass tree planting and blood donation events that the DSS generates what Chidester (2005: 117) has called 'sacred surpluses'. It is via its penchant for the spectacular that its publicity materials elide humanitarian world records with miracles: for example, the Guinness world record certificate that the DSS obtained in 2004 for most blood donors in a single day is positioned in the 'Miracles' section of its website.[14] These non-supernatural miracles of magnitude and quantity seem to achieve miraculous status by way of the superlatives used to describe them. Miracles of *participation* – performed by a mass of DSS devotees – they are nonetheless attributed singularly to the grace of the DSS guru.

DSS adherents hail from a wide variety of caste and religious backgrounds. Predominantly lower middle- and middle-class Sikhs and Hindus, a large number of low-caste and Dalits are also included among its followers.[15] Not only the DSS, but a host of *dera*s have risen to prominence in Punjab in recent years (though the DSS is the most publicly visible of these) and persistent discrimination by Jat Sikhs against the low castes in rural Punjab is often posited as a key factor in the rise of *dera* membership in general (e.g. Lal 2009: 227). Whereas Dalits in nearby Uttar Pradesh have political outfits like the BSP to protect their interests, so this line of thinking goes, Punjab has *dera*s (see, for example, Baixas 2007: 4064; cf. Baixas and Simon 2008).

I referred above to the widespread argument that the controversy of 2007 was driven by caste logic, and this view was also aired in blog postings. I quote one contributor:

> The main problem is not the dress or the *dera* . . . The underlying fact is that no religion has been able to thwart the evil of casteism or groupism as such . . . When the so-called downtrodden are denied their natural rights just in the name of this or that caste what are they going to do and to whom do they turn! We all know what is the treatment that is met to the so called low castes in Punjab . . . What they do is turn to these *dera*s for solace and when they start thinking that they have become equals some or the other conspiracy is hatched to kill their voices and souls . . .[16]

Other contributors in the same discussion forum noted: 'After shouting "caste caste" at Hindus it seems as though [Sikhs] are bleeding much worse', and: 'Jat Sikhs have violated the mandate of the Sikh Gurus with their ugly casteism and racism. Clearly they are the main villains of the piece here. What choice do the discriminated Dalits have but to set up a parallel religion?'

Sikh teaching on caste, in this view, is not matched by practice, an analysis that is in fact supported by much scholarly work (e.g. McLeod 2006). I wish here to neither endorse nor refute arguments concerning a putative Sikh 'failure' on the question of caste discrimination, only to note their contemporary currency which

is vital for understanding the import of the recent DSS innovation in naming practices that I consider now.

The guru's title is Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan. In combining names from Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam it advertises the movement's professed secularism. 'Insaan' – 'Human' – is a recent addition. Its use is a point of contention, for just as the Sikh baptism ceremony requires the substitution of 'Singh' or 'Kaur' for family names connoting caste identity, the reworked DSS version substitutes 'Insaan'. The scandalous suggestion of this mimetic reworking is, of course, that the original has failed. The *intention* of Guru Gobind Singh might have been to mix the four castes into one (Singh 1952: 57), but 'Singh' no longer – if it ever did – stamps out the initiand's caste identity. As one Sikh Internet discussant puts it: 'when I was growing up, my Sikh friends were just Singhs or Kaurs. Today, everyone seems to be an Aurora, or a Sahni'.[17] So 'Insaan' is not merely a copy – it suggests the insufficiency of, and thereby critiques, the original. It is a copy that corrects.

The irony is that though the use of 'Insaan' might well succeed in levelling caste identity within the order, from without it may well itself come to function as just another caste marker. Even if that becomes the case, the reworked ceremony will possess efficacy for the DSS as an act of 'ritual institution building' congruent with its project of accelerated national and global expansion. The ambiguity of fashioning ritual institutions lies in the contradictory need to fashion ritual forms that match and communicate with those of other religions (in order to be recognisable as such), while simultaneously creating and defending a unique religious identity (Chatterjee 1993). The DSS ritual no doubt mimicked the Sikh baptism ritual, but it was a very particular and, for Sikhs, troubling kind of mimesis – for in a double manoeuvre, it critiqued the very 'religion' from which it lifted. Imitation was *not*, in this case, the sincerest form of flattery. I return to the notion of corrective mimesis below. First, though, I consider the complex conjunction of different 'types' of copying, or modes of mimetic pressure point, that inhered within the DSS act of imitation. I begin with the copy that lifts.

Not guru, not not-guru

As was noted earlier, orthodox Sikhism, in part because of the nature of its relationship to Hinduism, possesses a heightened sensitivity regarding 'unauthorised' usage of its external forms. Consider an article published by the Karnataka Sikh Welfare Society soon after the offending pictures of the DSS guru appeared in 2007:

> We at Karnataka Sikh Welfare Society strongly condemn the incident that was carried out by so called Sant, Ram Rahim of Dera Sacha Sauda, wherein the Dera Chief was shown dressed like 'Guru Gobind Singh Sahib' and had called a congregation to give Amrit to his followers. *Sikhism . . . has its unique vocabulary and terminology* which are to be used *exclusively by and for the Panth*.[18]

Such an emphasis on exclusive rights of usage brings to mind Chidester's (2005: 105) proposal that we consider religion as 'the cultural process of stealing sacred symbols, back and forth . . . [R]eligion is a cultural struggle over the always contested ownership of symbols'. Idiosyncratic though this definition may be, it appears to find a reflection in some of the Sikh responses to the DSS images. Anthropologists have similarly proposed treating ritual prerogatives as a special class of intellectual property, for instance providing detailed accounts of the transaction of copyrights in religious iconography in parts of Melanesia (Harrison 1992). However, part of the problem with the DSS ceremony lay not just in the act of using a Sikh ritual form but in the manner or etiquette of the usage which was akin – in the eyes of some Sikhs – to theft. The guru had tried to pass the ceremony off as his own. I clarify this point with an example: an elderly Sikh woman, mother of a friend of mine residing in Delhi, is an avid late-night viewer of the 'spiritual' Aastha TV channel.[19] The discourses of a quite distinctively Hindu *baba* who features regularly on the channel almost invariably include Sikh chants. This *baba*, despite his (acknowledged) borrowing, is – I quote – 'one of her favourites'. For it is a question, she says, of *how* one borrows: 'It's like at college you get credit if you quote others and acknowledge it, but if you try and pass it off as your own, then it's plagiarism'.

When one considers that the copy was not acknowledged (at least not at first, and never explicitly) then such an interpretation of the DSS ceremony – as an act of ritual plagiarism – comes to seem apposite. During questioning by Punjab police after a case was registered against him for 'hurting religious sentiments of the Sikh community', the DSS guru was reported to have stated that the offending dress 'was provided to him by one of his disciples and it was not similar to the one worn by Guru Gobind Singh as it was of the kind that was worn during the Mughal period . . . "No dress was worn by the Dera chief akin to the one worn by Guru Gobind Singh," [said the DSS spokesperson]'.[20]

I suggest that the failure to acknowledge the copy – that is, the plagiarism of the ritual form – was as troubling for many Sikhs as the act of copying itself. The point can be elucidated with reference to an essay by Snodgrass (2002) on spirit possession, imitation and nuclear tests in Rajasthan. Snodgrass (ibid: 52) notes that the Indian government's tests were thought of by many he spoke with as a rediscovery of mythological Indian technologies of war.[21] Rather than mere mimicry of 'western technoscience', the tests were reframed as a distinctly Indian enactment of prophesised events. What resulted, says Snodgrass (ibid.), was 'a logic of simultaneous imitation and denial of such an imitation' through which 'the Indian state not only seizes the power of threatening enemies but also disguises the fact that such a seizure has taken place'. A comparable, disquieting logic of seizure and denial seems to have characterised the DSS approach: it tendered three, albeit not very fulsome, apologies for the episode to the Sikh temporal body the Akal Takht – thereby tacitly acknowledging that an imitation had occurred – but nonetheless denied any imitation to the police. According to Snodgrass's argument, the copy that is denied adds to the troubling force of the 'deceptive replacement' (ibid.: 55). For the case of the DSS we might say that the

copy not only, in some sense, seizes power from the Sikh original, it seeks to deny or disguise the fact that such a seizure has taken place, adding further to the alarm of many Sikhs.

The logic of simultaneous imitation and denial of such an imitation allowed the DSS to inhabit the perceptual ground of what Dasgupta (2006: 11) has called 'the twilight' – a consubstantiality of 'pieces of day and pieces of night'. The DSS apology was soon followed by an interview with the 'unruffled' guru in which the tacit admission of imitation was now disavowed: ' "I wear whatever my followers give me to wear," says the 40-year old, the turban on his head twinkling. "My robes can match anybody's. They don't indicate my inclination toward any particular religion. All religions are the same'.[22] The DSS guru thus assumes the form but also denies assuming the form of Guru Gobind Singh. He is, to adapt Willerslev's (2004) formulation in a different context, *not* Guru Gobind Singh, but also not *not*-Guru Gobind Singh. Willerslev is seeking to describe the way in which Yukaghir hunters in northeastern Siberia are able to assume a very particular 'double perspective' vis-à-vis their prey: they 'transform their bodies into the image of prey' in order 'to assume the point of view of the animal, while in some profound sense remaining the same', since their ultimate aim is to shoot and kill it (ibid.: 630). The hunters, says Willerslev, are *not* animal, but also not *not*-animal. The attempt is 'to deceive an animal by taking on its bodily appearance, movement and smell' (ibid.: 635). In a comparable manner, the DSS guru appears to act 'in-between' identities, with – from an orthodox Sikh perspective – similarly threatening intent. The cultivation of an aura of twilight is critical: he is *not* Guru Gobind Singh, since a measure of difference is necessary in order to produce the critique of orthodox Sikhism that I mentioned above and delineate further below. But neither is he *not*-Guru Gobind Singh. To extract from the power of the represented form – the equivalent of catching and killing one's prey among the Yukaghirs – the DSS guru assumes the physical identity of Guru Gobind Singh while insisting that his attire was 'just another costume'.[23] This is, then, a copy that lifts – a kind of charismatic theft through mimesis.

The copy that distorts and the copy that elides

I consider now a second fear attached to the DSS copy – that it was a copy which distorts. The fear was frequently voiced in Sikh Internet discussion forums that the original had been subject to mockery and satire. That several serious criminal charges have been levelled against the DSS guru caused the comparison with the 'original' Sikh master to be particularly troubling, as the following examples demonstrate:

> In any civilized society the freedom of speech is guaranteed but that does not mean that one can *imitate, ridicule, mock* at the high ideals, principles or terminology of that religion. Can anybody call himself Chief Justice, Prime Minister or Deputy Commissioner? The point is that, can he *denigrate* or *ridicule* Guru Granth Sahib by projecting himself as Sat Guru or preaching in any manner that Guru Granth Sahib is not the Guru?[24]

> There are already pending woman abuse cases against him. I am stunned by his audacity to show himself as equal to 10th Guru.[25]

> The guru granth sahib is the final and only guru. So what's wrong with these people . . . trying to *distort* the [true] meaning.[26]

The alleged criminality of the imitator thus apparently heightens the insult. There is also the implicit danger not just that the qualities of the original spiritual master might be attributed to the impostor (a transfer presumably desired by the DSS), but that the 'criminal' qualities of the impostor might cast aspersions on the saintly original – thereby compromising it. The parodic ritual copy, enacted by a criminal guru, seems to mock the 'fullness of presence' of the Sikh original. The partiality of the imitation – denied (yet winkingly acknowledged), the alleged criminality of the imitator, his doctrinally distorting recreation of the very guru who announced the end of the line of Sikh gurus – precipitates a 'mimetic tension' (Snodgrass 2002: 52) whereby the skewed copy appears both like and critically unlike an original whose 'power to be a model' (Bhabha 1984: 128) comes to be undermined.

The problem is that once a relation is set up it can seem inescapable. The very webpages set up to counter the unwanted association between original and impostor guru end up reconfirming it. The Facebook page 'Sikhs against Dera Sacha Sauda' contains, as its profile picture, a coupling of two images: the DSS guru on the left and Guru Gobind Singh, in matching attire, on the right. It visually emphasises the scandalous copy, leading no doubt to further consternation; certainly, the large number of comments below the coupling attests to its effectiveness as an incitement to discourse. But for several contributors such a coupling for dramatic effect is itself a scandal. As one webpage discussant put it:

> Waheguru ji ka khalsa, Waheguru ji ki fateh. [The Khalsa belongs to Waheguru; the victory belongs to Waheguru]. Satkar yog veer jiyo kirpa karke . . dhan dhan guru gobind singh maharaj de brabbar es bande di photo na lgayo ji. [Respected brother, please do us a favour and do not put this man's photograph next to great, great Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj]. tusi photo vich hi os bande nu kalgidhar maharaj de brabar bitha dita . . . [You have given him a status equivalent of the great kalgi bearing guru by placing his photograph next to the Guru's]. So please remove him from this place . . .[27]

Other contributors posted messages in support of this request. For several Sikh writers, then, the coupling of the images of the respective gurus on the anti-DSS Facebook page represents a tactical mistake because it implies equivalent status (*braber bitha dita*) between them. Following from this, the wider problem for protesting Sikhs is surely that even the mere act of pointing out the scandal of the copy acknowledges the comparability of the entities, such that DSS ambitions – by way of the Sikh response as much as the imitative act itself – attain a kind of fulfilment.

A third mode of copy may be termed the copy that elides; by which I mean the capacity of the copy to create uncertainty concerning distinctions between

portrayal and the thing portrayed (the chapters in this volume by Gold, Copeman and Ikegame, and Pechilis also explore slippages of identity between and across guru figures via procedures of mimesis). I emphasise that, insofar as we can speak of a strategy on the part of the DSS, I do not propose that complete elision was either its aim or effect. As was mentioned above, the DSS guru positions himself at a critical distance from the copied precisely in order that he may be critical, at the same time as lifting liberally from it. What I draw attention to instead is the *fear of elision* voiced by a number of Sikh Internet discussants. I have already suggested that the criminality of the impostor guru, via the logic of the copy, prompts concern about the two-way transference of moral qualities, and discussed the representational paradox whereby, in order to demonstrate and protest the scandal of the copy, the similarities between representation and represented must be delineated, suggesting equivalence. Concern that the copy might create an understanding of sameness or equivalence is expressed more directly still in the following comment on the Sepia Mutiny blog:

> [T]he reason the DSS situation is a problem is due to how easily people can be manipulated in Punjab and India generally. This is primarily due to a lack of education. Someone can come along and emulate the initiation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh and in essence compare himself to Guru Gobind Singh and people will believe it . . . This is an attempt to sway people into DSS allegiance by connecting the dots with Sikhism.[28]

In other words, due to the uneducated nature of the mass Sikh body, the copy is liable to be mistaken for the real. That would mean, in this case, that the DSS guru would be understood not just to have imitated but to *be* – or at least to share qualities with – Guru Gobind Singh. This logic may be applied to the ritual form as well as to the person of the guru; for instance, a comment posted in a Sikh discussion forum remarks contemptuously of the Sikh *janata* (masses) that 'handing out some sherbet like Rooh Afsa as amrit, in all rights it will turn out to *be* amrit in their little minds'.[29] Similar views were articulated to me by several of my Sikh acquaintances in Delhi (I note that they, too, are from the kind of middle-class, 'educated' background that is the condition of possibility of such views). For instance, a Sikh friend employed at Delhi University concurred that the Sikh *janata* would indeed be likely, as a result of the copy, to elide the two gurus: 'in a country where most people are illiterate image stands for gospel truth. Anyone playing Ram becomes Ram'. The reference here is to the telecast of the epic *Ramayana* by Indian state television between 1987 and 1990, after which Arun Govil, the actor who played Ram, campaigned for the Congress Party as Ram himself, promising the electorate Ram Rajya (Rajagopal 2001: 85). Deepika Chikhalia, who played Sita, later won an election as a candidate for the BJP. What is important here is less the question of whether or not in the eyes of the '*janata*' the actor and the god did exchange properties, but the assumption harboured by many commentators that they did. It is a comparable elite Sikh perception of the Sikh *janata*'s propensity towards 'indistinction' – towards the copy that elides – that animates the concern that the

DSS guru's ritual-sartorial copy might prompt an intolerable merger between sacred original and profane impostor.

Having thus far delineated three key mimetic pressure points of the DSS copy – respectively lifting, distortion and elision – I turn now to a consideration of what I take to be a final critical provocation of the imitative image – the possibility that it might be a copy that usurps (i.e. takes the place of the original). In so doing, I consider the responses of DSS devotees to the accusations made against their devotional order which are important, I shall argue, for disclosing the DSS project of redefining the devotional real.

The copy that usurps: corrective mimesis

The idea of corrective mimesis was introduced earlier in reference to the DSS usage of 'Insaan' as a critical commentary on the persistence of caste discrimination within the mainstream Sikh community. The bestowal of 'Insaan' is no doubt a copy of the 'original' Sikh substitution of 'Singh' and 'Kaur' for family names, but it is a corrective copy, for it insinuates the failure of that which is copied. The suggestion is that the DSS seeks, in its act of corrective mimesis, to revitalize the neglected ideal and thereby become better Sikhs than Sikhs themselves. This is what is meant by referring to the usurpation effects of the copy.

A quite frequent response on the part of DSS devotees to the written attacks against it populating the internet, along with the legal cases and the Akal Takht demand that all DSS *dera*s be shut down, has been to argue that 'great souls' are *always* attacked and frequently not recognised during their own lifetimes. Below are two indicative quotes, the first from a *Times of India* discussion board:

> [F]rom times immemorial when great souls came they were treated in the same way only when they died they were worshipped see the examples of Lord Jesus, Lord Krishna, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Guru Teg Bahadur.[30]

> hay guys remember Moguls? muslims?? they say similar words about our ten guru sahib ji. when ever a guru has come people have not recognized him.[31]

The attacks on the DSS guru, on the evidence of this argument, lead not to critical self-scrutiny but instead provide further critical proof of the guru's saintliness. Such a response hints at the disquieting idea that the DSS might actually have sought out the controversy since, as its devotee-bloggers assert, Jesus, Nanak and other great spiritual masters, too, were the subject of opprobrium during their lifetimes. For devotees, then, the attacks may be viewed as desired reality effects which reconfirm the guru's godliness.

Another common response on the part of DSS discussants to written attacks on their guru is to point to an incongruity between the invective of protesting Sikh writers and 'true' Sikhism, which would abhor such words. For instance, a discussion forum situated beneath a YouTube video titled 'Reality Of Dera Sacha Sauda', seemingly uploaded by a DSS devotee ('kaurinsan'), contains a particularly fierce set of insults directed toward the DSS guru. A DSS devotee

responds: '*Baba Nanak bahut khush ho reha hona gallan pad key apne sikhan diyan*' ('Guru Nanak must be ashamed to hear all these swear words'). Also: 'Sikhs r repressing Dera Premis these days. Boycott, attacks, killings, etc. of the premis is nothing but religious persecution. Would Nanak agree with whatever BS you have written? . . . *Ki faraq reh gaya tere ch tey Aurangzeb ch?* (What is the difference between you and Aurangzeb [a notorious Mughal persecutor of Sikhs]?)' Another DSS contributor writes: 'Whosoever commenting on Dera without knowing the realities or by visiting and personally watching the activities is just doing *Ninda* which is forbidden in Sikhism. Please do not let your heritage/*Guru Vani Shabads Vachans* (Gurus' teachings) go in vain'. '*Ninda*' literally means 'criticism', and refers to the Sikh Gurbani teaching that unsubstantiated criticism or slander directed towards saints will lead to perpetual rebirths.

Such comments demonstrate how anti-DSS tirades are capable of playing into DSS hands, since they allow DSS followers to argue that it is the writers, not they, who are insulting Sikhism, whilst also allowing them to pose as learned, moderate 'Sikhs' in pointing out how those insulting the DSS do so in a way which contravenes the very religion they seek to defend – for example, in 'doing Ninda'. So far as DSS devotees do refrain from 'Ninda' and invective, there is the provocative suggestion, again, that the DSS is the true heir to the Sikh religion.

A still more common response on the part of DSS discussants is to expound upon the great charitable feats enacted by the DSS (see also Ikegame in this volume on guru-inspired humanitarian interventions). The argument, on the face of it, is simple: DSS charitable endeavours indicate the true and saintly nature of the movement and that it does not deserve the opprobrium heaped upon it. But there is another, more subtle, implication here: DSS charity is framed as the sacrifice Khalsa Sikhs are no longer willing to make. I provide two examples:

> It was the true saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh ji who has prepared [his devotees] to help people in times of disasters. Check out the history of last 10 years, and you will find that anywhere in India, if at all there has been any natural calamity, the Dera Sacha Sauda Master and the followers have been the key helping persons, without whom the affected people would have been left to suffer infinitely!!! Such an institution and its followers are only and only worth respect and praise for all their sacrifices and noble deeds.[32]

> *babe ne 3 hospital bhi kholen hain jahan garibo ko free medical facilities milti hain, babe ke sangat puri INDIAN ARMED FORCE ke monthly blood requirement puri karte hain*, WORLD RECORD IN BLOOD DONATION, TREE PLANTATION, ORGAN DONATIONS, HELPING IN EARTHQUAKE, DROUGHT, FLOOD AFFECTED PEOPLE AND LAKHS OF OTHER SOCIAL UPLIFTMENT PROGRAMMES [Baba has also opened three hospitals where the poor receive free medical facilities, and his followers fulfil the monthly blood requirements of the Indian Armed Forces . . .] . . . *jo great deeds ho rahi hain proof ke sath voh aapko dikh nahi rahi?* [Can't you see that these great deeds are proofs of his saintliness?][33]

Charity in capital letters and with exclamation marks is thus central to DSS devotees' defence of their guru, providing authentic 'proof' of his true character. But in addition to the usage of charity as a medium of defence, there are grounds for conceiving of DSS supercharity as a critical means of 'onto-devotional' *offence*; by which I mean it becomes a means for the DSS to stake a claim on the devotional real. I quote again from the writer of the second quotation, who is responding to a Sikh discussant's reference to the allegations of rape against the DSS guru: 'Sir, please also comment what good you have done for society? May be then we start worshipping you. YOU MAY ACT SIKH BUT YOU ARE NOT SIKH, SIKH IS LEADER WHO HELPS'. The writer of the first quote, referring to Sikh persecution of the DSS, also asks: 'Where was the police when the so called True Sikhs were setting the Deras in Punjab on fire, beating people and trying to kill them as well????'

As was mentioned above, the DSS has attained several world records for its feats of blood donation; and I have argued elsewhere (Copeman 2009a: 130) that the DSS has been at the forefront of exploring the expressive possibilities of this medical practice. What is significant here is that DSS devotees donated their blood in direct response to the initial Sikh attacks on the movement in May 2007, as a form of protest. At the height of these tensions a DSS blogger wrote: 'The followers of DSS are expressing their dissatisfaction by donating blood but bad tempered people are flowing the blood of innocent people. Sikh protesters are forgetting . . . that Respected Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji has given the swords for saving [the] helpless, not to make the blood shed out of helpless people. These terrorists have taken the lives of many innocent people in the last decade when there was demand of Khalistan . . . whereas on the other hand DSS devotees are proving themselves to be real sikhs by donating blood, by giving their kidneys, bone marrow and eyes after death for the sake of humanity'.[34] The writer thus suggests that the DSS' protest in the form of service of humanity makes it really Sikh, whereas the violent nature of the orthodox Sikh response represents a perversion of true Sikh principles.

The claim is also implicitly made that DSS devotees' donation of body parts reanimates a consecrated template laid down by Guru Gobind Singh in a way that orthodox Sikhs fail to do. As is well known, at the foundation of the *khalsa* in 1699 Guru Gobind Singh 'through a dramatic hoax, demanded the ultimate test of loyalty to his person as a holy man' (Gold 1987: 21). Gold (ibid.: 176–177) draws on Macauliffe's account:

> Guru Gobind Singh had summoned his followers outside his tent, and when they had all assembled he asked if ' "any one of his beloved Sikhs [were] ready to lay down his life for him?" . . . All grew pale . . . A third time he spoke in a louder voice, "If there be any true Sikh of mine, let him give me his head as an offering and proof of his faith." ' One disciple finally accepted the challenge and entered into the tent with the guru. Outside, the assembled followers heard the sharp thud of steel cutting through flesh, and the guru emerged alone, his sword dripping with blood. One by one, four more volunteers came

> forward. Four more times the thud of the sword was heard, and the guru displayed it soaked in blood. Finally, the guru revealed that his demands for a disciple's life had only been a test: the disciples were still alive and goat's blood was on the sword.

I have highlighted elsewhere (Copeman 2009b: 18–19) the important role of analogy for understanding the donation of blood and other body parts. Whether the analogy is with the shedding of blood in warfare, the blood shed by Christ in his crucifixion, or with bloodletting, blood donation appears nearly always to take place within a larger field of extractions with which it can form powerful analogies. The analogy in this instance is evidently between Guru Gobind Singh's call for bodily sacrifice and the DSS commitment to donate blood and other body parts. In fact the latter may be understood as a kind of mimesis of the former; but it is a *corrective* variant of mimesis, for it draws attention to alleged unwillingness on the part of 'so called True Sikhs' to engage in extractive service. The blogger argues, along with other DSS adherents, that it is only the DSS that fulfils Guru Gobind Singh's teachings in this respect, with its plentiful corporeal offerings 'for the sake of humanity'. The contrast thus becomes one between 'Sikhs' and *Real Sikhs* – as defined (or revealed) by those who are willing to excavate their bodies most deeply. Moreover, DSS blood donation forms a similar test of devotion to the offering of one's head at the formation of the *khalsa*. The comparison might appear at first outlandish, but my ethnographic research amongst devotee-blood donors attests to the profound fears they must overcome in order to donate. For most followers, blood donation is understood to be a dramatically unhealthy activity; that they nonetheless donate is indicative of the spiritual benefits they assume will derive from willingness to undergo the test of devotion (see Copeman 2009a: 86–87; see also Morse in this volume on imperilling tests of devotion).

This demonstrates the extent to which claims to the devotional real are made through the idiom of sacrifice. Sikh internet discussants seek to deflect the DSS claim on the devotional real with statements which emphasise the exemplary, unreplicable sacrifices of Sikhs: 'I don't think any of [the DSS guru's] followers would give *their* heads for him'.[35] The DSS argument, on the other hand, concedes the point that Sikhism centres on a foundational sacrifice, while suggesting that 'so called True Sikhs' have disavowed this critical tenet, which is at present properly fulfilled only by the DSS. So who then now are the *Real Sikhs*?

Counter-mimesis and the charitable potlatch

This chapter has thus far been concerned with an act of alleged mimicry performed by the DSS guru. In a striking act of counter-mimicry, however – a counter claim on the real, so to speak – the Sikh temporal body, the Akal Takht, issued a call in February 2009 for Sikhs to congregate on the festival of Hola Mohalla to donate blood in such quantities as would surpass the existing world record – a record held, of course, by the DSS. In other words, it was now orthodox *Sikh* organisations who were copying a DSS strategy of public self-representation in a kind of

mimetic power struggle. I quote from the *sandesh* (message) of the Akal Takht (original in Punjabi):

> The *Khalsa Panth* of the Guru is the successor to a great tradition where our ancestors have set historical accomplishments by sacrificing their lives for the betterment of the society. The Gurus established such magnanimous examples by sacrificing their own lives that the Sikhs have felt privileged in doing the same for spreading happiness in the society. . . . The message of Sri Akal Takht Sahib for the entire Sikh *Sangat* is that in addition to other forms of social service, the service through blood donation, organ donation and eye donation should also be made a part and parcel of our lives. Every Sikh should donate blood at least once in the memory of the martyrs of the Sikh faith. To commence this noble task, the day of Holla Mohalla (10 March 2009) has been chosen by various Sikh organizations under the umbrella of Sri Akal Takht Sahib. The blood donation will take place at Sri Anandpur Sahib at a very large scale. This is the sacred place where Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji bestowed us with a spiritual life through the Nectar of Amrit. Being His Sikh, it is our duty and responsibility to offer our contribution in this noble cause for the support of our society and to save someone's life. The Sikh *Sangat* is requested to volunteer with whole-hearted dedication in this cause.[36]

With references to the sacrifices of the Sikh martyrs and a call to donate blood in their memory, there is the sense that the event formed part of an attempt to reanimate a principle of sacrifice which the DSS accuses mainstream Sikhism of misplacing. It is also significant that the event was staged at Sri Anandpur Sahib, where Guru Gobind Singh is said to have demanded the heads of five of his devotees. The suggestion of sacrifice is made even plainer in a poster advertising the event which depicts the bloodied heads of Sikh martyrs impaled on spears, a reference to a particularly bloody period of Sikh persecution in the early eighteenth century. Beneath the impaled heads lies the Punjabi text: 'To give blood in order to protect honour (*laaj*) / That is our faith (*eeman*) / May it always fly high / Our symbol of Khalsa'. And below that, in English: 'We are what we repeatedly do . . . It's not an act but a habit for Sikhs . . . Excellence in saving humanity! Let's prove it, again'. Perhaps the 'honour' that must be protected is the honour called into question by the DSS with its techniques of corrective mimesis. The exhortation to 'prove it, again' likely alludes to Guru Gobind Singh's demand for bloody proof of devotion, but probably most pertinently connects with a desire to fortify the public representation of Sikhism – to prove, in other words, that Sikhism is *still* animated by its foundational principles of sacrifice. The 'again' points to the repetitive nature of the event: the slogan explicitly frames the event as a repetition of prior Sikh sacrifices in another form – a form now seemingly defined by the DSS. The Sikh retort constituted an act of corrective mimesis, then, in two ways: first, it sought to correct the DSS insinuation of there being a disconnect between founding ideals and current practice; and second, unlike other (i.e. DSS) blood camps which are merely an 'act', this is blood donation *for real*.

The DSS' claim to the devotional real, via sacrificial blood and body donation, was thus met in kind, demonstrating how Sikh authorities had begun to play by DSS rules in seeing blood donation as a contemporary analogue of the *khalsa*'s founding sacrifices. That the event was meant as a rebuke to the DSS was not mentioned in the Akal Takht *sandesh*, but it was widely interpreted in such a way in newspaper articles and discussion forums. 'Sikhs give blood to defeat Dera Sacha Sauda' ran a *DNA* newspaper headline: 'Sikhs gave blood, literally, to defeat the Dera Sacha Sauda on Hola Mohalla . . . Their idea was to displace the Dera from the Guinness Book of World Records where it holds the envious record of having organised the largest-ever single blood donation camp in the world at Bapu Ji village in Sri Ganganagar.'

The reference to displacing the DSS from the *Guinness Book* is telling. Consider now the following comment from a Sikh discussion forum focusing on the Sikh world record attempt: 'Great effort and something good to unite youth on a common platform and help make them better citizens. But do we know the reason behind this and how it started? The whole reason is that someone came across Dera Sacha Sauda's record in the Guinness Book and *they decided to break it and remove his name*. All I am trying to say is that it started as something to surpass someone else, but not as a *seva* to humankind' (emphasis added).[37] In other words, as in the Kwakiutl potlatch described by Boas (1966) and others, what results from these charitable potlatches is the literal vanquishing of names. Harrison (1992: 236) notes in reference to the potlatch system among the Indians of the American Northwest Coast that 'competitive feasts and contests in wealth-destruction were held in order to validate claims to highly valued non-material possessions: to ancestral names, titles, totemic crests and special prerogatives in the main cycle of rituals, the winter ceremonial. Wealth was only a means; the ultimate goals of actors in the system were to obtain ritual prerogative'. I have suggested that high-profile charitable expenditure forms part of a DSS strategy to lay claim to ritual forms and, on the part of Sikh institutions, to wrest them back. Expenditure 'is economic activity in which the loss must be as great as possible in order to certify a claim on ultimate meaning' (Chidester 2005: 4). The expenditure of the charitable potlatch, I argue, stakes its claim in a similar way – ritual property and the devotional real contested via how much (blood) one can give away.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified four major pressure points of the DSS copy: lifting, distortion, elision, and correction/usurpation. The degree of overlap between these pressure points is considerable – for instance, elision between copy and copied might well also be figured as distortion of the original – my categorical distinctions being merely a heuristic to assist in analysis.

A piece in a late May 2007 issue of the Indian news magazine *Outlook* referred to the then recent Sikh–DSS controversy as being '*ostensibly* triggered by an advertisement [which] showed the living leader of Dera Sacha Sauda, Gurmeet

Ram Rahim Singh, dressed like Guru Gobind Singh' (emphasis added).[38] Beneath the froth of the image, the piece argued, lay the real cause (a conjunction of caste and electoral factors). This chapter has moved from a politics of the real cause to a politics of the devotional real, asking the question: what if the images and their implications *were* a chief cause of the Sikh disquiet?

This politics, with its claims and counter-claims to the devotional real, is grounded in a particular Punjabi and English rhetoric of imputed fictitiousness. In addition to the DSS guru's 'meta-copy' of Guru Gobind Singh, there is also a mimetic (and counter-mimetic) component to much of the excited language it provoked. As was mentioned above, the phrase *Sacha Sauda* is itself borrowed from an episode in the life story of Guru Nanak. I also noted the Sikh website www.jhoothasauda.com, whose name – which converts 'True Deal' (*Sacha Sauda*) into 'False Deal' (*Jhootha Sauda*) – represents a retaliatory mimetic distortion of the DSS copy that the website exists to critique. A further example is the re-articulation '*Lucha Sauda*' (Immoral Deal), posted beneath the YouTube video mentioned earlier in which a youth throws his *chapal*s at the DSS guru.[39] In the same discussion, the DSS guru is termed a '*pakhandi* [fake] *baba*' and a 'pseudo-*sant*'. The *Jhootha Sauda* website promises to expose 'The Real face of Dera Sacha Sauda'.[40] Elsewhere, too, lists of Sikh grievances against the movement bear titles such as 'Dera Sacha Sauda: The reality'.[41]

As we have seen, however, such reality claims hardly flow in one direction. DSS discussants write of 'the *true* saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh ji' and '*so called* True Sikhs'. More provocative still is the claim: 'DSS devotees are proving themselves to be real Sikhs by donating blood, by giving their kidneys, bone marrow and eyes after death for the sake of humanity'. Evidently discussants from both traditions evince a discursive straining towards the real. Outside of the chatroom, another straining towards the real was on display, with blood donation developing into a key source of devotional reality effects. First, DSS devotees gave blood in response to the tumult of May 2007, and second, Sikh devotees gave blood counter-mimetically on Hola Mohalla in 2009 at the very place where Guru Gobind Singh asked for the heads of his disciples. In each case blood donation was mobilised as a *proof*; we might say it possesses a verifying function. If DSS devotees were 'proving themselves to be real Sikhs by donating blood . . . for the sake of humanity', two years later Sikhs gave blood, according to the Akal Takht *sandesh*, 'in order to protect honour (*laaj*)' and to 'prove, again' their 'excellence in saving humanity'. As a powerfully enunciative act in north Indian devotional contexts (as elsewhere, but particularly so in such contexts), it is thus evident that blood donation forms a critical element within a larger field of devotional reality construction and contestation that also found a striking rhetorical manifestation in post-May 2007 discussion forums.

This chapter has thus presented a case study in the cultural production of the 'really real' guru.[42] For Tarde, famously, society began 'when one man first copied another' (1903: 28). Something similar might be said of guru-ship – especially where succession is at stake, and when the necessity arises for authenticating incorporation of one's forbears (see Copeman and Ikegame this volume, Gold this

volume). Acute suspicion frequently arises around the question of the identity of the true guru, and techniques of identification for separating these out from perceived charlatans can be elaborate (Khandelwal 2004: ch. 5; Barrett 2008: 37). While the spectre of the fraudulent guru may breed anxiety about the origins of spiritual value, 'fakery appears as the margin, the horizon against which a moral centre is clarified' (Shipley 2009: 524), which is to say that the very accusation that someone is a *pakhandi* or a *dhongi baba* rests on the assumption (and reconfirms as fact) that real or true gurus do exist. Things can get more complex due to the recognition that 'really real' gurus may be faking their fakeness (which means one should not be too dismissive of even those who appear most obviously fake [Khandelwal 2004: 173]). In respect of the case study presented in this chapter, the situation may appear less complex given that from an orthodox perspective *anyone* connected with Sikhism who proclaims his/her guru-ship must by definition be 'fake' given the longstanding ban on human gurus. But the mimetic tensions precipitated by the DSS guru's dress nevertheless speak more generally to a set of presentational issues concerning the guru who must of necessity dress the part – and moral evaluations of the guru's dressing up differ, of course, contextually.

In Frøystad's chapter in this volume the dressing up of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as Sikh is an incongruence playfully acknowledged – dressing up is here an aspect of the guru's social charm. The same might be said of the newly minted yoga guru discussed in Cohen's chapter who finds in his white flowing robes an artful drama he terms 'drag' and 'camp'. Prior to becoming a religious teacher, he had a reputation for destructive excess. If Cohen frames the life of homosexuality in contemporary India in terms of both promise and accusation, might we utilise the same terms in helping to account for the guru and his/her dressing up? Does the potential of guru-ship to form a kind of existential loophole that allows a person to eclipse or perfect problematic pasts form the basis of a kind of promise? That is one possible reading of Cohen's drag queen turned religious teacher. Other suggestive examples are available: Chatterjee (2002) recently provided an account of the 'Bhawal Sannyasi Case' from 1921, in which a *sannyasi* is identified as in fact a *zamindar* thought to have died twelve years earlier. Rumours that freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose led an ascetic afterlife continue to possess currency. An RSS volunteer's activist past is eclipsed by his new guru-ship (Mills 2006). Such eclipse or dissociation is to an extent institutionalized in Hindu theory which posits particular transformations as convention (i.e. the four stages of the ideal life, resulting ultimately in *sannyas*). Might it be widespread implicit knowledge that guru-ship may be used in order to eclipse identities and problematic pasts that can cause gurus to be treated ironically (one thinks of Mastii TV's Baba Filmananda who solves the problems of perplexed devotees with reference to Hindi films) or, indeed, as subjects of accusation? For the promise of eclipse and re-formation (of pasts or past lives) may also be conceived pejoratively as calculated obviation or disguise. For a Company official in the 1760s warrior ascetics were insidious 'mendicants in disguise' (Pinch this volume), while in the DSS case, too, an accusation of injurious disguise was implicit in denunciations of the

guru. Was assuming the form of – dressing up as – Guru Gobind Singh an attempt on the part of the DSS guru to reawaken guru-ship's promise; that is, to eclipse and re-form a past principally associated for most observers with criminal charges and drawn-out legal cases? Perhaps, but it led also to intensified levels of accusation, of course.

I finish with a reservation and an attempt at partial redress. By means of a typology of the copy, this chapter has painted a picture of nigh-on universal Sikh condemnation of the imitative image. To some degree, this is problematic: the argument that those not offended by the imitation might be less readily 'incited to discourse' is surely at least partly credible. I close, then, by foregrounding the several voices of critical self-scrutiny that I did manage to locate within a set of Sikh webpages that otherwise heaped opprobrium on the DSS guru. The comments in each case focused on the guru's dress. I quote from a blog headed 'Sikhs and Dera Sacha Sauda Row: Bad Games': 'why are [we] dragging the name of Guru Gobind Singh Ji [in?]. When [did] we Sikhs start trademarking imaginary dresses of our Gurus[?]. (They might have worn different kind of clothes in their life time. Do we exactly know what colours and style they wore, and now lets put a ban on that so nobody else can wear that)'.[43] Second: 'From where we came to know about that Dera Sacha Sauda . . . chief dressed like our beloved Dasmesh Pitaji [Guru Gobind Singh] [?]. If your answer is from Sobha Singh ji [famous Sikh portrait artist, 1901–1986] painting, then we all know Sobha Singh ji was not the contemporary of Guru sahiban it was his pure imagination'.[44] Both writers thus observe that the Sikh protests existed to defend a mode of dress that was only ever an imaginative depiction. In other words, the proprietorialism ('trademarking') of protestors referred to a non-existent object.

This internal critique prompts a point of clarification. The image of Guru Gobind Singh is indeed fictive but not unreal. He has been defined pictorially in a very particular manner for a number of decades, and it is indeed over the facility of *imagining* Guru Gobind Singh, rather than merely his dress, that many 'ordinary' Sikhs seek to retain exclusive rights. An official Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) publication (Singh 1999: 117) presents the orthodox view that the portraits the DSS guru based his copy upon are themselves untenable: 'One wonders how the false pictures of the Gurus and even their plastic, wooden and metallic idols appeared, not only in the houses of Sikhs but also in many Gurdwaras. This is nothing but Brahmanical philosophy displacing the Sikh faith from the Sikh houses and their places of worship.' Yet it was also the SGPC which first demanded the arrest of the DSS leader and the closure of all *dera*s in Punjab after the offending images were made public. The response underlines the complex subject positions of such bodies as the SGPC and Akal Takht, and the recursiveness of guru image-making: the very portraits imitated by the DSS guru are, from an orthodox perspective, scandalous imitations of a reality that remains unknown; nevertheless, these unsanctioned, 'anti-Sikh' (ibid.: 119) portraits must be defended against an impostor institution which, through its twilight devotional devices, seeks to 'lift' much more than a mere ritual form and (imagined) dress.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Daniel Gold, Lotte Hoek, Aya Ikegame, Manleen Kaur and Alice Street for helpful readings of drafts of this chapter.
2 A drink from concentrate containing fruits and herbs; frequently served to guests throughout northern areas of the subcontinent, and sometimes used for breaking the Ramadan fast.
3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXnLjBGf5SI
4 'Sala' ('brother-in-law') is a term of abuse insinuating that the speaker has had sexual relations with a person's sister.
5 http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments=1&v=tH0ZIBeEJvQ
6 According to some accounts, the DSS is itself an offshoot of the Radhasoami lineage (Baixis and Simon 2008). On Radhasoami lineages, see Gold (1987, and this volume), Babb (1986) and Juergensmeyer (1991).
7 See Gold in this volume on devotees' valuing access to divine power through a *living* guru.
8 Guru Nanak, as a youth, is said to have been given 20 rupees by his father in order to turn his son's mind to the need to engage in profitable transactions. Nakak, however, used the money to clothe and feed the needy, later informing his father that he had engaged in a true deal (*sacha sauda*) with the money.
9 Initially a campaigner against perceived heresy within Sikhism, Bhindranwale became the figurehead of the Khalistan movement. He was killed in 1983 along with 500 of his followers in Sikhism's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, by Indian Armed Forces.
10 http://www.internationalreporter.com/News-2083/ad-shows-baba-ram-raheem-as-guru-gobind-singh-protested-all-over.html
11 http://derasachasauda.in/index.html
12 The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw an efflorescence of *sant* poets such as Kabir, Nanak, Ravi Das, and Nam Dev. Most espoused versions of *bhakti*, defined by Vaudeville (1974: 97) as 'a religious attitude which implies a "participation" in the deity and a love relationship between the individual soul, the *jiva*, and the Supreme Lord, *Bhagavan*, the "adorable one." ' These *sant*s gathered followers and formed communities of mainly low-caste laymen.
13 http://derasachasauda.in/index.html
14 http://www.derasachasauda.in/Miracles/GuinnessWorldRecords.html. See also Copeman (2009a: chapter 5).
15 It has been estimated that 70 percent of all *dera* followers in Punjab are low-caste or Dalit (Lal 2009: 226).
16 http://o3.indiatimes.com/deraaaaa/archive/2007/05/19/4311501.aspx
17 http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/004461.html
18 www.ksws.co.in/news.htm
19 The channel claims to be 'India's No. 1 Socio-Spiritual-Cultural Network, reaching over 30 million households, with more than 200 million viewers! Aastha caters to the vast Asian Indian populace worldwide – people who place socio-spiritual-cultural values above everything else . . . Aastha's chaste blissful viewing vividly portrays India's strong heritage, which has sustained and outlived various onslaughts while emerging stronger' (http://aasthatv.co.in/index.html).
20 *Outlook*, 3 Dec. 2007.
21 As Cohen (1995: 331) notes, the oft-heard claim that 'whatever new sophistication the west dangles before us as the latest necessity for any scientifically or socially mature society, ancient India has already produced it . . . is . . . a classic counter-hegemonic argument' in the country.
22 *Indian Express*, 16 May 2007.
23 The idea that a copy can seize power from an original probably finds its most notable anthropological articulation in the work of Taussig (1993). 'The wonder of mimesis', says Taussig (ibid: xiii), 'lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original'.

24 www.ksws.co.in/news.htm
25 http://o3.indiatimes.com/deraaaaa/archive/2007/05/19/4311501.aspx
26 http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments=1&v=tH0ZIBeEJvQ
27 http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2346732917&v=wall&ref=ts
28 http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/004461.html
29 http://www.tapoban.org/phorum/read.php?f=1&i=116442&t=116422
30 http://o3.indiatimes.com/deraaaaa/archive/2007/05/19/4311501.aspx
31 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXnLjBGf5SI
32 http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/004461.html
33 http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments=1&v=tH0ZIBeEJvQ
34 http://www.ndtvblogs.com/views/viewblogs.asp?gl_guid=&blogname=sami&q_userid=12887.
35 http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2346732742&=wall&ref=ts
36 http://www.sikhisms.com/2009/03/worlds-largest-blood-donation-camp.html
37 http://www.sikhchic.com/article-detail.php?cat=12&id=750
38 *Outlook*, 28 May 2007.
39 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXnLjBGf5SI
40 http://www.jhoothasauda.com/category/perspective/page/3/
41 http://www.unp.co.in/fl5/dera-sacha-sauda-the-reality-17641/
42 I draw here on van de Port's (2011) phrasing.
43 http://politicalgames.wordpress.com/2007/05/
44 http://www.tapoban.org/phorum/read?f=1&i=116422&t=116422.

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9 The mediated guru

Simplicity, instantaneity and change in middle-class religious seeking[1]

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'We don't even understand these traditional gurus!' This was the instant response from a woman in South Delhi when I voiced my puzzlement over the booming interest in Western(ized) guru movements, growth therapies and spiritual literature among urban middle-class seekers in 2004. The people I had in mind typically worked as middle-level managers, government officials, teachers or housewives, had college education, used cars or scooters but never bicycles, auto rickshaws or buses, and lived in apartments or bungalows. They knew English well but preferred Hindi or other vernaculars at home, were of upper-caste Hindu, Sikh or occasionally Muslim background, and referred to themselves as *acche log* (good people), 'people of good families', 'middle class' or 'upper middle class'.[2] Mid-way through a multi-sited fieldwork that comprised six spiritual movements in Delhi and a non-congregational ashram in Haridwar that catered to this kind of people, I was still struggling to understand the unprecedented attraction of the many high-profiled guru movements, semi-spiritual self-development techniques and American-style motivational literature. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Canfield and Hansen 1993) had long been a South Delhi bestseller; Reiki healing was widespread among upper-caste housewives and a new generation of gurus and spiritual movements saturated with foreign impulses were attracting larger crowds than ever. Different as these developments may seem, they were closely intertwined. Recommendations for self-help literature and growth therapy courses circulated during the breaks of guru-specific *pranayama* (breath control technique) classes and vice versa, and were promoted side by side in the glossy 'mind body spirit' magazines that began to appear in the mid-1990s. Middle-aged people whose religious practice formerly had revolved around *puja* (worship), *havan* (fire sacrifice conducted by a ritual specialist) and occasional temple visits and pilgrimages had now added guru devotion, classroom-style meditation courses, weekend retreats and Western-style inspirational reading to their spiritual life. What could these currents possibly add to a religious heritage as rich as the Indian one, and which attractions could they possibly have in common?

Until then I had primarily ascribed this trend to the exponential intercontinental travel and communication since the early 1990s, to the awe that many Indians showed for all things Western despite their ambiguity to the Western world and to the way in which the new movements facilitated personal adjustment to the

competitiveness and risk that accompanied the expanding neoliberal employment sector. Much of the work that has emerged on middle-class spirituality since then supports the merits of such arguments (see, for example, Strauss 2005; Warrier 2005; Warrier 2006; Birtchnell 2009; Frøystad 2009; Nanda 2009; Ramachandran 2011). In this chapter, however, I explore the possibility that my female acquaintance had an equally valid point to make when stating her difficulty in understanding 'traditional' gurus, arguing that religious change in India is rooted by a far deeper dynamics of religious change in which the current quest for simplicity driven by globalization and neoliberal anxieties is but the latest manifestation.

To base one's argument on a spontaneous rationalization encountered during fieldwork, as I do here, may at first sight indicate too heavy a reliance on statements recorded in the field (see e.g. Holy and Stuchlik 1983: 121). Nonetheless, our subjects' explanations of why they do what they do constitute an invaluable source of information, particularly when examining choice, and when similar rationalizations recur again and again. Since my own puzzle concerned the aggregate of choices that helped bring about a religious transformation of sorts, and since I already had encountered numerous middle-class seekers who expressed a strong dislike for teaching they characterized as 'difficult' or 'boring', my Delhi acquaintance's statement struck me like a bolt of lightning. Thus in this chapter I follow her cue by unpacking the appreciation for simplicity that I kept encountering, focusing primarily on its rhetorical, linguistic and performative aspects. What did simplicity entail in terms of rhetoric, language and performative style in the mid 2000s? And in which dynamics of religious change could it be rooted? I begin with the latter question, which I approach by resurrecting the work of Madeleine Biardeau.

Simplicity, instantaneity and religious change

As several textbooks on Hinduism suggest, disenchantment with the difficult has been vital in generating rhizomatic offshoots from the Vedic tradition of the Brahmans, and thus in shaping the history of religion in India. The strongest proponent of this view is probably the French Indologist Madeleine Biardeau (1994), who considers both Buddhism and the bhakti movement from which the present guru tradition developed, as responses to Brahmanic intellectualism: since the Brahman tradition holds that Truth has been revealed in the Vedic scriptures once and for all, its Brahman custodians had little to contribute beyond interpretations and commentaries. This gave their teaching a scholastic, intellectualist form (Biardeau 1994: 76), which combined with their elaborate rituals made Vedic religion rather intricate. Buddhism, in contrast, which began to develop around the fifth century bce, had no corresponding belief in permanent principles of Truth that could be captured in static structures of thought and language. In Buddhist thought all ideas – like human beings and objects – are transient and will ultimately cause suffering. To advance acceptance for this view, Buddhism emphasized devotion and direct sensory experience, which privileged instantaneity over intellectualism. These features were cultivated further in the Bhakti movement

which emerged in South India around the fifth century and spread to North India from the thirteenth century onwards (Brockington 1997). Like Buddhism the bhakti cults bypassed the authority of Brahman priests, turned away from extensive rituals and downplayed caste. In addition they used vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit or Pali and advocated personal devotion to God. Thus Bhakti has been explicitly characterized as a 'simplification' (see, for instance, Ishwaran 1981: 81; Sadarangani 2004: 95) or a 'reform movement' (Jones 1994). Its critique of intellectualism has also influenced the guru tradition, where one often hears that books and intellectual thought are irrelevant or even counterproductive for truth-seeking.[3] Such statements resonate with the view of the Bhagavad Gita and certain other texts that the shifty faculty of discursive thinking (*manas*) is inferior to the subtler consciousness known as *buddhi*, which in turn is subordinate to one's true self, *atman* (Armstrong and Ravindra 1979; Halliburton 2002).

Certain bhakti saints and gurus nevertheless included rather intricate matters in their teaching. Biardeau offers two explanations for this. One is the cross-influence that occurred over the centuries between bhakti saints or gurus one the one hand, and the Brahmanic tradition on the other. Another is the coexistence of intellectualism and instantaneity in all these religious currents from the very beginning, which I find particularly interesting. To appreciate the latter point, it is helpful to know that Biardeau's analysis is rooted in the French structuralist tradition of Louis Dumont (cf. Fuller 1991). Rather than tracing the historical development of each major current within Hinduism and thereby foregrounding their differences, she seeks to understand their underlying 'holistic unity' (Biardeau 1994: 159). Her analysis thus emphasizes the values, beliefs and practices that recur *across* its many currents and scriptures, one of which she claims to be the opposition between instantaneity and intellectualism. In the Vedic religion of the Brahmans intellectualism was primary and instantaneity subordinate; in Buddhism and bhakti the value hierarchy had been reversed, she argues.[4] In the bhakti movement, she continues, devotion and instantaneity certainly predominated but Brahmanic doctrines were more pronounced than most scholars have acknowledged. As a Weberian addendum to Biardeau I also mention the routinization that may follow the passing of a guru and stimulate interpretations and commentaries, particularly if the guru's legacy is transferred to a formal organization or a less charismatic adept (*shishya*) (see Weber 1964: 363–73). Having said that, we also find successors who teach in a more instantaneous way than his guru, as exemplified by Daniel Gold (this volume). Gender is also of significance here, as the emphasis on personal experience is particularly strong in movements spearheaded by female gurus (Pechilis, this volume). Whether the coexistence of instantaneity and intellectualism in the guru tradition is caused by hierarchical reversal, cross-influence, routinization/elaboration of charisma or gender differences, a quick glance at the diversity among contemporary gurus certainly confirms their coexistence: some make frequent references to the Vedas and other scriptures; others rely on folk tales and analogies (Narayan 1989). Some have a fair knowledge of Sanskrit; others do not (cf. Bharati 1976: 173; Parry 1985). Some incorporate Vedic rituals, others argue against them. Some teach in a serene, lecture-like

manner; others dance around in divine joy. Such differences may also be reproduced *within* guru movements (cf. Morse, this volume). In short, it is easy to understand why my Delhi acquaintance found some gurus more difficult to understand than others.

In spite of certain problematic aspects of Biardeau's overall analysis (see Fuller 1991; Kumar 2010), her identification of intellectualism and instantaneity as a central opposition in Indian religious life resonates remarkably well with the simple/difficult opposition I encountered during my fieldwork in Delhi and Haridwar. My female acquaintance was seconded by a 53-year-old bank manager in Delhi who explained his appreciation for Walsch's bestseller *Conversations with God* (1996) by praising its 'simple and clear concepts'. Likewise, a septuagenarian ashram-resident in Haridwar described her fascination for Osho with her appreciation for his 'simple language' whether she read him in English or Hindi; and a marketing professional in his fifties whom I met at a meditation course in Delhi spent many a break convincing me about the excellence of certain *pranayama* (breath control) techniques and yoga *asana*s (bodily postures) by maintaining that 'These techniques are very simple. Easy to remember, and easy to do.' Maya Warrier notes a similar appreciation for simplicity among followers of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission – in particular the absence of intellectualism and Sanskrit (Warrier 2005: 71–2), and simplicity could even be alluded to by gurus themselves, as when Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who spearheads the Art of Living movement, claimed that 'Spirituality is not boring. It is the rasa (flavor) of life. Don't make it a serious topic, or it will become just another compartment. Spirituality should be like gossip – casual and intimate' (Chopra 2000). Simplicity, I suggest, is a central but only partly explicit value that aids spiritual seeking in India's complex religious field, thereby amplifying, if not generating, the present spiritual turn.

What simplicity entailed beyond language and effort was difficult to elicit. To unpack the notion of simplicity further I thus proceed by analysing the characteristics of the spiritual literature, gurus and movements they either preferred or rejected. Based on observations of a number of spiritual gatherings, talks and texts, I emphasize the following aspects of simplicity, as perceived by urban middle-class seekers in the mid 2000s: (i) a rhetorical aspect with a growing preference for autobiographical and impressionist styles; (ii) a linguistic aspect with a growing preference for simple Hindi or English; and (iii) a performative aspect with a growing preference for intimacy and playfulness. A closer scrutiny of rituals and other religious practices would have brought out additional aspects, not least efficacy, aesthetics and sensory effects, some of which border on the better researched opposition between entertainment and boredom (see e.g. Schechner 1994; Kaur 2005; Nuckolls 2007). So which kinds of gurus were rejected by the average middle-class seeker as too 'difficult'? I begin by looking at spiritual rhetoric.

The autobiographic and impressionist turn

Ever since Aristotle it has been known that persuasion depends as much on rhetoric as on content. While Aristotle himself is best known for tripartition of *logos*

(the use of reasoning), *patos* (appeal to emotions) and *ethos* (emphasizing the credibility of the speaker), modern studies of rhetoric have identified numerous additional styles. Expanding the perspective that Kirin Narayan employed in *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels* (1989) to examine how a guru anonymized as Swamiji employed narratives in his religious teaching, I suggest that contemporary spiritual talks and texts in India typically rely on either *didactic, narrative, autobiographic* or *impressionist* styles, with a growing preference for the latter two. My examples are drawn from texts since I did not tape-record the spiritual events I attended,[5] and the texts are all in English since this was the preferred reading language of the seekers with whom I associated.[6]

A didactic style is characterized by a realism without a clear subject or plot, which makes it resemble the genre of numerous textbooks. As an example I quote from a compilation of the teachings of the South Indian sage Ramana Maharishi (1879–1950), which I was given by a seasoned spiritual seeker with the warning that 'this is not for beginners'. The compilation begins and ends like this:

> 1. The One Self, the Sole Reality, alone exists eternally. When even the Ancient Teacher, Dakshinamurti, revealed it through speechless Eloquence, who else could have conveyed it by speech?
> 2. Reality is at once Being and Consciousness. To know That is to be That in the Heart, transcending thought. Absolute surrender to the Supreme Lord, whereby the 'I' and 'mine' are destroyed, is the one means to realize Immortality. The Supreme Being, the one ultimate cause of the universe, manifests Himself as many which do not exist apart from Him. To destroy the ego and BE as the Self, is the supreme method of attainment.
> 3. To him who is one with the formless Self, everything is formless. Existence of the world is merely relative. The world is really synonymous with the mind. Since it is knowledge that illuminates the world, the former is ulterior to the latter. That Knowledge alone is real which ever remains changeless. Worship under name and form is only a means to realize one's absolute identity with the Nameless and Formless.
> (. . .)
> 125. There is no greater mystery than this, that, being the Reality ourselves, we seek to gain Reality. We think that there is something binding our Reality and that it must be destroyed before the Reality is gained. It is ridiculous. A day will dawn when you will yourself laugh at your effort. That which is on the day of laughter is also now.
>
> OM TAT SAT
>
> (Rajeswarananda 2003)

Contentwise the book revolves around self-inquiry, non-dualism and silence. Its style is highly condensed. Many of the sentences require considerable contemplation before they begin to make sense. The text is virtually unaided by parables, analogies or examples. It contains hardly any characters except the Supreme being and the 'I' which must be dissolved. The frequent use of capital letters gives the text

an old-fashioned flavour. Combined, these features make Swami Rajeswarananda's summary of Ramana Maharishi's teachings fairly concentration-requiring. Yet it could have been worse. The book contains no Sanskrit *sloka*s (verses) that would have offered resistance to people with as rudimentary a knowledge of Sanskrit as that of the average seeker I met. Its density was nevertheless significant, which was why it was handed to me with an accompanying warning. Its density may also explain why I met very few others who had read summaries of Ramana's teachings, and why spiritual books written in a similar style normally were rejected as 'difficult' or 'boring' even if authored by notabilities such as Satya Sai Baba or Sri Ashutosh Ji Maharaj.

In a narrative style the message is facilitated by plots, parables and analogies with real or fictional characters, which reduce the textbook-like impression although the aim remains educational. As Narayan (1989) argues, narratives enable spiritual teachers to impart knowledge in an entertaining way by engaging the interpretive faculty of the listeners. This may be why narrative religious transmission extends all the way back to the Jataka tales, the Panchatantra and the Bible. One of those who commonly made use of narratives was Osho (a.k.a. Bhagwan Shree Ranjeesh, 1931–1990), here represented by an excerpt from the book *From Sex to Superconsciousness*, a compilation of talks he gave in 1968:

> My beloved ones,
>
> Early one morning before sunrise, a fisherman arrived at a river. On the bank he stumbled against something and found it to be a small sack of stones. He picked up the sack, and putting his net aside, sat down on the bank to await the sunrise. He was waiting for dawn to break in order to start his day's work. Lazily he picked a stone out of the bag and threw it into the quiet river. Then he cast another stone and then another. In the silence of the early morning he liked the splashing sound, so he kept tossing the stones into the water one by one.
>
> Slowly the sun rose, it became light. By that time he had thrown all the stones away except one; the last stone lay in his palm. His heart almost failed him, he was breathless when he saw by the daylight what he held in his hand. It was a diamond! He had thrown a whole sack of them away; this was the last piece in his hand. He shouted. He cried. He had accidentally stumbled upon so much wealth that his life would have been enriched many times over. But in the darkness, unknowingly, he had thrown it all away.
>
> (Osho 2003: 33–34)

With this story Osho introduced the topic of what we may have lost and thrown away in our lives without understanding its value before it is too late, and how we can salvage whatever is left. In contrast to Narayan's Swamiji, Osho does not leave the interpretation to his readers but moves on to offer his own, which makes his texts oscillate between a narrative and a didactic style. Such oscillations were welcomed by his readers, as Osho's books – most of which had been compiled after his passing – remained widely read 15 years later. The book I quoted from

here was particularly remarkable. Not only did it thematize sexuality despite its unspeakability in most Indian contexts; it even advocated an acceptance of sexual desire, though primarily as a phase one needs to transcend to attain *samadhi* (bliss). Thus it was with great surprise I observed elderly retirees reading this book in Haridwar. One woman commented that 'he explains things very well' though she disliked his stance on sexuality. Another appreciated the way in which his 'simple language' had enhanced her understanding of how she could attain *moksha* (liberation from rebirth) through right living. Even his sceptics appreciated his style, such as the retired doctor who termed him a 'perverted genius'. Spiritual teachers who mastered an Osho-like oscillation between narratives and didactics were typically praised as 'interesting' and 'very good'. Even so, they met growing competition from spiritual teachers who employed more novel rhetorical styles.

One of these was the autobiographical account in which the spiritual teacher weaves his teachings into a narrative that revolves around the author himself. While religious autobiographies have been around for at least 2,000 years in Europe,[7] Hindu autobiographies did not develop until the early twentieth century. Not only did the autobiographical genre challenge the sociocentricity that characterized Indian selfhood (cf. Arnold and Blackburn 2004); religious autobiographies were unthinkable since their self-centeredness was contracictory to Hindu ideals of selfhood and spiritual greatness. As Sudipta Kaviraj puts it, 'The saint never recites his own life, his moral achievements; someone less capable of such excellence does' (2004: 87). When the Bengali intellectual and religious reformer Pandit Sivanath (or Sibnath) Sastri nonetheless published India's first autobiography in 1918, it was a move enabled by Christian influences and a growing turn to an inner God in the Brahmo movement of which Sastri was part (Kaviraj 2004). The religious autobiography that is most widely read in India today, however, is Paramhansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, first published in Los Angeles in 1946. Here is an excerpt from the first page:

> *My Parents and Early Life*
> The characteristic features of Indian culture have long been a search for ultimate verities and the concomitant disciple–guru relationship.
>
> My own path led to a Christlike sage; his beautiful life was chiseled for the ages. He was one of the great masters who are India's truest wealth. Emerging in every generation, they have bulwarked their land against the fate of ancient Egypt and Babylonia.
>
> I find my earliest memories covering the anachronistic features of a previous incarnation. Clear recollections came to me of a distant life in which I had been a yogi amid the Himalayan snows. These glimpses of the past, by some dimensionless link, also afforded me glimpses of the future.
>
> I still remember the helpless humiliations of infancy. I was then resentfully conscious of being unable to walk and to express myself freely. Prayerful surges arose within me as I realized my bodily impotence. My strong

> emotional life was mentally expressed in words of many languages. Amid the inward confusion of tongues, I gradually became accustomed to hearing the Bengali syllables of my people. The beguiling scope of an infant's mind! adultly considered to be limited to toys and toes.
>
> (Yogananda 1946: 1)

The book proceeds with glimpses from the author's childhood and education, describes his meeting with his master, Sri Yukteswar, and outlines the spiritual turning points, supernatural experiences and personal encounters that shaped his development from a young disciple to a 'missionary' of meditation in the USA. Into this story Yogananda weaves insights about being and the divine, and his underlying yearning for unity with the absolute and dissolution of his own self generates an additional tension with the self-centeredness of the autobiographical genre. The book was written in California, and Yogananda's choice of genre may just as well have been influenced by his American devotees as by Shastri's or later religious autobiographies from India.[8] At any rate it became a huge success and still has a remarkable readership among Indian and Western seekers alike. In his overview of Indian gurus, for instance, Sujan Singh Uban reports that Yogananda's autobiography was one of the first spiritual books he ever read (1977: 19). Likewise, the man who gave me the Maharishi compilation claimed to have been enormously inspired by Yogananda's autobiography when he was young, and one of those I met claimed to have read it no less than ten times. Needless to say, Yogananda's wide readership in India was a formidable advantage to his American disciple Swami Kriyananda, now an elderly charismatic spiritual educator himself, when he decided to expand his Ananda Sangha movement from the USA and Italy to India in 2003 (cf. Frøystad 2009), thus widening Yogananda's readership further. The extensive circulation of this book was also enabled by its many translations and formats,[9] but the main reason for its popularity was its enthralling autobiographical style. Though several other spiritual leaders have since authored autobiographies of their own, none have acquired as large a readership as Yogananda.

The most novel rhetorical style was the impressionist one in which the author recounts events roughly in the order they occurred to enable the reader to 'as far as possible (. . .) feel what the [writer] saw, heard and felt' (Van Maanen 1988: 103). Besides its narrative emplotment and autobiography-like subject positioning, impressionist writing employs an oral, evocative style that activates a remarkable Aristotelian pathos. Impressionist spiritual literature was an unknown terrain in India until Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations of God* (1996) appeared in the Indian bookstores. This is how it begins.

> In the spring of 1992 – it was around Easter as I recall – an extraordinary phenomenon occurred in my life. God began talking with you. Through me.
>
> Let me explain.
>
> I was very unhappy during that period, personally, professionally, and emotionally, and my life was feeling like a failure on all levels. As I'd been

> in the habit for years of writing my thoughts down in letters (which I usually never delivered), I picked up my trusty yellow legal pad and began pouring out my feelings.
>
> This time, rather than another letter to another person I imagined to be victimizing me, I thought I'd go straight to the source; straight to the greatest victimizer of them all. I decided to write a letter to God.
>
> It was a spiteful, passionate letter, full of confusions, contortions, and condemnations. And a *pile* of angry questions.
>
> (. . .)
>
> To my surprise, as I scribbled out the last of my bitter, unanswerable questions and prepared to toss my pen aside, my hand remained poised over the paper, as if held there by some invisible force. Abruptly, the pen began *moving on its own*. I had no idea what I was about to write, but an idea seemed to be coming, so I decided to flow with it. Out came . . .
>
> **Do you really want an answer to all these questions, or are you just venting?**
>
> (Walsch 1996: 1, italics and font change in the original)

In the pages that follow God teaches Walsch how to become more attentive to his presence in everyday situations and to judge his actions according to his own standards rather than to societal norms. As we see, his evocative style includes a minute chronology, informal expressions, the use of italics to highlight emphasis and surprise, and not least a different font to represent the voice of God far more evocatively than what one would have achieved with quotations in inverted commas. The sheer novelty of these features turned *Conversations with God* into a spiritual bestseller, which prompted Walsch to write two sequels. Despite the author's American Roman Catholic background and non-mention of Hindu strands of thought, the Conversations trilogy became an enormous success in India. I first encountered it on the bookshelf of an 80-year-old government retiree from Delhi who spent most of his time in Haridwar. Later it was recommended to me by a Delhi housewife half his age on the grounds that people claimed it to be authentic. Yet the middle-aged bank manager I mentioned in the introduction was undoubtedly the greatest Walsch fan I met: he claimed to have read the first volume 13 times and the third four or five times. Besides his enthusiasm over its simple language, he was thrilled to have found spiritual literature that resonated with his own efforts to communicate with spirits as a young man. These people were not alone: a workshop had crystallized around these books in Mumbai some years earlier, and the first volume had been translated into Marathi (Varughese 2000).

Both the autobiographical and impressionist rhetorical styles enhanced the cherished sense of simplicity and instantaneity that influenced middle-class spiritual seeking. Besides informing the choice of spiritual literature, they also influenced the selection of a suitable guru or movement when the seeker was ready to move on from inspirational reading, which gave rhetoric a vital role in India's spiritual transformation. Before moving on to the performative aspect of simplicity I pause to take a closer look at the role of language.

Anglicization

I have mentioned that many urban middle-class seekers read spiritual literature in English and found frequent references to Sanskrit verses thorny. What role does language play in spiritual choice? In this section I suggest that the increase of English-medium education made it difficult for a growing number of people to follow, much less speak, the formal style of Hindi considered appropriate for religious topics, and that English was further promoted by migration and class cocooning. As Srinivas Aravamudan shows in *Guru English* (2006), the use of English to explain Hindu religious doctrines is not new. It extends all the way back to the Bengali Brahmo Sabha founder Rammohan Roy (1774–1833) and his translations of Shankara's Vedanta interpretations, and gained further ground with international figures such as Vivekananda, Yogananda and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. A more recent development is the growing use of English in India, for Indian followers. It is symptomatic that India's first generic 'mind body spirit' magazine *Life Positive* was only published in English when it saw the light of day in 1996. Only nine years later did the owners consider the market sufficiently ripe for a Hindi edition.[10] The transition to English was not limited to writing. Consider, for instance, the following fieldnote excerpt from an annual event in the Maitreya Preksha Seva Mission in May 2004. Inspired by G. W. Ballard's 'I AM' movement, an offshoot of theosophy, the Maitreya Mission awaits the coming of the great master Lord Maitreya, evokes divine rays and addresses the divine by means of affirmation and so-called decrees. The event took place in Noida, Delhi's new trans-Yamuna suburb, as a part of its Wesak festival,[11] and turned out to be a two-day session of talks, decrees and meditations. I enter my fieldnotes shortly after the female leader, Shyama Raj, had welcomed the participants, adjusted her sari and begun to speak:

> Our thoughts are either negative or positive; *neutral nahin hota hai* (they are never neutral). Do you know Kabir? Sanjiv here [nods at her associate, who sits next to her] is very fond of Kabir and often recites his *doha*s (couplets). It is said that the being that incarnated himself as Kabir came from a very high cosmic level. Later again he became Shirdi Sai Baba. It was great souls like them and the creator of the Bahá'í faith who made the platform that will pave the way for the Golden Age. Now, Kabir chose to take birth among poor parents who made a living of spinning and weaving clothes. Kabir once said that he weaves God's name in every joint, something that makes his *kapra* (cloth) far better than the *kapra* made by others. Many people spin negative karmas without wanting to. Without trying and struggling, such as when you struggled to find the way to this auditorium in Noida, how can you ever reach enlightenment? If we work harder to weave God, our negative karmas will get transmuted. Master Djwal Kul, the ascended master who was a Tibetan monk, brings spiritual unity and tells us to keep our mind steady in the light of God. Even if it is fear that drives you to make *halva* (semolina pudding) for *prasad* (offering), you nevertheless weave the *kapra* of God.[12]

This quotation is reproduced from notes I made during the talk, which I expanded the same evening. While not as accurate as a transcribed recording, it gives a fair impression of Shyama Raj's use of English interspersed with words and phrases in Hindi. The Maitreya Mission was not alone in its reliance on English. Several of the movements I followed in Delhi relied on English as their main medium of teaching, relegating Hindi and other vernaculars for off-stage clarifications and small-talk during the breaks. To make sense of this Anglicization I pause to outline what many Hindi speakers conceptualize as a Sanskrit–English continuum.

At the Sanskrit pole, I encountered at least two understandings of what it meant to 'know' Sanskrit. In conventional religious settings such as evening *aratis* (fire worship) in the temples, knowing Sanskrit entailed the ability to recite long series of Sanskrit verses correctly, whether by heart or by reading (cf. Parry 1985). In the spiritual movements I followed, however, 'knowing' Sanskrit had increasingly come to entail the ability to discern its meaning, if not word for word then at least its main message. Hardly any of the seekers I met knew Sanskrit in either sense: in the Haridwar ashram temple an attempt to recite the verses when the ashram *pandit* (priest) was ill dissolved in embarrassed laughter, and during a weekend retreat to Rishikesh with meditators from Delhi there was much discussion about what the Gayatri mantra 'really' meant, which remained unresolved until someone recalled how their guru had once interpreted it. In addition, many were clearly confused by the different interpretations that circulated of central Sanskrit concepts. The term *jivanmukt*, for instance, was usually explained as liberation from rebirth while still retaining one's physical body, but I also heard it explained as freedom from suffering and even as inner happiness. Sanskrit, in short, was becoming increasingly 'difficult'.

In-between the dead language of the ancient scriptures and the elite lingua franca disseminated by the former colonial power, the middle-class Hindi speakers I have met over the years tended to distinguish between four shades of Hindi, graded according to their purity and complexity.[13] *Shuddh* (pure) Hindi is a Sanskritized Hindi decontaminated from the many Persian, Arabic, Urdu and English loanwords that entered everyday Hindustani during Persian, Moghul and British rule. A cultural symbol of the Independence movement (cf. Shackle and Snell 1990: 43), shuddh Hindi became the 'official' language of the Hindi news bulletins when All India Radio and the TV channel Doordarshan went on air in 1936 and 1965 respectively. *Saaf* (clean) or standard Hindi is the moderately Sanskritized language used by contemporary authors, newspapers, government institutions and schools – in other words, the currently 'correct' Hindi despite its many loanwords from the aforementioned languages. *Kitchari* (mix, mess) Hindi refers to the everyday spoken language,[14] which tends to be a mixture of *saaf* Hindi, other vernaculars (typically Punjabi in Delhi) and English. This is the language of Bollywood movies, TV serials and everyday life in the states that surround Delhi. And then there is Hinglish, the neologism which comprises everything from kitchari Hindi to English dotted with Hindi idioms or syntax. The English end of the continuum was also graded. At the upper end was the kind of English one spoke if one had lived in an English-speaking country, which hardly any of my acquaintances had.

At the lower end was the broken English spoken by people who had been educated in Hindi, which brings me to the medium of education.

When I lived in Kanpur to study local expressions of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s, I spent considerable time with middle-class people of upper-caste background born in the 1940s and 1950s. Besides the kitchari Hindi they spoke at home and the saaf Hindi they encountered in the news media, their language proficiency depended on their education. Those educated in Hindi-medium schools typically understood shuddh Hindi and some English but spoke neither with confidence, whereas the English-medium educated people generally understood and spoke (H)english but had severe problems with shuddh Hindi since they missed out on most of the Sanskritized words. Many of the latter were frustrated by Doordarshan's news bulletins (see also Rajagopal 2001: 82) and applauded the launch in 1992 of Zee TV, whose news reports were presented in a less complicated Hindi. Doing fieldwork among middle-class seekers in Delhi over a decade later I encountered a far higher proportion of people with an English-medium language competence. Not that I ever prioritized movements that used English as their main language. My selection criterion being incorporation of meditation of some kind, I had hoped to attend more spiritual events in Hindi. But as it turned out, Hindi-language spiritual events of the kind in which I was interested were the exception rather than the rule.

There are at least four reasons for this. First, the historical hegemony and accuracy of Sanskrit in Hindu contexts fostered an expectation that, if a religious talk was to be given in Hindi, it had better be a saaf Hindi bordering on shuddh. Consider the grumbles I heard following a religious discourse I once attended in the ashram temple in Haridwar. The English-educated founder of the ashram was about to emphasize the importance of overcoming one's bad virtues (*avgunas*) in his *saaf*est *kitchari* Hindi but had to ask the audience for the Hindi term for 'will power', which they after some discussion agreed corresponded to *iccha-shakti*. The way in which this question interrupted the flow of the talk and damaged his religious credibility ('doesn't even speak a word of Sanskrit', an elderly woman sneered on her way out) suggests that, unless a religious speaker masters an immaculate Hindi that assures an acceptable religious precision, he or she might as well turn to English. Second, the number of English speakers in India was on a rapid rise. No longer confined to the elite, English-medium private schools now mushroomed even in working-class neighbourhoods and small towns (Krishnakumar 2004) as more and more families saw English as the key to social mobility. Between 1995 and 2005 the enrolment in private schools (whereof most used English) rose from 10.5 to 16.9 per cent – and to 30.4 per cent in Delhi (National Sample Survey Organisation 2006: 34–5). These schools would usually teach Hindi and Sanskrit classes as well,[15] but the proficiency that their pupils gained in these languages could not compare with that of Hindi-medium pupils, and in the newest generation of small-town private schools the English they learned was not always on a par with the English of upscale private schools either. Third, Delhi – where I did most of my fieldwork – was home to many white-collar migrants who knew English better than Hindi. Shyama Raj was a case in point. Born in Andhra Pradesh she had grown up with Telugu, not Hindi, as her mother

tongue. In spite of being fairly fluent in Hindi, she found English easier still given her English-medium education. Using English, she further reckoned, enabled her to reach other migrants and perhaps some foreigners too, which also suggests the 'scale-making' dimension (cf. Tsing 2005) of language choice. Fourth, English served as a way to maximize the number of elite and middle-class followers while keeping members of the lower classes away, a goal which several spiritual teachers stated explicitly though their rationalizations varied. One needed investors for a new ashram; another referred to caste differences and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to argue that non-English speakers would be insufficiently advanced for spiritual teaching of this kind; and a third reasoned that a certain homogeneity of class helped the participants to bond properly with one another.

All in all, the growth of English-medium education and Hinglish everyday speech was making it difficult for a growing proportion of the urban middle class to understand religious teaching in Hindi without considerable concentration. Other matters being equal, most of the seekers I met would rather opt for a weekend retreat in English than one in Hindi, the former enabling a stronger sense of simplicity and instantaneity.

Intimacy and playfulness

In her study of the Mata Amritanandamayi movement Maya Warrier remarks that some members of the urban middle class prefer intimate gurus like Mata while others appreciate serenity (2003: 40–2). This is certainly true, but which of these styles draw largest crowds, and why? My own observations suggest that spiritual teachers who mastered an intimate and playful performative style had a clear edge over the others, and that playfulness and intimacy were closely connected to bodily movement and voice modulation. I base my argument on what Richard Schechner terms the 'theatre' pole of performances such as a religious event. According to Schechner, all performances may be located along an analytical continuum spanned out between a theatre pole and a ritual pole. The theatre pole is characterized by entertainment and fun, an audience that watches more than it participates, and is directed at those who are present here and now. In contrast the ritual pole is marked by efficacy, an audience that participates and believes, and is directed at a transcendent Other such as a god, ancestor or divine king (1994; 2003: 130). My emphasis on the theatre pole is grounded in the fact that the spiritual events in which I participated tended to devote far more time to verbal inspiration and instruction than to ritual. This made voice modulation and bodily movement crucial aspects of guru assessment, and to illustrate their significance I contrast two ethnographic vignettes that bring out the difference between a serene style and an intimate and playful one. I begin with a snippet from a meeting in the Divya Jyoti Jagrati Sansthan movement spearheaded by Ashutosh Ji Maharaj and chaired by his female associate Sanghmita Bharati:

> The event is about to begin. One by one people take off their shoes, enter the room, greet or prostrate in front of the large photograph of Ashutosh Ji

> Maharaj, and sit down on the floor, men to the right and women to the left. After a brief introduction three women enter, first two teenaged girls wearing bright yellow *salwar–kurtas*, then Sanghmita Bharati herself, wearing a bright orange sari. Bharati sits down cross-legged on the dais, takes the microphone, shouts '*Ashutosh Maharaj ki . . . .*?' and waits for the '*. . . jay!*' from the audience. She does this three times. The two girls sing a few introductory *bhajan*s (hymns) with smileless faces. Then Sanghmita Bharati begins to speak. Her Hindi borders on *shuddh*; and she talks about Ishwar (God) and human *chetan* (consciousness) in a loud, monotonous voice. She speaks rapidly, as if she has numerous points to make before the time is up. Throughout her talk she sits motionless, her expression blank but serene. Half an hour later she is done, the young girls sing a few concluding *bhajan*s and the participants receive blessed offerings (*prasad*), find their shoes and leave.

The meeting was attended by around 50 participants, all of a seemingly more modest class background than those I met at the Wesak festival in Noida.[16] Let me now contrast Sanghmita Bharati's serene style with that of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who tends to draw larger and more well-heeled crowds. The following field note excerpt is from a *satsang* (gathering) in Delhi's Punjabi Bagh neighbourhood. Its topic was the Japjee Sahib, the opening verses of the Sikh holy scripture Guru Grant Sahib:

> The outdoor space is as large as a football field and enclosed by a white makeshift wall punctuated by entrance gates decorated with flowers. Along with thousands of others I enter, remove my shoes and sit down on the ground. The stage is beautifully decorated, and we wait for the event to begin. A woman enters the stage to sing a long introductory *bhajan*. After twenty minutes or so a buzz goes through the audience: '*Guruji a rahe haĩ*! (Master is coming!)'. And there he is. Wearing a white robe with golden borders, he tosses his long hair back and walks quickly, almost jogs, toward the stage while he smiles at the audience. When four prominent Sikhs appear next to him to tie a turban around his head and a sword (*talvar*) around his waist, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar smiles like a child and lets them adorn him as a Sikh. When they are done he pulls the sword out from its sheath, holds it up like a warrior and giggles. The audience laughs. *Sat sri akal!* he greets them, and once they fall quiet he begins to talk, opening with meaning of *sat sri akal, pranam* and other Indian greetings, continuing with his interpretation of the Japjee Sahib, and concluding by emphasizing the similarity of all religions and the irrelevance of specific religious communities such as Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam. He speaks surprisingly clean (*saaf*) Hindi for a South Indian. With a voice so soft and high that it could have belonged to a woman he continuously varies his tone to emphasize his points, which makes me feel that he speaks directly to *me*.
>
> Sri Sri Ravi Shankar hardly moves during his talk, but his physical expressivity returns during the question-and-answer session that follows. Among the questions are what death is like, whether it is important to be vegetarian,

> and how to stop thinking about money. His facial expressions shift as he answers. Sometimes he looks questioning (with eyebrows raised), sometimes smiling (deepening the fine wrinkles around his eyes) and sometimes more serene (when explaining things), in-between which he frequently shakes his head to keep his long hair away from his face.

Religious principles and gender aside, Sanghmita Bharati and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar were remarkably different as far as their performative styles were concerned. While Bharati spoke in a loud, monotonous voice and kept her body and face still while speaking, Shankar spoke in an unusually modulated voice, frequently moving his body and face. Indeed, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's expressivity was one of his trademarks, one which was imperative for his popularity. Combined with his frequent use of evocative stories and his competent but uncomplicated language in Hindi, English, Kannada and Tamil alike, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was one of India's ultimate embodiments of instantaneity in the 2000s. This is probably what he had in mind when he claimed that spirituality should be casual and intimate rather than serious and boring. Intimacy, in this context, has nothing to do with physical contact, and far less contact of a sexual kind. Indeed, gurus rumoured to have illicit sexual relations would almost invariably suffer a legitimacy loss since they ideally should have achieved a spiritual level that has nullified their sexual drive.[17] Intimacy was rather the ability to address listeners in such a manner that it draws them near and makes them feel as if the speaker talks directly to *them*. To master such an intimacy in front of large audiences as well as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar did so necessitates a comment on the role of technological meditation.

Imagine yourself standing in front of hundreds or thousands of people with no technological aid. How would you get your message across? The first requirement is to train your voice. The ancient Greek statesman and public speaker Demosthenes (384–322 BC) is said to have practised speaking with pebbles in his mouth and strengthened his voice by speaking against the roar of the waves. Likewise, in his book on public representation (1930), the Norwegian Prime Minister Einar Gerhardsen (1897–1987) recommended physical exercise and reading texts loudly outdoors. With the invention of megaphones, microphones, loudspeakers, magnetic tapes and radio transistors the need for a powerful voice was almost eradicated (cf. Kittler 1999: 37). Speakers could now talk to large audiences in the same voice modulation that they used when chatting with friends, which introduced a radically new sense of intimacy in public speaking (Johansen 2007). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was one of those who mastered technology-mediated intimacy to his fingertips. The second requirement when addressing large groups without technological aid is to decide whether your words require support from your body language, in which case you must exaggerate your movements for the benefit of those in the back. The invention of TV cameras and video screens has greatly diminished the need for movement exaggeration, though it remains common in technology-scarce zones such as theatres and opera houses. In Indian religious contexts an exaggerated body language is likely to have been rare even before the introduction of TV screens since it would have been at loggerheads with

the widespread emphasis on the subordination of the body to the subtler forms of the self.[18] Indeed, quite a few spiritual teachers give religious discourses with their bodies remarkably still, Sanghmita Bharati being a case in point. Visual technology nevertheless enabled a radically new style of bodily movement in which manual and facial gestures were cultivated to give an impression of naturalness and intimacy. Few spiritual teachers could afford 'live' technology mediation, but many had produced video recordings of previous talks, which were sold as VCDs or DVDs, posted on the internet or telecast on one of India's religious TV channels. This development had made middle-class seekers in Delhi accustomed to seeing spiritual teachers up close when they talked, which is why they increasingly perceived immobile speakers such as Sanghmita Bharati as something of a drag.

But techniques of the body die hard, and certain spiritual teachers would also use pre-microphone voices in front of a microphone and a restricted body language in front of a video camera. In the audio recordings that Paramhansa Yogananda made in the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, he shouts out his memories of his beloved guru and descriptions of meditational bliss with a loud and piercing voice, exaggerating each consonant and stressing every word. More than once I have heard Europeans remark that they could hardly bear to listen to these tapes because Yogananda's voice reminded them of Hitler, who like Yogananda was a first-generation microphone user. Even today many Indian spiritual teachers follow suit, particularly if accustomed to speaking in localities with erratic power supply, which may have been the case with Sanghmita Bharati. And many spiritual teachers kept their bodies surprisingly immobile also when being filmed, one example being Swami Ramdev, whose YouTube recordings from this period showed a slim orange-clad man lecturing in *padmasana* (crosslegged) with limited facial expression, only underlining his points with his hands and arms. To urban middle-class people accustomed to TV-mediated intimacy and appreciative of soft-spokenness and *mithi bhasha* (sweet speech, cf. Frøystad 2005: 113–16) such as my female acquaintance in South Delhi, the performative styles of Swami Ramdev and Sanghmita Bharati were off-putting in a way they found difficult to describe. True, Swami Ramdev loosened up over the years, and due to his frequent TV appearances, Ayurvedic medicines and emphasis on the health benefits of yoga (cf. Wirth 2011), he now enjoys an impressive middle-class following. In sum, performative style was a crucial criterion in urban middle-class guru seeking, though hardly anyone mentioned its importance explicitly. Having grown accustomed to the intimate and playful styles promoted by sound systems and TV screens, old-style immobility and flat voice modulation were rapidly losing appeal. Contemporary instantaneity required a novel technique of the body in which the guru's words were supported by body language, gestures, facial expression and voice. Without such support the guru's words would stand entirely alone and come across as more 'difficult' and 'boring' alike.

Concluding remarks

Suppose Biardeau is right in arguing that all religious currents within what we label Hinduism are marked by an opposition between intellectualism and instantaneity,

and that a (re)subordination of the former to the latter is vital in producing new religious currents, including the bhakti-rooted guru tradition. If so, both instantaneity and intellectualism have endured as core values through several millennia. At an abstract level this may well be so. But as the Indian society has changed, the concrete manifestations of instantaneity or intellectualism were bound to change with it. What came across as instantaneous and reinvigorating at the time of Adi Shankara (788–820 ce) may seem intellectualist and dry today. In the present chapter I have discussed some of the features that instantaneity entailed for middle-class spiritual seekers in Delhi and Haridwar in the mid 2000s. The term they used was simplicity, and their simplicity-motivated preference for one guru, movement or book over another have made me argue that spiritual simplicity has at least three aspects: a rhetorical one, a linguistic one and a performative one. The current ideal was the guru who employed an autobiographic or impressionist style and spoke English or simple Hindi accompanied by expressive body language and voice modulation. The kind of guru from which my middle-class acquaintances tended to turn away was the guru who employed a condensed, didactic style and spoke *shuddh* Hindi with a flat voice and an immobile body. This was probably the guru type that my female acquaintance in Delhi thought of as 'traditional'. Needless to say, such a prioritization left the way open for spiritual entrepreneurs and foreign influences alike, though it would be misleading to attribute such changes to instantaneity alone.

Before I close the subject I also want to mention the possibility that contemporary gurus and spiritual teachers make greater efforts to attract followers than before, which tempts them to simplify their teachings. Swami Satyeswarananda Giri (1991) explicitly criticizes Yogananda for popularity-motivated simplification, and a similar critique has been made against Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Follower competition may also take radically different forms, such as in the ostentatious blood donation camps arranged by rivalling Sikh sects (cf. Copeman, this volume). The fear of follower alienation is paralleled by a profound change in the guru–disciple relation. Previously gurus could be tremendously strict with their adepts. In 1955, for instance, a disciple of Yogi Bawa Hari Das reported that '[my] guruji is so strict that he nullified seven years of my austerities simply because I had slapped a self-confessed sinner in anger' (Uban 1977: 13). Such a punishment was unheard of in the 2000s. No guru or spiritual teacher seemed to expect the follower loyalty enjoyed by their predecessors, guru-swapping and parallel followship having almost replaced the classic long-term, devoted guru fellowship (cf. Warrier 2003). To attract followers before they were spiritually 'ripe', they not only simplified their teaching; they became as reliant on their communication skills as on the efficacy of their spiritual techniques.

Notes

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2 Rather than following a clear-cut Marxist, Bourdieu-inspired or quantitative delineation of the middle class, I make my point of departure in its members' self-understanding and distancing from strata they hold to be inferior (cf. Frøystad 2005; 2006). A central feature is their discrete distancing from the 'new' middle class, particularly if suspected of having benefitted from caste-based reservation of any kind.
3 Arguments about counterproductivity seem particularly common among Western devotees. Agehananda Bharati made a similar observation in the 1970s, which he attributed to intellectual laziness (Bharati 1976: 175).
4 Biardeau speculates that this process originated with the Aryan conquest: pre-Vedic religion is likely to have been a devotionalist religion that was incorporated by the conquerors but given a subordinate place (Biardeau 1994: 89).
5 I use the term 'spiritual event' as a generic reference to collective religious activities ranging from rituals, satsangs, pujas and prayer meetings to class-room teaching, lessons and inspirational talks.
6 I also encountered the first three styles in Hindi talks and books, but an analysis of Hindi texts would have illuminated additional rhetorical specificities as well.
7 A classic example is Aelius Aristides' *Sacred Tales*, in which the author describes his experiences with medical and divine healing following the great plague in Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) in 165 ad (Beard, North and Price 1998: 232).
8 According to Sandhya (2002) these include Swami Ramdas' *In Quest of God* (1923) and *In the Vision of God* (1935), Purohit Swami's *The Autobiography of an Indian Monk* (1932) and Sitanath Tattvabhushan's *Autobiography* (1942).
9 Yogananda's autobiography is available in English, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Nepali and several other Indian languages, and the English version is also available as an audio book, a free PDF version and a Kindle e-book.
10 Interview with Life Positive's founder-editor Parveen Chopra, 26 March 2004.
11 The festival was named after *baisaakh*, the second month in the lunar calendar.
12 Kabir was a highly revered fifteenth-century poet and mystic; Sai Baba of Shirdi a nineteenth-century saint and fakir, and Djwal Kul an ascended Tibetan master whom Madame Blavatsky and Alice Bailey claim to have dictated parts of their books. For more information on these characters, good places to begin are Hawley and Juergensmeyer (1988) and Zoller (2004) for Kabir, and Rigopolous (1993) for Shirdi Sai Baba.
13 The 'grades' of Hindi identified by my fieldwork acquaintances differed from the Hindi versions identified by linguists, such as *khariboli* and Hindustani.
14 *Kitchari* normally refers to a porridge-like mixture of rice, lentils and *ghi* (clarified butter) which is often used as diet for the sick.
15 The Indian Government has made it compulsory for all schools to teach three languages to obtain government recognition (LaDousa 2005). In Delhi and the surrounding states, most people opted for English, Hindi and Sanskrit.
16 This judgement is based on their clothing, appearance and mannerism, which I 'decoded' according to the model described in Frøystad (2006).
17 The massive media attention to Satya Sai Baba's alleged sexual overtures to men in the early 2000s and Swami Nithyananda's videotaped liaison with a woman in 2010 attest to the asexuality that a guru ideally should display. Most gurus are celibate, but recent years have also seen the emergence of guru couples such as Sri Bhagavan and Amma in Tamil Nadu.
18 This subordination is also reflected in the bodily asceticism which marks numerous Hindu practices, most famously in Mahatma Gandhi's fasting, naturopathic diet, and abstention from sex (cf. Alter 2000).

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10 The cosmopolitan guru

Spiritual tourism and ashrams in Rishikesh[1]

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The town of Rishikesh, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, is over 200 kilometers from Delhi, a half-day journey by train or road. And yet, despite this distance from a major international airport, the town has become known in recent decades as the yoga capital of the world. Its attraction for Westerners has increased along with the expansion of new forms of spirituality that emphasize personal experience over the conformity to external obligations often associated with 'religion' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Strauss (2005) has observed that yoga is a metonym for spirituality writ large and that its contemporary meanings and practice reflect modern transnational processes. Moreover, most Indians and non-Indians imagine spirituality as a quintessentially Indian trait and the country's gift to the West (Strauss 2005: 8–11). As the practice of yoga has become increasingly hybridized, transnational, and commodified, its definition has become contested. Even as yoga is transformed into aerobic workout, dance, and stress relief therapy, it has retained some association with India and its religious traditions. The nature of this association has resulted in a battle over the origins and ownership of yoga postures and techniques, one involving the Government of India, the Hindu America Foundation and those seeking US patents on yoga techniques they claim to have invented. The conservative Hindu America Foundation has launched a Take Back Yoga campaign to demand that yoga's debt to Hinduism be acknowledged by practitioners (*New York Times* Nov. 27, 2010), while the Government of India has initiated a project to document yoga techniques and postures in order to prevent the granting of international patents on traditional knowledge.[2] The cultural politics of yoga have intensified as its practice is embraced, transformed and appropriated.

Given the global visibility of yoga today, it is not surprising that Rishikesh's economy is increasingly oriented toward domestic and international tourism of the spiritual variety. Rishikesh is situated in the newly established mountainous state of Uttarkhand; it separated from Uttar Pradesh in 2000 to become India's twenty-seventh state with the interim name of Uttaranchal, but the name was changed to Uttarkhand in 2007. Rishikesh is a place of stunning natural beauty, a point of access to the great Himalayan pilgrimage sites sacred to Hindus – Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri – and home to mythical, historical and contemporary saints and sages. The city itself is quite new, but the region's ancient

association with monks and ascetics is embedded in mythology and scripture. Hindu pilgrimages to sacred sites in the high Himalayas have been taking place for almost three millennia and the pilgrim economy has long provided economic support for local populations (Singh 2005). In modern times, the establishment of roads for military purposes, trade and extraction of resources made the middle regions more accessible to visitors. British colonials established hill stations in the middle altitudinal belt across the Himalayas to provide escape during the hot summer months, and so introduced new ideas of travel for recreation and comfort. During the postcolonial era, social mobility, democratization of leisure and the notion of tourism as 'development' led to mass domestic tourism in the region. Singh reports that the state has the highest concentration of pilgrims in the world and that the government estimates about 10 million domestic tourists visited the state in 2001 (2005: 219). Most domestic travelers to the region are en route to pilgrimage sites. At the same time, for both domestic and foreign visitors, the distinction between leisure and pilgrimage is both fuzzy and shifting, for tourists may become more serious about religious pursuits and spiritual seekers also enjoy the amenities offered by the tourist economy.

Rishikesh continues to be more closely associated with Hindu monasticism and yoga than with either leisure activities or temples, despite its proximity to several hill stations and sacred sites. What was until the mid-twentieth century a quiet town of renouncers and forest hermitages gained international attention in the 1960s when the Beatles traveled there to meet their guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. This trend was furthered by Swami Sivananda's efforts to make Hindu knowledge and practices more accessible to non-Indians. He initiated foreigners into sannyasa (renunciation) and, beginning in the 1960s, sent both foreign and Indian disciples to other countries to share their knowledge, which then prompted further circulation of monks and lay followers between the Shivananda ashram in Rishikesh and its centers around the world. Rishikesh is now home to many transnationally-oriented gurus, who may visit devotees in other countries on a regular basis or attract foreign devotees to Rishikesh; most of these gurus are Indian, but they come from all parts of India. By 2005 when I spent three months in Rishikesh conducting ethnographic research, Rishikesh was not only the starting point for Hindu pilgrimage routes, but was also an international tourist destination positioned on what Hutnyk calls 'the banana-pancake trail' of Indian budget tourism (1996: 10).[3] The lack of luxury accommodation in town reflects the fact that most are trekkers or spiritual seekers. Approximately 55,000 international tourists visited the state in 2001 (Singh 2005: 219), and most would have included Rishikesh on their itinerary.

Rishikesh cannot be reduced to a destination for religious or spiritual tourists, for it is many other things as well, but my intent here is to explore cosmopolitanism in the context of spiritual tourism in a monastic center. While conducting research in Haridwar and Rishikesh in 1989–90s, I was struck by the contrast between the two places. The former was a religious site that attracted devout Hindus who came to purify themselves by bathing in the holy Ganga, to visit gurus in one of the many ashrams, or to conduct Hindu rites on the banks of the

river. The latter was a spiritual center that attracted both Indians and foreigners, Hindus and non-Hindus. Even though visitors arriving by car or train must pass through Haridwar to reach Rishikesh, most foreigners do just that – pass through – to reach their real destination.

Rishikesh's more cosmopolitan character was evident in a range of common auditory and visual cues, including the sound of foreign languages being spoken and cybercafés filled with ads for Indian cooking classes, Reiki treatments and used sleeping bags for sale. Outside the cybercafés, signs of foreign presence included rolls of toilet paper and bottles of drinking water artfully displayed in most shops. The city is organized to make people from wealthy countries (mostly in Western Europe and North America, but also Israel, Japan, South Africa, etc.) feel comfortable. It is a place where people from various regions of India and many countries interact, and where differences in language, dress, food, and ethnicity are hyper-visible. French tour groups can hear a lecture on Hindu philosophy delivered in English by a Tamilian monk with simultaneous translation into French. Yoga classes might be taught by an instructor from London, Tokyo, New York, or Delhi.

Given the likelihood of finding appropriate and affordable food, the company of other tourists, and English-speaking locals, we cannot assume that foreign tourists are any more cosmopolitan than the local residents who welcome (or tolerate) them. If Rishikesh caters to the tastes and habits of middle-class metropolitans, it raises the possibility that foreign visitors are not cosmopolitans at all, but rather 'metropolitan locals' (Hannerz 1996: 107). My concern here is not to evaluate the cosmopolitanism of foreign visitors, but rather to shift the focus to local residents, especially monastic residents, and the question of *their* cosmopolitanism. The anthropology of tourism has tended to focus on the 'host–guest' relationship and its (mostly negative) development consequences for host people, following the anthropological tradition of exploring the impact that actions of Western developed societies have on less developed societies (Nash 2001). Economic development is certainly part of the story in the expansion of Rishikesh, as my interviews with a government official and a tour operator show below, but here I am concerned with cosmopolitanism. Thus, my interest in the 'hosts' (or, rather, their hospitality) is not aimed at understanding the social and economic impact of tourism on their lives – certainly an important issue for further research – but rather on their role in creating a cosmopolitan atmosphere. My goal is to unsettle assumptions about cosmopolitanism that tend to associate it not only with tourists (and others who travel) rather than hosts, but also with secular rather than religious contexts.

Hannerz has suggested that those who move *and* have a willingness to engage the Other are cosmopolitans (Hannerz 1996: 103). Kaplan (1995) has critiqued the discourse that freedom to travel signals liberation for Euro-American women, such that cosmopolitanism is obtained through consumption in a world without boundaries. Similarly, Peter van der Veer (2002b) has pointed to Western imperialism as the enabling condition for the prototypical enlightened intellectuals (colonial officials, missionaries and anthropologists) to embrace such engagement.

Werbner (1999) has critiqued the longstanding assumption that cosmopolitanism is the prerogative of elites and has demonstrated that working-class people can be cosmopolitans who familiarize themselves with other cultures and move easily between them. Even so, scholars continue to view as quintessential cosmopolitans those who travel, including refugees, diasporics, migrants, and exiles (Pollock, et al. 2002: 6). More recently, Werbner (2008) has pointed out that travelers must rely on hosts who enable the emergence of a cosmopolitan dialogue. This raises the question of hospitality that I take up here in the context of Rishikesh. Most foreigners are drawn to Rishikesh by an interest in yoga, meditation and spirituality, albeit with divergent degrees of seriousness. In what ways do 'local' discourses, practices, and institutions *enable* the self-conscious cosmopolitanism of these spiritual tourists and seekers in Rishikesh?

Should we categorize those who host international visitors as 'locals' in the context of Rishikesh?[4] Many residents of Rishikesh, including monks and gurus, instructors of yoga, and hotel staff, were neither born nor raised in the town. Some of the most prominent gurus and spiritual leaders in Rishikesh come from other parts of India; they and their followers, including yoga teachers, may speak neither Hindi nor local Garhwali, such that English may become the common language (see Frøystad, this volume).[5] Strictly speaking, it may be a misnomer to consider them locals, and the same is true of those who have left villages for employment in hotels and ashrams. There is no essential link between people and place. However, these actors now reside in Rishikesh, at least for much of the year; they act as hosts to visitors and are viewed by foreigners as Indians in a generic sense. Service providers, though invisible, are the backbone of the tourist economy, while gurus and yoga teachers are hyper-visible and the main reason visitors come. My focus here is on the gurus and monks. Host communities are not homogenous and, in Rishikesh, those who are hosts may also be migrants, for the region's iconic value as an ideal place for meditation and other spiritual practices is what draws both monks and tourists (Sherlock 2001: 271–274). One caveat, further explored below, is that Hindu renouncers idealize an itinerant lifestyle and so cannot be unambiguously identified as 'locals' anywhere. Rishikesh is a magnet for renouncers and yogis from India and beyond because of its status as a center for renunciant practice and its association with great sages of the past. The institutions surrounding spiritual teaching and yoga instruction, and the discourses of Hindu spirituality that many prominent gurus offer, are transnationally and historically produced and yet are deeply associated with the place of Rishikesh and the Himalayan landscape. These are the people I call local residents, and it is their role in creating the cosmopolitan atmosphere that I explore here.

Ashrams and the tourist industry

Rishikesh is a center of Hindu monasticism and ascetic practice. Most visitors, Indian and foreign, come with religious or spiritual goals, although this has begun to change with the booming business in river rafting and other leisure activities that draws increasing numbers of young people who want to have fun with friends.

Meat and liquor are prohibited by law. The town generally shuts down by 9:00 p.m. and comes to life again before dawn breaks – the ideal time for meditation. This is hardly a scene that conjures up standard images of cosmopolitan life, which is more commonly associated with the 'cocktail-sipping worlds' of diasporic elites who write of hybridity and double consciousness (Werbner 1999). Cosmopolitanism is associated not only with elites and those who travel, but also, and more persistently, with secularism (Parry 2008: 327, Rovisco 2009: 182).

Scholars have recently begun to explore the cosmopolitan possibilities of religion. Peter van der Veer argues that the old concept of cosmopolitanism was seen as an expression of Western enlightened secularism: 'Liberal thinkers [. . .] tend to assume that religious affiliation restricts the believer to the absolutist claims of religion and condemns him to intolerance' (2002b: 16). Confronting the presumption that religious people are by definition parochial and intolerant, Maria Roviskco (2009) has studied the volunteerism of Portuguese youth who visit Africa and concludes that the secular volunteers she studied are no more cosmopolitan than their counterparts who serve as Catholic missionaries. Tulasi Srinivas (2010) describes the worldwide Sathya Sai movement of devotees of the charismatic guru Sathya Sai Baba; he himself did not travel and yet some 2 million devotees from 175 countries visited Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh for his eightieth birthday celebration in 2005 (Srinivas 2010: 348). Srinivas explores how cosmopolitanism works on the ground – as a process – and calls for theories of cultural globalization that can better account for religion. She also points to the challenges of cultural translation that arise, for example, with regard to Hindu ascetic practices, and points to a kind of cosmopolitanism that seems comfortable with the idea of paradox and ambiguity (Srinivas 2010: 329–332). I build on recent efforts to expand our understanding of cosmopolitanism in the context of religious social domains, rather than bracketing these spaces off as necessarily parochial. Indeed, it is gurus and ashrams that not only attract foreigners to Rishikesh but also create the conditions for cosmopolitan dialogue to occur.

The town's sadhus and gurus are transnational figures, whether they travel or not, as evidenced by the gift economy of Swiss and Belgian chocolates that they receive from foreign visitors and distribute as *prasad*. If gurus are charismatic icons of the neo-Hindu spirituality that attracts foreigners to Rishikesh, its central institutions are ashrams. An ashram can be a small hermitage where a handful of renouncers live, or it can be a sprawling complex that incorporates a kitchen capable of feeding hundreds daily as well as rooms where pilgrims and other laypersons can stay for short periods. Depending on its size and sectarian orientation, an ashram may have a temple or altar for performing fire sacrifice (*yajna*) or a meditation/yoga hall. It may be run by a national or transnational religious organization with clear ecclesiastical structure or may have as its head a charismatic guru who serves as spiritual and institutional authority.[6] Ashrams are considered to be religious rather than touristic institutions, but in practice this distinction has become blurred as ashrams are incorporated into the tourist industry. The touristic aspects of temples and pilgrimage have been noted (Singh 2005), and the same can be said about monastic institutions or ashrams.

In some ways the link between ashrams and the tourist industry is complementary. As one hip young travel guide told me, many foreigners come for spiritual attractions, but they may learn yoga for one hour in the morning and then need other things to do. Visitors (domestic and foreign) who come for instruction in yoga or meditation or for the guru's blessing, and whether they stay in an ashram or a hotel, purchase goods from local shops, dine in restaurants, and hire transport. Since the central and state governments are actively promoting tourism as a means of economic development in the region, it is not only the private sector that has a stake in its success. In March of 2005, the Minister of Tourism from Delhi, Renuka Choudhary, accompanied by several officials from the Government of Uttaranchal Tourism Department, visited one of Rishikesh's largest ashrams and performed a puja with the spiritual leader. I spoke with an official of the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam, Ltd. (GMVN), the Government of Uttarkhand's business venture aimed at running guest houses and promoting local eco-tourism, river rafting, skiing, and, most recently, village tourism. He confirmed that the government plans to promote spiritual tourism as well and has built a meditation hall and hired a yoga teacher for one of its resorts.

The relationship between ashrams and the flourishing tourist industry (whether government or private sector) is not always so friendly. Ashrams, both legally and normatively, accept donations but do not charge fees for accommodation, meals, or services. The perception that some ashrams are crossing the line between donation and fee has led to accusations of corruption. One local resident expressed a concern that echoed those of several small business owners I met who relied on tourism; she complained that ashrams are becoming like hotels and guest houses that earn a lot of money. She observed that all the *dharmasalas*, rest houses where (Indian) pilgrims could stay for free, have disappeared. 'They have turned into guest houses,' she declared. Local critics feel that ashrams should remain outside the sphere of market economy, and indeed, as Bornstein (2012) has shown, their legal status as religious organizations (Religious Endowments, Religious Charitable Trusts, or Religious Societies) exempts them from taxes and frees them from the kind of taxation and government regulation that governs businesses and secular charitable organizations.

A GMVN official with whom I spoke predicted that the state tourism department would begin to regulate ashrams directly. The government, he felt, should oversee how much foreign and domestic tourists are charged. Ashrams, he said, give rooms to visitors on a 'donation only' basis, and then, when people are departing, they ask for a donation of ten thousand rupees. His concern, of course, was that these deceptive practices are leaving tourists with a bad impression, for his office aimed to promote tourism. He also noted that the central government had just allocated funds to train taxi drivers, scooter operators, restaurant owners, and other front-line service providers, on how to interact with tourists, both domestic and foreign.[7] Newspapers were reporting in 2005 the Ministry of Tourism's new campaign to train Indians across the country to better accommodate tourists with the aim of gaining India's fair share of the world tourism economy.

> 'Even the swamis will be trained,' the official pronounced.
>
> I was taken aback. 'What would you want to teach the swamis?'
>
> 'The place must be clean first of all,' he explained. 'Food must also be clean and hygenic. They must clearly post a sign outlining a policy of donation only or set fees for rooms.'
>
> 'But will the swamis come?' I asked, incredulous at the thought of swamis dutifully showing up to a government tourism training session.
>
> 'They'll have to come . . . or send their general manager who sits at the reception. The police will make them.'

This GMVN official clearly wanted to incorporate ashrams into a state economy oriented toward spiritual tourism and hoped to rationalize their institutional practices in order to create a more predictable experience for tourists and to better control ashram activities.[8] However, if government officials hope to rationalize tourists' experiences in ashrams, countervailing processes also exert pressures (see Weaver 2005: 349), and these may include the 'push back' from sadhus and ashram managers as well as the possibility of spiritual enchantment and wonder that is central to the lure of Rishikesh (see Khandelwal 2007).

The owner of a small thriving business for rafting and other adventure activities voiced his concern about the environmental impact of recent construction along the river, and he accused ashrams of committing more serious crimes than simply extracting money from gullible tourists. He charged that they pay bribes to flout laws against building within 200 feet of the river. Then, he observed cynically, they can attract wealthy guests with Ganga-facing rooms or even sell the ashram as a hotel. He said that when he takes foreigners rafting down the Ganga, they see all the ashrams built on the edge and he speaks freely and openly with them. 'These ashrams and mahatmas are very rich,' he charged. 'Because they have a lot of money, they have influence in bureaucracy and politics. We people [residents] must build within the forest department regulations – 200 feet away from the river and not more than 2–3 storeys high. People complain about how tourism has ruined Rishikesh because of the congestion and all that. But who is building these huge buildings? And who is turning ashrams into hotels? Ashrams are the ones doing it! Many ashrams have sold their lands on the banks of the Ganga to hotels for a lot of money. They have money, so they get the permission to build.' This young man's livelihood in adventure and budget tourism was being threatened by the dams and the fees imposed on tourist activities.

Intentionally or not, ashrams are being incorporated into the economy of foreign tourism, even if all do not participate equally. Some gurus and ashrams create cosmopolitan spaces hospitable to foreigners unfamiliar with ashram values and practices, and their role in the making of a cosmopolitan Rishikesh is crucial. I argue that several features central to renunciant life – a philosophical orientation toward detachment, a cultivated sense of displacement, emotional aloofness, and acceptance of differences in body practice – converge to make Rishikesh an attractive place for foreigners to seek self-transformation. To the extent that

cosmopolitan practices exist in Rishikesh, it has as much to do with the culture of Hindu monasticism as it does with visitors from abroad.

Cosmopolitan spirituality in Rishikesh

Aravamudan identifies Guru English as the most recognizable form of South Asian cosmopolitanism and Aurobindo as not only the first modern guru but one who lived cosmopolitanism (2006: 91). He also, curiously, suggests that A-list gurus with a global aura and export-friendly religion encourage 'a globally efficacious cosmopolitanism of *appearance*' (2006: 228–229), implying that their cosmopolitanism is less authentic because of its collusion with consumer capitalism. While I agree with Aravamudan's broader argument, I do not seek a pure form of cosmopolitanism based on an a priori definition. Rather than assuming a European notion of cosmopolitanism, Pollock et al. propose looking at the world across space to see how people have thought and acted beyond the local and how people in different regions have participated in transnational culture without compulsion and without obliterating what is already there (Pollock et al. 2002:10, see also van der Veer 2002b). Such an approach may lead us to unlikely sites, including monastic institutions. How have gurus and ashrams helped to create spaces where different kinds of people engage neo-Hindu spirituality without compulsion, assimilation, or conversion? The answer, I suggest, lies in both philosophical abstractions and the everyday attitudes and practices found in monastic institutions.

Philosophical orientation toward detachment

Advaita Vedanta's philosophy of absolute monism has come to represent modern Hinduism, with sadhus as its most visible spokespersons (King 1999: 129–132, Aravamudan 2006: 64); this is especially true of Rishikesh, a center of Hindu renunciation. This form of Vedanta – more aptly called neo-Vedanta – posits that enlightenment is the realization that the individual soul and the Absolute are one and the same, and that ultimately all distinctions are illusory; this includes sensory distinctions like that between hot and cold as well as social differences like that between rich and poor, male and female. In claiming that all cultural differences are unreal, neo-Vedanta proclaims itself to be the true universal religion, one that encompasses all others (King 1999: 140). Indeed, many gurus who attract a foreign audience present Vedanta as philosophy rather than religion, claim that the spirituality they offer is compatible with any religion, and eschew the desire to convert anyone to Hinduism. In this sense, claims to absolute moral authority are relative (Parry 2008: 327) even if truth is retained as that which transcends any particular religion.

If cosmopolitans are those who believe in the intrinsic worth of diversity (Hannerz 1996: 111), then Hindu gurus do not fit the category. Gurus I identify as cosmopolitan do not seek out 'diversity' as American multiculturalism exhorts one to do.[9] But neither do they flatten all differences in their everyday interaction

with the world. Vedanta's universalism is transcendent and abstract, so differences such as those of nation and religion are acknowledged as real in social life at the same time that they are treated with a certain levity as being ultimately illusory and transient (see Khandelwal 2004: 180).

Vedanta's philosophical orientation is cosmopolitan in the ease with which, precisely because of its abstractness, it offers different messages to different audiences. Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedanta may have been nationalist in the context of anti-colonial movements in nineteenth-century India, but his interpretation was deeply cosmopolitan in a North American context (Aravamudan 2006). Peter van der Veer (2002a) argues that the (right-wing) nationalist organization Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) is cosmopolitan because it articulates one message in India and another in diasporic North America. In India, he notes, the VHP promotes a militant Hindu nationalism with anti-Muslim and anti-secular tendencies, and it resists economic liberalism and Western influence. Yet in the United States, the VHP presents itself as a cultural organization focused on the family and inculcating Hindu religion among second generation Indian-American children; missing, according to van der Veer (2002a), are the critiques of globalization and of the minority Muslim population in India.[10] Transnational gurus in Rishikesh offer a variety of messages compatible with Vedanta. For a mainstream Western audience, many promote yoga for health and meditation as a technique for stress reduction. For more serious Western spiritual seekers, they promote a view of spirituality and meditation that is compatible with any religion and tend to emphasize mystical elements of Hinduism rather than orthodox ritual practices. When addressing an audience of Indian diasporics living in the United States, who are heavily concentrated in the fields of science, engineering, medicine, and IT, many gurus tend to emphasize Vedanta's compatibility with modern science. I heard one lecture by a well-known Vedanta scholar that focused on genetic coding as the working of the Ultimate Reality. In this sense, transnationally-oriented gurus engage differences in very astute ways. Not all gurus enable cosmopolitan dialogue with various Others, and I describe my encounter with an orthodox, non-cosmopolitan ashram below. Nevertheless, it is clear that Vedanta offers a philosophical orientation that enables gurus to think beyond the local and to incorporate difference even if relegating it to the level of the unreal and transient. Cosmopolitan gurus imagine and evoke a de-racialized and de-nationalized community of spiritual people.

Positive value on displacement

Sadhus may be itinerant or may reside periodically or permanently in a cave, forest hermitage or ashram. Regardless of their particular living circumstances, they are expected to deliberately cultivate the experience of displacement and to avoid attachments to the comforts, securities and kinship ties associated with domestic life. Itinerancy aims to create a stance of detachment, and is also the result of this stance. This orientation toward displacement, I suggest, predisposes renouncers to cosmopolitanism. Nava (2002) describes cosmopolitanism as a

desire to escape *from* family, home, and country. The similarity to renunciation is striking. A swami from Azerbaijan (now settled in Rishikesh) conveyed to me what he told an Indian immigration official when he met to request extension of his visa: 'I am a baba. I have no country.' Attachment to home and family is precisely what sadhus abandon, because it signifies all the desires, attachments, and comforts that are inimical to renunciant life. Indeed, 'leaving home' is a metaphor for renunciation. Their presumed existence outside of ordinary kinship structures, and the webs of obligation these engender, is precisely what makes the spiritual leaders of Karnataka *mathas* described by Aya Ikegame (this volume) less corrupt than politicians. Reddy (2003) has noted that the recent electoral successes of transgendered hijras, who liken themselves to renouncers, is due in part to their own claim that they are excluded from procreative sexuality and thus from kinship networks and that this frees them from pressures of nepotism and corruption. A stance of detachment is not only idealized by renouncers but is also normative, at least in the sense that it is something most strive to achieve even while acknowledging the struggles and obstacles of doing so. As I have written about elsewhere (Khandelwal 2004), the success or failure of these efforts is central to the reputed spiritual authority of particular sadhus. As such, it is a common subject of discussion among householders about the reputations of particular gurus.

Hausner (2007) has theorized the ways that renouncers create communities; they do not reside in a particular place and cannot be identified as a single, sedentary group. At the same time, their wandering status contributes to their reputation as powerful. They have seen the world; they embody the blessings of distant holy sites, and have collected cures from many places where they have wandered. Because they have no homes they are not accountable in the way that lay persons are to family and community (Hausner 2007: 186–187). One might wonder how meanings may have changed today, given the ease of travel and the fact that distance may be traversed by plane rather than on foot. One prominent and transnationally-oriented swami based in Rishikesh said to me that today's travel is a continuation of ancient wandering of the *yati*. 'This wandering is part of sannyasa,' he said. 'But the wandering became a different type of wandering. Now they go by train, they go by bus, and even by plane.' Displacement is not new to Hindu gurus, even if the distance and mode of travel have changed.

Cultivation of emotional aloofness

In addition to avoiding emplacement, sadhus cultivate a stance of emotional detachment more generally. While they may be absolutely certain that meditation will yield results or that their chosen guru is indeed enlightened, sannyasa also encourages them to continually question what they once knew to be true. Any discipline (a strict meditation regime, silence, fasting, devotional worship, etc.) that is necessary for spiritual advancement for one person may be an impediment for another, and that which is helpful at one stage in a person's spiritual journey may become an obstacle at a later stage. Some may even come to question the

validity of the very renunciant life that they have chosen to pursue. Bryan Turner suggests that the cosmopolitan citizen assumes a stance of ironic distance and skepticism toward grand narratives, that their view of society is always provisional and open to revision (2001: 148). Even if sadhus express certainty about transcendent realities, they tend to be skeptical of social truths: filial loyalty, romantic love, religious ritual and material prosperity. Most are not rebels or revolutionaries who either reject the validity of such narrative or hope to transform them. Instead, many (if not all) conform to social or religious conventions, even those of ashrams, but often with an attitude of simply following a set of historically and socially constructed rules.

For example, a woman renouncer who was a central figure in my monograph (Khandelwal 2004) conformed to modest dress and comportment and expected me to do so as well, while at the same time indicating that this was merely a pragmatic accommodation to imperfect social institutions of female modesty rather than some deep expression of a gendered self (for a striking contrast, see Mahmood 2005). My experience in working with sadhus is that they follow many conventions without being emotionally invested in them and without having internalized their meaning. This, I suggest, exemplifies the stance of ironic distance that Turner associates with cosmopolitanism.

Hausner (2007) makes similar observations about the way in which sadhus deliberately cultivate detachment from the body (which, according to Advaitic ontology, includes the mind) and seek to transcend the body. A renouncer has a physical body which others perceive, but they no longer experience it as such for it is ultimately unreal; the body is simultaneously a tool to achieve one's goal of enlightenment and the very thing that traps one in worldliness (Hausner 2007: 188). Sadhus are in the habit of mediating between worldy and transcendent levels of reality and this, I suggest, often results in skepticism toward accepted narratives, of the body, of class, of gender, of religion, of nation.[11]

Openness to bodily practice

Related to emotional aloofness is an acceptance of difference in bodily practice that exists in many ashrams. In contrast to Catholic asceticism, Hindu renunciation is defined as the giving up of attachments, both sensual and emotional, rather than the taking up of any particular ascetic practice. Because monastic communities and institutions validate a wide variety of spiritual practices even among Indian initiates, it is then easier to engage with practices of foreigners. Ultimately, what distinguishes those ashrams that welcome foreigners from those that do not is an acceptance of difference in everyday practice and bodily comportment. Tulasi Srinivas' (2010) recent study of the Sathya Sai Movement offers some insights with regard to bodily practices in the context of a cosmopolitan ashram. Sex and food are strictly controlled in the ashram, and many devotees complained about the enforcement of gender segregation and other rules. Indic ideas related to *sattvik* practices of the body require self-control and abstention and these are linked to self-improvement in many branches of Hinduism, including the

Hindu–Muslim syncretic traditions of saints and mystics in which the Sathya Sai Movement has its origins (Srinivas 2010: 4). The matrix of meanings and its inherent ambiguities, argues Srinivas, allow for multiple and new interpretations, which in turn allow for an idea such as *sattvica* to travel across cultures. This mobility does not always involve effective translation. For example, Indic ideas posit a direct link between bodily control and self-betterment, but radically different cultures may see it as a healthful moral choice rather than a path to god. Indic thought promotes celibacy and *sattvik* eating as a way to remove impure desires from the body and to calm the passions, but this is translated among Western and Indian diasporic communities as healthy living and lifestyle choice (Srinivas 2010: 228–230). Various kinds of bodily practice are tolerated in ashrams, but this may be because of the possibility of multiple and new interpretations.

Indian sadhus comprise one of the most enduring visual tropes of exotic India, and their images appear on postcards and in coffee-table books that are available in gift shops all over India. Photos tend to focus on freakish bodily practices, colorful dress, elaborate insignia. In Rishikesh tourists can observe actual sadhus wandering the streets, begging alms, or giving discourses, although most are more ordinary-looking than those who appear on postcards. The Western gaze produces certain kinds of Indian holy men, but the categories of foreigners in Rishikesh are also constructed through the gaze of Indian residents and observers.

Some gurus and ashrams are more hospitable and welcoming than others. Some are listed in tourist guide books; others are not. If all share a similar philosophical orientation, then the difference may be more a matter of accommodating practice. What is the dominant language spoken in a particular ashram? Is a spoon given when food is served? Are foreigners made to feel welcome? Are breaches of etiquette tolerated?

Parmarth Niketan is one of the largest and most accessible ashrams in Rishikesh. It appears in tour guide books and offers neat and clean rooms to both Indian and foreign tourists. It orchestrates an elaborate Ganga Arati every evening, which appears live on Indian television and is itself a tourist attraction. One evening I joined the audience. Leela, an Indo-Caribbean woman who was staying at the ashram and who had recently befriended me, was seated next to the *havan kund* (sacrificial fire altar) with several other people – a place of honor in this public event. Leela saw me in the audience and beckoned me to sit next to her, which I did. Also seated around the *havan kund* was a South Indian family visiting from Chennai and a group of French tourists. An older French woman had her legs stretched out in front of her with feet almost touching the *havan kund* – a serious breach of Hindu etiquette. Leela tried to tell the woman to point her feet in another direction, but she understood no English. My friend persisted by asking the French man next to her (who spoke English) to explain to the lady about her feet. He smiled back and said she had surgery on her feet and thus could not fold them under her body. We were all given *samagri* to toss into the fire as at regular intervals during the recitation of Sanskrit verses. One of the French men had spilled his *samagri* on Leela, and finally, in the middle of the *arati*, she muttered to me: 'This is a disaster.'

'What?'

'These foreigners.'

Then she told me she was leaving and, in the middle of the ritual, stood up and quickly departed. Although Leela had no patience for the behavioral mis-steps of these tourists, and I observed grumbling by other Indians in the ashram, ashram heads and managers are often more forgiving. In this case, the ashram's spiritual leader and manager created a welcoming environment for foreigners by simply tolerating small everyday transgressions, regardless of whether this irked Indians guests or not. Whatever the motive, and some offer the cynical view that it is because welcoming foreigners and their different bodily practices brings financial reward, it is nonetheless an example of cosmopolitan practice.

Orthodoxy and the non-cosmopolitan ashram

Not all gurus, ashrams or contexts are welcoming to foreigners. In less cosmopolitan spaces, breaches of etiquette produce more discomfort, anxiety or direct censure. I visited one highly respected ashram where many well-known Indian sannyasis (males only) have studied Sanskrit and Vedanta philosophy according to the tradition of Shankaracharya and guru–disciple parampara. With rare exceptions, only those initiated into sannyasa, or those about to be initiated, are allowed to stay at the ashram for intensive study. I was able to arrange an interview with the head of this institution, but learned that he speaks only Sanskrit until 3:00 every day. He agreed to an interview in Hindi in the late afternoon. Although I appeared for the interview dressed modestly in salwar kameez with my head covered, his first question was whether I was married and, when he learned that I was, why I had not worn sindoor in my hair.

When I sought the opinion of Swamiji on the increasing numbers of foreigners who come to Rishikesh, he was clear that anyone, Indian or foreigner, male or female, has the right to cultivate detachment and to serve and sacrifice, but that this should be done within limits and within the (Vedic) rules. In other words, he carefully articulated his views: women and foreigners may have the right to adopt the practices and aims of renunciation but they do not have the right to initiation according to Vedic rites. The publication department sells books in Hindi and Sanskrit, but not English. This ashram is respected as a center of Vedic learning even by cosmopolitan gurus, some of whom studied there, but it would be a stretch to identify cosmopolitan practices in that site. Advaita Vedanta philosophy does not in and of itself necessarily result in cosmopolitan interpretations.

Class and cosmopolitanism

When considering Indian engagement with foreigners in the Yoga Capital of the World, the figure of the hippie is salient. Specific visual and social cues related to class serve to designate certain foreigners in India as hippies, whether tourists passing through or long-time residents. Scholars of South Asia have given more attention to class in recent years (see, for example, Dickey 2000, Dwyer 2000,

Osella and Osella 2000), a welcome corrective to the narrow emphasis on caste that defined South Asian Studies in the United States for several decades. Frøystad (2006) examines the way Indians evaluate the class position of strangers in public places such as markets based on quick observations of visible and audible characteristics, and she suggests that these categorizations contain implicit assumptions about caste as well. She found that the salient markers of class were clothing, complexion, shape and movement of body, and speech. While Frøystad elucidates how strangers are 'class-ified' in a Kanpur neighborhood dominated by upper-caste, middle-class Hindus, I suggest that foreigners are also class-ified by Indians. Foreigners who turn up in Rishikesh cannot be classified simply as tourists, for they too are a diverse lot.

One morning, I went to visit one of the largest and most influential ashrams in Rishikesh in hopes of meeting its spiritual head. The waiting room was somewhat sterile with a counter to one side and benches along the walls; on the benches sat several middle-class Indians waiting to see Swamiji. I took a seat, and a few minutes later a tidy-looking young British fellow entered, removed his sandals at the door, and sat down next to me. Dressed in a crisply pressed white kurta pyjama, his face was clean-shaven and his hair neatly combed. He came to arrange accommodation and yoga training at the ashram for a group of 100 British visitors. The counterpart to this upstanding foreigner was a hippie. Sitting on the floor in lotus position, he was a wiry, blue-eyed fellow with faded turban, bare chest, missing teeth, and pants encrusted with the dirt of his travels. He began, inappropriately for the context, chanting a Sanskrit mantra while contorting his body into advanced yoga postures. Those sitting on the benches appeared to be simultaneously horrified and amused, as they stole side glances at the spectacle on the floor. Then the hippie addressed his audience cheerfully in American English: 'This looks like a doctor's office. You've all come to see Swamiji, yet you look so serious and unhappy. Be happy! I'm happy to be here with you all! I hope my singing doesn't bother you.' The middle-class onlookers smiled awkwardly and quickly looked away from the American Untouchable. The 'good' foreigner seated next to me was neat in appearance, respectful of Indian practices, with access to resources. He succeeded in speaking with the manager, while the yogi on the floor was unable to gain anyone's attention. Western hippies are, broadly speaking, despised by middle-class and elite lay Hindus, who consider them to be pariahs who are mentally unstable, contribute little to India, and survive by participating in the drug economy. It is right, most feel, that the government does not encourage them to immigrate or obtain citizenship; in fact, it is extremely difficult for a foreigner to obtain Indian citizenship.[12] There also exists a more sympathetic discourse among foreigners in Rishikesh about peers who get 'stuck' or 'lost' in India, those who stay too long, then realize they are getting old and have no job skills or pension. At that point, several people suggested to me, it is very difficult for them to adjust to life back in their country of citizenship.

A few foreigners come to Rishikesh and become renouncers themselves. Some are respected and fairly well-integrated into local society, but others are treated with disdain or humor. Renunciation is a serious matter, and initiation is expected

to be permanent, but many Indian residents in Rishikesh feel that renunciation is treated by many Westerners as a lifestyle choice that they can 'try out' for a time. Two residents of Rishikesh expressed the widespread sentiment that some foreigners 'just wear the clothes' as a kind of fashion statement. Soon after arriving in Rishikesh, I spotted twice in the market a white woman swami whom I did not recognize. When I asked an Indian friend if she knew who this person might be, she said dismissively 'Sometimes, they only wear the clothes.' When I inquired of a business owner in the same market if he knew this foreign swami, he laughed out loud. 'There are so many – one day sannyasi clothes with mala, and the next day jeans!' he said, and then launched into a story.

> One foreign woman was with a swami named Mahesh Baba, and then a few days ago she lodged a complaint with the police that this swami had taken U.S. $1,100 from her. The swami confessed to the police that he took the money. . . . There was another older, foreign woman – in her 50s – who took up with one baba and called him her husband. One day she came around asking for him and learned from a shopkeeper that he'd gone off to the mountains with some German woman. Then she brought the shopkeeper a letter and asked him to give it to the baba when he returned. It was a letter saying she'd broken all relations with him. The next day she took up with another baba – he was so old and dirty, with filthy matted locks. Next day he showed up with nice clean, white kurta and dhoti and new haircut.

The shopkeeper laughed uproariously at his own narrative.

Hippies are treated with suspicion and disdain by many middle- and upper-class Indians (which I suggest is more about class than foreign-ness), but I was surprised to learn that several Indian sadhus with whom I spoke, including both those reputed to be liberal or orthodox, were more sympathetic. They are not happy that foreign interest in yoga has resulted in more crowds and noise in Rishikesh or that this interest has focused heavily on the physical aspects of yoga. At the same time, most gurus were aware that those who arrived in India in the 1960s came from middle-class backgrounds in the West, and they believe that nothing but intense spiritual longing (whether conscious or unconscious) could have led them to renounce the privilege of their upbringing. Most Indian gurus disapprove of a pleasure-seeking lifestyle, and may not wish to invite hippies into their ashrams – class does matter – but neither do they resort to villification.

Swami Sivananda, for example, initiated many foreigners into Hindu renunciation – and was criticized by his more orthodox peers for this. One of his Indian disciples, who now lives abroad, noted in an interview with me that 'In the 1950s when travel became cheaper, people from Europe and then the US started coming to India to learn hatha yoga. But at least 10 percent of them were interested in the spiritual side of yoga. First they came out of curiosity and then later for spirituality. Among them, there are some who genuinely wanted to take sannyasa, and such people stayed on in the ashram for years.' Despite the loss of peacefulness in the town, he says it is a positive thing that there are more foreigners

in Rishikesh because they come to learn something. 'Many are sincere. Even if it is only for curiosity the first time, it doesn't matter.'

Several mentioned that it was mostly hippies who came to Rishikesh in the 1960s but that today's foreign aspirants are more serious. One senior swami who has lived in the United States and South America said that in the beginning very few were interested in the spiritual side of yoga. 'There are some who genuinely wanted to take sannyasa,' he said, '[but] the majority wanted orange robes for their personal vanity . . . to go back to the West and pose as swamis without any qualification whatsoever and then to make disciples. I don't approve of them at all.'

One prominent swami who is associated with Hindu nationalist organizations also reflected on the exodus of hippies to India in the 1960s. 'They all came here,' he said. 'I was here at that time, and they used to come and sit in my classes. But they were looking for something; they were looking for some answers . . . The hippie movement has disappeared, but it has settled down in the form of self help groups, and that is very spiritual. The self help groups I've seen in the west are the most spiritual groups I've seen anywhere. This 12-Step program they have is an excellent program . . . any attempt to help myself or change myself is spiritual.' This more accepting attitude toward hippies certainly required a cosmopolitan orientation on the part of the gurus who received them in their classes and ashrams, for this openness was compatible with more orthodox ideas about the importance of Sanskrit learning or spiritual discipline.

Of course, only some foreigners in Rishikesh are classified as hippies. Many are tourists attracted to Rishikesh by its beautiful landscape, clean air, ample opportunities for trekking and river rafting, and easy availability of yoga and meditation classes. For them, Hindu spirituality is another 'sight' on a long list of things to do and places to see in India. Some are serious spiritual sojourners who organize their employment and social life back home in such a way that they can spend a few months in India periodically, sometimes annually, 'to get recharged'. They tend to stay in ashrams or guest houses, wear Indian clothes appropriately (in contrast to hippies), and are less 'marked' as foreigners. Many have an Indian guru and engage regularly in some kind of spiritual practice: hatha yoga, mantra chanting, meditation. They engage with Hindu practices and beliefs more seriously, may have Indian friends, but do not usually speak Hindi. Unlike the tourists, they tend to arrive at the Delhi airport and start immediately on the five-hour journey to Rishikesh, without spending even a day in Delhi, and are generally less interested in visiting other tourist destinations in India. They are participants in, rather than simply observers of, ashram life. They come on tourist visas and have the resources to leave whenever they want. Most are educated and come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, although their financial resources may be limited. Indeed, many have forgone employment opportunities that would have made it impossible for them to visit India for long periods. Sojourners have a 'home' elsewhere, and the low cost of living in Rishikesh is what enables them to stay for extended periods. I heard a Swede claim that he could winter in Rishikesh for less money than it cost to pay his seasonal heating bill back home! Those few foreigners who have themselves become renouncers and live in Rishikesh generally have no

home outside of India (Khandelwal 2007). They have made a long-term commitment to stay in India, and the very steps that secure their future in India may have also cut off financial resources or kinship ties that would allow them to leave at will.

I do not wish to render the distinctions between spiritual tourists, sojourners, and foreign swamis unnecessarily rigid, for these categories exist on continuum. Spiritual sojourners purchase many of the same commodities that are available for tourists: guest houses, restaurants, airport taxi service. Some foreign swamis participate in the tourist economy by meeting friends at restaurants, by frequenting cyber cafés, or simply by hosting foreign guests . . . but I would argue that they do so only marginally. More significantly and less directly, spiritual sojourners and foreign swamis construct Rishikesh as a culturally and spiritually distinct place, which is the very discourse that draws tourists. While some overlap is inevitable, the differences between foreign swamis and other foreigners are more significant. As migrants, they have made a life-long commitment to their vocation and to India and are immersed in a spiritual tradition. Even though the sight of a foreigner in orange robes may provoke some amusement, some are respected as sadhus who are serious about their spiritual practice and have cultivated Indian habits and interactive styles. My goal is not to evaluate the outlook of foreigners in Rishikesh, but rather to highlight the generally overlooked cosmopolitanism of gurus and monastic institutions and to suggest that it enables a cosmopolitan dialogue to emerge.

Not all renouncers and monks are cosmopolitan, for some are deeply committed to orthodox practice, and even those I identify as cosmopolitan have their limits. As my story about the hippie suggests, class distinctions persist in ashram life even when they are rhetorically rejected as irrelevant to spiritual life. Another limit to Rishikesh's status as cosmopolitan center of yoga may be the result of communal politics in India, especially at a time when Hindu hostility toward Muslims dovetails with the US-led war on terror. While people from many countries and religious backgrounds come to Rishikesh in search of a guru or yoga instruction, I have never met or heard of a person from a Muslim background in Rishikesh.[13] Are they uninterested in its spirituality derived from Hindu monasticism or are they unwelcome – or both? The absence of Muslims in an otherwise cosmopolitan ashram makes it impossible to study interpersonal interactions between Muslims and those who promote Hindu spirituality in the yoga capital of the world, but it does suggest the limits of its openness. There is no pure cosmopolitanism.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship reveals a trend away from the assumption that quintessential cosmopolitans are elites who move comfortably between metropolitan and secular sites, and it encourages us to look for cosmopolitanism in unlikely places. In doing so, we learn more about how differently situated persons may obtain distance from the location of their birth and upbringing and thus be able to mediate

traditions (Ram 2008, citing Held). Though we think of tourists, including budget travelers, as cosmopolitans, I have argued that it is the cosmopolitan orientation of local monastic communities that creates the conditions for a cosmopolitan dialogue to emerge in Rishikesh and other tourist destinations. Even though charismatic Hindu gurus today travel widely and have global visibility, discussions of cosmopolitanism do not evoke images of monks in ochre robes who retreat to the Himalayas to follow a life of discipline and to seek periods of solitude.[14] Gurus do not celebrate diversity (of the kind that liberal democracies promote), but many have a cosmopolitan outlook that includes a philosophical orientation toward difference, cultivation of displacement, emotional aloofness, and tolerance for difference in everyday practice. This is precisely what makes Rishikesh an inviting place for foreigners to seek self-transformation.

Notes

1 I am grateful to the Swamis (both prominent and lesser known) who were willing to talk with me about their ashrams, teachings and encounters with non-Indians. I also wish to thank those ashram residents, yoga instructors, government officials, business owners and tourists who spoke with me about their experiences and goals. Tapoja Chaudhuri and David Geary included me in their panel 'Incredible !ndia: Tourism, Place-Making and the Imagination in South Asia' organized for the 2008 AAA meetings, where I received useful feedback. I also appreciate comments received from athinka Frøystad, anonymous reviewers, and the editors of this volume. As always, all eaknesses in the chapter are my own responsibility. This research would not have been possible without financial support from the American Institute of Indian Studies to conduct research and an Arts and Humanities Award from the University of Iowa for writing.

2 The Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) is an organization established in 2001 in Delhi. It is a collaboration involving the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Ministry of Science and Technology, and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. TKDL is creating a modern classification system for Indian systems of medicine that is based on the structure of International Patent Classification. It aims to document traditional knowledge and make this knowledge available in languages and format understandable to patent examiners at International Patent Offices (TKDL website accessed January 4, 2011). For example, TKDL is filming hundreds of yoga postures in order to pre-empt patents on specific yoga practices (*Guardian* article June 8, 2010).

3 I was living in Rishikesh for three months in Spring 2005 to conduct ethnographic research on transnational aspects of sannyasa, as a follow up to earlier work: For 18 months from 1989–91, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Haridwar and Rishikesh on women renouncers. In addition to the three months of research in 2006, I made many short visits to Rishikesh between 1995 and 2003 and have visited three times after 2005 to follow up on particular questions.

4 I thank Kathinka Frøystad for prompting me to think through this point more fully.

5 There is also a contingent of foreign nationals who live more or less permanently in Rishikesh and about whom I have written elsewhere (Khandelwal 2007).

6 Ashrams are the central institutions of Hindu renunciation, but I have argued elsewhere (Khandelwal 2004) that renunciation also cultivates anti-institutional forms of religiosity.

7 The Ministry of Tourism has invested in human resource development for the hospitality sector. For more information, see Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Annual Report 2009–10 (http://tourism.gov.in/annualreport.htm).

8 I have not found any evidence that the GMVN succeeded in this goal.
9 Prema A. Kurien explains that multicultural models posit that all persons and cultures possess an inner essence that gives them their individuality and that this must be respected and valued (2007: 3). Gurus ask spiritual seekers to instead peel away the characteristics that constitute their individuality and cloud their ability to know their true selves. If gurus in Rishikesh offer one message in Rishikesh, it is quite possible for them to support a different one in Indian diaspora in the US (see Kurien 2007: 188–92).
10 Prashad offers a more nuanced analysis of VHP activities in the United States, one that blurs the distinction between cultural and political domains (2000: 134–47).
11 Adding 'caste' to this list requires more analysis than can be offered here, for Hindu monastic traditions take very diverse stances on issues of caste and gender.
12 My efforts to gather statistical information on how many foreigners are living permanently in India were not successful, for the government of India considers all immigration statistics to be classified. This, combined with the fact that many live independently in their own cottages or caves and, like their Indian counterparts, are not enumerated in census accounts, makes it difficult to ascertain how many foreign swamis or aspiring swamis are living in India today.
13 Tulasi Srinivas (2010) met several followers of Sathya Sai Baba who are Muslims who came from predominantly Muslim countries; in contrast to the tradition of Hindu sannyasa dominant in Rishikesh, the Sathya Sai Movement is situated in the saintly traditions arising from Hindu-Muslin syncretism (Srinivas 2010: 4, 117).
14 There is a long history of Hindu monks' interaction with Christian institutions and missionaries (Dobe 2010).

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11 The literary guru

The dual emphasis on bhakti and *vidhi* in western Indian guru-devotion

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In this chapter, I investigate aspects of the history and importance of the Datta *saṃpradāya*, a western Indian religious tradition comprised of worshipers of the god Dattātreya and his incarnations, as they pertain to the history of bhakti in India and specifically to the tradition of devotion to a guru. Drawing on close readings of the tradition's Marathi liturgical text, the *Gurucaritra* (composed c. 1550 C.E.), historical data, and field research, I argue that the ethos of the Datta *saṃpradāya* exhibits a unique amalgam of two foci not often found together in the history of Indic religions: the calling for one-pointed, self-forgetting devotion (bhakti), alongside continual exhortations to act in accordance with the prescriptions and rules (*vidhi*) expressed in the Vedic and śāstric corpuses. I suggest that the figure of the guru functions as a cultural interlocutor between two complementary, and in some respects competing and conflicting, modes of religiosity. The guru, in this case most importantly Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī (c. 1378–1458), who was the second and most influential guru-incarnation of the god Dattātreya, is particularly well suited to mediate between a religiosity based principally on devotional surrender and a Brahmanical moral code prescribing all manner of action laid out in the Hindu law books. Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara, the author of the *Gurucaritra*, sees the guru as a god in human form and presents the guru's instruction to be divinely inspired wisdom. Viewed as a divine being, the guru inspires pure devotion. Viewed as a human teacher, the guru gives directives that are unambiguous and compelling for disciples.

Due to the content of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's instruction, these rather common qualities of guruship led, in the case of the early Datta *saṃpradāya*, to a unique kind of bhakti, a 'devotion according to the rules', and the guru became the mediator in a field of competing social and religious forces. For Brahmins may have been attempting to reassert the relevance of their vocation, and the socio-religious world in which it was embedded, in the face of the widespread popularity of bhakti movements that were well established throughout the Indian subcontinent by the fifteenth century CE. I believe the contemporary guru continues to function as such a cultural interlocutor in this tradition, for the guru is the common nexus between disparate groups of participants in ritual activities who espouse a variety of ideological viewpoints and describe and value different kinds of experience.

This chapter examines historical and contemporary cases of guru-devotion in a western Indian tradition, shows that devotion to Dattātreya and his guru-incarnations

was and continues to be different from devotion to other figures. I use textual analysis, historical enquiry and ethnography to explore the forces that have shaped the tradition, and in so doing, I hope to engender dialogue about how the figure of the guru functions in struggles for socio-religious power and ideological hegemony.

Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara describes the figure of the guru as greater, more powerful, and indeed of more importance, than even the triumvirate at the pinnacle of the Hindu pantheon, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Devotion to such a holy teacher, he says, is more effective and better suited to our present era (the Kaliyuga) than other forms of religiosity. The kind of devotion he espouses is substantially different, however, than the bhakti we find blossoming throughout the subcontinent by the turn of the second millennium, which is characterized by a spiritually egalitarian ethos that places comparatively less emphasis on rules of caste, purity, and conduct, and more emphasis on a personal, unmediated relationship to one's chosen deity, freedom from control by the priestly class, and a lack of dependence on textual traditions and the Vedic corpus.

Guru-bhakti in the *Gurucaritra* and the tradition that follows it does indeed involve an intense personal relationship with, and devotion to, one's chosen guru, but that relationship, as enunciated in the text, is mediated by exhortations to follow rules laid down in the Śāstras, calibrated according to each person's social status and developmental stage in life (*varṇāśramadharma*), one of the hallmarks of Brahmanical Hinduism.[1] Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara pays special attention to the specific duties incumbent on women and Brahmins, although disciples of all classes come to the incarnations of Datta and receive blessing and instruction. Most commentators of the Datta *saṃpradāya* focus on the Brahmin-centric qualities of the tradition, characterizing the movement as a conservative tradition that aims to revive Brahmanical praxis that they view to have been in decline under Muslim rule, but alongside the conservative Brahmanical moral code runs a radical 'bhakti morality' that values and prescribes one-pointed devotion to the guru at the expense of all else.

Unlike many other varieties of bhakti that proliferated during the period, the guru-bhakti of the Datta *saṃpradāya* is distinctly textual in a number of ways. Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara explicitly invokes the corpuses of 'the Vedas and the Śāstras' throughout the *Gurucaritra* to justify his insistence on the rules and prescriptions that pertain to conduct, ritual observances, and the like. Furthermore, the *Gurucaritra* volume itself is important as an object of devotion in the daily lives of disciples: bhaktas often offer worship to the book itself, with the full 16 elements of Hindu *pūjā*; they read it in a ritually defined way; and they say that hearing or reading the text fulfils all worldly desires and brings salvation. Indeed, there is an *āratī*, a song of praise accompanied by the waving of lights, sung to the text. In that hymn, the text is described as the verbal incarnation of the god Datta. And the formal recitation of the text (*pārāyaṇa*) is one of the primary religious acts in the tradition.

The Datta *saṃpradāya's* privileging of textuality and literacy seems to substantiate Jonathan Parry's supposition that Brahmanical learning does not necessarily

bring about cognitive modernism, an emphasis on individualism, or rational, sceptical thought (Parry 1985). Indeed, similar to the deployment of the Benarasi funerary texts Parry studied, the *Gurucaritra* imagines and creates a distinctly pre-modern socio-religious literary world in which traditional values are upheld and championed. Literacy, specifically the engagement with the *Gurucaritra* text itself, a primary mode of religiosity in the *saṃpradāya*, is subject to social constraints of class and gender, discussed below. The qualities Parry associates with the paradigmatic literature of Brahmanical Hinduism, the Sanskrit canon(s), apply strikingly well to the *Gurucaritra*: the text has the weight of scriptural authority, approaching the status of the Veda for members of the tradition, and it seems to have been largely immune from scepticism by Datta bhaktas, except for a few modern interpreters who attempt to distance themselves from specific practices the text prescribes that blatantly contradict modern sensibilities, such as widow immolation, as discussed below. The text, and in some sense the tradition as a whole, is clearly under the purview and control of Brahmins, and professes to contain an eternally valid and divinely sanctioned body of knowledge that supports and re-creates a traditional, pre-modern status quo.

After a brief introduction to the god Dattātreya, I proceed from text to practice to context. I investigate, on the one hand, how Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara presents bhakti in the *Gurucaritra*, and on the other, how he places great importance on following the rules (*vidhi*), and I explore how the two foci are in creative tension with each other. I then discuss the dynamics between bhakti and *vidhi* in the Datta *saṃpradāya* practice of reciting the *Gurucaritra* in contemporary western India, and I conclude by exploring various social, religious and historical forces that may have given rise to the śāstric bhakti we find in the Datta *saṃpradāya* and the unique function of the guru the tradition demonstrates.

Dattātreya: the three faces of guru-bhakti

Dattātreya is a god in his own right, but he is also understood to be an incarnation of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva in a single form, often (but not always) depicted with three faces/heads, and as an archetypal guru.[2] The texts usually interpret the name Dattātreya as a patronymic that refers to the son of (lit. 'he who was given to') Atri, the fifth of seven Ṛṣis or seers enumerated in the Veda who dwell in the north. Chapter 4 of the *Gurucaritra* presents one among many variants of the story describing the birth of Datta to Atri Ṛṣi and his wife Anasūyā thus: Anasūyā was the 'best of devoted wives' (*pativratāśiromaṇī*), serving her husband Atri so well that 'all the gods were afraid and thought in their minds that she might soon acquire sovereignty over heaven' (4.14).[3] Indra and the other gods assembled in front of the *trimūrti* (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva) and begged them to break her vow of remaining obedient and faithful to her husband (*pativratā*), in order to weaken her so that she would not become so powerful as to be able to conquer heaven (4.15–25). The three great gods, taking the guise of wandering mendicants, visited Atri's forest residence when he was away, and asked Anasūyā to serve them food in the nude, a request she had to fulfil due to the rules governing the service due

to guests (4.37–41). But the power of her vow of fidelity to her husband transformed the three great gods into mere babes and she suckled them happily, fulfilling their request while also preserving her honor. Atri returned, immediately realized what had happened through his omniscience, and paid homage to the gods. The three gods then appeared in their adult forms and offered Anasūyā a boon, for which she asked that they all remain in her house as her children (4.42–62). The three thus remained there as Anasūyā's sons, Datta initially as an incarnation (only) of Viṣṇu, Durvāsas from Śiva, and Candra from Brahmā. Durvāsas and Candra eventually took their leave and imparted their qualities to Datta, leaving him as the sole incarnation of the *trimūrti*. In this rendering, Dattātreya is first understood as an incarnation of Viṣṇu but then takes on the position of an incarnation of all three gods in one form. We might note that Datta's birth is a direct result of the unequalled fidelity of Anasūyā to her husband, the principal duty incumbent on women as described in the text, and a theme we will explore below. The *Gurucaritra* describes Datta, with his three faces, as the founder of the unbroken succession of teachers (guru-*paraṃparā*) in the Datta *saṃpradāya*, and contemporary Maharashtrians often associate guru-bhakti with Datta.

The Datta *saṃpradāya* and the handbook of guru-devotion: the *Gurucaritra*

Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī (c. 1378–1458), whose biography is told in the *Gurucaritra*, is the second and most prominent avatar of Dattātreya, and the Datta *saṃpradāya* that springs from him is an important minority religious tradition in western India today, growing in popularity. Antonio Rigopoulos, following the prominent Marathi historian R.C. Ḍhere and others, identifies the distinguishing characteristic of the Datta *saṃpradāya* as its Brahmanical ethos – he says the *saṃpradāya* is a 'revivalistic cult attempting to preserve Brahmanical orthodoxy, the system of castes, and overall emphasis on ritualistic religion' (Rigopoulos 1998: 110). Emphasis on rules of conduct, for Rigopoulos, is what sets the formal *saṃpradāya* apart from the larger field of those who respect and worship Datta. The *Gurucaritra* is the handbook for these Brahmanical elements, as its narratives and didactic expositions exemplify the duties and conduct appropriate to those of various castes (but especially Brahmins), the proper performance of ritual (for example, the recitation of the Gāyatri *mantra*), and the moral consequences of actions, *karma vipāka*. The Datta *saṃpradāya* stands out in the field of Maharashtrian religious traditions because of its emphasis on Brahmanical norms.

Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara, whose native tongue was likely Kannada rather than Marathi, probably composed the Marathi *Gurucaritra* text on the southern edge of the Marathi-speaking area of western India during the early or mid-sixteenth century CE.[4] The work was composed in 52 (in some editions 51 or 53) chapters which contain in total over 7,000 verses in the Marathi *ovī* meter. It consists of the hagiographies of the first two incarnations of Dattātreya, Śrīpāda Śrīvallabha (c. 1323–1353) and the more influential figure of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī (c. 1378–1458), often referred to merely as 'Śrīguru'. The hagiographical narratives in the

text are interspersed with myths from the Vedas, Epics and Purāṇas, and didactic elements that teach the importance of caste law, the observance of right action according to one's stage in life (*varṇāśramadharma*), the correct performance of rituals, conservative views of women's dharma, the benefits of pilgrimage and shrine worship, the practice of renunciation, and the like. These Brahmanical elements in the text are intertwined with statements about the necessity and importance of devotion to, meditation on, and surrender of body, mind, wealth and will to one's guru, who in the text is often Śrīguru Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, in person or as represented by his ceremonial wooden sandals *(pādukās)*. In response to such acts of devotion, Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara relates, Śrīguru, cures the ill, brings the dead back to life, and accomplishes impossible deeds merely by his mysterious and all-powerful grace, compassion or mercy (*kṛpā*).

One way in which the devotional disposition described in the text is embodied by the *saṃpradāya* is through the continual reading and re-telling of the *līlās*, or the stories of the miraculous life-events, of the first two incarnations of Datta. The text is thus an important source of inspiration for those in the tradition; its didactic narratives are taken to heart by disciples, it serves as a primary object of veneration, it is believed to have the power to cure ailments of all kinds, and it approaches the status of the Veda for members of the *saṃpradāya* (Ḍhere 1964:207). The entire work is recited in public and in private throughout the year in a ritual reading called *pārāyaṇa*, usually in the span of one, three, or seven day(s). Special importance is attributed to recitations on *pūrṇimā* (full moon) days, especially Guru Pūrṇimā (in June–July), and on Datta Jayanthī (the celebration of Dattātreya's birth, in December–January). Many Maharashtrians I have spoken with, in rural villages and in urban centers, told me that reading the *Gurucaritra* was a regular part of their devotional lives, for example reading a set number of verses or a chapter of the text regularly.

Dīpaka: paragon of guru-devotion

On nearly every page of the *Gurucaritra*, Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara exhorts the reader to devote himself or herself to Śrīguru. Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara asserts that the God Dattātreya is himself an incarnation of the *trimūrti* and that he is the founding guru of the lineage that continues through Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī to many contemporary gurus. Indeed, the text demands that one understand and treat one's living guru as a god, a concept expressed in what is probably the most often-quoted hymn to the guru in the Indic world (and found in numerous places in the *Gurucaritra*): 'The Guru is Brahmā, the Guru is Viṣṇu, the Guru is Lord Śiva. The Guru is likewise the highest Brahman. Homage to that holy Guru.'[5] The author asserts that confusion, turmoil, doubt and wretchedness of all kinds are due to a lack of comprehension of the true nature of the guru. We find this sentiment expressed in the stories of Śrīpāda Śrīvallabha's and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's life events and their interactions with disciples, especially in the case of supplicants who are afflicted by severe pain and suffering. This teaching is made particularly explicit at the beginning and end of the work, where Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara

develops the characters in the frame story and makes explicit the morals expanded in the text. The narrator of the text, Siddha, who was himself initiated by Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, tells the seeker and disciple Nāmadhāraka that the latter is troubled at heart because he does not fully understand the nature of the guru, his power, and how a disciple should relate to such a being (2.16–22).

Siddha recounts the greatness of the guru to Nāmadhāraka in no uncertain terms: the guru is the best of all beings; the guru's grace is the 'subtle essence of Brahman and yet also manifests in the expanse of the material world', and 'all the gods can be controlled by one who has the grace of the guru' (2.20–1).[6] He says that the guru is really the *trimūrti* and thus should be meditated upon always, and that the guru is greater than all gods because the guru can protect disciples when the gods get angry, but that the gods have no power to save a disciple if the guru is upset (2.23–5).[7]

Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara illustrates these principles in the story of Dīpaka and his exemplary service and devotion to his guru Vedadharma. The story demonstrates the ethos of 'bhakti morality' more plainly than any other, and it is often used to explain the qualities of a true guru and an ideal disciple.[8]

The guru Vedadharma asked his disciples who among them would accompany him to Kāśī and serve him as he performed penance to suffer through and expiate his last remaining sin, a process that would involve him becoming maimed, blind, lame, and afflicted by leprosy for a period of 21 years. Dīpaka stepped forward, saying that he would suffer the afflictions in his own body out of love for his guru, but his guru said this was not possible – he must consume his own sin. Affirming that his guru was the same as Viśvanātha (literally 'lord of the universe,' an appellation of Śiva) to him, Dīpaka promised to serve him (2.149–182).[9] The guru and disciple then went to Kāśī (present-day Vārāṇasī/Benares), and the guru's body became deeply afflicted with leprosy. Pus and blood oozed from his many open sores, and he became epileptic. Dīpaka continued to serve him loyally, begging food and offering it to his guru, and cleaning his body. As Vedadharma's condition worsened, he began to torment his disciple, hurling abuses and rejecting the food he brought. He would alternatively praise and revile his disciple (2.183–200). Thus,

> That disciple [Dīpaka] served the guru single-mindedly, irrespective of his good or bad qualities, saying, 'That very one is Īśvara.' Whatever food he could get, he brought it all, saying, 'My guru is just like Lord Viṣṇu.' Although he was in Kāśī . . . he did nothing but serve his guru. He did not perform pilgrimage, go to festivals, perform the daily duties of caring for the body, or socialize – day and night he was devoted to the guru, thinking, 'He is Brahmā-Harī.' He did nothing but service.
>
> (2.201–4)[10]

Both Śiva and Viṣṇu were so pleased by Dīpaka's extreme and single-minded devotion to Vedadharma that they came in person to give him boons. Dīpaka wanted to ask for the boon to end his guru's suffering, but his guru forbade him to

do so. Dīpaka sent Śiva away without requesting a boon, saying that he needed nothing save for his guru. Śiva was flabbergasted (2.217ff.). Later, after more prodding from Viṣṇu, Dīpaka finally asked for the boon that his own guru-bhakti be increased so that his knowledge would also increase. This pleased Vedadharma, who praised Dīpaka's devotion and predicted that he would liberate others. Then Vedadharma died (2.250–70).

Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara explains that Vedadharma took on his bodily afflictions only to test Dīpaka and instruct human beings – there was never really any sickness or residue of sin to cause it (2.271–2). The narrator in the frame story, Siddha, lays plain the moral of the story for Nāmadhāraka: 'Be firm of mind like this. If you are, then you will pass beyond the ocean of existence by means of such guru-bhakti . . . The one who is firmly devoted to (his guru) in body, speech and mind attains Īśvara (Śiva), and Īśvara will be under his control' (2.275, 7).[11]

The story of Vedadharma and Dīpaka functions as a didactic parable of one-pointed guru-devotion both in the text and in the living tradition. Dīpaka suffered great hardship serving Vedadharma, but always his mind was firm and his heart was set on his guru to the exclusion of everything else. Living in Kāśī, he performed none of the customary religious activities – he neither went on pilgrimage to the many holy sites there nor did he attend festivals. Indeed he abandoned all ritual practices, including the obligatory rites incumbent on him, rites the text later identifies as compulsory. Dīpaka represents the extreme of one-pointed devotion to guru-as-god, and his disposition serves as a marker for the radical primacy of devotion in the Datta *saṃpradāya* by negating the importance of Kāśī as a sacred space where customary religious activities are performed as a matter of course. In this episode, both Śiva and Viṣṇu endorse this nearly heretical exclusion of all praxis save for guru-devotion, and they affirm that his vision of the nature of the guru is true. Contemporary Datta bhaktas refer to Dīpaka as the paragon of guru-bhakti; his sacrifice, suffering, and persistence in service to his guru are the ideals toward which many in the tradition strive.

According to the rules: *vidhi* in the *Gurucaritra*

Dīpaka represents the extreme case of one mode of religiosity expressed in the text, while Śrīguru instructs a cast of supporting actors in a different mode. Most stories of disciples coming to Śrīguru involve a crisis of some sort (disease, misfortune, poverty, death, the requirement to make great sacrifices, etc.), a test of devotion to Śrīguru (pilgrimage to his seat, hardship, conflicting advice, the call to perform difficult service, etc.), a meeting with the guru in person, and then a prescription to follow some specific course of action in order to rectify their situation. The courses of action often involve the performance of various rituals, such as bathing, circumambulating a sacred tree, presenting offerings to Brahmins, visiting sacred bathing sites, and/or performing certain vows. These prescriptions point toward a world-view complementary to the radically exclusive bhakti exemplified by Dīpaka; coming to the guru, affirming that he is the *trimūrti*, serving him, loving him and worshipping him is not always, or even generally, sufficient. One must act

in certain ways, performing specified rituals. And this not just in extraordinary circumstances of crisis and turmoil, but in daily life as well, Śrīguru says.

The bulk of the text presents these duties implicitly; the narrative flows back and forth from a disciple of Śrīguru who is a devoted washerman, to a destitute Brahmin leper, to a young Brahmin widow, for instance, and these characters receive instruction about the conduct appropriate in their specific cases, rules said to be laid down by 'the Vedas and the Śāstras'.

In chapter 2, Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara describes the ideal person, in this age of the Kaliyuga, as one who is devoted to his guru, is versed in and follows the prescriptions found in the Śāstras and Purāṇas, and performs his duties with discrimination (2.126–7). The guru is said to be the one who reveals the path of right action (2.140). If the disciple is sufficiently devoted to a guru, he receives the guru's instruction, understands the śāstric injunctions, and acts accordingly. Thus, in this paradigm, guru-bhakti leads the disciple to the performance of *vidhi*.

In these instances, our text expresses the purpose of the spiritual teacher found in the Upaniṣads, namely, to impart knowledge in a world where gurus (then referred to as *ācāryas*) taught, explained and elaborated on the oral texts of their traditions to their disciples. Our author affirms that understanding and realization is possible only in the context of the guru–disciple relationship; Brahmā says to the personified Kaliyuga that there is no way to transcend *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth and entrapment in the conditional realms) without the guru:

> Without the guru, no one would understand anything. How could you hear the Śāstras without an ear? Listen! When they hear the Śāstras, men survive the noose of *saṃsāra*. On account of this, the guru himself illuminates the Śāstras. Know the guru thus, in his illustrious form.
>
> (2.145, 7)[12]

The guru, here, is the saviour of his disciples, the boat to carry them across the ocean of worldly existence, the one who appears in response to worship and devotion, and the bestower of grace, compassion or mercy (*guru-kṛpā*), but he is also the illuminator of the knowledge found in the Śāstras. The guru is able to speak to different audiences in different registers, and the institution of guruship brings together bhakti and Brahmanical modes of religiosity in a space of negotiation, each vying for the upper hand and each achieving it at various points in the narrative.

In what context does the guru impart śāstric knowledge? Which śāstric norms does the *Gurucaritra* prescribe? In the next section I briefly engage narratives that exemplify the most prominent of these norms, those that govern the behavior of women and Brahmins, in order to place the text within the larger Brahmanical world the text imagines, speaks to, and creates.

Rules for women and Brahmins in the *Gurucaritra*

The rules we find enunciated in the *Gurucaritra* revolve around aspects of *varṇāśramadharma* and hark back to the Dharmaśāstric categories enunciated in

Mānavadharmaśāstra. Strīdharma (the collection of duties incumbent on women) in the *Gurucaritra* is understood primarily in terms of a woman's vow of fidelity and service to her husband. Such a woman is called a *pativratā*, one who upholds a vow of fidelity, and she wields great power, as we saw above in the case of Anasūyā, who was able to transform even the three high gods into mere babes and cause them to remain in her house as her sons. In chapter 31, Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara describes what it means to be an honorable wife: A wife should always dine after her husband, respect guests and elders, obey her husband, rise before and retire after him, adorn herself with jewellery when it pleases him and refrain from doing so when it does not. She should do nothing without his permission. She should be joyful when her husband is happy, restrained when he is not, and never get angry with him, or else she will be reborn in the womb of a dog. She should keep herself secluded when menstruating, and offer herself to him afterwards. (31.33–100)

Indeed, the text asserts that a wife should consider her husband to be equal to a god and she should behave as if he is Śiva even if her husband is destitute, vile, impotent or diseased (31.67–8). A good wife should consider sacred and drink the water used to wash her husband's feet (31.73, 8). The text asserts that Śiva will come in person to meet such a *pativratā* and take her and her husband to his heaven (31.79). Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī looks kindly on the 'good woman' (*satī*) who at least prepares to join her deceased husband on his funeral pyre rather than continuing life as a widow, a practice called *sahagamana*, literally 'going with (the husband).'[13] In response to her intention to make the ultimate sacrifice for her husband and relatives (and by extension, possibly herself), Śrīguru often spares such a wife and revives her dead husband before the act is carried through. Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara presents the practice of *sahagamana* as noble, appropriate and as natural as moonlight disappearing with the setting of the moon (31.101–2). Such controversial views about the proper conduct of women, exhibited in a number of narratives in the work, make sense in the thought-world of the text precisely when we recognize that the text is imagining, re-creating, and affirming a patriarchal world-view that harkens back to the time of the Epics, if not before.[14] Regardless of whether or not the practice of *sahagamana* was ever common, our text places a strong emphasis on it. Contemporary commentators attempt to distance themselves from the 'far too unjust and "even barbarous" ' idea and emphasize the religious benefits that accrue to the husband, wife, and their families, rather than the social injustices of the practice (Kendra 2007: xi–xiii).

Women's dharma is bhakti, but of a specific kind, defined as service to and worship of her husband. Indeed, in this thought-world, everything of importance for a woman is her husband; a woman should recognize her husband to be her guru, her dharma, her god and her most holy place of pilgrimage (31.93). Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī often rewards female disciples who come to him, but he does so in most instances because of their devotion and service to their husbands and the actions they perform in such a disposition, not because of their devotion to him or any other guru or god.

Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī is concerned about proper conduct for women, but even more ubiquitous is his instruction about the conduct appropriate for and ritual

obligations of Brahmins. Chapter 36, by far the longest chapter of the book, is named *āhnika nirūpaṇaṃ*, 'the exposition of the daily ritual obligations' of Brahmins. It starts with a concrete situation where rules are broken and moves to an extended exegesis, lasting more than 500 verses, of nearly every duty incumbent upon Brahmins, explicating how each should be accomplished. These involve every detail of a Brahmin's daily routine: when to get up, where to go (and in which direction to face) for excretion, how to wash one's body and teeth/mouth, the temperatures of water to use, the application of ash on the body, etc. There is a full discussion of food and eating habits, the important daily *sandhyā* rituals that Brahmins are to perform at the three 'junctures' of the day (morning, noon, and evening), as well as a long and intricate presentation of the circumstances under which to recite the Gāyatrī mantra and the benefits each recitation affords.

The Gāyatrī mantra serves as a touchstone for the Brahmanical elements in the text, which have been the subject of much debate in the tradition. Indeed, one does not even have to read *between*, merely *below*, the lines; the notes and appended verses given by the editor R. K. Kāmata betray the ideological tug-of-war at play in the text, in its interpretation, and in its prescriptive call to action. Verses found in the Māṇagāṃva recension of the *Gurucaritra*, included after chapter 51 in the Kāmata edition, make the Brahmin focus of the text explicit:

> In the *Gurucaritra* there are sacred Vedic mantras that are to be read only by Brahmins. Know that they are inadmissible to those of all other castes. One should listen to the text as told by Brahmins. People of non-Brahmin castes should listen with feeling, omitting the 36th chapter. The way of action appropriate for Brahmins is told in the 36th chapter. Hearing it, Śūdras and those of other non-Brahmin castes will fall into hell. Know this to be true.[15]

The line of reasoning is clear: because chapter 36 contains the prescriptions and prohibitions for Brahmins as well as Vedic mantras, non-Brahmins should cover their ears when they come to that chapter.

The text's greatest contemporary interpreter and one of the most prominent Datta gurus of modern times, Vāsudevānānda Sarasvatī Ṭembhe Svāmi (1854–1914), was extremely vocal about the conservative and traditional elements in the text, and expanded on them in his own teachings on proper conduct. He believed that women should not read the *Gurucaritra* at all, but rather hear only the appropriate sections from a Brahmin, and that women did not have the right to learn Vedic mantras except those appropriate for a wife in a Vedic sacrifice.[16] His views are held by many to be canonical today.

Conflicts between bhakti and *vidhi* in the *Gurucaritra*

In light of these considerations, is the *Gurucaritra* meant only, or primarily, for male Brahmins? Can we reduce guru-bhakti to the worship of a human teacher who principally serves the intellectual and spiritual maturation of Brahmin males, especially at the time of initiation into *brahmacārya* or Vedic study? Are women

radically excluded from guru-devotion and thoroughly constrained within a regressive value system in the Datta *saṃpradāya*? Clearly not. There is, however, a productive tension or conflict between prescriptions to follow śāstric norms of behavior (for members of all social groups), on the one hand, and on exclusively worshiping and adoring god in the form of a living human being, on the other. The tension is, in some sense, dialectical, as the state of liberation espoused by the tradition is achieved by means of the grace or compassion of the guru *and* by following the rules; these two religious activities are synthesized in a state that is beyond them both. The performance of one's duties is a means to an end and not an end itself; likewise, even the purest devotion presumes separation from, or at least a distinction between, oneself and one's guru or chosen deity. These dispositions and presumptions must be transcended to reach the goal to which disciples aspire.

On the level of narrative, however, Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara oscillates between the two poles. In some stories, devotional yearnings are flatly subordinated to rule-based action. In the beginning of chapter 35, for instance, a young wife asks Śrīguru to give her a mantra so that she could always remember Śrīguru's feet no matter what happens in her life. Śrīguru refuses, saying, 'You should be happily devoted to your husband. (Other) Instruction should not be given to women. By imparting an initiatory mantra to women, the (force of the) mantra is destroyed' (35.6–7).[17]

Bhakti, however, seems to be the more senior disposition in the ethos of the text as well as the more common resolution of the dichotomy on the narrative level. We have already encountered how Dīpaka served his guru unflinchingly while omitting all of the customary rituals a Hindu would perform in Kāśī, and his guru affirmed his achievement of realization. Aṃbarīṣi in chapter 3 breaks the rules of feeding guests, but is saved by Viṣṇu who comes to his rescue in person precisely because of his devotion. In chapter 5 Sumathā feeds a mendicant, who is Datta in disguise, before she feeds the Brahmins performing a death anniversary ceremony, but her transgression is forgotten and she is hailed for her devotion and given a boon that she will bear a child who will be an incarnation of Datta (a child that turns out to be Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī himself). In chapter 40, bhakti trumps *vidhi* in a most dramatic way: a low caste tribal man worships a *liṅgaṃ* daily with ash collected from freshly burned corpses. When on one day he cannot procure fresh ash, his wife offers to be burnt and he obliges, even though he knows it to be a great sin. The wife miraculously appears alive afterwards, and Śiva comes, is pleased, and blesses them, showing how even a twisted, adharmic variation of wife-burning brings about an auspicious result when performed in the disposition of devotion. Indeed, the moral of these stories is the same; one receives all manner of blessings and liberation if one merely has faith in the guru, sees the guru as non-different from god, and is devoted to him. Transgressions, and the rules generally, fade in the face of the brilliance of the guru's grace.

Pārāyaṇa: bhakti and *vidhi* in practice

The *Gurucaritra* is alive today; it functions as a framework in which many people make sense of their own experiences and personal struggles, pertaining both to

this world and to its transcendence. The text is made concrete in the physical landscape where the stories took place; Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī is tangibly present in the village of Gāṇagāpura, located in the Gulbarga District of northern Karnataka, due in large measure to the collective memory of the stories preserved in the text. When in Gāṇagāpura, I participated in this literary-cum-geographic landscape, daily walking the well-traveled foot-path that runs for 3 kilometers along the river from the village to the Saṅgama, a pilgrimage place located at the confluence of the Bhīmā and Amarajā Rivers. Along the path I would pass many of the pilgrimage sites described in the text as well as locales where Śrīguru was said to have interacted with devotees, such as the field formerly sown by the Sūdra farmer Parvateśvara, described in chapter 47, who cut his jowar (sorghum) crop before harvest time following Śrīguru's suggestion and later reaped a great harvest because his crop was not destroyed by the torrential rains that fell at the normal harvest time. The Papavināśī Ghāṭa, referred to throughout the text as a healer of even the greatest ailments and the gravest sins, along with the seven other sacred pilgrimage places, stands testament to the fact that Śrīguru's enduring legacy is imprinted on the landscape of Gāṇagāpura. The means of this imprinting, the stamp or mold, is the *Gurucaritra* text. I believe that I was quickly embraced in Gāṇagāpura because I knew and was able to articulate the stories that gave meaning to the physical space I inhabited – I became part of the community precisely because of my engagement with the text.

Rules about who has access to the text affect people's religious lives and their connection to their tradition. The text itself is treated as a sacred object, worshiped, and praised, and reading the text is one of the primary ways in which to be religious in this tradition. The act of reading or listening to the text is said, literally in every chapter of the work, to cure all ailments and fulfil all desires. Who has access to this ocean of grace? As we have seen, the Māṇagāṃva edition holds that only Brahmins have direct access, and that all others may participate only through their mediation. Ṭembhe Svāmi goes further, prohibiting women from reading the text and suggesting that they should only hear the parts pertaining to *pativratā-dharma.* The practice of *pārāyaṇa*, or ritual reading of a text, is one of the defining features of the Datta *saṃpradāya* – many devout followers I spoke with read a portion of the text daily, and many urban devotees travel to Gāṇagāpura, Narsobācīvāḍī or Pīṭhāpura to perform *pārāyaṇa* at especially sacred times. I was in these locales at a number of these times, and I performed and observed a seven-day *pārāyaṇa* of the *Gurucaritra* in the week leading up to the full moon of Guru Pūrṇimā on 25 July 2010 in Gāṇagāpura, and experienced firsthand the dichotomy between bhakti and *vidhi* in contemporary Datta *saṃpradāya* practice.

The afterwords to *Gurucaritra* editions include many injunctions that one is instructed to follow when performing *pārāyaṇa*, the most important of which include: take no food of any kind before finishing the day's reading; eat only plain rice or fruits (no full meals with vegetable curry dishes); eat only *sattvic* foods (containing minimal oil, spices, and sugar); do not engage in sexual activity; sleep on the ground on a white floor covering; sit in a single position for the duration of

a day's reading and return to the same place each day; do not cut one's hair or nails; bathe completely after using the bathroom, etc.

Readers followed the rules to various degrees. One middle-aged woman who sat in front of me wanted to make sure I didn't eat the *prasāda*, food offered to the deity and returned to devotees as a blessing, that was distributed at noon-time, for she said I should eat only fruit, and only after I had completed my day's reading. The *saṃnyāsi* beside me agreed that I should not eat the *prasāda*, and insisted that I keep my book on my table and not move it for the duration of the *pārāyaṇa*, returning to the same low stone table each day. Some groups of readers, along with many visiting pilgrims, would sing *āratīs* that included praises to Vāsudevānānda Sarasvatī Ṭembhe Svāmi, whose presence, along with his conservative interpretation of the rules governing access to the text and its teachings, is very much alive in practice today. Indeed, he is always counted as one of the great contemporary *avatāras* of Datta, even when other members on the list fluctuate. I asked a group of well-respected Brahmins at the Saṅgama about the participation of non-Brahmins and women in *pārāyaṇa*, and I received a common response – the practice of *pārāyaṇa* is a *sādhana*, or religious activity, meant primarily for Brahmin males. Indeed it was their opinion that the entire Saṅgama area should be restricted to male Brahmins, but that Indian civil law demanded everyone be allowed access. Conservative views about the rules of ritual engagement, are thus certainly in evidence today.

Plenty of readers were less concerned about *vidhi*, however. They were often non-Brahmins, but not exclusively. Many readers accepted and ate *prasāda* when it was given, returning to their reading afterward, and some came and went during the course of a day's recitation. Some women, including the one who was concerned about me not eating forbidden food, were themselves engaged in recitation of the *Gurucaritra* text, a blatant transgression in the view of Vāsudevānānda Sarasvatī. Bhakti won out for those devotees in some respects, but the rules were important in other instances.

When I spoke to devotees who were performing *pārāyaṇa*, it was clear that many of them were most interested in the personal experience of Datta's presence, referred to in the text and in conversation as *sākṣatkāra*, literally an appearance of the deity before one's own eyes. Upon finishing my seven-day *pārāyaṇa* of the *Gurucaritra*, I was asked time and time again about what I felt, what I experienced – did I receive a vision of Datta? Did I feel him present before me? These concerns illustrate the fact that many readers perform *pārāyaṇa* in the hope of attaining an unmediated experience of the divine, the very relationship every bhakta hopes to experience with the chosen deity. For some readers, devotion was infinitely more important than following the rules.

Piety in the living tradition is expressed through both poles, bhakti and *vidhi*, just as it is in the *Gurucaritra's* narratives. The non-Brahmin devotees who were most concerned with a personal experience of the presence of Datta nonetheless asked a nearby Brahmin to perform *āratī* for them at the end of their recitation, showing their concern for *vidhi* in the midst of their privileging of bhakti. There is no contradiction between the two modes of religiosity in practice; members of the

tradition integrate them seamlessly, producing mixtures that differ only in the proportion of each element.

Conclusion: context and cultural interlocutors

The text and many of its interpreters assert that the Brahmanical elements of the tradition arose because of a decline in Brahmanical practice due to the results of Muslim rule.[18] Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara does not look kindly on Muslim kings or their rulership, and in the text he directly links the decline in the observance of dharma with foreign rule: 'These are difficult times for religious observance. Foreign rule has produced cruel deeds. Adharma is being practiced openly. Foreigners are coming here' (50.258).[19] We are to believe that Kaliyuga, a personification of the fourth age of human degeneration and a character introduced in chapter 2, had brought down the house, and that Brahmins had lost their touch, all because the Sultanate kings desecrated Hindu religion and corrupted Brahmins, leading them away from their rightful duties into an adharmic and hedonistic courtly life.

But did Muslim rulers actually engage in widespread persecution of Hindus or campaigns of conversion? The short answer seems to be: 'Not all that much.' A. R. Kulkarni states that Muslim rulers in the region between the 13th and 17th centuries 'generally adopted a policy of tolerance' toward the local population, and that there is little evidence of widespread defacement of Hindu images or forced conversion (Kulkarni 1996: 112, 32). Conversion to Islam for political expediency did occur,[20] but Muslim rulers likely affected Hindus' religious lives rather minimally.

Contrary to the standard narratives espoused in Marathi literature, the Sufis, who came with the first Muslim incursions southward beginning in 1296, may have been engaged in nominal proselytizing, but they seem to have been more interested in mystical union with the divine through physical, mental and emotional exercises of devotion and love. They were distrustful of the local population and largely uninterested in interacting with them (Eaton 1974: 118). I suspect that Sufis encroached on Brahmins' authority more in the Brahmin imagination than in practice, contrary to what some scholars have claimed.[21] Indeed there are instances demonstrating mutual respect and collaboration. There is a popular theory that Ekanātha's guru Janārdana was initiated by a Sufi *pīr* of the Qadiri order by the name of Cānda Bodhale, also known as Said Cāndasāheb Kādrī (Tulpule 1979: 353), connecting Ekanātha, himself a Datta bhakta, to Sufi traditions and implying that sufi religiosity may have impacted the most prominent writers of the period to some degree (Tulpule 1979:353). Furthermore, Hugh van Skyhawk points out that in the famous *Ekanāthī Bhāgavata*, Ekanātha's Marathi commentary and interpretation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* written c. 1573, 'not one clear-cut example of criticism against Muslims can be found, while scathing attacks on the orthodox paṇḍits and yājñikas are numerous' (van Skyhawk 1992:75).

Both the antinomian ascetic Mahānubhāva tradition and the popular movement that formed around devotion to the God Viṭṭhala/Viṭhobā, which became codified

in the Vārkarī Pantha, overshadow the Muslim Sultanate kings' interference with Brahmanical religious practices and the Sufi influence in the Deccan. Thus, the real assault on Brahmanical religion, I believe, came from the inside, not the outside: the two most important indigenous religious traditions of western India were either dismissive of or downright antagonistic toward Brahmanical mores.

Neither class nor gender was used to exclude members from the Vārkarī Pantha, and indeed many of the saints in the tradition were from the lower classes, Tukārāma, for instance, being a Śūdra (Deleury 1960: 5; Tulpule 1979: 334). S.G. Tulpule describes the Vārkarī poet-saints as constituting a 'spiritual democracy that recognized no distinctions of caste, creed or sex' (Tulpule 1979: 338). This 'spiritual democracy' had permeated the socio-religious fabric of Maharashtra by Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's time (fifteenth century CE), thus challenging the Brahmin establishment, whose power and authority was dependent on the very distinctions that the Vārkarī's 'spiritual democracy' swept away. Although Brahmins did participate in the tradition (some of the great poet-saints, such as Ekanātha, were Brahmins), the Vārkarī's bhakti was at odds with the śāstric ethos.

The Mahānubhāvas, for their part, were radically anti-Brahmanical: 'Considered heterodox at best, . . . [they] rejected caste and the worship of idols, [and] refused to acknowledge the ritual and scriptural authority of Brahmans even though many early converts were Brahmans' (Feldhaus 1988: 264). Because of their rejection of distinctions of caste and gender and their unorthodox doctrines and practices, it seems that the Mahānubhāvas presented such an assault to Brahmanical values that Maharashtrian Brahmins felt the need to stigmatize and persecute them, finally forcing them to adopt radical measures of secrecy and anonymity.

At roughly the same time as the Brahmanical Hindu tradition denounced the Mahānubhāvas, they seem to have incorporated and co-opted the god Dattātreya, purifying him of his antinomian characteristics described in *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, wherein he is associated with classic 'left-handed' or transgressive Tantric practices such as eating meat, drinking liquor, and engaging in sexual activity (Rigopoulos 1998: 45). Datta was a rather unlikely figurehead for conservative values in light of these associations; nonetheless, the Brahmanical Datta *saṃpradāya* embraced Datta and championed the god as an archetype of an immortal guru and *avatāra*. This move can be seen as an attempt to recode an important heterodox symbol with Brahmanical meanings, and it may point to one of the ways Brahmins were attempting to regain influence in the realm of popular devotional Hinduism in medieval western India.

Brahmins may have seen in the figure of the guru a bridge between their conservative religious mores and the growing devotional culture of mid-second millennium India. Datta, recast as a figurehead of guruship, became an appropriate and comprehensible object of devotion that could fit with the emerging socio-religious bhakti revolution that was overwhelming religious life at the time and eclipsing the need for priestly mediation. Brahminhood is born in the guru–devotee relationship; the guru is the person who initiates a Brahmin youth into *brahmacārya*, the period in which a Brahmin male studies the scriptures and prepares to enter his vocational path. Thus, the guru is the perfect recipient of

devotion in the Brahmin imaginaire; the Vedic initiator is elevated to the status of a god and glorified as a divine figure. Who better to receive such a celestial mantle in a Brahmanical paradigm? Indeed, the claims made in the *Gurucaritra* that the guru is greater than a god make sense in this respect, for in the context of the study of the scriptures, the guru offers what the gods cannot: vocational and salvific knowledge imparted in a circumstance of trust and human intimacy which fosters comprehensive understanding.

I believe that the *Gurucaritra* has been in part misread to be *descriptive*, when in fact it was and is in important ways *prescriptive*. Ḍhere argues that the importance of the text is primarily that it *describes* the world in which it was written.[22] In some respects, this is undeniable; every work is, at least in part, a product of the cultural and historical milieu in which it is written. But we must hold out the possibility that the thought-world of the text is in some aspects a literary fiction, created by Brahmin males, in large measure for them, and purposed to inspire conduct that serves to perpetuate, or indeed (re-) create, a social order in which they are highly valued. The Brahmanical elements in the text could be read as assertions of the importance, necessity, and divinely ordained nature of the entire social structure on which the Brahmin hereditary vocation rested, at a time when they were losing (or had already lost?) their monopoly on the means to achieve salvation largely at the hands of bhakti traditions.

Just as many of those who perform *pārāyaṇa* declare that a personal experience of the presence of the guru or deity trumps all other motives and experiences, so we find in the final chapter of the *Gurucaritra* the assertion that one should act outwardly in accordance with the Śāstras, but that one's heart should be fixed always on the feet of Śrīguru (52.8).[23] Proper conduct is necessary, but it does not in itself take one to the farther shore. Even in the midst of the most thoroughly Brahmanical tradition in western India, bhakti's ascendancy is affirmed. It is a unique kind of bhakti that emerges in the Brahmin imaginaire, however, a devotional love of and surrender to one's guru, to guru-as-god, to a figure who serves to bridge and unite competing modes of religiosity.

Notes

1 I take Brahmanical Hinduism to be the religion presided over by the Brahmin priestly class, a kind of religiosity that is comprised of the performance of rituals by Brahmins emphasizing Vedic learning, a divinely ordained, hierarchical social order, and an insistence on the division of labor and a graduated moral code which was applied to each according to one's place in society and one's stage in life, *varṇāśramadharma*. See especially *Mānavadharmaśāstra* 1.88–98 (For an English translation see Doniger 1991:12–13).

2 Myths and stories about the god Dattātreya can be found in the Epics and minor Upaniṣads, and they proliferate in the Purāṇas, especially in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, and in some Tantras.

3 *Gurucaritra* 4.14: *patisevā karī bahuta, samasta suravara bhayābhīta, svargaiśvarya gheīla tvarita, mhaṇoni cintitī mānasīṃ.* This story of the birth of Datta to Anasūyā is found in verses 4.12–71. All citations from the *Gurucaritra* are given from (Gaṅgādhara 2006) and will be hereafter cited in the body of the text using the format of (chapter. verse). This edition was edited by R. K. Kāmata, who compiled the closest we have to a

critical edition of the *Gurucaritra* in the early decades of the twentieth century after extensive research into the various recensions of the text. All translations from the Marathi and Sanskrit are my own. See Bharadwaja 1987 and Gaṅgādhara 1994 for abridged English renderings of the text. The work has not, to my knowledge, been translated verse for verse into English or into European languages, and Kiehnle corroborates this (Kiehnle 1999).

4 There is disagreement as to the *Gurucaritra*'s date of composition. I. M. P. Raeside dates it at 1550 CE (Raeside 1982:498), whereas Shankar Tulpule dates it at 1538 CE (Tulpule 1979:352). Other scholars seem to choose between the two options.

5 *Gurur brahmā gurur viṣṇur gurur devo maheśvaraḥ, gurur eva parabrahma tasmai srī gurave namaḥ.* This Sanskrit *śloka* is used in a great many guru-traditions across India and in the west. Its origins are not clear, but it occurs as verse 32 of the *Gurugītā*, a Sanskrit text included in some versions of the Marathi *Gurucaritra*. The Sanskrit verse is quoted in the *Gurucaritra* at 2.136 with a Marathi gloss following it in 2.137, and the sentiment is expressed in many other places in the text, e.g. 1.84, 2.23, 2.206, etc. This verse is sung at daily Datta *āratīs*, and is often the first verse quoted by Datta bhaktas to explain the true (and thus divine) nature of the guru.

6 *Gurucaritra* 2.20–1: *siddha mhaṇe taye veḷīṃ, aika śiṣyā stomamauḷī, gurukṛpā sūkṣmasthūḷīṃ, bhaktavatsala pariyesā. gurukṛpā hoya jyāsa, dainya dise kaiceṃ tyāsa, samasta deva tyāsī vaśya, kaḷikālāsī jiṅke nara.*

7 This sentiment is expressed throughout the text at various places, e.g. 1.136, 2.28, 2.133–6, etc. This is a Marathi mirror of the Sanskrit verse 44 of the *Gurugītā* (Anonymous 1991).

8 This episode is found at *Gurucaritra* 2.149–274.

9 We might see in this test of devotion a corollary to the formative moment in the Sikh *khalsa* when Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last of the personal Sikh gurus, asked who of his disciples was prepared to offer his head in devotion to his guru. The term *khalsa* itself serves to denote the brotherhood of Sikh initiates as well as the disposition of devotion to guru and god around which the tradition is formed. See the section 'Not guru, not-not guru' in Jacob Copeman's chapter in this volume for an extended discussion of the Sikh tradition and the ways in which devotion and bodily sacrifice have been used to define the tradition and its disputants. The sacrifice of self in service to one's guru is a ubiquitous trope in guru-traditions. William Pinch, in his chapter in the volume, explores how the sacrifice of self inherent in guru-devotion is akin to slavery, as both involve a social death and rebirth.

10 *Gurucaritra* 2.201–4: *aise guruce guṇadoṣa, manā nāṇī to śiṣya, sevā karī ekamānasa, toci īśvara mhaṇoni. jaiseṃ jaiseṃ māge anna, āṇūni deto paripūrṇa, jaisā īśvara ase viṣṇu, taisā guru mhaṇatase. kāśīsārkeṃ kṣetra asatāṃ, kadā na karī tīrthayātrā, na vace devāciye yātrā, gurusevevāñcūni. (śloka) na tīrthayātrā na ca devayātrā na ca lokayātrā, aharniśaṃ brahmaharīsabuddhyā guruṃ prapanno nahi sevyamanyat.*

11 *Gurucaritra* 2.275, 2.277: *siddha mhaṇe nāmakaraṇī, dṛḍha mana asāveṃ yāciguṇīṃ, tarīca tarela bhavārṇīṃ, gurubhaktī ase yeṇeṃvidhi . . . dṛḍha bhaktī ase jayāpāśīṃ, trikaraṇasaha mānasīṃ, toci lādhe īśvarāsī, īśvara hoya tayā vaśya.*

12 *Gurucaritra* 2.145, 2.147: *(śloka) guruṃ vinā na śravaṇaṃ bhavetkasyāpi kasyacit, vinā karṇena śāstrasya śravaṇaṃ tatkuto bhavet. (oṃvyā) śāstre aikatāṃ pariyesīṃ, taratīla saṃsārapāśīṃ, yākāraṇeṃ guruci prakāśī, jyotiḥsvarūpa jāṇāvā.*

13 See Doniger 2009, chapter 21, for an excellent discussion of the historical and textual foundations of sahagamana.

14 The wives of Pandu, in the Mahābhārata, argue about who would have the privilege of performing *sahagamana*, for instance.

15 *Gurucaritra* chapter 51, Māṇagāṃva Manuscript edition additional verses 3–5 (Gaṅgādhara 2006:661): *yānta asatī vedamantra, viprāṃsī vācāvayā ase pavitra, anyā yātīsa sarvatra, agrāhya ase jāṇije. tyāṃṇīṃ vipramukheṅkarūna, grantha karāvā śravaṇa, chattisāvā adhyāya vegaḷona, itara bhāveṃ aikāveṃ. chattisāvyā adhyāyīṃ, brahmakarmācī sāṅgitalī soī, śūdrādi yātīneṃ aikatāṃ apāyīṃ, paḍatīla satya jāṇa pāṃ.*

16 See 'The opinion of Śrī Ṭembhe Svāmī Mahārāja's (Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī) about why women should not read the *Gurucaritra* and other matters, reproduced from a letter which came from R. Naraharapanta, the son of the accomplished doctor G. Vyam. Sātavaḷekar, himself a devotee of the master' in the Editor's Afterword to Gaṅgādhara 1954:770.

17 *Gurucaritra* 35.6–7: *śrīguru mhaṇatī tiyesī, striyānteṃ kāya upadeśī, patibhakti karāvī harṣīṃ, upadeśa striyānteṃ deūṃ naye. detāṃ upadeśa striyāṃsī, vighna ase mantrāsī, pūrvīṃ śukrācāryāsī, ghaḍaleṃ ase pariyesā. Vidhi* also wins out in the story about Rāvaṇa in chapter 6, for his insistence on performing the evening *sandhyā* rituals causes him to lose the all-powerful *liṅgaṃ* he received as a gift from Śiva because of his, and his mother's, devotion.

In her chapter 'The Female Guru' included in this volume, Karen Pechilis offers an example of a female Maharashtrian guru, Bahinabai (1628–1700), who received a mantra from Tukārāma in a vision, and was subsequently reprimanded by her husband.

18 See for instance Ḍhere 1964:196–7; Ghurye 1962:217; Joshi 1965:88.

19 *Gurucaritra* 50.258: *kaṭhiṇa divasa yugadharma, mleñccharājya krūrakarma, pragaṭa asatāṃ ghaḍe adharma, samasta mleñccha yetheṃ yetī.* Chapters 14 and 25 describe Sayandeva, a principal disciple of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, working for a Muslim king. In chapter 41, Śrīguru, in a royal dispensary tone, tells Sayandeva that he should no longer serve Muslim rulers.

20 Burton Stein comments that, during the fourteenth century, freelance warriors who converted to Islam had greater opportunities of employment and were at less risk of being killed if captured by Sultanate forces, showing that religious affiliation and conversion, at least among some of the military elite, may have been politically motivated (Stein 1989:23).

21 Tulpule claims the Sufis were 'systematically encroaching on the traditional religion of Mahārāṣṭra,' (Tulpule 1979:352). I accept that the presence of Sufis in the Deccan affected the indigenous population; Sufi Dargahs are common throughout the region and some members of the Datta *saṃpradāya* consider some Sufis to be Datta bhaktas. Furthermore, there is reason to believe Sufis of the Chishti order likely did interact with Hindus to some degree – they wrote popular poetry and folk songs in the Deccani language which addressed themes of village life in order to connect to the local population and teach them the basic tenets of Islam (Eaton 1978:157). This folk literature did not appear until the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries in Bijapur, however, calling into question claims about the widespread encroachment of Sufism on Maharashtrian religions during the life of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī (c. 1378–1458), the era described in the *Gurucaritra*.

22 *'coudāvyā śatakāntīla mahārāṣṭrācyā sāmājika jīvanāceṃ pratibiṃba mhaṇūnahi yā granthāveṃ mahattva viśeṣa āhe'* (Ḍhere 1964:207).

23 *Gurucaritra* 52.8: *yākāraṇeṃ antaḥkaraṇīṃ, dṛḍhatā asāvī śrīgurucaraṇīṃ, bāhya dehācī rahāṭaṇī, śāstrādhāreṃ karāvī.*

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12 Continuities as gurus change

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In many Indic traditions, individual gurus and their successors are felt to offer their devotees the same continuing means of salvation: a specific mantra, enlightening teaching, and/or spiritual power, which the successor has somehow assimilated from his or her predecessor. The actual human personalities of the predecessor and successor gurus, however, can be quite different. Although differences of culture-historical generation certainly come into play here, just as important are those of personal temperament and style. Together these can lead to obvious changes in apparently central areas of practice, such as modes of initiation and openness to worldly entanglements. From the outside these differences may be readily taken as aspects of the changes inevitably occurring in religious traditions, but from the inside those changes might appear problematic: aren't old devotees often jarred and puzzled by what seem to be the successor's new, sometimes quite different ways? Of course they are, but they often manage to accommodate themselves very nicely, reaching different understandings about the meaning of succession in the process. I will examine some continuing dynamics of change, accommodation, and understanding in the case of succession to a regional guru based in central India. I first became acquainted with the old guru in the spring of 1969 when serving as an American Peace Corps volunteer in Madhya Pradesh. At that time I formed a lasting bond with him. Since then, I have continued to visit his ashram off and on and to interact with his successor. I thus have a rather long story to tell, mostly about the changes in the gurus, practices, and ashram community, but also a bit about my relationship to it all. That part becomes most apparent at the end.

The ashram is on the outskirts of Gwalior, in the northern part of Madhya Pradesh: the next major railway stop after Agra on the main line south from Delhi. Gwalior has grown up around the foot of a steep bluff that offered strategic command over its hinterland and was used by successive military chiefs as a site for a fort. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Maratha chief Mahadji Scindia rode up from the southwest, captured the fort, and made Gwalior the northernmost outpost of the Maratha empire. During British times, the Scindias' Gwalior was an important princely state dominated by a Marathi-speaking elite but readily incorporating local Rajputs into its military establishment. The first of the gurus in my story – Thakur Mansingh Kushwah (1909–83), known to his disciples as Malik Sahib – was a self-conscious scion of one of these Rajput military families.

The ashram founded by Malik Sahib lies to the north of the fort, in an area of the city that only began to see development in the last decades of the twentieth century. When Malik Sahib started building there in 1961, the area was mostly open land, and his neighbors included members of the old Maharashtrian elite who had built retreats for themselves outside town. Malik Sahib was then in his early fifties, having taken early retirement some years before from the middle ranks of the civil service in Gwalior State and its successors in Independent India. But he nevertheless felt a kinship with his well-to-do neighbors. His family, too, had been part of the local gentry: his great-grandfather had been a famous colonel in the days when the Scindias still occasionally skirmished with their neighbors, and his grandfather was a major general (Miśra 1999: 4).[1] Malik Sahib's father, however, after a brief stint in Scindia's army, mostly looked after the family lands, which did not yield a particularly high income. Still, the family had holdings in two villages, and the title *Thakur* – commonly used before Malik Sahib's given name – is an honorific given in the region to Rajputs of rank. Born in a big manor house in a small village in an outlying district, he went to the Sardars' School, built on top of Gwalior fort near the end of the nineteenth century for the sons of the gentry (it is now an elite prep school).[2] Unlike many of his classmates, though, Malik Sahib's family fortunes were such that he had to find work after graduation. He thus began an honorable career as a civil servant, much of it as a *nāyab tahsīldār* – the second in charge at district land record offices, a position that would give him a modicum of local authority in the districts he served.

Although Malik Sahib was posted throughout his state – which changed its name and territory under different political dispensations – much of his time was spent in the districts around Gwalior where he had his roots. Saiṃthrā, the village where Malik Sahib was born, is in Morena district, and the family also had land at Lahroli in Bhind. These adjoining districts – which together border Rajasthan on one side and Uttar Pradesh on the other – are in the Chambal valley, infamous into the 1960s as an area rife with highway bandits. Known in Indian English as dacoits, they could hide in the area's deep ravines and foil local police efforts by easily moving across state lines. In this world, many thought it best to keep arms themselves – Rajputs especially, who could often be seen carrying rifles when they went out.

Malik Sahib came out of this Chambal valley culture of the Gwalior hinterlands, if from its upper strata, and never lost his roots there – but he doesn't seem to have been entirely *of* it. As a child in the village, we read in his authorized biography, he wearied and sometimes confounded his country schoolteacher with questions about Hindu divinities (ibid.: 6). He had vivid visions of them, too: the Goddess in several of her aspects, and Hanuman (ibid.: 9–10). At Sardars' School, he didn't really mix easily with most of his classmates, who were largely occupied with the pursuits and fancies normal to privileged young men of the day. Arriving there at the age of 10, young Mansingh's obviously different disposition, we hear, actively alienated a number of his peers. But in time he also found some companions who took his religious questions seriously and with whom as a teenager he organized regular devotional meetings. He also eventually found encouragement

from the school's headmaster, a Mr Pearce, whom late in life he still remembered fondly (ibid.: 11–17; 54–55).

The tensions between a background at once tough and elite and a spiritual path that often forefronted devotional humility would be with Malik Sahib throughout his life. He tended to deal with it consistently, too: keeping a distance from the world while cultivating a small group who appreciated him. Despite the strong impact he had on those who felt his spiritual power, he never had an extremely large following – maybe, by the end of his life, several hundred active devotees. People were sometimes put off by his occasional gruffness and perhaps even more by his complex personality, which could be a little difficult to fathom. I remember him once in his sixties, sitting among his devotees, when the talk turned to something (I forget just what) that seemed to stir feelings of wounded pride in him. 'There is Thakur-nature *(ṭhākurvat)* in me, too,' he admitted, showing some emotion: this was a personal issue with which he seemed to have had persistent experience. The apparent disjunct between his worldly persona as a Rajput landlord from the Chambal valley and the devotional yoga he taught was a fact he recognized: he sometimes told a story about his encounter with a mysterious *siddha bābā*, a disembodied being who, they say, claimed to know him over past lives.[3] This *siddha bābā* appeared to Malik Sahib, looked at him intently, and remarked 'Sants and progeny don't go together' (*sant aur santati sāth sāth nahīṃ hote*). 'He got the tradition right, too,' Malik Sahib would sometimes add, referring to his own lineage in *sant mat*, the path of the Hindi poet-singers called sants: 'he knew.'

Malik Sahib met the guru who initiated him into *sant mat* early in life. While still a student at the Sardars' School, Malik Sahib came into contact with Lala Shyamlal, known as Guru Data Dayala, who traced a lineage to the nineteenth-century Radhasoami Maharaj through the latter's younger brother Pratap Singh. The Radhasoamis have been the major advocates in modern India of the more esoteric side of the Hindi sants, best known through sayings attributed to the sixteenth-century Kabir.[4] Guru Data Dayala's succession through Pratap Singh, though, was always to remain a minor Radhasoami lineage, often ignored in its histories. But that didn't matter to Malik Sahib. He became an ardent disciple of Guru Data Dayala and brought others to him; when the guru passed on in 1940, Malik Sahib felt called upon to give initiation in the tradition himself. The managing committee at Data Dayala's ashram, alas, had other ideas and in fact never managed to find a viable successor. So Malik Sahib continued on his own, holding religious gatherings where he often gave discourses on sant verse and offering initiations. As he was transferred around his state to different government postings, he found new groups of disciples, some of whom stayed with him till the end of his life.

By the time I met him, however, Malik Sahib was initiating disciples into something more than the *sant mat* practice he had first learned. More spiritually adventurous than many devoted Radhasoamis and unattached to any institution that demanded sectarian orthodoxy, he remained open to new religious experiences. In 1952 he made the acquaintance of Yogendra Vijnani of Rishikesh, like himself a

householder, who – after getting to know him better some years later – initiated him into a Shaiva *śaktipāt* tradition. Malik Sahib stayed with his *śaktipāt* guru in Rishikesh for just a week over the festival of Holi in 1958, but the results of the contact were profound. The effects of his own initiation, Malik Sahib would say, were felt 'spontaneously' *(sahaj)* by his disciples already doing the *sant mat* practice, and these effects could be initially confusing (Miśra 1999: 122–129). The Radhasoami practice emphasized listening to sounds heard in the head and cultivating ecstatic love; this could lead to experiences of consciousness being drawn up rapturously by a sound current through a series of stations beginning at the point between the eyebrows. Making sense of these experiences intellectually was a dualistic theology that bears some resemblances to early Western gnosticism – with a demiurge seeking to keep souls enthralled in the world and a true lord pulling them home to the highest heavens – but which seems unusual in Hindu-oriented contexts.[5] The *śaktipāt* practice, by contrast, was monistic, grounded in understandings about the essential unity of Shiva as ultimate consciousness and Shakti as divine power. It had devotional aspects to be sure, but it did not highlight the experiences of intense, blissful love that were featured in the Radhasoami tradition. Instead it was said to lead relatively quickly to a clarity of consciousness through an awakening of the consciousness-force in the body, often referred to as *kuṇḍalinī śakti*. The internal subtle-physical emphasis in the practice Malik Sahib now offered was no longer oriented predominantly toward the centers in the head; the well-known bodily chakras of later Hindu yogas also came seriously into play.

For both disciples and guru, these two experientially and intellectually divergent traditions needed to be integrated. For the disciples, experiential integration was foremost. The disciples still experienced the ecstatic love associated with *sant mat* devotion, but now often in the six bodily chakras as these were purified by play of the *kuṇḍalīni śakti*: when devotees surrendered themselves to the *śakti*, further, they might go into a deep trance, spontaneously start doing different sorts of *prānayāma* breathing, or repeat mantras inwardly or outwardly. As the disciples progressed, they were more likely to successfully become absorbed in the blissful sounds of the higher regions. What kept Malik Sahib's two practices together for the disciples was the centrality of the guru's grace in both: it now provided a wider variety of experiences, but they were all recognized as coming from the same source. I never heard of any devotees leaving Malik Sahib because of the new practice. Probably some did, but I suspect that there weren't very many. Malik Sahib had a fairly small following in those days, and those who came were attracted more by his own personal magnetism than any codified Radhasoami doctrine, which could have been more easily had from an established lineage.

The experiential integration of the sants' sound current and the yogis' *kuṇḍalinī* seems to have been immediate for Malik Sahib himself. The intellectual integration may have taken more time, but Malik Sahib eventually managed to talk about the Radhasoami practice in familiar Hindu language and make a number of neat correlations: the goal of *sant mat* was the real Vishnu and the *kuṇḍalinī* practice offered the real Siva.[6] How many contemporary gurus, devotees could now boast, offered such a complete package?

From 1965, when Malik Sahib moved into his ashram, he lived a fairly quiet life, staying mostly at home in Gwalior and presiding over small daily evening *satsangs*, devotional meetings where both sant verse and passages from yoga-oriented books were read. Three times a year, in conjunction with the Hindu festivals of Holi, Diwali, and Gurupurnimaa, there would be three-day functions where Malik Sahib would give the *śaktipāt* initiation to several devotees collectively: usually not very many – I remember mostly five or eight during the times I attended. Those seeking initiation would be expected to sit with him in his inner meditation room morning and evening for each of the three days. There was also some room there for older devotees, but the new initiates were told to sit in front, opposite the guru himself. For most people who came, the initiation took, in the sense that the person had some felt experience of the guru's power. If it didn't, the person was often deemed not yet ready (or not right) for this yoga.

During the functions the ashram was crowded with Malik Sahib's devotees from out of town. Most of these were from the extended region through which he moved during his government service. They included small-town merchants and village Rajputs, who sometimes came with their rifles. There were also a number of well-to-do Delhi folk who had happened to come in touch with Malik Sahib over the years, and three clusters of devotees from specific locales who had been inspired by enthusiastic disciples from their areas: a small group from Himachal Pradesh, a larger one from Jodhpur, in Rajasthan, and a few disciples from around Banda, Uttar Pradesh. Most of the rest of the year the ashram was pretty quiet and life was fairly simple. Although the size of the main house was impressive for the area, there was actually not much money around. During some of my visits, the only motored transportation they regularly had available was a scooter – and this in an area where regular public transportation did not reach. If Malik Sahib had to go into town, he would ride on the back with someone else driving. The house was surrounded by a couple of acres of land and there were a few devotees who lived there and worked it. Sometimes joined by paid workers, they grew grain and vegetables that were mostly consumed at the ashram. There were often overnight visitors – sometimes just devotees from outlying villages who had business in Gwalior, so there were usually plenty of people to feed.

The Ashram was called Adhyatma Niketan, 'Spiritual Home'. Malik Sahib would sometimes say that he called it a home rather than an ashram because it was a place where he lived with his family. Malik Sahib had, in fact, been married twice, his first wife dying prematurely and leaving three small children. He had three more children by his second wife. By the time I met him, the two daughters from the first marriage were married and living with their husbands, but the son of the first marriage, the youngest of the three, was still mostly at home, a young man in his mid-twenties named Pratap. The children of the second marriage, also at home, included a young son, a school-age daughter, and a teenaged boy named Kripal, who would become his father's successor.

Kripal was 17 when I first came to know him in 1969; I was 22, with recent memories of undergraduate years at Berkeley. He seemed to me at the time to be a very good boy, always ready to answer his father's call and run ashram errands.

To my 1960s-jaded eyes, in fact, he often seemed a little *too* good. The obvious contrast was to his older half-brother Pratap, who showed a degree of rebelliousness that seemed more normal to me. Although Kripal was clearly devoted to his father, in those days he never did much sit-down meditation as devotees were enjoined to perform daily. Instead, he demonstrated his devotion through increasingly responsible work at the ashram. He finished college and tried a few jobs (there was a stint as an agent for the Life Insurance Corporation of India), but none seemed quite right. He was, however, always needed at his father's 'spiritual home' and the work there seemed to be his métier. By the late 1970s, as Malik Sahib's following increased and his health began to fail, Kripal was clearly the go-to person at the ashram. He handled ashram business intelligently and interpersonal matters tactfully, both always with a calm smile. Although he was well liked, the fact that he did no regular meditation led many connected to Malik Sahib, including myself, not to regard him as potential guru material. By the end, however – a time I was busy in the United States with my first teaching job – a number obviously did.

On February 12, 1983, Malik Sahib passed on without naming a successor. Right after the cremation two days later – they had waited for disciples to collect – Kripal began acting strangely.[7] At the ensuing gatherings of devotees, unexpected words started coming from his lips in a voice that was not his own. Sitting with his eyes closed he said, 'I've given everything, but have kept the grace with me.' Was this Malik Sahib speaking? The occurrence was compelling enough to inspire some important disciples to make a bow to whomever it was who was talking. Kripal was evidently in a very unusual state. Later, as a tribute to Malik Sahib was being made at a memorial function, Kripal started using strong language of a sort sometimes heard from his father but never from him: 'You fools, why are you paying tribute to the one who never comes and goes, to the eternal?' People were dumbfounded and disturbed, and the function broke up. In subsequent days, during evening *satsangs* in particular, Kripal frequently seemed similarly possessed. Using language and intonations uncannily like Malik Sahib's, people said, he would address one of the senior disciples, a respected retired college principal, by the disciple's first name – a name used regularly by Malik Sahib but by no one else; Kripal sometimes, moreover, used an admonishing tone to him. While his brothers took their father's ashes to Allahabad for ritual immersion, Kripal stayed at home and mostly kept silent. At times, though, he fell into states in which he uttered unexpected remarks of the sort that might have come from Malik Sahib. If his voice on these occasions wasn't just like his father's, I was told, it didn't really seem like his own either.

What was going on? Most devotees felt generally benevolent toward Kripal and trusted him, so they had no reason to think that whatever strange things were happening with him were not at least sincere. They had also learned to value having access to divine power through a living guru and wanted to continue to be able to do so. Maybe Malik Sahib's force really had begun to act in him in a particular personal way that was broadly conceivable within yogic traditions but that hadn't really been expected in this instance.[8] So what if Kripal hadn't been a

regular meditator in this life: couldn't his consciousness have been purified in past existences? A number of Malik Sahib's disciples were in fact feeling ready to acknowledge Kripal as guru – but maybe not quite yet.

Things came to a head at the eleventh-day funeral feast, the first public occasion where in this guru-centered tradition a formal worship of the living preceptor was in order. Even though many senior disciples were inclined toward Kripal, not all felt ready to acknowledge him just then. After all, it was their old guru's funeral feast, maybe for now they should just do the formal worship to Malik Sahib's image. The matter seems to have been decided by the actions of the visiting Swami Shivom Tirth, the successor to a brother-guru of Malik Sahib's in the *śaktipāt* line. He draped a shawl around Kripal, who was sitting with his eyes closed, and gave a speech, talking about the various ways in which the *guru-śakti* can manifest and alluding to some legendary teachers of the past: 'Just as Vivekananda, Shankaracarya, and Jnaneshwar did great things at a young age,' said the Swami, 'this boy will too.' That day people did the ritual worship to Kripal as guru and would eventually refer to him by the honorific Maharajji, as I will henceforth here. Under Maharajji, the lineage now continued, but things were going to change in some very noticeable ways.[9]

A trip to Himachal Pradesh that August appears to have given the freshly-minted guru some personal confirmation of his new career and perhaps a better sense of the turns it would take. Although the Radhasoami practice was sedate – mostly quiet sitting, sometimes accompanied by slowly chanted hymns – *śaktipāt* initiation often led to idiosyncratic movements: in addition to spontaneous yogic breathing and mantras, there could be shaking, dancing, and shouting. Devotees were told to keep their body relaxed and let things happen. These responses to the guru's power are called *kriyas* (derived from the Sanskrit *kṛ*, 'to do') and are understood to express the free, purifying play of divine power in the body. There are inward as well as outward *kriyas*, but the outward ones are especially frequent in early stages of practice. During the Himachal tour, Maharajji still didn't do much public speaking but must have been emanating considerable energy. He just sat in meditation as others sang prayer-songs and people started having *kriyas*. The people having *kriyas*, however, were not just initiated disciples of Malik Sahib but also many of the spiritually curious who had come to see the visiting guru, and a catering worker doing his job. Visiting Himachal at the invitation of a few of Malik Sahib's old disciples, Maharajji made 'more than a hundred' new devotees of his own.[10] This Himachal tour and subsequent ones – Maharajji has sometimes referred to Himachal Pradesh as 'my state' – seemed formative to the way his career as a guru would take shape.

First, it would establish the principal dynamic through which people would become attached to him as devotees. While there were stories about cases of unintentional initiation during Malik Sahib's day, these cases were uncommon. Mostly, people got special attention at the three-day functions, and the *dīkṣa*, 'initiation', received then was seen as crucial for forming a guru–disciple bond. With Maharajji, people would increasingly begin to experience the guru's power during lively prayer-song sessions and come back for more. The word used to

describe this process has been the Hindi verb *juṛnā*, 'to join'. There could still be *dīkṣā* at the regular functions, but the functions had changed and the *dīkṣā* now often appeared as quick interactions in a line of devotees approaching the guru: the offering of a coconut, the whispering of a mantra – a traditional sealing of a connection that had already been made. With this shift to 'joining' came increased attention to prayer-song performance.

Although prayer-song sessions were held during the three-day functions in Malik Sahib's time, they were generally simple affairs by unpolished singers, afternoon initiatives of devotees between the regular morning and evening programs. Malik Sahib didn't seem particularly fond of them and often didn't come – he was generally wary of music, seeing it basically as a tempting worldly delight. Young Maharajji, however, frequently participated in them and has integrated lively music into his regular *satsangs* as a guru – at least as a possibility. Although the musical aspect of many *satsangs* is similar to that in Malik Sahib's day – with old-time devotees chanting sant verse in a few familiar patterns – on Sundays, when devotees from the city are especially encouraged to attend, trained musicians have normally come too. They sing familiar verses in popular, classical, and folk-tune styles, and add from their own repertoires. Of a different cultural generation from his father, Maharajji seems to appreciate music more than Malik Sahib did and is more open to its religious potential; he certainly has more diverse musical tastes. At the same time, lively music is also clearly crucial to the new initiatory dynamic that saw its beginnings in Himachal Pradesh. Indeed, when talking to one of the old Madhya Pradesh singers about the origins of the new style of singing at the ashram, he traced it to the 'Himachal brothers and sisters' who had their own folk tunes to sing.[11] As Maharajji continued to tour, not only did the vitality of the music help draw people in, but its diversity also helped integrate new local folk cultures into his devotional field. Based in the Madhya Pradesh heartland, Maharajji was increasingly becoming a multi-regional guru.

Maharajji's vigorous touring was itself something new. Malik Sahib's visits to distant disciples had been infrequent and uncomplicated. By the time he was settled as a guru in Gwalior, he was already on in years and didn't abide the discomforts of travel very well. When he did get out, the *satsangs* were pretty much similar to what were held at the ashram – often the reading of sant verse and other texts in a devotee's drawing room, which might inspire a discourse. The difference was that at distant venues Malik Sahib normally *did* speak, and the discourse might be longer and more deliberate. Maharajji went on tour more frequently and with more enthusiasm. He eventually began giving discourses, as he did at the Sunday *satsangs*, and these were certainly appreciated. But he also helped assure the sessions' success by regularly bringing with him a few talented singers who would add to the local talent. People have come to expect that there will be some engaging musical performance enhancing the psychic atmosphere that Maharajji can elicit.

Regularly touring areas of north India with musical programs that let even casual visitors get swept up into a collective energy has brought Maharajji a much larger following than that of his father, one measured not in hundreds but in

thousands. The groups in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and the Banda area have expanded, and another has taken shape in the major industrial city of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Additional construction was needed at the Gwalior ashram to house the many more devotees coming to the regular functions there – now held four times a year, with the addition of one at Shivratri, close to Malik Sahib's death anniversary. The broader scope of the ashram in a growing Indian economy has eased the straitened material circumstances at the ashram often seen in Malik Sahib's day. Maharajji and his family, like quite a few of his devotees, live at a comfortable middle-class level, if in a somewhat traditional way, and everyone who stays there eats well. Even as public transit lines have reached the neighborhood, the ashram still usually maintains a number of vehicles in different states of repair. Most days, Maharajji goes somewhere in one of them.

Indeed, more than his father ever was, Maharajji is recognized as a spiritual personage in Gwalior and its hinterlands, and is very frequently invited to say a few words as a chief guest or in some other honorary capacity at events of all types. This was something his father never did very much. For his own devotees, Malik Sahib's talks and writings left very strong impressions: he could give intricate discourses explaining the meaning of a Hindu mythic text from his own yogic practice and, to help explicate a point of inner experience, could recite pages of old sant verse from memory. He also wrote his own verses on esoteric topics in mellifluous Hindi. But he didn't always communicate so well to the general public. On the one occasion I can remember him speaking at a public event in Gwalior, he gave a talk with yogic depth that most of those present had no interest in trying to understand. I could see it falling flat and the convener could, too. In escorting Malik Sahib out, he politely noted the importance of speaking to the level of one's audience. This is something that Maharajji understands very well. Instead of his father's literary gifts, he has highly developed social skills. He speaks appropriately at the diverse public events to which he is invited and deals most personably with individuals, treating them with warmth, patience, and calm. These are cultural traits not recognized as particularly characteristic of his own Rajput caste community – which can make Maharajji's presence particularly welcome as an irenic presence in intracommunal affairs. He has thus held positions of leadership in local and regional Rajput caste organizations and is regarded by many Chambal valley Rajputs who have no personal religious attachment to him as nevertheless a public figure who is their own.[12] Maharajji's general stature in the area together with his influence in a particular important caste community has, perhaps inevitably, brought him to the attention of statewide politicians.

Thus, during the years around the turn of the millennium Maharajji found himself to be something of a political player. He had caught the eye of Digvijay Singh, a two-term Congress chief minister (CM) of Madhya Pradesh (1993–2003). For several years toward the end of the latter's time in office, Maharajji became known not only for his ability to channel divine power but also for his connections to political authority.[13] I first saw Digvijay Singh at the ashram early in 1993. He was to become the state chief minister at the end of that year but at the time was

still a member of the national parliament in Delhi. I think during that visit he was just building his networks in a general way. Maharajji was not then particularly well known in Singh's parliamentary district, but the future CM obviously had broader ambitions, was known to take an interest in holy persons,[14] and was, like Maharajji, a Rajput. I didn't really see the blossoming of their political relationship, however, until the late 1990s.

In those days Maharajji would come out from his private quarters regularly at 9:00 AM and remain available to the public for most of the rest of the day. Old devotees certainly came as usual, but they might now have some crucial personal request, often involving government transfers: to cancel a posting to a distant location, or to have a scheduled transfer be nearer to Gwalior. Although keeping disciples close to their guru can be taken to be of spiritual as well as practical value, there were plenty of strictly mundane requests, too – sometimes from peripheral devotees and even from new petitioners who had come for the purpose. Maharajji would listen to their stories and would try to help if he thought it possible and appropriate, usually by putting in a good word to the right person in a contact-driven government bureaucracy. Sometimes he wasn't ready or able to help and gently said so: I remember the case of a short woman who didn't meet the height requirements for police employment. Many grateful new supplicants undoubtedly made donations according to their means once their work was accomplished – as people also normally do at shrines when boons are answered by gods – but as far as I could see, there were no fixed expectations. Maharajji sometimes noted in more private settings that meeting all these petitioners was actually quite a lot of work and not very satisfying. He was, however, obviously expanding his sphere of contacts and influence.[15]

There was even talk of Maharajji running as a Congress candidate for Parliament in the 2004 national elections.[16] When I first heard him mention the possibility, I was horrified – a reaction I learned was not untypical of many devotees. People valued the spiritual power Maharajji could manifest – while any sleazy person could become a politician. But what to do? Adjusting to the idea while watching Maharajji juggle his cell-phone and his land-line, I joked that maybe he could be communications minister; he didn't smile. When asked why he was considering the possibility of a run, Maharajji would usually say that if the CM Sahib asked him, how could he refuse? At least, I thought, he took his political debts seriously. I had begun to think about a future political career for Maharajji in terms of his own personal karma, so the next time talk of his running came up, I suggested it was the play of the Lord ('*Bhagvān kā khel*'); he told me I was beginning to understand ('*Ab samajhne lage*.') A few devotees have noted after the fact that Maharajji never seemed particularly serious about a political run.

Still, one day shortly before I left the scene that year, there was mention in the public media that Maharajji was a very strong contender for the Congress ticket from Bhind district, where the family still had property and where he had devotees. The ashram was abuzz, and I think Maharajji believed that day that he would be running. But the ticket finally went to someone else. I'm not quite sure what happened: there were, of course, centers of power in the regional congress other

than Digvijay Singh, and these probably became more prominent after he led the Madhya Pradesh party to a decisive loss in a state election held in December 2003, a few months before the national elections in April. In his new job as general secretary of the national Congress in Delhi, Digvijay Singh has not had much leverage with the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh, and neither has Maharajji. A chapter in Maharajji's life as a guru came to a close.

A visitor to the ashram later in the decade would find a more subdued atmosphere, closer to what it was in Malik Sahib's day. Maharajji seems more inwardly oriented and somewhat less easily accessible. He has instituted a simple morning *satsang* at eleven, with chanting, readings, and silent meditation. This he regularly attends, so devotees know when to come for a dose of grace, but he doesn't normally meet the public until shortly before the *satsang* starts. He still goes out frequently in the city and region, but undertakes distant tours somewhat less, citing in part the high cost of petrol. He's also no longer so young, approaching the age of Malik Sahib when I met him, a mature guru in his ashram. But he is clearly a different personality than Malik Sahib, or is he?

More than once, when I have been talking to Maharajji about Malik Sahib, he has slipped into the first person, as if I were talking about *him*. I would usually try to clarify, 'I mean, your father', and what I would usually get was a smile and a yes. He could see I was not making the connection that many seem to have made – a kind of elision of personal identities between guru and successor, something more than just the continuing presence of a particular spiritual force. Not all – probably not even most – of the devotees recognize that elision. Even though some actually use the rather idiosyncratic honorific Malik Sahib to refer to Maharajji, this usage can have more of a figurative sense than a literal one. There is an important way, moreover, in which it doesn't really matter. What is crucial for most devotees is that they have recognized a particular spiritual force in Maharajji and responded to it. They could figure it all out later. The guru is a mystery. Succession is a mystery. Understanding changes and grows.

Certainly, this trumping of understanding by experience and mystery helped accomplish the successful transition at Malik Sahib's passing. At least after Malik Sahib started the *śaktipāt* initiation, he would talk about how spiritual practice was 'natural' (*svābhāvik*), how the play of divine energy is 'spontaneous' (*sahaj*). There was a sense that spiritual progress was an organic process, a natural development that inevitably came with surprises. And as divine power played in the individual, so it played in the universe: naturally, spontaneously, sometimes unexpectedly. Decades earlier, Malik Sahib's oldest devotees had the not-always-welcome surprise of the new *śaktipāt* initiation itself. At his passing, they could recognize Kripal's strange states as indicating an unexpected, but natural, transition, an organic play of divine force. Once devotees finally experienced something of Malik Sahib's initiatory energies in Maharajji, they could accept much, including all the changes in spiritual style that were to follow. After all, didn't Malik Sahib radically change his previous initiation practices? And who could gainsay the subtly organic means in which divine power might work? Might it not also include an unusually close psychic identity between father and son?

The outward form of the succession was itself clearly most unusual. Succession generally passes quietly to one or more devotees respected for their serious practice and more often than not outside the guru's biological family.[17] The dramas at succession most often come from sometimes bitter rivalry among claimants, not from spectacles of what seemed to be some kind of possession by the guru father of his successor son. At the same time, the very different personalities of father and son could be read as a kind of complementarity – the father an aloof inner adventurer whose following remained modest; the son a broadly approachable public actor who in his formative years never concerned himself much with spiritual practice. The father presented something of a traditional Rajput demeanor but never had a rewarding Rajput career: he sometimes remarked that he was never the *tahsīldār*, always the *nāyab*, the second in charge. He would say this to help explain his early retirement and to express the inevitability of dissatisfaction in worldly life, but it did seem to come from his heart. The son, by contrast, got a real taste of the political game that is the Rajput's traditional due. Was the father's person continuing to fulfill itself in some way through his son? For the devotees that Maharajji has himself made, by now the vast majority, this is not really an issue. For them Malik Sahib represents a sense of lineage, a rootedness in some kind of traditional authority. But for those who had known Malik Sahib personally their understanding could affect their attitude toward the present guru.

I never noticed Maharajji responding in the first person to a reference to Malik Sahib in a conversation with anyone else. This does not, of course, mean very much – particularly since talk does not often turn to his father these days. But especially given his experiences at succession, I suspect Maharajji senses some sort of personal presence of his father inhering in him – something more than just a very subtle, if powerful, initiatory force that he has inherited. Perhaps this was something he wanted me to understand as well, one of a continually decreasing number who knew Malik Sahib and still sometimes visit the ashram. We'll see.

Notes

1 Much of the detail on Malik Sahib's early life is taken from Miśra's authorized Hindi biography of him (1999). It was originally written during his lifetime with the second edition offering an addendum treating his passing and some later developments at the ashram.

2 Sardar was the title used by the Maratha nobility in Gwalior state. With the end of the old regime the Sardars' School morphed into the Scindia School, which serves upper-class families from throughout the country.

3 Miśra presents a number of anecdotes about the *siddha baba* (1999: 71–73) although not the one I give here.

4 For the religiocultural background of the sants, the best introduction remains Charlotte Vaudeville's introduction to *Kabīr* 1974. On the continuing sant tradition, see Lorenzen 1996. For a treatment of some problems of guru devotion among the sants, see Gold 1987, which also discusses the Radhasoamis. For full treatments of the Radhasoamis themselves, see Juergensmeyer 1991 and Lane 1992.

5 The teaching was presented in English by Malik Sahib's own guru in Shyam Lal 1923. More easily accessible English versions of that teaching can be found in numerous publications from the Radhasoami centers in Agra and Beas, Punjab. For parallels to

Western Gnosticism, see Segal 1977, who writes suggestively about *Two Powers in Heaven*.

6 These correlations are given in more detail in Gold 2010.

7 The account here is taken from an interview recorded in November, 2007, with Ram Gopal Agrawal, a senior disciple of Malik Sahib who has a house in the ashram.

8 The ability to enter the body of another is a classic yogic attainment listed in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (III.39), where it is called *paraśarīrāveśa*, 'entering another's body'. The same literal meaning is more often expressed as *parakāya praveśa*. Some philosophical background to the concept and a number of examples are given by White 2009: ch. 4 'The Science of Entering Another Body'; perhaps the most pertinent of these is from the Mahabharata (15.33.24–29), when the sage Vidura leaves 'his now dead body behind to permanently cohabit the body of Yudhishthira' (ibid.: 142). At the same time, the events surrounding Kripal's succession may also have been interpreted by some in terms of spirit possession, common in many areas of rural India and with which many devotees can be presumed to have been familiar.

9 Successions, of course, are rarely smooth, and at Malik Sahib's death there were several claimants to his mantle. Of these, only one, the old leader of the Jodhpur group, has managed to maintain a small cohesive following of his own. The majority of the Jodhpur group has turned to Maharajji and has built a large *satsang* hall for him there; the relationships between the two groups are not friendly. Another claimant at the time, who was just a young man at the time of Malik Sahib's passing, couldn't manage the psychic force, and has spent time in an asylum. His psychological condition was described to me as 'childlike.' Two others initially made some claims but were soon won over by Maharajji and are now his close disciples. Another two have given initiations to a few individuals. One of these maintains an ambivalent relationship with Maharajji, living in Gwalior and still visiting the ashram now and then.

10 Agrawal, narrating these events in Hindi (see note 7), first said *saiṃkṛoṃ*, which can mean an indefinitely great number; he later restrained himself to 'more than a hundred'.

11 Interview with Govind Sharma, a singing devotee from rural Guna, M.P., March 15, 2003.

12 Although many regional Rajputs feel a special connection with Maharajji as one of their own, Rajputs are not unusually well represented within his religious following, which includes members from across caste and economic strata as a well as a few Muslims. Malik Sahib, however, had initiated a number of Rajputs in a few Chambal valley villages where he was known, and these sometimes seemed conspicuous at his comparatively small seasonal gatherings. The two families of close disciples from Malik Sahib's time who continue to live at the ashram are Brahmins and Agrawals, the latter a large North Indian mercantile community.

13 Relationships between political rulers and holy persons are common and fraught in both South Asian and world religions. For an example from early nineteenth-century India that offers some general references, see Gold 1995.

14 In *The Week*, a national Indian newsweekly Deepak Tiwari (2003) writes: 'It is the BJP which is usually credited with having the largest number of saints and babas in tow. But in Madhya Pradesh, the importance of political sanyasis has grown exponentially during Digvijay's tenure.' The article goes on to mention the open support for Digvijay by 'Sant Kripal Singh of Gwalior'.

15 Maharajji's role during his years of real political influence bears some comparisons with those of the gurus treated by Ikegame in this volume. The authority of those gurus, however, deriving first of all from *maṭhas* deeply rooted in established societies, has made their political roles more enduring than Maharajji's – whose political weight, while he had it, emerged from a conjunction of his own personal charisma with the vagaries of electoral politics.

16 Although Maharajji has tried to avoid narrow identification with any one particular political faction, during his years of public association with Digvijay Singh, he could not help being generally seen as aligned with Congress.

17 In spiritual lineages where gurus marry, succession does often go to a family member, and this is indeed the case in some of the Radhasoami lineages stemming from Beas. Malik Sahib's extended *śaktipāt* lineage, however, mostly passed through celibate sannyasis and hence through biologically unrelated successors.

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Index

Agnivesh, Swami 39n
Alter, J. S. 28–9, 198n
Amritanandamayi, Mata 3, 8, 19, 25–6, 33–4, 47, 122–5, 184, 193
Arya Samaj 3, 39n
ascetic 9–13, 17, 18, 20, 22, 26–30, 32, 48, 56, 61n, 64–6, 69, 71, 76n, 80, 82, 84, 89–90, 93–4, 102, 109, 116, 123, 175, 203, 205–6, 209, 211–16, 220n, 227,
*ashram*s (life-cycle stages) 23, 28–9, 175
*ashram*s (spiritual hermitages) 13, 15, 17, 20, 26–7, 82–3, 86, 90, 123–5, 181, 191–3, 202–18, 242–252; *see also* *dera*s, *matha*s
auspiciousness and inauspiciousness 120, 149, 233

Babb, L. A. 23, 38, 149, 161
Benjamin, S. 5
Benjamin, W. 24–5
Bhagavad Gita 7, 111n, 128n, 183
bhakti 16, 22, 37, 115, 119–21, 128–9n, 182–3, 197, 223–238
Bharat Mata 11
Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) 10, 26, 36, 50, 52, 91–94, 167, 252, 254n
Biardeau, M. 22, 85, 182–4, 196, 198n
blood donation 14–15, 34–37, 162, 169–174, 197
body 8, 12, 18, 24–6, 29, 33, 105, 109, 118, 120, 134, 157, 170–1, 190, 195–7, 208, 212–15, 227–9, 232, 245, 248
Brahma 23, 114
brahmachari 28–9
Brahman (subtle unified essence of the universe) 114–16, 126
Brahmin caste and Brahmanical tradition 3, 16, 20, 22–23, 25, 36, 46, 48–50, 57, 66, 81, 86, 88, 102–3, 110, 114–20, 126, 128n, 176, 182–3, 223–238,
Brahmo Samaj 21, 187, 190
British rule 22, 32–3, 65–6, 68–70, 80–1, 88–9, 134, 136, 191, 203, 242
Buddhism 22, 113, 161, 182–3

Calcutta 22, 65, 89, 107
Carsten, J. 3, 16,
caste 5, 10, 19, 36, 46–60, 70, 81, 88–9, 119, 156, 158–9, 162–3, 181, 215, 224, 226–7, 232–3, 237, 250
Cavell, S. 146, 149
charity 169–73, 213
Chatterjee, P. 19, 20, 175
Chidester, D. 162, 164, 173
Christianity 4, 12, 17, 21, 52, 88–9, 105, 150, 187
clothing *see* dress
Cohen, L. 2, 10, 23, 27–8, 30, 37, 54, 97–112, 175, 177n
communalism 11, 53, 60, 90, 218
Congress party 31, 33, 50, 86–7, 91, 105, 158–9, 167, 250–2
cosmopolitanism 2, 17–18, 98, 126, 201–219
cow 49, 57, 59, 76n, 91, 102
crime 6, 20, 65, 70, 77n, 84, 87–8, 101, 105, 165–7, 176, 208

Dalit 12–13, 28, 50, 52–6, 58, 99–100, 158, 162, 177n
darshan 27, 83, 124, 144
Das, Dyal 6, 160
Das, Ravi 177n
Das, V. 11, 13, 22, 32, 110n, 133–155
Dasgupta, P. 165
Dasgupta, S. 24–5

deities 6, 8, 16, 21, 23, 73, 85, 99, 106, 119–22, 124, 135–6, 138–40, 148, 151n, 167, 190, 193, 223, 227 235–6
Delhi 12, 14, 31, 66, 73, 85, 87, 97–8, 101, 105, 107, 109–10, 133, 142, 147, 156, 161, 167, 181–97, 217, 246
democracy 19, 31, 37, 39n, 59, 91, 219 237
Dera Sacha Sauda 6, 14, 111n, 156–176
*dera*s and 'dera-ism' 158, 162, 168, 170, 176
Derrida, J. 16
desire 20, 27, 29–30, 84, 106–8, 136, 187, 211, 213, 234
dharma 30, 81, 86, 121, 227, 230–2, 236
Dhirendra Brahmachari 85–6
diet 33, 89, 116, 161, 194, 198n, 206, 235
disease 61n, 71, 99, 108, 229, 231
donation 12, 14–15, 34–6, 47, 51, 54, 61n, 82, 85, 92, 162, 169–74, 197, 207–8, 251
Doniger, W. 29, 240n
dreams 11, 14, 119, 133–151
dress 8–9, 12, 22, 23, 26, 51, 105, 122, 156, 161–4, 174–6, 190, 194, 212–17
Dumont, L. 22, 30, 46, 81, 94n, 183

East India Company 32, 34, 65–9, 152n, 175
election 19, 50, 54, 90, 158–9, 167, 251–2

fasting 12, 31, 177n, 198n, 211
fate 150
Fausto, C. 18
festivals 10, 89, 91–2, 171, 190, 194, 228–9, 245
fire 84, 117–18, 137, 139–40, 143, 170, 181, 191, 206, 213
Foucault, M. 35
Fuller, C. J. 3, 34

Gandhi, Indira 10, 39n, 82–6, 88, 90, 94
Gandhi, M. K. 27–9, 30, 33, 80, 83, 89, 93, 198n
gender 8, 26, 28–9, 100, 105–6, 111n, 113–127, 137–8, 152–3n, 204, 214, 224, 226–7, 230–35,
globalism and globalisation 2, 4, 11, 15–17, 20–3, 25, 47, 105, 109, 125, 149, 163, 182, 206, 209–10, 219
'godmen' 4–7, 16, 20, 33, 83, 107
god and goddess *see* deities
Gold, D. 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 24, 25, 32, 35, 38, 50, 64, 77n, 127, 167, 170, 183
Gourishankar, V. 14, 18, 55
government and state power 5, 19, 26, 30–1, 34–7, 39n, 46–60, 65–9, 73–6, 80–94, 105, 158–9, 202, 207–8, 252, 254n
guru-disciple relationship 6, 12–15, 28–30, 31–2, 34–5, 55, 64–5, 69–76, 77n, 85, 87, 88, 100, 104, 108, 110, 114, 118, 120, 122, 127, 135, 147, 170–1, 197, 223–4, 227–30, 244–8
Gurumayi (Swami Chidvilasananda) 122–3, 125–7, 130n

Harriss, J. 3, 5, 34
healthcare 35–6, 47, 105, 109, 196, 210, 213
Hindu/Muslim relations 11–12, 17, 22, 53, 58, 88–9, 91, 110n, 141, 143, 147–9, 210, 218, 220n, 236–7
Hinduism 3, 11, 15–17, 21–2, 29, 33, 113–4, 133, 148–9, 161, 183, 196, 202–19, 224–5, 236, 245
Hindutva 3–4, 9, 11, 17, 46–7, 49, 50, 53, 81, 88–93, 210, 217
homosexuality 27–8, 97–110, 175

images 13–14, 18–19, 20, 26, 47, 102–3, 136, 145, 156–9, 166–7, 174, 176, 213, 236, 248
imitation 6, 8–9, 156–176
initiation (*diksha*) 6, 12, 15, 29, 71, 114, 118, 121–3, 140, 203, 214–16, 228, 233, 236, 238, 242, 244–9, 252–4
Insan, Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh *see* Dera Sacha Sauda
internet 20, 23, 26–7, 111n, 127, 156–7, 162–6, 174, 196
Islam 11, 15–17, 22, 53, 77n, 88, 91, 93, 133–152, 163, 210, 218, 220n, 236–7, 240n

Jaffrelot, C. 4, 10, 11, 19, 30, 31, 80–96, 111n, 159
Jainism 22, 161
Juergensmeyer, M. 15, 160, 253n

Kabir 15, 161, 168, 190, 198n, 244
Kakar, S. 4, 33
Kali Age 224, 230, 236
Kali's Child (Kripal) 27, 106
karma 190, 226, 251

Karnataka 7, 16, 20, 36, 47–60, 163, 211, 234
Keane, W. 150
Khandelwal, M. 13, 17–18, 28, 126, 127n, 175, 203–222
kin (family, lineages) 29–30, 32, 56–9, 68, 70–1, 74, 89, 97–8, 111n, 123, 137, 139, 210–11, 253
king 10, 46, 49, 53–4, 57, 81, 85–6, 88, 90, 94, 102–4, 110–11n, 114–18, 128n, 140, 145, 147, 236–7
Krishna 16, 38, 53, 57, 120, 143, 162, 168

Latour, B. 2, 147
leadership 12–13, 18, 32, 37, 48, 53–7, 113, 120, 127n, 250
Lévi-Strauss, C. 38
liberation *see* salvation
Lorenzen, D. 76, 253

Mahabharata 10, 28, 88, 102–4, 110, 128n, 254n
Maharashtra 15, 35, 83, 89, 119, 226, 227, 237, 243
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi 24, 113, 190, 197, 203
mathas 22, 36, 48–61, 211
Mazzarella, W. 19, 26, 33
McKean, L. 34, 127, 149
media and mediation 4, 11, 19–20, 23–8, 39n, 48, 60, 87–8, 106, 111n, 149, 156–7, 192, 195–6, 212, 218, 223–4, 234, 238
Mehta, D. 147–9
Meyer, B. 23–4
middle class 3–5, 16, 20, 22–3, 33–4, 47, 54, 109, 162, 167, 181–98, 204, 214–17, 250
mimesis *see* imitation
Mines, M. 14, 18, 55
Muktananda, Swami 8, 113, 123, 125
Muslim *see* Islam

Nanak, Guru 159–61, 168–9, 174
Nandy, A. 30, 80, 88, 93
nationhood and national identity 5, 10–11, 20, 28–9, 47, 80, 90, 92, 109, 149, 210
Nithyananda, Swami 20–1, 26–8, 198n

Olivelle, P. 22, 128n
Other Backward Classes, or Castes (OBC) 36, 49–50, 55–6, 58, 60, 119, 124, 162–3, 177n, 193, 232–3, 237, 254n

Paramhansa Yogananda 21, 187–8, 190, 196–7
Parry, J. P. 191, 206, 224–5
Pechilis, K. 10, 29, 113–132, 167, 183, 240n
pilgrimage 17, 51, 61n, 65, 119, 123, 161, 181, 202–3, 206–7, 227–9, 232, 234–5
Pinch, W. 11, 29, 31, 32, 34, 46, 64–79, 239n
pollution and purity 24, 120, 128, 133, 138, 203, 224, 245, 248
puja (worship) 49, 103–4, 124–5, 181, 191, 207, 224, 231, 233–4, 248

Radhasoami movement 6, 15, 158, 160, 244–5, 248, 253n
Rajneesh, Bhagwan Shree (Osho) 8, 23, 27, 113, 184, 186–7
Rajagopal, A. 23–4, 39n, 167, 192
Ramakrishna 20–2, 27–8, 105–6, 111n, 129n
Ramayana 121, 128n, 167
Ramdev, Baba 2, 3, 28, 30–32, 105–6, 108–9, 111n, 196
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) 9, 10, 31, 88–94, 161, 175
Ravi Shankar, Shri Shri 3–4, 7, 23, 36, 47, 111n, 175, 184, 194–5
reformism 6, 21, 25, 160–1, 183, 187
renouncer *see* ascetic
renunciation *see* ascetic
Rishikesh 17, 191, 202–219, 244–5
rituals 25, 48, 53, 84–5, 113, 141, 143, 147–8, 161, 182–4, 227, 229–30, 232–3
Roy, Ram Mohun 21, 190

sacrifice 31, 80, 84, 111n, 114, 138–9, 152n, 169, 171–3, 181, 206, 214, 229, 231–2, 239n
salvation 25, 84, 118, 125, 187, 191, 224, 233–4, 238, 242
Sangh Parivar *see* Hindutva
sant tradition 15, 25, 64, 160–1, 174, 177n, 244–6, 253n
Saraswati, Swami Dayananda 3, 33
Sathya Sai Baba 3, 6, 7, 14, 15–18, 25, 27, 34, 36, 38, 39n, 206, 212–13
secularism 24, 34, 36, 46–50, 52–3, 56, 58–9, 80, 82–4, 89–90, 93–4, 105, 133, 164, 204, 206, 210, 218
seva 34–6, 130n, 173
sex 8, 20, 27–9, 84, 97, 100–1, 105–7, 109, 111n, 114, 123, 127n, 187, 195, 198n, 211–12, 235, 237

shakti 15–16, 85, 192, 245
Shiva 16, 18, 23, 106, 120, 129n, 245
Shree Maa 122–5, 129n
Sikhism 6, 10, 23, 25, 31, 35, 111n, 142, 156–176, 181, 194, 197, 239n
Singh, Guru Gobind 6, 10, 35, 156–176, 239n
Singh, Khushwant 6, 159–61
slavery 31–2, 64–77, 139, 239n
soul (*atma*) 68, 86, 94, 139, 141, 143, 183, 209, 245
sovereignty 33, 61n, 65, 73, 80–1, 225
spirit possession 14, 24, 99, 135, 247, 253–4
spirituality 31, 59, 62, 113, 120, 182, 185, 195, 202, 206, 209–10, 216–218
Srinivas, S. 15–16, 23, 36, 149
Srinivas, T. 6–7, 15–18, 38, 206, 212–13
Srivastava, S. 29, 101
Strathern, M. 2, 18
submission 32, 33, 54, 57, 72, 77n, 150
succession 8–9, 15, 27, 32, 67–9, 174, 226, 242, 244, 252–3, 254–5n
Sufism 16, 32, 75, 144, 236–7, 240n
superstition 7–9, 39n, 153n
syncretism 133, 213, 220n

Tantra and Tantrism 10, 27, 29, 31, 39n, 72, 84–8, 94, 99–101, 107–8, 115, 138, 141, 237
Taussig, M. 177–8n
television 3–5, 20, 23–4, 39n, 105, 111n, 157, 164, 167, 175, 191–2, 195–6, 213
temples 48–9, 57–8, 82, 84, 99–100, 121, 135, 138–9, 143–4, 147, 152–3n, 181, 191, 206
transnational *see* globalism and globalisation

United States 21, 27, 82, 105, 113, 122, 127n, 210, 215, 217, 220n
Urban, H. B. 23, 100, 126

Vallabhacharya ascetics 38
van der Veer, P. 17, 204, 206, 210
vegetarianism 22, 116, 161, 194
video *see* television
vidhi 22, 223–240
Virashaivas (Lingayats) 25, 48–52, 55, 58, 60
Vishnu 15–16, 23, 106, 128n, 148, 245
Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) 4, 9, 17, 53, 210, 220n
Vivekananda, Swami 9, 10–11, 21–2, 28, 190, 210, 248

Warrier, M. 8, 15, 19, 33–4, 47, 124, 184, 193,
White, D. G. 14–15, 100, 254n
Willerslev, R. 165
Wittgenstein, L. 146, 153n

yoga 3, 14, 21, 30–1, 72, 85, 89–90, 105, 108–9, 113, 124–5, 127, 184, 196, 202–7, 214–18, 244–8, 250, 254n

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