| Colloquia |

Guru logics *

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This commentary highlights the diversity of thematics and conceptual schema generated by guru-ship, and its capacity—as a set of principles as much as specific persons—to participate in, and move between, multiple social and conceptual domains. The aim is to reassess some of the key existing literature on guru-ship while developing a kind of analytical toolkit in order to aid future studies and stimulate new thought on the phenomenon. The guru, we argue, is a social form of peculiar suggestibility. We suggest that the multiplicity and diversity of the guru's political and economic entanglements point toward a sense of the guru's uncontainability, a quality which, in a seeming irony, relies at least in part on the guru's ability to contain diverse others (principally his/her devotees and former incarnations). We present the case study of an avatar guru—a particularly prolific "collector of associations"—who exemplifies the expansive personhood of the guru as an "inclusive singularity." Emphasizing the plural forms of guru-ship, we define categories of anti-guru and collective guru while also drawing attention to the guru's mimetic proficiency and the complex role of the guru in imagination and fantasy and gender politics. The political and governmental functions of guru-ship are also analyzed, with "guru governmentality" not "just another" agency of devolved governance in an era of economic liberalization but the retooling of the radical asymmetry of the guru-devotee relationship in order to produce "humanitarian" or "developmental" effects, which from devotees' point of view could hardly be glossed as "secular".

Keywords: gurus, anti-gurus, gender, containment, devotion, politics, technology, South Asia

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The phenomenon of guru-ship has been a classic and enduring theme within South Asianist scholarship, but nevertheless critical aspects of the social lives and roles of gurus remain under-explored. The aim of this commentary is 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, we provide insights into the wider

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political and social significance of guru-ship in pre-modern, modern and contemporary South Asian society. The commentary moves across different gurus, and kinds of gurus, defining the term "guru" broadly—not only do we deal with categories of South Asian religious leader variously called *maharaj, sant, baba, sadhu, mahant, swami, sanyasi*, and *acharya*, we define guru-ship as a kind of principle or model with significant capacities of structuration.[1] 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 modeling tools for other forms of social phenomena.

Recent literature has begun to move beyond 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 & Harriss 2005; Warrier 2005; Beckerlegge 2006; Shah 2006; Barrett 2008; S. Srinivas 2008; Copeman 2009; T. Srinivas 2010; foretokening these contributions, see Khare's [1984] important study). 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. We reflect here on this expansive analytical move and 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. This commentary thus aims to highlight the diversity of thematics and conceptual schema generated by "the guru" and to draw attention to the guru's capacity to participate in, and move between, multiple symbolic and practical spheres,[2] the aim being to reassess some of the key existing literature on guru-ship[3] whilst developing a kind of analytical toolkit in order to aid future studies and stimulate new thought on the matter of the compelling and enduring phenomenon that is South Asian guru-ship.

As we have already noted, we are not only interested 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). This commentary 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

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1 While many gurus are "ascetics" (though see the "Asceticism and accusation" section below) only few ascetics attain guru-hood.

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

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

situation is one of quasi-legal adjudication (Ikegame 2012a), political mentorship (Jaffrelot 2012), anti-stigma campaigns concerning leprosy or HIV (Barrett 2008; Mehta & Pramanik 2010), a liberalizing economic milieu (Frøystad 2012) and its connected frame of globalizing cosmopolitanism (T. Srinivas 2010; Khandelwal 2012) or indeed the high-profile anti-corruption campaigns of 2011 (one of whose leaders was yoga guru Swami Ramdev). 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 commentary. We also ask: what are the conditions of possibility of such "harvesting," and explore 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 modernizing reformist fervor to those of convention and continuity. Needless to say, whilst 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 toward 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.[4] We return to this sense of uncontainability below.

Recent 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 liberalization, globalization 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 (principally the Vedas) such that it may be applied to contemporary practical concerns (for instance, business management—see Fuller & Harriss 2005). Type 3 gurus, according to Nanda, are primarily known for teaching yoga or meditation (Swami Ramdev would be a high-profile example).[5] What links each type, says Nanda, is their comparability to CEOs—which is certainly apt when one considers the management teachings of Swami Dayanada Saraswati and the success of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's breathing courses, some of which are explicitly targeted at business professionals for alleviation of work-related stress—and a pronounced evangelism, in respect of which she quotes

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

5 Nanda is careful to state that in practice these "types" are prone to overlap in various ways.

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. (Cited in Nanda 2009: 101)

The reference to evangelical Christian preachers is instructive on several levels. That the Hindu right seeks to operationalize 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 organization is actively seeking to harness the evangelical potential of such gurus. Moreover, such gurus—mirroring the highly mediatized 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. This kind of analysis is also in sympathy with our aim of exploring the lives of gurus beyond the ashram, and several recent ethnographies have underscored the importance of middle class "godmen" for understanding the ways in which faith "travels" (e.g., 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 instrumentalize gurus for evangelical purposes (Dasgupta's comments imply a direct emulative link between the phenomena, a point that echoes Jaffrelot's [1996: 76] famous description of Hindutva organizations' strategy of simultaneous stigmatization 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, but the rise of globalising middle class gurus, who appear on television and possess millions of devotees, is only part of the picture. What of the lives and roles of non-Hindu gurus? What of perspectives on guru-ship from outside Hinduism? What of gurus who stand as advocates of their lower caste/class followers? What of more minor gurus who do not necessarily appear on television or claim millions of devotees and the complex and multifaceted roles of gurus in history and myth? 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, that 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 demonstrate.

Plural forms

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 (2012) has recently provided an example of this. The focus of his study 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 Sigh, 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.[6] Cutting the network of gurus (Strathern 1996), 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".[7] (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 materialized by the guru constitutes, for skeptics, "a weak spot in the materializations thesis"). Now the anti-guru activist depicted in the aforementioned photograph has a bedraggled look about him, with

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6   See also Padoux 2000: 45 on a distinction between "fabricated" (*kalpita*) and "not-fabricated" (*akalpita*) gurus in the Tantric tradition.

7   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.

extremely long white hair, and a beard halfway 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 "real" gurus (see Rinehart 1999), hagiographies abound.[8] 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.[9]

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".[10] 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—but 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 symbols of their non-attachment and stimulating a

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8   On guru hagiography see also Babb 1986; T. Srinivas 2010.

9   http://rationalistprabir.bravehost.com/

10 http://srisriravishankar.org/biography

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 northeastern Siberia who transform their bodies into the image of their prey all the better to catch and kill them (Willerslev 2004), 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 simply seeking to establish here is 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 rationalist activists themselves, with a certain ironic pleasure, use the term "anti-guru." At the recent sixtieth birthday party of a leading Indian 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, with the description "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 (2012) has similarly focused 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,[11] while Gold (2012: 253) records 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.[12] 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.

Such questions lie at the heart of what may be termed the cultural production of the "really real" guru.[13] That the same procedures via which gurus seek to "upgrade the[ir] reality calibre" (van de Port 2011: 75) as gurus in whom forbear gurus and/or other deities are revealed as immanent are also those that may be suggestive of expedience and cheap imitation means, unsurprisingly, that 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 specter 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* (i.e. fake) guru rests on the assumption (and reconfirms as fact) that real or true gurus do exist.[14] 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]). The guru, then, must of necessity dress the part and this may produce authenticating effects or, conversely, mimetic tensions.

In a discussion of spiritual seeking among middle class urbanites in north India, Frøystad (2012: 194) describes the dressing up of (Hindu) guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as Sikh at a congregation in south Delhi. In this case the guru's dressing up—an incongruence he playfully acknowledges—becomes an aspect of the guru's social charm. The same might be said of the newly minted yoga guru discussed by Cohen (2012: 108-10) who finds in his white flowing robes an artful drama he terms "drag" and "camp." Prior to becoming a religious teacher he had been a drag queen with a reputation for destructive excess. Cohen frames the life of homosexuality in contemporary India in terms of both promise and accusation, and the same terms seem helpful in attempting 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

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11 http://www.shreedarshan.com/saint-sadguru-aniruddha-bapu.htm

12 See also Sathya Sai Baba devotees' sensuous imitation of their guru's ascetic body (T. Srinivas 2012: 191). Both devotees (in respect of their guru) and gurus (in respect of other gurus), then, are mimetically inclined—a classically Tardean situation (for Tarde, famously, society began "when one man first copied another" [1903: 28]).

13 The phrase draws upon van de Port (2011: 74).

14 Or as Hyde (1998: 60) puts it, "only when there is a Lying Worm can we begin to speak of a True Worm".

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. Rumors that freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose led an ascetic afterlife continue to possess currency. An RSS volunteer's activist past is eclipsed (hidden from view) 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, culminating in *sannyas*). It is perhaps 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, of course, also be conceived pejoratively as calculated obviation or disguise, and holy man confidence tricksters are as prominent in ancient Indian texts (Mabbett 2010) as in the present-day writings of rationalist activists. For a Company official in the 1760s warrior ascetics were insidious "mendicants in disguise" (Pinch 2012: 70), while in the case of the aforementioned Dera Sacha Sauda guru, 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.

Beckerlegge (2010) provides a further example of the anti-guru paradox. In a revealing discussion of the Vivekananda Kendra, a lay service organization influenced by Swami Vivekananda but also affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which maintains 206 branch centers 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 skeptical about the role of ascetics in providing humanitarian service, and generally critical of charismatic personality cults (in contrast to which the *kendra* emphasizes 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 organization 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 the present commentary 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 depersonalized guru is the *collective guru*. This is an idea introduced in Jaffrelot's (2012) recent work in which he explores certain guru-like qualities 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 depersonalized analogue of the Raj guru, who acts as counselor 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 organization.[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 2012: 88-94). 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 (2012: 88) 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 [2012] has also recently recounted 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 [2012], conversely, has asked what it is to be denied the *position or status* of guru). For some, serving as a component of nationalist narrativization and rhetoric, India herself constitutes a collective guru to the world. As is well known,

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15 Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party).

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 & Harriss 2005; see also Gold 1988: 121-2; 2005; Forsthoefel & 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 right-wing Hindu activists. The Hindu nationalist organization, 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% "spiritual advancement"—contrasted in tabular form with far lower numbers of gurus and saints located in "rest of world").

Comprehending through gurus

We moved in the above section from the anti-guru paradox to consider the extensibility of guru models such that guru-ship, 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 recent study centering on the imaginal proximity of a Muslim *amil* and a Hindu guru, Das (2012) brings together "classical" themes—ritual, sacred speech, dreams, asceticism—with the very contemporary concern of communal relations. Providing important non-Hindu perspectives on "Hindu" gurus, Das's essay demonstrates ways in which the figure of the guru—in an imaginative sense—can act 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 distancing connection. The dreamed guru in Das's study 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 emphasizes there are no easy translations to be had). Relations with gurus—even imaginative or dreamed relations—are liable to all too easily and 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]?" (ibid.: 147). 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 organizations 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 & Vroom 2003], which presents a set of global proselytizing 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 forego 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 organization 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 forego cremation rites, recruits are characterized 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 forego 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. (Though it is also worth noting here that in explicitly pedagogical contexts as diverse as the training of mental health professionals [Jain & Jadhav 2008] and formal education in the north Indian classical music tradition [Schippers 2007] questions have recently been raised about the appropriateness and efficacy of the "authoritarian" guru-*chela* paradigm as the dominant model of knowledge transmission. Conversely, nuclear scientists based in the Anushaktinagar township in Mumbai enthusiastically endorse the guru-*shishya* relationship, with its "holistic" bringing together of discipline and emotion, as the culturally appropriate antidote to the hollowed out, self-interested educational environment considered to typify the liberalizing present [Kaur n.d.]).

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16 *The Hindu,* November 30, 2007.

17 A fuller account is available in Copeman 2006.

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 much 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 characterized as "'superior beings'—to be revered and followed" (ibid.: 126), it is also the case that, as in the aforementioned study by Das, 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 marginalization 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 important and persuasive, it should be pointed out that debate and argument concerning the authenticity and direction of the leader is far from absent in contexts of guru-ship (see Gold 2012; Copeman 2012; 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 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.

The guru as inclusive singularity

Introducing a noteworthy recent volume on leadership in India, Price (2010: xxiv) draws attention to the "expansive agency" that characterizes the style of leadership she terms "lordly" in the subcontinent. Drawing on works by Burghart (1996) and Brass (1965), Price (op. cit.: 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-collectivized" (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 depersonalized 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 has recently explained (2009, 2012), 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). 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 (2012), in 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 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" (Gold 2012: 244). 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" (ibid.: 249). 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 . . . 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 prophesized 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 'flashback' 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 characterizes 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 agency . . . in picking the required ingredients for their personal transformation" (ibid). Khandelwal (2012) also connects aspects of contemporary guru culture to the literature on cosmopolitanism. Drawing on fieldwork in the north Indian town of Rishikesh, 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 amongst visitors as amongst 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/behavioral 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 doctrinally present 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 categorized 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 proselytizing gurus. While gurus are adept in flexibly selling different messages and goods according to the needs of western spiritual seekers, they can also foster exclusivist Hindu nationalist attitudes amongst Indians at home and in the diaspora. The VHP, which was established in order to mobilize Hindus throughout the world, is a case in point. The VHP uses anti-globalization 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 globalization 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 spiraling 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.[18] 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 has been shown elsewhere (e.g., Ikegame 2010; Jaffrelot 2012), it is not only caste leaders, but also gurus, who are vital "container actors" at election time (Ikegame [2012a] has shown that the categories of guru and caste leader are perfectly capable of collapsing into one). Gold (2012) refers to the Indian media's coinage of the term

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18 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. His essay "The poisoner and the parasite" (2012) takes theoretical discussion of containment to a new level.

"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").[19]

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 by both the movement's literature and by devotees themselves. The guru's followers fetishize the energy they have produced together as a power inherent to the "magnetizer"-guru (Mazzarella 2010a: 724).[20]

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 (2012) 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 popularization

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19 Politicians may also, of course, be framed as inclusive singularities—see, for instance, the Emergency-era slogan: "India is Indira and Indira is India" (Rajagopal 2011: 1015). We noted earlier the corporate nature of the parastatal guru. Following Roberston's (2001) analysis of the business corporation, the comparison may be extended. Consider the definition of a corporation as "a company or group of people authorized to act as a single entity (legally a person) and recognized as such in law" (New Oxford American Dictionary). Writing with reference to early mercantile communities, Robertson (2001: 215) notes that "repackaged into new corporate bodies, people could do business with one another more concertedly and at less personal risk, in ever-expanding arenas." The parastatal guru, similarly, is a "many" who acts as one, and who, in consequence, can appear to possess less "liability" (for instance in the sense of possible culpability for a given action being distributed across, or locatable within, a guru's contained elements— e.g., a divine forbear [cf. the 1860s "Maharaj Libel Case"]).

20 To employ terms proposed by da Col (2012), we might say that the guru is both parasitical and hospitable at the same time. He draws on and deploys the vital forces of his devotees for the enactment of miraculous feats or great works of a charitable or developmental nature, while being recognised as their singular origin. But containment may be equally a mode of hospitality, since protection and nourishment, both spiritual and material (e.g. in the form of subsidised medicines and foodstuffs), are also frequently provided to devotees happy to be "hosted" in his person.

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.

Gurus and/as media

On March 2, 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 vandalized buildings. It was alleged that Nithyananda's driver-cum-manager filmed and sold the tape to the TV channel. On April 21, 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 June 23. 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 amongst 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). The sexuality of a guru becomes problematic only in certain contexts and in specific ways.

Born in 1978 in Tamil Nadu, the youthful Nithyananda was fast becoming a high profile face amongst the globalising hyper-gurus. By the time of the scandal, his spiritual organization—Life Bliss Foundation—claimed to have centers in thirty-three 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 billboards depicting 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.

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; Huffer 2011).[21] Apart from this message that "the individual can have direct experience of ultimate reality," Vivekananda's denial of the Christian doctrine of original sin strongly appealed to Americans searching for alternative religious experiences (ibid.: 180).

Vivekananda's universalized 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 sanitize 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 behavior of Ramakrishna—dressing and eating like a Muslim (Wessinger 1995: 175), 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 have forcefully argued, 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 romanticized, Orientalist images of "mystical" or

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21 In a recent stimulating discussion, Huffer (2011) shows how Indian gurus teaching in the United States, in order to appeal to the broadest possible constituency, have inaugurated a process of "active distancing of largely Hindu ideologies, practices [and] discourses. . . from the category of Hindu religion" (ibid.: 375). Intriguingly, she suggests that this process appears to result (unwittingly) in the advancement of Hindutva ideologies, with "youth searching for a Hindu identity [being] more often than not restricted to conservative and orthodox options because the innovative and liberalistic options have been recoded as [generic] spirituality" (ibid.: 376).

"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, Frøystad (2012) 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, emphasized 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 2003), 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).

In Frøystad's (2012) 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 (as mentioned above). The serious message of the sameness of all religions is expressed with a childlike playfulness and 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 & Wadley 1995; Dasgupta 2006; Hughes 2009; Meyer & 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 amongst 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 modernization theory that as mediating technologies of reproduction developed religiosity would lose its intensity and diffuse into modern secular sensitivities, many scholars of religion recognize that the opposite has been the case. Media and religion are now frequently characterized as being complementary rather than antagonistic to one other (Stolow 2005; Meyer & 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:

> [R]eligion 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 analyzing 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 whilst 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 the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), 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 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 types are 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 an important 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 monopolization 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 monopolized by Brahmin elites. Many medieval religious movements in India, such as *sant* movements in the north, Sikhism in western India, and Lingayatism in the south, 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 result of the institutionalisation or "routinisation" of charisma. The institutionalized 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 producer's 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 recognized. Since the famous *Tehelka* sting operation in 2001 (see Mazzarella 2006), the technology of the sting operation or exposé has been radically democratized. *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 favors. Corruption in the government itself was hardly shocking news, though the dramatic visibilization of the scene of corruption was sensational enough. More recently, however, we have seen 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 amongst 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 since been reincarnated 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 of video 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* (i.e. behold his sacred image). Here again the "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.

Close distance was also characteristic of the brief appearance in November 2011 of high-profile Arya Samaj leader and social activist Swami Agnivesh in the house of India's controversial reality television show *Bigg Boss*, the Indian version of the *Big Brother* format. 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 certainly bold, 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.[22] 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 diminished auratic authority.

Asceticism and accusation

The Nithyananda sex scandal was scandalous not merely because it visually exposed his (supposed) sex acts. Rather, it was disturbing because 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 controlled distance between the public (or devotees) and the guru 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 2012), 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 the revered Sri Ramakrishna,

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22 *The Hindu*, November 11, 2011

and David Lelyveld's *Great Soul* (2011), on Mahatma Gandhi's life and career, have often been accused of entertaining baseless accusations against great men, resulting in nationwide controversies involving both scholars and political activists, calls for bans, and sometimes physical violence.

In view of such examples of accusation and exposé, the Nithyananda case might be legitimately considered "just another" guru controversy. Nevertheless, it possesses several exemplary features. First, there is the aspect of its mediatization. As was noted above, the scandal, intensely visibilized, 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 a public 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".[23] 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 means 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 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 idealized Mother, certainly not as sexual partner or wife (Chowdhury 2001: 131-135; Charu Gupta 2001).

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23 *Times of India*, April 30, 2010

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 2012), 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 for countering 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 (2012), describes one such interaction between these two paths.[24] 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 lineages of philosophical thought. Women represent "domesticity" (marriage, kinship, practicality), defined in opposition to the kinless creation of the guru lineage, 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 70s: "the personal is political" (Hanisch). Situated outside the institutionalized 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 realize limitations intrinsic to the knowledge-centered path toward spiritual insights, thereby opening new paths of personal experience. Moreover, contemporary female gurus have begun prioritizing the personal experience of devotees over the presence of gurus and centralized organizations. Importantly, what this suggests is the survival of a long established alternative path to male-centered asceticism within the Hindu imaginary; which is to say that uncontainable guru-ship could not be contained in one gender alone.

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24 See also Pechilis 2004 and Huffer 2010 on female gurus in the United States and Khandelwal 2009 on Hindu female ascetics in general.

Political *asana*s

Following our earlier discussion of "ballot babas" and devotee mobilization, 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". [25] 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 (2012a), a guru's putative kinlessness can cause him to be seen as an ideal figure for politics because, lacking children to direct funds to, they 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,"[26] he has also demanded the hanging of corrupt politicians and, as we shall see, also called for the creation of a "yoga army." Despite such periodic "saintly" challenges to politics as usual, however, for Jaffrelot (2012) the more powerful underlying model, frequently occluded by the theatricality 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* whilst calling attention to ways in which political power nonetheless "has constant relations" with the spiritual sphere. [27]

   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 illegitimately mixing yogic spirituality with politics. Having been forcibly removed by police from the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi where he was

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25 *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2011.

26 http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/ramdev-threat-will-build-an-army-arm-protesters-110874&c

27 It is worth noting that pre-colonial states allowed differing political segments considerable autonomy, with gurus and their institutions sharing sovereignty with the king (Ikegame 2012a, 2012b). Powerful local gurus, king-like, would frequently resolve local disputes, collect tax/donations, and distribute a range of welfare services.

undertaking an anti-corruption fast, Swami Ramdev was reported to have threatened to set up a yoga militia for self-defense: "'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.'"[28] 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, for the guru in South Asia has long been a figure of multiple political entanglements.

To begin with, accusations concerning gurus' lack of democratic accountability are not new (Jaffrelot 2012). 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 2012] 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.[29]

As we have noted, a further aspect of the 2011 guru-led anti-corruption campaign was Ramdev's declaration of militaristic intent. In a recent brilliant exploration of interrelations between slavery and religious discipleship in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century north India, Pinch (2012) demonstrates that the notion of the guru as a military commander possesses historical antecedents. Exploring the "shared ground of slavery and discipleship," Pinch attempts to account for and interpret critical changes in the intellectual history of spiritual and political authority in relation to the values and ethics of being a devotee. Many of the *chela*s in pre-modern ascetic armies, notes Pinch (2012: 64), 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." Pinch's 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 more militarily accomplished brother

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28 Ibid. I.e., it will not be the play (*lila*) of the righteous god Ram, but the play of the demon-king Ravana.

29 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.

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 (ibid.: 69), "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." As we noted earlier, gurus' "kinlessness" can cause them to be viewed as trustworthy political actors. Pinch notes that guru-commanders may have similarly favored slave-*chela*s because, unlike "voluntary" *chela*s, they perforce had no competing loyalties to natal kin.

One of the vital insights of Pinch's study 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 (ibid.: 71), "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 racialized 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 here is that master-slave, guru-*chela* and parent-child relationships may overlap and, indeed, constitute "forms of each other" (ibid.: 74).

If in pre-modern north India master-slave and guru-*chela* relationships both involved absolute submission to the will of another, 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".[30] Kakar (2011), too, has commented on a relation between "godmen" and "the anti-intellectual and authoritarian tendencies of Hindu society".[31] 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 medicalized 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.

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30 *The Guardian* (London), June 5, 2011.

31 *India Today*, May 9, 2011.

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 generalize 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 emphasized 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 infantilized by their dependence on spiritual masters and the fairly typical 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 characterization 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 incisive 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 (2006, 2012). 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 liberalization.

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 forms part of a "common repertoire of social service engagements" undertaken by guru-led service organizations (Warrier 2003: 241).[32] 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 imperiling 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 medicalized gift—blood donation, the pledging of eyes and bodies, the organization 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-organized with an organization 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-organizations are in large measure an effect of a guru-devotee model typified by asymmetrical exchange; *guru-seva* the repeated attempt to repay that which cannot 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 liberalization 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 fulfill 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

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32 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.

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 organization 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 & Gupta (2002: 989) note, the concept of governmentality more recently has been refined in order to take account of intensified logics of economic liberalization 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). Exploring local guru institutions in Karnataka (called *matha*s) and their employment of welfare activities as a means of situating themselves within the neoliberal economic and political agenda of the Indian state, Ikegame (2012a) provides a further vivid example of this phenomenon.

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. Commentators have been quick to declare 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 organization, they will be well spent (more wisely than through government agencies) is widely shared amongst the people of Karnataka, partly as a consequence of the fact, already referred to, 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

liberalization. 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 generalized. 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 aforementioned study 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 mobilizable 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 mobilization (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 might begin to think in terms of a "guru governmentality."

Conclusion

We have been at pains to emphasize that we are by no means dismissive of the rich existing literature on spiritual leadership in the region; rather, we seek 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 2012: 99). Perhaps the quality most common to the guru across its manifold individuals, institutions and logics is that of uncontainability. Guru-ship is a suggestive 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.

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 writing and that in any case maintaining certain distinctions is necessary in order to be able to recognize their porousness in given situations (the signal extensibility of the guru's form and reach in this case)—but a discomfiture remains.

Second, our characterization 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 behavior 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: 90-1). 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-emphasize 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 characterized as being beyond all limiting categories (Babb 1986: 147; T. Srinivas 2010: 66). It seems likely that it is at least in part because guru-ship is akin to 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 guru-focused scholarship cannot hope to pin down the nature of guru-ship but rather simply act as another of its staging posts as it moves between domains and troubles cherished distinctions.

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Logiques gourou

Résumé: Ce commentaire souligne la diversité des thématiques et schémas conceptuels engagés par la gourou-ité, et sa capacité — comme ensemble de principes tout autant que de personnes — à prendre part et se déplacer entre de multiples domaines sociaux et conceptuels. L'objectif est de reconsidérer une part de la littérature sur la gourou-ité en développant un outillage analytique afin de faciliter de futures recherches et de stimuler de nouvelles analyses du phénomène. Nous proposons d'envisager le gourou comme une forme sociale inhabituelle de suggestibilité. La multiplicité et la diversité des intrications entre le politique et l'économique chez le gourou nous orientent vers une perception de son incontenabilité, une particularité qui, de manière ironique, repose au moins partiellement sur sa capacité à contenir de multiples autres (principalement ses dévots et ses incarnations antérieures). Nous présentons l'étude du cas d'un gourou avatar — un cas particulièrement prolifique de « collectionneur d'associations » — qui exemplifie la personnalité expansive du gourou en tant que « singularité inclusive ». Insistant sur les formes plurielles de la gourou-ité, nous définissons des catégories d'anti-gourou et de gourou collectif tout en attirant l'attention sur la capacité mimétique du gourou et son rôle complexe dans l'imaginaire, le fantasme, et les politiques du genre. Les fonctions gouvernementales et politiques de la gourou-ité sont également analysées. La « gouvernementalité gourou » n'est pas juste une capacité d'action de la gouvernance déléguée dans une ère de libéralisation économique, mais la réorganisation de la relation gourou-adepte, ayant pour but de produire des effets « humanitaires » ou de « développement » qui, du point de vue des adeptes, pourraient difficilement être dépeints comme « laïcs ».

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